

Broadening the Frame: Italian Tokenism on Israel/Palestine

by Tiziano Girardi



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E S S A Y P R I Z E

Violence in photography comes not from the content that is captured but from what is left out from its frame. Images depicting the suffering of Israelis and Palestinians on front-page news have contributed to force a bi-dimensional and incomplete picture of the situation in Israel/Palestine on viewers across the globe.¹

In May 2021, Israel's planned eviction of Palestinian families from

¹ The term "Israel/Palestine" is used here to refer to the land and the people inhabiting the space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, comprising Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt) (East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank) as well as the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

their homes in the occupied East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah triggered a violent escalation culminating in the 11-day confrontation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.²

During these events, international audiences were exposed to a stream of media content from Israel and occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Yet, after 11 days of fighting, a deafening silence returned to envelop Israel/Palestine. For many, this returning media silence sounded like violence.

² Crisis Group website: *The Israel-Palestine Crisis: Causes, Consequences, Portents*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/17125>.

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The overall media frame identified the evictions as the initial spark for the escalation. While factually correct, such framing misses the larger picture. These forcible displacements are just another knot in the broader tangle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To shed light on this intricate history, one must first unravel this simplified picture, dismantling its imposed frames through a needed process of “re-complexification”. The May 2021 events did not shape this frame *ex nihilo*. Instead, they represent a paradigm of all the dramatic ruptures that have punctuated this long narration.

Words shaping worlds

One possible starting point could be 2018, when the Israeli parliament (*Knesset*) ratified the so-called Nation-State Law. This *dispositif* was designed to strengthen the Jewish character of the state through symbolic and material provisions. Labelled by Israel’s President at the time as a law that was “bad for the State of Israel and bad for the Jews”,³ the legislation has been heavily criticised by a number of scholars as largely incompatible with democratic values.⁴

The new law employs the Hebrew words *le’om* (nation or, more precisely, belonging to a certain people) and

medinat (state) and erases the word *eZRACHUT* (citizenship/nationality). Such wording carries heavy implications for Palestinians with Israeli citizenship – 21 per cent of the total population⁵ – and other non-Jewish citizens (around 5 per cent), as both are *de facto* moved from being recognised as second class citizens to not being recognised at all.⁶ Another controversial clause downgrades Arabic to an auxiliary language with “special status”, explicitly colliding with the pledge, included in Israel’s Declaration of Independence, to guarantee equal freedom of language.⁷

These semantic changes comply with the broader promotion of Jewishness over democracy (some have spoken about an “ethnic democracy”⁸), which is causing a severe encroachment on the basic liberties of minorities living in Israel.

Add to this, the “Peace to Prosperity” initiative, unveiled in January 2020 by former US President Donald Trump. Benjamin Netanyahu, at the time still serving as Israel’s Prime

⁵ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, “Population of Israel on the Eve of 2021”, in *CBS Media Releases*, No. 438/2020 (31 December 2020), <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/Pages/2020/Population-of-Israel-on-the-Eve-of-2021.aspx>.

⁶ Umberto De Giovannangeli, “Gli arabi di Israele. Da ‘popolo invisibile’ a popolo cancellato”, in *Limes*, No. 9/2018, p. 151-157.

⁷ Mohammed S. Wattad, “The Nation State Law and the Arabic Language in Israel: Downgrading, Replicating or Upgrading?”, in *Israel Law Review*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (July 2021), p. 263-285.

⁸ Sammy Smooha, “The Model of Ethnic Democracy: Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State”, in *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (October 2002), p. 475-503.

³ “Israel’s President: Nation-State Law Is ‘Bad for Israel and Bad for the Jews’”, in *The Times of Israel*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/president-nation-state-law-bad-for-israel-and-bad-for-the-jews>.

⁴ Alon Harel, “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People”, in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (March 2021), p. 262-269.

Minister, subsequently announced a unilateral annexation of large swaths of the occupied West Bank;⁹ a move that was ultimately avoided – or rather postponed – by a third major development: the signature of the so-called Abraham Accords, inaugurating the “normalisation” of relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

Nonetheless, away from the media coverage and independently from governmental announcements of a postponed annexation drive, the Palestinian people have been witnessing a slow yet ceaseless process of encroachment on their land and resources; what many have called “creeping annexation”.¹⁰ Israel has benefitted from this, maintaining credibility in the eyes of the international community, without taking responsibility for the legal limbo experienced by the Palestinians in the oPt since over five decades.¹¹ The Trump initiative resembles a “peace of the stronger”, being rather close to Israel’s maximalist positions.¹²

⁹ “As Peace Plan Rolls Out Netanyahu Says He Will Annex Jordan Valley, Settlements”, in *The Times of Israel*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-peace-plan-rolls-out-netanyahu-says-he-will-annex-jordan-valley-settlements>.

¹⁰ Crisis Group, “Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine”, in *Crisis Group Middle East Reports*, No. 225 (10 August 2021), p. 32, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/17681>.

¹¹ Lorenzo Kamel, “The Roots of Israel’s Annexation Policy”, in *Sada*, 6 August 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82425>.

¹² Others have also framed this as a climax in a gradual process of “Israelization” of the US foreign policy. See, Andrea Dessì, “The Trump Vision and the Israelization of US Middle East Policy”, in *LSE USAPP Blog*, 28 February 2020, <https://wp.me/p3I2YF-9Is>.

In this way, Israel is allowed to continue “the land grabs, the house demolitions, the assassinations and all that long list of violations that lie at the core of Israel’s denial of Palestinian rights”.¹³ Furthermore, recent statements by Israel’s new Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, endorsing the “natural growth” of Israeli settlements and reiterating his commitment against the creation of a Palestinian State, confirmed this dire scenario.¹⁴

Mantras will not bring peace

With these momentous events in the background, how did Italian foreign policy and more broadly the EU react? Not proactively. Instead, Italy and other European member states simply reiterated the rather futile nursery rhyme of the respect for international law. Indeed, as the saying goes, the EU, including Italy, has always been “a payer but not a player” in Israel/Palestine.¹⁵

Italy has become one of the leading EU donors to Palestine,¹⁶ encouraging the

¹³ Nathalie Tocci, “Framing an EU Response to Israel’s Annexation of the West Bank”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|51 (July 2020), p. 3, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11889>.

¹⁴ Ron Kampeas, “Bennett: Israel Won’t Annex Territory or Establish Palestinian State on My Watch”, in *The Times of Israel*, 25 August 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-israel-wont-annex-territory-or-establish-palestinian-state-on-my-watch>.

¹⁵ A phrase constantly repeated by Palestinians as reminded in Nathalie Tocci, “The EU, the Middle East Quartet and (In)effective Multilateralism”, in *MERCURY E-papers*, No. 9 (June 2011), p. 5, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/3501>.

¹⁶ Daniela Huber, “A New Venice Declaration from a ‘Coalition of the Lead Donors’ on Israel/Palestine”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|30 (April 2019), p. 3, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10253>.

reopening of direct negotiations and supporting the two-state framework. At the same time, Italy – like other European states – has expanded its bilateral relationship with Israel. Such an approach amounts to a form of tokenism towards the Palestinians.

Italy has traditionally been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, but this attitude has weakened over the course of the years. One example was the inclusion in 2003 of Hamas in the EU terrorist list – due to its terrorist activities, rejectionist¹⁷ and anti-Semitic views –, an initiative actively promoted by then Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, under Italy's EU Presidency.¹⁸ Next, in 2005, the Berlusconi government sealed a "Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation in the Military and Defence Sectors", thus agreeing to cooperate with Israel in defence, security and scientific research for both civilian and military purposes.¹⁹

In 2012, during the Monti government, Italy's Finmeccanica (now renamed Leonardo) signed defence contracts worth about 850 million US dollars with Israel.²⁰ Since then, defence

cooperation has expanded significantly, with the sale of helicopters, training jets and other materials.²¹ By 2020, Italy was the third main arms supplier to Israel.²² Moreover, in June 2021, a joint military exercise involving Israeli, Italian, US and British pilots with F-35 jets,²³ served as a further indication of Italy's and Europe's distancing from an alleged neutral role in Israel/Palestine. Strikingly, the exercise took place only a few weeks after the bombing of Gaza by the Israeli Air Force in May.

Beyond trade and defence cooperation, another driver for Italy's newfound vicinity to Israel revolves around energy. Beginning in 2009, major gas reserves were discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean, off the coast of Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel, Gaza and Egypt. Subsequently, Italy's energetic and strategic interests in this area accrued, with Rome positioning itself as the

USD 850 Million after Agreements with Israel, 19 July 2012, <https://www.leonardocompany.com/en/press-release-detail/-/detail/finmeccanica-da-accordi-con-israele-contratti-per-850-milioni-di-dollari>.

²¹ Giorgio Beretta, "L'Italia vende armi a Israele: ecco cosa c'entriamo col conflitto israelo-palestinese", in *Osservatorio Diritti*, 21 May 2021, <https://www.osservatoriodiritti.it/?p=32805>; Seth J. Frantzman, "Israel, Italy swap helicopters and missiles in new arms deal", in *DefenseNews*, 24 September 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/09/24/israel-italy-swap-helicopters-and-missiles-in-new-arms-deal>.

²² Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers 2020", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, March 2021, p. 6, <https://www.sipri.org/node/5350>.

²³ Judah Ari Gross, "In First, Israeli F-35s Train in Italy – With Iran in Their Sights", in *The Times of Israel*, 6 June 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-israeli-f-35s-train-in-italy-with-iran-in-their-sights>.

¹⁷ Likewise, similar rejectionist stances (of a Palestinian State) can be found in the Likud Charter of 1999. See, Tristan Dunning, "Israel's Policy on Statehood Merits the Same Scrutiny as Hamas Gets", in *The Conversation*, 20 November 2014, <https://theconversation.com/israels-policy-on-statehood-merits-the-same-scrutiny-as-hamas-gets-33897>.

¹⁸ Marco Carnelos, "L'Italia sta con Israele perché pensa sia più forte dei palestinesi", in *Limes*, No. 9/2018, p. 251-260.

¹⁹ Arturo Marzano, "Italian Foreign Policy towards Israel: The Turning Point of the Berlusconi Government (2001–2006)", in *Israel Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 2011), p. 79-103.

²⁰ Leonardo, *Finmeccanica: Contracts Worth*

Mediterranean gas bridge to Europe. This created new opportunities of cooperation with Israel, while progress on the Palestinian front remains non-existent.

Efforts to develop these resources, including via the establishment, with active Italian participation, of the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF) and plans to construct an East Med Pipeline to transport gas from Israeli and Cypriot fields to Europe via Italy have also been developed. Independently from the feasibility of the pipeline, these energy discoveries, and the participation of Italy's leading energy company Eni in the development of these reserves, are another indication of Rome's increased vicinity to Israel. Moreover, the inclusion of the Palestinian Authority in the EMGF is just a *façade* since Israel, through a decade-long blockade, has prevented the Palestinians from accessing their gas reserves in the form of the Gaza Marine field, located in Palestinian Exclusive Economic Zone.²⁴

Beyond tokenism

These multiple arenas and layers of cooperation between Italy and Israel, like those that exist at the EU level and individual member states, help to shine a light on a "business as usual" approach to Israel/Palestine that does not advance the prospects of peace or the promotion of international law.²⁵

²⁴ Yousef Alhelou, "Israel Kicks Off Middle East Gas Exports While Continuing to Deny Palestinians Their Drilling Rights", in *The New Arab*, 17 January 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/node/228881>.

²⁵ Crisis Group, "Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine", cit.

On the one hand, this tokenism results in persistent calls for dialogue and negotiations. Yet, on the other, it fails to acknowledge the daily realities on the ground in Israel/Palestine, a reality that sees Israel's policies of soft annexation progress with little or no accountability or oversight.

In this process, the displacement of Palestinian residents from East Jerusalem neighbourhoods like Sheikh Jarrah or Silwan are examples of what Palestinians face on a daily basis. Notwithstanding these policies, Italy, like other major European states, continue to pursue their commercial and trade interests with Israel, benefitting from this *status quo* of perpetual occupation. Even with regards to aid and assistance programmes for Palestinians, recent data has demonstrated how approximately 78 per cent of this actually ends up in Israeli coffers.²⁶

In this regard, Italy should strive to rediscover the underlying historical and social roots that frame current developments in Israel/Palestine to better appreciate the situation on the ground.²⁷ An important starting point is that of acknowledging the clear power asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians, admitting that there are not two equal sides fighting each other.²⁸ While not ignoring Israeli

²⁶ Shir Ever, "How Much International Aid to Palestinians Ends Up in the Israeli Economy", in *Aid Watch*, September 2015.

²⁷ Lorenzo Kamel, "Why Do Palestinians in Gaza Support Hamas?", in *Haaretz*, 5 August 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.608906>.

²⁸ Daniela Huber, "Europa evanescente di fronte alla tragedia israelo-palestinese", in

security concerns, such a recognition implies a revisiting of standard mantras applied to the diplomatic process, ending paradigms based on direct negotiations that have failed long ago due in large part to this power asymmetry between the sides.²⁹

In this, Europe should play a more active role, calling for committed international action, including via political and economic pressure on both sides, to end the occupation and promote new modalities of negotiation and compromise. Ultimately, Italy and Europe also need to problematise their expanding trade, energy and security cooperation with Israel, as this is not translating into improvements on the ground. Rather such practices result in providing Israel ample leeway to progress in its expansionistic policies and what some have termed the “Gazafication” of the occupied West Bank.³⁰ Such a situation can only result in more instability, conflict and threats to Italian and European interests, prolonging the suffering of Palestinians and Israelis.

In conclusion, Italy’s role – like that of the broader European Union – seems to resemble the myth of the two-faced Janus: it is still capable of seeing the past – the Oslo Accords and

the peace process – and the future – trade interests with Israel – but it is not willing to recognise the present, due to a selective use of history. Such a double game is currently allowing Israel, a country that certain leading international organisations have recently described as an apartheid regime,³¹ to perpetuate its structurally oppressive practices while its bilateral relationship with Europe continues to expand.

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AffarInternazionali, 17 May 2021, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=88239>.

²⁹ Daniela Huber, “Equal Rights as a Basis for Just Peace: a European Paradigm Shift for Israel/Palestine”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|04 (January 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12653>.

³⁰ Tareq Baconi, “Gaza and the One-State Reality”, in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2020, p. 77-90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/037919X.2020.1842002>.

³¹ Michelle Pace, “The EU Must Change Vocabulary on Israel-Palestine”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|28 (June 2021), p. 2, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13491>; Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed. Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*, April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/node/378469>.

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