



# UNITED NATIONS ROUNDTABLE ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

*Building Bridges with Palestinian Diaspora in Central America*

Managua, 4 February 2017

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

## OPENING SESSION

Statement by

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## **Beyond recognition: the role of Central American Governments in the search for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East**

The year 2017 marks 100 years since the Balfour Declaration when the then British Foreign Secretary in 1917 declared Britain's support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

The year 2017 marks 70 years since the UN General Assembly proposed a Partition Plan for Palestine into Jewish and Arab states with Jerusalem to be an international city.

2017 marks 50 years of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian homeland.

2017 is a time when the world seems to be upside down, when those who ruthlessly expel people from their ancestral land and kill those who resist are called victims, and those who are driven out and massacred are called terrorists. It is time to go back to basics.

The State of Israel was built on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, when over 700,000 Palestinians were forcefully driven from their homes and thousands were brutally killed. We call this the Nakba, and although it began in 1947, it has continued since and is still practiced today, seventy years later, with the same impunity and reckless disregard for international law and opinion as ever.

Let us recall UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948: The UN General Assembly resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return.

The Israeli State has simply refused to acknowledge this right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Part of the reason for this is the denial of the Nakba, a pretence that the founders of the Israeli State did not, with malice aforethought, carry out the crime of ethnic cleansing by the brutal forceful removal of Palestinians from their land, (accompanied by dozens of massacres, desecration of holy sites, land robbery on a massive scale and other crimes against humanity. No, the Israeli story is that the land was empty: a land without people for a people without land. This did not stop in 1948, but continues to the present day, while the Israelis continue to deny what they did and continue to paint themselves as the victim.

Israel has continued to defy dozens of UN resolutions since then, but the essence of those resolutions is captured in the most recent Security Council Resolution 2334 of 23 December 2016, passed without a negative vote. It refers to the Israeli settlements of Jewish Israeli citizens built on Palestinian lands occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War, and which a UN resolution that very year required them to relinquish. The resolution states that Israel's settlement activity constitutes a "flagrant violation" of international law and has "no legal validity". It demands that Israel stop such activity and fulfil its obligations as an occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which makes it illegal for nations to move populations and establish settlements in territories acquired in a war. Israel's argument that these are not "occupied" but "disputed" territories because "there were no established sovereigns in the West Bank or Gaza Strip prior to the Six Day War" was totally rejected by the International Court of Justice in its Advisory Opinion on the Segregation Wall in 2004.

Resolution 2334 also states that all measures aimed at changing the demographic composition and status of Palestinian territories occupied by Israel, including construction and expansion of settlements, transfer of Israeli settlers, confiscation of land, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians are in violation of international humanitarian law. Significantly, the Resolution also "underlines" that the UN Security Council "will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations"; and calls upon all states "to distinguish...between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967".

Israel's reaction to this unanimous resolution passed by the Security Council was typical of its lawless behaviour since its foundation as a State: the day before the resolution was passed Israeli authorities approved 566 more units in settlements in occupied East Jerusalem, and the day after Netanyahu approved 2,500 units in illegal settlements throughout the occupied West Bank. And, typically, Netanyahu declared that the resolution was "part of the swan song of the old world that is biased against Israel".

Well, Belize is not part of the “old world”. Belize is a young nation, 36 years old since our Independence in 1981, the youngest nation in Central America that I was privileged to serve as Prime Minister. And we certainly recognize a flagrant violation of international law by the Israeli Government in building settlements on Palestinian land under illegal military occupation.

We need to challenge the idea that anyone who denounces the illegal acts of the State of Israel is biased against Jews. This is made credible somehow because of the Nazi crimes against Jews and others in the 1940s. And so the Holocaust is invoked to justify the "right" to a racially exclusive Jewish state on the land of the Palestinians. But nobody has explained why Palestinians are required to pay for Nazi crimes. Israel has refused to acknowledge guilt for its violent colonial land seizures, massacres and ongoing oppression.

What chance peace in this scenario? An Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, has said that “There are two factors that have so far succeeded in defeating all chances of an equitable solution to the conflict in Palestine to take root: the Zionist ideology of ethnic supremacy and the ‘peace process’. From the former stems Israel’s denial of the Nakba; in the latter we see the lack of international will to bring justice to the region—two obstacles that perpetuate the refugee problem and stand in the way of a just and comprehensive peace emerging in the land”.<sup>1</sup> His reference to the “peace process”, clearly, is to the long and bitter history of failed peace initiatives, all of which deny 1948 and the culpability of the Israeli State for the horrific conditions of the Palestinians for the past seventy years. All road maps so far have led to perdition for the Palestinian people.

And so here we are in 2017, seventy years after the dispossession and after fifty years of brutal occupation, and we are asked what we can do to contribute to peace and justice in Palestine. We have to admit that whatever we can do is not nearly enough, but that whatever little we do is a contribution, however small, which we cannot in conscience refrain from doing.

We have to recognize that the Palestinian people have always been and continue to be the sufferers of a worldwide media reality that denies or fails to report the crimes committed by the

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<sup>1</sup>Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oneworld Publications, London, p. 234.

Israeli State. So that we must begin by using all means at our disposal to make the reality of Palestinian lives and Israeli crimes known to our peoples and governments. We need to make known the fact that we are not just talking about a history of past subjugation, but about a continuing reality. The Israeli army is still engaged in the systematic destruction of the infrastructure of the future Palestinian State; confiscating private properties and demolishing homes as part of the project of building ever more illegal settlements on Palestinian land.

The real cause of the lack of peace in the Middle East is the actions of the State of Israel, the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories and the brutal subjugation of the Palestinian people in a futile attempt to break their will and take away their dignity.

One of the first and most important things the peoples and governments of Central America can do to promote peace in the Middle East, therefore, is to use all available means to make the truth known to the peoples of the region, so that they can fully understand the plight of the Palestinian people, recognize who is responsible for the crimes, and support their governments and others who take measures to attempt to persuade the State of Israel to stop its evil ways. This must include all traditional media as well as the new avenues opened up by “social media”, which we must learn to harness effectively to further our cause.

Everybody knows that from the time it was established Israel has maintained a strictly apartheid system in varying forms for the Palestinians within the pre-1967 borders. And the plight of the people in the occupied territories is even worse: Israel has stolen the best land, controls water resources and severely discriminates its distribution against Palestinians, maintains a network of Jewish-only roads and checkpoints where Palestinians must present ID to occupation troops and are delayed and detained and humiliated at will, builds the Segregation Wall to further separate, isolate, economically cripple, and humiliate the Palestinian population.

And what is to be said about the behavior of the Israeli State with regard to Gaza? The atrocities committed there over the past decade are too well known for me to repeat them in this forum, but it is useful to recall the judgment of The Russell Tribunal on the evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity, crimes of murder, extermination and persecution. “The cumulative effect of the long-standing regime of collective punishment in Gaza appears to inflict conditions of life calculated to bring about the incremental destruction of the Palestinians as a group in Gaza.”

Until the majority of people in our region and in the world are aware of these facts and realize that unless effective actions are taken by the nations of the world the oppression will continue. Hence the need to use all available instruments to achieve this. We should support a move for a resolution to be passed at the United Nations to create an International Palestine Occupation Remembrance Day.

Just before he left office, US President Obama warned that the settlement activity was making a two-state solution impossible: "I don't see how this issue gets resolved in a way that maintains Israel as both Jewish and a democracy," Obama said, "because if you do not have two states, then, in some form or fashion, you are extending an occupation. Functionally, you end up having one state in which millions of people are disenfranchised and operate as second-class occupant—or residents. You can't even call them 'citizens' necessarily".

Resolution 2334, with its clear depiction of all the Jewish settlements on Palestinian land as illegal, makes it easier for us to encourage our governments and peoples to join the boycott against all producers and goods produced by Israel in the illegal settlements. We should also support and have our governments enforce the academic and cultural boycott of Israel.

In short, the actions we can take to advance the cause of peace in the Middle East must pass through reaching a just solution to the crisis of Israeli occupation of Palestine, and what we can do is:

- Pursue effective measures that will make known the truth of the situation to the peoples of our region so that they can support their governments to take appropriate action or pressure them to do so;
- We can support international measures to achieve that objective world-wide;
- Join in the boycott of goods produced in the illegal settlements in the occupied territories and against those companies investing therein, in keeping with the call in Resolution 2334 for all States "to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967".

- Join the intellectual, artistic and cultural boycott of Israel as long as it persists in its present policies;
- Recognize the State of Palestine and encourage all types of relations with it.

We can join the call made by the Palestinian Human Rights Organizations Council and the Palestinian NGOs network for all the leaders of the Palestinian people in Palestine and in the Diaspora to create a unified national strategy that will restore the vision and the mission for national liberation. We owe that to the young people of Palestine to offer them hope for a better tomorrow.

The experience of civil war and social upheaval in Central America has taught us the lesson that there can be no lasting peace unless there is justice for the oppressed and the exploited.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission has served our region well and we recommend such a Commission in which the crimes committed during the Nakba can be acknowledged.

Let us use all legal and peaceful means possible to pressure Israel to comply with all the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2334 of the 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2016.

In this year marking 70 years since the partition and 50 years since the onset of Israel's occupation of the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip which remains under an inhumane Israeli blockade, we must as members of the International community, seize the opportunity offered by the UN Security Council Resolution 2334, to end the Israeli occupation and so allow the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination as an independent sovereign contiguous and viable state of Palestine.

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