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Analysis: Czechs lead divided European delegation

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The arrival of the European Union delegation represents the first serious external diplomatic involvement since the Gaza fighting began following Hamas's decision to renew rocket attacks against Israel.

This visit is also the first to be headed by Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg following the handover of the EU presidency from Paris to Prague on January 1. In a fundamental change in the EU's tone, Czech spokesman Jiri Potuznik, speaking in the name of the EU, referred to the Israeli ground operation as "defensive, not offensive."

This statement reflects the slowly increasing influence of the "new Europeans," whose policies are shaped by the memory of the Soviet occupation, resulting in a stronger position against terrorism and dictatorships than Western Europeans. They are also less vulnerable to Arab pressure, in part because their populations include far fewer Muslims and Arabs.

But the European leadership "troika" is strongly divided, with both France, which held the presidency until last week, and Sweden, which takes over on July 1, continuing a "soft power" policy that opposes military action, particularly by [Israel](#), and tends to see Palestinians as victims.

Directly opposing the Czech statement, the French Foreign Ministry condemned "the Israeli ground offensive against Gaza as it condemns the continuation of rocket firing." This statement makes no distinction between Hamas and the IDF, or between aggressor and defender.

The French government is promoting a vague "humanitarian cease-fire" which, Israel fears, will allow Hamas to rebuild and even extend its rocket forces for the next round. French President Sarkozy is expected to make a separate trip to the region, ostensibly to visit the French troops in the UNIFIL force in Lebanon which are officially responsible for enforcing UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which was adopted at the end of the 2006 Lebanon War. While UNIFIL has claimed a few well-publicized successes in uncovering rockets aimed at Israel, the overall mission has failed, and Hizbullah is reported to have doubled its arsenal. In talks with Israeli officials, this record is likely to be among the issues under discussion.

Although relations between Israel and Western Europe have improved steadily and significantly in the past few years, particularly after the death of Yasser Arafat (a cultural icon for many Europeans), and the election of more sympathetic leaders in Britain, Germany, Italy, and France, there are still many points of friction. The competition for influence with the US continues, particularly in the case of France, and this comes at Israel's expense.

In addition, European government funding for dozens of radical pro-Palestinian "civil society" and human rights organizations that are campaigning on behalf of Hamas is a major problem. These groups, including the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) and Adalah, led public relations efforts to portray the situation in Gaza as a "humanitarian crisis," and encouraged the Hamas leadership to expect international pressure in preventing the Israeli military action. The wave of denunciations and anti-Israel demonstrations in many Western European cities - including London and Paris - are also supported by groups such as the French "International Federation for Human Rights" (FIDH) and the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network. In a joint statement, these groups "strongly condemn the wide-scale aerial offensive by the Israeli Defense Forces in the Gaza Strip which started on December 27th, 2008 and killed almost 300 Palestinians." As on many occasions in the past, the bias is blatant.

The visit of the European Union delegation, led by the Czech presidency, which also includes External Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner (from Austria), will be too short and focused on the situation in Gaza to resolve these issues. But the next six months present an important opportunity to go beyond the clichés and strengthen the basis for greater European-Israeli cooperation.

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