

Some Considerations on the Situation in Israel and Palestine

By Sergio Iavarone

Let's start by remembering a generous girl, a courageous young woman, an unrecognized, unarmed heroine: Rachel Aliene Corrie.

On March 16, 2003, she lost her life in Rafah, a Palestinian city, in the Southern of Gaza Strip. She was 23, a US citizen, born in Olympia, Washington State.

She was a pacifist who went to Palestine for her ideals of justice and solidarity. Her death was not caused by an accident. She died while trying barehanded to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian doctor's home. She was mercilessly crushed by an armored bulldozer operated by an Israeli soldier and her life was cut down that day. No one has paid for this crime.

The US government failed to condemn Israel for her assassination.

Demolitions are a common tactic employed by Israelis with Palestinians homes.

If a person can die under those circumstances without any consequences, moreover a person coming from a country that helps Israel more than any other in the world and under all aspects, you can imagine what may happen to Palestinians.

To clear the field of any misunderstanding: I wish peace and security for all people living in Israel, including Arabs living on its territory. At the same time I wish peace and security for Palestinians living in the occupied territories (Gaza Strip and West Bank). I am against all kind of terrorism, not excluding indiscriminate bombings and targeted killings.

I'm not able to justify the way Israelis are acting. Jewish people have suffered so much and not only because of the Shoah. Let's not forget the pogroms and persecutions they had to bear for centuries. They were discriminated and segregated into the ghettos all over Europe. It seems they apparently forgot what experienced and are discriminating and segregating the Palestinian Arabs, at their turn.

I sometimes listen to some people who say: Israel is the only democratic country in the Middle East. I am sorry, but this is not a good point in favor of Israel, on the contrary. I expect a misbehavior, to use a fine euphemism, from an antidemocratic country.

Holding regularly elections is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a country to be considered democratic. In between two elections there is a whole range of things that can be or cannot be done and that makes not a little difference. This concept of course is valid for each single country.

When I have to take a position in a dispute, I always try to be with the oppressed not with the oppressors, no matter who the latter can be.

Criticizing the Israeli government doesn't mean being against Jewish people and thus consequently being accused of antisemitism. Authorities and people are altogether two different things. At the same time criticizing the Israeli government doesn't mean questioning about the Holocaust or denying what happened in the concentration camps. I am Italian, but this doesn't refrain me to fiercely criticize and condemn Mussolini's deeds just because he was Italian like me.

For those who maybe don't know, the word Semite can be used for both Hebrew and Arab population: they are both Semitic people, both descend from Abraham, the Arabs through Ishmael, one of his sons. Ishmael was born to Hagar, an Egyptian handmaiden, and to Abraham himself. Thus saying that Arabs have an antisemitic attitude is simply a non sense.

In the 9 wars that have taken place since 1948, the year of its foundation, Israel has eaten chunk by chunk Arab territories. Palestinians live in a kind of apartheid or if you prefer they appear to be like native Americans living in the reservations. For some fanatic, delusional, hyper-religious Israeli settlers God himself promised that territory to the Hebrew people about 4000 years ago. In conclusion God is seen as a kind of landlord, Jewish people as the legal tenants and Palestinians are the squatters who have occupied illegally the apartment (Israel). Poor God in which hands has fallen! In the name of God human beings have carried out terrible slaughters for centuries, still now. I respect all kind of beliefs but, let me use an oxymoron: thanks God I am not a believer. Imagine to live in a land where your forefathers have been living there for centuries. Then imagine that one day newcomers appear and say: we used to live here 2000 years ago, thus this is our land and you have to go away. Don't even think to come back, while our folk can come from all over the world and settle here whenever and wherever they want. To be more convincing in the last decades over a million olive trees and hundreds of thousands of fruit trees have been destroyed in Palestinian lands. The Israel Defences Forces have been accused of uprooting olive trees to facilitate the building of settlements, expand roads and build infrastructure. This have threatened the livelihood of tens of thousands of Palestinians families. A grave crime under international humanitarian law. No counting that the arboricide is also contrary to Jewish religious teachings. But this was not enough.

Israel is denying Palestinians their right to access to adequate water by using discriminatory and restrictive policies. Israel allows the Palestinians access to only a fraction for the shared water resources, which lie mostly in the occupied West Bank, while the unlawful Israeli settlements there receive virtually unlimited supplies. In Gaza Israeli blockade has made an already dire situation worse.

Israel uses more that 80% of the water from Mountain Aquifer, the main source of underground water in Israel and the OPT (Occupied Palestinian Territories), while restricting Palestinian access to 20%. Israel takes all the water from the Jordan River, the Palestinians get none. In the Gaza Strip, 90 to 95 per cent of the water from its only water resource, the Coastal Aquifer, is contaminated and unfit for human consumption. Yet, Israel does not allow the transfer of water from the Mountain Aquifer in the West Bank to Gaza. And because of the blockade on the Gaza Strip and stringent restrictions

imposed by Israel on the entry into Gaza of material and equipment necessary for the development and repair of infrastructure have caused further deterioration of water and sanitation situation in Gaza, which has reached a crisis point.

Israel continues to impose institutionalized discrimination against Palestinians living under its rule in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). It displaced thousands of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as a result of home demolitions and imposition of other coercive measures. Israeli forces continue to use excessive force during law enforcement activities in Israel and the OPT.

Israel maintains its illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip, subjecting its residents to collective punishment and deepening the humanitarian crisis there. It also continues to restrict freedom of movement of Palestinians in the OPT through checkpoints and roadblocks. The Israeli authorities detain in Israel thousands of Palestinians from the OPT, holding hundreds in administrative detention without charge or trial. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, were committed with impunity. The authorities used a range of measures to target human rights defenders, journalists and other who criticized Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syrian Golan Heights. Violence against women persists, especially against Palestinian citizens of Israel. The authorities deny asylum-seekers access to a fair or prompt refugee status determination process. Conscientious objectors to military service are imprisoned.

Israel demolishes Palestinian residential and livelihood structures in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, displaces thousands of people, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Israeli authorities said many of the demolished buildings lacked Israeli-issued permits, which are impossible for Palestinians to obtain, or were in closed military zones. The law of occupation prohibits such destruction unless necessary for military operations.

In other cases Israel confiscated residential and livelihood structures, including some that were donated for humanitarian purposes. Punitive demolitions constitute collective punishment and are prohibited under international law.

Israeli settler organizations initiated, with the support of the Israeli authorities forcible evictions of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem.

Israel continues to discriminate against Palestinian citizens in Israel, I am talking now about Palestinians living in Israel with Israeli passport, in areas of planning, budget allocation, policing and political participation. According to the Adalah-The legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, Israel maintains over 65 laws that discriminate against Palestinians.

The vast majority of Palestinian citizens, comprising 20% of the total population live in around 139 towns and villages. They receive only 1.7% of the state budget for local councils. The government policy discriminates against these communities in the distribution of housing, construction and land development benefits compared to neighboring Jewish communities that enjoy higher socio-economic status and have access to such benefits.

Israel continues to deny Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza married to Palestinian citizens of Israel the right to nationality by enforcing the discriminatory Entry to Israel Law.

In December, last year, the Israeli Health Ministry began the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines that excluded the nearly 5 million Palestinians who live under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

For the 14th consecutive year, Israel continues its illegal air, land and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip, restricting the movement of people and goods in and out of the area, which continues to have a devastating impact on the human rights of Gaza's 2 million inhabitants. Israel stops the entry of construction materials and fuel into Gaza repeatedly. This shut down the only power plant in Gaza, leading to a further reduction in the supply of electricity, which had already been available for only about four hours a day. Israel also imposes a full maritime closure and repeatedly limits entry of goods to food and medicine only. The measures amounted to collective punishment at a time of increasing COVID-19 infections in Gaza.

In the West Bank, at least 593 Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks continue to heavily restrict the movement of Palestinians and access to rights, including health, education and work. Holders of Palestinian identification cards face an ongoing ban on using roads built for Israeli settlers.

Israeli restrictions on freedom of movement continue to impede Palestinians' access to health care, posing further threats to vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of access to hospitals and specialized clinics during the pandemic particularly affected Palestinian residents of the East Jerusalem neighborhoods of Kufr Aqab and Shu'fat Refugee Camp, which are segregated from the rest of the city by military structures, including checkpoints, and the fence/wall.

In June, last year, Omar Yaghi, a baby with a cardiac condition, died in Gaza after Israel denied the family a permit to enter Israel for a scheduled operation on 24 May at the Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan city.

Israeli soldiers, police and officers continue to torture and otherwise ill-treat Palestinian detainees, including children, with impunity. Reported methods include beating, slapping, painful shackling, sleep deprivation, use of stress positions and threats of violence against family members. Prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes lasting months, is commonly used as a punishment. Israeli forces occasionally deny medical help for Palestinians injured during law enforcement activities. The authorities used a range of measures, including raids, incitement campaigns, movement restrictions and judicial harassment, to target human rights defenders who criticized Israel's continuing military occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territories.

I have taken most of the above news from Amnesty International.

Unemployment in the occupied territories is up to 40%. Many Palestinians in order to work and get a living have to commute to Israel and when Israeli authorities decide to close the border for some reasons they find themselves in a second without job and therefore without a salary.

Maybe not many know that in the occupied territories live Palestinian Christians. In general they are not very often mentioned. They get along very well with Palestinian Muslims, they have been used to live together for centuries. They belong to all kind of Christian denominations (about 25). Today they represent only 1% of the Palestinian population, but a century ago they were 10 times more, one million live in the Palestinian diaspora. They enjoy the same treatment of the Palestinian Muslims. In this Israelis are impartial.

The two parts, West Bank and Gaza Strip, on which, theoretically on paper, a Palestinian state could establish are more than 100 km apart, in between the state of Israel that controls all movements in and out these two territories and is able to stop them any time, whenever they want.

The United Nations Security Council and its Human Rights Council, the General Assembly of the UN, the International Court of Justice voted more than a hundred times in favor of resolutions condemning Israeli actions. Israel never respected them. Israel has got one of the strongest armies in the world, Technologically extremely advanced and it unofficially has even the atomic bomb. That's why you shouldn't be surprised that in the recent eleven-day war Israeli armed forces killed 243 people in Gaza, among them 66 children. While Israel, though the about 4000 rockets fired by Hamas, suffered "only" 12 dead, of which 3 children. There were 1600 Palestinians and 350 Israelis injured. These are the rough figures, everybody can make their own mind about who endangers whom. Moreover we have to count the destructions caused in Gaza, about 150 million dollars. Among the other targets Israeli strike destroyed Gaza tower housing media organizations, such as Associated Press and Al Jazeera. Press freedom and the lives of foreign journalists have been threatened. AP has categorically stated that bombing of the tower block had as a result that the world knew less about events in Gaza. The bombing of the temporary media facility one day later was a further blatant attack on press freedom and is yet another illustration of the absolute disregard Israel has for humanity and international law, or seemingly its closest ally.

The Palestinian organizations Hamas and Hizbollah seem to be the counterpart of the fundamentalist Israeli settlers and their religious parties. Their hatred feeds each other. Hamas committed to a pyrrhic form of defense, gains prestige, but no practical benefit for the Palestinians, while the weak and directionless Palestinian Authority has no leverage, and the international community has effectively washed its hands.

The truth of the matter surely is that Benjamin Netanyahu has done himself a favor with his latest provocation of an oppressed people whereby Jews can reclaim property owned before 1948 but Palestinians cannot, with disastrous consequences for many Palestinians. Netanyahu knows that the international community will do nothing, just as it has done nothing to address a string of injustices perpetrated by the Israeli state against Palestinians. Netanyahu knew that Hamas would've reacted and that this would've helped him hold on to power and avoid scrutiny. Palestinians cannot be held responsible for falling into the trap. For as with all oppression, it is the oppressors who need to acknowledge their wrongdoing before real progress can be made. The actions of Netanyahu are not the result of some collective amnesia, but are deliberate acts of

oppression by a man who does not want progress. It takes an act of will to forget a 54-year occupation, since the Six-Day War in 1967, just as it takes an act of will to forget the separate legal systems for Jews and Palestinians and the rest of the mounting, state-sponsored oppression that Netanyahu leads. Benjamin Netanyahu was on the verge of losing power to a coalition sustained by two Arab parties. But he fails to draw the stronger conclusion that Netanyahu deliberately provoked the events in Jerusalem, Netanyahu needed a crisis to protect his own position, and produced one.

In order to eradicate this cancer that jeopardizes the world peace we need that the international community speaks up and loudly. In the first place the US that supports politically and economically Israel and of course the European Community and the other countries.

The force of reason must prevail over the reason of force.