

DISCUSSION PAPER



The European Left's Response to Israel's War on Gaza

Ömer Carullah Sevim

TRT WORLD
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centre

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WRITTEN BY

Ömer Carullah Sevim

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AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

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4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC

www.trtworld.com

researchcentre.trtworld.com

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Introduction

Since Israel's War on Gaza started on October 7, the Israeli forces have been targeting civilians disproportionately and indiscriminately. At the time of writing, the death toll is nearing 20,000 people, the majority of which are children and women, while 46,000 were wounded. Moreover, close to 2 million people - 85% of Gaza's population - have been displaced (UNRWA, 2023). Instances of war crimes, crimes against humanity and even genocide have been brought forward by experts. Israel's onslaught on Gaza is already one of the greatest mass murder instances mankind has ever witnessed. This time, western capitals are not merely turning a blind eye to what Israel is doing; they are actively supporting it.

In Western politics, left-wing politicians were expected in the past to put forward some pro-Palestinian rhetoric. However, this is no longer the

case, and amid a shrinking space for public debate in the West over Israel, pro-Palestinian stances have become an exception rather than the norm. Jean Luc Melenchon, leader of La France Insoumise and former presidential candidate of the leftist alliance, is under attack for his pro-Palestinian stance. In the UK, there is serious unrest within the Labour Party because of the position towards Gaza. In Spain, the left-leaning government made some pro-Palestinian statements. Despite its exceptional position among European governments, the more vocal Podemos politicians could not find a place in the new cabinet (McMurtry, 2023). These examples illustrate how the European Left experiences turbulence because of the situation in Palestine.

This paper will analyse European leftist politics, comparing the standpoints of various left-wing parties in European nations vis-a-vis the Palestinian situation while assessing the political trajectory of the left overall.



Jean-Luc Melenchon, founding leader of the main opposition party La France Insoumise attends a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Paris, France on December 17, 2023. (Ümit Dönmez - Anadolu Agency)

A Public Space in Coma

Israel's war on Gaza brought the ugliest and bloodiest forms of warfare. The unspeakable atrocities taking place have led to important political ruptures. For many, the events in Gaza are a litmus paper. Old political frameworks can no longer offer a relevant explanation to current dynamics. For example, the anti-Semitic march in Paris on November 12 received significant support from far-right figures, many of whom have a history of anti-Semitism. The British Labour Party, which held pro-Palestinian discourse in the past, offered unconditional support for Israel's massacres. Worse still, contrarian opinions that want to make Israel accountable for its actions are silenced with a label: anti-Semitism.

The anti-Semitism label was used and abused long before the latest onslaught on Gaza. The weaponisation of the accusation of anti-Semitism in the West has been used in the past two decades to narrow public debate and stifle dissenting voices. In recent months, 79-year-old singer Roger Waters' concerts in Poland were cancelled. In the UK, a Labour MP called for their cancellation. Waters was also subjected to intense controversy in Germany. Waters' crime was the Nazi-like costume he used to criticise fascism in a show he had been staging for more than three decades. In Germany, journalist Nemi el Hassan was fired from her job for participating in a pro-Palestinian demonstration in her youth (Hauenstein, 2021). Examples abound in this context.

Any criticism against Israel, whether it emanates through academic analysis or via political statement, was attacked as anti-Semitic. This modus operandi occurred before October 7, which means that Israel's occupation policy is not only directed against the Palestinian territories but also represents a conquest of the Western public sphere. There is a rationale for this. Israel needs the non-stop support of the global north. The unconditional financial and military support from the US and other Western powers is vital for Israel to continue its occupation policies.

Israel is aware of the state of Western public debate and is frantically manoeuvring to regain its primacy. Israel's Hasbara can simultaneously target the European right-wing by reducing anti-genocide university protests to woke culture (Lanum, 2023) and the "woke liberal left"

with its policy of advertising women's and LGBT rights – also known as pinkwashing (France 24, 2023). In other words, all vectors of Western discourse are used as elements of Israeli propaganda. This strategy helps to distract from the blatant statements of Israeli state officials who promote genocide and label the massacre in Gaza as "a war between the children of light and the children of darkness" (Arna'out, 2023) and against "human animals" (Middle East Eye, 2023).

Anti-Semitism has produced a moral cover for Israel's aggression. This cover brought together far-right elements and liberal and left-wing politics under the same roof. Thus, even the most critical thinkers have been contained and can only comment from within this restricted space.

The West's history of anti-Semitism has had a significant impact on the facing of the Israel problem in the Western public sphere. In other words, unconditional Western support for Israel is not new. The controversy caused by Jean-Paul Sartre during the 1967 war is worth remembering. Sartre, known for his intense support for anti-colonialist struggles, especially the Algerian struggle for independence, had supported the establishment of Israel in 1948. Before the 1967 Six-Day War, Sartre took a position close to Israel. As a result, Fanon's widow asked the publication house to remove his anti-colonialist preface of Frantz Fanon's seminal text "The Wretched of the Earth": "From now on, there is absolutely nothing in common between Sartre and us" Fanon's widow said (Merida, 2020).

Ussama Makdisi analysed the ambivalent positions of critical thinkers towards Israel. For him, the Israeli issue is not a phenomenon for the West to be understood independently of their history of anti-Semitism; "Israel's creation is a just and moral recompense for the history of European anti-Semitism that culminated with the Holocaust" (Makdisi, 2023).

Israel's war on Gaza has only intensified this conflict in the Western public sphere. Even critical intellectual thinkers begin and end their remarks with Israel's right to defend itself. Slavoj Žižek, known for his leftist and critical ideas and who advocated for resistance against oppressive regimes during eventful episodes, such as the Arab Spring and the Ukraine War, penned his first

article after October 7, 2023. In this piece, he condemns Hamas and blames "the fundamentalists on both sides" (Zizek, 2023).

Jürgen Habermas, a prominent figure of critical theory and the Frankfurt School, goes much further and addresses the issue from a reduced position. In a statement co-signed with three other academics, Habermas expressed his concerns about anti-Semitism and emphasised Israel's right to defend itself. However, little was said about the plight of the Palestinians, who have suffered from colonialism for 75 years (Deitelhoff et al., 2023).

Another example is the postponement of the award ceremony for Palestinian writer Adania Shibli at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Zizek started his opening speech by condemning the actions of Hamas. However, he also said, "there will be no peace in the Middle East without resolving the Palestinian question," adding, "One should defend Palestinian rights and fight anti-Semitism." At that point, the book fair director Juergen Boos took to the stage for an unscheduled response, which looked like a rebuff to Zizek.

What happened recalls Barthes' famous quote: "Fascism does not prevent speech; it compels speech".

Even though Zizek condemned Hamas, he did not deliver what was expected from him, namely a full ostracisation of the Palestinians, blaming them for their own ordeal. Such hegemonistic discourse also pervades the airwaves, exemplified by Piers Morgan's show. The latter always starts with a question that will be subsequently repeated ad nauseam: "Do you condemn Hamas?" The contour of the debate is, therefore, delineated. One must pass this test before talking about anything else. By this token, the speaker is already confined to a counter-terrorist discourse, whatever he/she intended to say.

At universities, pro-Palestinian students are subjected to intense pressure. Those who do not suppress the freedom of speech in universities are subjected to cancel campaigns like the one against the Harvard rector (Middle East Eye, 2023). The slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free", chanted by groups including Jews, is falsely interpreted as a call for genocide against Jews. For Palestinians, who have nothing to do with Nazi history, being against the occupation is equated with anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, the Israeli army is not shying away from posting images that, indeed, they are subjecting Palestinians to Nazi-like treatment, ranging from concentration camps, abuses, and massacres.

The European Left and Palestine

The Palestinian question unified the European left, especially in the late 1960s and 70s. At that time, the Palestinian cause was a third-world struggle against global imperialism (Haugbolle & Olsen, 2023). However, it has become more divisive than unifying for leftist political actors (Henley et al., 2023).

In the past, the Palestinian independence movement was dominated by leftist and nationalist organisations, all represented by the PLO umbrella. Thus, the European left found it easy to take a stance considering the global political tensions of the Cold War. At that time, political violence was not seen as a problem. Leftist organisations within the Palestinian movement, such as the PFLP, conducted some of the most violent actions of the day. The kidnapping and death of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics is a case in point.

However, the subsequent waning of Palestinian leftist and nationalist movements and the resurgence of Islamist movements, such as Hamas, who took the reins of the resistance movement was denounced by European leftist movements, giving the latter a pretext to wash their hands from the Palestinian predicament.

In earnest, leftist movements in Western countries are not the same. However, they face serious hegemonistic obstacles. First, they cannot affect the US and European states' firm and enduring support of Israel. Second, the European left no longer has a societal project that appeals to the masses. By multiplying the fractures among their movement and cosyng up to right-wing parties, the European left has little left to offer to the people. Most of the time, the left cannot form an effective opposition or even offer an alternative political project. The paralysis on the Palestine cause reflects this general context.

Currently, party politics in the West can only operate within a pro-Israel position. Figures like Bernie Sanders, who often use radical rhetoric, cannot even advocate for a humanitarian demand, such as a ceasefire. In Germany, a repressive anti-Semitism debate, which resulted in Muslims, especially Palestinians, being investigated and dismissed from their jobs, was already in place before the war. In this stiffened political atmosphere, the ruling coalition, led by the Social Democratic Party, offers unconditional support to Israeli aggression in Gaza. Meanwhile, pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been banned in several countries

since October 7. However, despite these bans, huge demonstrations were organised against the massacre in Gaza.

In Britain, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets. However, participation from political parties was lacklustre. Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour's leader until a few years ago, spoke at these demonstrations. Nevertheless, this was an exception, especially since he was suspended from the party on flimsy charges of anti-Semitism in 2023. Corbyn is now an independent House of Commons member.

The Transformation of the European Left

It is worth looking at the transformation of the left, which occurred in recent years. The traditional left-right divide has lost meaning in the past three decades. In the European context, for example, the political tension is more between a pro-EU stance and Euroscepticism (Blackburn, 2021). The political trajectory in France over the last five decades exemplifies this trend. In the 1970s, the second left emerged within the left in France, proposing various reforms. This movement, which grew in influence in the 1990s, aligned the left with the premises of neoliberalism (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, Francois Mitterrand, who came to power in 1981 with relatively radical leftist promises such as nationalisation, offered no meaningful resistance to the neoliberal winds during his presidency. Fast forward to the present day, Macron, then finance minister of the socialist President Francois Hollande, has invaded the political centre with his new party. His main rival was Marine Le Pen, a Eurosceptic with far-right views. On the other hand, in a political atmosphere where Macron does not seem concerned about the lower classes' votes and the left parties have lost interest in conquering the hearts of the have-nots, Le Pen has developed a populist discourse tailored to win over the lower classes, departing from her initial neo-liberal free-market views that she advocated a decade ago.

The most prominent example of left-wing politics reforming itself with the values of the free-market economy is undoubtedly the New Labour initiative of

the British Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair. Since the end of the 1990s, with the third way, the Labour Party has limited its discourse towards the lower classes. Rather, it accepted the neoliberal transformation with an agenda for social justice. The US Democratic Party, although not having a socialist background, became one of the major forces supporting the internationalisation of the third way through the example of the UK (Mudge, 2018).

The political transformation in Britain and France was not limited to these countries. Blairism and the Third Way became important concepts throughout the Western political sphere. This transformation of the left parties can be seen through several prisms. One of them is undoubtedly the fact that the claim of socialism became history with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the conditions of the Cold War disappeared. On the other hand, this transformation occurred parallel to the change in the working class's traditional male and blue-collar character, especially in the Western world (Eley & Nield, 2000). However, on the other hand, although they carry a vision of social justice on their agenda, the role of left parties in mainstream politics has lost its class character and connection with the lower classes. In this context, Warner (2023) states that "the call for "social Europe" ended up serving as a thin veneer for the neoliberal core of European integration."

Representative democracy has largely reduced politics to who will run the bureaucracy with technocratic prescriptions. As a result, the voting enthusiasm of



Spanish Minister of Social Rights and 2030 Agenda and leader of the left-wing Podemos party in Spain, Ione Belarra makes a speech during the "76 years of occupation in Palestine" conference in Madrid, Spain on November 28, 2023. (Burak Akbulut - Anadolu Agency)

the lower classes has declined (Blackburn, 2021). This is precisely the vacuum that far-right parties are addressing. The efforts of Le Pen and other far-right actors to appeal to the lower classes in contrast to their traditional economic stance and to consolidate the masses who have distanced themselves from political participation bore fruits. Using external threats, especially the perception of immigration threats to local communities, seems to be successful.

Today, far-right parties have become candidates to take the reins of power in many countries. Wilders' PVV, which emerged as the first party in the Dutch elections last month, typifies this situation. In other words, the new left or the third way means two things: First, it represents a break from the traditional oppositional stance of the left, and second, it also represents a departure from being the vanguard of the lower classes and disadvantaged groups that it traditionally claimed to represent.

On the other hand, the reactions to the escalating Israeli aggression in Palestine have shown that this process is a complex undertaking. While a very important and influential part of European left-wing politics has come to act with the reflexes of the establishment, this is not true for all actors. Another debate encompasses whether these dissident actors are in this different position because of their proper engagement with today's socio-economic problems or their deep-seated ideological beliefs.

In this regard, the crisis in the French left is a good case. LFI leader Melenchon, who was the joint candidate of the leftist alliance in France only a year and a half

ago, and his party's pro-Palestinian stance have been strongly criticised by other members of the leftist alliance. Under these circumstances, it is doubtful how long Melenchon will be able to maintain his position as alliance leader. The criticism is not only from within left-wing politics. Melenchon receives extensive flak from international left and liberal actors (Hurst, 2023).

In the UK, under Keir Starmer's leadership, the Labour Party has shown unconditional support for Israel in alliance with the ruling conservative government. However, this is not a fully accepted position within the party. In the meantime, there have been several defections from the party, including the resignation of 8 shadow ministers. In Spain, while the Spanish government led by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party has been fairer than most other European countries in this process, Podemos, which has been more vocal on Palestine, did not find a place in the new government formed last month. Differences over the Palestinian issue have led to this separation (McMurtry, 2023).

The picture is similar in the Netherlands. Kauthar Bouchallikht, a member of the coalition of the Dutch Labour Party and the Green Party, announced that she would not run for office again after the controversy within the coalition over Palestine and the statement made by the coalition. She said: "This 'war' did not start suddenly; it has been going on for 75 years. Now is the time for context. Context is not denying the horrific acts of Hamas last weekend. Context is recognising where they came from, namely the actions of the Israeli government, even against the wishes of many Israelis and Jewish people," (Stöckl, 2023).

The Split between the People and Politics

Craig Mokhiber, a lawyer and human rights defender who has worked at the UN for over 30 years, said in his resignation letter:

"We have to learn from the principled stance taken in cities around the world in recent days, as masses of people stand up against the genocide, even at risk of beatings and arrest. Palestinians and their allies, human rights defenders of every stripe, Christian and Muslim organisations, and progressive Jewish voices saying, "not in our name", are all leading the way. All we have to do is to follow them." (Ayari, 2023)

Mokhiber's criticism of the UN for its dysfunctionality and his reference to civil initiatives as the address of political power underline an important point for the European left. A similar dysfunction is also valid for them. Left-wing politics, which is in tune with the establishment and the capitalist economy, seems to be experiencing a rupture with at least a significant part of its electorate on other issues. On the other hand, this also points to a crisis in Western democracy.

The picture described above about party politics contrasts with the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets in Western capitals against Israeli atrocities in Palestine. Parliamentary politics seems incapable of proportionately reflecting the demands of the people. The censorship of Palestinian congresswoman Rashida Tlaib's speech in the US is an example of this.

Democracy was a promise of self-government for the people. What is happening these days is, first and foremost, the violation of the Palestinians' right to self-determination. On the other hand, the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets in the West and the millions they represent are effectively deprived of the right to determine the politics of their own country. Centre-left politics, which are supposed to develop politics on the axis of democracy, equality, and freedom, are no exception. The Palestinian issue may be purging Melenchon or various 'backward' figures in the British Labour Party outside the mainstream political scene. At the very least, fractures within the left-wing parties and

persuasion are clear for all to see. More domino effects are expected.

On the other hand, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and white and dark-skinned people are united in their opposition to the massacre. The memory of the Holocaust is not only used to justify Israel's massacres; Jewish Anthropologist Mauria Finkelstein (2023) is now speaking out against the genocide of Palestinians, saying, "Never again means never again for everyone". Jewish demonstrators are organising strong protests demanding a "ceasefire now". Palestinian Christians (2023) are calling on their Western co-religionists to act justly. Even if this does not find empathy in Western parliaments, it would be hasty to say that it will have no impact. There are already discussions about the loss of votes. As one British Labour shadow minister put it, "haemorrhaging Muslim votes massively - enough to lose seats if there was an election tomorrow." (Ross, 2023).

For many, the genocidal war in Gaza has resulted in the unmasking of human rights and Western liberal values. On the other hand, the irony is that Western democracies are in the middle of a crisis of democracy. The crisis of the European left parties is only the tip of the iceberg.

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