

## A response to a Euro-Mediterranean appeal

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ANAT N. KURZ and EMILY B. LANDAU , THE JERUSALEM POST

An appeal regarding the developments in Gaza was circulated a few days ago to people involved in EuroMeSCo, an extensive network of policy and security-oriented research institutes from the Euro-Mediterranean region, of which the Institute for National Security Studies is a member. The work carried out in the framework of EuroMeSCo, which is a venue for the meeting of Israeli, Arab and European researchers funded by the European Commission, is intended to be in the spirit of dialogue, mutual understanding, confidence-building, and serious research. The circulated appeal, however - authored by six people of influence in the network, past and present - was anything but that. Characterized by biases and blatant distortions, some factual errors, and a disturbing lack of understanding of complex realities on the ground, the appeal is more political propaganda than analysis.

Unfortunately, it probably reflects wider tendencies apparent in the public debate in Europe today.

THE APPEAL - which begins by saying "we condemn in the strongest possible terms the latest outbreak of violence in the Middle East, with the Israeli attacks on Gaza, in response, it claims, to rocket attacks on Israel itself" - is indicative of a tendency in the European debate to escalate to outrage only when Israel takes action against those who attack it. At the point of Israel's response, everything prior to that is disregarded - either forgotten or deemed irrelevant. A stark example is the caveat "it claims" in the opening reference to Israel's military response. Is it not a simple fact that over the past eight years Hamas has fired thousands of rockets across the border of the Strip at Israeli towns and villages? Not only did the firing continue, albeit sporadically, during the cease-fire, but this time-out was cynically used by Hamas for further entrenchment of its military infrastructure, and increasing the range of its rocket from 16 to over 40 km.

But still Israel's defensive action is labeled as "excessive, disproportionate, and ineffective," and as violence which "contravenes the basic principles of international law." What would be a proportionate response to a daily threat to civilians, backed by a political platform that rejects any possibility for a lasting, comprehensive solution to the conflict? Israel's response was indeed disproportionate. It has been using its power and force to convince Hamas of the limits of its ability to dictate the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel refuses to moderate its response to the blatant targeting of densely populated civilian areas simply because it is the stronger party.

WITH REGARD to international law, the contradictions bred by the European approach are prominent. The same Europeans that are outraged by Israel's strong response to rocket attacks are strangely unperturbed by the fact that not only was this a defensive response to Hamas's ongoing attacks (and self defense is of course recognized by international law), but that when Hamas fires their rockets, they are intentionally targeting civilians and aiming to kill. One would think that targeting civilians might raise an eyebrow or two in the context of international law, but not for those who insist on focusing only on Israel.

Israel's keen efforts to avoid civilian casualties through its "roof knocking" policy for example - whereby the inhabitants of buildings housing military assets are notified by Israel via telephone ahead of bombing so they have time to evacuate - are also not noticed by the authors of the appeal. It does not interest them that the Palestinians themselves know they can count on Israel to call off attacks when they cynically climb to the roof-tops of these buildings to serve as human shields rather than evacuating. Isn't it a pretty strong indication of Israel's adherence to international law that Palestinians are willing to bet their lives on it? Another striking confirmation of the abuse of Israel's sensitivity to international law, as well as moral codes, is the fact that the leadership of Hamas in the Strip has been hiding in bunkers, prepared specifically for this purpose, under the hospital of Gaza City. Moreover, Hamas operatives are regularly accompanied by small children when they cross the street.

THE FACT that towns in the South of Israel have been the target of rocket attacks for eight long years is a further uncomfortable piece of information ignored by the appeal. Why allow facts to interfere when it is much easier to simply write that the rockets fired from Gaza since late December were "in return" for Israel's attacks, or that rocket attacks constituted "a response to the isolation imposed, since January 2006, on the Gaza Strip"? The authors of the appeal also condemn what they describe as "unilateral use of force." Does that mean that Israel is the only party using force? Well, as the Hebrew saying goes, "paper suffers everything".

A focal point raised in the appeal is the claim that lifting the economic siege on the Gaza Strip is a key to resolving both the intra-Palestinian, as well as Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. While it is true that Hamas continued its fire during the cease-fire because it hoped to force Israel to lift the economic siege, the siege itself was put in place due to the perpetual rocket fire and concern over the accelerated military buildup in the Strip. Hamas's efforts to advance the opening of the crossings would have been much more successful if they had stopped the fire. As simple as that. Needless to say, taking this course could have saved the residents of the Strip much suffering.

With regard to the appeal's call to Israel to lift the siege on Gaza so that Palestinian rival parties can reach accommodation

among themselves, is Israel the cause for the intra-Palestinian conflict? Indeed, what has prevented the establishment of a unity government - in addition to disagreements concerning division of power and authority - is Hamas's rejection of the idea of a two-state solution.

If Hamas were to accept the conditions set by the Quartet for dialogue - recognition of Israel and previous agreements signed by the PLO, as well as renunciation of violence - the road to establishing national unity in the PA as well as to political dialogue with Hamas would be open. Thus far, Hamas has flatly rejected any pressure to do so. An inevitable conclusion is that Hamas is simply not interested in dialogue.

The authors of this appeal, who claim that they have "many years of engagement with the affairs of the Mediterranean," must have read Hamas's political platform, which rejects the idea of an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They must have asked themselves whether Hamas is really interested in being involved in a peace process, and why Hamas did not turn Israel's withdrawal from Gaza as well as the money that was transferred into the Strip into an opportunity for economic rehabilitation. Also, they surely wondered how Hamas's leadership sought to lift the siege imposed by Israel and Egypt by means of continuous rocket fire targeting civilians in Israel.

Of course if they had seriously addressed these challenging questions, they surely would have done a much better job when tackling the prospects for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They surely would have recognized that letting Hamas off the hook unconditionally will simply mean starting the countdown to the next round of violence, which is exactly what Israel has been trying to avoid.

*The writers are senior research associates at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University.*

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