

Is there hope for Palestine?

*Bethany Hughes writes** : The recent violence in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories has had a huge impact on civilians, particularly in Gaza, where the damage and destruction will likely take years to repair. According to UN figures, 243 Palestinians were killed and 12 Israelis over the 11 days of intense fighting. As well as significant destruction to civilian homes in Gaza, 53 schools, 6 hospitals, 11 key healthcare centres, Gaza's central COVID-19 testing laboratory, half of its power lines and a water desalination plant supplying 250,000 Palestinians with clean drinking water, all suffered damage. An estimated 77,000 civilians have been displaced within Gaza, with many taking shelter in UN administered schools; according to the World Food Programme, the recent fighting has pushed an additional 160,000 in Gaza into food insecurity.

The spark of the recent flare-up in violence was the anticipated forced evictions of several Palestinian families from the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. Whilst there is a complex legal history behind the ownership of property in Sheikh Jarrah, the ultimate point to note is that numerous UN Resolutions, and the International Court of Justice have condemned Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem as an illegal annexation, therefore international law regarding occupation should apply there rather than Israel's domestic law. All Palestinians under occupation are entitled to the benefits prescribed in international law regardless of any changes to laws Israel applies to the territory. According to Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which Israel ratified in 1951, "the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies." It also prohibits the "individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory", unless there is a legitimate security reason for doing so, in which case, displacement should be temporary. Indeed, such actions constitute war crimes according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. On the other hand, Israel's domestic law which has been enforced on East Jerusalem includes the right for Israelis to reclaim properties in East Jerusalem which they had owned before the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, while Palestinians who lost their homes in what is now Israel cannot exercise the same right.

Ultimately, the conflict over Sheikh Jarrah is only a symptom of the wider underlying problem of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the blockade on Gaza which has so far lasted 14 years. Periods of increased violence and fighting such as the recent crisis, are inevitable if no lasting solution is found and the occupation ended.

The claim of self-defence

A key argument which has been used by Israel to justify its air strikes on Gaza is that Israel has the right to defend itself against Hamas. However, it is important to note that Hamas would not exist if it wasn't for Israel's discriminatory policies and practices against Palestinians, and the underlying cause of continued tensions today is the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the blockade on Gaza.

Of course, Israel has a right to defend itself, but this right is a universal one which applies to all, including Palestinians. However, due to the power imbalance in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israel's methods of 'defence' are disproportionate and inevitably have significant implications for civilians. Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system which intercepted the vast majority of the rockets fired by Hamas into Israel is self-defence; we should however question whether days of air strikes on Gaza, impacting the civilian population is also defence. Israel can claim to be targeting Hamas, but when Hamas is the de-facto government of Gaza (whether legitimately or not), Hamas affiliated buildings include schools, hospitals, and other public bodies which aid the civilian population. Targeting militants does not justify destroying such establishments, especially during a pandemic when healthcare infrastructure is more essential than ever.

Is criticising Israel Antisemitic?

A key issue when discussing the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is whether criticising Israel is Antisemitic. In the wake of the recent fighting, there have been a number of reports documenting an increased number of Antisemitic attacks globally. Antisemitism should in no way be condoned, but it is important to note that the Antisemitic minority does not represent all who fight for Palestinian liberation, and it is important to deal with Antisemitism in a way which does not divert attention and resources away from the Palestinian cause. No government represents the views of all the people it governs. Therefore, criticising the Israeli government does not equate to criticising all Israeli citizens or all Jews. Equally, criticising Hamas does not mean one cannot fight for the Palestinian cause, since Hamas does not represent all Palestinians. It is possible to fight for Palestinians as deserving of human rights equal to every other human on the earth and to criticise the Israeli authorities who deny Palestinians their rights without being Antisemitic.

The most widely accepted definition of Antisemitism is that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA): "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities". An alternative definition, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism responds

to the IHRA's definition since it is unclear in its distinction between Antisemitism and critique of Israel. It highlights that the following actions and attitudes do not constitute Antisemitism, since the same forms of criticism could be applied to many other states in the same way:

- Criticising Zionism as a form of nationalism – any other nationalist movement which has a detrimental impact on a civilian population could be criticised in the same way
- Evidence-based criticism of systemic racial discrimination enforced in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories – racial discrimination in any form is wrong, whether against Palestinians, Jews, or any other groups of people
- Using non-violent forms of protest such as boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel – these are the same methods which were successfully used against the apartheid regime in South Africa in the years leading up to the early 1990s

Therefore, criticising Israel, not because it is a Jewish state, but because it engages in severe human rights abuses and violations of international law, is not Antisemitic. It is the same criticism which could be afforded to other nations who engage in such behaviour, such as the treatment of Uighurs in China, and the Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Please see below the full mentioned definitions of Antisemitism:

<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>

<https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>

Is Israel an apartheid state?

A further area of contention is whether Israel is an apartheid state. The 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid defines apartheid as “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them”; a similar definition was adopted by the Rome Statute of the ICC. Israeli policies and practices, such as the building of the separation wall in the West Bank, and the application of different legal systems for Palestinians in the West Bank compared to Israeli settlers, do indeed suggest apartheid, and if not certainly discrimination. Indeed, reports issued this year by Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, and international organisation Human Rights Watch both accused Israel of the crime of apartheid – see the links below:

https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>

So, how can you help?

Anna Hughes writes:*

There are a number of ways you can show solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Buy Palestinian produce – olive oil soap, olive wood gifts, olive oil, dates, zaatar (a delicious mix of herbs which is used to dip bread into, and also goes well on fish, meat or roasted vegetables).

Zaytoun and Traidcraft stock Palestinian produce online:

<https://zaytoun.uk/products/>

<https://www.traidcraftshop.co.uk/food?brand=48>

The Leek Palestine Link Group usually run a stall in Leek market on the 3rd Saturday of every month selling Palestinian produce, as do some Oxfam charity shops.

Plant an olive tree in Palestine – Zaytoun and other organisations can arrange for olive trees to be planted on your behalf to help young Palestinians start out in farming, or to replace trees destroyed by Israeli settlers or military personnel.

<https://zaytoun.uk/plant-a-tree/>

Go to Palestine (in safer times) – in the spring, the plant olive trees to replace ones destroyed by the Israeli authorities and settlers; in the autumn to help the farmers harvest the olives. The presence of international visitors reduces the chance of Palestinians being attacked whilst picking their olives. If you'd like ideas of organisations which run such trips, drop us an email at aga_hughes@lineone.net

Give money to charities such as Medical Aid for Palestinians (<https://www.map.org.uk/>); Pro Terra Sancta (<https://www.proterrasancta.org.uk/>); the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (<https://www.palestinecampaign.org/>)

Join the Leek Palestine Link Group which organises film showings and shared tables of Palestinian food, runs a stall at Leek market when Covid allows and raises money for Medical Aid for Palestinians. Contact us if you would like details. aga_hughes@lineone.net



Join the **Palestinian Solidarity Campaign** at <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/> and take part in their campaigning activities. The Manchester branch produces a monthly action briefing with details of petitions to sign, online meetings, demonstrations (when allowed).

Boycott Israeli goods and companies – This can exert pressure on Israel to comply with international law, and to call upon its government and its people to promote justice and peace for all, thereby affirming its own rights as well as those of the Palestinian people. Here are some examples of key goods and companies who are complicit in the Israeli occupation, directly or indirectly:

- **Fruit and vegetables** – one of Israel’s biggest exports and many agricultural exporters are complicit in Israel’s violations of international law as they operate on stolen Palestinian land. Key produce includes citrus fruits, kiwi fruit and avocados.
- **Caterpillar** – Caterpillar bulldozers are regularly used in the demolition of Palestinian homes and farms in the West Bank and Gaza. Whilst you are unlikely to buy a bulldozer, you may have bought Caterpillar shoes or boots.
- **HP** – Hewlett Packard helps run the ID system that Israel uses to restrict the free movement of Palestinians. It also provides services and technology to the Israeli army and police. Our most likely HP products are laptops or printers.



- **Puma** – Puma sponsors the Israel Football Association, which includes teams in Israel’s illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian land. We can avoid buying Puma products (mostly footwear and clothing) and also encourage UK football teams to not accept Puma as a sponsor. In 2020, Liverpool FC responded to this campaign by rejecting a Puma sponsorship bid, and several other football clubs have done similar.



- **Sodastream** home drinks machines are one of Israel’s best-known exports
- **Ahava cosmetics** are another of Israel’s best-known companies. Try **Faith in Nature** products instead – <https://www.faithinnature.co.uk/> - natural, vegan, cruelty free and ethical, made in Lancashire using locally sourced ingredients where possible.



- **The Strauss Group** – an Israeli food company that provides financial support to the Israeli Defence Forces – the group’s brands and partnerships include Sabra hummus, Danone and Doritos
- **Airbnb and TripAdvisor** include in their listings activities, attractions and Israeli-owned properties in illegal settlements in the West Bank. This boosts the settlement economy and contributes to the expansion of the settlements. Promoting settlements as a tourist destination helps to normalise them despite their illegality under international law. It is often possible to use these sites to search for properties or activities, but then to book directly with the owner.
- **PayPal** denies its service to Palestinians – though not Israeli settlers – in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The company cites regulatory concerns as the reason for its discriminatory policy, although it works in areas equally and less stable than Palestine, including Somalia and Yemen. If possible, pay by Credit or Debit card instead.
- **Banks** – look into the ethics and investment policies of your bank. Banks such as HSBC and Barclays hold shares and investments in companies such as BAE Systems, Raytheon, Caterpillar, Elbit Systems, which supply Israel with equipment and weaponry which is used against Palestinians.

It is of course very difficult to boycott every company involved in Israel and the occupation, but the more awareness is raised about the actions of these companies, the easier it becomes to avoid them. Perhaps even more importantly than any of the actions mentioned above is to talk about the plight of Palestinians and their everyday reality under Israeli occupation. Many people do not know about what is happening in Palestine, so discussing the situation openly creates an environment in which more pressure can be asserted on our own government to sanction Israel, recognise Palestine as a sovereign state, and stop UK arms sales to Israel

**Bethany and Anna are members of St Alban’s J & P Group Macclesfield .*