

Peter Slezak

Speech to 'Free Palestine! Stop the Massacre in Gaza!' Rally, Hyde Park, Sydney Sunday 15th October 2023

It is a privilege for me to be here today in this very difficult time ...

My parents were survivors of the holocaust. I think I know antisemitism when I see it. I grew up with these stories.

I want to pay a particular tribute publicly to the organisers of this rally, like every other rally over the years that I have had the privilege to attend and to speak at. I want to pay tribute particularly to the Palestinian community and all of you for clearly and loudly saying each time, as we just did, that we reject antisemitism and it's not anti-Jewish to protest the crimes of the State of Israel.

I'm one of the very many Jews that's here and around the world ... who are distressed and ashamed, not for the first time, by what Israel is doing in our name.

I'm privileged here in Australia and elsewhere, to have Palestinian friends, and in Palestine, and I'm devastated to see, not for the first time, their anguish, heartbreak, the horrors and the suffering they have to endure. But like many Jews, I also have close family in Israel, and I share their grief over the atrocities and loss that they have suffered.

We must be able, as many Jews have been saying recently, to grieve and mourn both Palestinian and Israeli deaths. Israeli and Western leaders have actually dehumanised Palestinians, but the response from us cannot be to dehumanise the Israelis. If we lose our moral consistency, we weaken the Palestinian cause.

Speaking to the Jews, one Jewish writer has said just yesterday that our humanity is being put to the test. This is now in relation to the strategy, the awful things happening in Gaza. It is in the same spirit that a rabbi in New York has just said – and I won't read it all – he said even as we mourn our dead in Israel, we must acknowledge and protest the genocide Israel is currently perpetrating against the Palestinians. He went on at some length, but he said, if we ignore this reality, without commenting and without committing ourselves to the cause, without fighting actively for the Palestinian people, we will be complicit in this horrible bloodshed.

So in London and in New York, there are huge crowds of Jews assembling to protest the US backed Israeli attacks on Gaza. They're chanting "Not in our name" and I'm proud to stand with them and with you in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian cause, on the other side, for national liberation and self-determination, is based on justice, human rights and international law. But this means that we can't ignore ... or condone the recent atrocities perpetrated on innocent civilians. We may follow the Palestinian ambassador to the UK, the very articulate Husam Zomlot, who said we must regain the moral high ground. We undermine the Palestinian cause if we look away. In other words, we must understand and explain the causes of the recent tragic events which is not to justify them.

The attack on Israelis was said to be unprovoked. But in fact it was a desperate breakout from a concentration camp by the people of Gaza. The world only pays attention when Israelis are killed and Palestinians resist. The tragic suffering of Gaza and Palestine didn't begin last week. The people of Gaza have been under the most brutal, inhumane and illegal blockade. It's a crime in international law for the past 16 years.

Gaza's caged population has been traumatised beyond endurance. What did Israel or the world community expect? How can you trap some 2 million people in Gaza, half of whom are children, in one of the most densely populated places on the planet for 16 years?

What did Israel or the world community expect. How can you keep people in such conditions? And it must be said, Israel, contrary to its claims, didn't leave Gaza as they kept on saying. Israel withdraw its soldiers and its settlers in 2005, but it controls every single aspect of the Gazans' life. It controls every entry and exit, as well as Gaza's airspace and coastline. It controls and restricts Gaza's electricity and they suffer from severe shortages. Israel prevents farmers from having access to the most fertile parts of the farming land. Israel limits fishing in Gaza's territorial waters.

Israel calculated – this is the most sick kind of policy – Israel actually calculated the amount of food allowed into Gaza, the amount of calories that they could have, so that the Gazan people would starve but not quite die. They describe this policy as putting the Palestinians on a diet. Shame.

In 2018 not so long ago in the great march of return, Israeli snipers lined up on a barricade and shot dead nurses, disabled people in wheelchairs and hundreds of unarmed civilians. We all know that they have endured four devastating military assaults – unequal military assaults – since 2008.

Let me just list a few of the features of Palestine's and Gaza's suffering in particular:

- 70% of the people of Gaza are on humanitarian aid
- 40% are unemployed
- 10% of the children under five have stunted growth due to malnutrition
- 60% of Gaza's school children are anaemic
- 90% of the water in Gaza is unsafe for human consumption.

Shame on Israel.

Of course, as we have heard today, the usual cry is that Israel has the so-called right to defend itself. But it is not self defence to starve the people of Gaza. That's pure barbarity and a crime in international law.

The suggestion that there is no provocation - maybe all of this could be seen as provocation. In fact it amounts to collective punishment under international law and the civilian population is being persecuted and treated under the crime of the 4th Geneva Convention. This is under the watch and the protection of governments, including our own. Shame.

Of course, we ask how long did the world expect Palestinians to endure this brutality and dehumanisation. And of course, as has already been said, it is not just Israel but Western governments and complicit media, including our own, who are to blame. Their silence and indifference to the desperate suffering of the Palestinians is a direct cause of recent events.

Let me talk about recent event quickly before I wind up. The present assault on Gaza is of course not a war, but the cowardly act of terrorism. It is perpetrated by the most sophisticated military force against a defenceless population. Gaza doesn't have F16 jets or Merkava tanks or assault rifles.

Israel's Minister of Defence, Yoav Gallant, has openly, publicly admitted that they're committing major war crimes. They don't hide their intentions at all and the world tolerates it. Besides what has gone before, he has called the Palestinians of Gaza animals and he announced the full closure of the Gaza strip, including cutting food supplies, water, electricity and fuel. These are the most grotesque war crimes.

The horrifying images on-line that we can see, which the world doesn't see enough of and the casualty figures, speak for themselves. Entire civilian residential districts are bombed to rubble. This is not targeted at Hamas or anybody else. This is a devastation of the civilian population as we can see it.

It is a shocking fact I've just read that Israel has dropped more bombs on Gaza in six days that the US dropped on Afghanistan in one year ... (T)he Israeli scholar and activist, Jeff Halper, said Israel is in the process of committing genocide in Gaza. That's no longer hyperbole or exaggeration and it's abetted by our own government.

Of course, it's important for me to say one other thing about this – this is not military necessity as we know it, but in case you're not aware, this is actually an explicit military policy of the Israeli government. This military policy has a name: it's called the Dahiya doctrine. They are deliberately targeting civilians on a massive scale. This is Israel's approach to the Palestinians generally.

Let me wind up. Since 1948 in Palestine, the Jews are not the victims. We are the perpetrators. (There are some people) that the Jews referred to during the Second World War as the righteous among the nations – the ones that stood up against the crimes of their own people. We can't remain silent when the crimes are being committed in our name. So I call on the Jewish people, in particular, to learn the right lessons of our own experience as victims of prejudice, racism and genocide.

We have the slogan 'never again', but 'never again' can't be just for the Jews. It means never again for everybody.

Finally, we must stand in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and the Gazan struggle, in particular, for national liberation and self-determination towards a very long denied peace with justice.

We must demand an end to the Israeli assault on Gaza. We must have a shared vision of the future for all the people of the region, Israelis and Palestinians alike.

This means from the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free!