



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-51-9204423, 24
fax: +92-51-9204658

Report – Webinar

**Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA) in collaboration with
Middle East Monitor (MEMO), London UK**

**“Kashmir & Palestine: The destruction of
indigenous cultural heritage”**

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Rapporteur: Fatima Raza

Edited by: Amina Khan

The Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA) in collaboration with the Middle East Monitor (MEMO), London organized a webinar titled “**Kashmir & Palestine: The destruction of indigenous cultural heritage**” on September 10, 2020.

The distinguished panel of speakers included: Sardar Masood Khan, President Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK); Dr Salman Abu Sitta, Founder and President Palestine Land Society; Ms Mushaal Hussein Mullick, Wife of detained Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Chairman; Mr Kevin Chamberlain, Former Deputy Legal Adviser, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office & the Palestinian Authority; Dr Salma Malik, Assistant Professor Quaid-e-Azam University; Dr Mahmoud Hawari, founder member of Oxford Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and Dr Khuram Iqbal, Head of Department of International Relations (IR), National Defense University (NDU).

In her introductory remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CMEA outlined that there are several parallels between two of the most protracted and deadliest conflicts- Kashmir, where the people have been struggling for the right of self-determination in the face of Indian atrocities and Palestine, where its people have been striving against brutal Israeli occupation. The United Nations Resolutions, 194 and 242 in the context of the Palestine-Israeli dispute; and UN Resolutions of August 13, 1948 and January 5, 1949 in the context of the Kashmir dispute, advocate the right of self-determination for Palestinians and Kashmiris, respectively. However, they have not been implemented to date.

She said that despite the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which acknowledges the rights to culture, diversity, and self-determination, claims of cultural genocide are often derided, and their indicators dismissed as benign effects of modernity and indigenous cultural diffusion. Ethnic and religious undertones of India’s actions in Kashmir have accentuated comparisons to Israel’s occupations of the West Bank since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. While, the occupations of Palestine and Kashmir are not completely identical, as there are certain legal differences between the two, significant parallels do exist. In fact, Israeli and Indian ambitions are not so different, and in some ways, feed off each other. Both India and Israel use diversion tactics in order to shift the focus away from their actions. Israel camouflages its brutal occupation by blaming suicide bombings by Palestinians and disunity between Hamas and Fatah.

Similarly, in order to deflect attention from the human rights violations in IOK, Prime Minister Modi uses terrorism and Islamophobia to vindicate his government's actions against the innocent civilians of Kashmir.

Ms Khan informed the audience that Israel and India continue to employ tactics which involve the use of lethal force against non-combatants, humiliation, and violation of fundamental human rights so as to sustain their illegal and forceful control. Indian atrocities in IOK and its policies to facilitate a demographic shift in Kashmir itself by bringing in more Hindus from India to settle into Kashmir are mirrored in how Israel consistently ethnically cleanses Palestinians, by building settlements, taking over their homes and quelling dissent as part of a larger bid to remove the Palestinian footprint. She concluded her remarks with a famous Noam Chomsky quote, "The last paradox is that the tale of Palestine from the beginning until today is a simple story of colonialism and dispossession, yet the world treats it as a multifaceted and complex story- hard to understand and even harder to solve." This depiction, she opined applies equally to Kashmir as well.

Dr Daud Abdullah, Director of Middle East Monitor (MEMO), in his remarks, highlighted a tradition from past, which can still be observed in case of Kashmir as well as Palestine that involves looting of the cultural property of the defeated side by their invaders. Dr Abdullah stated that since the 18th century, international institutions have been trying to prevent such outcomes of armed conflicts by differentiating between combatants and non-combatants. He also mentioned several conventions like the Geneva Convention of 1949, Genocide convention of 1948, the Rome statute and others that prevent destruction of cultural or religious beliefs. He also cautioned that Israel is a signatory of many but is not of the first article of Genocide Convention of 1948 that prevents such destruction and looting. Only 16 countries (including Pakistan) are signatory of that article. Dr Daud also pointed out the cultural extinction of 35 million people of Kashmir and how it is a challenge for international community.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, Director General Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) said in his remarks that the US deal of the century has emboldened the Israeli leadership and prevented resolution of the Palestinian conflict while in Kashmir after the revocation of Articles 370 and 35A, all hell has broken loose and the Genocide Watch has also issued an alert in

this regard. He further said that the US tilt toward India has encouraged Modi's government to continue its atrocities against the people of Kashmir instead of honouring the UN resolutions on Kashmir.

The Keynote speaker at the webinar was Sardar Masood Khan, President Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK). Sardar Masood Khan highlighted several overlapping and differing aspects of the two struggles of Kashmir and Palestine in his address. A few similarities between these two conflicts are colonialism, struggle for the right to self-determination, first issues to be out before UN in 1948 and the aspect of UN multilateral diplomacy has also been a common feature. Pointing to some differences, he said that while Palestine received widespread international support, Kashmir did not get the same amount of attention. While Kashmir captured world attention in the late 1940s and early 1950s and from time to time in the backdrop of Indo-Pakistan rivalry particularly the dimension of nuclear capabilities. Palestine has a separate observer status at the UN while Kashmir is represented by Pakistan which is the only sovereign window for Kashmir to the UN as well as other multilateral forums.

President Masood Khan enlisted the several stages of genocide. These are: classification, symbolism, discrimination, dehumanization, organization to commit genocide, politicization, persecution, final extermination and denial. Kashmir, he pointed out, was at the stage of persecution. These stages, he elaborated were described in detail by Gregory Stanton, founding President and Chairman of Genocide Watch. Dr Stanton has said that, "Narendra Modi's regime has all the hallmarks of an incipient Nazi regime." Taking it further, Mr Masood Khan called out the atrocious nature and policies of the present Indian government as fascism and Nazism in the new garb of *Hindutva*. The doctrine driving this madness and brutality is in fact a campaign to 'cleanse' the land of the ethnic and religious identity of Muslims who are viewed as 'outsiders' or 'converts' by its perpetrators.

These are genocidal tendencies that include depopulating and then repopulating the land to obliterate all remains and signs of Kashmir's Muslim population. Defining genocide, he detailed that there are several types of genocide and destroying a certain group's identity is also included in these different types. He gave an example of such policies prevalent in IOK where many new languages are now being introduced to diminish the impact of the native language and the culture

it accrues to. Thus, he asserted that a genocide does not only include the killing of masses, rather it also includes the way Kashmiris are being deprived of their identity, language, banning Ashura gatherings during Muharram, mapping and reconstruction of temple sites only because it would help India erase the Muslim heritage. Stealing of indigenous Kashmiri artefacts has also begun. Two other dimensions of genocide being applied in Kashmir are the demographic changes and the new domicile laws which he said are comparable to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935.

He said that the dilemma of the UN was that it always sheds a tear after the genocide has occurred. Speaking about the role and responsibility of the UN, he said that the organisation has an obligation to honour the voices and rights of the people of Palestine and Kashmir in their struggle for right of self-determination. He said a well-designed communication and cooperation strategy is required to expose the dark crevices of *Hindutva* and Zionism.

Dr Salman Abu Sitta elaborated upon the ten colonial wars being waged against the Palestinians which are: military operations to conquer and seize land, crushing dissent, using political tactics to further their agenda, geographical war by modifying maps, historical war involving obliteration of Palestinian history, archaeological war to destroy cultural sites, religious war to expel Palestinians from sacred sites, defamation of Palestinian fighters, the war against international law and economic war.

Elaborating upon ten types, he said that the use of military in order to seize the land, silencing the voice of Palestinian victims e.g. back in 1948, about five dozen massacres took place but none was reported in the five western news media present at the moment. He said Zionism built a huge edifice based on sheer lies and propaganda. Dr. Sitta mentioned that the 'political' war being waged against Palestine includes the actions of United States and its western allies at the UN where any moves to take action against Israel for its violations of international laws have been vetoed. Another war waged against Palestine is geographical in nature since it is associated with modification of maps. New Israeli maps deleted 55,000 names describing Palestinian landscape and replaced them with 6800 fabricated Hebrew names honouring their leaders.

As per the historical war, the historical records of Palestine in the last 2000 years have been obliterated and replaced with Jewish history; even the cultural history of Palestine in terms of food and dress has been expropriated. The next war is archaeological which has been a

systematic effort going on since 1948. Israeli soldiers that destroyed 500 Palestinian villages were accompanied not only by bulldozers but also with teams of Israeli archaeologists. This war began in 1948 and continues to this very day through false claims on historical artefacts. It is in fact, meant to destroy the cultural sites of Palestine while a religious war is also being waged to keep the Palestinians away from sites that are sacred to them.

Apart from this, the ‘defamation’ war is also being used against them because the Palestinians who attempt to defend themselves are labelled as ‘terrorists’. The last two wars discussed by Dr. Sitta were the legal and economic wars through which Zionist regimes are violating the international law against Palestinians and how the Israeli-imposed blockade of Gaza and the West Bank interprets their economic freedom by converting people into economic hostages.

The next speaker was Ms. Mushaal Mullick who highlighted a few commonalities between the Kashmir and Palestine’s occupation and how their voices are being silenced by their governments. She referred to the Hindutva ideology as a ‘fascist’ ideology and narrated how Kashmiris have been suffering at the hands of India for too long; her husband Yasin Malik, Chief of the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front has since long been detained and tortured by the Indian government. She mentioned that the people of Kashmir are being marginalized without having any defence system. Regarding the destruction of indigenous cultural heritage, she narrated that Kashmir has always had a very rich culture in terms of music, food, clothing, products, walnut furniture etc. all of which is at the stake of being vanished at the hands of BJP- a Hindu nationalist regime. Ms. Mullick urged the international community to come forth to defend both causes. She said concerted efforts are required on part of the Palestinians and Kashmiris to create greater solidarity and engage with the international community to further these causes.

Mr Kevin Chamberlain was the next speaker who said that while focus is laid on the hardships suffered by the Palestinian people as a result of the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, considerably less attention has been given to the systematic destruction of Palestine’s rich cultural heritage resulting from the Israeli occupation. Following the 1967 conflict when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, there was intense archaeological activity. Objects were removed in two ways – officially by the Israeli occupation authorities, or clandestinely by

individual Israeli soldiers, civilians and, unfortunately in some cases, even by Palestinians driven by financial woes. Mr Chamberlain maintained that the old buildings, stones and relics are a vital part of Palestine's cultural heritage and their destruction is similar to the destruction of people's collective consciousness and identity and shall be considered an 'ethnic cleansing'.

He said that there is no doubt that the Israel's policies in relation to the cultural heritage in the occupied Palestinian territories amount to a breach of the international humanitarian law. No peace agreement would be complete unless the wrongs done to the Palestinian cultural heritage are compensated for in a satisfactory manner. Rounding up his remark, Mr. Chamberlain posed an important question that some may ask, why so much fuss about some old buildings, relics and stones? These old buildings, relics and stones are part of the cultural heritage of Palestine. The destruction of a people's cultural heritage equals the destruction of a people's memory, its collective consciousness and identity. In other words, it is ethnic cleansing by another name.

Dr. Salma Malik spoke about women as targets of genocidal campaigns particularly with reference to Kashmir and about indigenous eradication of population both in Kashmir and Palestine. For instance, talking about Kashmir, she narrated how women have been made a direct and indirect target of Indian security forces in the form of harassment, rape, dismissal or assassination of their partners, forced pregnancies etc. Furthermore, she discussed the strict curfew in Kashmir where even the journalists have to struggle while reporting such violations in Kashmir since no outsider reporting is allowed within the territory and they are often killed when caught doing so. She held the view that with systematic tools of oppression used by the BJP becoming more ingrained in Kashmir, the safe space for women to operate is narrowing with the passage of time.

Talking further about the policies of the Indian government that are aimed at abolishing all signs of indigenous Kashmiri culture, she pointed out how thousands of new domiciles are issued to non-Kashmiris every day to allow them to settle in the valley. She talked about the plight of Kashmiri widows or 'half-widows' leading lives of uncertainty and despair in the widow village of Dardpura near Srinagar. These women don't even have the slightest inkling of when and if their husbands would return. Some have been waiting now for more than 30 years. The social fabric is being destroyed as women who were part of the nomadic native culture of Kashmir are

forced to stay indoors for fear of rape and violence. Women who were used to working side by side with men in the fields of the valley are missing from the work force causing economic degradation of the society as well.

Dr. Mahmoud Hawari elaborated how the Palestinian people have a vibrant culture and heritage represented in all aspects through music, theatre, film and literature which has been proven through extensive archaeological expeditions. He also talked about the destruction of indigenous cultural heritage and use and misuse of archaeology. He voiced his solidarity with the people of Kashmir and Palestine against the brutalities that have been waged by their occupiers. He talked about sites that are of religious significance to these three religions namely: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Yet Christians and Muslims are not allowed to visit.

Dr. Hawari said that the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine continues unabated with the ultimate aim to establish Jewish exclusivity and achieve the erasure of the Palestinians who are the indigenous people of the land. Throughout the past century, the Palestinian people have been subjected to on-going ethnic cleansing, expropriation of their lands and natural resources. He pointed out that about 530 Palestinian villages were destroyed and depopulated in 1948 where archaeology was used and misused to falsely establish a link between the new state of Israel and the so-called ancient Israel. He highlighted that Israel has not only been involved in destruction of the Palestinian cultural heritage but also its appropriation to make it their own. This, he informed has been simultaneous to the destruction of buildings, stealing of ancient Palestinian artefacts and transferring of such antiquities to museums within Israel and all over the world.

Dr. Khuram Iqbal stated that the world's conscious has woken a little since August 2019 when Kashmir arrived at stage one of genocide. UN, Amnesty International and many international organizations have highlighted this issue. The current Hindutva policies he said, are making India pay on the international stage as people question its claims of being a secular state. Dr. Iqbal also pointed out the demographic engineering happening in Kashmir while talking about the one million new domiciles issued there to non-Kashmiris.

He pointed to the double standards used by status quo powers like the US and its allies by comparing their reaction to situations in Kashmir and Hong Kong. He said China has displayed exemplary restraint in dealing with anti-Beijing protests and is still being penalized and

sanctioned while Indian atrocities in Kashmir go completely unnoticed. He said that India is not only carrying out mass killings but also destroying people's spirits. Hence, he said that the way forward is to have a humanist perspective and to have discourse on a more comprehensive definition of terrorism which will have a direct impact on the ground realities in both Kashmir and Palestine.

Q & A Session:

A brief question and answer session followed in which following questions were posed to the panel of discussants:

Q.1. Joining hands and raising voices has clearly not worked in the past. What solution, other than the rhetorical ones would the panellists recommend to offset the injustices perpetrated against Kashmiris and Palestinians on a daily basis?

Mr Chamberlain said that the first thing to do in resolving this conflict would be for the US electorate to get rid of President Donald Trump whose policies toward Israel have damaged the cause of Palestine, tremendously. Secondly, the Americans should stop their blind support to Israel and thirdly, he stressed that the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu must also be replaced by someone who is not so rabidly pro-right.

Q.2. What role can the Kashmiri political leadership play in resistance to the cultural changes imposed by India?

Dr Salma Malik stressed that the Kashmiri political leadership has the space to utilize the several available forums such as social media, political platforms and formal or informal sectors to resist these different types of archaeological and cultural changes orchestrated by the Indian occupational forces in Kashmir.

Q.3. How is the new UAE-Israel deal viewed upon in Palestine?

Dr Mahmoud Hawari responded to this question by describing the Palestinian sentiments and said that most Palestinians are dismayed and angered by this agreement as the Arab states have previously been committed to the Palestinian cause. He called it a strange agreement as the UAE

was never a hostile country to Israel in the first place which means that there were no logical grounds for a 'peace' agreement. He called this agreement, a pact or an alliance against Iran.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood concluded the webinar by expressing his gratitude towards the respectable speakers and organizers for arranging and participating in such an important discussion. He stated in his remarks that despite their origins being different, the Kashmir and Palestinian occupation has many things in common since both involve the right to self-determination which has yet been denied to them by Israeli and Indian government. Moreover, in both cases, sanctity of the United Nations' resolutions has been violated and international humanitarian law along with the violations of human rights can clearly be observed in both cases.