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**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related
forms of intolerance: follow-up to and implementation
of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 May 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



European Commission President's Speech on Nakba 75th Anniversary

Ursula Von Der Leyen Speech

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, recently faced both criticism and condemnation for repeating anti-Palestinian, far-right, Israeli talking points in a video message she delivered celebrating the 75-year anniversary of Israel. She opened her speech by saying "Today, we celebrate 75 years of vibrant democracy in the heart of the Middle East. Seventy-five years of dynamism, ingenuity and ground-breaking innovations."

Von der Leyen then added, "You have literally made the desert bloom," repeating the racist ahistorical claim that the State of Palestine was barren and empty until European Jewish settlers made it "bloom". Von der Leyen ignored the fact that the State of Palestine has a 4,000-year recorded history. Home to various indigenous communities, including Jews, Christians and Muslims, and that inhabitant of the territory had a distinct Palestinian identity. During the onset of the settler colonial Zionist take-over of the State of Palestine in the early 20th century, over 95 per cent of the territory was inhabited by Muslim and Christian Palestinians.¹

The Palestinian Authority condemned Von Der Leyen's speech as they claim it "dehumanises and erases the Palestinian people and falsifies their rich history and civilization".

In addition, it says that the European statement "whitewashes" Israel's occupation of lands Palestinians claim for their hoped-for future state and denies what they call "the Nakba" (Arabic for "catastrophe") of 1948.²

Recognising 'Israeli Independence' whilst Denying the Nakba

The mass, and ongoing, displacement of Palestinians is central to the story of Israel and its founding, yet it is still widely ignored, including by many Western governments and officials. Comments last month by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen were a reminder of how pervasive this erasure remains, when she repeated the old trope that Israel "literally made a desert bloom" in a message to commemorate Israel's 75th anniversary. Israeli policymakers are generally, and without exaggeration, either Nakba deniers or Nakba apologists. In order to appease Israeli politicians, Western policymakers have adopted a similar approach—either denying the Nakba and its impact, or justifying or ignoring Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their homeland. This denial effectively demands that Palestinians similarly "forget" or ignore the Nakba, focusing solely on Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip through the framework or lens of human rights—thereby ignoring Israel's violent colonial past and linking it to its violent colonial present.³

By removing the Nakba from the narrative of Israel and the Palestinians, and subsequently from the situation referred to as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Western world has been able to treat the Israeli-Palestinian situation with the same levels of cognitive dissonance as Israelis themselves. It has allowed the West to approach Israelis and Palestinians with a false sense of parity. Translated into international policy, this means the West demands that Palestinians prove their benevolent intentions toward Israelis in order to even be allowed to sit at the table without ever challenging Israel's intentions. That has only been possible by adopting the Israeli narrative that buries and minimises a well-documented history of ethnic cleansing and decades of concrete steps to deny Palestinians their most fundamental rights of return and self-determination.³

The West's suppression of the history of the Nakba has meant denying Israel's settler-colonial nature that has been seeking to displace the Palestinian people, expropriate their land and completely erase them. The disregard of this reality has heavily shaped Western policy in the occupied Palestinian territories, as it entailed viewing Palestinians and Israelis as equal "sides" in a conflict, while overlooking the systematic oppression of Palestinians and neglecting the power imbalance between the oppressor/coloniser and the oppressed/colonised.

Palestinians: An Indigenous People Deserving of Indigenous Recognition and Rights

The first recorded mentions of the State of Palestine date back to more than 3,200 years ago. Yet much of the State of Palestine's ancient history is neglected, in line with the colonial approach which only gives selective visibility to the State of Palestine to establish Zionist erasure of the indigenous population. In turn, the Zionist erasure was also responsible for the elimination of the Jewish Arab-speaking minority in the State of Palestine among other disappearances, to pave the way, in the aftermath of the Second World War, for racial identity and eliminate the various regional identities in the State of Palestine. In colonial conquest, the Zionist movement's erasure of the State of Palestine and its entire heritage was paramount. Throughout the different historical periods, it is noted that while the State of Palestine underwent several transformations – religiously, economically and socially – there was continuity as regards the preservation of Palestinian territory and its dissemination in literature, travel writings and cartography. The State of Palestine's social memory and political geography, it can be argued, remain inscribed and documented history attests to this fact. Furthermore, there is evidence of indigenous collective consciousness and self-representation among Palestinians which would, in later years, resist British imperialism and Zionist colonisation.⁴

Colonial narratives have conflated the State of Palestine's history with biblical myths which eliminate historical knowledge of the State of Palestine and its status as a distinct geopolitical entity since the Bronze Age. A reading of the State of Palestine from an indigenous perspective shows an uninterrupted sequence in which the land was enriched by different cultures and no attempt to annihilate the original inhabitants and their spaces. Linguistically and territorially, there was continuity. The cultural heritage and Palestinian historical consciousness were also paramount in shaping its national consciousness.⁴

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from September 2007 affirms that indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples. The resolution also affirms that indigenous peoples contribute to the diversity of cultures and that they must not to be discriminated against due to their traditions and the exercise thereof.

In context to the State of Palestine, the Nakba, and Israel's denial of the Nakba, the declaration furthermore notes that indigenous peoples were subjected to historic injustices for example as a result of colonisation. Henceforth that the 'Independence Day' Von Der Leyen celebrated in her speech was in fact a result of the ongoing Nakba, consisting of ethnic cleansing and colonisation of the Palestinian people. The declaration also acknowledges indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, the right to the resources in their territories and the right to restitution or compensation for stolen lands, territories and resources.⁵

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples outlines in Article 7.2, 'Indigenous peoples have the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples and shall not be subjected to any act of genocide or any other act of violence'.⁶ However Israel's perpetration of the Nakba has been ongoing for 75 years, committed against the indigenous Palestinian people, without any efforts to stop its ongoing colonial brutality, least of all, not even facing any condemnation anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd condemns Ursula Von Der Leyen's celebratory speech laced with anti-Palestinian racism, and denial of the Nakba. The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd (PRC) calls on all members of the United Nations Human rights council to denounce such anti-Palestinian racism any and every where it presents itself. The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd (PRC) also calls upon members to protect the rights enshrined to the indigenous Palestinian people outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- 1 Middle East Monitor: Ursula Von der Leyen slammed for 'You have literally made the desert bloom' message to Israel. Middleeastmonitor.com. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230427-ursula-von-der-leyen-slammed-for-you-have-literally-made-the-desert-bloom-message-to-israel/>
- 2 BBC News: Palestinians condemn EU's von der Leyen for 'racist trope'. Bbcnews.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-65413810>
- 3 DAWN MENA: Denying the Nakba. Dawnmena.org. Available at: <https://dawnmena.org/denying-the-nakba-75-years-later-a-democracy-in-exile-roundtable/>
- 4 Middle East Monitor: Palestine - A Four Thousand Year History. Middleeastmonitor.com. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181030-book-review-palestine-a-four-thousand-year-history/>
- 5 ECCHR: UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People's. Ecchr.eu. Available at: <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/glossary/un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples/#:~:text=The%20declaration%20acknowledges%20indigenous%20peoples,stolen%20lands%2C%20territories%20and%20resources.>
- 6 United Nations: UN Declaration On The Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Un.org. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf