The Future of European Soft Power after Gaza

18 NOVEMBER 2024

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After the war is estimated to have killed over 40.000 People and counting, many European Countries still fail to criticise Israel and call for a ceasefire. For example, when the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, visited Jordan in September, her Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi called for German Support in sanctioning Israel. Further critique by the Director of the Global Public Policy Institute, Thorsten Benner, was that European Soft Power will be weakened through it's selectiveness and incoherence in the positions taken in this conflict and will lead to a loss in reputation in big parts of the local population. Regarding Germany, a former Egyptian

Diplomat even argued that: “No country has suffered more damage because of its stance on the Gaza war than Germany.”

This brief argues that the incoherences in EU countries’ foreign policy will hinder Europe’s ability to wage the tool of diplomacy in the future.

The concept of Soft Power

Usually, Political Scientists distinguish between soft and hard power. Soft power, contrary to that, describes achieving your aims by co-opting foreigners or foreign countries by the attractiveness of your values, practices or ideas. The EU is a good example for the use of soft power, since the European Union attracts people and countries through European Values and a common European Identity. Josep Borell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, argued that the main influence of the European Union lies in it′s soft power.

One example for a loss of soft power was the Iraq war. The reputation of the US and the UK took a hit after the decision to invade Iraq. Because of the negative perception due to the decision of going to war, the US and UK suffered in public opinion polls and it became harder to influence events in that region. A more recent is the Invasion of Lybia, which ended up having similar effects.

2. Europe and the war on Gaza

As it is known, during the terrorist attack on October 7th 2023, Hamas murdered over 1000 Israelis and taking dozens of hostages. Subsequently, European Countries came together and condemned Hamas for it′s unjustifiable act. Across the EU, many leaders offered solidarity to Israel. For example, Emmanuel Macron of France condemned the attack after talking with Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas and offered Israel his Solidarity. Other European leaders issued similar statements. As the war continued, Israels actions lead to the death of over 40000 people, leaving almost the entire Gaza Strip in ruins. At one point, the leadership of Israel and Hamas had arrest warrants issued against them by Karim Kahn, the ICC Prosecutor. The charges against Western allied Israel included Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and Extermination and/or murder. In Europe, some countries remained silent, while countries like France and Spain confirmed their support for an independent ICC.

Beyond that, however, no states beyond Spain, Norway and Ireland chose to take more concrete actions towards recognizing an independent Palestine. For that, criticism has been rampant. Accusations of double standards are coming from the UN Human Rights Chief, emerging states. In February 2024, more than 800 Western Officials criticised their governments in a statement for ignoring their advice regarding Gaza and one of the arguments was that governments should stop : “[...] asserting to the public that

there is a strategic and defensible rationale behind the Israeli operation and that supporting it is in our countries interests."

3. Conclusion

To conclude this article, the Division between Member States is also unhelpful for the vision of a "geopolitical Europe". While countries like Hungary, Austria and Germany basically gave Israel a carte blanche, with Germany still supplying weapons for one the most destructive military campaigns in history, others like Spain, Belgium and France criticised Israel in many aspects and called for a ceasefire. Therefore, not only the standing of member states is damaged but also the standing of the European Union will suffer in a time when the situation calls for unity.

It might be too early to tell the scale of the damage that the largely unconditional and uncritical support for Israels War in Gaza will do to the standing of European Countries and the European Union in many parts of the world, however, the failure in both moral and strategic terms could not be much more obvious. European Values are understood to represent Human Rights and Democracy, but it seems that the European Union and some of its Member States need to be reminded of that.

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