

The Palestinian issue has become of geopolitical importance. And the West must realize that, before it loses influence

The West is faced with the choice of seriously working towards a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or inheriting a greatly reduced position of power and an increasingly explosive world, argues Bregje Galema.

The worldwide dissatisfaction and frustration about the war in Gaza and the fate of the Palestinians finds little resonance in policy in Western democracies. The bare fact is that Israel's Western allies hardly attach any consequences to the now seven-month Israeli offensive, which is aimed at Hamas, but at the same time against all

Palestinians in Gaza. The decisiveness of the US and countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands, which could exert pressure to stop the carnage, is hard to find. This has significant geopolitical consequences.

Without having to do anything itself, this strengthens Russia, which in its devastating war in Ukraine benefits from the complete erosion of international norms and therefore eagerly welcomes another culprit. So Russia seizes the opportunity to point out Israel's misdeeds with both hands. The country that finds the Western arms supplies to Ukraine a thorn in its side, is eager to exploit the Western double standard when it comes to the Israeli war.

Iran sees the devastating war waged by arch-rival Israel as an opportunity to polish its own image and promote itself as a regional power player. The usually repressive attitude of pro-Iranian militias in the Middle East now suddenly has an aura of goodness to uninformed social media users. So because the Houthis in the Red Sea claim to be operating for Gaza, you will soon hear: "At least they are doing something for the Palestinians."

China is also cleverly positioning itself in the vacuum left behind by the West: as a sudden active advocate of a Palestinian state. While China has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause from an anti-Western and anti-imperialist vision, it is now doing so with new energy and massive online influence campaigns that are resonating with a public upset by the

visible suffering of Palestinians.

The rhetoric of these power players – who in fact do little concretely for the Palestinians or against Israel – is in great demand on social media. The statements of Russia, Iran and China are problematic in many respects, not least because they back Hamas. And while accusations about this are mostly aimed at parties in the Middle East, the anti-Semitism that China displays in anti-Western social media campaigns remains underexposed.

Where healthy democracy fails, frustrations find their way into the most extreme forms. In the US you can already see this in the political margins, as some in Trump's camp opportunistically start using anti-Israel rhetoric, in line with the above-mentioned authoritarian states.

These Republicans use anti-Zionism primarily as a vehicle to promote their own political agenda, that includes anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Time will tell whether they can successfully ride on the wave of popular demonstrations in the West against support for Israel. But it says a lot about the forces that can step into a vacuum. A vacuum that political elites in the West have created by downplaying, rather than putting a stop to, a likely genocide and blatant war crimes.

The goal of the authoritarian states with their “pro-Palestinian” narratives is primarily to incite against the West, all in a typical divide-and-rule tradition. The highly politicized Syrian refugee crisis shows exactly where this can lead to. Because it is precisely the fact that no Western actor is inclined to solve this ongoing crisis (who

is still talking about Syria?), which has led to European politics being hijacked by anti-migration sentiments. Russia, being partly responsible for the Syrian refugee flow with its mass bombings, has seen an opportunity in the absence of sensible Western foreign and asylum policies. So support for Assad and European far-right factions has become Putin's success formula for exerting influence in the Middle East and weakening the European Union from within.

It is not just the West's credibility or 'soft power' that is now at stake. The war in Gaza has strengthened Iran's belief in developing a nuclear weapon and entrenching its position of power throughout the region. The fact that then-President Obama did not maintain his 'red line' in Syria in 2013 (after a poison gas

attack by the Assad regime, ed.), contributed to Russian calculations to intervene in Syria and attack Ukraine after. Likewise, the current Western incompetence to rein in Israel will also have serious consequences.

Although the Palestinian issue has always been overshadowed by larger international interests in the past, powerful world players are now seizing the opportunity to profile themselves exactly on this issue. The Palestinian cause has thus become of geopolitical importance. The West is faced with the choice of seriously working towards a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or inheriting a greatly reduced position of power and an increasingly explosive world.

About this article: Bregje Galema is an expert on the Middle East and works at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. She writes this piece in a personal capacity.