

OPINION | Commentary

Europe's Moral Credibility at Stake

On the Failed Suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement

Reinhold W. Lang | *President, Club of Rome – Austrian Chapter*

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Abstract — *For the second time within a year, EU Foreign Ministers on 21 April 2026 blocked the suspension of the Association Agreement with Israel — overriding the EU Commission's own recommendations, a landmark ruling of the International Court of Justice, and ICC arrest warrants against the Israeli Prime Minister, and disregarding appeals from nearly 400 former ministers and diplomats as well as numerous UN Special Rapporteurs appointed by the Human Rights Council. In this Commentary, the author examines what this means for Europe's credibility as a defender of international law and human rights.*

“But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.”

Nelson Mandela | Pretoria, 4 December 1997

At the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers on 21 April 2026 in Luxembourg, another attempt to suspend the *Association Agreement* between the European Union and Israel, or to impose sanctions against Israel, has failed. The initiative by Spain, Ireland and Slovenia – supported by a growing number of other member states – did not achieve the required qualified majority. Germany, Italy, and also Austria along with several other countries blocked the decision. This was the second attempt within a year: as recently as May 2025, 17 of 27 member states had voted in favor of a suspension – without reaching the quorum required for binding measures (approval by 55% of member states representing 65% of the EU population).

The Legal Basis and Factual Background are Unambiguous

The *Association Agreement* of 2000 enshrines in *Article 2* the *respect for human rights and democratic principles* as an “essential element” of cooperation – as an explicit conditionality clause. *Article 79* provides for corresponding measures in the event of violations of *Article 2*.

On 20 May 2025, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas announced the initiation of a review of *Article 2* of the Agreement. At the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers on 23 June 2025 in Brussels, the delegation reached an unequivocal conclusion: Israel is committing serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law through its violence in Gaza, thereby breaching the fundamental principles of the Agreement. The review found that the measures taken by the Israeli government constitute a violation of essential elements relating to the respect for human rights and democratic principles – entitling the EU to unilaterally suspend the Agreement. In response, the EU Commission proposed on 17 September 2025 the suspension of trade concessions as well as sanctions against extremist Israeli ministers and violent settlers. This initiative also failed in the Council.

Subsequently, in mid-April 2026, more than 350 former ministers, ambassadors and senior officials called in an open letter for immediate suspension; over 180 human rights and humanitarian organisations joined this demand. Most significantly, in a *press release* dated 20 April 2026 — hence, one day before the Luxembourg ministerial meeting — a group of UN Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts and Working Groups appointed by the UN Human

Rights Council (collectively referred to as the "*Special Procedures*") called for the immediate suspension of the EU–Israel Association Agreement as a "*minimum requirement under international law*".¹ The experts stated that "*the EU cannot credibly claim to uphold human rights while sustaining preferential trade with a State whose conduct has been found by multiple international bodies as amounting to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes*" and framed the Luxembourg meeting explicitly as "*a clear moral test*".

The legal and moral basis for EU action was and is thus clearly established — and was nevertheless ignored.

Further Weighty Arguments in Context

In response to Israel's military offensive in Gaza, South Africa filed a complaint against Israel at the *International Court of Justice* (ICJ) in The Hague under the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* as early as 29 December 2023 – barely three months after the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 that had triggered the conflict. Shortly thereafter, in January 2024, the Court ordered provisional measures against Israel, acknowledging the plausibility of South Africa's allegations and its own jurisdiction. Israel was called upon to do everything within its power to prevent acts prohibited under the *Genocide Convention*, to allow sufficient humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, and to suppress inciting public statements by leading Israeli officials. The main proceedings have not yet been concluded; after several extensions, Israel submitted its counter-memorial in March 2026.

Noteworthy is the evolution of Germany's position in these proceedings: Germany had initially announced its intention to intervene before the ICJ in favor of Israel – but withdrew this support in March 2026, as Germany now finds itself having to answer before the ICJ in a case brought by Nicaragua for possible complicity in genocide.

The ICJ further established in an advisory opinion of 19 July 2024 that Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories is unlawful as a whole and must be ended without delay – a ruling that international law scholars consider one of the most far-reaching in the Court's history. The ICJ found that Israel had systematically violated the law of military occupation through its conduct in the territories occupied since 1967. The Court also found violations of *Article 3* of the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* – i.e. apartheid and racial segregation – and ordered Israel to pay reparations. The *Resolution ES-10/24* based on this opinion was adopted by a large majority of the *UN General Assembly* on 18 September 2024 and called for Israel's withdrawal within one year. Europe was divided on this vote: Germany, Austria, Italy and the Netherlands abstained.

Alongside the ongoing ICJ proceedings, a further, legally distinct development has arisen. On 21 November 2024, the *International Criminal Court* (ICC) issued arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. The Court found sufficient grounds to believe that both bear criminal responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity – including the deliberate deprivation of food, water, medicine and fuel from the civilian population of the Gaza Strip, as well as murder and persecution. All 125 ICC member states – including all EU countries and therefore also Germany and Austria – are obligated under international law to arrest Netanyahu and Gallant should they enter their territory. In July 2025, ICC judges rejected Israel's application for the withdrawal of the arrest warrants; these remain in force pending a final decision on the Court's jurisdiction.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/04/un-experts-call-immediate-suspension-eu-israel-trade-agreement-minimum>

The 'Constructive Dialogue' Argument is Unconvincing

That it is precisely the German federal government that is blocking the suspension of the Association Agreement at the EU Foreign Affairs Council is, against this backdrop, perhaps unsurprising but nonetheless difficult to comprehend. German Foreign Minister Waidephul justified Germany's rejection by stating that the preference is for 'constructive dialogue' rather than suspension. This argument is neither new, nor does it become more convincing through repetition. Dialogue without consequences is not a lever – it is capitulation to the status quo. The Agreement grants Israel, among other things, tariff-free access to the EU single market; the EU is Israel's largest trading partner, accounting for more than 30% of its trade. Forgoing this economic leverage strips 'dialogue' of its most important substance. On top of this, Germany has since lifted its temporary arms export embargo against Israel.

The implication of the *ICC arrest warrants* against Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant is also clear: a state that is, on the one hand, obligated as an ICC member to enforce these warrants, while on the other hand refusing any economic or political conditionality vis-à-vis Israel, is **undermining not only the credibility of the EU but the integrity of the entire international legal order**. All of this underscores the glaring inconsistency of Germany's stance, as well as that of the other countries that have blocked the decision to suspend the *EU-Israel Association Agreement*.

A Union that Does Not Enforce Its Own Values

What remains is a deeply troubling picture: a European Union that on the one hand proclaims the rule of law, international law and human rights as the foundation of its identity – and on the other hand is unwilling to enforce these principles against a partner country whose violations are well-documented. **This credibility gap damages the EU not only in how it is perceived externally in the Global South, but also in its self-understanding and internal coherence.**

From the perspective of the *Club of Rome* – which has for decades advocated for a planetary ethic of responsibility and the binding of economic cooperation to normative standards – this outcome is yet another symptom of structural failure: the short-term interests of individual member states systematically override the long-term strategic and moral capacity for action of the Union. In particular, the unanimity requirement in European foreign policy, as well as quorum rules as illustrated by this very example, are increasingly proving to be institutional paralysis.

Thus, the question is not whether Europe is taking sides in this conflict – it is doing so through inaction as well. The question is simply which side the EU is taking, and how it will be perceived internationally as a result.

This text reflects the personal assessment of the author and does not represent an official position of the Club of Rome. The text was produced with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic).