

Europe as a bystander?

In the sudden war between Israel and Iran, and the recent targeted bombing of nuclear facilities in Iran by the United States, most commentators saw Europe as a bystander. These developments affect key European interests, but powerless and at best with good intentions the EU can only issue fruitless calls for de-escalation and diplomacy. For many reasons, Europeans have failed to develop a credible collective role to shape developments in their southern neighbourhood. Most recently, Europe has lost credibility and clout in large parts of the Middle East and around the globe due to its failure to find a balanced approach to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. It should have jointly balanced its condemnation of Hamas' horrendous terrorist attacks on Israel, its unacceptable hostage-taking, and the affirmation of Israel's right to exist and defend itself, with calling out egregious violations of humanitarian law in Israel's military response, the unacceptable level of civilian casualties, and the illegal blocking of food aid which caused severe suffering among Palestinians.

While the United States has yet again projected its power and demonstrated determination to use force despite increasing domestic pressure to put an end to military campaigns abroad, Europeans only hours before the US intervention tried to broker a return to arms control negotiations. Led by the E3 format of France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and coordinated with both the US and the EU, the Europeans met the Iranian foreign minister in an attempt to revive the high-level diplomacy to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. US President Donald Trump, who pulled the US out of the JPOCA in 2018—prompting Iran to step up uranium enrichment—chose not to wait, making European diplomatic efforts look irrelevant.

Simply deploring Europe's inability to develop and project power to pursue its interests in the region is pointless. Clearly, European leaders, despite all difficulties, understand that they cannot avoid re-engaging in regional developments. Berlin, Paris, and London have taken the initiative. It failed, but what was the alternative?

One seemingly easy option is for Europeans to leave Washington to handle the Middle East without questioning its policy choices, since Europe is dependent on US security guarantees while Russia pursues its war of aggression against Ukraine and therefore should avoid annoying President Trump as he might abuse Europe's acute vulnerability. However, European governments have no choice but to try to keep a foot in the door, given their own interests in the region. These include ensuring regional stability, affirming Israel's right to exist and the right of Palestinians to statehood, the fight against terrorism, upholding international law, maintaining energy supplies, controlling migration flows, and keeping trade routes open.

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Europe's calls for diplomacy may sound naïve, especially if not underpinned with sufficient power to influence policies. But Europeans should have the self-confidence to believe that they are not alone, as many countries in the region would rather return to diplomacy than see a continued spiral of military escalation.