

From Eurovision to the Recognition of Palestine: How Israel Is Fracturing European Consensus

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Since the start of Israel's war in Gaza, following the 7 October Hamas terrorist attacks, Europe's domestic politics and foreign policy have been destabilized by deep internal divisions. Large protests against Israel's actions have spread across Europe,¹ European governments have struggled to coordinate a coherent response and the issue has permeated broader popular culture. While these divisions, of course, long predate 7 October, the scope of Europe's divisions over Israel is unprecedented and raises complex questions for how Europe's leaders and societies engage with Israel.

United by Music, Divided on Politics

Arguably, few popular cultural events have so ostensibly encapsulated Europe's divisions as much as the Eurovision Song Contest. The deep political disunity over Israel's participation is uniquely striking, coming despite the official political neutrality of its organizer, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), and its goal of showcasing musical talent from across Europe (and beyond) with the slogan "United By Music."

To some extent, despite bans on political lyrics and other political messaging, politics has never been far from Eurovision. Criticizing Russia has perhaps been the most recurrent theme. In 2009, Georgia's "We Don't Wanna Put In" was disqualified for its thinly veiled protest against Vladimir Putin, following the previous year's Russian invasion of Georgia.² Ukraine's 2024 entry, though lyrically about women's empowerment,³ features imagery evocative of the war and chemical weapons; the delegation was later fined for wearing clothes calling for prisoners of war to be released by Russia.⁴ The EBU is itself not above geopolitics. As the enforcer of rules, the organization suspended Russia from 2022 onwards after other member countries threatened to withdraw if Russia participated; an inherently political choice.

Links between the contest and politics extend beyond Russia. Iceland's broadcaster was fined in 2019 after Icelandic band Hatari displayed a Palestinian flag.⁵ Finland's 2013 entry was a protest in support of Finnish same-sex marriage legalization, featuring Eurovision's first on-screen lesbian kiss.⁶ In voting, geopolitics has sometimes appeared more important than music; countries often appear to enter unofficial voting groups, allocating large vote shares to each other seemingly more out of geopolitical kinship rather than solely based on music, most notoriously in the case of Greece and Cyprus.

1 TAÏX, Caroline. "Tens of thousands join pro-Palestinian marches across Europe." *AFP International*, 21 June 2025.

2 GILLISPIE, Brason. "'We Don't Wanna Put In': A Case Study of Georgia at the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest." *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 23 May 2024.

3 BRONSON, Fred. "Alyona Alyona & Jerry Heil Want People 'To Feel Empathy for Ukraine' With Their Eurovision 2024 Song." *billboard*, 30 April 2024.

4 *Kyiv Post*. "Eurovision Organizers Fine Ukrainians for T-shirts Calling for POW Release." 15 May 2024.

5 ABELLAN MATAMOROS, Cristina. "EBU fines Iceland for their band's display of Palestinian scarves during Eurovision final." *Euronews*, 22 September 2019.

6 WYATT, Daisy. "Eurovision 2013 to feature first lesbian kiss in protest against lack of gay marriage legislation." *The Independent*, 18 May 2013.

Yet the political divisions currently marking the contest are unprecedented. There have been widespread calls and petitions to boycott the contest. Nemo, a former Eurovision winner, returned their trophy in opposition to Israel's participation.⁷ Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain have all withdrawn from the 2026 Eurovision contest over Israel's participation. Spain's withdrawal is of particular importance to the future of the contest, as one of Eurovision's "Big Five" countries, the largest five funder countries of Eurovision. Germany, another of the Big Five, signalled Israel's exclusion might prompt Germany's withdrawal.⁸ The seemingly intractable political issues facing Eurovision mean it can no longer go on as Europeans have known it.

Israel's Strategies at Eurovision

What has caused all this consternation at Eurovision? For a contest that catapulted ABBA and Måneskin into the mainstream, a fixation on geopolitics might seem misplaced. Yet Israel's conduct in the contest should not be ignored. Events like Eurovision consolidate a country's image, both at home and internationally, sending political signals. Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, explicitly referred to Israel's continued inclusion in Eurovision as part of Israel being sheltered from accountability on the international stage.⁹ The contest is inextricable from politics. The high degree of importance the Israeli Government attaches to Eurovision is visible from Israel's conduct in recent contests.

When Israel hosted Eurovision in 2019, illegally occupied territories were broadcast as part of Israel. During "postcard" promotional videos played before a performance, where a location from a host country is normally shown, occupied territories from the Golan

Heights (internationally recognized as parts of Syria) and from East Jerusalem (part of the illegally occupied West Bank) were broadcast as being part of Israel.¹⁰ In the lead-up to the 2025 Eurovision Song Contest, Israel launched an extensive advertising campaign. As detailed by Maria Flannery and Derek Bowler,¹¹ the Israeli Government Advertising Agency funded adverts to promote the Israeli contribution. Adverts targeted all participating countries and urged viewers to vote 20 times for Israel's song. This strategy might have sought to exploit the quirks of Eurovision's voting system, as a single device could vote 20 times. Eurovision's voting system is inevitably more vulnerable to such mobilization campaigns, since voters cannot vote tactically, and can only vote in favour of a song, not against one. The exact reach of this campaign is unclear. However, the large public vote the song received prompted calls from Spanish and Irish broadcasters for voting audits. Belgian, Dutch and Finnish broadcasters raised concerns of vote manipulation.¹²

The EBU has since reformed rules for the 2026 contest. The maximum votes from a single payment method were limited from 20 to 10. Artists and broadcasters are now restricted from participating in advertising campaigns coordinated by government agencies. Whether these reforms go far enough to preclude political campaigning is unclear. But to critics of Israel's participation, these reforms fail to deal with the crux of the issue. Absolute political impartiality is unfeasible for the EBU, not least when their main sponsor, Moroccan Oil, is an Israeli firm. The EBU will have to continue to make inherently political choices, whether it is choosing between including Israel or Spain, or choosing whether to mute the audience booing of Israel's performances, as reportedly happened in 2024 and 2025.¹³ Ultimately, as long as Israel remains a member of the competition, inclusion or exclusion of Israel will remain a dividing issue for Europeans.

7 TIAN, Yang. "Eurovision winner Nemo to return trophy in protest at Israel." *BBC News*, 12 December 2025.

8 MOURIQUAND, David. "German Chancellor Friedrich Merz threatens to boycott Eurovision Song Contest if Israel is excluded." *Euronews*, 6 October 2025.

9 ALBANESE, Francesca. "Report: 'Gaza Genocide: a collective crime' by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 (A/80/492)." *United Nations*, 20 October 2025.

10 OFIR, Jonathan. "Israeli state broadcaster uses Eurovision promo videos to market occupied territories as 'Israel'." *Mondoweiss*, 14 May 2019.

11 FLANNERY, Maria and BOWLER, Derek. "Israeli government agency paid for adverts targeting Eurovision Song Contest public vote." *Eurovision News Spotlight*, 19 May 2025.

12 YOUNGS, Ian. "Israel's Eurovision result prompts questions over voting." *BBC News*, 21 May 2025.

13 MAZUROV, Nikita. "Audio Analysis: Eurovision Broadcaster Muted Sounds of Crowd Booing and Shouting 'Free Palestine!'" *The Intercept*, 17 May 2025; WOODCOCK, Zara. "Eurovision under fire after 'bosses cover Israel booing with fake applause'." *Daily Mirror*, 17 May 2025.

Varying Influence Strategies in European Politics

More consequentially, Israel has sought to influence European politics through various means. Israel's dominant party through most of the past 50 years, Likud, has cultivated ties with political parties across Europe. Sharon Pardo and Dani Filc (2021) detail the various Eurosceptic and far-right parties Likud has engaged with, including Italy's Lega and the Netherlands' PVV.¹⁴ Israel has lobbied governments directly. Pardo and Neve Gordon argue that Israel lobbied Greece, then led by the Syriza government, to water down EU Council conclusions relating to Israel's violations of international law in the West Bank, on the back of Greek opposition to EU austerity measures.¹⁵ In the lead-up to their recognition of Palestine, Israeli leaders pressured France and the UK: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned French President Emmanuel Macron against recognition for fuelling antisemitism,¹⁶ and Israeli President Isaac Herzog warned British Prime Minister Keir Starmer that it would embolden extremists.¹⁷

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Lobbying other governments and links between political parties are not unusual in international politics. Yet, separate from the operations of the government and Likud, there have also been other cases which

go beyond conventional means, to more clearly resembling foreign political interference in European democratic processes. Black Cube, an Israeli private intelligence firm, reportedly sought to interfere in Slovenian parliamentary elections, wiretapping officials in an attempt to undermine the re-election bid of incumbent Prime Minister Robert Golob.¹⁸ In 2016, Romanian authorities arrested two Black Cube employees over suspicion of targeting an anti-corruption prosecutor, who were later convicted.¹⁹ In the lead-up to the 2018 elections, Hungarian NGOs were reportedly targeted through secret recordings by Black Cube, which were then later published in a Hungarian state-controlled newspaper.²⁰

To be clear, with these interference allegations directed at Black Cube, there is no evidence that these actions were sanctioned by the Israeli Government. Strategies to influence European politics (or indeed even the outcome of Eurovision) are not unique to Israel. Rather, the influence strategies coming from Israel should instead be understood as a blend of conventional, government-led or Likud-led engagement, and a separate set of private interference strategies to affect Europe's democratic processes. The impact and goals of various means have, however, been consistent: orienting Europeans away from measures which might obstruct Israeli interests.

The EU's Divided Diplomatic Response

Israel's influence has had a profound impact on the EU's ability to chart a meaningful foreign policy. Even modest steps taken by some have not lasted long, such as Germany's brief suspension of arms exports to Israel, which resumed following the initial ceasefire.²¹ The EU has struggled to articulate a united response to Israel's wars in Lebanon and Palestine. Though the EU has continued to emphasize its commitments to

14 PARDO, Sharon and FILC, Dani. "EU-Israeli relations: Geopolitical perspectives in the wake of national populism." In *Routledge Handbook of EU-Middle East Relations*, ed. by Dimitris Bouris, Daniela Huber, Michelle Pace, (Milton : Taylor & Francis Group), 2021.

15 PARDO, Sharon and GORDON, Neve. "Euroscepticism as an Instrument of Foreign Policy." *Middle East Critique*, Vol 27, Iss. 4 (2018).

16 BRONNER, Luc. "Nétanyahou accuse Macron de nourrir l'antisémitisme en appelant à la reconnaissance internationale de l'Etat palestinien." *Le Monde*, 20 August 2025.

17 FREIBERG, Nava. "Amid strained UK-Israel ties, Herzog holds 'tough' meeting with Starmer in London." *The Times of Israel*, 11 September 2025.

18 WALKER, Ali; Starcevic, Sebastian; Roussi, Antoaneta. "Black Cube, leaked tapes and corruption: Israeli spy firm crashes Slovenia's election." *POLITICO Europe*, 19 March 2026.

19 MUTLER, Alison. "Romania: 2 arrested over prosecutor intimidation." *Associated Press*, 6 April 2016.

20 BAYER, Lili. "Israeli intelligence firm targeted NGOs during Hungary's election campaign." *POLITICO Europe*, 6 July 2018.

21 LUNDAY, Chris. "Germany lifts restrictions on arms exports to Israel." *POLITICO Europe*, 17 November 2025.

the principles of the two-state solution, Member States have been deeply divided on any actions to realize that vision. Instead, there has been a fragmentation of policies, with Member States pursuing their own strategies through smaller groupings.

Consider the recognition of Palestine. Historically, Europe has been out of step with most of the rest of the world in recognizing Palestine, but in recent years recognition has gained pace. Spain, Ireland and Norway recognized Palestine two years ago. France led a later initiative to recognize Palestine, along with Portugal, Belgium, Malta and Luxembourg, and non-EU states Australia, Canada and the UK. The EU is now effectively split into two almost equal blocs: 14 states recognize Palestine, 13 do not (Czechia and Hungary dispute their past recognitions).

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These divisions have likewise characterized the EU's response to Israel's war in Gaza. Rhetoric calling for de-escalation and a two-state solution has not translated into concrete action. In September 2025, the European Commission proposed suspending trade concessions for Israel under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. As Israel's largest trading partner, such a measure could have sent a strong political signal. Yet for the proposal to take effect, approval from a qualified majority of Member States was required, and no such consensus materialized. Though the proposal has not been officially rejected, it remains frozen.

The fragmentation of EU policy towards Israel is therefore prompting smaller groupings of states to team up to drive EU policy in different directions. For example, in the lead-up to the monthly meeting of EU foreign ministers, Ireland, Spain and Slovenia, jointly urged the EU to revisit its approach to Israel, in a joint

letter to Kaja Kallas, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.²² On the other side, Hungary, Germany, Czechia and, to a lesser extent, the Baltic states and Italy, continue to oppose any suspension of the Association Agreement.

What Comes Next?

Where this fragmentation leads for the EU is unclear. On the one hand, it is entirely plausible that European leaders decide to stick with current arrangements, rather than ploughing ahead with sanctions against Israeli settlers or suspending the Association Agreement. Given leaders' past reluctance to back concrete action, despite the rising public protest and opposition, it might seem inevitable that they once again decide against direct action.

On the other hand, the balance of power at EU level does seem to be shifting towards those in favour of suspending the Association Agreement. Two of Israel's main backers, Hungary and Italy, now seem shakier in their support. Viktor Orban's successor, Peter Magyar has signalled a more case-by-case approach than Orban's hardline support; Italy's Government suspended renewal of a defence agreement with Israel after prolonged disputes relating to IDF shots fired at an Italian convoy, and another dispute between the Catholic Church and Israeli authorities.²³

Regardless of the outcome, it is clear that European societies have shifted dramatically in their perceptions of Israel. Israel is viewed in increasingly unfavourable terms and by historic margins. A Pew Research poll from June 2025 found that in every European country surveyed, a majority held unfavourable views of Israel, nine of which have over 60 per cent unfavourable views;²⁴ in May 2025, YouGov polling recorded increases in perceptions that Israel's actions were neither justified nor proportionate in the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, outnumbering the opposing view.²⁵ Foreign policy may lag behind public opinion, but it is unlikely to do so forever. If public opinion trends hold, EU foreign policies will eventually have to catch up to these realities.

22 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. "Letter to H.E. Ms Kaja Kallas on the situation in the Middle East." 18 April 2026.

23 ROBERTS, Hannah. "Italy's Meloni halts defense pact with Israel." *POLITICO Europe*, 29 April 2026.

24 SILVER, Laura. "Most people across 24 surveyed countries have negative views of Israel and Netanyahu." *Pew Research Center*, 3 June 2025.

25 SMITH, Matthew. "Net favourability towards Israel reaches new lows in key Western European countries." *YouGov*, 3 June 2025.