


Some are more equal than others: responses to political violence

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In September 2013 in a blog post written for the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security at the University of Birmingham, I [posed the following question](#): 'Why is it that the policy of sanctions which is considered appropriate for Iran is not appropriate for Israel?'

The focus of this question derived from the controversy that emerged following the imposition of restrictions by the European Union on financial assistance to Israeli institutions. The EU adopted guidelines in June 2013 to prevent financing and cooperating with institutions and organisations in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. Intended to apply pressure on Israel with regards to its settlement policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and to encourage movement towards a peace agreement with the Palestinians, these relatively minor sanctions were met with anger in Israel and by requests for their relief by the US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Kerry's reasoning at the time was that a suspension of these restrictions would demonstrate to the Israeli public the benefit of pursuing a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Secretary Kerry is [reported as saying](#), "I think it's important that the Israeli people and the government see that coming to the talks, taking the risk of moving toward peace is worthwhile". Needless to say, given the massive and asymmetrical escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip between Hamas and Israel in recent weeks, the peace process that Kerry worked hard to revive failed absolutely as the peace talks collapsed by May 2014.

Last time the contrast I was seeking to expose referred to the very different logic then being applied to Iran over its nuclear programme. Iran, who has been in negotiations intermittently since 2003, prior to the referral of the Iranian nuclear file to the Security Council in 2006, has been subject to some of the harshest multilateral and bilateral sanctions ever imposed. In 2013, following the election of President Rohani which was widely recognised as promising renewed diplomacy with a very different mandate for negotiating than had been the case under former President Ahmadinejad, the United States still refused to put significant sanctions relief on the table as a reward for re-starting negotiations. The Iranian case has, since then, made considerable progress although it remains very much an unfinished story.

My current concern returns to the discrepancy between actions applied to Israel in its fourth week of an escalating military campaign against Hamas in Gaza which is responsible for taking over 1000 Palestinian lives (to date) and injuring over 6000 more, and actions taken against Russia who is suspected of arming the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine responsible for the downing of the Malaysian passenger airliner MH17 on 17 July. President Obama, along with the EU, has just announced the application of tougher targeted sanctions against Russia in a bid to condemn its role in the Ukrainian conflict.

The BBC's Gavin Hewitt [has written that](#), "Europe's leaders did not want to move to economic sanctions but they were moved by two considerations: the outrage at the way investigators have been blocked from access to the crash site of the downed plane and, secondly, the fact that Russia, since the

incident, has been allowing heavy weapons across the border into Ukraine". The argument is that although European countries have been reluctant to take such measures which may harm their own economic interests and will target Russia's finance, energy, and defence sectors, they are doing so to ensure that the message that actions have consequences is made clear to President Putin.

The reverse side of this politically violent coin is that the United States voted against and a number of EU countries abstained from the resolution passed in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on 23 July to investigate Israel for potential war crimes. Despite the documented breaches of international law and international humanitarian law by Israel dating back many years, these countries sought to err on the side of restraint.

While it is true that the US has, for once, signed up to a UN Security Council statement which calls for an "immediate and unconditional humanitarian cease-fire", this might still be considered a tactical step to prevent more strongly worded resolutions against Israel being proposed in the Security Council. As the US and the EU moved to sanction Russia one week after the tragic attack on the Malaysian airliner, they have failed to take the lead on the international stage to remove the umbrella of impunity under which Israel's leaders continue to shelter as it relentlessly and disproportionately carries out attacks on Gaza which cannot, given the urban density of the Strip, avoid knowingly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure such as homes, hospitals, Gaza's only power plant, and UN-run schools where much of Gaza's population have sought refuge.

There are many perspectives on the current violence taking place in Gaza and I am not seeking to address all of the arguments and rebuttals which might be made of this brief summary. Without condoning the actions of Hamas, what I am seeking to do is cast some light on the hypocrisy of states and their leaders as they fail to take actions which would bring an end to the utter devastation of Palestinian lives. While all states may be equal under the eyes of international law, this unequal application of sanctions serves to remind us once more that some may be more equal than others.