



## VIRTUAL EVENT

2021 Conference on the Question of Jerusalem

***“Forced demographic change in Jerusalem – grave breaches  
and a threat to peace”***

Convened by the  
**Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP)**  
with support from the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)**

**1 July 2021**

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### CHAIR SUMMARY

The International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem **“Forced demographic change in Jerusalem – grave breaches and a threat to peace”** was convened virtually, on 1 July 2021, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) with support from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The event was chaired and moderated by Ambassador Cheikh Niang, Chair of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations. It consisted of an opening session with remarks by Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and representing Secretary-General António Guterres at the conference; Mr. Samir Bakr, Assistant Secretary-General for Palestine & Al-Quds Affairs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; and Mr. Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations.

The panel speakers comprised of Ms. Lara Friedman, Foundation for Middle East Peace in Washington, D.C.; Mr. Michael Lynk, UN Special Rapporteur; Ms. Suma Qawasmi, Sheikh Jarrah community leader in East Jerusalem; Ms. Nivine Sandouka, “Hoqoqna – Our Rights” NGO in East Jerusalem; and Ms. Emily Schaeffer Omer-Man, Human Rights Attorney in Tel Aviv. Member States participated in the two-hour event on the WebEx platform. Viewers watched the conference on UN WebTV and UN YouTube and had an opportunity to make comments and pose questions to the panellists.

The Panellists highlighted decades-long Israeli policies and actions to promote Jewish settlement into and Palestinian emigration from Jerusalem, enabled by a legal system ignoring international law and excluding the political context of a power imbalance between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. The young Palestinian representatives outlined their daily struggles and peaceful resistance, highlighting the power of social media and international support.

In his introductory remarks, **the Chair** underscored that the event was taking place amidst serious developments on the ground, and continued violent incidents in occupied East Jerusalem, particularly between the Israeli security forces and settlers, and Palestinian residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood.

He noted that this neighbourhood was experiencing repeated clashes, and Palestinian households still faced the imminent threat of eviction by the Israeli authorities from their homes. Jewish settlers had been evicting Palestinian residents from their homes under the protection of Israel's security forces as thousands marched, yelling hate speech, through East Jerusalem up to the gates of the Old City's Muslim, in an echo of the kind of events that had led to the violence in May that also engulfed the Gaza Strip.

Mr. Niang reiterated that Israel's settlement activities throughout the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem – including the neighbourhoods of Sheikh Jarrah, Batan al Hawa, and Silwan – presented a major obstacle to peace and were flagrant violations of UN resolutions and international law, threatening in particular Palestinians' rights to self-determination and return. He stressed that a two-State solution, leading to a long overdue Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital, was the only viable way to achieve peace.

**Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo** highlighted the particular relevance of the conference's theme, as the forced displacement of Palestine refugee families in occupied East Jerusalem had catalysed events that culminated in 11 days of deadly armed conflict in May. The Gaza war, the third since 2008, had claimed many lives, predominantly Palestinians, she said, noting that Palestinian protests, Israel's heavy-handed response, and clashes around the Aqsa Mosque compound had brought tensions to a "whole new level".

The crisis was far from over, she said, describing Jerusalem as "a powder keg", with those who are willing to play with fire. She called on all sides to respect the status quo of Jerusalem holy sites revered by billions of believers worldwide. She implored Israel to cease demolitions, evictions, and illegal settlement activities, stressing that measures to change Jerusalem's status and demographic composition were without legal validity and should be firmly rejected by the international community.

Palestinians were not resigned to their fate of perpetual occupation. To this end, she urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders, supported by a revitalized Quartet on the Middle East, to recommit to credible negotiations that would address all outstanding permanent-status issues, ushering in the vision of two States, based on 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as a shared capital and Gaza fully integrated into the future Palestinian State through a credible, time-bound national reconciliation process.

**Ambassador Riyadh Mansour** similarly pointed out that Palestinians – both in occupied East Jerusalem and throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory – were facing massive aggression at the hands of Israel’s occupying authorities. This antagonism had extended to the neighbourhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan in occupied East Jerusalem and was indicative of an ethnic cleansing policy against Palestinians within both the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel itself.

If the international community was serious about adhering to international law, UN Resolutions 476/8 (1980) and Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), it could not merely reiterate these principles while the occupying Power committed crimes with impunity. Questioning what was being done – after 54 years of occupation – to defend international law and implement relevant Council resolutions, he called on the international community to act, rather than advocate for restraint as Israel killed civilians.

Otherwise, Amb. Mansour said, it was unfair to continue asking Palestinians to comply with demands from the international community, as they were frustrated and resentful under the current abhorrent system of occupation. “Enough is enough,” he insisted, and added that it was time for the International Criminal Court to expedite its investigation into war crimes committed against the Palestinian people.

**Mr. Samir Bakr** likewise affirmed that the absence of dissuasive international measures had emboldened Israel to carry on with its violations of international law and norms. He called on the international community to activate legal mechanisms to guarantee Israel’s accountability and take all measures necessary to pressure Israel into honouring its obligations under international law.

Emphasizing that Jerusalem has been an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 – and that its annexation was illegal, null and void – he cautioned against taking actions that legitimized Israel’s pernicious moves to change the demographic, political, legal, and historical status of the holy city. The Security Council would have to ensure compliance with its resolutions, halt Israel’s settlement and ethnic cleansing policies, and thereby avert dire repercussions that could plunge the already volatile region into a cycle of violence.

#### Panel Discussion

**Ms. Lara Friedman** emphasized that the events unfolding in Jerusalem were not new; what was happening today had occurred, in various forms, daily since the 1967 War, when Israel took control of East Jerusalem and began its policy of demographic engineering. The current reality was the logical and inevitable result of Israel working with ideologically motivated actors both inside and outside the country to implement a systematic policy of demographic engineering with total impunity.

Events in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan spoke directly to the question of who had the right to return, highlighting Israel’s policy that Jewish Israelis could return to properties lost pre-1948, but Palestinians could not return to theirs. In 1967, when Israeli took over East Jerusalem, its

Palestinian inhabitants could not be removed *en masse*, as had happened in 1948. The Palestinians remaining inside the Israeli borders after 1948 were given Israeli citizenship, but Palestinians in East Jerusalem were too many for Israeli demographic plans and thus would not be given citizenship, leaving them in the legal limbo of permanent, yet revocable, resident status. After 1967, various means were used to take land in East Jerusalem, which was then used to build government-backed Jewish settlements. Today, the absentee property law, along with the Jewish right of return, was being weaponized to take land, as is happening in East Jerusalem as well as in Hebron in the occupied West Bank. In addition, onerous requirements are used to revoke residency status, and housing limitations to prevent Palestinians from building or expanding homes in their own City.

She described events unfolding today as a clashing of Israeli policies that are reaching their logical conclusion after 54 years of impunity. Because the international community only offered empty rhetoric, it would be irrational to expect Israel to change course and heed international law. Any small gains made so far had been achieved on technicalities, rather than because Israel's collective punishment of Palestinians was illegal and immoral, underscoring a fundamental conflict between the rights of Palestinians, the obligations of international law, and what was happening on the ground.

**Ms. Suma Qawasmi** described events unfolding in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood where she lives as ethnic cleansing – and simply another chapter of Israel's modern military occupation. The neighbourhood was home to 28 Palestinian families (or 550 individuals) who have lived there since 1956 following an agreement with Jordan, which provided the land. The families had originally been forcibly uprooted from their homes in historical Palestine in 1948, from which they were prevented to return under Israeli law and policies. Following Israel's illegal annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, the neighbourhood had faced illicit ownership claims and forced displacement, backed by Israel's discriminatory policies, practices, and courts. "We are trying to prevent settlers from taking over Palestinian homes, in which we have lived for generations," she said, objecting to the unjustified use of force by Israel's security forces to stop her community from speaking up.

Ms. Qawasmi emphasized that digital grassroots activism – such as the "#SaveSheikhJarrah" campaign – was a key method to spread awareness, mobilize collective action, and connect with people in the international community. This, in turn, would allow to ramp up the pressure on Governments to help end forcible displacement in Sheikh Jarrah and other Palestinian neighbourhoods. "We decided that we are going to help our parents and grandparents keep their houses," she said, stressing that the world could not continue to turn a blind eye to Palestinians' basic human rights and freedoms. Pointing out that her community had nowhere else to go and would not tolerate losing their Jerusalem IDs, she said "History cannot repeat itself; we don't want to experience the Nakba again."

**Ms. Emily Schaeffer Omer-Man** said the 100-plus legal proceedings over the years concerning Sheikh Jarrah could be roughly divided between the plight of those living in the eastern and western parts of the neighbourhood. In eastern Sheikh Jarrah, an agreement in place since the 1980s had created a protected tenancy – but not ownership rights – for the Palestinian residents and while this may have kept many in their homes, it had also allowed their residency

to be subject to the will of settler committees that have already evicted many Palestinian inhabitants on procedural grounds. The western part, on the other hand, had been subject to a years-long battle to prove the status of the land, centred on competing claims of public ownership versus title granted to Jewish tenants by Jordanian authorities.

The problem inherent in discussing these details was that it required stepping into the Israeli legal framework, which treated the subject of Palestinian evictions as only a real-estate issue. This situation – rampant across the Occupied Palestinian Territory – was representative of a larger trend to rewrite international law out of the Israeli legal framework as its Government and institutions implemented a clear demographic policy through “creeping legal annexation” that starkly departed from international law. Ms. Schaeffer Omer-Man called on the international community to support the International Criminal Court in its investigations and on States to ensure that private actors were not complicit in these practices by implementing oversight and accountability regulations.

**Ms. Nivine Sandouka**, noting that the new Israeli Government’s intentions towards East Jerusalem were as of yet unknown, pointed out that all previous Governments had emphasized the Jewish element of Israel’s identity and worked to eliminate any mention of a Palestinian identity or narrative, for example in school curricula. Also, although Palestinians comprised 60 per cent of the population in East Jerusalem, they had only received 30 per cent of all building permits issued, and ever since the 1967 occupation Palestinian neighbourhoods had not been allowed to naturally expand. Palestinians living in East Jerusalem were considered residents – not citizens – so if they lived or travelled outside the City for an extended period of time, or married a person with Palestinian citizenship, they had their residency revoked.

She also detailed the shrinking space for civil society actors in Jerusalem, pointing out that, since 2016, Palestinian civil society organizations had to report their sources of funding, and were subject to closure or prosecution if such funding came from places deemed unfriendly to Israel or if they expressed a viewpoint critical of Israeli policies. Stating that the United Nations had not assumed its responsibility to protect civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory – the “cornerstone of any peace process” – she called on the international community to provide funding to civil society and the opportunity for advocacy, to hold Israel accountable for the poor living conditions in East Jerusalem, and to support peace activists on the ground.

**Mr. Michael Lynk** outlined how Israeli settlements encircled Palestinian East Jerusalem, blocking off the West Bank like a fortress, while the Separation Wall’s route wove in such a way as to maximize its enclosure of Israeli settlements and minimize the number of Palestinians living within it. The overall Israeli goal was to make it demographically and politically impossible for Palestinians to gain East Jerusalem as the capital of their own State. This came against clear resolutions by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly that East Jerusalem was occupied territory, that its annexation by Israel was null and void, and that any attempts to change that area demographically violated the Fourth Geneva Convention.

In 1950, Israel’s parliament had passed the Absentee Property Law, decreeing that Palestinians who had fled their homes during the 1948 War could not recover their property. It then passed the Legal and Administrative Matters Law in 1970, ensuring that Jews who had lost

their property in the 1948 War could reclaim their property. Israel's courts did not recognize or apply international law, seldom protecting those who deserved protection under the Fourth Geneva Convention. Mr. Lynk then drew attention to Security Council resolution 476 (1980), which had ruled that Israel's occupation – then only 13 years old – had at that point in time already been prolonged and that there was an “overwhelming necessity” to end it. The Council had already then condemned Israel's defiance of its own resolutions; stated that any proposed annexation of East Jerusalem was illegal, null, and void; and threatened to enforce accountability. Yet, if that had already been the case in 1980 – three decades ago – “what are we to say now?”, he wondered, stressing that inaction by the international community had enabled Israel's continued flaunting of international law and norms and thus shared responsibility for today's situation.

In the ensuing discussion, the Chair relayed questions from the wider virtual audience about why the term “forced demographic change” was used more so than “illegal occupation”, and how to incorporate international law principles – and their violation of them – into the framework of the solution. The session also heard commentary by several delegates, with **Indonesia's** representative underscoring the priority need to address Israel's occupation. A solution could only be reached through multilateral dialogue and the revival of peace talks, he said, stressing that there should be no impunity for human rights violations.

The representative of **Egypt** said Israel's continued unilateral measures – including settlement activities in East Jerusalem – jeopardized the two-State solution. He called on Israel to uphold its obligations under international law and to offer protection to Palestinians from extremist Jewish groups. The escalation of violence had presented the need for a reinvigorated peace process and settlement of the Palestinian question, in line with resolution 2334 (2016), the Arab Peace Initiative and a two-State solution. He also underscored the importance of the United Nations in helping the International Quartet on Peace in the Middle East to advance negotiations.

The representative of **Turkey** warned that, unless the causes of violence were addressed, fighting would reoccur. She expressed concern over demolitions in Silwan and stressed that families in Sheikh Jarrah now faced eviction. She pointed to a Human Rights Council resolution adopted in May, which had established a commission of inquiry to investigate instances of repression based on national, racial, and religious identity, underscoring the need to pursue all possible avenues for accountability.

The representative of **Tunisia** recalled that administrative measures taken by the occupying Power to alter Jerusalem had no legal validity and expressed concern that looming evictions of Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan were only exacerbating the situation. He also called for an end to impunity.

**The Chair** concluded by thanking the speakers for taking the time to participate in the briefing, sharing valuable information and insights, and answering the questions from the participants and audience across the world.

The Chair closed the event.

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*\*\*\*Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the virtual Event. A video of the Event can be found on the webpage of the CEIRPP, [www.un.org/unispal](http://www.un.org/unispal), as well as on UN Web TV.*

*\*\*\*Note: The views and opinions expressed in this Summary are those of the speakers. They do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.*