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“Israel's Policy of House Demolitions: A Systematic Mechanism of Displacement”

PIETRO STEFANINI, RESEARCHER, PALESTINIAN RETURN CENTRE: Thanks, everyone for coming tonight to this event organized by The Palestinian Return Centre. This evening we will be talking about Israel's policy of house demolitions as a systematic mechanism of displacement. My name is Pietro Stefanini, and I am researcher at The Palestinian Return Centre. I'd like to briefly introduce the organization before we start.

The Palestinian Return Centre is an independent consultancy focusing on historical, political, and legal aspects of the Palestinian refugees. It specializes in the research, analysis, and monitoring of issues pertaining to the dispersed Palestinians and their internationally recognized legal right to return.

So we have four speakers today, and each speaker will talk about 15 or 20 minutes. Then, if we have time, we’ll open the floor for questions. So I'll be going first, and I'll be discussing—I’ll be giving an overview of the destruction of Palestinian living space in the West Bank and in Gaza. So my talk is based on a report I’ve written for the The Palestinian Return Centre which investigated the destruction of Palestinian homes in the occupied territories as an ongoing and systematic mechanism of displacement.

So I want to provide an overview of the situation both in the West Bank and Gaza, and I think it's important to talk about both geographical areas under the same focus, and that is home demolitions. When talking about Area C of the West Bank, I will highlight demolitions under the pretext that they have either no permits, or I’ll talk a bit also about the origins of the punitive home demolitions and the current situation. While in reference to Gaza, I’ll provide an overview of the destruction of Palestinian homes in roughly the last 10 years, and for the most part these were justified as for alleged military purposes. Then at the end I want to talk a bit about the ineffective reconstruction mechanism that has been put into place in Gaza.

I want to say first that whether these demolitions occur under the pretext of no permits or military purposes or for punitive measures, this Israeli policy against Palestinians clearly contravenes international law. Now I’m not going to list all the international laws Israel is violating, both in the West Bank and Gaza, as they are pretty well known and really Israel has no reasonable legal case to make.

Displacement can certainly to be considered the essence of Israel's conflict with the Palestinians and nothing demonstrates it more graphically than Israel's policy of house demolitions. If you go back to the 1948 war, many Palestinian homes and villages were totally destroyed, as well as over 750,000 Palestinians became refugees in neighboring Arab countries. And this was fundamental for the foundation of Israel as a settler colonial state.

Since 1948, a systematic pattern of forcible displacement transformed Palestinians into the largest and long-standing unresolved refugee case in the world today. About 8 million Palestinians are now considered to be displaced outside of historic Palestine, and that is over 60% of the global total Palestinian population. It is for this reason that the Nakba or catastrophe should not considered as an isolated event in history but as an ongoing process of expulsion and exile of Palestinians from the land.

So one of the most important triggers of displacement is house demolitions. According to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, ICAHD, since 1967 the Israeli authorities have demolished some 48,000 Palestinian homes in the entire occupied territory. Then since the signing of the Oslo Accords, more than 15,000 homes have been demolished in the West Bank and more than 500 Palestinian-owned structures have been demolished annually.

If you look at the West Bank specifically, this area is home to some 2.6 million Palestinians who are suffering from progressive fragmentation and isolation. An estimated 300,000 of them live in Area C and are considered the most vulnerable people in the West Bank. It is evident today, I think, that this so-called peace process and the Oslo Accords were a matter of partition rather than peace. And according to these accords, Area C was going to be gradually transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction but, however, the agreement was never fulfilled in Israel currently has total control over Area C.

And this area holds the most significant land reserves available for Palestinian development as well as the bulk of Palestinian agricultural land. This is the region in which the West Bank's most important and lucrative natural resources are concentrated and, unsurprisingly, Area C is where the majority of house demolitions have taken place. And the prospects seem increasingly dangerous for Palestinians living in this area. Between 300,000 and 400,000 Israeli settlers already live in Area C. And back in May 2014, Israeli Construction and Housing Minister, Uri Ariel, declared that the settler population would be about 500,000 or 600,000 by 2019. So that is the double of what it is at the moment.

While it is difficult to obtain accurate statistical data on other issues of Palestinian refugees, especially outside of the occupied territories, OCHA and other sources seem to provide very accurate and up-to-date account of Israel's illegal demolitions. Overall in the West Bank between 2009 and February 2016, OCHA recorded a total of over 4,000 structures demolished, of which 272 were donor-funded. And this left 6,700 people displaced.

Now in the West Bank, the data clearly indicates a rise in the amount of structures demolished. In the month of February 2016, there was the highest number of house demolished in a single month since OCHA began recording in 2009. Then figures collected on March the 4th of 2016 show that since the beginning of the year Israeli forces have destroyed or dismantled 323 homes and other structures across the West Bank. And the vast majority of these were in Area C and displaced almost 440 Palestinians, and more than half of those were children.

And roughly one-third of the structures targeted so far this year—108—were provided as humanitarian assistance to families that were already in need. And these also are some of the highest levels of demolitions and displacement recorded in a similar time frame since 2009.

One of the most common justifications Israel provides for the demolition of Palestinian homes is that they do not possess valid building permits. Statistics on house demolitions due to lack of Israeli permits show that from 2006 until August 2015 Israel demolished at least 927 Palestinian residential units in the West Bank causing over 4,000 people, including at least 2,000 minors, to lose leave their homes.

Now due to the lack of adequate planning and discriminatory allocation of public land, it is nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain building permits in most of Area C. This leaves Palestinians with three options: living in crowded housing and poor conditions; moving to Areas B and C of the West Bank, which is difficult to do, and expensive; or building without permits. And given the lack of opportunities and resources, most Palestinians have no other choice but to repeatedly rebuild their homes without permits.

Now I just want to say a few words on the issue of punitive home demolitions. Regulations sanctioning this policy were first enacted by the British Defense Emergency Regulation in 1945. These were a set of regulations imposed by the British mandate in response to the Arab revolt and the rising violence between Arabs and Jews. So it can certainly be considered a policy that has been passed on from one colonial power to another. And many of the features of Israel's occupation comes from the British military experience: closures, curfews, users of walls and other security systems are all borrowed from the British.

Now in February 2015, an Israeli military committee convened by then Chief of Staff Moshe Ya’alon and Major General Udi Shani, they concluded that not only this policy of punitive demolitions was ineffective in deterring what they claimed to be terrorism, but they actually incited additional attacks. In spite of this, the policy which was stopped in 2005 was revived in 2014 after Israel's near abandonment. Now since June of 2014, the Israeli authorities have demolished or sealed 16 structures, displacing 90 Palestinians according to UN figures.

Punitive home demolitions, they constitute a form of collective penalty, and it's in breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention. And the fact that it was revived after it was deemed actually to incite additional attacks should make us question what is the real purpose of this policy?

Moving on to the Gaza Strip. If in the West Bank home demolitions come under the pretext of no permit or as a punitive measure, a third category that Israel uses to justify the destruction of Palestinian homes is a very broad concept of alleged military purposes. Before looking at the recent major attack on the Gaza Strip, I want to briefly talk about some demolitions before the blockade. And already at the time of the Second Intifada, Israel was engaged in its fight against Palestinian tunnels. It is in this context that between 2004—between 2000 and 2004, the IDF demolished 1,800 homes in the Rafah area alone mainly under assumption that they might conceal underground tunnels.

Now it is in this context, if you remember, that American activist Rachel Corrie was run over by an Israeli bulldozer on March 2003 when attempting to protect a house from demolition.

Paradoxically, the massive destruction inflicted on the area and the huge quantities of rubble still lying around after demolishing these homes actually made it easier to hide the construction of tunnels.

Then in 2005, the removal of about 8,000 illegal settlers and the evacuation of the IDF from the ground service of Gaza, I believe was an attempt to replace one system of domination with another. Until 2006, Palestinian homes were demolished in a similar manner, if you may, to those in the West Bank today. With Israel's evacuation of Gaza, land occupation was replaced by aerial occupation. This also meant that military bulldozers were replaced by bomber jets for the purpose of house demolitions.

Following the evacuation, another procedure code named “A Knock on the Door”, which later would be followed by the more deadly “Knock on the Roof”, actually replaced military bulldozers with bomber jets for the purpose of home demolitions.

Now I wanted to briefly talk about these issues because I think it's important to see the effects in Gaza also not as isolated events, but as a development of previous home demolitions policies, and in particular the destruction of Palestinian homes and the killings of people inside not just as collateral damage, but they are actually the intended aim of the military.

Now very briefly, in the 2008 and 2009 attacks on Gaza over 22 days, 1,300 Palestinians were killed, approximately 4,000 homes were destroyed, and 20,000 people became homeless. Then in 2012, as a result of Israel's attacks, 102 Palestinians were killed, 124 homes were completely destroyed, leaving also 2,000 partially damaged.

Moving on to the latest major attack on Gaza in 2014. Over 1,400 Palestinian civilians died, and over this period it is reported that 0.5 million Palestinians were displaced. According to shelter cost figures from March 2015, 12,400 housing units were totally destroyed and 6,600 housing units were severely damaged. In the both these categories are inevitable structures.

The response to this incredible amount of destruction of Palestinian homes has had very little effect. If you looked at, just 15% of Gazan families that were displaced from the war have been able to return to their repaired or reconstruction homes. And also up to 18,000 families have no homes to return to, and are in need of medium- and long-term shelter solutions. According to the international charity, Oxfam, at the current rate of reconstruction and without lifting the blockade, it could take more than 100 years to rebuild Gaza's housing, education, and health infrastructure.

The Gaza reconstruction mechanism is a temporary agreement between the government of Palestine, the government of Israel, and was brokered by the United Nations in 2014. The UN claims that if implemented in good faith, this mechanism represents an important step towards the objective of lifting all remaining closures, and a signal of hope to the people of Gaza. So far, the UN-sponsored mechanism seems not only to be ineffective, given that still 74% of homes destroyed have not been rebuilt, but they might actually be reinforcing Israel's occupation on the strip. In fact, instead of challenging Israel's siege and systematic attacks, this mechanism is entrenching the closure. And Israel’s main cement provider, Nesher, is profiting, mainly because Israeli authorities are the only dictator of which construction materials are permitted to enter the strip.

Here there has to be said there is actually a legal vacuum because there are no requirements on donors to ensure that their money actually reaches the intended recipients. But we should also remember that if we were to abide to international law, Israel, not the EU or the UN, would be taking responsibility for these families’ welfare.

Poorly considered direct intervention, however well intentioned, could become complicit with the very aims of the occupying power itself. And flawed interventions, similar to the Gaza reconstruction mechanism, often undertake the legal task—the tasks that are illegal though neglect the responsibility of the military in control. Therefore, it allows Israel to divert resources out.

Israel continues to this day to displace Palestinians in the oPt, as it has done for the past almost 68 years. And at the same time, it denies millions of refugees their right to return. Home demolition should not be, of course, only because they contravene international law, but because they serve the Israeli logic of depopulating and dispossessing Palestinians within the context of colonization, occupation, and siege. Thank you.

Now moving on to our next speaker. Munir Nuseibah is the director of Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic and Community Action Center. He will talk to us about the displacement in Jordan and recent updates.

MUNIR NUSEIBAH, DIRECTOR, AL-QUDS HUMAN RIGHTS CLINIC AND COMMUNITY ACTION CENTER: Good evening, everyone, I appreciate that all of you are here today for this side event after the long day, so thank you all. My name is Munir Nuseibah. I am an academic and also the director of a center in the old city of Jerusalem that provides fee legal services to Palestinians in Jerusalem, focusing on some aspects where there is criminality against Jerusalemites.

My presentation today will focus on forced displacement in Jerusalem as an overview. I will not be going into any details in the topics that I will go through. It's more of an overview in order to show how forced displacement has been and continues to be a huge problem, a huge human rights problem and crisis in Jerusalem, and how it has been and continues to affect thousands and thousands of Palestinians in Jerusalem.

But before I start with this, I would like to share with you this poster, which—or this slide, which has a number of posters for a political party that I don't think it exists anymore. It was called Moledet. But part of its advertisement for elections was a code for transfer. For example, some of these sentences would read that Jordan is a Palestinian state, or we are here, they are there, equals transfer.

So basically this is part of—and the reason I am sharing this with you is to show, is to actually tell you that although in most of the cases the forced displacement and transport of Palestinian population is a hidden—not hidden, but it's not something that the Israeli government would be talking about openly. But there are still many elements in the Israeli community who would talk about it openly, whether they were political parties or even individuals in the community, unfortunately.

There is this culture. And this culture doesn't come from nowhere. It comes basically from the historical background of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the first place. And although I assume that many of you know something or maybe know a lot about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but I will just very quickly try to open my presentation with sharing you a little bit of the history.

As you know, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is in a way a result of the Jews in the world being victims of genocide and a lot of crimes that have been against the next against the Jewish population in many places around the world in the 19th century and the 20th century. So Jewish intellectuals in that period were thinking, what can we do to address the Jewish problem? How can we save the Jewish population from all of tragedies that they go through? And maybe, if I’m not sure if I'm being comprehensive in this, but at least there were two points of view. One of them was we should integrate them in the societies, empower them in their own societies everywhere. And the other one was more of a colonial idea, let's make them a Jewish state somewhere in the world, and eventually the decision was let's make the Jewish state in Palestine.

And obviously this Palestine was not empty when this choice was taken and advocated for and progressed with time. And unfortunately, as the time progressed, we got into 1947 to ‘49, the war, where after all the colonialism that happened during the British mandate period, the Jewish population was only 30% of the Palestinian population, the total Palestinian population. So non-Jewish Palestinians were 70%, and so the minority could not make a state. And as a result of them being a minority, unfortunately the Zionist movement chose to displace Palestinians.

So there was the famous 1948 war, in which 80%, 8-0 percent, of the whole Palestinian population was forcibly displaced. And obviously neo-historians have been able to access the Israeli archives and to show that displacement was actually intentional. They could even cite written orders to evacuate full towns, like Lydda and Ramle for example by the military commanders.

So it wasn't a coincidence that in 1948 the war, that the majority of the Palestinian population, 80%, were forcibly displaced from their homes. But what is more important is that since then until today they have been denied the right to return to their homes, to live in their own towns and villages in the cities, and to rebuild their lives again in Palestine. So that's why we have a huge Palestine refugee problem, which is a result of the forced displacement policies. So wars, wars was one of the most important ways in which forced displacement happened. In 1948, in this war, Israel managed to conquer 78% of Palestine and to displace the 80% of Palestinians that I mentioned.

In Jerusalem, West Jerusalem was actually full of Palestinians in 1948. And what happened is that now you don't find Palestinians anymore in West Jerusalem. And most of the villages in the Western outskirts of Jerusalem also disappear. They don't exist anymore. Some of them are now national parks where you could go and enjoy a barbecue. Others are destroyed houses that you can actually see and remember the people who lived there one day, and others are houses that still continue to exist. But instead of the Palestinian inhabitants, there are Israeli inhabitants living in them. So West Jerusalem does not have its community that existed one day anymore, and this is the fate of the houses that were full of life one day until 1948.

And then we got into the 1967 occupation where also between one quarter and one third—I’m not sure, the statistics are different—of the West Bank population where displaced, and especially in Jerusalem there were also some important displacement activities. There were 135 houses in the Moroccan Quarter demolished, and there were evictions of also thousands of Palestinians from the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem. So at that time Jerusalem was under very serious—the series of demographic changes and displacement also started in 1967, but obviously most of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem continued to live there at the time.

But then Israel annexed East Jerusalem into Israel. And annexation means that I'm sure also many of you know is that Israel has been considering, since 1967, East Jerusalem as part of Israel and so it implements Israeli law in East Jerusalem. And many of these laws have been resulting in displacing more and more Palestinians.

For example, there is the policy of residency revocation. Israeli occupied East Jerusalem in 1967. It did not grant the Palestinians in East Jerusalem citizenship, but alternatively gave them residency status. This residency status is very fragile. Over time since 1967 until today, Israel has been introducing methods to change or to revoke the residencies from Palestinians. One of the main methods have been that they decided that if your center of life is not in Israel, you will lose your residency status. This policy has got us—this policy of where you actually live—do you live in Israel or elsewhere—has caused, over the years according to statistics that originally comes from the Ministry of Interior itself, 14,500-and-something Palestinian residents it revoked since 1967.

More recently, Israel has been introducing new methods, new criteria for the residency revocation and this is actually quite alarming for us. The new criteria now is punitive residency revocation. So Palestinians were accused of attacks against Israelis have been—after that now, recently, especially since 2006 until today and more especially since 2015, there has been this new policy of revoking the residencies of these persons and then not allowing them eventually to live in Jerusalem anymore.

And the reason that the Israeli Ministry of Interior has been citing for these revocations was breach of allegiance. So the Israeli Minister of Interior sent letters back well in—or orders, both in 2006 and more recently in 2015, informing Palestinians that their residencies have been revoked because they have breached their allegiance to the State of Israel. Of course I should remind you that these Palestinians are not citizens to the State of Israel in the first place, and they never had an allegiance and they were never requested to pledge any allegiance to the State of Israel, and obviously it is actually illegal to expect allegiance from a population under occupation.

So this whole allegiance consideration is quite problematic and quite scary, and we are very afraid now that it will be affecting all of the Palestinian population in Jerusalem at some point. This is just an expectation. I'm not sure what will happen. We'll just have to wait and see, or maybe resist it now and try to stop this policy from continuing and stoppings. The Supreme Court is still considering the case, and I am hoping that they will decide not to accept the criterion of allegiance, but the record of the Supreme Court with forced displacement has not been good so far.

There are other ways of taking property, like for example the absentee property law, which my colleague will be talking more about so I will not mention it now, and other laws that result eventually in taking land, as well as taking—advancing and displacing Palestinians. There is of course the wall which insists Israel, which of course the international Court of Justice has declared illegal.

There is more than or around 100,000 residents. They became outside the wall when it was built, and the Israeli government has been contemplating actually publicly that they will also revoke the residencies of the Palestinians who are behind the wall. We are talking about areas that are part of the municipal borders of Jerusalem, so Israel considers them Israel, part of Israel, but they are on the other side of the wall. And we are scared that the Israeli government will actually implement its plan, or its whatever it has been declaring that it’s contemplating, and at some point consider these areas as outside Israel, and then which will end up resulting in revoking the residencies of Palestinians. So this is very scary for us.

There is also the zoning and the planning policy, which my colleague Zakaria will talk more about, but I will just quickly, as part of my bigger presentation, mention since Israel occupies East Jerusalem, it has expropriated 75% of its land for Israeli settlements. It has zoned 22% of the land as green areas and Palestinians would not be allowed to build in these green areas. There is 30% of the land, it’s unplanned areas so Palestinians would not be allowed to build an unplanned areas. And only 13% of the land is zoned for Palestinian construction, and this is already built and full of building.

So basically out of this zoning policy, you will find that there is no place for a Palestinian to build in Jerusalem. If the only 13% of Jerusalem is zoned for building and it’s already built, this means that Palestinians have no space to expand and this has resulted in Palestinians building without permits. So from the Israeli point of view, building illegally obviously. And this has resulted in more than 2,000 houses—and these are OCHA figures, UN OCHA. More than 2,000 houses demolished since 1967 and over one third of the Palestinian houses in Jerusalem are considered to have been built illegally which also will result in 90,000 Palestinian residents being at risk of displacement because of home demolition. So the figures are quite scary. One-third of the Palestinian houses in Jerusalem are considered illegal by Israel and because of it zoning and planning policies. Obviously the UN has criticized this policy time and time again, but unfortunately it continues.

The recent Palestinian intifada we’ve been hearing more and more and getting and receiving orders more and more from the Israel government on punitive residency—no, sorry, this is residency revocations, but here I meant to say punitive house demolition which my colleague, Pietro, had also mentioned in the context of the West Bank. The same policy that happens in the West Bank also is taking place in Jerusalem.

Somebody who is accused of a terrorist act, including in fact a case of Palestinians whose family members were accused of throwing stones at a vehicle, that they received orders of home demolition and also orders that they will not be able—and confiscation of property and inability to rebuild a house that existed before. So this is a form of collective punishment. The person had allegedly done the act is in prison, or dead, actually. It’s one of two. Either they kill the person or the person ends up in prison. So there is already a criminal process in place in Israeli law, according to the Israeli criminal law, in which that the Palestinians would face if they violate the laws of the state. So if they throw a stone or stab someone or do whatever they do that is contrary to the Israeli laws, there's a criminal process against the person.

And as we know, punishment, especially according to the principles of law that the world ignores and agrees upon, you cannot punish somebody else for a crime that someone else has done. If someone has done a crime, you should punish that person only and only that person.

Unfortunately, Israel does not take this into consideration. It considers punitive home demolition as a measure that can deter Palestinians from conducting more and more actions, which they stopped for a while in 2005 because they discovered that it is not deterring Palestinians from doing attacks, but now they are bringing it back.

My opinion—and that's only my opinion—is that they are bringing it back because it is bringing more and more forced displacement, unfortunately. This is something that goes into the bigger picture of forced displacement. They could just punish a person and that's it. There is no need to demolish their family's house.

There is also the issue of evictions, for example. There are families in Jerusalem that are facing evictions as a result of so many different laws and so many different backgrounds. This is, for example, one case of an eviction is Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood where Palestinians were evicted because it was thought by the Israeli—the Israeli court was convinced that these houses that Palestinians live on are built on land that were Jewish property before 1948. And when this area was under Jordanian rule, the Jordanian government allowed Palestinians to build in these places. And then this has been an issue facing many Palestinians to be evicted from their houses because of the claim that these houses belonged to Jewish persons before 1948.

The same claim does not work if you claim a house in West Jerusalem. If you're a Palestinian who has a house in West Jerusalem, and this lady actually claims that she has a house in West Jerusalem, and she said if you want to take me out of this house, that's okay, but give me my house in West Jerusalem. Obviously, the rules don’t work the same for Jews and non-Jews in the state of Israel. And that's one of the—that’s the main problem of discrimination in the State of Israel. It doesn't treat people equally. That’s what it is unfortunately about.

Then we also have the problem of family unification. So more restrictions. I talked about residencies but in addition to residencies, Palestinians who want to marry persons from the West Bank or Gaza or four other countries in the world, which are a Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, if a Palestinian was to marry any person from these country, a Palestinian cannot actually give his or her residency status to the spouse. This means that if the Palestinian will not succeed in inviting their family members to Jerusalem, if they want to live together, they will need to leave. And if they leave, of course they will lose their residency status because their center of life is not Jerusalem anymore.

This creates either that you will choose your spouse according to their ID card, which actually happens a lot now, unfortunately, and you will break up with a partner that you might be in love with just because they don't have the right ID card, or that you will marry someone and live apart, actually, which also is a case that exists a lot. There are many families that simply don't live in the same house. So it’s quite impossible in many cases to live in the same space for different spouses.

But in addition of that, there is also the child registration restrictions. So the Palestinian from Jerusalem who has residency status cannot automatically pass his or her residency status to their children. There are a lot of complicated law that show when you can actually pass the status through your child and when you cannot pass the status to your child. And there’s an estimation of 10,000 Palestinian children not having any registration. This means that they have no social rights and no even right to be present in the same space with their family members.

This is very scary. All of these policies are bringing us again to the expulsion of Palestinians from Jerusalem, evicting as many as possible from Jerusalemites from Jerusalem. And we as human rights organizations in Jerusalem are trying our best to resist this through the legal means, mainly through the Israeli legal system, trying to seek remedies through the Israeli legal system. But I am telling you, in many cases we have failed to get remedies because the legal system itself is discriminatory and complicated and is designed to inflict that displacement upon the Palestinian community.

So Palestinians are trying in different ways to demand the right of return and to be steadfast in their homes. This cartoon on the right was drawn at a point when the town of Silwan was facing and continues to face orders of evictions and demolitions in that village. And Palestinians feel that they want as much as possible to continue to live in Jerusalem. We feel that we have roots in Jerusalem. This is where our roots are, and we don't want to be uprooted. But unfortunately, the legal system is doing its best, slowly changing the facts on the ground and the international community is unable to address this issue effectively.

Thank you for listening.

PIETRO STEFANINI: Thank you very much, Munir, for that contribution. We will now move to Zakaria Odeh. He's the director of the Civic Coalition for Palestinian Rights in Jerusalem and he will also discuss the issue of home demolitions as a result of zoning and planning.

ZAKARIA ODEH, CIVIC COALITION FOR PALESTINIANS, JERUSALEM: Good evening. First, I would like to thank The Return Centre for organizing this meeting, or as we said, at the end of a day after a long day.

My name is Zakaria Odeh. I am director of the Civic Coalition. It’s a coalition of human right organization that work on human right issue. It’s a legal human right coalition which work on the human right issues in occupied East Jerusalem. In fact, excuse me because of some issues that I was supposed to raise have already been raised by my friend, Munir, so I’ll try my best either to skip or not to go in details with these issues.

In fact, home demolition and housing rights in occupied East Jerusalem, we can’t talk about housing rights and for Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem without talking about the Israeli policy land policy, the Israeli land control policy, and the Israeli discriminatory planning policy.

First, I would like to touch on the legal framework which Israel has established after they occupied East Jerusalem. The first thing Israel they did there, expand the border in Jerusalem where they added 70 kilometers to that original size, which was 5.5.

The second step or one of the major steps that Israel took is the annexation of East Jerusalem. What does that mean? That East Jerusalem has become under the jurisdiction of the Israeli state, the people and the land. This has been promoted with the basic law which was established by the Israeli Knesset, the parliament, in 1980 which talk identified East and West Jerusalem is the capital of Israel.

These are the major legal framework that Israel has established and all the policies that have been implemented during the last 48 years of occupation is based in order to achieve this legal framework.

The other issue is that Israel has introduced various laws in order to control the land and for the purposes of planning. One of the main laws that Israel has implemented is that law everybody know of 1950. We know this law was established in 1950, which considered any Palestinian during 1948 during Rattat and Nakba, anybody who was not in Palestine was outside Palestine in any of the Arab surrounding countries, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or Egypt is considered absentee. So the property of this person will to go to the Israeli government. This law is one of the main laws that Israel used after 1948 in order to take control of the Palestinians.

The other law, which has been used in occupied East Jerusalem, is land for public purposes. A lot of the land that has been re-confiscated by the Israelis in East Jerusalem has been confiscated based on public purposes that the government expropriate the land, and in many cases the lands were transferred to the Israeli Jewish settler groups in order to ban the settlement.

The third law is planning and zoning where based on this policy that Israel takes a lot of land, and Israel takes 40% of the land for the purpose of zoning and planning for the use of the government.

The fourth, which is the state land, any state land which was used by the Government of Jordan before 1967, which was ruling, so it goes directly to the State of Israel. These are the main legal framework, the main laws that Israel has used in order to control the land and to expropriate the land of the Palestinians.

You know the Israeli planning policy, in fact, has several objectives or aims. One of them is to strengthen its [inaudible] by creating a Jewish majority in the city of Jerusalem. So the demographic issue is always one of the main concerns of the various Israeli government; that always its objective to create a majority of Jewish-blood relations vis-à-vis a small minority of Palestinians. So demography was essential and the basis of the Israeli planning policy.

The other objective for the planning policy is to prevent the inclusion of heavily populated Palestinian areas. So always in their planning policy they tried to get rid or to exclude the Palestinian neighborhood which is populated by Palestinians. Another issue there that urban planning imposed by Israel on Palestinian without any consultation with any Palestinian with a group or community in East Jerusalem. So Israel is the only—dictates where and when Palestinian can build, but even they decide if Palestinian can build; nobody else.

So as a result of these laws, Israel has control out of the land: 35% of the land that confiscated by Israel was for building settlements; 40% of this land are private-owned land; 22% confiscated indirectly and classified as a green area, green area where only the government allowed to use it, but Palestinian population are not or residents are not allowed to use this land; and 13% unplanned land, so all what has been left for the Palestinian, as my friend said, only 13% of the land of East Jerusalem is left for the use of the Palestinians.

Of course, land confiscation is connected with building settlements. In East Jerusalem—within the City of East Jerusalem, there are 16 illegal settlements which has been built since 1967; 28 settlements in all the district of Jerusalem. There are in the City of Jerusalem, which what they call it the Municipality of Jerusalem border, 215,000 Jewish settlers that live in East Jerusalem; nearly 45% of all the population combined of Jerusalem are Jewish settlers. So you can see we can see how controlling land is very connected with building settlements or property in East Jerusalem.

You know, this is a statement for Amir Cheshin. He is an ex-advisor on the Arab affairs to the former Israeli mayors. Look what he said: “Israeli leaders adopted two basic principles in their rule of East Jerusalem. The first was to rapidly increase the Jewish population in East Jerusalem. The second was to hinder growth of the outer population, and to force other residents to make their homes elsewhere.” These are the basis of all the various Israeli with our government, with our institution, mainly like the Municipality of Jerusalem; all the other ministries.

So one of the main discriminatory planning is that what we call it, the local scheme planning, which is based on the law of 1965, its 1965 planning and building law, which provide the legal basis for the implementation of the local planning scheme. Or they call it, the—known as town planning scheme.

Now objective of this scheme, or this plan is to control the development of the land and the local planning area and to ensure appropriate condition for the point of view of health, sanitation, security, and transportation. In reality, this scheme has been used in East Jerusalem in a multi-fractured discriminatory manner in order to maintain demographic control and minimize the Palestinian population. This is one of the main plans or schemes that the Israeli municipality has established. And we have, however, drafted a plan or urban plan, which they call it the Jerusalem master plan 2000 or 2020, which reflects how the Israeli government they see Jerusalem in 2020.

One of the main goals of this master plan is a geographical and demographic main tool to maintain a population ratio between 70 Jewish and 30 Palestinian Arabs. In the 70s there was discussion about demographic balance, and the Israelis decided that Palestinian should not be more than 24, 26% of the population and the rest must be Israeli Jewish in East Jerusalem—in all Jerusalem, sorry.

Now in the master plan they start talking about 70/30. Again at this moment, Palestinians are only 38% of all the population of all Jerusalem. And this is really a big concern of the various Israeli leadership and governments and individual that in spite of all these voices that my friend, Munir, has been talking about: residency policy, the planning policy, and the housing policy that the Palestinians had been really maintaining an increase of the population of East Jerusalem. As well the primary means the master plan used to remove Palestinians and encourage Jewish settlement.

So it is a political tool rather than diplomat tool to strengthen the Jewish presence in occupied East Jerusalem.

There is another plan. I mean the master plan 2020 or 2000 is based on what we call the Israeli regional plan, which was approved in 2010 by the cabinet, which mainly it's aiming to increase the population of the Jewish Israeli population. It called as well—they called it Plan Number 30. According to the draft plan, Jerusalem is to be the Jewish national priority area. That was the main theme of the decision by the Knesset. It will promote as the right Jewish capital it is clearly stated in the plan to the East and West Jerusalem is the united capital of Israel with a Jewish majority, the capital of the Jewish state, and the heart of all the Jews all over the world.

So the aim of this—one of the main aims of this plan is to encourage young Jews to settle in East Jerusalem. Because during the last 10, 15 years, or 20 years there have been a lot of immigration mainly by the sacred or Jewish from Jerusalem to other cities. So the Israeli government have realized the threat or the dangerous of this immigration on their main objective, which is create a majority of Jewish population in East Jerusalem.

As well, its aim to encourage young to settle in East Jerusalem, you know according to the planner who studied this plan, they said the plan deals with East Jerusalem as if there is no Palestinian Arabs at all, as if there is no population. So it talks how a broad settlement, how to connect settlement with infrastructure, which already established tunnels, highways, and how to exclude the Palestinian neighborhood outside the border of East Jerusalem.

So of course all these policies, the land policy by Israel and the Israeli planning policy has really affected the housing right of the Palestinians, because of the shortage of land and as well because of the restriction on obtaining building permit. Israel or the Municipality of Jerusalem has established a lot of restrictions on obtaining building permits. One of these is a restriction that it is a complicated process. It takes a long time. Sometimes it could take 5 to 10 to 15 years to get a building permit only for Palestinian East Jerusalem.

As well you have to pay high fees to get a permission. Just to get a permission for an apartment or house of 100 m², the average fees would be around USD 30,000 just to get the permission from the Israeli Jerusalem municipality.

Another restriction that they put a condition, anybody wants to build they have to have an individual registration certificate, which is the top photo. And as you know in Palestine during the Ottoman and then during the British and the Jordanian, there was no individual registration, or none of this government facilitated their individual registration. So the land was always in the name of the whole family, not the individual. So they put this as a condition in order to restrict the process of obtaining building permits.

So with all these restrictions, of course Palestinians in East Jerusalem have been growing. The population in 1967, the population Palestinians who were living in East Jerusalem, there were 67,000. Now there are 360,000 Palestinians who are living in East Jerusalem who are holding what we call it Israeli ID card, which is Israeli residency. So you can imagine this growth with little land, short land, more land confiscated, more restrictions, so people there have no choice but to build without permission.

In East Jerusalem now there are 20 house or apartment that are built without a license or without a permission from the Jerusalem municipality. Nearly 85,000 Palestinian, one-third of all the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, they live in homes without permission, without a license. What does that mean? That means that all these houses are under the risk of demolition, because according to the Israeli law if you build without a license or permission your house must be demolished. That's why every day we have been hearing that Israel have been demolishing homes, and as well not only that they are demolishing homes, they are issuing fines the Palestinians who built without a permission. Sometimes it could reach $10,000, USD15,000, the fine for building the home without a permission.

And as a result, just to give some statistics, 970 homes were demolished between 2000 and 2009, which displaced 5,523 people, of whom 3,023 are children. This is just some of the number. You know we have a problem, as Munir said, the only source of that and the statistics are the Israelis, and usually they don't reveal the statistics. We have to struggle. You know sometimes we have to go to the High Court in order to force the Israeli Interior Minister or the municipality to give data about different issue that nobody knows about it.

And as well, 178 homes were demolished and 2,293 people were affected during the years 2014 only and 2015. We have several types of home demolitions. There is the demolition which is done by the municipality and we have as well what we call it, self-demolitions. We have during the last—only on 2014, 31 homes that are demolished by the people. You know, the municipality; they force the families who built without permission to demolish their homes by themselves. Can you imagine when a family, they have to demolish their homes by themselves because if they don't do that, they have to pay a fine and they have to pay the cost of the demolition to the municipality of Jerusalem.

You can't imagine what's more really vicious policy. I think where in this age that this kind of oppress is not implemented in any part of the world.

It's not only that. If you remember, Munir talked about one of the neighborhoods, Sheikh Jarrah, which people have been evicted from their homes. Three families were charged of 15,000 Israelis shekel, which is nearly $5,000 for the cost of eviction. They had to pay for the police nearly US$5,000, the cost of the eviction. Can you imagine?

So as well the third type I'm finishing is the part of which Munir talk on punitive demolition which they demolish home of the families who they were accused or alleged that they are carried any resistance against the Israeli police or the Israelis. So what we are facing really in occupied East Jerusalem in particular and the rest of the combined territories, deliberate ethnic cleansing policy. A policy of population transferred that all the policies that implemented by the various Israeli government and institution is aiming to force the people to leave the city of Jerusalem and to go and live even not in the rest of the West Bank, but even outside the city of Jerusalem.

And thank you for listening.

PIETRO STEFANINI: Thank you very much, Zakaria, for that great contribution, the really exposed of the zoning and planning policies result in the forced displacement of Palestinians in Jerusalem.

Now I’d like to introduce Sara Apps. She’s the Interim director of Palestine Solidarity Campaign UK, and she’ll be discussing the role of the U.K. and why the EU civil society in tackling this Israeli systematic policy of home demolitions.

SARA APPS, INTERIM DIRECTOR OF PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN UK: Hi. Hi, everyone. Can you hear me? Okay, great. You'll be glad to hear I have cut down a little bit because we all need to go on from here, so I shouldn't take too long.

But I just wanted to begin by reiterating really the impression that my colleagues have given you, which is that when you demolish homes, you don't just demolish the house. It's not just bricks and mortar. You’re actually destroying lives, destroying communities, and actually in this case you’re actually destroying or certainly damaging the prospects of peace and justice. So we must keep this absolutely to the forefront of our mind when we're thinking about how to challenge this.

I think the approach that's taken by the Human Rights Council from the contributions that I have heard whilst I’ve been here is that it varies somewhat from the political approach, which is that it’s very much a rights-based approach. Obviously with looking forward to solutions too, but I think one of the difficulties of much of the political approach today is that it expects the occupying people to have their rights frozen. To basically await the final solution, which of course they’ve waited too many years for already, and that, that's not acceptable when you're looking at an occupied people and the lives that they must be able to just continue for now.

Reading the comments and hearing from the Special Rapporteur on this issue, his frustration is palpable, as is ours. He talks about the disconnect between the rights and protections afforded to them. That's protected persons, which is the occupied people under international humanitarian law, and the actual protection they afforded. I think that if you look at the recommendations that he gives, I mean when you look at this particular situation, it's not just the fact that the report's recommendations aren’t being implemented, but in fact the very blockage of the Special Rapporteur to being able to investigate is itself extremely dangerous. And now this is being followed up with possible attempts of blocking the actual appointment of a Special Rapporteur, this becomes really a crisis, I think, for the Human Rights Council.

NGOs, campaign groups across the U.K., across the EU absolutely share the frustration of the Special Rapporteur. It is not policy which is at fault. I would say that, on the whole, we pretty much agree on policy. There may be some room for improvement, but the bedrock is there. It is actually the total failure to implement that policy which is holding us back and which is preventing there from being justice. It is in fact a policy failure and should always be seen as such.

We have failed to meet any of the policy objectives that have been set out. In fact, if you look at any single indicator, the situation is worse now than it was several years ago. Whether that's looking at the implementation of a two-state solution, which is a top political priority, whether or not that's preventing growth of settlements, or looking at this issue of home demolitions. The situation now is getting worse and worse. And that failure comes from impunity and a lack of accountability, the lack of implementation of international laws and knowns.

I'm sorry to say this, but I'm afraid it's not just a failure of the two parties. Often we hear our ministers and at EU level and also at the international level, too, talking about the difficulties of getting the two parties together. In fact, this is a failure of the implementation of international law in the context of multiple opportunities to enforce it. So I'm afraid it is actually our collective failure and it cannot be pointed just at those parties. It is a lack of accountability due to the lack of consequences for actions.

I'll give you one example of this, which is in my home turf, which is in London. In the House of Commons last week, a member of the Parliament asked one of the ministers who is responsible for the area of foreign affairs, house demolitions went up three times 2015 levels, and you made representations to the Israeli government. They are now four times the level of 2015. What do you plan to do about it? And the minister replied, but in fact what he intended to do was make further representations. This is a problem. There’s no different approach being taken. It’s the same approach every single time. Albert Einstein, if I may quote somebody who is considerably probably more intelligent than any of us, described insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I think that may not be perhaps how we describe insanity, but I think it's a pretty good description of what the situation is at the moment.

Given the Palestinian people and in fact all the people of the region have waited too many years already, the approach that is being taken is not only unrealistic and ineffective, but it's also dishonest. So what tools are available? So we know already that the diplomatic tool is the major tool that has been used from the toolbox, but there are other tools. There are political tools and cultural tools, economic tools and legal tools, and these are at the disposal. There are many international actors involved, there is obviously the EU, the Human Rights Council itself in the UN, state actors, the USA, the Quartet, and I'm glad to see the ICC as a potential part of this process. I think that's an important move forward.

There have been some changes of using different tools in order to move us forward. The EU guidelines would be a good example. Basically it didn't really create new policies, but it brought the policies together to create a more difficult environment for Israeli settlements to discourage funding of Israeli settlements and to discourage further involvement from EU and Israeli settlement actors. So this is one step forward.

The labeling regime which the EU brought in in November 2015 is another. It has caused considerable uproar, I think, from Israeli partners and from the Israeli government. But in fact, it is very similar to a policy that the U.K. brought in in 2009 which has been working quite effectively in terms of giving consumers more choice, and it is also meant that there has been a change in that when it was first implemented—at supermarkets’ request, I may tell you, because they were getting too many requests from consumers that they wanted more information—it actually meant that there was—first of all, there were that were labeled Israeli settlement goods that were fresh goods. Those have largely disappeared from the shelves because they just weren't being bought.

But if you look it, these very small steps to deal with a very big problem. And if you look at normal policymaking, if you look at the way that policymakers work, they normally say, what is the problem that we’re trying to deal with? And will our policies overcome this issue? And what are the unexpected or undesirable outcomes that we may see as well? And I think that we can say these policies that have been implemented so far just go nowhere near far enough to deal with the issues at hand. And with home demolitions, it's quite clear that they cannot have the required effect.

I'm going to go on to quote now the Israeli Prime Minister and what he said. He’s actually said that sanctions work. That's what he told the UN. He is in fact can be quite right. And in that instance, he was actually talking about Iran, of course, but Israel uses boycotts and sanctions frequently against the Palestinians.

If we look at the relationship with the Special Rapporteur, that is surely a form of boycott in a sense. But further than that, often financial money, like tax money, is withheld from Palestinians and that, indeed, is a sanction. It's for some misdemeanor or other that the Israeli government disagrees with the Palestinian authority, so they withhold funds. That is a sanction. If we look at punitive home demolitions and deportations of families, say, from Jerusalem or to Gaza, prisoners, that again is a form of sanction.

So if we look at the issue of Israeli settlements and we consider the situation, the issue of settlements and home demolitions, I think as my colleagues have made very clear, are inextricably linked. You know, the two go hand-in-hand. And the World Bank has basically assessed in 2013 that the Palestinian economy loses more than $3.4 billion a year, which is 35% of its GDP, because of the infrastructure of the occupation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

And then if we look at the situation on the other side, what trade has done, and $30 billion of trade is between Israel and the EU every year. Only $300 million is EU trade with settlements at the moment, and that's 1% of the total. It is also important to remember that the EU is Israel's biggest trading partner at 34%, but actually trade with Israel is only 1% of the EU's trade.

So what does all that tell us? What it tells us is the Palestinians acute is loss, not just personally but also economically. It tells us that the EU is in a great negotiating position to make a difference, and that overnight they could have a significant impact on Israel's policy on settlements through ending trade with settlements themselves.

So what I'm saying is that we need to look at using different tools and different opportunities in order to achieve change. And I think that's only fair. The occupying power has too much to lose. The balance of power is too great to ask these two actors, to ask the two partners to do it alone. It will require action by the international community to bring change about. The weight of sorting this problem out cannot be left to these two partners. It is unfair.

What are the barriers within the international community to this happening? Well, of course, it’s the lack of unity to take this response. And in fact that is actually down in fact to the failure to adequately support international law. And as many speakers have said earlier today, it actually fundamentals weakens international law that this issue continues chronically over such a long period of time.

So we see an environment where we see the EU taking some action, but we also see some countermeasures. And there have recently been an attempt in the U.K. and also in France and in other countries to try and push back against citizens supporting economic measures being used in order to try and help resolve this occupation and conflict. So it may be that the Human Rights Council and other bodies are going to have to look in future at the human rights of those people who are standing up to call for change in this issue.

You may actually be looking at protecting the right of people in Britain and people in France, not just people in Palestine and Israel, as their rights to protest and to call for boycott and economic sanctions are undermined. And this is something I want you to think about for their future. As I have said, it's not only not realistic to ask the two parties to come to a solution, but it's also outside the bounds of being fair to do so.

So what is on the horizon for—I’ve been asked to talk about the U.K. and EU situation. Well, the EU is currently looking at a new EU Israel framework agreement and updating from the 2004 action plan. And this, it is said that this will be based on looking at issues of common interest.

The EU has kept this process closed for some years now and the reason is because they said there had to be more progress towards the implementation of international humanitarian law, human rights law, and also the Middle East peace process. So why is this peace process being move forward now? Is it because there has been progress made in those areas? I’d say clearly not. There’s clearly been no progress, and yet the EU is opening up this process again.

So they are clearly feeling under some pressure to develop further relations with Israel economically, and I would argue it is very much the wrong time to do so. It is important that we put counter pressure to make sure that this and any upgrade attempt does not happen until there is progress in the implementation of the international humanitarian law, human rights law, and also with the Mideast peace process.

I would say that probably the major difference between the part of the world I come from, the NGOs and the campaigning groups and the politicians and perhaps the approach taken by the UN is that whilst we all draw on the same evidence for our criticism, it's there, we have the same evidence and we have the same policy basis, on looking at some of the issues such as home demolitions and administrative detention and settlements, et cetera.

So we look at the same evidence and we look at the same policy, but where our focus is different to those other parties is that we think that the change will come about through the international community as a first step rather than simply by putting pressure on the two parties involved. So in other words, linking the human rights and the human rights framework to the action taken by international partners and institutions.

In short, what we should be doing is talking a lot less about what Israel can do and perhaps even less about what Palestine can do and more about what we can do in order to make a difference. Looking again at those different levers that are open to us, not simply diplomacy but political, economic, cultural, and legal, and actually trying to change that power balance.

Thank you very much.

PIETRO STEFANINI: Thank you very much, Sara, for that very important contribution. We are on a tight schedule, but we have maybe two or three minutes for question or two. I see there's a question here already. Anyone else wants to go after. I will give you the floor.

BASAAM ALONI: Yes. Hi. Thank you very much for this remarkable presentation, and I'm going to ask you a very simple questions. Of course, Basaam Aloni, I’m from Global Network for Rights and Development, London. It seems that Israel is the only country in the world that practices this evil act of demolitions, which is considered as a stark violation against international law. Yet we see the international community and the UN playing with kid’s gloves with it while raising the stakes against the Palestinian. Why?

Thank you very much.

SARA APPS: Thanks very much. I mean I’d be interested to know whether or not it is the only place where house demolition takes place. I suppose it's various forms. I would say that there is a failure. Often, we're often told by the U.K. that it would be—in fact it was repeated mantra by U.K. ministers that penalties at this point would not be helpful. And I think there is a sense in which and there is still old world politics going on, which is not looking at international law and international legal frameworks, but actually seen people in relation to being friends or foe, or allies or enemies. And I think that that is problematic. I think the issue of implementing international law when it suits you, and not using it where it doesn't suit you actually is fundamentally undermining international law and is a real problem for all of us. And actually for anybody who believes in international law and justice it’s absolutely vital that this this is applied evenly and fairly in order to move forward, because that is part of the reason why so many people are so critical of the international community itself, because they see such inconsistency.

PIETRO STEFANINI: Thank you. Any other question?

ZIYAAD PATEL, ATTORNEY: Good afternoon. And thank you very much for a very informative discussion. I would like to—a few things for raised, and I come from South Africa. I would like to make again the analogy of apartheid Israel to apartheid South Africa. We experienced exactly the same issues. When you talk about house demolitions, it was whites Afrikaners versus black people. My parents were forcibly removed from known white areas as such.

The other issue about ethnic cleansing of East Jerusalem, why don't we start using the term genocide? It's definitely a genocide. It is institutionalized. It is the ethnic cleansing of areas, particularly in East Jerusalem. If you look at the Gaza Strip, for instance, Operation Protective Edge, what was that? That was actually the beginnings of genocide. As an attorney working in the areas of lawfare, we've discussed—we raised issue on crimes against humanity. We’ve raised the issue of war crimes, disproportionate uses of force, and like the one speaker said that Einstein made this remark, we have to look at different options in order to make Israel accountable for its crimes it commits with impunity. Thank you.

PIETRO STEFANINI: Thank you. Thank you for your question. Anyone else wants to answer?

MUNIR NUSEIBAH: Thank you, sir, for your question. First, your comment also on the comparison between the apartheid of Africa and Israel, I agree with you, there is a lot to compare. It seems that there is some colonial mentality that exists in both cases, and the idea when somebody comes from abroad and they find themselves a minority, they want to build themselves a community in a land that is already inhabited, so they try to move out the local population and to live in their place. This is something that happened in South Africa, happened in many other places around the world. It might be a colonial pattern. I'm very happy that this ended in South Africa, and I know that South Africa will spend a very long time to redress the victims of forced displacement. I know that the decisions have been made and the transitional period, but that the implementation is very difficult. I'm trying to learn about that, actually.

But regarding the term genocide, it's not the appropriate term to use in terms of what's happening in Jerusalem. It is an ethnic cleansing in the way that Israel is actually moving Palestinians out, but genocide has a different meaning. The definition of genocide includes: it includes either killing people in a large number—in large numbers in order to end their existence or to forcibly make women pregnant in certain situations. So whatever, the first displacement of Palestinians and the ethnic cleansing is not genocide. And I don't like to use terms that are not appropriate or not necessarily they don't fit the definitions, because I am a lawyer also, and I studied international law.

However, I would actually say very confidently is that forced displacement, whether a home demolitions and residents’ locations during wars, during the whole metrics of laws that Israel is using in order to forcibly displace, especially in the occupied territory for under war crimes and crimes against humanity. I've studied that very well, actually, and the legal analysis. I've looked at the jurisprudence of ICTY, the Yugoslavia Tribunals. And I know very well that it does fulfill both conditions. Each Palestinian who is displaced from his home forcibly within the occupied territory or from the occupied territory to abroad is a victim of a war crime. And because the policy is systematic, and as you can see from all of our presentations that it is so systematic and widespread, has affected a large number of people. This means that it’s also a crime against humanity. So I can confidently tell you that, but genocide, no, it's not.

PIETRO STEFANINI: We can take one last question.

ABA AL-DAKAR: Hello. Good afternoon, and thank you for your presentations. Again, from the Global Network for Rights and Development, Aba al-Dakar. My question is on my own capacity as a Palestinian coming from Gaza. My father's house was destroyed in the last war. My sister's house was also flattened. And I totally agree with you that we need a fundamental solution that doesn't have or not necessarily including the State of Israel, or Palestine, or like a power, official powers. What we need is, I agree that we need as an international community, as individuals, to come together and start working on the issue, to force it to be in the political agenda. But my question for the panelists, why as NGOs, why as a grassroots or human rights defenders we like to work or until now there is no mechanism that all of us can come under it and work together? So far we have so many other umbrellas, we have networks, we have everything, but we are not uniting against like one specific issue, especially when it comes to Palestine.

Thank you.

PIETRO STEFANINI: Thank you. That’s a very good comment. I agree with you that certainly if all NGOs would be able to come together, as you said, definitely it would help not disperse sometimes our efforts. Even here at the Council, we all come with our own framework, and we all want to argue and convey our message. And I personally don't know why this hasn't been implemented yet. And it’s certainly a great idea, and maybe we should start thinking about it in the future, because on the other side, Israel, they all focus for one thing. It is the state of Israel. Whereas other NGOs, they come from different countries, even different continents, and sometimes they have their own agenda. And it's very difficult to convey the same powerful message together.

And if no one else has any comments, we'll end the discussion here tonight. Thanks again, everyone, for attending. And on behalf of the Palestinian Return Centre, thank you very much.