



The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy

## **What Can the EU Do To Support De-Escalation Along the Israel-Lebanon Border?**

*Insights from a Diplomeds Working Group Meeting*

**March 2024**

International efforts are underway to contain the Israel-Hezbollah confrontation, prevent further flare-up, and eventually improve Israel-Lebanon relation. The US, France and the UN have been traditionally playing a leading role on these issues, and are continuing to do so. In addition, Gulf states are also becoming increasingly active on the Lebanese front, including on issues related to domestic politics. In March 2024, members of a Diplomeds working group on the Israel-Lebanon issue, convened to discuss whether the EU can also have a role to play in support of de-escalation, and if so – which concrete policy paths can it take and advance. This paper summarizes key insights raised by meeting participants.

**A. Demonstrate that the Israel-Lebanon issue is a priority** - On 22 January 2024, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council held separate exchanges with the Palestinian, Israeli, Jordanian, Saudi and Egyptian foreign ministries, as well as with the Secretary General of the League of Arab States. The EU can carry out a similar exchange focusing on Israel and Lebanon, with the foreign ministers (or other high-level officials from both states). In addition, as follow up to HR/VP Borrell's visit to Lebanon and Israel in January 2024, a follow up visit can take place, once some sort of pause in fighting is reached, focusing on communities on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border. These steps will showcase interest, commitment and solidarity, and can better position the EU for future interventions.

**B. Complement US mediation, not compete with it** - The EU's added value may be in development, aid and unofficial engagement, rather than in official mediation. EU involvement should be supportive of US mediation, coordinated with it, and not be carried out in rivalry mode. The EU should seek to help reach a deal, and once that happens - ease its implementation and leverage it for additional benefits. While the US mediation needs to focus on finding a formula that is accepted by Hezbollah, EU interventions can focus on empowering the Lebanese state. In that regard, EU involvement may be more effective once tensions decrease, rather than when the risk of flare-up is still prominent.

**C. Build upon US statements on southern Lebanon** - US Envoy Amos Hochstein recently emphasized the need to develop the economy of southern Lebanon and assist reconstruction there. This opens a potential role for the EU. While the EU does not want to be a "payer" it could invest in southern Lebanon, and encourage the European private sector to be more involved there as well. The EU can also highlight the necessity of implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and call on Hezbollah to limit (as a confidence building measure to support de-escalation) Hamas presence in Lebanon and Hamas actions against Israel from the southern Lebanon.

**D. Nurture a positive environment in the border zone** - The EU should launch an assistance project in the Israeli and Lebanese areas close to the border. There is a need to create better living conditions that will enable the return of evacuated civilians. This could be done, for example, via European investments in agriculture, which is a vital sector for the area's inhabitants. It is important that once the dust settles, the border area will not be characterized only by security measures and military presence, but also by reconstruction and economic activities. Farmers, in both countries, should feel secure enough to cultivate fields in their own territory; the EU can engage with private sectors and municipalities, rather than with national government, to develop the area and foster good neighborly relations. A parallel reconstruction initiative can be taken on both sides of the border, by the EU picking two villages – one in Lebanon and one in Israel – and deploying a team to reconstruct them both, with the same working modality, and with as much as possible cross-border mobility.

**E. Foster engagement between the sides** - Recently, there is a somewhat increased public discourse legitimizing the idea of future peace between Israel and Lebanon. This increased openness (albeit still very limited) can be enhanced, especially when coupled with arrangements reached by officials (such as the maritime border deal). The EU can help scale up and broaden dialogue channels between Israelis and Lebanese. This could be done through convening officials in multilateral forums (such as the UfM and the Cyprus Climate Change Initiative), supporting track-two initiatives involving experts from both countries (including via EU consultations on its Southern Neighborhood policies), and create additional trustworthy channels through which policymakers can convey messages to each other. In addition, at the civil society level, multi-national EU programs in which both Israel and Lebanon participate can prioritize the joint acceptance of applicants from both countries, so they get to engage in non-bilateral settings. The EU can advance within the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) an offer to Lebanon to join the organization as observer (while providing Israel with necessary reassurances for it not to veto such a move).

**F. Help local policy elites generate new knowledge and understandings** - The traditional lack of interaction between the policy elites of Israel and Lebanon creates gaps in understanding each side's domestic scene, interests, priorities, and nuances. Increased engagement, as described above, will help alter this, but so can an EU effort to translate media and think tank articles published in both countries, so they can become accessible to the other side. In addition, papers and research on aspects related to Israel-Lebanon ties can be supported, e.g. on explaining the importance of the maritime border deal (in light of those bashing it for reasons of domestic politics) and on possible scenarios for Israel-Lebanon relations in the post-war reality ("day after" discussions currently focus mostly on the Israeli-Palestinian track).