

A report on shifts in European reactions to the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip

At the onset of the 7 October events, the collective and individual European stance appeared resolute and unequivocal in favour of Israel, providing unwavering support through various means. However, as Israel initiated its destructive war against the Gaza Strip, marked by escalating crimes against humanity, ruthless bombings of hospitals and schools, the atrocities in the Jabalia massacre, and the deadly siege imposed on civilians in the Strip, European voices began to amplify, demanding an immediate end to the criminal war.

In an unprecedented shift, certain European countries, including Spain and Belgium, witnessed a transformation in their positions. They not only denounced these crimes but also condemned Israel strongly—a departure from their previous stance. This condemnation was not uniform across all European nations. While some, like France, moved to moderate their tone, calling for the avoidance of civilian casualties and the facilitation of relief aid, others, such as Austria, Germany, and Hungary, have steadfastly maintained their hardline support for the criminal war. These nations have rejected calls for a ceasefire and persist in backing Israel, attempting to suppress voices condemning its crimes and justifying the continuation of its relentless assault on civilians in the Gaza Strip.

The following provides an overview of the latest developments in this evolving situation:

- **The European Union:**

On 12 November 2023, Josep Borrell, the European Union's representative for foreign policy, emphasised the European Union's call for an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of humanitarian corridors, including a sea route for aid delivery to the Gaza Strip. Borrell expressed deep concern about the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza, highlighting the severe impact of hostilities on hospitals and the significant losses among civilians and medical personnel. He underscored the importance of upholding international humanitarian law, which mandates the protection of hospitals, medical supplies, and the civilians within them.

• **Spain:**

From the outset, several Spanish officials voiced strong opposition to the Israeli war, advocating for Israeli officials to be held accountable as war criminals. Among the prominent figures was the Spanish Minister of Social Affairs, Ione Pellara, who urged the imposition of sanctions on Israel for its alleged acts of genocide against Palestinians. Pellara highlighted the failure of the international community to prevent Israel's reported massacres of Palestinian civilians. She called on Spain and the global community to sever relations with Israel and bring Israeli political leaders to the International Criminal Court.

On 15 November 2023, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez issued a statement condemning what he termed "the blind killing of Palestinians in Gaza." He called on Israel to immediately cease fire and adhere strictly to international humanitarian law, emphasising the current disregard for these principles. Prime Minister Sanchez pledged that his new government would actively pursue the recognition of the Palestinian state within Europe and Spain.

• **Italy:**

The Italian stance underwent a noticeable shift following the loss of thousands of civilian lives and the dissemination of images depicting the killing of children and women in the Gaza Strip. Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani issued a stern warning to the Israeli government regarding attacks on the civilian population. Tajani emphasised that among the 14 Italians stranded in the Gaza Strip, two were pregnant women. He conveyed a clear message to the Israelis, echoing the sentiment expressed by US President Joe Biden, stressing the imperative of exercising utmost care in avoiding harm to the civilian population in Gaza. Tajani underscored the international community's responsibility to unequivocally acknowledge and act upon this imperative, emphasising the need to protect all civilians in strict adherence to international humanitarian law.

Furthermore, Tajani affirmed Italy's preparedness to provide medical treatment for Palestinian children in Gaza requiring care in Italian hospitals. He highlighted Italy's proactive engagement in humanitarian efforts, mentioning the dispatch of two military planes carrying aid to Gaza. Italy intends to expand its humanitarian activities to further assist the Palestinian population.

- **Belgium:**

- Following the atrocities and massacres perpetrated by Israel in Gaza, Belgian stances have shifted to oppose the Israeli war crimes. An article on the official website of Belgian radio and television RTBF, published on 7 November 2023, highlighted Belgium's transformation from initially offering unconditional support to now advocating for a ceasefire. The article emphasised that Belgium's shift occurred more swiftly than in other European countries. It also noted the call from Belgian Minister of Cooperation and Development, Gnes Caroline, urging the necessity of imposing sanctions on Israel.

- Belgian Prime Minister De Croo, addressing a gathering of Belgian diplomats on 8 November 2023, expressed his views, stating that, "If someone were to bomb an entire refugee camp with the intent of eliminating one terrorist, I believe such actions are no longer acceptable. The significance of the ongoing Palestinian struggle should not be underestimated. For decades, we have championed the cause of self-determination, and Belgium remains impartial, seeking an end to violence and the prevention of further casualties numbering in the thousands."

- In a statement on 8 November 2023, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Ms. Petra de Sutter asserted that it is time to impose sanctions on Israel, condemning the inhumane act of Israeli bombings that resulted in thousands of casualties. She urged the European Union to immediately suspend the partnership agreement with Israel and suggested allocating additional funds to the International Criminal Court to support investigations into war crimes committed by both Israel and Hamas.

- Belgium's Minister of Development Cooperation, Caroline Jeans, supported the idea of boycotting Israeli products as a means to pressure Israel into a ceasefire. In response to these calls, the Belgian government convened on 8 November 2023. The Prime Minister described Israel's actions in Gaza as no longer appropriate, calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. The government endorsed several initiatives, including:

- Providing 5 million euros to the International Criminal Court in The Hague for investigating war crimes in Israel and Gaza.

- Committing to receive and treat seriously injured children and women from the conflict, offering medical assistance to Israeli hostages through the Red Cross, and providing funds to Egyptian hospitals.
- Organising a round table, facilitated by the Minister of State for Equal Opportunities, bringing together representatives from the Jewish and Palestinian communities with the aim of promoting dialogue between the sects.

• **France:**

On 10 November 2023, the French President initially expressed strong support for Israel and even visited the country in solidarity, advocating for an international coalition against Hamas. However, in recent days, he conveyed to the BBC the imperative to cease targeting children and women by Israeli forces. Following a humanitarian conference he initiated, the President highlighted the consensus among countries and governments that a temporary humanitarian cessation of fighting leading to an actual ceasefire is indispensable. In response, the Israeli Prime Minister criticised Macron's position, emphasising that Hamas is responsible for civilian deaths. In a subsequent phone call with Israeli President Herzog, Macron retracted his statement, affirming unequivocal support for Israel's right to defend itself.

On 15 November 2023, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement expressing deep concern about Israeli military operations at Al-Shifa Hospital in the Gaza Strip. The statement reminded Israel of its obligation to adhere to international humanitarian law, emphasising the protection of hospital infrastructure and the principles of distinction, necessity, proportionality, and caution.

• **Austria:**

Austria, represented by its Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg and Speaker of the Parliament Wolfgang Sobotka, maintains an extreme stance of unwavering support for Israel in its conflict with Gaza. Austrian officials consistently express opposition to calls for a truce within the European Union, and Schallenberg objected to the humanitarian truce proposed by Josep Borrell, accusing him of deviating from the agreed-upon European position.

During an event commemorating the so-called "anniversary of the November massacres," Sobotka, alongside the Speaker of the Israeli Knesset via video conference, asserted that events similar to those on 7

October would not occur again. Sobotka labelled Hamas as "terrorists" and placed responsibility for the suffering and losses in Gaza squarely on them. Hamas are "the only ones committing crimes against humanity, and who bear responsibility for the suffering and losses in Gaza. An international coalition should be established that resolutely opposes Hamas and fights any comparison between the perpetrator and the victim."

On 8 November 2023, Israeli government spokesman Elon Levy praised Austria's supportive stance toward Israel, expressing gratitude for the "solidarity and backing conveyed by the Austrian Chancellor, President, and Foreign Minister."

• Britain:

After British Home Secretary Braverman's article in The Times on 8 November 2023, in which she referred to participants in pro-Palestine marches as "bastards and hate marches," and urged the police to prevent a planned march on 11 November 2023, she faced severe criticism from opposition parties, including the Labor Party, the Scottish National Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party. Accused of fostering discord between Muslims and Jews in Britain, Braverman was dismissed by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak under mounting pressure from opposition parties.

While calls for a ceasefire began to emerge in Britain, they remained relatively subdued. The Welsh Parliament, on 8 November 2023, voted in favour of a proposal calling for an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire in Gaza. The proposal received 24 votes in favour, 19 against, and 13 abstentions, following significant pressure from the Labour Party.

On 15 November 2023, the British Parliament rejected a proposal presented by the opposition Labor Party calling for humanitarian truces in the ongoing war. The proposal garnered 183 votes in favour but faced opposition from 290 representatives. Another proposal by the Scottish National Party, calling for a complete ceasefire in Gaza, was also rejected with 125 deputies supporting and 293 voting against. While observers consider the parliamentary vote on these proposals largely symbolic, approval would have represented an embarrassment for the leadership.

Germany:

•German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier delivered a speech on 8 November 2023 at the Federal President's headquarters in Berlin, addressing a round table that included Muslims and Jews. He called on

Germans of Palestinian and Arab descent in Germany to unequivocally distance themselves from anti-Semitism and the extremist Hamas movement. Steinmeier emphasised that those who wish to live in the country must respect the principles of peaceful coexistence, understand the nation's history, and recognise that safeguarding Judaism in Germany is both a state's duty and a responsibility of its citizens.

- Conversely, the German News Agency reported on 8 November 2023, citing the German Ministry of Economy, that the German government has prioritised the processing of requests for exporting armament equipment to Israel. Decisions regarding these requests are being made based on the current situation. Furthermore, the German government has increased permits for arms exports to Israel this year, surpassing the previous year's figures by 10 times.

- On 13 November 2023, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock expressed her profound pessimism about the war in Gaza and its future prospects during the European Union foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels. She acknowledged the escalating tension and deepening crisis, and regarding the ceasefire, she understood the motivations behind it. Baerbock stressed the importance of protecting Israel's security and expressed concern for the hostages held by Hamas. She proposed that a temporary ceasefire could be a viable option at present, allowing for the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians.

- Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in a statement dated 9 November 2023, urged the German government to take decisive measures against anti-Semitism within the country. She warned against all forms of hostility towards Jews, whether from the right, left, or Islamist factions. Merkel expressed concern about the worrying rise of anti-Semitism, emphasising that it poses a threat to the lives of Jews in Germany and around the world. She further cautioned against expressing hatred towards Israel and Jews under any pretext, even if it stems from a legitimate desire to establish a Palestinian state.

The G7:

The foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (United Kingdom, United States, Japan, Canada, France, Italy, Germany) convened in Tokyo on 8 November 2023, alongside the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and

Security Policy of the European Union, Josep Borrell. Their joint statement covered various issues, notably addressing the situation in Gaza and the West Bank:

- **Condemnation of Terrorism:** The G7 strongly condemned the terrorist attacks initiated by Hamas and others across Israel, starting on 7 October. They also denounced the ongoing rocket attacks, affirming Israel's right to defend itself and its people in accordance with international law to prevent further incidents.
- **Call for Hostage Release:** The ministers called for the unconditional release of all hostages. They extended sympathy and condolences to the victims, their families, as well as to all Palestinian and Israeli civilians. Emphasising the equal right of Israelis and Palestinians to live in safety, dignity, and peace, they expressed unequivocal rejection of anti-Semitism in their societies and worldwide.
- **Urgent Humanitarian Measures:** Recognising the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the G7 stressed the immediate need for measures to address it. They urged the facilitation of access for food, water, fuel, and humanitarian workers, expressing support for a humanitarian ceasefire.
- **Call on Iran:** The G7 called on Iran to abstain from providing support to Hamas and take additional measures that may destabilise the Middle East, including support for Lebanese Hezbollah and other entities.