

# MERIA

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE GAZA WAR: VIEWS FROM EUROPE Symposium\*

*The perceptions of Western elites and publics, and the policies of Western governments toward the Middle East have always been viewed as vital to events in the region. Perhaps such concepts are exaggerated, yet this subject is well worth examining. Thus, in the wake of the Gaza war, people from a number of European countries were asked to look at trends in the places where they live. Three levels are examined: the policies of governments, the attitudes of intellectual-media-cultural-journalistic elites, and public opinion. Several European countries were chosen to get some sense of whether these factors are changing and their current status.*

*Biographies of contributors can be found at the end of each section.*

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### ITALY

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In Italy, the two main political factions have diametrically opposite views on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. In general, while Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's PdL (People of Freedom) is generally pro-Israeli, Veltroni's PD (Democratic Party) is typically pro-Palestine. The war in Gaza sparked debates among politicians, pundits, and ordinary citizens. Yet to what extent did these events actually change people's minds about the conflict?

Massimo D'Alema, a former foreign minister, well-known for supporting Hamas, during a sit-in held in Assisi, said that the Gaza war would tarnish the reputation of the Israeli government and could even cause people to become anti-Israel: "It was a bloody

useless war. I am not trying to hide Hamas's-- a fundamentalist group--enormous responsibilities, but they are the beneficiaries here.... This war was a terrific propaganda for the radicals."

D'Alema's position remains the same as usual, since he advocates (as he did before) the diplomatic recognition of Hamas as a legitimate political party. In Assisi, he continued by acknowledging that his opinion "is a taboo, [but] I don't feel like I am by myself here, I even received letters of solidarity from the foreign ministers of some moderate Islamic countries."

The former foreign minister is not the only one whose position has not changed much. Even Berlusconi's recent remarks are quite familiar: "It was the population of Gaza that suffered more from the recent crisis, since Hamas used them as human-shields to combat the Israeli action. Israel, on the other hand, must absolutely be comprehended. I spoke with many Israelis, every day they went to sleep staring at their roof and asking themselves if they would be able to make it through the night." Berlusconi continued, "Italy is very close to Israel in this troubled time," he stated at the meeting in Sharm al-Shaykh, Egypt, called to discuss the crisis.

Other politicians, however, think that the war has changed the situation in the Middle East and that some Italians may even have begun to sympathize with Israel. As PD's Congressman Emanuele Fiano puts it:

Something has changed. Hamas's fundamentalist nature, its violent constitution, its appeal for a holy war against the Jews, and its inclusion in the list of terrorist movements identified by Europe, have perhaps for the first time caused a split in Italian public opinion, between a judgment of Palestinian versus Israeli rights and unconditional support for Palestinian representatives. Hamas's fundamentalism has made us understand Israel's right to defend itself. This is obviously without diminishing the sorrow for any innocent victim of this war.

Fiano's position is somewhat similar to that of Senator Domenico Benedetti Valentini (PDL):

I think that Hamas' cruel proclamations have convinced the free world of Israelis' absolute right to live in peace and prosperity inside well guarded borders. The tribute paid in blood by the Gaza civilians might have caused someone to lose faith in Israel. Generally speaking, though, the number of those who ask the European institutions to take part in the tragic Israeli-Palestinian controversy and make this a 'Mediterranean' issue for us is rising. Europe should intervene more effectively between the two sides and try to induce a historical compromise inspired by cohabitation among civilizations.

He added: "I think that the first step toward reconciliation should come from the Islamic world even though it's clear that the civilian death toll in Gaza does not help. We should isolate those who promote hate as a solution to the problems of our time."

Both Fiano and Benedetti Valentini, along with other Italian politicians, visited Israel and the Israeli town of Sderot in December 2008, during a trip organized by the Italian inter-parliamentary association. They come from opposing parties but share a common vision: Hamas must change its policy if it really wants to be considered legitimate.

Turning to the media standpoint, consider the case of "Annozero," for example, a show on Rai, public television, anchored by Michele Santoro. On January 15, 2009, "Annozero" hosted some politicians, analysts, and journalists to talk about the war in Gaza. According to many, the program was biased toward the Palestinian cause, so much so that a well known leftist journalist, Lucia Annunziata, walked out and told Santoro: "So far, except for one girl, it has been 99.9 percent pro-Palestinian." Annunziata's decision was widely approved, especially since she had never been considered a supporter of Israel.

The majority of Italian newspapers are pro-Palestinian, no doubt. The same is true of most television programs, and of course public opinion is heavily influenced by the media. A number of young people now wear *kafiyas*, and others consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an issue of good versus evil, with the latter as the good side.

Unfortunately, there are few polls available to give an accurate picture. However, Renato Mannheimer, one of the most famous Italian pollsters, wrote in *Il Corriere della Sera* of January 11, 2009: "More Italians continue, indeed, to align themselves with the Israeli people as opposed to the Palestinians by a margin of 22 percent to 18 percent. This is particularly high among males from the north of the country who, predictably, support the center-right coalition. The number of those who feel more empathetic toward the Palestinians is much higher among center-left voters at 31 percent."

Mr. Mannheimer also points out that the subject is becoming more important among Italians. It is hard to say if the war in Gaza has led to a change in either direction. One thing for sure, though, is that Italians have become

more interested and informed, at least temporarily, on this issue.

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## SWEDEN AND NORWAY

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If ever there were a paradise on earth, leaving aside any religious implications of that phrase, Sweden would have to be a top contender. The same length as the whole of continental Europe, Sweden nonetheless has a population less than that of London. The country is green, clean, spacious, quiet, and rich in just about everything humankind could want apart from oil--and that is partly offset by clean and plentiful hydropower.

After decades of left-wing Social Democrat cradle-to-the-grave government, Swedes have been largely conditioned to having someone else do their thinking for them. The nanny-state was designed in Stockholm and exported around the world, with political correctness evolving to the point of self-effacement --all of which speaks volumes about the welfare of this wonderful nation and the time that its population has on its hands to voluntarily engage in "good works."

Foremost among these good works is the Israel-Palestine issue. The problem as explained to the Swedish public is between Israel and "Palestine"--the wider Arab instigation and perpetuation of the problem is largely ignored. Swedes like their problems neatly packaged and easy to handle--like their IKEA furniture.

Justifiably proud of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg's heroic personal role in

rescuing so many Jews from the jaws of death in Hungary during World War II, Swedes are also palpably distressed that this was nonetheless just a personal role--the Swedish government itself did nothing; hence Sweden's traditionally friendly attitude to Israel.

That all changed in 1967. Jews were now asserting themselves, no longer the cowed remnants of a smashed minority in Europe. With their love for neat packages and simple black-and-white images, Swedes were quick to abandon their support of the Jewish state and Sweden's Jewish community and instead embrace the freshest batch of downtrodden victims packaged for them--the Palestinian Arabs. Sweden has for most of the past half-century been governed by a series of left-wing socialist governments. Former Minister Olof Palme moved Sweden from its traditionally Israel-friendly stance to being an increasingly belligerent, non-nuanced critic of the Jewish state.

Keen not to be perceived as once again standing on the sidelines, Sweden as a nation was ripe for over-compensation. In a culture conditioned to deal with one problem at a time and to solve it with engineering efficiency--Sweden has given us both Volvo and Saab, cars renowned for their engineering excellence--Swedes embraced and disseminated the Palestinian Arab narrative without question.

Sweden's oil dependency may be another factor in this change. In 1978, Sweden was given the opportunity of a barter deal with Norway whereby the Swedish state would buy out vehicle manufacturer Volvo and exchange a part of its shareholding in the company for a stake in Norway's recently discovered offshore oil reserves. For a variety of reasons the agreement was never ratified, and Sweden was left without any oil resources of its own. The pronounced shift in Sweden's Middle East stance largely coincides with the country's increasing dependence on oil to fuel its economy and its ever-larger oil bill.

To this mixture a number of other ingredients must be added: Not having been at war for 200 years, there is generally little

nationalistic feeling in Sweden. Self-effacement is so far developed that native Swedes now question the suitability of flying the national flag, bearing in mind that the country has over the years become home to several hundred thousand “new Swedes”—the politically correct term for refugees, asylum-seekers, and other immigrants (mostly from the Middle East). There are about 400,000 Muslims—4 percent of the population—and 20,000 Jews in Sweden.

In 2006, a non-socialist coalition government came to power led by the Conservatives and supported by the Liberals, Center Party, and Christian Democrats. The current coalition adopts a more balanced approach to the Middle East but has been unable to make a real change. For example, economic aid to the Palestinians is never conditioned on such issues as greater democracy and human rights or even a limitation on not using Swedish aid for anti-Israel incitement.

How has all this affected Sweden’s perception of Israel over the years, and more specifically in the aftermath of the war that Hamas provoked with Israel in December 2008? To say that attitudes have changed would be both correct and incorrect. Correct because for the first time since 1967, the man in the street is expressing understanding of Israel’s security position and the geopolitical dilemma Israel faces: an aggressive Iran using Hizballah and Hamas proxies to expand its hegemony in the Middle East; an Arab world that seldom, if ever, questions its own policies; the abuse of Islam by Islamist political extremists for seeking political power; and the ever-present threat and commission of violence by large and growing minorities of disenchanted Muslim youths against other Muslims or non-Muslims.

In private, Swedes are as never before expressing concern over the demographic changes to their society and concern that their long-standing Jewish minority are under existential threat—Jews have lived here for almost 250 years, yet synagogues and other Jewish facilities require police protection, something no other minority group has ever

needed in this country. Meanwhile, the most important tone-setter in this country—the media—is still largely committed to a political agenda that sees vilification of the Jewish state as a legitimate means of bringing about its demise. The mainstream Swedish media—the national and local newspapers, state-funded radio and TV—are traditionally and still are openly anti-Israel. Swedish Radio and Swedish TV are both widely perceived as mouthpieces for pro-Palestinian activist groups. At an inter-faith rally in Gothenburg recently, a non-political event designed to bring together followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and whose sole banner read “A prayer for peace,” Gothenburg’s largest daily GP labelled the event an “anti-war rally,” in other words, opposing Israel’s policy in Gaza, something the organizers vehemently deny. The organizers were never asked for their comments.

One of the most active advocates against the Jewish state is news agency TT, the Swedish equivalent of Reuters or AFP. TT is 80 percent owned by the country’s six biggest dailies, so its politically filtered news is automatically spread to 80 percent of the country’s newspaper readers and to Swedish TV teletext news consumers. TT relies on three main strategies: deletion of news items that do not match its agenda, mistranslation of news or quotes to suit its agenda, and the insertion of lies in a stream of otherwise genuine news items.

Many journalists adopt TT’s strategy. This explains why anti-Semitism is once again on the rise in Sweden. It also helps explain why specifically Jewish targets are selected whenever the conflict in the Middle East takes a turn for the worse—all Jews are by definition made collectively responsible for the actions of Israel. While the vast majority of Jews in Sweden are unequivocal and proud in their support of the Jewish state, this strategy is aimed at making Swedish Jews directly responsible for Israel’s actions.

Sweden’s Christian press and many of the smaller local and regional newspapers are often a clear contrast to the virulent anti-Israel, bordering anti-Semitic, discourse of the

mainstream media. The Christian press, particularly, but by no means only the evangelical Protestant media, routinely maintains a higher ethical standard in its coverage of the Middle East. In contrast, the leadership of the Church of Sweden is strongly politicized and vociferous in its routine condemnations of Israel, while rank-and-file churchgoers seem to have a very different attitude. On January 27 every year, Sweden commemorates World War II and the Holocaust in which six million Jews were slaughtered. This year, in 2009, citing Israel's actions in Gaza as the reason, the Church of Sweden in Luleå announced its withdrawal from the customary commemorative service.

Just two days before that, on January 25, 2009, Jews and non-Jews gathered in the southern city of Malmö at a police-authorized rally in support of peace and the Jewish state. They were attacked by an illegal demonstration consisting of hundreds of Palestinians and Swedes who cut the power supply to the public address system and hurled stones, bottles, and rockets at the rally participants. The police responded immediately--by ordering the Jews off the streets. Holocaust survivors attending the rally recounted reawakened terror as uniformed officers with snarling German Shepherd dogs hustled Jews down dark alleys while a frenzied mob shouting "Heil Hitler" and "Death to the Jews" seized their meeting place.

In today's Sweden, such an event is by no means remarkable. What is equally disturbing is the minimal coverage it received in the mainstream media and the vilifying inaccuracies in the few stories published, with incorrect reports that the police had to quell a riot between Jewish demonstrators and anti-Israel counter-demonstrators. In fact, the Jews were singing about peace and engaged in no violence; the pro-Hamas demonstrators were carrying Hizballah's rifle-emblazoned flag and attacking them without provocation. There is film footage to prove it.

When it comes to the overwhelmingly negative and partisan treatment of Israel in the Swedish press, the saving grace is the

electronic media, to which the general public is increasingly turning for unbiased news coverage and on which even politicians are increasingly relying for accurate news and incisive analysis.

Sweden may be a paradise in many respects, but as the propagandists and political extremists move ever more confidently onto center stage in an official Sweden paralyzed by political correctness, the grass-roots native population is becoming increasingly restive with the ugliness of a discourse imported from the Arab Middle East.

Similar issues can be seen in Norway. To give a sense of the atmosphere there, after speaking at a rally in Oslo on January 8, 2009, Siv Jensen, chairwoman of the Progress Party, the main opposition party, had to be placed under around-the-clock police protection after receiving a number of death threats. The party's foreign policy advisor, Dr. Asle Toje, remarked, "I have never experienced this kind of hatred in Norway. There were people throwing stones at and spitting on rally-goers. Afterward, people carrying Israeli flags were randomly attacked in the streets."

Remarkably, this reaction came despite the fact that Jensen's speech was an even-handed one, calling for secure borders for Israel coupled with an end to fighting and aid to the Palestinians in Gaza.

In contrast, the Socialist Party, which is part of the current government, has proposed boycotts of Israel. In August 2006, Jostein Gaardner, Norway's most famous living writer, wrote in the newspaper *Aftenposten* saying Israel should be dismantled. "Zionist terrorists started operating in the days of Jesus," he wrote, among other antisemitic slurs.

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## UNITED KINGDOM

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In years to come, we may well look back on the Gaza crisis as a tipping point for anti-Israel activity in Britain: the moment when anti-Zionist groups gathered enough momentum, and supporters in the right places, to make a real impact on policy and public opinion regarding Israel. As with all wars, public perception of right and wrong comes as much from media images as from any preconceived sense of moral weight or military rationale. The dominant images of the Gaza campaign in the British media were of civilian, usually child, casualties; distraught relatives and angry aid workers; of Israeli planes flying high above a captive, mostly civilian, population, dropping bombs on people incapable of fighting back. After the ceasefire, British journalists competed with each other to find ever more heart-rending accounts of lives lost, families shattered, and homes destroyed. The outrage provoked by the BBC's refusal to broadcast a charity appeal for humanitarian aid for Gaza was further evidence that the dominant narrative of Gaza had become one of a suffering civilian population who were innocent victims of an unjust Israeli assault.

This does not mean that Israel failed to make its public relations points in the British media. The Israeli ambassador and government spokespeople appeared frequently on all channels and in the press. The basic point about the years of rocket fire from Gaza and the obligation on any government to respond were well made and understood. It is just that this argument failed to convince the many people in Britain, including broadcast interviewers, who simply do not accept that bombing is the correct response to anything--even to being bombed. This is even more the case, and is expressed with even greater emotion, after Iraq. By the time Israeli ground

forces had gone into Gaza--and the media became dominated by reports of Israeli fire allegedly hitting schools and UN headquarters--no explanation could justify, for most people, the loss of life and physical destruction that Israel had wreaked.

"Most people" is a phrase that needs qualification. Opinion polling regularly shows that many people in Britain--up to one-third--neither know nor care about the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Of those who do care, many do not take sides. However, in the only published opinion poll on the conflict, conducted a week after the ceasefire, 47 percent of British people agreed that "Israel is acting far too harshly towards Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza," while just 22 percent thought that "Israel is doing all in reasonably can to live in peace with Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza."

This judgment should not be taken as a sign that British people have any particular affection for Hamas. On the contrary, almost everyone in Britain--beyond those parts of the political left that have made common cause with Islamism--has a very low opinion of Islamist extremists, especially those who send suicide bombers onto public transport. The Palestinian people in Gaza, though, are regularly portrayed in the British media as the most pitiful and helpless of all oppressed peoples. British people like to think of themselves as having a strong sense of fair play and were thus outraged by the obvious disparity in firepower in Gaza.

Parliamentary debates on Gaza were marked by the overwhelming condemnation of Israel from MPs, and Israel's friends in the House of Commons found it hard to make any sort of headway. While only muted criticism came from the upper echelons of government, for many people in the media, politics, academia, and moderate Muslim opinion, Israel crossed a line in Gaza and condemned itself to pariah status.

This is the reason why anger over Gaza far exceeded anything seen in Britain during, for example, the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Over 250 antisemitic hate crimes were reported to CST, the UK Jewish community's

security and defense organization, during the four weeks from the start of the Gaza crisis on December 27, 2008. This is about eight times the number that would normally be recorded at that time of year. It is roughly double the number of antisemitic incidents (134) reported to CST during the 34 days of the Second Lebanon War. However you measure it, this is not just the worst period on record (CST has recorded antisemitic incidents since 1984), it is completely off the scale. These hate crimes reflect a high level and type of anger against Israel, and anyone perceived as connected to it, unprecedented in recent years in Britain.

To get at the meaning of these antisemitic incidents, you have to look at what sort of things took place. As has been repeatedly demonstrated over many years--in Britain and elsewhere--extreme hatred of Israel manifests in attacks on--and more general prejudice toward--Jews. There were relatively few violent physical assaults, although assaults did take place, of visibly Jewish people, by pro-Palestinian supporters. There was one attempt to burn down a synagogue, which failed.

Yet the vast majority of the incidents involved antisemitic and anti-Israel graffiti on synagogues, Jewish buildings and public property in "Jewish" areas; or abusive and threatening phone calls, hate mail, and emails to synagogues and Jewish community organizations. The reason that the incidents mostly took this form, rather than random street violence, is that they are essentially political expressions, which come from an anti-Zionist politics expressing itself in antisemitic ways.

The mass form of this politics could be found in the anti-Israel demonstrations that occurred on a daily basis in London and around Britain during the conflict, and here, too, the anti-Israel discourse was tinged with antisemitism. Many of the protestors in these marches were not motivated by antisemitism, or even by fully-developed anti-Zionism, but by a simple, human reaction to the suffering in Gaza and a desire to see two states, side by side in peace, which, crucially, they blame Israel for preventing. Some were Jewish, not all of whom were anti-Zionists.

However, they marched in an anti-Israel movement some of whose leaders support Hamas, where the equation of Israel with Nazi Germany is a central theme and shouts of "Kill the Jews" could even be heard. The level of violence that emerged from these anti-Israel street protests was another escalation since 2006. Videos on YouTube show protestors chasing police officers through the streets of central London and hurling missiles at them outside the Israeli embassy. Branches of Starbucks and Tesco were attacked by protestors who believe that they support Israel economically.

This anger and energy is likely to find a home in two places: the campaign to prosecute Israeli politicians and military personnel for war crimes, and the campaign to boycott Israel. It is generally believed in Britain that Israel committed war crimes in Gaza. Even William Hague, the shadow foreign secretary for the opposition Conservative party, has called for war crime allegations to be investigated. The question asked is not whether war crimes took place, but rather whether offenders can be identified, enough evidence gathered, and a court found to try the case. One moderate Muslim organization, which has sincerely pioneered Muslim-Jewish relations in recent years, has even established a fund to pay for this process.

Also apparent is the boost that all this energy and anger has given to the campaign for a boycott of Israel. A movement that previously had little support and even less impact, mainly because of its obsessive focus on the academic sector, has now found genuine momentum for a boycott of Israeli goods. Local councilors in Birmingham and Oxford have called for boycotts; some want the law changed so that local councils can consider moral and ethical issues when awarding contracts.

The opinion poll cited above found that 29 percent of the British public think that "we in Britain should boycott goods from Israel, and refuse to buy them, in protest against Israel's policies towards the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza." This is more than

enough people to build an effective boycott movement.

This is a populist movement of street politics, led by a far left that is looking for a post-Iraq bandwagon, and Islamists who have identified ending British support for Israel as an attainable strategic objective. It can now count on the active support of at least some MPs, local councils, and a large chunk of ordinary British people. Whatever the intention, a successful movement to boycott Israel will inevitably leave British Jews feeling vulnerable and isolated. If there has up to now been a dike penning up anti-Israel venom in British politics, Gaza may just have burst the dam.

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## FRANCE

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For almost 50 years, from Charles de Gaulle's (1959-1969) to Jacques Chirac's (1995-2007) presidency, France's Middle East policies were shaped primarily by nationalistic "Grand Strategy" factors: hostility toward American hegemony; the lure of cheap oil and later for oil-related trade and investment; and a fascination for a French-Arab or Euro-Islamic alliance. On all three accounts, Israel was seen as a nuisance, if not an enemy.

The nationalist paradigm was partly eased under François Mitterrand (1981-1995) who was interested, for various reasons and at least up to a point, in better relations with both the United States and Israel. A second relaxation occurred during Chirac's final years as president (2004-2007). The Iraq War, which

Chirac had fiercely opposed, had destroyed or weakened several of France's associates or former associates in the area: Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but also the Asad dynasty in Syria and Muammar Qadhafi's Libya. It was safer, accordingly, to adapt to the new American-dominated situation. In addition, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's about-face on the Palestinian question, implementing a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, allowed for a quick reconciliation with Israel without any loss of face on the part of France.

In 2007, French nationalism seemed to be gone for good, as Nicolas Sarkozy, a supporter of NATO, a friend of America, and an open admirer of Israel, was elected president. Two years later, however, France is clearly relapsing into its former pro-Arab and pro-Islamic options, not for grand strategy reasons anymore, but out of sheer domestic concerns. France, once a Western country with a Christian background, is morphing into a multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious nation with a strong Islamic element.

Like most other Western countries, and in spite of its nationalistic posturing, France has ingathered large numbers of alien immigrants for decades, mostly from the Third World: either citizens of former colonies--in North or Sub-Saharan Africa, the Levant, the Indian Ocean, the Far East--or citizens from other Middle Eastern or tropical countries, and even French citizens from still-existing overseas territories in the West Indies, the Indian Ocean, and Oceania. In the long run, it has led to a dramatic demographic and societal transformation.

Under French law, no census may be taken on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin. Even academic investigation is somewhat restricted regarding these matters. Still, it is widely estimated that:

--About 10 million residents of metropolitan France, out of a total of 63 million, i. e., one resident out of six, have Third World roots;

--If one were to include France's overseas territories, there are 13 million residents, one out of five, who have Third World roots.

--The immigrant or overseas communities are much younger and have more children than the historic French population, providing at least 30 percent among the younger generations and according to some definitions as much as half.

Quite naturally, these Neo-French ("*les Français issus de la diversité*," as they are currently referred to--which could be loosely translated as "the more diverse Frenchmen") tend to exert as much leverage as they can on French politics. Since every child born on French soil is entitled to citizenship, this means a very large and increasing number of people. Until the 1990s, their constituency was still modest: many of them were still without the right or were too young to vote.

Today, as many alien residents have been naturalized, and as their children are coming of age, it is becoming a key constituency in voting for local, national, or European parliamentary elections. This proportion is expected to grow even more impressively over the next twenty years. In addition, Neo-French leverage may include less democratic means, such as mass demonstrations, street violence, riots, or terrorism. As a result, every political party is now attempting to coopt the Neo-French or at least not to antagonize them.

Since Mitterrand, the Socialist Party, and left-wing groups have championed immigrant and non-white communities: They currently garner about two-thirds of their total vote, and about 80 percent of the Muslim vote alone. Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, a neo-fascist party that once campaigned against Islam and non-white immigration, has changed its tune in the 2000s, thus winning many Neo-French supporters.

Among the conservatives, Chirac had always been eager to play the Neo-French and Muslim cards. Sarkozy, who owed his election in 2007, in no small measure, to a strong stand on "national identity" and against mass immigration, was the first president ever to support affirmative action--a concept hitherto shunned as a break from the French Republican idea of equality--as government policy. He also appointed Neo-French figures,

such as Rachida Dati, the Moroccan-born minister of justice, Rama Yade, the Senegalese-born minister for human rights, and Fadela Amara, the Algerian-born minister for urban policy, to full-fledged cabinet posts.

Moreover, concern for the Neo-French vote may be the ultimate rationale behind one of Sarkozy's most striking, and less understood, initiatives in international affairs: the Union for the Mediterranean (UFM), which is supposed to federate the European Union with every single country or entity in Northern Africa and the Near East.

The Neo-French are generally anti-Israel, certainly in their majority. Muslims, who amount to two-thirds of them, are anti-Israel, and often anti-Jewish and even anti-Western. Non-Muslims tend frequently to side with Muslims, Arabs, or Palestinians, because they feel close to them as former colonial subjects or Third-Worlders. A reinforcing factor is also the common scourge of Islamic cultures and many traditional-oriented, non-European cultures as well: ochlocracy and the supremacy of group conformity over individual opinion.

The Gaza War between Christmas 2008 and New Year's 2009, started a period known in France as "*la trêve des confiseurs*" ("the confectioners' truce"), where politics and the media are supposed to come to a standstill. This tradition, however, did not prevent the Islamic militants from engaging in sermons, internet buzz, and rallies on behalf of the Hamas regime, so effectively that anti-Jewish violence flared up throughout the country. In Toulouse, in southwestern France, Muslim extremists set a car aflame and launched it against a synagogue. In Metz, Lorraine, in the east, Muslim demonstrators marched from the mosque, where they had listened to an anti-Jewish sermon, to the local synagogue, apparently in order to vandalize it. A pogrom was luckily averted by the local police.

Several Jewish rallies were cancelled, including in Paris, for fear of violence. A well-known TV icon who is Jewish, Arthur, had to cancel his show in several cities because of threats. In Strasbourg, Alsace, a Jewish city

council member was subjected to similar bullying. All in all, 352 antisemitic acts, including 50 violent acts, were reported during the month of January, 5 times more than the monthly average during the previous years.

When the “confectioners’ truce” was over, Islamic protest evolved into a broader “human rights protest” against what was now described as either the “slaughter in Gaza” or even as “genocide.” Large-scale demonstrations with tens of thousands of participants were staged in every major city. Most of the participants were Muslims or Neo-French. Many women were veiled. Arab and Muslim flags were flown. All kinds of anti-Israel or anti-Jewish slogans were shouted, including “Death to Jews.” Again, violence erupted. In Paris, cars were burned and windows were smashed, for example, in a pro-Hamas demonstration on Boulevard Malesherbes.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the government, the political class, and most of the media have either aligned with the Neo-French with regard to the Gaza crisis or acted with a carefully crafted, ostensible even-handedness.

Most of the Left condoned the pro-Hamas frenzy. On January 6, 2009, the Political Bureau of the Socialist Party denounced Israel’s military operations as “excessive” and “illegitimate in terms of international law.” On January 10, Martine Aubry, the new leader of the party, said Israel’s behavior was “scandalous” and “unlikely to be supported by any peace-loving democrat in the world.” In many instances, Socialist mayors or members of parliament participated in the street demonstrations. Aubry herself did so as mayor of Lille, capital of France’s industrial north, which also happens to be--if suburbs are included--the largest Muslim city in the country. The far Left (Communists, Trotskyists, antiglobalists, and militant environmentalists) was even more extreme in its support of Hamas and its vilification of Israel.

Some Socialist leaders were more cautious, however. Bertrand Delanoë, mayor of Paris, a city where Jewish voters still balance the Neo-

French, remained silent throughout the Gaza War. So did Segolene Royal, Aubry’s arch-rival, who had taken in 2007, as a Socialist contender in the presidential election against Sarkozy, a fiercely pro-Israel and anti-Iran stand.

On the Right, President Sarkozy characterized the Israeli military operations against Hamas, at the very onset, as “disproportionate.” Upon his subsequent visits to the Middle East, while insisting on Israel’s right to security, he never questioned the validity of Hamas rule in Gaza. On March 2, 2009, he cancelled the speech he had agreed to deliver at the annual dinner of CRIF, the Representative Council of the French Jewish Organizations. He just dropped by a few minutes before the dinner, then left. François Fillon, the prime minister, gave a speech instead. While sticking in principle to the president’s doctrine on Middle Eastern issues, he did his very best to appear as a friend of Israel and the Jewish people. According to various sources, former president Jacques Chirac was “appalled” by the war, i. e., opposed Israel once again on a vital issue. There is evidence that the Gaullist faithful among the conservatives share that view.

The Far Right was split. Le Pen’s diehard followers supported Hamas. As a matter of fact, the National Front leader attended on December 26, 2008, the day before the Gaza War started, a show by Dieudonné Mbala Mbala, a Black antisemitic and anti-Israel activist, where a special award was bestowed on Robert Faurisson, the most famous Holocaust denier in France. The show took place at the Zenith theater, with an attendance of 5,000, half European, half Neo-French.

The more traditional Far Right (which has been deserting the National Front in recent years) was unwilling to side with Hamas. It apparently drew a parallel between the Middle East and many French or European problems, or was concerned by the street violence. Some of the Far Rightists even expressed explicit support for Israel.

The media reacted in very diverse ways to the Gaza War. Some, including state-run television channels like France 2, were rabidly

anti-Israel. *Nouvel Observateur*, flagship of the fashionable Left, devoted much space to civilian losses among the Gaza Palestinians, reporting events very much in line with Hamas propaganda. Other media was more balanced. The Left-of-Center magazine *L'Express* published a strongly pro-Israel editorial by Christophe Barbier. *Valeurs Actuelles*, a conservative magazine, was largely supportive of Israel.

What remains to be seen is the outcome of the broader cultural, political, and intellectual struggle within France. Will the Neo-French become assimilated to the point where they embody to a greater extent the existing spectrum of opinion, putting individual freedom ahead of communal loyalties, or not?

The prospects, so far, are not very optimistic on that score. Alternatively, a broad coalition of democrats might emerge and counterbalance those, either Neo-French or classic French, who have embraced a very different approach. Two years ago, Sarkozy was seen as the nation's best hope in this regard. This is no longer true today, even if Sarkozy remains more decent than many other political leaders in the country.

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## GERMANY

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The war in Gaza showed very clearly that public opinion and the media in Germany have changed. Across the country, people went out on the streets to demonstrate against what they called the "terrorist country" that was killing innocent children. The media, rather than covering the story from a neutral position, accused Israel of war crimes against poor, helpless people.

## Government Reactions

One of the first reactions after the first attacks on Gaza came from German chancellor Angela Merkel, who said, in opposition to French President Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Brown, that Israel had the right to protect itself from terror and that Hamas was the aggressor.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, Merkel was criticized by German politicians, including members of her cabinet as well as members of the opposition.

Seeing that former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer had played a role as mediator in the Middle East, his successor Franz Walter Steinmeier wanted to follow in his footsteps. This could be the reason why he was not happy with Merkel's declaration, which placed full responsibility for what was happening in Gaza on Hamas, as undercutting those ambitions to play peacemaker between Hamas and Israel.

## Political Reactions

This showed the discrepancy in the German political landscape. All the bigger parties, as well as the new left-wing party "Die Linke" are split. Yet the Berlin sector party chairman was hardly criticized by other party members for his participation in an anti-Hamas demonstration in Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

Former German Finance Minister Norbert Blüm attacked Israel in several statements. On a television show, he claimed Israel was conducting a war of extermination.<sup>3</sup> Another critic was Social Democratic parliamentarian Rolf Mützenich, a foreign policy specialist in his party who had been in Israel on a number of occasions; Mützenich announced that Israel had to stop its bombardment.<sup>4</sup>

## Intellectual Reactions

The intellectual elite in Germany took many different positions. The former director of the German Orient-Institute in Hamburg, Professor Udo Steinbach, famous for his anti-Israel stance, claimed that the roots of today's anti-Semitism could be found in the war in

Gaza. In a television discussion, he said that Israel's aim with this war was to wipe out the Palestinians.<sup>5</sup> As a speaker at different demonstrations against Israel, mainly organized by Islamic organizations, he criticized Merkel for her "unlimited solidarity" with Israel and its alleged mass murder.<sup>6</sup>

Famous television journalist Ulrich Kienzle, considered a Middle East expert and pro-Palestinian, said on a television talk show that Israel's right to defend its citizens was not a factor here and that it had provoked the missile attacks by an inhuman confinement of people in this small strip of land. On the same talk show, former German Ambassador to Israel Rudolf Dressler spoke of his positive experiences in Israel as well as the impossible situation for Israelis living near the border.

Last, Michel Friedman, vice-president of the Central Consistory of Jews in Germany, appeared on several programs attacking the media's anti-Israel statements and antagonistic experts. Another defender of Israel was the widely read writer and *Der Spiegel* columnist Henryk Broder. Broder wrote from Sderot during the war and attempted to generate interest in Germany for what is happening in the border area.<sup>7</sup>

Many others appeared frequently on television, including Michael Lüders, whose expertise seemed to consist mainly on his having written a dissertation on Egyptian cinema. Lüders claimed that Israeli Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni's Kadima was a right-wing party, and Patrick Leclercq, a convert to Islam who had lived in Cairo, took a strong anti-Israel line.

### **Media Reactions**

During the earlier part of the war, the larger German newspapers often published information and specific figures of fatalities and injuries that were not credited or questioned, but in fact came from Palestinian groups. After some days, the numbers were reduced and responsibility for the correctness of this information was disclaimed.

Moreover there was a great deal of editorializing across the spectrum of

newspapers. Words such as "child murder," "massacre," "mass murder," and "unjustified response" were frequently used. The basic narrative was that Israel was the aggressor trying to overthrow the Hamas regime by any means possible. Hamas rocket attacks on Israel were generally mentioned only at the very end of most articles. Of course there were some exceptions such as *Der Spiegel*, which pointed out the background of the war and the relatively calm reaction of more moderate Arab countries.

Television news was generally more balanced than the print media. Due to Israel's refusal to let journalists into the Gaza Strip, German television stations instead used footage about what was happening in Israel. There was also questioning of reports sent by Palestinian stringers in Gaza, noting that the stations could not guarantee their accuracy. As noted above, interviews with German experts were often more critical of Israel.

### **Public Reactions**

The reactions of Germans to the war were related to their own self-images and attitudes on other matters. Most Germans today do not believe themselves responsible for the deeds of their ancestors, and intellectual circles are often hostile to Israel directly. A large number of demonstrations took place daily in many German cities. They were mainly organized by Islamic groups, like the radical Milli Görüs or Palestinian groups, but so-called peace demonstrations also took place regularly.

Such a peace demonstration took place in the industrial city of Duisburg in North Rhine-Westphalia. It was organized by Milli Görüs. When thousands of Muslims and Germans were demonstrating against Israel, they passed a house where a student had hung two Israel flags on his balcony and window. This was seen by police as a provocation to the demonstrators, who began to attack the house. The police, rather than protecting the property or its residents, rushed in to remove the flags.<sup>8</sup> Following harsh criticism by political figures, the city's police chief apologized.

Another incident took place in the Hessian city of Kassel. On the same day at a demonstration against Israel, organized by the Peace Forum at the local university, a small pro-Israel information booth was attacked by many demonstrators and destroyed.<sup>9</sup> In Mainz, capital of Rhineland-Palatinate, a pro-Israel peace demonstration was attacked. As participants fled for safety into a big store, the manager asked police to arrest them for unlawful entry.<sup>10</sup> There were many more such incidents, and antisemitic manifestations reached a new high level. Chants such as “Jews out,” “Kill Israel,” and “Destroy Israel” were widespread. Gaza was equated to Auschwitz on banners. All over Germany,

stickers blaming Israel were put up. In a few cases, synagogues and other Jewish facilities were also attacked. There were pro-Israel demonstrations, in some cases quite large ones, but it took considerable courage to attend them.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Merkel verteidigt Israels Gaza-Offensive,” *Spiegel Online*, December 29, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,598703,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “LINKE in Berlin bleibt über Gaza-Krieg entzweit,” *Neues Deutschland*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/142627.linke-in-berlin-bleibt-ueber-gaza-krieg-entzweit.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Hart aber Fair,” Broadcast on ARD, January 21, 2009, [http://medien.wdr.de/m/1166043649/hartaberfair/wdr\\_hart\\_aber\\_fair\\_20090121.mp3](http://medien.wdr.de/m/1166043649/hartaberfair/wdr_hart_aber_fair_20090121.mp3).

<sup>4</sup> “Merkels Schuldzuweisung provoziert Kritik,” *Spiegel Online*, December 30, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,598901,00.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Hart aber Fair,” Broadcast on ARD, January 21, 2009, [http://medien.wdr.de/m/1166043649/hartaberfair/wdr\\_hart\\_aber\\_fair\\_20090121.mp3](http://medien.wdr.de/m/1166043649/hartaberfair/wdr_hart_aber_fair_20090121.mp3).

<sup>6</sup> Udo Steinbach at an anti-Israeli demonstration in Marburg, where he works as a professor at the university, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH1jheN-7qE>.

<sup>7</sup> “In Reichweite der Kassam-Raketen,” *Spiegel Online*, January 3, 2009,

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,599288,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> “Polizei stürmt Wohnung und hängt Israel-Fahne ab,” *Spiegel Online*, January 13, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,601058,00.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Demonstranten greifen Israel-Stand in Kassel an,” *Israelnetz*, January 19, 2009, [http://www.hr-online.de/website/rubriken/nachrichten/indexhessen34938.jsp?rubrik=36086&key=standard\\_document\\_36185658](http://www.hr-online.de/website/rubriken/nachrichten/indexhessen34938.jsp?rubrik=36086&key=standard_document_36185658).

<sup>10</sup> “Gaza-Demo in Mainz: Ärger um Israel-Fahne,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, January 16, 2009, [http://www.fr-online.de/frankfurt\\_und\\_hessen/nachrichten/hessen/?em\\_cnt=1660810](http://www.fr-online.de/frankfurt_und_hessen/nachrichten/hessen/?em_cnt=1660810).