

# John Gatt-Rutter and the EU's Middle East Fantasies

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The Middle East has become a horrible burning ground, but the European Union remains fixated on the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis, and an imagined “Middle East Peace Process” (MEPP). In European foreign ministries, the mythologies of the 1970s remain unchallenged, perhaps because dealing with the real threats to Europe from the chaotic Middle East reality – ISIS, Syria, desperate refugees, Iran, etc. — is overwhelming.

The faith that Europe has something positive to contribute is reflected, in part, by the presence of numerous European envoys and diplomats in Israel. In addition to the EU embassy (referred to as a “delegation”) and ambassador in Tel Aviv, there is a full-time “peace envoy”, as well as an embassy and ambassador to the Palestinian Authority, situated in what the EU refers to as “east” Jerusalem.

The envoys and their staffs spend considerable time shuttling between Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Gaza, Brussels, and other points, writing memos (often based on selected media and NGO publications) and issuing press releases. The more successful diplomats manage to avoid doing harm, and, in a few cases, are able to contribute to marginal improvements in the relationship.

Ambassador John Gatt-Rutter is currently finishing a four year term as EU Ambassador to the West Bank, Gaza and UNRWA (the problematic UN refugee agency dedicated to the Palestinians). A veteran Arabist from Malta, Gatt-Rutter had previously headed the EU's Mashraq/Maghreb (MaMa) policy group, and advised ex-EU foreign policy head Javier Solana on the MEPP.

During his tenure Gatt-Rutter, reinforced the prevailing European mythologies while funds for anti-peace and anti-Israel NGOs continued to flow. His lengthy article published in the *Palestine-Israel Journal* (2015), optimistically entitled “The European Union's Role in Facilitating a Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” is a reflection of his policies, beliefs, and actions over the past four years.

This article, like his public statements and recent media interviews, repeats many standard catch- phrases – the obstacles to peace are again blamed on “the Israeli occupation” and “illegal settlements.

Not surprisingly, he fails to devote a single word to the chaos and violence throughout the Middle East

– as if the brutality of ISIS, the Syrian civil war, Iran and Hezbollah do not exist. His artificial map is restricted to the small area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

In this fictional world, Israel is all powerful, and Palestinians are portrayed as victims incapable of taking responsibility. He patronizingly chides them for internal disputes and lack of unity, noting that they “would be well advised to restore their national and democratic project through holding elections.” But Gatt-Rutter skirts the abject failure of the EU’s efforts to promote democratic institution building in the West Bank, or the fact that President Mahmoud Abbas is in the tenth year of the four year term to which he was elected in 2005.

Furthermore, the departing EU ambassador to the Palestinians strikingly ignores the many brutal terror attacks that took place while he was in the Jerusalem office – not a word about the Har Nof Synagogue massacre or the murder of the Fogel family.

In contrast, and following the usual pattern, Gatt-Rutter devotes considerable attention to suffering in Gaza, and recounts the “destruction I saw driving through Shuja’iyya”. But he did not see or mention any hint of thousands of Hamas “fighters”, terror tunnels, or the 4563 rockets and mortar shells launched from houses, mosques, hospitals and schools at Israeli civilians – every one a war crime.

Gatt-Rutter also makes no mention of the drum-beat of Palestinian incitement that legitimizes the violence, including videos of hate and ceremonies that honor terrorist “martyrs”. And although he has been the top European official responsible for overseeing the massive budget with which taxpayers subsidize UNRWA, including its notorious spokesman, Chris Gunness, this organization and its failures are absent from his overview.

Under Gatt-Rutter, the EU increasingly engaged in illegal building projects that created significant environmental damage. Avoiding any pretense of objectivity, he condemns Israel for the “demolitions of Palestinian property” that have, in his view, “poisoned the atmosphere and destroyed trust.” Responding to the Israeli efforts to enforce the law, he boasts that “the international community, with the European Union at the forefront has stepped in” to expand this illegal activity.

Similarly, he was a leading proponent of European promotion of boycotts and product labeling – the soft and socially acceptable part of the anti-Zionist antisemitic BDS campaign, closely reflecting with the activities of fringe NGOs. This policy has exacerbated Israeli-European tensions, adding to the distrust that many Israelis have of the EU.

In his parting shot, Gatt-Rutter launches his own threats against Israel. He calls for “taking further measures to strengthen respect for international law,” meaning expanded lawfare cases, which are largely funded by the EU through NGO allies. His call for expanded economic warfare (also promoted by NGOs) is expressed as “ensuring compliance with legislation covering preferential treatment in the area of trade; restrictions on the use of funding for the benefit of settlements; advice to businesses and investors working in settlements; and settlement product labeling.”

These measures, readers are told, “could make a meaningful contribution in favor of a peace agreement,” and help “to re-balance Israeli-Palestinian negotiating positions within the Middle East peace process.”

But Gatt-Rutter is wrong, as his four year record demonstrates. If the EU extends the confrontational measures he and others have advocated, there is no evidence to suggest that they will have a positive impact, but rather the opposite.

Indeed, the most important conclusion based on Gatt-Rutter term as the EU’s representative to the Palestinians is the need for a new approach. In appointing his successor, Federica Mogherini, the current foreign policy czar, has an opportunity to move away from the myths, paternalism, and obsessive confrontations with Israel, and to launch a positive approach.



