



Statement for the United Nations International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People

November 29, 2016

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

It is an honor to be with you today and I appreciate having the opportunity to engage with this distinguished audience on this International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

The tireless work of Palestinian and Israeli human rights defenders, activists, journalists and community organizers agitating for rights and dignity has never been easy. These courageous advocates too often face derision or are made invisible by our mainstream media and political leaders – yet their stories and their work to challenge abuses of power are invaluable in holding our governments accountable and inspiring our communities to organize and demand change.

For those Palestinians and Israelis working to build a future that is just, equal and free, this has been a particularly challenging year. While the international community largely views the situation in Israel and Palestine as status quo, developments on the ground are rapidly changing. Notwithstanding the daily brutality of the occupation, second class existence of Palestinians living in Israel, and the millions of Palestinian refugees who live in increasingly dire circumstances, we continue to see egregious, unchecked violations of international law by the Israeli authorities, including extrajudicial killings of Palestinians, ongoing home demolitions and forcible displacement, collective punishment campaigns, discriminatory housing policies, illegal settlement expansion, arrests and detentions without due process, including of Palestinian children, and severe limitations on Palestinian communities' ability to develop economically and sustain their livelihoods.

We have also witnessed increased censorship and attacks on freedom of expression. For years the Israeli government has been ratcheting up their efforts to silence every form of political protest and dissenting voices, sometimes in coordination with the Palestinian Authority's security forces. This repression takes



myriad forms – from laws that aim to stigmatize non-governmental organizations as “agents of foreign powers” and create a chilling effect amongst those who advocate for the use of boycotts, a classical, peaceful form of civil and economic resistance, to arbitrarily arresting Palestinian journalists and holding them under administrative detention. From surveilling, arresting and torturing Palestinians – including children – for no more than a Facebook post to violently squashing unarmed protests. From imprisoning Palestinian human rights defenders and activists who organize their communities nonviolently to government-sanctioned campaigns aimed at undermining Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations.

To give you one example that hits particularly close to home for our team at Just Vision: the human rights defender and nonviolent activist Issa Amro is currently facing trial in Israeli courts over 18 baseless charges that have been accumulated by the authorities over the last several years. During these years, Issa has been organizing in Hebron nonviolently – mentoring youth leaders to take unarmed action to protect their communities from encroaching illegal settlements and settler violence as the military turns a blind eye, digging wells, building schools for children, holding marches and peaceful demonstrations. For this, Issa is being accused of “incitement” and “breaking the law and order” by the Israeli government – a clear government-sanctioned and coordinated campaign to silence him.

In short, the Israeli government has all but declared war on anyone who speaks out or seeks to protect the inherent freedom, dignity and equality of Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

My team at Just Vision has been researching, documenting and disseminating the stories of Palestinian and Israeli grassroots leaders for 13 years. Our work is about nonviolent resistance and rights it is also about pluralism and role models - we find the people who embody those values and put a spot light on them so that they can inspire others. And we do this through a variety of media, including documentaries that have been delivered to world leaders and screened for millions around the globe, graphic novels that we share with youth in refugee camps and women at community centers across Palestine, and our Hebrew-language news site, *Sikha Mekomit*, co-run with +972 Magazine, which disrupts the Israeli mainstream



conversation with stories of human and civil rights issues and grassroots activism, and is capturing the attention of the country's top political leaders and media outlets.

While our team of human rights advocates, filmmakers and journalists have been in the field for 13 years, frontline activists have been organizing for decades -- and I want to tell you one story that is especially salient as we enter 2017.

Next year will mark the shameful anniversary of 50 years of Israel's military occupation and over 70 years of dispossession and subjugation of the Palestinian people. It also marks 30 years since the First Intifada, the most disciplined and sustained civil resistance effort in Palestinian history, a people powered movement that put such severe pressure on the machinery of the Israeli occupation that it demanded that the international community reckon with Palestinians' right to self-determination for the first time.

Unknown to most people today, in 1987 a group of courageous and committed Palestinian women helped clandestinely fuel this extraordinary effort. For those who have a visual memory of that time, the dominant images that come to mind are likely stone-throwing Palestinian youth facing off with Israeli military tanks, or Molotov cocktails and burning tires – the stories that were captured in our headlines. In reality however, the movement was largely unarmed, and women were at the frontlines.

They drafted leaflets that set the agenda for civil disobedience campaigns and secretly delivered them in bags of spinach and pita sold at the market. They determined strike days and marched in demonstrations. They formed and led committees to teach children, grow food, and treat the sick and injured. All of this while facing off with Israel's brutal policies to squash the movement – which sought to criminalize every act that threatened Israel's power, from those as simple as making a Palestinian flag, to convening in groups of 10 or more, to raising cows to produce their own dairy in an effort for self-sufficiency.

This all goes to say: what held true 30 years ago, 50 years ago, 70 years ago – holds true today. People will not sit aside as their rights are abused. Likewise, those with power will not readily give it up.



Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

What happens in Israel and Palestine has ramifications across the region and the globe. For too long, the international community has failed to take concrete, meaningful action in the face of injustice in Israel and Palestine. When communities and ordinary people put their bodies and lives on the line to demand change in the face of violations of human rights, it is incumbent upon us to act.

This is not merely a question of political will, political expediency, or political strategy. It is our moral obligation.

This means that we not only support, but we also defend, the organizers, activists, journalists and human rights defenders who are a lifeline to the values we hold sacred, and whose work is essential in ensuring sustainable, meaningful solutions. Moreover, if it is true that the international community wishes to see peaceful resolution that is based on mutual respect in the Israeli-Palestinian context, then it is absurd that Western democracies and international powers keep arming and militarizing the region. This must stop.

This means that we celebrate the women who have held our communities together and fueled some of the most transformative movements for social change of our time, not only because but especially in light of political leaders today who have attacked our bodies and called into question our involvement in public life.

This means, importantly, that we pay attention to, listen to, invest in and respect the communities in Israel and Palestine who have been experiencing dehumanization for decades, and are persistently calling for equality.

And significantly, this means that the United Nations wield its power not only with soft words, but also with firm action.

Communities in Israel and Palestine have been holding steadfast to human dignity through some of the most honorable forms of peaceful, civil resistance – preserving human decency in the face of inhumane acts of power exerted by their political leaders. But they can't do it alone. The United Nations has an obligation to protect those communities and defend their cause – a cause that aligns with the values and principles that this institution represents.



I urge you to take swift, decisive action to uphold the sanctity of international law as it applies to Israel-Palestine.

In the months ahead, the UN Security Council will likely again deliberate on the question of Palestine. It is an opportunity for this institution to exercise its full sanctioning power, to end the occupation, to protect the rights of refugees and to uphold the dignity and equality of every human being in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

We urge you to act and to act now.

Thank you.

Delivered by: Suhad Babaa, Executive Director
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