

## **European civil society and the decolonisation of Palestine**

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- There is a view that because the settler colonial project started in Europe, by Europeans, for Europeans, that its resolution should begin here also.
- This should not be taken to the extreme without caution. The nature of international relations has changed and Europe is no longer the centre of power that it was when political Zionism embarked on its enterprise in Palestine.
- There is no doubt, however, that European public opinion is fast changing. The once unconditional support afforded to Israel no longer exists. At the same time, solidarity for the Palestinian cause growing in all walks of life: trade unions, civil society and academia.
- Palestine is no longer seen as a cause of the Palestinian people, Arabs or Muslims.
- It has, indeed, become the great moral and political issue of our time.
- While the outlook of the EU towards Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine is always seen through the prism of economic, military and security cooperation, the views of European people are markedly different.

- Historically, there was always a tendency not to view Israel as a settler colonial entity but rather as an outpost of European 'civilisation' and democracy.
- However, Israel by its racist policies, disregard for international standards of conduct, and human rights have gradually turned European public opinion against it.
- The shift, no doubt, is also due to the hard work of Palestinian communities across Europe and their supporters.
- One method used to foster awareness and understanding has been through the twinning of cities.
- An example was that between Falkirk in Scotland and Um el Fahm, concluded by then Mayor of Um el Fahm Sheikh Raed Salah in 1997.
- Today, support for Palestine in Scotland is ranked among the highest and strongest in Europe.
- Without Western help, Israel would not have come into being or become the dominant power in the region.
- It could not have occupied Palestinian land in violation of UNSC resolutions.
- It could not have ignored Resolution 194 since 1948.
- It could not have attacked Gaza at will.

- In this light, there is a need for greater international solidarity with the Palestinian people.
- Across Europe, that is now being manifested in Israel apartheid week on campuses (now in its 17<sup>th</sup> year, despite government efforts to prevent them), the BDS movement, and other forms of solidarity activities.
- Governments of Germany, Austria and France are arguably the most hostile and unfriendly to solidarity activities – which they conveniently describe as anti-Semitic, which is criminalised.

### **BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT & SANCTIONS (BDS)**

- The BDS movement has called for boycotts against Israeli businesses, universities and cultural institutions in a nonviolent campaign in protest at Israeli abuses of Palestinians and their legitimate rights.
- In January 2021, the Provincial Court in Valencia, Spain, dismissed a criminal complaint against eight BDS activists who had questioned the invitation for Jewish American singer, Matthew Paul Miller, to take part in the Rototom Festival in 2015.
- Miller's invitation to the "European Reggae Festival" was withdrawn because he would not publicly endorse Palestinian statehood.
- The Court's decision was praised by the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC), an NGO based in Amsterdam, which defends and empowers the Palestine solidarity movement in Europe through legal means.

- "This is another milestone victory for the right to freedom of expression for those who defend Palestinian rights in Spain," the Centre explained.
- In February 2021, East Sussex Pension Fund in the UK divested from Israel's largest private arms manufacturer, Elbit Systems, months after human rights activists lobbied the fund to bring an end to its ties to companies which violate international law.
- Elbit Systems produces a range of weaponry used by the Israeli occupation forces.
- Several European pension funds, including in Norway, Holland and Sweden have also divested from the company.
- Similarly, in June 2020, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that the conviction in France of activists who support the BDS movement was a breach of their freedom of expression by criminalising the movement.
- It ordered the French Government to pay damages of €27,380 (\$31,150) to each defendant.
- Unsurprisingly, United States diplomats have pressured lawmakers and officials in certain European countries to oppose moves to boycott Israel or the illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank.
- In May 2019, Germany voted to define the BDS movement as anti-Semitic, becoming the first major European parliament to do so.

- This measure is now being challenged in court
- One of the immediate drivers for the French and German action has been the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism, which included criticism of Israel.
- The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), was formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, or ITF; it was initiated in 1998 by former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson.
- Its membership consists of 34 member countries, which seek to strengthen international political coordination against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism.
- Ever since its adoption, the pro-Israel lobby and Zionists have used the IHRA definition to silence supporters of the Palestinian cause, including academics, scholars and politicians.
- In February 2021, the Academic Board of UCL concluded that the IHRA working definition was not fit for purpose and urged the UCL Council to retract and replaced with a definition that protects Jewish students without compromising the safety and rights of UCL's Palestinian students.
- It has also been wielded as a big stick to criminalise the peaceful BDS around the world.
- Last week (March 2021), more than 200 international scholars, including experts on Jewish and Holocaust history, released a new declaration on antisemitism stating that opposing Zionism, criticising Israel's policies and boycotting Israeli products are not inherently antisemitic acts.

## **TRADE UNION SUPPORT**

- On the occasion of Palestinian Prisoner Day, April 2018, more than 150 European trade unions, political parties, human rights organizations and faith groups from over 16 European countries issued a call urging the EU to uphold its legal responsibilities and exclude Israeli military companies from EU Framework Programs.
- In September 2020, Britain's Trade Union Congress (TUC), has passed a motion identifying Israel as a state practicing apartheid and called for the continued support of the Palestinian people
- The TUC also pledged to "communicate its position to all other national trade union centres in the International and European Trade Union Confederations and urge them to join the international campaign to stop annexation and end apartheid."
- With this, the TUC joins a growing consensus among progressives worldwide that Israel's regime constitutes apartheid, military occupation and settler-colonialism.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

- The BLM movement for Black rights which first erupted in response to police brutality in 2014, following the killing of two African Americans: Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City.
- Black people in the centres of former European colonial powers – London, Paris and Brussels – have also taken to the streets to protest against police violence and racism.

- Black Lives Matter UK (BLM UK) was accused of anti-Semitism by the UK's Board of Jewish Deputies after tweeting solidarity with Palestinians as annexation looms.
- The movement said criticism of Zionism and Israel's "settler colonial pursuits" were gagged in British politics, and that they "loudly and clearly stood by their Palestinian comrades".
- "As Israel moves forward with the annexation of the West Bank, and mainstream British politics is gagged of the right to critique Zionism, and Israel's settler colonial pursuits, we loudly and clearly stand beside our Palestinian comrades."

## **EUROPEAN PROPERTY**

- Israel has been systematically destroying EU-funded projects in Palestine. In 2019 alone, 204 Palestinian structures were demolished in Occupied East Jerusalem. In the West Bank Area C 127 structures that were funded by EU member states were demolished.
- In November 2020, the Belgian government condemned Israel's destruction of Belgian-funded homes in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank. Brussels demanded the Israeli government to pay compensation for the unwarranted destruction. Israel has refused.
- In spite of this, Europe remains Israel's number one trading partner. Israeli firms and institutions received more than \$1.45 billion from the EU under Horizon 2020, the EU's scientific research program.

- Neither will Israel cease its illegal demolitions of Palestinian homes and structures in the West Bank nor will Belgium, or any other EU country, receive reparations from Israel.

## **CONCLUSION**

- The Palestinian quest for freedom and independence is arguably the last of the great anti-colonial struggles.
- Their struggle has been compounded by the fact that they are not against a single colonising power but rather an alliance of European powers.
- The unwillingness of European governments to censure Israel for its denial of Palestinian rights has fostered its culture of impunity.
- The consequences have been two-fold: [1] it has led to a loss of credibility; [2] it has minimised the chances of European governments of playing a meaningful role in the restoration of Palestinian rights.
- With the growth of public pressure on European governments for a just and balanced policy, the process of change seems irreversible.
- Across the continent support for the Palestinians cause is growing in civil society, in trade unions, in the media and in academia.
- The history of settler colonialism is one that many Europeans today would like to remove from their collective memory. Unlike their forbearers, they feel no obligation to support an enterprise that its based on the dispossession and suppression of another people.



- If only for this reason, the demise of political Zionism in Palestine seems inevitable and closer than it ever was.