

Netanyahu's Address to an Emptying Hall and the West's Credibility Problem

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SUMMARY

The West has been prepared to bear high political and economic costs in defending international law against Russia, which launched the war in Ukraine, particularly the fundamental principles on which European and global security rests, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yet, when it comes to Israel, the West appears unable to display the same normative determination. Although the increasingly critical statements by some Western countries regarding developments in Gaza and the West Bank, the limited measures taken against settlements, and the recognition of a Palestinian state are important, the gap between rhetoric and action has still not been closed. At the same time, this “wavering” approach undermines not only the West's credibility in the Middle East but also the very credibility of its claim to uphold a rules-based international order. This article examines the West's position. However, the questionable stance of the world outside the West also deserves examination as a separate subject.

The West's real loss in the Middle East is not merely diplomatic influence. It is its normative authority.

When Benjamin Netanyahu took the podium at the United Nations General Assembly on 24 September, delegations from dozens of countries left the hall. The rows of seats began to empty even before Netanyahu had started speaking.

Admittedly, the scene was striking visually. What was particularly noteworthy, however, was that, apart from Spain and Ireland—which chose to leave only one diplomat in the hall to take notes—no Western countries were among the delegations that walked out. This inevitably raises once again the question of what Western governments are doing in the face of Israel's ongoing and increasingly brazen policies in the region.

Because the problem Western countries face today regarding Israel is no longer whether they criticise the Netanyahu government's policies. They do. Indeed, it can be argued that the language they have used recently has become relatively more forceful.

But the real question should be this: Why is the West unable to apply the principles of international law that it defended in the context of Ukraine with the same determination when it comes to Israel?

This difference cannot be explained by diplomatic sensitivities or political pragmatism alone. It is reasonable to regard it as a blatant manifestation of the double standard long pointed out. The cost to the West is not merely a loss of influence in the Middle East; it is also the erosion of its own normative and soft power on a global scale.

I have already addressed, in another article, how the West's selective application of the fundamental principles of the rules-based international order undermines its own credibility. My central question there was this: If the rules are truly universal, why can principles that are binding when applied to adversaries become more flexible when the countries concerned are those with which important relationships are at stake?

What we are witnessing today in the case of Israel makes that question even more important. Because the West's position in the Ukraine war was extremely clear. One state cannot seize another state's territory by force. Borders cannot be changed through the use of force. Occupation cannot create permanent sovereignty. Civilians must be protected under all circumstances. Aggression must carry a cost for those who perpetrate it.

These principles did not remain merely rhetorical. The international community imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on Russia, provided political, military, and financial support to Ukraine, and activated international legal mechanisms. Unfortunately, we do not see the same approach in Israel's case.

The analyses of Nathalie Tocci, the Italian foreign-policy expert whom I know personally and whose assessments of international affairs I respect for their intellectual depth, are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

As early as 2009, Tocci examined the European Union's Israel-Palestine policy under the heading "Determined in Rhetoric, Concessional in Practice." She argued that the EU had developed a strong normative discourse in favour of a solution based on human rights and international law, but that its use of diplomatic and economic instruments had created a gap between this rhetoric and its actual behaviour.

Seventeen years have passed. The problem is still there. Indeed, it has become far more visible with the Gaza war.

In 2025, Tocci wrote that Europe had "stood tall" in defending democracy and international law in Ukraine, while Gaza had shattered Europe's credibility. She specifically compared the EU's 19 sanctions packages against Russia with its hesitancy over suspending trade privileges in the case of Israel. This, quite rightly, raises a critical question: Why are the fundamental principles of international law applied differently not by the nature of the situation, but by the perpetrator's proximity to the West?

Israel, of course, has a right to security. But the right to security is not unlimited. The protection of civilians, proportionality, the delivery of humanitarian assistance, compliance with the law of occupation, and the legal status of settlements do not disappear for security reasons.

Perhaps the clearest example of this contradiction is found in European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's "State of the Union" address to the European Parliament on 16 September. The Commission President explicitly described Israel's announced E1 settlement project as "illegitimate" and "unacceptable." She also referred to settler violence in the West Bank and the humanitarian suffering in Gaza. But immediately afterwards, she acknowledged Europe's political impotence: Member states had been unable to secure the necessary majority for a common response. Europe was divided, and when Europe is divided, it cannot change the course of events.

This is precisely where an attitude that could be described as "spinelessness" emerges. The law is clear. Violations are identified. Yet the political will needed to impose consequences for those violations fails to materialise.

France, one of the EU's major member states, provides another recent concrete example of this "wavering."

Together with Britain and Canada, France has announced trade measures concerning goods originating from Israeli settlements and measures relating to the settlements. At the same time, it continues to emphasise its commitment to Israel's security and its close relations with Israel.

These two positions may not be inherently contradictory.

However, the statement made by French President Macron in his UN General Assembly speech concerning Hamas's activities in the West Bank, which was subsequently clarified, demonstrated how delicate a balance the West's rhetoric in this area rests upon. French officials later explained that Macron meant Hamas does not govern the West Bank. A linguistic slip, on its own, does not prove that a state policy is unprincipled. But it can be read as a symbol of a broader problem: the reluctance to accept the political consequences that may arise even when taking a firm normative position.

This is where the West's image of "wavering" comes from.

Although Europe possesses considerable economic and diplomatic leverage over Israel, it has long been reluctant to use it. This approach has become one of the principal reasons why Europe has lost credibility over Gaza. While the EU has begun to restore greater weight to international law through trade measures targeting the settlements, it would not be wrong to say that it remains divided, with Germany's resistance emerging as an important factor.

The problem, therefore, is not that "Europe has no instruments at its disposal." The instruments exist. There is economic leverage. There is diplomatic leverage. There is the EU-Israel Association Agreement. There are trade relations. There are defence relations, including arms sales. The problem is the lack of a common political will on when and to what extent to use these instruments.

The real cost of the double standard becomes apparent here: An international order consists not only of rules. The legitimacy of those rules derives from the belief that they will be applied to everyone. The danger for the West is not merely a loss of trust in the Arab or Muslim world. It is also the weakening, across the world and particularly among the "Global South" countries, of the persuasive power of the West's claim to uphold a "rules-based international order."

The issue here is not opposition to Israel. Nor is it in any way a rejection of Israel's existence or security. There is no contradiction between condemning Hamas's 7 October attack and defending the rights of the Palestinians.

On the contrary: principled politics means being able to defend these two realities simultaneously and defending Israel's security while also defending the rights of the Palestinians. Condemning Hamas's terrorism while also condemning the ongoing genocide in Gaza and demanding the protection of civilians. Maintaining a strategic relationship with Israel while imposing, at the very least, economic sanctions in response to its settlement policy in violation of international law.

These are not mutually exclusive policies.

For this reason, it would be wrong to attach too much importance or meaning to the emptying of the hall during Netanyahu's UN speech. In the end, however powerful it may be, diplomatic symbolism cannot substitute for political will.

If one believes that international law has been violated, will there be economic, diplomatic and legal consequences? Or will there be a retreat after a few strong statements once strategic interests come into play? The image the West is presenting today is, unfortunately, still far too close to the latter.

The West's real loss in the Middle East is not merely diplomatic influence. It is its normative authority. The selective application of rules undermines not only the credibility of a particular policy but also the legitimacy of the rules-based order itself. Against this backdrop, given the current course of global developments, questioning whether the rules-based order can continue to exist has, unfortunately, become a legitimate problematique.

The West's future credibility will be measured less by the truth of what it says than by whether it stands behind what it says in difficult times. What matters is whether, when a friendly country violates fundamental principles, the West can also stand up to that country.

This article has examined the West's position. But how should we explain the ambivalent position adopted by the East/South and the Muslim world in the face of developments in the Middle East? In this context, it is important, in practical terms, to acknowledge that similar double standards to those observed in the West also exist in many of these countries. There is, without doubt, a separate analysis to be undertaken of the attitude of the world outside the West and its susceptibility to criticism.



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