

EAPPI presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Introduction

This committee is familiar with the occupation of Palestine, many have been on the ground in Palestine and Israel, some of the committee have even met with our own group while there. As such I will try and avoid details of the wider issues, and focus instead on two particular emerging crises. The situation has been so bad for so long it can be numbing, it can be hard to see one emergency as standing out against the background of the ongoing slow motion catastrophe.

However the reality is that two recent events do stand out, events that are existential threats for a future Palestinian state and events that challenge us to live up to the commitments we have made to support peace and justice in the region.

I want to present to the committee about the expected imminent demolition of Khan Al Ahmar and the recent cuts to UNRWA funding.

Who We are

While the committee is familiar with us I want to quickly state for the record who we are, and provide a short introduction to our programme. The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, or EAPPI, was founded in response to a call from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem. Since 2002 over 1,500 international volunteers from 22 countries have served as Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs). The work we do includes monitoring and reporting violations of international law, providing a protective presence, supporting the work of peace groups and undertaking public policy advocacy. We have the largest number of observers on the ground of any group in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and as such are able to provide unique eye witness testimonies. I am Lesley O'Connor, I was based in South Hebron Hills in 2017, and this is Patrick Costello, who was an observer based in the Bethlehem area in late 2014.

Khan Al Ahmar

Khan Al-Ahmar is a village in the occupied West Bank to the east of Jerusalem and is situated between two large Israeli settlements, Ma'ale Adumim and Kfar Adumim, and close to an Israeli industrial zone called Mishor Adumim. The people of Khan al-Ahmar are descendants of Bedouins who were expelled from the Negev by the Israeli government in the 1950s. On September 5th Israel's highest court upheld an order to demolish the entire village, bringing years of legal challenges by the residents to an end. The ruling means the village can be demolished, and its residents forcibly transferred, any time from September 12th.

As the committee well knows there are frequent demolitions of Palestinian homes, schools and agricultural structures across the West Bank. We as observers have frequently witnessed demolitions and their aftermath. A point to note also is that many demolitions are of buildings paid for by European Union development aid.

Like those demolitions the expected demolition of Khan Al-Ahmar, and the resulting forced transfer of its 200 residents, including nearly 100 children, would be a grave breach of the Geneva conventions, and a war crime under the Statutes of Rome. However, the demolitions of Khan Al Ahmar and the forced transfer of its residents carries a greater significance, as Tánaiste Simon Coveney highlighted, “The communities [of Khan Al Ahmar] are located in a particularly sensitive part of Area C in the West Bank, an area which is critical for the viability of a future Palestinian state. Any attempt to develop the land for illegal settlements is therefore a threat to the Two State solution”. Building settlements in this area would encircle east Jerusalem, cutting off what should be a Palestinian capital from the rest of Palestine. It would also continue the process of cutting the West Bank in two along an east-west axis. The actions here threaten the two-state solution more than any other demolition.

Due to the sensitive nature of this area the international community has spoken out frequently, calling on Israeli authorities not demolish the village, stating there would be serious consequences. If we are serious about peace and justice in the region than we cannot allow this demolition to happen or to happen without consequences. Already a joint statement by France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom on September 10th has condemned the decision, but it contained little meaningful action. What is needed now more than anything is action.

UNRWA Funding

95% of the village of Khan Al-Amar are refugees from the Negev in Israel. Should the demolitions go ahead they will end up relying on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, known as UNRWA. As the committee are probably aware the United States has recently ended all its funding of UNRWA, cuts which the UNRWA’s Commissioner-General has described as an “existential threat” to the agency.

UNRWA is mandated by the UN General Assembly to provide humanitarian relief, human development and protection of the rights of more than five million Palestine refugees across Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the occupied Palestinian territory, pending a just and lasting resolution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, protection and microfinance. The US’ funding cuts amount to a reduction of nearly a third of UNRWA’s operating budget, and thus critically endanger its ability to fulfil its mandate, jeopardising vital services, including health clinics, social services, and more than 700 schools providing education to 526,000 Palestinian refugee children.

During my time in Bethlehem I visited Aida refugee camp on several occasions. Aida is one of several refugee camps in and around Bethlehem and is home to approximately 3,150 refugees. The people live in dense, cramped and poor conditions, poverty and

unemployment are high. Due to its proximity with the Separation barrier and an Israeli military base there are frequent clashes with the Israeli military. The camp is regularly choked with tear gas or sprayed with Skunk water, or both. Against this background UNRWA provides vital education and psychosocial support for children, employment and food support for families and health services. Access to education for Palestinian children is regularly frustrated by the Israeli authorities and should the school here be forced to close because of the cuts, the children will struggle to gain alternative education. I personally met families in this camp whose basic needs are only met with the help of UNRWA food aid, families who without UNRWA would literally have nothing. In many areas, no-one can replace UNRWA. It's unique, and is doing things others can't.

The situation of course is worse in Gaza. With a 44 per cent unemployment rate, over half of Gaza's 2 million population are dependent on UNRWA.

Alongside those reliant on UNRWA aid, some 30,000 Palestinian doctors, nurses, teachers and other staff employed by UNRWA face unemployment and the prospect of poverty. But even that's not the full story. In some families there are up to 10 people relying on one UNRWA salary alone. The knock-on effect of these cuts is vast. As of September 12th, UNRWA only had enough funds to operate their core services, including their schools and primary healthcare facilities, until the end of September.

The US cuts represent an attempt to undermine the international legal consensus on the protected status of Palestine refugees, and so an attempt to undermine international law. The cuts also threaten what stability is currently in the region. There is a growing sense of despair and nihilism among Palestinians that will only fuel frustration, and possible violence and extremism.

As UNRWA's Commissioner-General said in an open letter to Palestine refugees and UNRWA staff on September 1st, *"The responsibility for the protracted nature of the Palestine refugee-hood, the growing number of refugees and the growth in needs, lies squarely with the parties and in the international community's lack of will or utter inability to bring about a negotiated and peaceful resolution of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The attempt to make UNRWA somehow responsible for perpetuating the crisis is disingenuous at best."*

What can be done, what we should be doing

Frequently this government has made encouraging declarations in relation to Palestine and to peace in the region. Little has changed though and in the face of these threats words are no longer enough. We call on the government to act.

We respectfully request that the committee endorse the following recommendations and press the government to commit to them:

- The immediate recognition of the state of Palestine as a simple step towards protecting a two state solution.
- Press for compensation for the demolition of EU-funded aid structures by Israel, systematically demanding compensation every time a structure is demolished
- The Irish government to provide increased funding directly to UNRWA
- The Irish government to advance at an EU level for increased funding for UNRWA from the EU.
- End the Arms trade with Israel, both government procurement from Israel and dual use exporting.
- Push for a review of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, ensuring we recognise Israel's primary responsibility over closures.

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