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# Hypocrisy as foreign policy

## The Gaza war has deepened a rift already dividing Western leaders from their publics — and fractured the centre-left along the way

Few issues in the recent past have proven as divisive among the centre-left in Western democracies as the Gaza war. Mass street demonstrations met by heavy-handed police crackdowns have been a common sight in major European and American cities. Fraught debates among legislators and political commentators are a regular occurrence in the media.

As with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself, these divisions did not begin with Hamas' horrific terror attacks on 7 October 2023, or with Israel's wildly disproportionate response. The now nearly two-year-long war on the densely populated Palestinian enclave has exacerbated an already existing disconnect between the elite ruling establishment and the voting public. The reason for this is clear: the chasmic disconnect between rhetoric and reality.

This disconnect is one part of a broader crisis of legitimacy in developed democracies. The political class's talk about shared values, universal principles and the rule of law is completely detached from the easily observable facts on the ground of the Israeli government's policy and behaviour. If this disconnect is not addressed and democratic leaders continue to refuse to match their declarations of principles with substantive action to uphold those values and create consequences for their violation, we can expect this tension to only worsen. Moreover, public cynicism and detachment will continue to deepen, and centre-left parties will continue to bleed support to far-right challengers who offer a comparatively more credible and compelling critique of a failed status quo.

## A polarised West

One couldn't imagine a more perfect social science experiment to demonstrate West's hypocrisy on Palestine than Russia's 2022 war on Ukraine. Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure and population

centres that were rightly condemned by European and American leaders were not only overlooked by those same leaders when Israel did them in Gaza, they were supported by solidarity visits. It's only now that Israel's policy of inflicting civilian harm has become impossible to ignore that cracks in the establishment facade have begun to show.

This hypocrisy is only heightened, and the political establishment's self-delegitimisation worsened, by the draconian repression applied to anti-war and pro-Palestinian rights activism. Across the United States, police were called in to violently break up non-violent protest encampments, as right-wing lawfare activists accuse protesters of giving 'material support' to terrorism through acts of legally protected speech. In the UK, the protest group Palestine Action was designated a terrorist group for breaking into a military base and spray-painting two aircraft and causing other property damage. In Germany, using the pro-Palestinian slogan 'From the river to the sea' is now a criminal offence, and anti-war protests are heavily policed and often brutally broken up.

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These approaches don't just fail to uphold liberal principles; they actively affirm the goals of Israel's illiberal far right while undermining Israel's struggling liberal-left peace camp. Bafflingly, rather than seek allies on that camp, liberal politicians in Europe and the United States have largely tended to hew toward a 'no daylight' approach, which has been wind in the sails for Israel's extremists, many of whom now occupy positions of power in government. By failing to impose any genuine consequences for blatant and systemic human rights abuses and international humanitarian lawbreaking, Europe and the United States have created an unmistakable permission structure for Israeli apartheid and now genocide.

Meanwhile, just as the Democratic Party establishment in the US has grappled with its rising progressive wing, parties of the European left and centre-left face challenges from surging pro-Palestinian factions: in the Netherlands, heated debates have taken place with supporters of anti-Israel measures shouting down dissenters; in the UK, the issue has been highly charged within Labour since the Corbyn era; and in Germany's *Die Linke*, it has sparked major controversies, with party members resigning over disagreements on a resolution condemning antisemitism.

One case that illustrates this polarisation is that of the Greek progressive

publisher Oposito Books, which dropped the work of left-wing sociologist Eva Illouz, a prominent Israeli academic, because of her article 'Time to Unmask the Imposture of Anti-Zionism'. While I personally found the piece's argument unconvincing, it was nevertheless well within bounds of the sort of debate that, in my view, a progressive press should seek to foster. This highlights how difficult the left has found it to navigate the Gaza/Israel issue, and how polarising the topic remains. As a *DIE ZEIT* piece on the case put it: 'Above all, it shows this: the world's heterogeneous leftist milieus, so proud of their fine sensitivity to differences, have still not found a common language almost two years after October 7.'

## The path forward

So, what is to be done? A few recent developments indicate a path forward out of this crisis. The recent decision by the government of France to recognise the state of Palestine, and indications that the UK, Canada and even Germany could follow suit are significant. It needs to be made clear that such recognition is not simply a punishment for Israel. It is a long-overdue affirmation of the Palestinian people's national rights, consistent with international law and in line with multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions on the matter. It should also be accompanied by support for the state of Palestine to use all diplomatic measures available to impose costs on the state currently occupying and dismembering its territory.

While the European Union's failure to suspend association agreements was, in the words of Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnes Callamard, 'a cruel and unlawful betrayal', EU states can and should move forward with their own individual measures opposing violations of international law, such as supporting a broad ban on trade with Israel's illegal settlements.

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The US is also showing signs of change. In late July, the US Senate voted on a series of resolutions introduced by Senator Bernie Sanders to block arms sales to Israel. While they ultimately did not pass, they received a record-breaking amount of support from Senate Democrats, with over half supporting the measures, including the ranking members of several key foreign policy committees. Those Democrats who voted in favour represent the majority of Americans – and a super-majority of Democratic and independent voters – who

oppose Israel's war on Gaza.

Finally, we should consider the recent New York City mayoral primary. Thirty-three-year-old democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani shocked the political establishment with his victory, which foregrounded policies to address the struggling working class and the out-of-control cost of living. But because of New York's own demographics combined with the weird rules of America's own foreign policy debates, Israel-Palestine was a major issue. Mamdani stood firm on his unequivocal support for Palestinian rights, but also formed a partnership with competing candidate Brad Lander, the current New York City comptroller and self-described progressive Zionist, with the two cross-endorsing each other in the city's ranked choice voting system.

The partnership enabled Mamdani to achieve a significant victory against establishment choice Andrew Cuomo, the disgraced former New York State governor who resigned in 2021 amid sexual harassment claims (and cynically attempted to build his political comeback on hard-line support for Israel), but also offers a compelling vision of the path forward. While some might be understandably sceptical that a New York mayoral primary might offer lessons for the centre-left internationally, I would argue that it does: a political coalition that both addresses the concerns of the working class while unequivocally upholding the rights and safety of both Palestinians and Israelis is a coalition that can win. These positions are not in tension; they are consistent and mutually reinforcing. The centre-left in the United States and Europe needs leaders with the courage and moral clarity to recognise that and run on it. And once in office, act on it.

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