

I wish to thank the Committee for the invitation to speak this morning.

Firstly, on behalf of the members of the Ireland Israel Alliance, I would like to offer my deepest condolences to all of those affected by over 1,200 Hamas rockets (and counting) raining down on Israel since Monday, a day when the people of Israel were celebrating Jerusalem Day. My condolences not only extend to Israeli citizens – Jews, Arabs and other minorities, but to the many Irish citizens with close family and friends in Israel. Also to the Palestinian communities, thousands of whom work in Israel on a daily basis to provide a better living for their families, the majority of whom want nothing more than to live in peace.

The Ireland Israel Alliance was established in 2018 because a growing number of Irish citizens were becoming increasingly concerned that the narrative circulating in the Irish public arena regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was disproportionately focused against Israel. Our objective is to bring more balance to that narrative and to make a constructive contribution to the debate.

We support a two-state solution and we encourage and support peaceful co-existence between Arabs, Jews and other minorities living within Israel and in the Palestinian territories.

Sadly however, we continue to witness from certain sectors of our society here in Ireland, a wholly biased anti-Israel narrative. It is to be variously found on our streets, our TV screens, in our national press, and especially on social media – resulting in giving those who wish to see Israel destroyed, the oxygen to breed discord and hate.

When Mark Twain visited the Holy Land in 1867 he wrote that it was “a desolate, heart-broken land.” Travelling on horseback through the Jezreel Valley he noted there was “not a solitary village throughout its whole extent”, and that a person could travel for “10 miles and not see 10 human beings”.

That said, there has been a continuous Jewish presence in Israel for over three thousand years, backed-up by extensive and ongoing archeological evidence. The Jewish people have a deep connection and love for the land from which they were twice exiled. Now back in their ancient homeland, they have always been, and continue to be, willing to share it. However, every single offer of peace so far has been rejected by the Palestinian leadership.

We firmly believe that the existence of Jewish communities within Palestinian areas are not an obstacle to peace, but an opportunity for coexistence and reconciliation. A prime example is Gaza. I was visiting Israel in 2005 when I witnessed approximately 8,000 Jewish people forcefully removed under the direction of Israel’s then Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, in a well-meaning, but failed attempt at land for peace.

Today, not one single Jewish person lives in Gaza, never mind a Jewish community.

Shortly after Israel’s disengagement from Gaza and its takeover by internationally recognised terrorist group Hamas, their militants started killing their Palestinian rivals (Fatah) by throwing them off 15-storey buildings and mutilating their bodies in the most barbaric ways.

In addition, greenhouses and irrigation systems left by the departing Gaza Jewish communities were smashed and destroyed.

Don't get me wrong. We are not anti-Palestinian. Quite the contrary.

Sadly, many of Israel's enemies are both anti-Israel and anti-Palestinian, because they are more interested in their persistent efforts to demonise, delegitimise and socially isolate the sovereign and democratic state of Israel than they are in actually trying to improve the lives of the Palestinian people and encourage Palestinian economic development within Palestinian areas.

The Ireland Israel Alliance took a delegation to visit Jewish towns and developments and joint Jewish/Israeli/Palestinian industrial estates in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley in 2019. When there, we witnessed Palestinian and Jewish communities working and studying together and enjoying peaceful and harmonious co-existence. Interestingly, we discovered in a business we visited in the Barkan Industrial Estate, the manager in charge of the business was a local Palestinian who managed a work force of both Israelis and Palestinians. The truth is, these communities desperately want peace, an end to the conflict, and economic stability.

One of the Jewish families we visited in the Jordan Valley told us they regularly visit Palestinian villages, have Palestinian friends and often attend each other's family celebrations, including weddings and bar mitzvahs. But many of these hardworking and peaceful Palestinians are too afraid to publicly admit this because of intimidation and harassment from the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian leaders do not need to care about the welfare of the Palestinians, because they will use any opportunity to avoid having elections. Palestinian leaders benefit from the dependency of Palestinians on massive external aid which provides opportunities for the diversion of funds to their own pockets, not to mention their notorious "pay for slay" policy, that incentivises and rewards the murder of Jewish Israelis.

The Jordan Valley is a vast area and represents the best of Israeli ingenuity. Apart from the Palestinian city of Jericho, the remaining 200,000 acres of desert land was largely vacant until Israelis started developing the region in 1968. Despite the challenges of lack of sufficient water resources and the intense heat, it produces a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and is known as a world leader in the Medjoul date market, with 6,200 acres farmed by Israelis and 3,000 acres farmed by Palestinians.

In the Barkan industrial zone in the Northern West Bank alone, there are some 164 factories employing about 7,200 workers of whom about 4,000 are Palestinians, many of them in management positions. The employment of Palestinians in Israeli businesses in the West Bank promotes peace and reconciliation through the good relations created between Israelis and Palestinians working together.

In 2018 the Ireland Israel Alliance submitted a report to the Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defense Committee regarding the Occupied Territories Bill, a Bill that seeks to boycott Israeli settlements in the West Bank and parts of Jerusalem. The proponents of the Bill seem to believe that this will promote the prospect of peace in the Middle East and benefit Palestinians. In our view, it would have exactly the opposite effect.

Not only that, but a draconian and discriminatory Bill that threatens Irish citizens who trade with Israeli business in the West Bank and parts of Jerusalem with fines of up to €250,000 and a five-year prison term, is hardly the way to encourage good relationships between Israeli people and Irish people. It serves only to cause more suspicion and division.

In the context of the barrage of over 1,200 rockets fired indiscriminately into Israeli civilian territory and the multiple Israeli casualties since Monday, I would like to finish, if I may, with a personal story of a visit our delegation took to the Ziv General Hospital in the north of Israel, 11km from the border with Lebanon and 30km from Syria.

The staff are multi-ethnic, reflecting the wonderful mosaic of people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds – Muslims, Christians, Jews, Bedouin and Druze (an Arabic-speaking ethno-religious group) – which gives the lie to the absurd claim that Israel is an apartheid state.

We met the hospital's General Director, Dr Salman Zarka, himself a Druze, who spoke to us about the unique security challenges the hospital faces.

During the Second Lebanon War of 2006 the hospital took direct hits from Hezbollah missiles, during which time its staff continued to treat 1,500 wounded, sometimes under fire.

At the height of the Syrian civil war the hospital provided unique humanitarian aid to some 5,000 Syrians, many of them unaccompanied children. By 2013 the battle in Syria spread to Israel's border and the wounded started to arrive.

Under international law it is acceptable to close your border in times of war. But Israel is known for providing humanitarian aid to people all over the world. So they decided to provide medical help to those wounded Syrians and set up a field hospital at the border with an intensive care unit. Later they evacuated them to the Ziv hospital, before sending them back to Syria.

Before we left, Dr Zarka told us that they are praying and hoping for peace, but that they have to be ready for war. Dr Zarka's comments resonate with everyone I spoke to during our time in Israel, and also with those Israelis, both Jewish and Arab, that I communicate with on a daily basis. The people of Israel, and indeed many Palestinians, are crying out for peace... literally!

I would therefore ask the Members of this Committee to ensure that any decisions they make of relevance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or which could detrimentally impact upon Israel do not exclude Ireland from playing a practical role in reigniting a viable peace process and that decisions made by this committee are ones that encourage and promote peace - not division, remembering that truth does not always belong to those who shout loudest.

Thank you