

The EU Must Change Vocabulary on Israel-Palestine

by Michelle Pace

As hundreds of Palestinians began cleaning the debris left behind by Israel's latest 11-day assault on the Gaza Strip – which caused at least 256 Palestinian deaths, including 66 children, and a further 13 deaths within Israel¹ –, a degree of humanity was restored to Gaza's besieged population.

The Gaza City municipality – which initiated the volunteering campaign – named it *Han'amarha* ("we will build it").² A strong statement that contributes to undermine the "us" versus "them" binary, providing a window into the individual and collective struggle of

Gazans as human beings – in spite of the "hell on earth"³ that Israel's settler-colonial violence has imposed upon them.⁴

The campaign's quest to humanise the everyday suffering of 2 million inhabitants of Gaza stands in sharp contrast to Israel's representation of the Gaza Strip as a hotbed of terrorists: the campaign overrides such depictions with the spirit of hope, love, solidarity and community.

What happened across occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) during May 2021 serves as a reminder that we are again witnessing Israel's sustained

¹ The Norwegian Refugee Council confirmed that 11 of the over 60 children killed by Israeli air strikes in Gaza were participating in its psychosocial programme aimed at helping them deal with trauma. See, Norwegian Refugee Council, *Eleven Children Receiving NRC Trauma Care Killed in Their Homes by Israeli Air Strikes*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/may/11-children-killed>.

² "Hundreds of Palestinians Volunteer to Clean up War-Ravaged Gaza (Video)", in *Palestine Chronicle*, 24 May 2021, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/?p=71050>.

³ UN Secretary General, António Guterres, described the lives of children in Gaza as "hell on earth" on 20 May 2021. See, UN News, *Gaza Children Living in 'Hell on Earth', UN Chief Says, Urging Immediate End to Fighting*, 20 May 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/node/1092332>.

⁴ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine. A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2020.

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campaign of pressure through “continued military rule, dispossession, discrimination and violence”.⁵

If observers have any doubts as to whether Israel is intentionally committing collective punishment and war crimes aimed at making life unbearable for Palestinians, a number of reputable international organisations have responded with nuanced evidence. The April 2021 report by Human Rights Watch finds Israel guilty of the crimes of apartheid and persecution.⁶ Israeli rights bodies – including B’Tselem and Yesh Din – similarly claim that Israel is not a democracy but an “apartheid regime”.⁷ Furthermore, the International Criminal Court’s chief prosecutor has opened a formal investigation into alleged war crimes in the oPt.⁸

⁵ Mairav Zonszein, “Haaretz front page today on the 67 children killed in Gaza...”, *Twitter post*, 27 May 2021, <https://twitter.com/mairavz/status/1397787259223654400>.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed. Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*, April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/node/378469>.

⁷ B’Tselem, *A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid*, 12 January 2021, <http://www.btselem.org/node/213260>; Michael Sfard, *The Occupation of the West Bank and the Crime of Apartheid: Legal Opinion*, Yesh Din, June 2020, <https://www.yesh-din.org/?p=7039>.

⁸ International Criminal Court, *Statement of ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, Respecting an Investigation of the Situation in Palestine*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=210303-prosecutor-statement-investigation-palestine>. See also Amnesty International, *Israel/OPT: Pattern of Israeli Attacks on Residential Homes in Gaza Must Be Investigated as War Crimes*, 17 May 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/israelopt-pattern-of-israeli-attacks-on-residential-homes-in-gaza-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes>.

Predictably, Israel rejects these claims, dismissing any reflective thinking about how its illegal actions (as a political agent) continue to embolden the Palestinians’ determination to fight for liberation.

In fact, Israeli actions have sparked a global solidarity movement in support of Palestinian rights. Israel is feeling the pressure and is increasingly anxious about it. When truth speaks to power it can be more powerful than one of the strongest armies in the world.

The *idea* of Palestine is not just about a place/country: its reach goes beyond a specific geographical location.⁹ It has become an ideal, an ideal that is spreading around the world. Global solidarity for Palestine and Palestinian rights demonstrates the broad reach of this ideal, speaking loudly in the face of Israel’s injustice, violence and occupation. The vitality of the idea of Palestine conjures a sense of power that Palestinians hold and Israel cannot destroy.

Europe has long been involved in Israel-Palestine. Since the creation of Israel

⁹ Edward W. Said, “The Idea of Palestine in the West”, in *MERIP Reports*, No. 70 (September 1978), p. 3-11. Palestinian territorial nationalism was created by Jewish Zionist nationalism. See the King-Crane Commission report for more on this: Henry C. King and Charles R. Crane, *Recommendations of the King-Crane Commission with regard to Syria-Palestine and Iraq*, 29 August 2019, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-206598>; and Jeremy Forman and Alexandre (Sandy) Kedar, “From Arab Land to Israel Lands: The Legal Dispossession of the Palestinians Displaced by Israel in the Wake of 1948”, in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (December 2004), p. 809-830. Thanks to Charles Shamas for our discussion on this point.

in 1948 and the parallel beginnings of the Palestine refugee issue – with over 700,000 Palestinians fleeing or forced to abandon their homes in what became Israel –, Europe has sought to position itself as a mediator and power broker in the region. In spite of different European countries changing their stances according to specific events and political orientations, the EU has long sought to adopt and maintain a single policy on Palestine.

In 1980, the then nine member European Community issued the Venice Declaration, an important milestone in that it recognised Palestinians' right to self-determination.¹⁰ Since then, European countries have attempted to maintain a balance between their support for Israeli security and right to exist on the one hand and Palestinian self-determination and independence on the other.

Their mantra has been that of pressing for negotiations towards a two-state framework. The problems with this formulation are well known.¹¹ Young Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, make a laughing stock out of this concept: how can the EU be so far removed from their daily struggles across the oPt? Can't the EU admit that this fixation on direct negotiations between occupied and

occupier has proven a dismal failure?

The facts on the ground speak to Israel's commitment to a unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank and discriminatory policies towards the Palestinians. When in 2018 Israel's "Nation-State Law" specified Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, thus formalising Israel as a Jewish state¹² – not as a Jewish and democratic state – the EU condemned the move. Yet, little of concrete has followed.

Europe needed no further evidence of Israeli Zionist exclusivism in historic Palestine. The EU's prescription based on negotiations between two presumably equal parties in "conflict" is complicit in Israel's own embrace of the nation-state model which helps enable Israel's growing settler-colonial expansionism and erasure of Palestinians from historic Palestine. If the EU is to have any legitimacy in this question, its efforts need to target Israel's decoupling of state from nation, while advancing the possibility of a state of no nation.

This moment will come if and when the EU musters the courage to demand an end to apartheid. It must do this together with international partners, even together with the US, given its monopoly over Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. A new and alternative political order must be defined to push the international community to end the longest occupation in modern history.¹³

¹⁰ Daniela Huber, "A New Venice Declaration from a 'Coalition of the Lead Donors' on Israel/Palestine", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|30 (April 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10253>.

¹¹ Michelle Pace, "The End of EU Democracy Promotion and of the Two-State Solution?", in Esra Bulut Aymat (ed.), "European Involvement in the Arab-Israeli Conflict", in *Chaillot Papers*, No. 124 (December 2010), p. 87-96, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/688>.

¹² Knesset, "Full Text of Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People", in *Knesset News*, 19 July 2018, https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/News/PressReleases/Pages/Pr13978_pg.aspx.

¹³ Marwan Muasher, "The EU's Passive Approach

The EU needs to address Zionism head on and Zionists need to similarly contemplate a situation where Jews will live alongside a non-Jewish majority in Palestine, on the basis of democracy: In other words what is needed is a vision of a state that is not constituted as a nation-state.¹⁴

Israel's occupation is permanent. Its laws enshrine extra political rights for Jews over Palestinian Arabs and repeated threats of annexation are real.¹⁵ Relying on the deeply discredited Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority, which nominally administers parts of the occupied West Bank but in reality remains completely dependent on Israel, will no longer suffice. Having again postponed Palestinian elections, the Palestinian Authority has continually demonstrated its inability (or unwillingness) to break free from the outdated Oslo model of direct negotiations.

With Israel's new coalition government shifting more to the right, a practice turn in the EU's vocabulary is long overdue. As Mamdani has argued: "something else is needed if a non-Zionist alternative is to bloom in Israel itself. [...] the Palestinian moment will come when it is not just the oppressed who seek political change but also the beneficiaries of oppression. Getting there will require a new kind of political consciousness within Israel, a

to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict", in *Strategic Europe*, 6 May 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/84486>.

¹⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native. The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2020.

¹⁵ See, Adalah, *The Discriminatory Laws Database*, 25 September 2017, <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7771>.

consciousness based on the recognition that the flourishing of Jews and Jewish life does not require Zionism."¹⁶

It is therefore time for the EU to start focusing its efforts on the social consciousness of Israelis. The question is how the EU can go about strengthening the moderate centre without bringing about a further right-wing backlash?

First, it is high time that the EU (along with the US and other key international players) starts playing politics within Israel – just as Israel does within Europe and the US. This will require coming to terms with the reality that the EU's approach to Israel is a failed and a self-defeating one.

The EU needs to change its vocabulary, moving to emphasise the need for equal rights for Palestinians. The EU could start by making it clear to Israel that dialogue and political recognition will only be bestowed on those who demonstrate a commitment to change the realities on the ground.

Adopting a rights-based approach grounded in the abidance to international law should represent the new litmus test for any actor in Israel or Palestine wishing to benefit from European engagement. Conversely, failure to do so, or continual violations, should face isolation and sanctions.

In a nutshell, the EU needs to urgently follow its own human rights directives and policies in ways that are consistent, without making exceptions, whoever

¹⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native*, cit., p. 326.

the perpetrators. The alternative will not only spell further violence and injustice in Israel and Palestine, but also imply an accelerated erosion of European credibility and influence, both internally and externally.

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