

For human security in Middle East policy: Options for political action

THINKPEACE #2

In a nutshell

- **Security, dignity and self-determination for all people in Palestine, Israel and the SWANA* region are the basis for sustainable security.**
- **In order to fulfill its obligations under international law, Germany must take concrete measures to prevent violations of international law and human rights by Israel in Gaza and throughout the Palestinian territories. These measures include, among other things, ending arms exports that can be used for war crimes and exerting political pressure for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access.**
- **The proportion of women killed in Gaza is unprecedented. In the context of Resolution 1325, protection against gender-based violence must be guaranteed in particular. Women from Palestine and Israel must also be involved in peace negotiations on an equal footing and from the outset.**
- **Peace and human rights organisations in Palestine and Israel must receive greater financial and political support instead of having their funding withdrawn.**
- **Only a credible political vision for security and self-determination for Palestinians and Israelis offers a chance for peace. Germany should therefore recognise a Palestinian state and support multilateral efforts to this end.**

Almost twenty months after the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October, the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza has reached a new level of violence. The escalation is evident in widely documented violations of international law, Israel's termination of the ceasefire on 18 March, → an intensification of the Israeli military offensive in Gaza, and the announced renewed permanent occupation of Gaza and the expected → expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Over 54,000 Palestinians have already been killed, and Gaza is almost completely destroyed. After more than 11 weeks of Israeli blockade of humanitarian access, based on the unsubstantiated claim that Hamas is confiscating aid, one in five people in Gaza is now → facing starvation. UN institutions, human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and → academics are increasingly classifying the events as genocide. The safety of the approximately 20 Israeli hostages still alive or any real prospect of peace and security for the people of Israel and Palestine does not appear to be a priority for either Hamas or the Netanyahu government.

In the context of the devastating developments in Gaza, violence is also escalating in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, along with Israel's illegal occupation and settlement policy, → according to the ICJ opinion of July 2024. It cannot be ruled out that the conflict will spread to the entire region from Yemen to Iran. Feminist perspectives base their approach on the → paradigm shift that security, dignity and the right to self-determination of all people in Palestine, Israel and the region are inextricably linked. This opens up the possibility of recommendations for action beyond short-term interventions. Political actors, especially parliamentarians, should explore more options in this regard.

Analysis

Although Germany has sought to improve the situation through diplomatic exchanges with the parties to the conflict, this has had no effect on the ongoing escalation. An approach based on international law, combined with a feminist perspective on Gaza, with its focus on human security and systemic injustice as a catalyst for conflict, offers further options for action. Even though the German Foreign Minister announced the end of feminist foreign policy guidelines when he took office, international legal obligations remain, not least → Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Human security

The → man-made humanitarian catastrophe and the extent of the military escalation, including the bombing of vital civilian and humanitarian infrastructure and civilian targets, whose misuse by Hamas for military purposes has only been proven in a handful of cases, are unprecedented in recent history. There is currently no protection or security for anyone in Gaza: neither for the Israeli hostages nor for the Palestinian civilian population. → Isolated aid deliveries since 19 May have been ineffective in the face of the dire situation following weeks of blockade, and humanitarian supplies are on the verge of collapse. A feminist focus on vulnerable groups, especially women and children, reveals the extent of this war's impact across generations, for example through the → systematic destruction of healthcare infrastructure, including sexual and reproductive health, or the unprecedented high proportion of female fatalities in Gaza.

While German Chancellor Merz, like the previous government, is now calling for the resumption of aid deliveries from Israel, German Foreign Minister Waidepohl recently → expressed understanding for the blockade of Gaza during his visit to Israel, even though international law is clear on this point: withholding humanitarian aid is a → violation of international humanitarian law or a war crime. The demand to make → German support for UNRWA conditional – despite the successful completion of

official reviews of the organisation – also creates uncertainty in times of humanitarian emergency. The doubts now expressed by Merz and Wadephul have not yet led to any political consequences on these issues.

International legal context

Focusing the debate solely on humanitarian aid would neglect the political and international legal context in Gaza. The termination of the ceasefire, the de facto ↔ ban on UNRWA activities, the blockade of Gaza and the isolation of humanitarian aid, as well as ↔ plans for the renewed territorial occupation of Gaza and ↔ expulsion of Palestinians seem difficult to reconcile with the ↔ ICJ order of 26 January 2024 calling on Israel to do everything in its power to protect Palestinians in Gaza from an imminent threat of genocide. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry for the Occupied Palestinian Territories has investigated the extent of gender-based violence, the impact and destruction of the war, and found it to be genocidal. According to the ↔ report, the Israeli military has used 'systematic reproductive violence,' deliberately attacked hospitals with maternity wards, and thus severely hampered reproductive health care. International humanitarian law ↔ obliges Israel to ensure health care for pregnant women in armed conflicts. At the same time, Hamas has committed ↔ massive crimes against humanity and other violations of international law through the targeted killing, mistreatment and abduction of hundreds of civilians and the military use of civilian infrastructure.

Regardless of the outcome of South Africa's case before the ICJ, Germany, like all signatories to the Genocide Convention, is already obliged to take all necessary measures to prevent violations of international law. In the context of Resolution 1325, states also commit themselves to taking special measures to prevent sexual and gender-based violence. This would include stopping the supply of weapons, military equipment and dual-use goods that could be used to violate international law, in line with the ↔ Arms Trade Treaty and Germany's Weapons of War Control Act. Again, ↔ contrary to international law, German Chancellor Merz announced on election night that he would invite Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is subject to an international arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court, to Germany. Finally, the ICJ opinion of July 2024 on the ↔ illegality of the Israeli occupation also imposes obligations on Germany - also in the context of Gaza and particularly with regard to the announced renewed occupation and ground offensive.

Impact on actors working towards political solutions and peace

The most promising approach towards political resolutions would be to promote, exchange and cooperate with Israeli and Palestinian organisations that continue to advocate for peace, democracy and human rights despite repression and increasing criminalisation in Israel and Palestine. Within the framework of Resolution 1325, it is also essential to focus on inclusive processes and, in particular, on strengthening the role of women and marginalised groups in peace processes. These civil society actors are needed to implement a post-war order in Gaza and shape a lasting solution to the conflict.

At the same time, funding has recently been moved away from precisely these actors. Organisations report, for example, that the German federal government has withdrawn its foreign policy clearance (*Außenpolitische Unbedenklichkeitsprüfung*) – and thus funding – in decision-making processes that are difficult to understand. In this situation, the space and funding opportunities for civil society are becoming increasingly limited. At the same time, the withdrawal of international aid, for example in the United States and the United Kingdom, is leading to a massive decline in funding for civil society engagement, including in Israel and Palestine. In Israel, the planned taxation of foreign donations to Israeli and, in some cases, Palestinian non-governmental organisations

threatens to cut off funding for civil society actors. Possible exemptions for certain organisations will do little to change this, as transfers of funds are also subject to taxation.

Recommendations for political actors

In view of the extreme deterioration of the situation and its further escalation, political actors urgently need additional options for action in line with Germany's obligations under international law. The following steps should be considered:

①

Establish human security through humanitarian access and an immediate ceasefire

Germany should insist with the highest priority on an immediate ceasefire and unrestricted humanitarian access in Gaza. The militarised food distribution mechanism implemented by Israel and the US through the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is a serious precedent for the disregard and violation of established rules for the distribution of humanitarian aid. Cuts or cancellations of financial support for UNRWA, as indicated in the German government's coalition agreement, would be devastating from a humanitarian perspective. The German government should join initiatives ↔ by other EU states to formulate a clear demand for an end to the war in a broader coalition.

②

Exert pressure to take action

Germany should use political measures and diplomatic means to build pressure for action on these demands. This includes targeted human rights sanctions against political decision-makers and binding implementation of rules on arms and arms exports to prevent their use in Gaza or the West Bank in violation of international law.

Germany should support the ↔ debate on suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement. If a majority agrees on a suspension, Germany should not block it.

③

Clearly examine and elaborate human rights responsibilities and principles of international law

This could be done, for example, in the context of parliamentary reports, as was most recently done in March 2025 to ↔ clarify legal questions regarding the enforcement of the ICC arrest warrant against Prime Minister Netanyahu in Germany, or with regard to Germany's own responsibilities under international law, for instance when reviewing exports of military equipment beyond weapons of war and potential dual-use goods. Parliamentary rights to raise questions and to make inquiries about the position of the Federal Government could also be used to strengthen transparency and push for stricter review procedures. Necessary reforms to arms export control laws should also be implemented. Parliamentary committees should build on existing discourse and feminist expertise, as documented, for example, in the process leading up to the new Arms Export Control Act, which was planned for the last legislative period.

Strengthen local Palestinian and Israeli peace initiatives, particularly with regard to Resolution 1325

In order to strengthen democratic forces for conflict resolution and political prospects, Palestinian and Israeli organisations working for peace and human rights should be offered platforms and their ↪ innovative solutions should be included in the discourse. Like other parliaments, the Bundestag can provide a space for the exchange of political ideas and strengthen ↪ initiatives that promote political solutions and peace. Networks between parliaments of different countries are also useful in this regard. Given the special role of marginalised voices and women in sustainable conflict resolution, particular focus should be placed on such initiatives and their capacity to act on the ground should be strengthened, not least to help ensure that women can participate on an equal footing in peace negotiations.

The German government and Bundestag should refrain from measures that would restrict the work of democratic forces in civil society. At the same time, it is important to critically examine how German policy may be weakening these actors. Specifically, this means critically evaluating, reflecting on and, where necessary, adapting German funding practices. Parliamentary instruments such as the right to ask questions, investigations or scientific services should be used here.

Creating future prospects through political recognition

Ultimately, only a credible political vision of security and self-determination for Palestinians and Israelis can offer prospects for peace in the region and weaken extremist actors. This must mean recognising a Palestinian state alongside the security needs of Israelis and Palestinians. This would also be necessary in view of the increasing *Gazafication* of the West Bank, which makes a negotiated two-state solution increasingly politically inconceivable. Germany should support multilateral initiatives such as the conference on the two-state solution planned by ↪ France and Saudi Arabia. Seeking to persuade states that stand in solidarity with Palestine to recognise Israel at the same time as recognising Palestine, ↪ as envisaged by France, would be a possible step towards breaking the political deadlock and, at the same time, would strengthen the security of the people of Israel and Palestine on the path to a lasting two-state solution. For German parliamentarians, this could mean following the example of initiatives such as those in the United Kingdom, where ↪ different political camps are calling on the British government to recognise Palestine as part of a political vision for the future. Ultimately, the future prospects and security of all people in Israel, Palestine and the region are inextricably linked.