

Manoeuvres and appeasement: Europe's response to the US-Israeli war against Lebanon

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The response of Europe's governments to the US-backed Israeli attack on Lebanon has been cowardly and devoid of principle. Any pretence that the European Union was capable of advancing a foreign policy independent of Washington was put paid by its resolution on the Lebanon crisis issued August 1, calling for "an immediate cessation of hostilities to be followed by a sustainable ceasefire."

The separation of the words "immediate" and "ceasefire" is all that is politically important in this tortured formulation. The resolution was an exercise in semantics. One would search in vain for a dictionary definition distinguishing an "immediate cessation of hostilities" from a "ceasefire." But this playing with words was necessary to paper over the divisions revealed by the meeting that preclude any possibility of a viable European response.

The original draft, proposed by the Finnish presidency, called for an immediate ceasefire and included a sentence warning that "disregard for necessary precautions to avoid loss of civilian life constitutes a severe breach of international humanitarian law."

Both formulations were dropped in order to appease opposition led by Britain and Germany, with the support of the Czech Republic, Poland and Denmark. The resolution instead called on all parties to "do everything possible to protect civilian populations and to refrain from actions in violation of international humanitarian law." This is exactly what Israel claims to be doing. The resolution was further altered to place the condemnation of Hezbollah's rocket attacks on Israel before a condemnation of Israel's killing of Lebanese civilians in Qana.

France claimed that the resolution was a victory for its diplomacy, but it was actually a significant retreat. From the start of the conflict, major European powers led by France, and including Italy and Spain, have made repeated calls for an immediate ceasefire. However, the EU was never able to advance a unified position.

Britain was, as usual, resolutely opposed to anything that would cut across the drive by the Bush administration to extend the Lebanese conflict to a broader offensive against Syria and Iran, so as to ensure US hegemony over the entire Middle East. Unlike in relation to the Iraq war, this same position was taken unambiguously by Germany.

Prior to the meeting of foreign ministers and in response to Israel's bloody assault on Qana, German Chancellor Angela

Merkel issued a joint statement with Prime Minister Tony Blair stressing Washington's favoured formulation of a "sustainable ceasefire" to be declared only when conditions allow. Reiterating the banal and cynical assertions she has made since day one of the Israeli assault that the aggressor was Hezbollah, she told the media, "We cannot confuse cause and effect. The starting point is the capture of Israeli soldiers."

The meeting in Brussels demonstrated the weakened position of France, which has hitherto based its entire foreign policy on a Franco-German alliance. Washington demonstrated its ability to wield a dominant bloc of European nations against any who do not fall into line.

The meeting also made clear that none of those who are calling for a ceasefire, including France, have any fundamental disagreements with America's Middle East strategy. Rather, their central objective is to maintain their own influence in the Middle East and position themselves in the reorganization of the region proclaimed by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

France's calls for a ceasefire, in particular, are bound up with political calculations over how to preserve its interests in the region, as well as immediate military concerns.

There is much on which Washington and Paris agree. France is no friend of either Hezbollah or Syria. It has a long and bloody history in Lebanon, where it was once a colonial power. Together with Washington, it was one of the major proponents of the so-called "Cedar Revolution," which aimed to end Syria's influence in the country and ensure a stable pro-western government. Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the multibillionaire whose assassination in 2005 provided the pretext for an escalation of the anti-Syrian offensive, was a personal friend of President Jacques Chirac.

In August 2004, Paris joined Washington in co-authoring United Nations resolution 1559, calling for Syrian troops to be removed from Lebanon and for Hezbollah's disarming. Following Hariri's murder in February 2005, France joined the US in blaming Syria and insisting on the full implementation of resolution 1559. Even now, French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy has stressed, "The first condition for a ceasefire is, of course, the disarming of Hezbollah."

Nevertheless, Paris has been dismayed by Washington's willingness to undermine the government of Prime Minister Fouad

Siniora and support Israel's destruction of the country. This is only the latest humiliation suffered by France at the hands of the US. The Iraq war saw it excluded from a major area of interest and similar concerns will be raised by the moves against Iran, where it has significant investments.

In opposition to the line of the US, France has insisted that Tehran play a part in ensuring a political solution to the Lebanon crisis. During his latest of three visits to Lebanon, Douste-Blazy insisted that Iran could play a "stabilizing role" in the region, describing it as a "great country, a great people and a great civilization." France, he said, "could never accept the destabilization of Lebanon, which could lead to destabilization of the region."

While in Beirut, he met with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and has made clear that he is prepared to travel to Tehran.

Paris clearly believes that it can exploit Washington's refusal to negotiate with Tehran to its advantage and that this will increase its standing in the Middle East, due to the rising tide of anti-US sentiment.

France also wants to establish its influence militarily by playing a major role in the proposed multinational force that will police an eventual settlement in Lebanon. But it considers a ceasefire and a political agreement by all parties to be a precondition for dispatching an estimated 5,000 French troops.

The US is happy for France to assume a military role, given that its forces and those of its main ally, Britain, are badly extended in Iraq and Afghanistan. Politically also it is helpful to Washington, and London, that a military intervention in Lebanon is not carried out by the same forces that invaded Iraq. But Washington will not accept any French role that is not on its terms.

Last week Paris circulated a resolution to the UN Security Council that echoed all the main elements of Washington's demands, including the establishment of a buffer zone extending from the Israeli border to the Litani River, but reiterating the call for an immediate ceasefire. Washington countered this by stating it would propose its own resolution.

At the emergency Security Council meeting on Sunday no US resolution was presented and the talks broke up without agreement. On Monday, France forced the suspension of a planned meeting to discuss the composition of the multinational force and threatened to boycott a meeting that had been scheduled for Wednesday on the issue.

A French diplomatic source said, "The meeting is premature because we consider that the conditions for force deployment, in other words the immediate end to hostilities and a political agreement, have not been met. For the moment, we do not expect to participate but it will depend on the discussions that are taking place at the moment."

This is the most cynical sort of horse-trading. France acquiesced in the EU resolution to US dictates and it will take part in an international force. But it calculates that it has some leeway before reaching an agreement, as the US wants Israel to have more time to deepen its assault on Lebanon.

France has made clear that once an agreement is reached, it is ready to act ruthlessly to smash up Hezbollah. Defence Minister

Michele Alliot-Marie has insisted that any military force must be 15,000 to 20,000 strong, "well-armed, have substantial firepower and armour" and empowered to engage in hostilities in support of the Lebanese army. "It must be credible and capable of making itself respected by everyone," she said.

Several other European nations are amongst the 30 countries scrambling to ingratiate themselves with Washington while also establishing a toehold in the Middle East through participation in the planned force. But some are less keen than France to be dragged into a Lebanese quagmire. Italy, which supported the French position at the EU foreign ministers' summit, said that it would contribute troops only on the condition that it is not a "combat force" and is not NATO-led.

Similarly, though France's diplomatic conflicts with the US have focused most media attention on its discussions with Tehran, there are reports of backdoor talks with Syria, Lebanon, and even Hezbollah involving countries as diverse as Italy, Spain and Britain.

The most open diplomatic initiatives with Syria have been mounted by Germany, with the aim of splitting it from Tehran. German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier of the Social Democratic Party reportedly offered Syrian President Bashar Assad trade incentives with the EU in return for breaking with Tehran and aiding the insertion of a multinational force. Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema also praised Syria's constructive role in helping to achieve stability in the region.

There are real concerns amongst all the European powers that Washington's support for Israel's war of aggression in Gaza and Lebanon will prove to be the beginning of a regional conflagration. But what unites them all is their refusal to contemplate an open confrontation with the US.

Two factors dictate this policy of appeasement.

In the first instance, they calculate that no combination of European nations, including the entire EU, has the ability to militarily challenge the US. They are awed by the eruption of US militarism that began with the first war against Iraq in 1991 and which finds its most finished expression in the Bush doctrine of preemptive war. Their greatest fear is that political opposition would provoke Washington to end all collaboration with international institutions such as the UN and pursue an avowedly unilateral course as a global hegemon.

Secondly, the occupation of Iraq and the advanced preparations for hostilities against Iran signal a reordering, not just of the Middle East, but of the entire globe that will determine who has access to strategic resources such as oil and gas. All the European powers hope for is that they will be allowed a share of the spoils in return for their subservience to Washington.



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