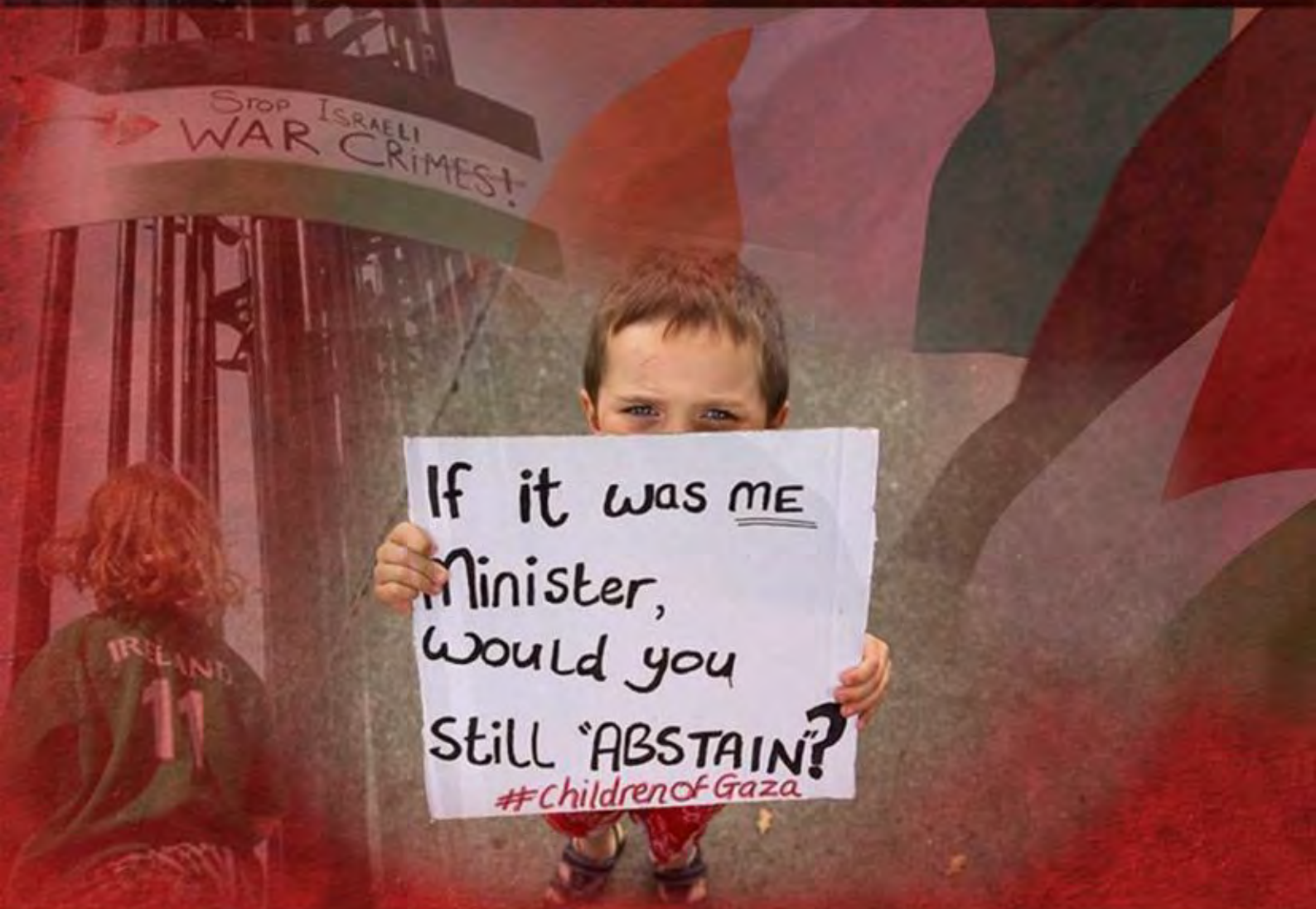


'Solidarity or Silence - Ireland's Reaction to Israel's Destruction of Gaza'



Compiled for Sadaka by Hilary Minch

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Compiled by Hilary Minch



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Solidarity or Silence:

Ireland's Reaction to Israel's Destruction of Gaza

“The past weeks have witnessed unprecedented action by members of civil society across the world against the injustice of Israel’s disproportionately brutal response to the firing of missiles from Palestine.

If you add together all the people who gathered over the past weekend to demand justice in Israel and Palestine – in Cape Town, Washington, D.C., New York, New Delhi, London, Dublin and Sydney, and all the other cities – this was arguably the largest active outcry by citizens around a single cause ever in the history of the world”.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, 14 August, Haaretz: "My plea to the people of Israel: Liberate yourselves by liberating Palestine"¹

This paper examines the impact Israel’s latest barbaric attacks on Gaza have had on Irish support for Palestine, both at popular and political level.

The dramatic growth in popular support for Palestine

Israel's 52 day killing spree in Gaza has finally come to an end – for now.

UNOCHA’s report¹ (27 August) puts the Palestinian death toll at 2,104, including 495 children. 475,000 people are displaced and sheltering in UN schools and relatives’ homes. 1,500 children have been orphaned.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, 10,224 Palestinians, including 3,106 children and 1,970 women and 368 elderly, have been injured. Preliminary estimates indicate that up to 1,000 of the children injured will have a permanent disability. Nearly half a million children were unable to return to school at the start of the school year.

It is hard to point to just one atrocity in the bloody litany of massacres committed by Israel over 51 catastrophic days that horrified Irish people above all others.

Maybe it was the massacre of the four Al-Bakr boys Ismail, 10, Ehad, 9, Zakaria, 10 and Mohamed, 11, as they played football on the beach at Gaza port, one of the most shocking events of the onslaught. Or maybe it was the shelling of Al Shifa hospital. Or the complete flattening of neighbourhoods such as Shuja’iya, described as a premeditated massacre². Or the killing of 15 civilians and injuring of 200 others as they slept in a UNRWA school³. UNICEF’s chilling warning that “There is nowhere safe for children and their families in Gaza right now”.⁴

In an interview with Galei Tzahal, a radio network operated by the Israeli Defence Forces, Israel’s Deputy Ambassador to Ireland, Nurit Modai claimed that "the silent majority" of Irish people "have no opinion as such," on the ongoing violence in the Gaza strip. How then does she explain the events of the last six weeks across Ireland, from Rosses Point to Skerries, from Kinvara to Kinsale. Communities, horrified by Israel’s attacks on Gaza and Irish

Government silence, have been taking action. Groups are mobilising to hold vigils, music events, die-ins, marching in their towns and villages, raising their voices for Palestine in diverse and creative ways.

Prompted by the massacre of the Al-Bakr boys, one community event, *'Make the Point'* was organised by photographer Brian Farrell. He asked people who have been horrified at the scale of the killing to bring their children to Rosses Point beach in the north west of Ireland to create an image containing over 300 children to represent the deadly death toll in Gaza .



'Make the Point', by Brian Farrell, 10 August, 2014, Rosses Point Beach, Sligo, Ireland.

A town in Galway, Kinvara, became the first Irish town to declare a complete boycott on Israel. Businesses and consumers in the small town in the West of Ireland decided to take a collective stand against Israel's attacks on Gaza by pledging to support the growing boycott of all Israeli produce, not just settlement goods. The appeal to local businesses was led by three members of the community. One of them, John Griffin, explained: "Like most people, we were sickened by the carnage we were seeing on our screens and felt helpless to do anything, until we decided to approach all the businesses in our community. The fact we've had such a positive response sends out a strong message of solidarity".⁵

These are just a flavour of the events that ordinary communities have organised across Ireland. The most striking feature of these events was the fact that the majority of them were organised by citizens not involved in Palestinian or political groups and had heretofore never organised or even gotten involved in actions of this type. They were ordinary citizens motivated to action by the horror of Israel's destruction of Gaza.

Palestine solidarity organisations

Prior to Israel's latest savage assault on Gaza, people in Ireland were already sympathetic towards the Palestinian cause and conscious of the massive injustice against the Palestinian

people. Ireland's own experience of occupation is often attributed as the primary factor which provides a natural affinity with the Palestinian people.

Some of this sympathy was also translated into unprecedented public action via Palestine solidarity organisations. The Palestinian community in Ireland alongside the main Irish Palestine solidarity groups (Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC); Gaza Action Ireland; Trade Union Friends of Palestine and Sadaka – the Ireland Palestine Alliance) held a series of protests and events in cities and towns, as well as carrying out media work, organising petitions, lobbying politicians and mobilising supporters to take action.

In response to the Palestinian call for a 'Day of Rage'⁶, the IPSC organised a national demonstration which saw over 10,000 people gather in Dublin to march to the Israeli embassy⁷. They travelled from all corners of the country and many of them had also attended marches on the previous four Saturdays. In global terms, the numbers might not seem impressive, but in the Irish context, there has never been such a massive public show of support for Palestine on the streets. This huge rally came after four weeks of street action and large Saturday marches in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Belfast and other cities.

Trade Unions

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) – despised by Israel for its position on BDS⁸- and individual unions, have also been to the forefront in expressing Irish anger at Israel's atrocities and in lobbying the Government to take action. They have a vital role to play in popularising the Palestinian call for BDS. In an open letter to Government on 20 July⁹, Congress stated:

"We also remind people of the call from Palestinian civil society for a campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights. Unless there are consequences for Israel's actions, history tells us they will continue to flout international law."

Mandate, the trade union whose 40,000 strong membership includes retail staff, has written to all major Irish retailers telling them to stop selling Israeli produce¹⁰. In addition, their petition¹¹ has over 8,000 signatories and is growing. In response, Ireland's largest retailer, the Musgrave group which operates the Supervalu supermarkets, while denying it was supporting the Israeli boycott, ordered that all Israeli carrots be removed from its shelves¹².

Irish Doctors protest

Members of the Irish medical community have spoken out in recent weeks at a number of protests against Israel's attacks and breaches of Medical Neutrality. Prof. Damian McCormack, a surgeon at the Mater Hospital stated: "In my professional opinion, the ongoing attacks on medics in Gaza clearly constitute a war crime that cannot be justified and warrant immediate referral to the ICC. I call on our government to demand an apology from the Israeli ambassador or to expel him". His colleague, Dr Paul Connolly, consultant orthopaedic surgeon, likened the situation in Gaza to a "slow grinding genocide"¹³.

Cultural and Academic Boycott

Another indicator of the growth in support for Palestine, is the surge in artists signing the cultural boycott pledge¹⁴. From the original 140 artists, the list has grown to include over 460 novelists, poets, painters, sculptors, film-makers, dancers, composers, performing musicians and others, including many members of Ireland's state-sponsored academy of artists

Aosdána. Raymond Deane, of the IPSC said, "Sadly, this pledge remains as necessary as when it was launched four years ago. Indeed, that around 200 artists have added their names since Israel launched its recent assault on the largely defenceless population of Gaza last month shows that our government's inaction on the issue is deeply at odds with all levels of Irish public opinion."

More than 170 Irish academics have now signed a pledge, launched by Academics for Palestine earlier this year, to boycott collaboration with Israeli institutions until Palestinian rights are respected¹⁵. The signatories come from a wide range of disciplines and include many well-known names, including the Trinity-College-based Haifa-born scholar Ronit Lentin. NUI Maynooth lecturer Conor McCarthy said the daily discrimination inflicted on Palestinian academics, along with savage attacks like those seen in recent weeks, were enough to justify such a boycott, but added: "Irish academia's collaboration with institutions closely linked to Israel's military-industrial complex is truly shocking".

International Development NGOs

The main international development NGOs including Trócaire, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Amnesty International Ireland, have all released strong statements and started emergency appeals and campaigns. In a joint letter published in *The Irish Times*¹⁶, the heads of Trócaire, Christian Aid, Social Justice Ireland, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and leading academics wrote:

"It is not enough to express horror at so many innocent lives having been lost during the latest round of violence in Gaza and Israel. We must instead ask how we can break the cycle that leads to this slaughter we call on the Government to ban all trade with illegal Israeli settlements, thus reducing the economic incentive for Israel to continue to confiscate land from Palestinians in the West Bank".

Game-changing moment?

According to Kevin Squires, National Coordinator of the IPSC, "The strength of support for the Palestinian movement for freedom, justice and equality was plain to see in the tens of thousands that took part in actions for Gaza in every corner of the island, culminating with over 10,000 people on the capital's streets, the largest ever pro-Palestine event in Ireland.

"We have seen both coordinated and spontaneous boycott Israeli goods actions...and a growing number of small businesses and celebrities are coming out in support of the boycott ... Of course, the 'silent majority' didn't just wake up - the numbers on the streets and taking actions are a result of years of campaigning groundwork by Palestinian solidarity activists, on the streets, in the media, online, and coalition building with trade unions, NGOs and politicians ... This could be a game-changing moment, but only if we work to make it so".

Dr. Yaser Alashqar, academic and political activist living in Ireland, believes that: "Ironically, while Israel's military attacks and crimes against humanity caused much destruction and suffering in Gaza, these attacks and crimes have also caused much damage to Israel at the international level and enhanced all kinds of support for the Palestinian national aspirations for freedom and self-determination. This support has seen increasing and stronger actions in Ireland and worldwide, including protests and boycotts at the community, educational and civil society levels. In my opinion, the message is clear and simple: the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people must end and their rights must be respected."

From Solidarity to Politics - Ireland's Foreign Policy and Palestine

Ireland has a proud tradition of political support for the Palestinian cause. As Sadaka's briefing paper, 'Palestine in Irish Politics'¹⁷ explains:

"The policy of the Irish state on the 'Question of Palestine' has been astoundingly consistent since the 1930s ... At the League of Nations, Ireland opposed the proposed partition of Mandate Palestine and supported its treatment as a unitary territory to be ruled in accordance with the wishes of its population, whether Muslim, Jewish or Christian."

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade recently reminded us that: "Ireland was the first EU member state to declare that a solution to the conflict in the Middle East had to be based on a fully sovereign State of Palestine, independent of and co-existing with Israel" referring to a joint declaration by the Foreign Ministers of Ireland and Bahrain in 1980¹⁸.

Since 2006 Ireland has condemned the siege of Gaza, with then Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern, in the first such statement by a European government, describing it in the Dáil (Irish Parliament) on 10th March 2008 as "collective punishment illegal under International Law."¹⁹

Following the Israeli onslaught on Gaza in December 2008 - January 2009, then Foreign Minister Micheál Martin sought its condemnation at European Council level and opposed the upgrading of EU trade relations with Israel. Ireland has also urged the inclusion of Hamas in talks and – within EU councils at least – sought an end to the EU-US boycott of Hamas as a political grouping. A Dáil motion condemning the Israeli attack on the Free Gaza Flotilla in June 2010 was adopted unanimously by TDs.²⁰

In November 2012, Ireland voted for Palestinian Observer status at the UN. The then Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore, T.D. said:

"We were proud this evening to join with so many fellow members of the UN in voting in favour of Palestine becoming an Observer State within the UN. Ireland has long-championed the cause of Palestinian statehood".²¹

Ireland's abstention at the UN Human Rights Council Vote

Prior to his first EU Foreign Affairs Council Meeting in Brussels, Sadaka – the Ireland Palestine Alliance presented a petition to the office of newly appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan.²² In the petition, almost 6,000 people demanded that the Government take strong action to stop Israel's attacks on Gaza. There was no response from the Minister apart from a statement saying that, "The appalling violence now being witnessed in Gaza and Israel is absolutely unacceptable. It is incumbent on all sides to agree an immediate ceasefire".²³

A few days later, on 23 July, Ireland abstained in a vote at the UN Human Rights Council. Almost universally, across the political spectrum, Ireland's abstention in the vote was condemned. There was nothing in Motion S-21/1 'Ensuring respect for international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem'²⁴, that any reasonable person could find problematic.

Fianna Fáil leader and former Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin commented: "Ireland once had a proud tradition of strong, principled and independent foreign affairs policy. The decision to sit on our hands and abstain from what should have been a very clear position on this UN resolution is a dereliction of this country's proud history in foreign and humanitarian affairs".

Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams described the abstention as: “a shameful act of political cowardice. The Israeli government is acting with impunity and the EU and the Irish government are failing to stand up to Israeli aggression”.²⁵

The Government was also criticised by some of its own TDs (members of Parliament). A number of prominent Labour Party TDs including former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Trade Joe Costello opposed the position adopted by Ireland: “In the past, Ireland has been to the forefront in leading EU thinking on the Middle East and took the initiative in November 2012, persuading many EU countries to support recognition of Palestine as a non-member state with observer status at the United Nations”. The veteran politician, Alan Dukes, former leader of Fine Gael and former Minister for Agriculture, Finance and Justice, criticised the Dáil silence on the ‘barbarities’ being perpetuated on the people of Gaza (from both sides).²⁶

In the closing days of the Dáil before the summer recess, a number of hard hitting statements were made by opposition Deputies, including:

Mary Lou Mc Donald, Deputy Leader of Sinn Fein, during Leaders questions 17 July²⁷:

“It is not sufficient for the Government or any Minister simply to issue a statement on this matter. There is an obligation to act. ... The crux of this issue revolves around the Israeli Administration and Israeli state's failure to abide by international law.”

The previous day (16 July), Independent TD Mick Wallace stated: “Israel claims that it has the right to self-defence, but an occupying power does not have the right to defence. It has an obligation and a duty to protect the civilians under its occupation ... We need responsible governments to introduce sanctions in order to work towards stopping these massacres and to address the root causes of these flare-ups, which is the structural violence of occupation, apartheid and settler colonialism”.

Upper House Recalled

In an almost unprecedented move, the Seanad (Upper House of the Irish Houses of Parliament) was recalled from its summer recess to discuss the crisis in Gaza (and Ukraine)²⁸. Most of the statements from Senators expressed outrage at Israel’s attacks and anger towards the Government for its silence and abstention at the UNHRC. Many also called for concrete action in the form of sanctions against Israel.

Fianna Fail Senator Averil Power: “I was shocked last week when the Irish Government chose to abstain in a UN vote on the establishment of an inquiry into Israel's war crimes in Gaza ... The experience of the last 47 years has shown us that condemnation of Israel is not enough. Ireland, the EU and the UN must take real action ... We must use our economic power to force Israel to stop its current attack on Gaza and end the occupation of Palestine ... If Europe as a whole is not prepared to do this, Ireland should step up and show leadership by doing it ourselves”.

Senator Power also made this crucial point: “We must also insist on proper international monitoring of any ceasefire agreement. Hamas complied with the 2012 agreement until last month but Israel did not, refusing to lift its blockade on Gaza”.²⁹

Sadaka’s briefing, ‘*Gaza: Nobody Needed to Die*’³⁰, expands on this point:

“There was no need for this offensive – or for the previous two offensives – for Israel to achieve that objective. Nobody, neither Israeli nor Palestinian, needed to die in order to bring a halt to rocket and mortar fire out of Gaza. All Israel needed to do was to stick to agreements it made with Hamas. But it didn’t.

“Clearly, an agreement to bring an end to Israel’s current murderous offensive must contain the same ingredients as the November 2012 agreement – an end to Israel’s military incursions into Gaza and the lifting of its blockade. But without an international enforcement mechanism, past experience suggests that Israel will not implement an agreement along these lines but will carry on as it did after the November 2012 agreement, making military incursions into Gaza at will and maintaining its blockade”.³¹

In a statement to the Seanad, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Charlie Flanagan said:

“I fully share the horror and revulsion of Senators and very many citizens at the horrendous scenes we have witnessed since the start of the Israeli military operation ... I have met and spoken on several occasions with the Israeli ambassador in order to make clear the very grave concerns and the very grave unhappiness of the Government at the disproportionate military response of Israel to Hamas rocket attacks ... I fear, in particular, for the damage its continued military operations against innocent civilians is doing to Israel's international reputation”.³²

Local Governments take action for Palestine

At local Government level, a number of County Councils across the country have passed resolutions which go beyond the usual condemnations of Israel.

Dublin City Council’s resolution calls for a military embargo and the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement³³. The motion was moved by Councillor Tina Mac Veigh of the People Before Profit Alliance: “This is the third massive offensive perpetrated by Israel on the Palestinian people in five and a half years. Israel’s acts of barbarism are always the subject of great public and moral outrage, condemned by many democratically elected institutions, however, Israel is never held to account.”³⁴

Galway County Council committed to send an urgent communique to the Minister of Foreign Affairs which among other things, called for an end to the illegal Israeli-imposed siege of Gaza and for the EU to suspend Israel from the Euro-Med preferential trade agreement.

Commenting on the motion, and the actions of Kinvara, renowned peace activist and former United Nations Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq, Denis J. Halliday said:

“The US and the EU have shown they are prepared to be blind when Palestinian lives, society and culture are destroyed by modern weapons. From land, sea and air we have seen children slaughtered, families obliterated and life, as we know it in Ireland, blown away. The courage of Galway County Council to formally protest is to be congratulated. So are the thousands of Irish people who have protested in Irish streets. The courage of the people of the small Kinvara community to boycott Israeli produce is huge. Our thanks - you all make us proud to be Irish”.

The significance of political representatives in the Dáil, Seanad and local government calling for sanctions against Israel, and demanding that the Government takes real action at EU level should not be underestimated. Local authority action was not unprecedented, however. A number of local authorities have in previous years adopted pro-Palestinian motions, including motions mandating local councils not to engage in contracts with Veolia because of its involvement in the construction of the rail system connecting the settlements with Jerusalem. Sadaka’s map³⁵ captures some of these previous divestment actions at local government level.

Irish Government Silence on Gaza

Given Ireland's relatively strong record (as a European country) on the issue of Palestine, how then to account for the weakness of the Government's reaction in the face of a month of Israeli attacks on Gaza? Could it be down to the newly appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade himself, a well-known supporter of Israel and a member of the Oireachtas Friends of Israel?

As Senator Averil Power put it: "I know the Minister has been an ardent supporter of Israel for a long time. He has a responsibility to represent the views of the Irish people as a whole, most of whom are horrified by what Israel has been doing".³⁶

In November 2011, (then Fine Gael party chairman), Flanagan attacked Trócaire, the development agency of the Catholic Church, for its campaign on Israeli settlement goods, accusing them of conducting a "very active political campaign in the Middle East ... Trocaire is waging this campaign against Israel. I believe it is biased and partisan."³⁷

Minister Flanagan's stance would appear to isolate him from official government positions on Israeli settlement goods. Ireland has consistently said it is in favour of an EU wide ban on settlement goods. Former Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore (2012): "I have previously stated that Ireland would support a ban on settlement products."³⁸

And on 3 July 2014, the Irish Government, following the example of EU countries introduced guidelines for doing business with Israeli colonies on the Department of Foreign of Affairs website³⁹.

"The Government ... wishes to offer advice ... of the risks related to economic and financial activities in the settlements and to make clear that we do not encourage or offer support in any way to such activity".

This is a small step, but a step in the right direction nonetheless.

Of all the things Palestinians desperately needed and of the possible actions open to the Irish Government, sending aid to Gaza was very low on the list of priorities. However, the one and only concrete step the Minister took during the whole crisis, (while expressing 'concern' and 'unhappiness'), was to donate €500,000 to the UN Emergency Flash Appeal for Gaza⁴⁰, as the Government pledged to "stand by all the innocent victims of this conflict."⁴¹

It was of course open to the Minister to stand with the people of Gaza in a meaningful way. He could have expelled the Israeli ambassador; voted to support the resolution at the UNHRC; imposed unilateral sanctions on Israel and done everything possible at EU level to put pressure on Israel – all of which would not have cost the State a single euro. Instead he chose to write a cheque.

At one of the marches held in Dublin, a sign was captioned: 'Minister Flanagan, how many more children does Israel have to kill before you take action?'

Israeli Ambassador Out

There is also growing momentum for the Israeli Ambassador to be expelled from Ireland as a result of the war crimes of his Government. In an online poll in The Journal, over 66% of people polled said they want the Ambassador to leave⁴². A further 32,000 people have signed an online petition calling for his expulsion⁴³, a number which is growing daily and has support among some politicians.

"This embassy has been the source of a string of shameful lies," Gaza Action Ireland member and former rugby international Trevor Hogan stated at a rally. "Lies about Palestine,

lies about the siege of Gaza, and lies about Irish activists. While Israel maintains its violent, murderous siege on Gaza, we should keep coming back for peaceful, symbolic ones here, until the ambassador is told to pack his bags and leave Ireland.”⁴⁴

It would not be the first time for an Israeli diplomat to be expelled. In 2010, an official from the Israeli embassy was expelled when it became clear that Israel had forged Irish passports in its extra judicial assassination of a Hamas leader in Dubai⁴⁵.

Translating Solidarity into Political Action

There is no ‘silent majority’ in Ireland. The people of Ireland have an important part to play in helping the Palestinian people achieve justice and their right to return home. Ireland also a duty, as a member of the international community, to ensure that a viable, independent Palestinian state is established.

From grassroots communities to senior political leaders, from dancers to doctors, Ireland stands with Palestine more firmly now than ever before. But the Government of Ireland, and particularly the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan, should hang their heads in shame, for they have chosen to stand on the side of the oppressor. This will not be forgotten.

Trade unionist, activist, journalist Eamonn McCann, at the national demonstration in Dublin (9 August), articulated why Ireland stands with the Palestinian people and will continue to do so for as long as it takes:

“It is shaming beyond words in the eyes of the world that the Palestinian people are still as far from home as ever. That is what we are fighting against. We are fighting for the return of the Palestinian people to their homeland. We are fighting for their freedom to go home. It is as simple and as basic as that. The right to go home to their own country, to live in freedom in a state where everybody has rights - be they Christian, be they Jew, be they Muslim. The same rights are human rights, they are for everybody. We are all human beings”.⁴⁶

Unless and until this re-invigorated solidarity translates into concrete political action to stop Israel’s savage slaughter of civilians in their beds and on the beaches, it may be cold comfort to the people of Gaza, still under siege, mourning their dead and trying to pick up the pieces amidst the carnage and catastrophe.

In the words of Palestinian poet Khaled Juma:

Oh rascal children of Gaza

You who constantly disturbed me with your screams under my window

You who filled every morning with rush and chaos

You who broke my vase and stole the lonely flower on my balcony

Come back, and scream as you want and break all the vases

Steal all the flowers.

Come back...Just come back.

Hilary Minch is an international human rights worker and Deputy Chair of Sadaka – the Ireland Palestine Alliance.

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⁴⁴ <https://zazafl.wordpress.com/category/gaza-action-ireland-gai/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/politics/israeli-diplomat-to-be-expelled-122519.html>

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfLJDsxGdFM>



Sadaka – an Arabic term for ‘friendship’ – is an Association established in Ireland in 2009 to maximise support in Ireland for the Palestinian people in their struggle for national, democratic and human rights. It aims to persuade those in government to champion the cause of justice for Palestine.

The Board of Sadaka consists of Marie Crawley (Chair), Dr. David Morrison, Alan Lonergan, Hilary Minch, Philip O’Connor, Stella Carroll and Michael Robinson.

If you would like to become a supporter of Sadaka or donate to our campaign, please contact us at:

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Sadaka supports a peaceful settlement in Palestine / Israel based on the principles of democracy and justice, be that in two states or in one state. We maintain an independent position on internal politics within Palestine, favouring neither Fatah, Hamas nor any other Palestinian political organisation.