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22 June 2017

Senator the Hon Lisa Singh
Senator for Tasmania
GPO Box 271
Hobart, TAS, 7001

Email: senator.singh@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Singh

Your speech on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

We write in reference to the speech you delivered in the Senate on 13 June 2017 concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We are greatly concerned by certain aspects of the tenor and substance of your speech.

In particular we were struck by the contrast in the way you depicted Palestinians and Israelis as human beings. You spoke of the Palestinians' "hospitality," "maturity," "professionalism", their "dignity", "human spirit", "culture and nationality", "incredible resilience". You repeatedly mentioned how much they "inspired" you and spoke of "their children", their "dreams" and their "hopes" and the "psychological impact" they endure.

In contrast, you spoke of the Israelis only in abstract and impersonal terms, without any similar recognition of their humanity, achievements, aspirations, legitimate concerns and feelings. You described Israelis as "soldiers with big guns" and used the word "illegal" in relation to Israelis on 12 occasions. In short, your speech dehumanised and degraded Israelis, depicting them collectively as one-dimensional criminals.

Nowhere did you describe the way Hamas rocket attacks have targeted Jewish kindergartens and nurseries, among other civilian targets in southern Israel; the suffering of Israeli children in southern communities who are regularly forced to scurry into bomb shelters; the psychological impact of terrorism on Israeli society; or the trauma of a nation that has been put through countless wars and waves of terrorist attacks directed primarily at innocent civilians. Nowhere did you refer to the illegality of Palestinian terrorism, of PA-sanctioned violence, of the war crimes of Hamas in deliberately targeting civilians while using their own civilians as human shields, or in employing child soldiers to build attack tunnels and summarily executing suspected collaborators and political enemies.

Your speech is also entirely uncritical of the Palestinian leadership, which is widely known for its endemic corruption, authoritarianism and support for terrorism. You referred to convicted terrorists, with the blood of civilians on their hands, as “political prisoners” and expressed solidarity with them.

You described a future Palestinian state as a “pluralistic, democratic society”, oblivious to the scandalous treatment of women, LGBT people and religious and ethnic minorities by both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. You have also swept under the carpet the strong support for a theocratic form of government by many Palestinians. Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, believes in the sovereignty of God and the primacy of religious authority over the secular. ([Hamas Charter 1988](#), Article 27: “*Secularism completely contradicts religious ideology. Attitudes, conduct and decisions stem from ideologies. That is why, with all our appreciation for The Palestinian Liberation Organization - and what it can develop into - and without belittling its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, we are unable to exchange the present or future Islamic Palestine with the secular idea*”).

Your speech levels the ignorant and unfounded slur of apartheid against Israel. Nowhere do you acknowledge that within Israel, Arab citizens have the same voting, civil, religious and legal rights as Jews. There have been Israeli Arab members of the Knesset ever since the first Israeli elections in 1949; seventeen of them are currently members of the Israeli Parliament. Israel’s Jews and Arabs have much the same life expectancy and infant mortality rates, use the same public transport, eat in the same restaurants, get treated at the same hospitals, share the same beaches, theatres and cinemas, shop at the same malls, attend the same public schools and universities and work side by side in many occupations. Immense resources have been invested in certain sectors to address areas of inequality and discrimination, which exist in Israel as they do everywhere. Palestinian natives of Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, and Saudi suffer far worse discrimination, but you do not accuse these countries of apartheid.

The simplistic application of the “apartheid” tag to the Israel-Palestinian conflict misses the essential point that Jews and Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza are not members of the same national community. Apartheid involves separation, and different fundamental rights, between members of the same national community, based on race. Unlike the conflict in South Africa, for example, which was a struggle by blacks and coloureds for equal rights with whites, as citizens of the same national community, Jews and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza do not see themselves, and are not seen by others, as members of a single national community. Each is a distinct national community in its own right. Each of them has a combination of shared language, customs, beliefs and traditions derived from a common past which gives them an historically determined social identity in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Your stated objection to Israel’s security barrier - “My take on this wall is that it is not for security, but for land appropriation.” – also turns a blind eye to facts that do not fit your preconceived view. The rate of large-scale terrorist attacks against Israeli buses, cafes and nightclubs, which were a regular occurrence prior to the construction of the barrier, has fallen to virtually nil. Many lives, Israeli and Palestinian, have been saved. Yet you did not deem this to be worthy of mention in your speech. At the heart of the fundamental misconceptions

contained in your speech about the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is the disgraceful falsehood that it "began with a group of immigrants attempting to displace a local people". Perhaps you are unaware that during World War II, the then leader of the Palestinian national movement, Haj Amin al-Husseini, was among the most devoted and loyal allies of Nazi Germany. Historians recently published a telegram to Husseini from Hitler's henchman, Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler, in which the SS chief wished al-Husseini success in his battle against "the Jewish invaders." We would not have expected you to share a similar cynically-distorted and odious perspective of the early Jewish immigrants and refugees.

In truth, the Jewish people, the Hebrew language and Jewish religion and civilisation are indigenous to the Holy Land, the location of the Jewish national home in antiquity for 1,500 years. Jewish polities and state institutions existed in the land for more than a millennium until the first century CE. No Palestinian state or other political entity identifying itself specifically as the polity of the Palestinian people existed anywhere in the land at any time in history, until the formation of the Palestinian Authority after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993.

The Jews who came to live in what is now Israel from the late nineteenth century onwards were not armed colonialist invaders coming to an entirely alien land, like the British coming to Australia in 1788, but masses of ordinary people returning legally and peacefully to the one place on earth that the Jewish people collectively call their nation's home, a place crowded with centuries of Jewish memories and history, including an organised State history, and nurtured with Jewish sweat and blood.

The Jewish arrivals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not occupiers and dispossessors of the Arab inhabitants, but people who purchased land from the legal owners at often inflated prices and built entirely new cities, towns, collective farms and businesses. The economic development and opportunities they created, and the improvements in health and public sanitation which they introduced, led to a three-fold *increase* in the Palestinian Arab population between 1881 and 1948, and a further five-fold increase in that population since 1948.

Jewish communities have existed throughout the West Bank, Gaza and all parts of Jerusalem for millennia, including in places such as Bethlehem, Nablus and Hebron, though some were ethnically cleansed or massacred in the 20th century both prior to the creation of Israel in 1948 and during the period of Jordanian occupation of the West Bank between 1948 and 1967.

After their expulsion from the land, Jews have always returned to it. Some Jews returned after the Babylonian exile, others returned during the period of Ottoman rule, others again returned in the 19th century and millions have returned since the creation of the modern State of Israel, the majority seeking refuge from the tyranny of Soviet rule or the expropriation and massacres inflicted on Jews throughout the Arab world in the 20th century.

We find it extraordinary that you would at once deny the character and rights of an indigenous people and malign immigrants and refugees in such a way.

At present, 75% of Jewish Israelis are native-born. Yet a recent examination of the results of 400 surveys carried out by five Palestinian research centres in regular polls in the West Bank and Gaza showed that during the past 20 years 70 per cent of Palestinians have continued to

seek an immediate end of the State of Israel, or to see a two-state solution as merely a stepping stone towards that goal rather than as the basis of a permanent peace. Have you nothing at all to say about that fundamental attitude, which makes any kind of peace impossible?

It is also worth mentioning that the Palestinians, who you have deemed the “native” people of the land, are themselves immigrants and claim descent from families who arrived in the land from other parts of the Middle East after the Ottoman conquest – that is, between the 16th and 18th centuries, or in rare cases after Saladin’s victory over the crusaders in the 12th century. They trace their origins to the Arabian peninsula and other parts of the Middle East.

We can accept that the Palestinians now are an authentic national community with the right to govern themselves and decide their collective future. We only wish that Palestinians and their supporters would do the decent thing and reciprocate by acknowledging that the Jewish people, in addition to being a faith community, are and always have been an authentic national community connected to the Holy Land who have the same right of national self-determination that the Palestinians claim for themselves.

We are immensely disappointed that you have made such a damaging and hurtful intervention into the conflict. Your words serve only to polarise, not heal. Your speech will do nothing to build bridges, foster coexistence, or mutual understanding or tolerance, which are essential to peace-making. Through your false and ill-conceived remarks you have polemicized instead of analysed, and made it more difficult to address rationally the many issues relating to human rights, national rights and conflict resolution that you have touched on. In fact, your complete lack of empathy for Israelis and hagiographic comments about your Palestinian hosts typifies the zero-sum attitude that entrenches and perpetuates conflict.

We request that you apologise to Israelis and the Australian Jewish community for the many calumnies in your speech, and refrain from making such false and inflammatory remarks in future. They have brought discredit to you, the party you represent and the office you hold.

We will await your response and are happy to discuss this issue with you in person. If we do not receive a response from you before **5 July 2017** we will publish this letter as an open letter.

Yours sincerely



Anton Block
President



Peter Wertheim AM
Executive Director