

Palestine and Israel

Harvard Initiative for Peace and Justice

"The Palestinians are concerned that they might once again become refugees Is it any wonder that the dream of 'liberating the conquered lands' has become their central national goal?"

--Shimon Peres¹

First and foremost we affirm the right of both Israelis and Palestinians to self-determination.

We are shocked by the violence in the region. The lives of Israelis and Palestinians are equally precious and this bloodshed must stop. We condemn the state-sponsored violence of the Israeli army and the suicide attacks on civilians. However, we believe that this violence is a symptom of a deeper problem – the historical displacement of the Palestinian people and the systemic violence of the occupation.

We cannot address this conflict without addressing the issue of imperialism, since it is only the support and aid of the US government that allows Israel to perpetuate its policies. We consider the struggle for the liberation of Palestine a part of our struggle against imperialism.

We stand in solidarity with with the growing anti-occupation movement within Israel. We believe that it is incumbent on all people to look for a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict. Any solution must ensure the economic well-being, security and dignity of both peoples. The proponents of a two-state solution must include safeguards to ensure that the Palestinian state is secure and prosperous. The proponents of a one-state solution must include safeguards to ensure that the human rights of the Jewish minority are respected.

History

We recognize the importance of history in the question of Palestine and Israel. The Jewish people, especially in Europe, have suffered persecution for centuries, culminating in the unparalleled atrocities of the Holocaust.

We must also remember the catastrophe that befell the Palestinians in 1948, when 700,000 Palestinians were expelled from their ancestral homeland.

Any solution to the conflict must be based on a humanistic understanding of both the Holocaust and the *naqba* (catastrophe). In this context, we reject the common myth, long propagated by the Israeli government, that the Palestinians left of their own volition in response to an appeal from Arab leaders. We also reject the revisionist claim, advanced by Joan Peters and others, that 'there were no Palestinians living on the land claimed by Israel.'

Violence

In the violence of the past three years, 2200 Palestinians and 800 Israelis have been killed². This violence is reprehensible. We reject the distinction, sought by the Israeli government, between "terrorism" and "collateral damage". The morality of an act cannot be judged by the political rhetoric that accompanies it.

However, the statistics above provide an incomplete picture. They do not account for the tremendous violence perpetuated by the occupation: confiscation of land, demolition of homes, mass unemployment, racial segregation, poverty, daily humiliation at checkpoints, denial of the right to self-determination – as well as the terror and violence unleashed by the Israeli army during its heavily armed incursions. Four million people live in fear, grinding poverty and without basic human dignity. We admire the resilience of the Palestinian people in the face of this unending tragedy. We believe that these systemic consequences of the occupation must be acknowledged as an extreme form of structural violence and addressed in any discussion on the conflict.

Many peace initiatives tend to focus on "reducing violence on both sides". This is definitely an important advance but we must remember that even in times of 'peace' the Palestinian people are crushed and denied basic human rights. We believe any approach to the problem must address the structural inequalities of the occupation and the historical wounds of the Palestinian people.

With this in mind, we believe that Israel must immediately withdraw from the Occupied Territories, demolish the separation wall, cease settlement activity, compensate the victims of the *naqba*, repeal its racist marriage law and urgently address the institutional racism directed against Palestinians in Israel.

We strongly condemn the suicide attacks on civilians. Taking the lives of innocent Israelis only causes unnecessary tragedy. Moreover, we have no sympathy with the program of the militant groups who state that they aim to violently destroy the state of Israel and expel its inhabitants. Their heinous rhetoric cannot lead to peace.

¹ Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East*, (New York:Henry Holt 1993), pg 168

² <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/isr-index-eng>

Attacks on civilian targets also harm the Palestinian cause tremendously, because they play into the hands of the Sharon government's attempts to divert attention from the brutality of the occupation. As an anti-war group, we note the parallels between this tactic of the Sharon government and the Bush administration's use of the September 11 attacks to further its agenda.

We cannot neglect the culpability of Arab regimes that have been insensitive to the plight of the Palestinians. However, we cannot accept the argument, often provided by the Israeli government, that the neighbouring Arab regimes are a threat to the existence of Israel. A quick search³ reveals that the military expenditure of Israel is **4.5 times larger** than that of Syria, Jordan and Lebanon put together. It is well known that Israel has developed a sophisticated nuclear capability that is not matched by any of its neighbours. The days of military parity between Israel and its Arab neighbours are long gone and Israel faces no credible threat.

The Role of HIPJ

We who are residents of the United States believe it is our responsibility to help put an end to this conflict. Israel is the largest recipient of US foreign aid, and US public opinion is a decisive factor with regard to the perpetuation of the occupation.

Israel has violated innumerable general assembly resolutions and over 30 security council resolutions, leaving aside many that have been vetoed by the US. This contempt of international public opinion is made possible only by the backing of the US. We recognize that the issue of Israel and Palestine is closely linked to the issue of imperialism.

We believe that the best chance for a just and peaceful resolution to this conflict will come out of a joint grassroots effort by Palestinian and Israeli activists, and we place our primary support with the peace movements in the region. We stand in solidarity with Israeli groups that oppose the policies of their government and would like to see an end to the occupation. We admire the courage of the Israeli soldiers who, despite the coercion of their government, have refused to serve in the occupied territories.

We believe any final settlement must deal with tricky questions like the right of return. These issues cannot be resolved by diplomats in Washington. The negotiations must involve massive democratic participation on both sides.

We resolve to work towards establishing people-to-people relations on campus and fostering dialogue based on a mutual understanding of the tragic history of both nations.

On Anti-Semitism

We have a broad definition of anti-Semitism that includes not only overt racism but also movements that implicitly deny the basic rights of the Jewish people including their right to self-determination. We acknowledge the presence of these elements in the pro-Palestine movement and consider them indefensible and detrimental to the cause they support.

In Palestine and other Arab nations, it is very unfortunate that the struggle against Israeli occupation has led to the revival of some of the ugliest facets of the European tradition of anti-Semitism. This mars the history of the Arab world, where Jews were an integrated minority living in harmony with other communities.

We are also alarmed at the rise of anti-Arab racism in the US. As the late Prof. Edward Said stressed, Arabs are the only ethnic community in America against which blatant racial slurs are permissible. The truth of his words is borne out by the writings of Thomas Friedman and numerous other mainstream political commentators. We are deeply concerned at the Bush administration's racist crackdown on Arab immigrants and political activists.

However, we believe that recent attacks painting HIPJ as an anti-Semitic organization are primarily meant to discredit us and draw attention away from the continued oppression of the Palestinian people that we persist in addressing.

We also stand by our commitment to rally for the civil rights of Palestinian activists in the United States. If we felt that the civil rights of Israeli activists in the United States were under attack, we would be as energetic in protecting them.

For more information, please visit <http://hcs.harvard.edu/~hipj>.

³ <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>