

The Growing Palestinian Solidarity Movement in Europe

– an awakening in public opinion, or merely a shift in the popularity index?

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What is intended by the solidarity movement in Europe

The growing Palestinian solidarity movement in Europe reflects the institutions, individuals, unions and associations, academics and members of the public who have expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people during the recent onslaught on Gaza through solidarity activities, marches and demonstrations, or through boycotting campaigns against the occupation.

Introduction

There is a near consensus among observers that the wave of popular solidarity with the Palestinian cause, in the context of the recent war on Gaza, has significantly increased in size, shape and form, compared with the Palestinian solidarity movement seen in previous aggressions in Palestine.

Record numbers of demonstrators have been recorded as a result of the recent onslaught, a record which some have likened to the numbers recorded during the war on Iraq in 2003. The diversity and ethnicity of the representatives showing solidarity was also very distinct, also showing remarkable popularity of the solidarity movement, which is no longer limited to a particular sector, but has involved people across all sectors, including trade unionists, academics, clerics, philosophers, political analysts and others.

Consequently, a significant shift in the proportion of Europeans supporting the Palestinians in their struggle against the Zionist occupation was also recorded. This was represented in polls which expressed such support, as well as in the media where Palestinian suffering was broadcast. Messages of support were also delivered by parliamentarians, iterating their support for Palestinian rights.

According to an annual opinion poll carried out by the BBC about the public's view towards Israel in 22 countries across the world, Europeans are markedly changing. In Britain, 72 per cent of respondents believe that Israel's impact on an international level is a negative one, while the figure was 67 and 64 per cent in Germany and France respectively, followed by Spain with 61 per cent. Indeed, the negative opinion of these countries towards Israel have been similar in the past three years. Israel's image in the West is thus no longer as it used to be. This is due to many factors, undoubtedly among which is the expansion of the activities of the Palestinian solidarity movements.¹

Contrary to what has been by Europeans in the past, the popular solidarity movement in Europe was a marked and expressive move showing outrage at Israeli policies. Despite all this, the actual impact on decision-makers in Europe until the present time has not materialised into a practical outcome. The terminology used by politicians in expressing their views and attitudes towards the war has not reflected the popular movement, and their stance and attitudes towards Israel has remained stagnant as is their relationship with Israel and their position on the Palestinian resistance, led by Hamas.

Geographical map of events

Despite the aforementioned breadth and comprehensiveness of the solidarity movement across Europe, according to observers, the movement in Britain has been the greatest by virtue of its nature and importance of the media in London at this level. Germany and France follow Britain in the popularity of their solidarity, followed by Spain, in addition to Denmark, Austria and other countries which also had a distinctive contribution.

Reasons for the growing popular solidarity movement:

1. The repeated wars on Gaza and the awakening of the European public, more than ever, of the ugliness of the Zionist war machine and the extent of the arrogance shown by the occupation in its refusal to achieving a peaceful settlement despite the substantial concessions provided by the Palestinian Authority. This bore outrage among Europeans who vehemently expressed their position.
2. The horrific barbarity of the scenes that emerged from the battlefield in the Gaza Strip during the onslaught which took over global media, including the West. The scope of disaster that befell the Palestinians was not possible to hide despite the scale of lying by the Zionist propaganda machine. What contributed to the stupidity of the Zionist war machine was their targeting of hospitals, schools, nurseries and housing projects, as well as the killing of large numbers of children, women and elderly. In light of the widespread means of communication, Western media companies are no longer able to hide or distort the truth as they were fully accustomed to in the past. This has allowed the scattered infiltration of the Palestinian narrative, which in turn, has contributed to the relative tangible impact in rallying public opinion and relaying the news to extensive European sectors. This does not in any way mean that Western media has taken the position of supporting the Palestinian resistance or adopting the Palestinian narrative, but a tangible shift in its position has indeed been detected.
3. The widespread use of social networking: It was the armies of social communication of Palestinians, Arabs and activists which had a considerable impact on relaying the news on the ground, allowing images to speak for themselves. This weakened Israel's own social media war despite the allocation of Israeli officials by the Zionist Ministry of War for this very purpose. The facts portrayed by the Palestinians therefore outweighed and highlighted the falseness and deception of the Zionist propaganda machine. The strongest armour was the emerging images from the Gaza Strip, of which many were broadcast by Western correspondents.
4. Coordinating efforts among popular solidarity movements: Representatives of the Palestinian, Arab and Islamic communities, as well as Western solidarity organisations, coordinated their efforts effectively, and better than ever before, as reported by those in the field. Some say that what was seen on the streets in Europe, particularly Britain, was the result of a cumulative effort of these organisations over a long period of time, both collectively and individually. For example, seven organisations in Britain (British Muslim Initiative [BMI], Palestinian Forum of Britain [PFB], Muslim Association of Britain [MAB], Stop the War, Palestine Solidarity Campaign [PSC], Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament [CND], and Friends of al-Aqsa [FOA]) met as part of a coordinating alliance where distinctive roles were allocated for the organisation of events supporting Palestinian rights and denouncing the war and the Israeli killing machine. The success of the collaborative effort in Europe in general to this advanced level of coordination between the various pro-Palestine groups was reflected in the organisation of prominent protests in around 200 cities across Europe simultaneously, emulating the strength of support for Palestine in Europe. All this was accompanied by a virtual absence of

the Zionist movement at the grassroots level, with the exception of some failed attempts here and there.

The importance of activism

There is no doubt that the various stances and activities that have taken place have contributed to the differing attitudes and the progressive and meaningful change of delegitimising the occupation and pushing for the boycott of Israel and its punishment by Europe and the international world. On the other hand, these activities promote the right of the Palestinian people to live in dignity and their right to defend themselves and liberate their land.

Manifestations of the impact and effectiveness of activism

It appears that the effectiveness of the organisations is presented first and foremost in their ability to gather large crowds for events protesting against the ongoing aggression, as witnessed in the streets of London in the Summer of 2014. However, the most important outcome of this movement was to relay the image of the Palestinian issue across all facets of the Western media, making an appearance in various print, video and audio media outlets. There is no doubt that this was attained in the framework of public pressure across the countries as well as the intensity of the confrontation on the battlefield.

Moreover, the economic and academic boycott of Israel has expanded to cover a significant range of institutions following the calls for academic sectors, student unions, as well as the Federation of Trade Unions, to join. Support for Palestine has expanded even among parliamentarians, for example in Britain where 10 per cent of members of the House of Commons have newly joined the pro-Palestine bandwagon, to bring the proportion of members supporting Palestinian rights to 20 per cent, in contrast to the fall in support of Israel from 14 per cent to 12 per cent, according to an official spokesperson. These estimates were adopted via messages which reached the Coordinating Committee of Parliamentarians with names and titles of all the parliamentarians involved.

The same scenario can be seen across the rest of the European continent, especially within key countries of the EU and at the level of EU lawmakers themselves. It should be noted that many large companies such as *Marks & Spencer* and *Starbucks*, which were threatened with boycott, were forced to show their position and prove that they do not support Israel as a result of advocacy campaigns to boycott the companies.

The future and its challenges

Challenges revolve around the ability of organisations behind the public movement to transform this mass momentum into lobbying politicians, the media and decision-makers to pay attention to Palestinian rights. Indeed, this is an immense challenge in light of the magnitude of obstacles that stand in the way of such ambitions. However, without this transition the cause remains but a dream that will drift away as other dreams before it, and instead of the efforts of the masses, trade unions and others becoming an investment on standby for the time of need, they will turn into dimmed voices despite their enormity. Therefore, the objective of the operating organisations is to adopt a clear policy and use more innovative and efficient tools.

They must therefore work on the following:

1. Build a long-term plan focussed on influencing decision-makers through attaining gradual changes in Western public opinion.
2. Work on applying the principle of adopting sanctions on Israel on the agenda of electoral rival political parties in parliamentary elections of all European countries, particularly those who are influential decision-makers.
3. Supplementing operating organisations with finance and manpower in order to build relationships and become influential through contacts, networks and adding pressure through specialised pressure groups.
4. Communicating and reaching out to the Arab and Muslim communities and trying to involve them in the popular solidarity movement, with particular targetting of mosques which have large gathering of worshipers, reminding them of their duties of adopting the Palestinian cause as part of their faith.
5. Monitoring a group of writers and analysts, fluent in the various European languages, to write and comment on ongoing events, as well as participate in the media.
6. Deepen the coordination between the organisations behind the public mobilisation in Europe for the establishment of a strong base for a long-term plan of action.

Tools:

1. Use the available legal means to communicate with parliamentarians and address them to try and influence them.
2. Develop the relationship with the British Muslim Council and other influential institutions in order to add pressure on Islamic centres, or by forming direct communication with them. It was noted that the Muslim community in general is distant from the Palestinian cause.
3. Coordinate relations with student associations and Islamic societies at universities to organise events and activities in support of Palestine. A specialised force must be formed for this purpose, and forming a key link with university student bodies would be a worthwhile investment.
4. Continue mobilising the public and developing as much public pressure as possible.
5. Use all possible means of the media.

Constraints:

1. The lack of specialised institutions and manpower, and the necessary financial means for optimum effect.
2. The ignorance of Arab and Muslim communities, including some Imams, Sheikhs and Islamic Centre trustees, to the Palestinian cause and the importance of working for the cause. Special effort is needed to educate and raise awareness among these communities as they represent an active and influential constituency if properly exploited.
3. A lack of sovereignty and poor motivation among the Arabs, including Palestinians, to exercise a role in the solidarity movement. This is often the result of a lack of conviction of expressing solidarity, and the apathy of influencing at a political level.

4. Zionist restraints, both Christian and Jewish, formal and informal, which remain a looming force lying above the heads of European politicians in the event of them contemplating stepping outside their prevailing policy in the relationship with Israel and Palestine.

General frameworks for the Western response to the war on Gaza

Official responses did not reach the desired diplomatic and political condemnation of Israel, and support for Palestinians and their legitimate right to self-determination and statehood remained only verbal. Thus, the official response has not changed from its usual reaction to this kind of aggression. Analysis of the discourse that accompanied these reactions can be identified in the framework of the following points, affirming that there is a long strenuous way ahead in order to develop a position of influencing Western governments to take practical steps to punish Israel and force it to deal with Palestinian rights.

Outline of the official positions:

- To invite the two sides for an immediate ceasefire and voice concerns of the renewed violence.
- The situation in Gaza is unsustainable and can lead to increased anti-Semitism.
- Condemnation of the bombing of UNRWA schools and the demand of an unconditional cessation of fire.
- Some opposition parties criticise their governments for their silence and complicity towards the Israeli massacres.
- The call to intensify efforts to bring about peace and establishing two states.
- Reaching a humanitarian truce.
- Increasing the load of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people to secure humanitarian needs.
- A spokeswoman for the British government confirmed the need to review arms export licenses to Israel.
- The announcement of supplying humanitarian equipment, including medical supplies, in cooperation with non-governmental organisations.
- The British Senior Minister of State resigned due to clashes with the government's moral policy toward Gaza.
- British lawmakers calling for the imposition of economic sanctions in the event of an escalation in the building of settlements in the West Bank.
- Parliamentarians call on their governments to put pressure on Israel to ease the blockade and the barriers which are affecting the lives of Palestinians.

- Some politicians exhibited sympathy with Palestinian child victims expressing their condemnation of both sides failing to reach peace.
- The announcement of the intention to resolve a violent extremist Jewish organisation in France.
- The call for action to stop the massacres.
- A political solution must be imposed by the international community on both sides.
- A call for disarmament in Gaza and the lifting of the blockade.
- The Gaza strip must not be an open air prison or a military unit.
- Efforts must be doubled to avoid civilian casualties.
- Israel has a right to defend itself but it must be proportionate.
- A call for an immediate end to the bloodshed in Gaza.
- A call for the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza.
- A willingness to resume European activity at the Rafah crossing.
- The European Union will impose a general boycott on milk and chicken products from Israel in the absence of distinguishing between what is produced in the Israeli settlements and what is produced within the Green Line. This will take effect from the beginning of October this year (the value of losses on the Israeli industries by the decision will not exceed \$30 million annually). It is worth mentioning that this is not linked to the war on Gaza, but a European decision was made earlier in this regard.
- The conflict in Gaza should not be an excuse for growing anti-Semitism in Europe.
- The bombing of the UNRWA schools is a shameful, immoral and criminal act, and Israel must be held explicitly and exclusively accountable.
- Warning of a health catastrophe.
- Continued restrictions will feed instability.

The framework in which the masses have moved in Europe was represented in the following lines:

- Directing tens of thousands of expressions of discontent to foreign ministries.
- A British city was declared forbidden for Israelis.
- Accusing some media stations that their coverage of the war was impartial and holding demonstrations outside their offices.
- The call to prevent the export of arms.
- Reception of the wounded for treatment and the announcement of the readiness of hospitals to receive more casualties.
- Criticising the positions of governments of the war on the ground, labelling what was hap-

pening on the ground as being a genocide.

- Call for boycott and sanctions.
- Calls to cancel pre-programmed visits to Israel and end cooperation with collaborating offices.
- The accusation of Israel of Nazism.
- Raising the Palestinian flag on some municipal buildings in Britain.
- The resignation of staff in protest of the biased nature of their channels.
- Refusal to host events supported by Zionist Jews.
- The exclusion of Israeli companies from European investments.
- Demonstrations and vigils in front of government headquarters.
- Posters calling for the boycott of stores promoting Israeli goods.

Conclusion

The consoling voice for the Palestinians at the grassroots level was heard loud and clear, but a lot can be done to translate this sound into action which can influence government policies. The efforts undertaken by Palestinian institutions and other distinctive support organisations were tremendous, but require more full-time efforts to elevate the outcomes. More planning and mobilisation in this regard will undoubtedly lead to real tangible changes, and in this regard, the work among the Arab and Islamic circles will convert the negative electoral powers into active electoral forces which can influence decision-makers – a certain method of having an impact politically.

Indeed, the greater the efforts invested in placing Palestine on the agendas of organisations, associations and institutions, the greater the extent of gain that can be reaped in favour of the Palestinian cause.



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