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## Report to the Protocol Committee - Visit of an tArdmhéara to Palestine April 2018

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On 21 February 2018 I was invited by the Ambassador of Palestine in Dublin, Ahmed Abdelrazek, on behalf of Dr. Mahmoud al Habbash, the Supreme Judge of Palestine, to speak at the Ninth International Bayt Al Maqdis (Jerusalem) Conference in Ramallah on 11 & 12 April 2018. I travelled to Ramallah via Frankfurt and Tel Aviv on 10 April. I was accompanied by Gráinne Kelly of Dublin City Council's International Office.

The day before my visit the April monthly meeting of Dublin City Council had adopted two motions, one endorsing the campaign of Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) against the Israeli state due to its treatment of the Palestinians, and another calling for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador in protest at the killings of protesters in Gaza by the Israeli military. It appears that it was in response to these motions that the Israeli Ministry for Strategic Affairs hastily decided to prevent my entry to Palestine. However, when I landed at Tel Aviv Airport I was permitted through passport control without incident.

On the evening of 10 April, as I prepared for the conference the next day in my hotel in Ramallah, I received word from my office in Dublin that the Israeli government's Interior Minister Arye Dery and Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan had stated that I had been stopped from entering Israel because of my support for BDS. I immediately made it known that I was in fact in Ramallah and knew nothing of a ban which had not been communicated to me in any way. I have still not received any such communication.

The Interior Ministry claimed that I was allowed through because my name was spelt incorrectly in the request it had been given by the Strategic Affairs Ministry to block me. However, the latter Ministry claimed the name was spelt correctly. The Interior Minister ordered an investigation. There was speculation that the error was the inclusion of the title Ardmhéara as part of my name, though this has not been confirmed.

I attended the conference on 11th and 12<sup>th</sup> April. The conference was especially significant in the context of the decision of the US Administration to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel. There were delegates from Palestine and from many other countries (including EU member states) and they were public representatives, religious leaders of various denominations and faiths, trade unionists and other civil society representatives. Almost 50 people, one third of the delegates, were prevented from entering Palestine by the Israeli government. This included a delegation from India, only two of whom were allowed entry, apparently because one of them was a former Government minister in India.

On the morning of 11 April I spoke in the conference session on the importance of Jerusalem. (See Appendix 1 for speech.)

Later that day I met the Mayor of Ramallah, Mosa Hadid, at his mayoral office.

In the company of Frank Connolly of SIPTU, who was visiting Palestine as a trade union representative, I met Shaher Saad, General Secretary of the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions.

That evening the conference delegates were addressed by Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority.

On 12 April, as well as attending the conference I met with the Palestinian Minister for Jerusalem Affairs Adnan Al Hussaini.

We were facilitated to meet Dr. Nabil A. Shaath, foreign policy advisor to President Abbas, and a long-time Palestinian diplomat. And we met with Palestinian civil society campaigners for BDS.

We left Palestine on 13 April. At Tel Aviv Airport Immigration I was presented with a form stating that I had been informed that should I wish to re-enter Israel I would have to seek permission. I signed this form and was permitted to leave after a delay of about 15 minutes. I was not asked to give, nor did I give, any commitment not to return to Palestine.

(See Appendix 2 re commentary on the visit.)

## **Assessment**

Our visit coincided with the ongoing killings of protesters in Gaza by the Israeli military. Even within Israeli society itself there was much opposition to this, summed up in a headline in the Israeli daily 'Haaretz' which said: 'Don't believe a word Israel says about Gaza.' There was also much anger at the false Israeli claim that a photographer killed in Gaza by the Israeli military on the Friday before our visit had not been a journalist but a Hamas activist. The International Federation of Journalists accused Israel of engaging in a cover-up of the murder.

Throughout the visit I learned of the ongoing plight of the Palestinian people, in a society which is, in effect, an open prison. We learned from the trade unionists of the apartheid-style pass system for the many thousands of Palestinians who work in Israeli areas and are under curfew to leave those areas when their work is done. The West Bank, supposedly under Palestinian authority, is split into zones under various degrees of Israeli control, while everywhere illegal settlements continue to be built. We witnessed the wall which separates Israeli from Palestinian areas and which severely disrupts working, family and social life for ordinary Palestinians.

There is clearly no intention on the part of the current Israeli government to engage in any meaningful peace process. As Dr. Nabil Shaath explained to us, what is needed now is an internationally led peace process, headed by credible governments. It is also important that full recognition is given to the State of Palestine by all the EU member states, including Ireland.

I believe what we witnessed during our visit vindicates the support for justice for Palestine and a real and lasting peace settlement between Palestine and Israel as repeatedly advocated by the elected members of Dublin City Council. There was much respect for the position taken the Council, by the Irish government and by Irish people generally in support of Palestine.

I believe the City Council should explore ways in which further practical links can be built, including with the city of Ramallah.

- I would like to record my thanks to Gráinne Kelly for her support and efficiency during the visit, to Jonathan Conlon and Declan Johnston of the Department of Foreign Affairs Ramallah office who were very helpful, and to Frank Connolly of SIPTU for his assistance also.

## **Appendix 1**

### **The significance of Jerusalem**

*Address by Mícheál Mac Donncha, Ardmhéara Bhaile Átha Cliath (Lord Mayor of Dublin) at international conference on Jerusalem in Ramallah, 11 April 2018.*

As Lord Mayor of the City of Dublin, capital of Ireland, it is a privilege to join you for your conference. I have to tell you that last night I was informed that the Ministry of Strategic Affairs of Israel had stated that I had been prevented from entering the country. But here I am and I am very glad to be here.

I want to thank the State of Palestine, through the ambassador in Dublin, Ahmed Abdelrazak, for the invitation to speak.

I accepted the invitation because Dublin City Council by repeated vote of its elected members, has expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine, has condemned the denial of their rights by successive Israeli governments, and has called for a peaceful settlement through inclusive negotiations, respecting all electoral mandates. On Monday at its monthly meeting Dublin City Council condemned the killings of Palestinians in Gaza by the Israeli military, another gross violation of human rights. The Council called for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador in protest at these latest atrocities. The City Council of Cork on the same night also called for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. And Dublin City Council voted to support the boycott, divestment, sanctions movement.

Now as in the past there is much respect and solidarity in Ireland for the people of Palestine in their unequal struggle for self-determination, justice and peace.

I extend that solidarity from one city, Dublin, to the city of Ramallah, and to Jerusalem, an historic city of world importance and, of course, a city of crucial importance to the people of Palestine.

Jerusalem is a place of huge cultural and religious significance for people all over the world, including in Ireland. Three major world religions - Islam, Judaism and Christianity - hold the city of Jerusalem sacred. I believe the attempt by any one state or religion to exclusively control Jerusalem is wrong. That is why the formal recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel by the US administration was wrong. It was a backward step for peace and a negotiated settlement. Also the recent moves to amend the Basic Laws of Israel to further cement it as an exclusively Jewish state are alarming.

Of course this latest intervention by the US administration is but the most recent whereby a great power has sought to use the region for its own selfish ends regardless of the misery this causes to the people of the region.

100 years ago the people of both Ireland and Palestine were victims of imperialism as their right to self-determination was denied. In both countries so-called solutions were imposed which condemned their peoples to a century of division, oppression and strife.

In the case of Palestine and the Middle East the British and French empires, under the Sykes-Picot agreement, carved the region up between them, setting the pattern for big power manipulation and exploitation. In the case of Ireland our country was cut in two by Partition. In addition of course the Middle East saw the Balfour Declaration which empowered Zionism to claim the land of Palestine, leading to mass expulsions, confiscation and killings. You are still living with the consequences today.

The suffering of the Palestinian people under occupation, exile, mass imprisonment, killings such as the most recent in Gaza, and a catalogue of human rights abuses, has horrified people all over the world. However, the international community, and particularly EU governments, have failed to hold Israeli governments to account for their abuses of human rights. It is time that this policy of standing idly by in the face of horror came to an end.

This week, in fact the day I arrived in Palestine, marked the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland.

20 years ago the Irish and British governments and the political parties, based on their electoral mandates, reached an agreement to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The basis of the negotiations was inclusivity; the basis of the agreement was respect, equality and human rights. It is far from a perfect agreement and it has taken a long time to implement - and it is still not fully implemented. But through the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement a peaceful, democratic way forward was provided. Despite the current severe political problems - arising primarily, I believe, from the British government, I am convinced the path to political progress and lasting peace remains open. For Irish Republicans - and I am one of them - that is the road to a United Ireland, based on equality and achieved through agreement and consent by referendum as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement.

Can the hope of Belfast in 1998 provide hope also for Jerusalem and Palestine in 2018? I believe it can.

In Dublin we have faith communities from all the faiths that look to Jerusalem as a sacred city. We have an Inter-Faith Forum that brings these and others together in a way that respects identity, expands diversity and encourages harmony. They promote dialogue and work together to bring about progressive change.

It may seem wildly optimistic to cite this example in the situation of intense conflict and deep division in Palestine and Israel. But seeds of hope begin very small. Perhaps the current attempt to end what remains of the shared nature of Jerusalem as a holy city will, in the future, be seen as a turning point.

One thing is certain, for all the people of this region, for the people of Israel and the people of Palestine, the only basis for progress is full respect for and implementation of human rights. And the only basis for progress is justice and self-determination. In the struggle to achieve these goals we stand with you.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Commentary on the visit**

There was much national and international coverage of the visit. A record of this is available in Oifig an Ardmhéara. On 12 April Maurice Cohen of the Jewish Representative Council in Ireland issued a statement accusing me of anti-semitism. Mr Cohen did not try to contact me directly nor has he done so since my return. I issued the following response on 12 April, when requested by media:

*"I am disappointed at the statement from Maurice Cohen, spokesperson of the Jewish Representative Council. I hosted and spoke at the annual Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony on 28 January in the Mansion House which Mr Cohen attended. I completely reject any notion that I am in any way anti-Semitic. The conference in Ramallah was sponsored by the Palestinian Authority and I accepted the invitation to attend through the Palestinian ambassador in Dublin. The focus of the conference was the cultural and religious significance of Jerusalem to the major world religions and its political status in the wake of the US government's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This was a backward step for peace, as recognised by the many international delegates present, of all religions and none. Regarding the image of El Hussein on the banner, I was unaware of who he was. This is a distraction from the central issue of the need for a shared Jerusalem and a two-state Palestine/Israel solution arrived at through inclusive negotiations. Once again, justified criticism of the policy of the Israeli government is spuriously equated with anti-semitism. I stand on my record in this regard."*

- See also report of visit by Frank Connolly in April edition of SIPTU newspaper 'Liberty'.  
<http://siptucommunicationsdepartment.newsweaver.ie/LibertyJuly2014/1o70pz0tb9d1o36yv74egu?email=true&a=11&p=53265600>