

European diplomacy in Gaza crisis prepares trap for Palestinians

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Unlike the United States, which has given its unconditional backing to Israel and opposed all cease-fire proposals following Israel's onslaught on the Gaza Strip, Europe has undertaken a series of diplomatic initiatives. There are currently a number of high-level European diplomatic missions in the Middle East.

On behalf of the European Union, EU Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner, chief diplomat Javier Solana and the foreign ministers of France, Sweden and the Czech Republic have traveled to the region. The Czech Republic currently holds the chair of the EU. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair is in the region on behalf of the so-called Middle East Quartet (United Nations, US, EU and Russia). French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited the region on Monday and Tuesday in his function as co-chairman of the recently founded Mediterranean Union. The second chairperson of the Union is Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

All of the European representatives have called for an immediate cease-fire. They have discussed their proposals with Mubarak, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and—in the case of Sarkozy—Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, all of the European delegations have ruled out any talks with Hamas, the immediate target of the Israeli aggression.

Many opponents of the Israeli attack on Gaza have welcomed the diplomatic initiatives by Europe. The speaker on foreign affairs for the German Left Party, Wolfgang Gehrke, for example, praised the intervention of the French president.

The Israeli peace activist Michel Warchawski has merely criticized these initiatives for being insufficient and for not moving quickly enough. On the web site of the French "New Anti-capitalist Party" he issued "an urgent appeal to all activists... to put pressure on their governments to intervene to stop the bloodletting and demand that they intervene now and not wait a day longer!" He went on to call for the dispatch of an "international force which places itself between the fronts and protects the people of Gaza."

Such declarations fail to recognize the real character of the European interventions.

The first point to note is that no European government has condemned the Israeli aggression and called it by its real name—a war crime. Instead, they have justified the actions carried out by Israel—its 18-month blockade of the population of Gaza, its targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders and its bombardment of the densely populated and virtually defenseless territory—as legitimate acts of self-defense.

Before leaving for his trip, President Sarkozy publicly blamed Hamas—and not the Israeli military—for the plight of the Palestinians, citing the firing of Hamas rockets into southern Israel. The head of the Czech government and current president of the European Union, Mirek Topolánek, declared that the Israeli military action had a "defensive" character. And in a telephone call with the Israeli prime minister, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the responsibility for the fighting lay "clearly and exclusively" with Hamas.

In appealing for a cease-fire, the European governments are first and foremost pursuing their own geo-political interests.

They fear that the ruthless methods employed by Israel will undermine the Arab regimes with which they have economic and political ties. The widespread popular anger over Israel's actions is increasingly being directed against the Arab ruling elites, which collaborate closely with Israel and the US.

Ruling circles in Europe also fear a destabilization of Israel as a result of the latter's brutal war in Gaza.

An editorial in the French conservative newspaper *Figaro* on January 5, entitled "Intervene Quickly for a Cease-Fire," warned against such a development, declaring, "Immediate action is absolutely necessary because dissatisfaction will grow in tandem with the number of victims in this new Palestinian drama." The newspaper added, "[D]espite the difficulties, it is necessary to conclude a cease-fire without delay because the worst may be yet to come: Any ground intervention in this densely populated area would have murderous consequences. And what would happen if Hezbollah opens up a second front in Lebanon? It is necessary to act quickly because the passivity of the US has created a vacuum which encourages numerous extremists."

European governments, in particular France, also fear for stability in their own countries, home to millions of immigrants from North Africa and Arab lands. Many youth who have rebelled against intolerable conditions in the French suburbs in recent years are of Arab and Muslim parentage and identify with the Palestinians.

Last but not least, the Europeans regard the passivity of the US, occupied with a change of administrations and a deep economic crisis, as an opportunity to reestablish and strengthen their position in the Middle East. This applies particularly to France, which, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was one of the leading colonial powers in the region until it was later forced out by Great Britain and the US.

This point is also dealt with in the *Figaro* editorial, which states, "Because of the momentary absence of the Americans, the president of the Republic can hope to once again create a role for the Europeans."

Since taking power, Sarkozy has worked systematically to strengthen the status of France in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. This was the purpose of the Mediterranean Union founded in July of last year, as well as Sarkozy's collaboration with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is regarded as a pariah in Washington. Sarkozy also maintains closer relations with Israel than any of his predecessors as French president.

Before setting out on his Middle East mission, Sarkozy boasted of his close relations in the region. "France bares a particular responsibility because it has been able to establish a bond of trust and friendship with all the concerned parties," he said in an interview which was published in three Lebanese daily papers.

Germany is also pursuing its own interests in the Middle East. German diplomacy proceeds more quietly than that of Sarkozy—not least because of the country's past role in the Holocaust—but it is just as ambitious. While Sarkozy has traveled to the Middle East with the media in his wake, German Chancellor Merkel and her foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, have been in telephone contact with the main players. In recent years, Germany has played a key role in the formation of the police and legal authorities in the nominally autonomous Palestinian regions.

The ceasefire pursued by the Europeans corresponds to their imperialist ambitions. Rather than securing the liberation of the Palestinian people and any easing of their misery, the European powers are intent on establishing a more effective means for their repression. To this end, they require the services of a reliable police force. The most likely candidates for such a role are the Egyptian regime of strongman Mubarak and the Palestinian Authority backed by the US and headed by Abbas.

While Israel intensifies its bombardment and ground war in Gaza, the Europeans are attempting to reach a deal that suits Tel

Aviv and Washington. According to the French newspaper *Le Monde* in its report on the discussions of EU delegations with the Egyptian government, France regards an end to the smuggling of weapons into Gaza as decisive in winning Israeli agreement to a cease-fire. To this end, it is necessary to establish even stronger controls over the border between Egypt and Gaza, most likely through the deployment of an international force.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* suggests additional motives. The real aim of the Israeli offensive, the newspaper writes, is to drive the Palestinians into the Sinai desert and "give Egypt part of the responsibility for the 1.5 million Palestinians." It goes on to say that "the situation would be almost comparable to the Six Day War of 1967: Arab war refugees fled at that time from Israeli troops into neighbouring Arab states and stayed there permanently. In the current case, Israel could offer an end to hostilities if a neutral power agreed to supervise the cease-fire. Egypt is a potential candidate. Cairo would be tasked with holding Hamas in check and making sure that people had something to eat. It would assume partial responsibility for administration of the Gaza Strip."

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concludes that the US would be prepared to accept such a solution and would exert pressure on Cairo, along the lines that "We are Israel's closest ally and Cairo's most important source of finance. Mubarak knows that nobody else is available."

The British *Financial Times* comes to a similar conclusion. The newspaper writes that Egypt suspects Israel's "real aim in Gaza consists of transferring responsibility for the Strip and its inhabitants to Cairo." The paper quotes a high-ranking Egyptian official who complains, "We are the victims of an evil game... when we open the borders and then have a huge refugee problem, what will happen? Should we transfer the population of Gaza into the Sinai?"

Such commentaries make clear that the European diplomacy has a sinister character. Following a war which could well involve the deaths of thousands of Palestinians and the expulsion from Gaza of hundreds of thousands, the Europeans are preparing a solution aimed at ensuring that Gaza remains a huge prison. In collaboration with Israel, the US and Europe, the administration of this prison would be handed over to Egypt and the Palestinian Authority.



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