

Europeans divided on Israel

Monday 25 June 2012, by [ABDULLAH Daud](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2011).

A poll conducted in Europe reveals growing disconnect between governments and people over the policy on Israel.

The Middle East is not the only region witnessing a growing disconnect between governments and people. In Europe, a major survey has shown that governments there have become increasingly out of tune with the views of their people on the conflict in Palestine.

This was one of the major findings of a poll carried out by the London-based polling institution ICM government and Social Research unit on behalf Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, the Middle East Monitor and the European Muslim Research Centre.

The survey, the first of its kind to exclusively focus on European perceptions of the conflict, was conducted in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Netherlands and Britain.

Since its creation in 1948, Europeans have empathised with the state of Israel. They showered it with unlimited diplomatic, political and military assistance; including a nuclear capability, courtesy of the French. The survey reveals that there is now a distinct lack of appetite to support practises that are manifestly illegal, unfair and oppressive.

While European governments individually and collectively pay regular homage to Israeli democracy - they say it is the only democracy in the Middle East - their public is reluctant to do so. Thirty-four per cent of the 7,045 people polled believe Israel is not a democracy, while less than half, or 45 per cent, believe it is.

In Italy and Spain, a staggering 41 per cent believe Israel is not a democracy. By expressing the views they did, the European public appears to be saying to their governments; our loyalties are to the principles of democracy and not to career politicians who profess allegiance but act differently.

One striking reason for this indictment of Israeli democracy has been its “illegal” actions and gross disregard for international standards of conduct. Half of Europeans, 53 per cent view the siege of the Gaza Strip as illegal, 60 per cent said the 2008-09 ground invasion of the territory was illegal; while 64 per cent said Israel’s attack on the Freedom Flotilla in May 2010 was illegal. The message emerging from the survey, it seems, is that future European support has to be earned and it would not be given gratis on the basis of pretence or partial adherence to international norms.

In a related matter, more than one-third of those polled (34 per cent) said that Jews with citizenship of a European country should not be allowed to serve in the Israeli army; this compares to only 17 per cent who said they should.

Israel as ‘occupying power’

The shift taking place today is a rejection of the “war on terror” paradigm, which was cynically used as cover to deny Palestinians fundamental right to freedom. Europeans have, therefore, returned to

the basic formula of occupied and occupier. The poll uncovered a better understanding of the nature of the Israeli occupation.

It showed that 49 per cent of respondents recognised Israel as the occupying power; 22 per cent said they did not know if it was. When the University of Glasgow conducted its study in Britain in 2001 it found that 71 per cent did not know that it was the Israelis who were occupying the territories.

Although the ICM survey reveals a marked improvement in understanding, it nonetheless demonstrates a clear lack of awareness of the situation, given the fact that there are many UN resolutions which explicitly refer to Israel as the Occupying Power. In reality, therefore, more Europeans should be aware of the 2004 the International Court of Justice advisory opinion which says that "Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, are illegal and an obstacle to peace and to economic and social development".

Another interesting revelation from the survey relates to the issue of criticism of Israel. While 50 per cent of respondents disagreed with the view that criticism of Israel makes a person anti-Semitic, only 12 per cent said criticising Israel does make a person anti-Semitic.

This particular result will, no doubt, strike at the heart of the claims made by the pro-Israel lobbyists and the likes of former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar who equates criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

Clearly pressured by an aggressive pro-Israeli lobby, several European governments, including Britain, have taken steps to change their laws on universal jurisdiction. The survey, however, showed that a clear majority, 58 per cent, oppose changing the law to make it easier for those accused of war crimes to visit Europe, only 10 per cent agree to make such changes. In Britain, only 7 per cent support the change.

This was the lowest recorded percentage in Europe. It should be noted that 2,000 people were polled in the UK with a margin error of 2 per cent. Yet the incumbent government is determined to press ahead with this unpopular policy. The resounding message here is that justice is not the right or monopoly of any particular people, religion or country. It is a universal value.

Hamis inclusion

One final outstanding revelation relates to the inclusion or exclusion of Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) from peace talks. Although the European Union took a decision in 2003 to place Hamas on its list of "terrorist" organisations and preclude it from any negotiations, 45 per cent of those polled said it should be included.

In Britain, where former foreign secretary Jack Straw had played a pivotal role in the proscription, 44 per cent believe Hamas should be included in the political process with only 19 per cent saying the movement should be excluded. Yet again, on a critically important issue, European governments appear to be in one valley and their people in another.

In recent years Israel has invested inordinate sums of human and material resources to improve its public image in Europe. While the ICM survey showed that its European lobby has been influential in political as well as the media circles, this has not been transformed into public support.

The underlying cause for this setback is the growing public perception of Israel as a state which seeks to progress and prosper through the subjugation of another people. The European public today sees things differently. Unlike their governments, they believe their own fulfilment would only

be achieved through recognition of the basic human dignity and freedom of all other people, including the Palestinians.

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* Source: Al Jazeera. Last Modified: 13 Mar 2011 05:04:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/03/2011313305512849.html>

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