



8 June 2021

**Hearing of the Ambassador of Palestine, Abeer Odeh, before the Committee on
Foreign Affairs of the Italian Senate**

Esteemed President Petrocelli and Esteemed Senators,
Good Afternoon.

Excellencies, I would like to thank you for this invitation, that will allow me to bring information, our position, and what we expect from Italy, the EU and the international community with regard to the current situation.

I understand that the main issue you would like to hear about is the current escalation. But let us put **things in context**: Israeli aggression is not new, and the escalation did not come in a vacuum.

- Two days ago we marked 54 years since the start of Israel's colonial, foreign **occupation** of the West Bank including East Jerusalem and of the Gaza Strip, as well as the passage of yet another year of its decades-long racist, Apartheid system of oppression of the Palestinian people.

I am compelled to draw your attention to the ever-worsening and volatile situation on the ground, in the absence of Israel's accountability for its illegal occupation's crimes and in the absence of a political horizon to bring it to an end.

- It has been almost three weeks since a ceasefire halted the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people particularly in the **Gaza Strip**, and yet the occupation's violence continues as Israel's occupying forces and extremist settlers persist with countless human rights violations and war crimes against the Palestinian people.

In blatant contradiction of its claims to value the **protection of civilians**, Israel, the occupying Power, persists with its excessive and lethal use of force against the unarmed, defenceless Palestinian civilian population under its occupation. More than 100 arrests per day have been carried out in the last week. All evidence points to the fact that Israel's **extrajudicial killings** of Palestinians are not just arbitrary incidents, but rather part of a systematic pattern of policies



designed to control the occupied population through violence, repression and fear. In the Gaza Strip, the aftermath of Israel's killing spree and wanton destruction in May continues to have grave humanitarian and psychosocial consequences for the Palestinian civilian population. Despite Israel's claims of "disengagement", its siege and 14-year land, air and sea blockade of Gaza, coupled with repeated military onslaughts, the latest being the fourth in the past 14 years, have inflicted unimaginable human suffering and insecurity, as this tiny strip of land and its people are attacked by Israel at will; starved of food, fuel, basic needs, and even hospital supplies whenever the occupying Power so pleases.

Israel remains the occupying Power, and international law – including Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention – strictly forbids the use of collective punishment by the occupier.

- At the same time, we must once again draw your attention to the continued confiscation of Palestinian homes, lands and properties as Israel, the occupying Power, accelerates the **forced transfer** of Palestinians to make room to its settlement colonization schemes, especially in and around occupied East Jerusalem.

It is self-apparent by now that this is all part of a systematic, deliberate plan to remove Palestinians – that is to say ethnically cleanse these areas – in preparation for annexation and in grave breach of international law, including the UN Charter, the Fourth Geneva Convention and UN resolutions, including Security Council resolution 2334 (2016).

Israel remains the occupying Power that practices a systematic violation of international law, with a world record of not respecting and implementing relevant UN resolutions.

- Moreover, while Israel, the occupying Power, claims that its **two-tier system** of separatism and inequality is nonexistent, portraying itself as the "only democracy in the Middle East", at least 65 racist laws support a system of



institutional discrimination against the 1.8 million Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the reality of its belligerent occupation on the ground contradicts this empty claim every single day, as its draconian military laws are imposed on the Palestinian people of the Occupied Territories with an iron fist, to make their lives impossible and serve the needs of illegal Israeli settlers on our land.

Israel is defined as an Apartheid State by International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Israeli organizations such as B'Tselem.

Moving forward to the root causes of the escalation, we should start talking about Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, our neighborhoods of East Jerusalem:

- The occupation has turned Jerusalem into an arena of oppression and division. The situation on the ground is rapidly destabilizing in the area, especially after the Israel's tainted judiciary system has ordered the forcible displacement of seven Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood.
- Since then, for the past couple of months, the Israeli occupying Power and illegal settlers attacked and harassed the families of Sheikh Jarrah, invaded their houses, restricted movement, prohibited entry of anyone not residing in the neighbourhood thereby preventing solidarity protests, intensifying violations, provocations, incitement, racists campaigns and aggressions against the Palestinian civilian population all over the Occupied Territories but especially in East Jerusalem.
- Attempts persist to forcibly transfer hundreds of Palestinian families from their homes to make way for Israeli Jewish settlers, as part of Israel's colonial annexation and Judaization plans for the Holy City.
- Despite the "postponement" of court decisions regarding the fate of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan - due to international pressure - State-sponsored settler encroachment in both neighbourhoods remains relentless and 150 Palestinian families amounting to more than 1,200 individuals remain under threat of eviction.
- Aggression has become a daily occurrence, with hundreds of Palestinians injured or arbitrarily detained.



During the Holy Month of Ramadan, Israel's extended its violence against the Palestinian families of Sheikh Jarrah to Palestinian worshippers at Al Aqsa Mosque, by brutally attacking thousands of civilians, including children, women and elderly people, throwing gas grenades and firing rubber bullets inside the mosque, and detaining hundreds of Palestinians:

- Israel turned the Al Aqsa Mosque into a military post, cutting electricity and loud speakers and preventing imams from conducting prayers.
- Likewise, Israeli occupying forces attacked **Palestinian Christians** as they were celebrating the Orthodox Easter, imposing punitive restrictions on Palestinians' access to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for prayers.

Israeli violations against the right of the Palestinian people to freedom of religion and belief reflects the systematic and discriminatory Israeli policies, laws and practices, which determine who may or may not exercise the right to freedom of religion and worship.

Following the same purposes, Palestinians in East Jerusalem – and the rest of Palestinians as a consequence - were prohibited from voting for their own Parliament and their own President:

- This resulted in the **postponement of the Palestinian elections**, which could not take place without the participation of the Palestinians who live in the legitimate capital of Palestine. Let me add that unfortunately, on this occasion, the EU failed to put pressure on Israel to make the elections happen.

The Palestinian leadership and population reacted to all this peacefully. We appealed to the international community to stop these abuses and our nonviolent demonstrations called for protection and support.

Why bombing Gaza?

Israel was requested to stop with its aggressions. But instead of stopping, the occupying Power opted for yet another brutal aggression on the Gaza Strip, which started on 10 May and lasted 11 days. This aggression further



traumatized an already targeted population. We are talking about 2 million people, who make of Gaza the highest density area in the world.

- Most of the people are refugees, with 48% of them under age of 18.
- Gaza has been under siege for 14 years. In this open-air prison, basic needs are hard to obtain:
 - 56% of the population live below the poverty line.
 - According to UN estimates, 70% of them receive international aid, mainly food.
 - Deprived of their main fishing resource, unemployment exceeds 45% of the population and reaches 70% among the youth, who are left with no hope for the future.
 - They all have electricity for maximum 4 hours a day, and they don't have drinkable water.
 - Moreover, they are regularly subject to brutal aggressions. The bombs of May 2021 are reminiscent of those that fell on Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014, whose consequences are still visible, for which justice has not yet been done, but which the International Criminal Court is rightly investigating.
- This was the devastated situation on which Israel decided to fire its latest bombing, making it even worse and almost unbearable.
- According to the World Health Organization, Israel's recent aggression on Gaza resulted in:
 - 278 Palestinians killed. The Palestinians targeted and killed by the Israeli bombs include 39 women some of whom were pregnant, 17 elderly people and 69 children. 9 entire families were totally destroyed.
 - **None of these people was a "human shield", they were all human beings. Israel attacked these civilians without warning them to evacuate.**
 - **Israel has all the instruments to do so: as an occupying Power it also has the registry of the Palestinian population. If Israel did not ask them to evacuate it is because it chose not to do so.**
 - 9,000, including hundreds of children and women, injured, who will keep suffering for the rest of their life, both physically and mentally, if they survive.
 - 77,000 internally displaced, homeless and mostly seeking shelter in UNRWA schools.



- 30 health facilities damaged, including the only Covid test laboratory present in the Strip, among other civilian infrastructures.
- 316 homes were destroyed and 132 building were demolished by the bombings.
- And it is not by chance that, among these buildings, the media tower was destroyed, to cover up the crimes of the occupier.
- A wastewater plant serving 800,000 people, the sewage system and a desalination plant were destroyed.
- Dozens of schools were also destroyed, leaving more than 600,000 students without a place where to study.
- After the Secretary General of the United Nations said on 20 May that “if there is hell on earth, it is lives of children in Gaza”, a psychologist report submitted to US Aid last week stated that “what children in Gaza are facing exceeds what any other children in any part of the world has ever experienced”.
- Children, as well as adults, cannot escape from this. They have no place to go.
- “When you put people under continued pressure you cannot be surprised when violence erupt”, Senator Sanders said last week in his speech on the US Senate floor.

The Position of the State of Palestine is clear and legitimate:

- Israel bears the whole responsibility for this spiralling violence.
- Israel is choosing violence. From the forcible transfer of Palestinian families in occupied East Jerusalem to the brutal aggression in the occupied Gaza Strip, Israeli officials opted to escalate violence and crime against the Palestinian people.
- We condemn Israeli’s discriminatory and deliberate policy of targeting civilians, in violation of its obligations under international law.
- The State of Palestine has repeatedly communicated with the international community and warned that the explosive situation in occupied East Jerusalem would further escalate and lead to more violence. We warned that Israeli’s unlawful and wanton use of force against Palestinian worshippers and its attack on Al Aqsa Mosque would



further destabilize the situation. We warned that the imminent forcible displacement of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem is a war crime and a threat to regional and international peace and security.

- The State of Palestine calls on the international community to stop Israel's war crime of collective punishment against our people in the Gaza Strip.
- The fundamental unavoidable reality at the heart of this volatile situation is Israeli illegal occupation and its Apartheid regime, both of which must end.

Actions, not words, by Italy, the European Union and the international community are necessary to stop the current escalation:

- Italy and the European Union cannot act as simple outsiders: They are extremely involved.
- Italy's diplomatic history is deeply rooted in Palestine, not just as Mediterranean neighbours but also with regards to Italy's presence in Jerusalem, the status quo of the Holy Sites and the important geopolitical role played by your country in our region.
- The European Union is Israel's main trade partner. Such relations continue to grow just as Israel's violations of international law and human rights are making a mockery of the very basis the European Union defends in its international relations: A rules-based world order.
- On top of that: Both Italy and the EU have enough bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to make sure Israel respects its obligations under international law and UN resolutions. So far we have seen an utter reluctance to do that.

What could Italy and the European Union do? A lot! Beginning by respecting your own laws with regards to relations with countries that violate human rights and international law:

- Regretfully we don't see any political will from the European Union to play the role it should play. This was reflected in the vote at the UN Human Rights



Council where no EU member, including Italy, voted in favour of a simple commission of inquiry to investigate ALL crimes and violations of international humanitarian law, regardless of who committed them, on both sides of the Green Line, over this period, focusing on the root causes, including systematic discrimination (Just compare this with the European voting record on commissions of inquiry elsewhere, which is always positive).

- If the EU claims to share values with Israel, then we openly ask: Is Apartheid a value rather than a crime? Is colonization something you feel proud of? There is a need to stop double standards and take action based on a concrete political goal: Ending the occupation that began in 1967, including East Jerusalem, in the context of two sovereign and democratic States that grant equal rights to all their citizens, also resolving the refugee issue on the basis of UN Resolution 194 of 1948.
- Impunity is not the way to achieve that goal. Justice is. If, as it is, colonial settlements are illegal, then you have to ban their products; you have to take action on your own companies working for the benefit of that illegal enterprise; you have to prevent from your own soil those who fund such criminal acts, including the Jewish National Fund that operates in this country and has dozens of projects in illegal colonial settlements.

What Italy should not forget:

- The Palestinian leadership has shown a large degree of political pragmatism, at a large internal cost, in aiming at achieving peace, including by declaring the State of Palestine on the 1967 border (22% of historic Palestine): Israel has sabotaged the prospects of this political solution, making everything possible to enhance their own racist project: Jewish supremacy from the river to the sea (historic Palestine).
- It is necessary for everyone to stop looking at the situation based on what Israel would be “willing to accept” (what’s possible) or what is good for the Israelis, and focus on implementing international law and UN resolutions (what’s needed).



What about the Peace Process:

- Soon we'll be marking 30 years since the Madrid Peace Conference. Did we achieve peace? No. Repeating same old formulas without tackling the core issues is not going to take us anywhere.
- Palestine is ready to engage in meaningful negotiations, based on international law and relevant UN resolutions, under the sponsorship of the Middle East Quartet (EU, UN, US and Russia). We are also open to the idea of expanding the Quartet in order to include some actors that are not currently there, including Egypt and Jordan.
- We ask Italy to support the Arab Peace Initiative and the initiative presented by President Mahmoud Abbas last year before the UN Security Council, of a Peace Conference under the umbrella of the Quartet with a time frame lasting until the end of the occupation.
- We ask you, the Senate of Italy, to help your government move a step forward and recognize Palestine as a legitimate State on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, in line with international law and all relevant UN resolutions.
- We see some positive messages from the US Administration. Their approach regarding Palestinians and Israelis deserving "equal measures of freedom, security, prosperity and democracy" is certainly welcomed and considered a positive development. The question is how the US plans translate this into concrete measures.
- Finally, I would like to thank all the Italians for their important and much needed support.
- The tremendous support to the Palestinian cause demonstrated these days all over the world, and especially in Italy, by your citizens, associations, trade unions and political movements, clearly confirms our legitimate right to exist and to have our State.

THANK YOU