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CEO criticizes the business community's silence on Gaza: "We have an obligation to stamp in on the discussion"

Danish CEO intervenes in the debate on Gaza – with a shout-out to both the government and his colleagues in the business community. "There is more at stake than the millions of poor people this is about."



The words are weighed on a gold scale when CEO Dariush Rezai speaks about the war in Gaza. Foto: Gregers Tycho.

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Although the conflict in Gaza fills the news flow daily, there is a remarkably quiet about the tragedies in the Danish business community.

Few top leaders want to take a public stance on what is going on in the war between Israel and Hamas. Too few, too, if you ask Dariush Rezai, who is himself CEO of Sweco Denmark.

"The man-made tragedy in Gaza has long since reached a level where we find it difficult to cope with the magnitude. As business leaders, we have an obligation to step in to the discussion when we can see that things are developing in the wrong direction," says Dariush Rezai to Finans.

Sweco is Europe's largest consulting architectural and engineering company, and Dariush Rezai has been at the helm of Sweco Denmark, which has 2,000 employees, for eight years.

He believes that the Danish business community is conspicuous by its absence from the public conversation about what is taking place in the high-tension conflict in the Middle East.

"I'm not going to generalize or criticize my colleagues. But there may well be a tendency to walk around with a SDG pin on your suit, fly the Ukrainian flag and participate in Copenhagen Pride when it is evident and does not divide the waters. We have to show our courage when it gets difficult," says Dariush Rezai.

In doing so, he is one of the few Danish business leaders who comments directly on the situation in Gaza and the heavy civilian casualties the conflict has caused.

The majority refrains from interfering in the debate, citing that it is not the job of business leaders to have an opinion on matters outside their business - and certainly not when it comes to a matter that can make many people's emotions boil.



"There is more at stake than the millions of poor people this is about. It is about trust in our systems. If it cracks completely, I'm afraid that democracy is facing a dark time," says Dariush Rezai. Photo: Gregers Tycho

But Dariush Rezai explains that he has also experienced being praised by other business leaders for being brave and daring to be political.

"But I don't recognize the premise that I'm political, because as a business leader I stand for the international legal order and human rights," Rezai said, referring to the fact that the International Criminal Court in The Hague has issued an arrest warrant for [Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu for war crimes](#), and [the UN](#) and [WHO](#) have officially declared man-made famine in Gaza.

"It's not something Hamas or the Israelis are proclaiming. These are the international institutions we have created in the ashes of World War II, because we do not want a repeat of what history brought us. That's why we have to listen to them," says Dariush Rezai.

He is worried about a growing skepticism towards international organizations and the elite, he explains. It started with Brexit. And most recently, Trump has withdrawn the United States from the WHO and the Paris Agreement.

"If we business leaders just try to bury our heads in the sand, I think we will contribute to accelerating the crisis of confidence that is underway," says Dariush Rezai and continues:

"There is more at stake than the millions of poor people this is about. It is about trust in our systems. If it cracks completely, I'm afraid that democracy is facing a dark time."

Stability and the rule of law are important for companies, he emphasizes.

"Therefore, as business leaders, we not only have a moral obligation, but also a business interest in being vocal," says Dariush Rezai, explaining that he misses that more players in the Danish business community are getting more involved in difficult debates - including the conflict in Gaza.

"I miss the fact that the Confederation of Danish Industry takes the initiative to discuss the problem among business leaders. So that they also come on the field when it gets uncomfortable. That they show a little courage."

Last year, Copenhagen Pride came under fire among its sponsors when the organization demanded "satisfactory answers" from them about their interests and activities in Israel and Gaza. A statement that prompted the Confederation of Danish Industry, Novo Nordisk and a number of other companies to withdraw their sponsorship support.

"Values are precisely values if you are prepared to let it cost you something. If you're not prepared to let it cost you something, it's not a value, but marketing or branding," says Dariush Rezai.

Dariush Rezai acknowledges that it is easy to be misunderstood in a polarized debate. But he believes that the case is too important to remain silent.

"When I get old one day, sit in my armchair and think back, I will have a good taste in my mouth."

Tania Ellis advises companies on social responsibility through her company The Social Business Company. She believes that Dariush Rezai's comment shows "ethical leadership."

"Some will call it activism, others will call it community engagement. Many people do not dare to comment on the conflict because it can quickly become politicized, and they are afraid of losing customers," says Tania Ellis.

Dariush Rezai does not know in principle whether he risks losing customers or employees because of his public announcements.

"I have not experienced that it has affected the business. I am aware that there is a risk of that, but I think the fear is exaggerated," he says.

Internationally, the business community has begun to move in some places in relation to the issue of Gaza. The UK initiative Business Leaders for Peace has collected signatures from over 900 business leaders in an open letter to the UK government.

The letter is signed by profiles such as John Elkington, one of the world's leading authors and speakers on corporate social responsibility, and Paul Polman, former CEO of Unilever.

Recently, the Norwegian Oil Fund, which is among the world's largest, withdrew its investments in the American company Caterpillar, which has been accused of supplying equipment used to clear the West Bank.

When companies relate to an issue like Gaza, there is both an ethical and legal dimension, which is about acting in accordance with guidelines for business and human rights from the UN and OECD, explains Tania Ellis.

One of the big differences between the war in Gaza and the war in Ukraine is that the EU has chosen to sanction Russia - but has not shown the same consequence towards Israel, she says.

"When EU policy makes both ethics and law selective, it becomes difficult for many companies. Should they follow political consensus or the international rules of the game that we as a world community have agreed on?" says Tania Ellis.

Finans has contacted the Confederation of Danish Industry for a response to the criticism. In a written comment, DI writes:

"The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza is a heartbreaking situation that affects us deeply, and we are following it closely. We have an ongoing dialogue with members about the situation and will continue to be actively available for sparring and advice."