

# European governments give Sharon a free hand against the Palestinians

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The Israeli army's brutal operation against the Palestinian territories has triggered an explosion of diplomatic activity in Europe. But neither the individual European governments nor the European Union (EU) has taken any measures to put pressure on Israel to withdraw its troops.

European foreign ministers assembled for a special session in Luxemburg on April 3 and the next day sent Javier Solana, EU representative for foreign affairs, and Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Piqué, the current chairman of the council, as mediators into the crisis area. They were brusquely rejected by the Israeli government and Ariel Sharon refused to allow them to meet with the Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat. Nevertheless, Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, categorically ruled out any sanctions against Israel. He considered them an unsuitable way of influencing Israel.

In fact, Brussels has considerable leverage for placing pressure on Israel. Just two years ago an association agreement came into force, regulating the preferential access of Israeli industrial and agricultural products to the European market. The EU absorbed more than 27 percent of Israeli exports, amounting to a value of 8.5 billion dollars in the year 2000. One paragraph of the agreement expressly stipulates the maintenance of human rights, and could easily be used to put pressure on Sharon.

Prodi refused to do this. He said the agreement was a means of opening up a dialogue, but, "We don't want it to be used as a means of applying pressure and blackmail." Even more emphatic diplomatic gestures, like the summoning of ambassadors, have so far been ignored. Instead, the European representatives are stressing that the pivotal role in the solution to the Middle East conflict will have to be played by the US—which has more or less openly supported Sharon's course.

In order to avoid being left out of events altogether, the EU is calling for close cooperation with the US, together with the participation of Russia and the United Nations (UN). A meeting of the relevant foreign ministers agreed such a stance at the beginning of the month.

The same motive lies behind the so-called Fischer plan, recently presented by the German foreign minister, providing for the dispatch of UN "peacekeeping" troops to the region.

There is no essential difference between the behaviour of the

European governments and that of the Americans. Concealed behind their empty appeals to reason and their calls for a return to the peace process lies a policy of giving Sharon and his occupying troops a free hand. European governments are therefore making themselves direct accomplices of the Israeli operation, which is more and more openly assuming the form of a military campaign of extermination against the Palestinian population and conforms to the criteria of a war crime.

In spite of occasional criticism of Bush's and Sharon's political course, they are basically in accord with the aims of the so-called "war on terrorism". In this, the term "terror" serves as a synonym for anything standing in the way of the hegemony of the imperialist powers and their regional agencies in the Middle East.

It borders on the absurd when the resistance of Palestinian youth—blowing themselves up in desperation—is described as "terror," while the heavily armed Israeli army's onslaught against overflowing refugee camps and defenceless citizens is regarded as a legitimate defence measure. In their efforts to present a "balanced" view, official European pronouncements interpret the situation as though there were equally matched sides: between the heavily armed Israeli state—which has disregarded every UN resolution for decades and ignored international law by adopting a policy of the planned murder of political opponents—and the Palestinian people, who have suffered expulsion from their homes and occupation of their lands, along with humiliation and oppression.

A comparison with the trial of Slobodan Milosevic, currently under way in the Hague, exposes the double standard that is being applied. One need not be a supporter of the former Yugoslav president to see that his activities to counter the violence of the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) in Kosovo, an internationally recognised part of Yugoslavia, were legally far more justified than Sharon's terror against the Palestinian Autonomous Authority, expressly recognised by Israel in the Oslo Peace Accord.

Particularly in Germany, any criticism of Israeli politics immediately meets with the charge of anti-Semitism. But this stands the matter on its head. If by anti-Semitism one means the debasement of Jewish tradition and culture, discrimination against and persecution of people because of their race and

religion, then the charge of anti-Semitism applies to Sharon rather than his critics. Whoever really wants to fight against anti-Semitism must take a stand against every form of racial oppression, including the oppression of Palestinians.

There are differences between the politics of Europe and America in the Middle East. Each is following its own economic and strategic interests, which are not compatible with one another in the long term. But these differences are predominantly of a tactical nature.

In order to secure its influence in the region, Europe has for some time taken the course of strengthening bourgeois forces in the Arab, and particularly the Palestinian, camp. The first Gulf war, which buttressed the Saudi dynasty at the expense of the more developed bourgeois regimes in the region, was only hesitatingly supported by the European governments, with the exception of the United Kingdom.

The Oslo Peace Accord came into being as a result of European initiatives. It aimed at the construction of a stable state structure in the Palestinian lands occupied by the Israelis, with the purpose of defusing the conflict with Israel on the basis of a two-state system. It was expected this would pave the way for closer economic relations between Israel and the Arab states and facilitate European exports and investment. Practically the whole structure of administration in the Palestinian regions was set up with EU finances. The European Union is still paying 10 million euros a month to the Palestinian Authority.

However, the situation of the Palestinian people has not improved as a consequence of the Oslo peace initiative. Even before the renewed escalation of the conflict in September 2000, their predicament was becoming increasingly unbearable. The break-up of the West Bank into small isolated enclaves, the increasing presence of Israeli settlers, the sealing of the borders with Israel and recurring bans on leaving their territories condemned the Palestinians to a ghetto existence, and deprived them of the chance of moving freely and earning money. Nevertheless, the *intifada* was reined in and greater violence prevented so long as there was hope of lasting improvement.

Under Bill Clinton, the US government went along with the Oslo Accord in line with its policy of seizing the initiative from the Europeans. With the transfer of the presidency from Clinton to Bush, and particularly after September 11, politics in Washington changed course. Now a green light was given to those forces in Israel that had always rejected the Oslo agreements.

Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount, triggering the second *intifada*, took place in the midst of the American election campaign, when Bush was ahead in the polls and Clinton was being sharply criticised over his intervention in the Middle East conflict. Four months later, Sharon became head of government. Since then, he has been systematically escalating the conflict with Washington's backing.

European governments have reacted by dropping Arafat and

the Palestinian Authority like a hot potato. Not once have they raised a serious protest as the Israeli army reduced to rubble the infrastructure that had been built up with European subsidies and credits to the extent of several hundred million euros.

This throws a revealing light on the true motive of European involvement in the Middle East. It has nothing to do with Palestinian self-determination or with peace in general, but rather with Europe's own economic and political interests. The famous remark by the nineteenth century British prime minister, Palmerston, concerning the policy of British imperialism also applies to his present-day counterparts: states have no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests.

This should be a warning to all those among the Israeli population who, fearing terrorist attacks, see American or European support for Sharon as a contribution to their own security. There are currents of anti-Semitism in both Europe and America. However, these are not to be found among the overwhelming majority of people who protest against the Israeli army's inhuman treatment of the Palestinian population, but rather among the ultra-right tendencies upon which the Bush administration and increasingly the European governments are basing themselves. For these elements, Israel is useful merely as an outpost for their own strategic interests.

Genuine physical and social security for the Jewish and Palestinian populations is possible only on the basis of the peaceful cohabitation of both peoples. To achieve this, the existing state structures and borders, founded on religious and ethnic privilege and cemented by it, must be dismantled and the region liberated from the influence of the imperialist powers and their local lackeys.



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