



Engagement with Iran

The regional conflict has also prompted the Saudi crown prince and Iran's president to speak for the first time after a Chinese-brokered initiative prompted the two Persian Gulf states to re-establish diplomatic ties in March after seven years of severed ties.

On Thursday, Saudi state media reported that MBS had discussed "the current military situation in Gaza and its environs" with President Raisi.

A Saudi statement said the crown prince told Raisi, "The kingdom is exerting maximum effort to engage with all international and regional parties to halt the ongoing escalation," underlining Riyadh's move to contain the crisis. A senior Iranian official told Reuters the 45-minute call aimed to support "Palestine and prevent the spread of war in the region."

On Friday, Saudi Arabia denounced the displacement of Palestinians within Gaza and attacks on "defenseless civilians," its strongest language criticizing Israel since the war broke out. On Saturday, thousands of Palestinians fled the north of the Gaza Strip from the path of an expected Israeli ground assault, while Israel pounded the area with more air strikes and said it would keep two roads open to let people escape.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said it had received an Israeli order to evacuate the hospital by 4:00 pm, but would not do so because it had a humanitarian duty to keep providing services to the sick and wounded. In Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, where Israeli planes struck a four-story building overnight, neighbors rushed to rescue people.

The UN estimated that tens of thousands of Palestinians headed south from northern Gaza after the Israeli order on Friday, adding to 400,000 Gazans already displaced earlier in the week. "We need immediate humanitarian access throughout Gaza, so that we can get fuel, food and water to everyone in need," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday. "Even wars have rules."

The US has firmly backed its ally Israel, but has called on it to protect civilians.

Pro-Palestinian rallies

Thousands of pro-Palestinian demonstrators marched in central London on Saturday, calling for an end to Israel's military action in the Gaza Strip.

Protesters, many of them waving Palestinian flags and signs saying, "Free Palestine," gathered close to Oxford Circus from where they planned to head to Downing Street, the official residence and office of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Chants were aimed at the governments of Britain and the US for supporting Israel. Earlier on Saturday, the headquarters of the BBC broadcaster, which is located close to the start of the march, was daubed in red paint.

Also, hundreds of people gathered in Times Square in New York on Friday to protest the weeklong Israeli bombardment of Gaza, waving Palestinian flags

and antiwar banners as more than 100 police officers and scores of television cameras looked on, nytimes.com reported.

The gathering, and a rally Friday evening in Brooklyn for Jews supporting Palestinians, might once have been considered unremarkable. But in the days leading up to the daytime protest, rumors about it sent a wave of anxiety through New York. The city has been stricken by grief and living on edge since the incursion and the Israeli response, which together have killed thousands of civilians. At the UN, the Palestinian United Nations envoy appealed to Guterres on Friday to do more to stop a "crime against humanity" by Israel, which has warned nearly half of the population of the Gaza Strip to relocate as it plans an assault.

Caution against 'a huge earthquake'

Ahead of a potential Israeli ground invasion of the Palestinian coastal territory, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian called on Israel to stop its attacks on Gaza, warning that the war might expand to other parts of the Middle East and that would make Israel suffer "a huge earthquake," AP reported.

Amir-Abdollahian told reporters in Beirut that Lebanon's Hezbollah group has taken all the scenarios of a war into consideration and Israel should stop its attacks on Gaza as soon as possible. He stressed that the Islamic Republic would continue to take all necessary diplomatic measures to stop the

Israeli atrocities and the blockade of Gaza. The top Iranian diplomat added that in any case, the resistance is to decide, and that in the case of a cease-fire, it is the resistance that will propose its conditions. Hezbollah fighters have been on full alert along Lebanon's border following last Saturday's attack. Amir-Abdollahian said he met Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who briefed him on the group's conditions in Lebanon. He said: "I want to warn the war criminals and those who support this entity before it's too late to stop the crimes against civilians in Gaza, because it might be too late in few hours."

European people's advocacy of Palestine



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas, which started on October 7, has sparked a wave of protests and solidarity rallies across Europe in support of the Palestinian people. Thousands of people have taken to the streets in major cities, such

as London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Rome, and others, to denounce the Israeli aggression and occupation and to demand justice and freedom for Palestine.

These demonstrations reflect the growing sympathy and awareness of the European public toward the Palestinian cause, as well as anger at the inaction of their governments and the international community.

The conflict, triggered by a massive and unprecedented attack by Hamas on Israel, resulted in thousands of deaths on both sides. Hamas claimed that the attack, dubbed Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, was a response to the repeated Israeli violations of the holy sites in Al-Quds and the rights of the Palestinians.

Israel retaliated with a brutal bombardment of Gaza, targeting civilian infrastructure and residential buildings and cutting off electricity, water, and food supplies. Israel also threatened to launch a ground invasion of Gaza, which would have escalated the humanitarian crisis and the bloodshed.

The European Union condemned the Hamas attack as a terrorist act and fully supported Israel's right to self-defense. However, it also called for an immediate cease-fire and urged Israel to act proportionately and by international law. The EU also expressed concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza and pledged to provide humanitarian aid to the Palestinians.

However, many European people felt such statements were insufficient and did not reflect reality. They accused their governments of being biased in favor of Israel and ignoring the root causes of the conflict, such as the Israeli occupation, apartheid, and oppression of the Palestinians. They also criticized their governments for failing to hold Israel accountable for its violation of human rights and international law and for continuing to provide military and economic aid to Israel. They demanded that their governments take concrete actions to end the Israeli occupation and support the Palestinian right to self-determination. According to various polls conducted in Europe before and after the conflict, there is a significant gap between the official stances of the European governments and the public opinions of their citizens regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

For example, a poll by Ifop in France in 2020 showed that 57 percent of French people supported Palestine as a state. The same poll also suggested that 69 percent of French people considered Israel's policies toward the Palestinians as a form of apartheid. Another poll by YouGov in Germany in 2020 indicated that 42 percent of Germans had a negative view of Israel, compared to 18 percent who had a favorable idea. The same poll also revealed that 62 percent of Germans supported imposing sanctions on Israel for its settlement expansions in the occupied West Bank. According to a third poll by Ipsos MORI in Britain in 2019, 43 percent of Brits sympathized more with the Palestinians than with the Israelis. The same poll also showed that 66 percent of the British supported recognizing Palestine as a state.

These polls suggest a generational divide within Europe about the Israeli-Palestinian issue, with younger people more likely to hold a favorable view of Palestine and a critical view of Israel. This may be attributed to several factors, such as increased exposure to alternative sources of information through social media and online platforms, growing awareness of human rights issues and social justice movements around the world, greater interaction with various communities and cultures within Europe, and more disillusionment with traditional politics and institutions.



People gather with placards and a large Palestinian flag to take part in a 'March For Palestine', part of a pro-Palestinian national demonstration, in London, the UK, on October 14, 2023.
● ADRIAN DENNIS/AFP