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Report – Panel Discussion

“Palestine under Siege”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) held a Panel Discussion titled 'Palestine Under Siege' on 21st May, 2021. The panel of experts included: Mr. Nader Alturk, Deputy Head of Mission / Counselor at the Palestinian Embassy in Pakistan, Dr. Mohammad Makram Balawi, Palestinian writer and President of Asia Middle East Forum, Ambassador Javid Hafeez, Former Pakistani Diplomat, Dr. Daud Abdullah, Director Middle East Monitor (MEMO), Mr. Muhammad Oves Anwar, Director Research Society of International Law (RSIL), Dr. Nazir Hussain, Former Dean School of Politics and International Relations, QAU, Dr Bilal Ahmed, Director General Middle East Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan and Mr. Haitham Naser, Palestinian Journalist based in Islamabad, correspondent of TRT Arabic channel.

Ms. Arhama Siddiq, Research Fellow CAMEA gave a brief overview of the present situation in the Gaza strip. She informed the audience, of the events that had directly led up to the ongoing conflict, the grave losses incurred by the Gazan citizens and response from the Pakistani government on the issue.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG ISSI, in his keynote address highlighted the recent carnage of the Palestinians at the hands of Israeli forces. He noted that Israel's pattern of violence resurfaced every few years and said that these 'symptoms' were emblematic of a much deeper problem- the root cause of which lay in the continued Israeli occupation and the denial of rights to the Palestinians.

Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, in her keynote address, further added that the sheer magnitude of illegal, disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force, tyranny and injustice being perpetrated by the Israeli occupation forces against Palestinians was appalling and jarring. Commenting on the response from the Western media, Ms. Amina Khan said that unsurprisingly, there was a deafening silence from the media which continues to eulogize Israel's stance and at the same time turned a blind eye towards Israel's atrocities. She reminded the audience that Pakistan's founding father, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, unrelentingly upheld the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and that his legacy continued to date under the current government of Pakistan as well: the people and government of Pakistan stood in firm solidarity with the people of Palestine and their right to self-determination, as had been exemplified by

Prime Minister Imran Khan's solid support for the Palestinian cause. Pakistan had through its rigorous diplomacy and lobbying has played a principal role in bringing about the ceasefire on the morning of 21st May, 2021.

Speaking of the Palestinian struggle for freedom, she said that although Palestinians were not as powerful as Israel, the Palestinian story of national struggle carried a moral power and their historic ambitions for justice and self-determination were legitimate. She added that Pakistan will continue to support this legitimate cause of self-determination at any and every level. She pointed out that although the ceasefire had taken place, let it not be forgotten that innocent lives had been lost and the struggle for justice and freedom would continue until the Palestinians were granted their legitimate rights.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, appreciated Pakistan's role in leading the global criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza especially that of Pakistan's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. He showed his disappointment in U.S. response, saying that the Security Council could not enforce the ceasefire till now because of the United States' constant veto. He stated that the siege had not finished and the important question now was how a sustained ceasefire could be implemented. Simultaneously, it was important to address the humanitarian dimension.

Mr. Aizaz stated that the present crisis was a reminder of the urgency with which the Palestine question must be resolved. He added that for Pakistan, this crisis was all the closer to heart because the situation in Indian occupied Kashmir was no different. The eleven days of carnage in Palestine had also revealed the double standards of the so-called human rights champions from the West. Mr. Khalid Mahmood too compared the Palestinian struggle with illegally Indian occupied of Kashmir since Indians are also wrecking all kinds of oppression on the people of Kashmir. He further added that, the United Nations also recognized the right to armed struggle of people under colonial rule. He said that in order to resolve the conflict, the proposals – which have included a coalition force to provide protection to the people of Palestine- needed to be fleshed out. It goes without saying that the root cause needed to be addressed and that could only be through the revival of the peace process.

Mr. Nader Alturk gave an overview of the Palestinian issue which he said started in 1916. Commenting on the demographic changes in Palestine since 1916, he stated that when the first UN resolution regarding a two-state solution came out, only 15 percent of the population was Jew and now it is 55 percent. He said that the creation of the state of Israel had not resulted in peace but instead has escalated conflicts and increased carnage in the Middle East. Israel was acting as a neo-Nazi state, he added.

Dr. Mohammad Makram Balawi argued that Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem was a de facto sovereignty. The international community had failed to protect Jerusalem from Israel's coercive influence. People of the world had a moral responsibility and any neglect was a betrayal to humanity itself. He said that Israel only understood power and did not believe in diplomacy at any international forum and if it was not held accountable there would not be a single Palestinian left.

Dr Bilal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan outlined three important repercussions of allowing Israel to carry out its illegal actions with immunity: firstly, the growing Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip made the two state solution appear farfetched, secondly, it led to a repetitive cycle of violence to occur in the occupied territory time and again and thirdly, it gave audacity to oppressive regimes in other parts of the world as well, to act with impunity, for example Indian actions in Kashmir.

Dr. Nazir Hussain opined on the level of solidarity amongst the Muslims themselves. He said that the first and foremost issue is disunity among the Palestinians, Arab and the Muslim World. He applauded the resistance that Hamas had put up in the face of Israeli occupation forces and underlined how double standards of the Muslim leaders had come to the forefront in the days surrounding the conflict. He said the Pakistani Foreign office has played a very proactive role. Unity is of the essence because while the Muslim world was divided in its response, Israel continued to carry out its barbarities to gain the sympathies of the international community.

Ambassador Javid Hafeez too lamented on how the Arab world today was divided and weak. Concurrently, Palestinian ranks were cracked as well. In the course of the past eleven days in the build up to the conflict, there had been largely lip service and rhetoric without actual actions. He

highlighted the importance of cooperating and working closely at the Islamic, Arab and Palestinian level.

Dr. Nazir also said that, it was the systematic policy of Israeli decision makers to constantly put pressure on Hamas. He was supported by Mr. Javid Hafeez, who said that Israel kept shifting its goal posts. The Abraham Accords were supposed to lead to a peaceful settlement of the Palestinian problem but that never happened.

Dr. Daud Abdullah elaborated on the role of Hamas, saying that at the moment, everyone had turned their attention to the Palestinian issue and Hamas in particular had emerged as the de facto protector of the Palestinian people. A form of unity had emerged in the backdrop of the heroic resistance shown by Palestinians. Through ingenuity, resolve and commitment, the Palestinians had been able to put up a commendable resistance. There was also recognition that Hamas was not just a military force but a political force as well. Their ability to participate had now been highlighted and it was time that they were brought into the political process.

Mr. Muhammad Anwar commented on the legalities of the Israeli occupation. He said that what we have seen in legal terms has been very disheartening. Legal technicalities had been invoked to justify the wrongful targeting of civilians. There had been misrepresentation and enforced failure of international law. With accountability missing, other countries too were emboldened, as was the case in Occupied Kashmir. Commenting on the strengths and weakness of international law, he said that the international human rights law suffered from the inability of the international community to implement it. However, it gave us lexicon to state our narrative and define terms like war crimes. He added that even if the perpetrators of war crimes were brought to court and punished, even the severest punishment would not make up for the extent of cruelty of their crimes. Dr Bilal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, opined that the situation in Palestinian land was that of illegal action superimposed by legal actions superimposed by more illegal actions.

Ambassador Javid Hafeez stressed on the need of a long-term strategy aimed at tackling this issue which should include accountability for Israeli atrocities as well. Since 1917, Palestine had been a human tragedy, he stated.

The role of social media was also highlighted in the discussion. Mr. Haitham Naser stated that twitter and social media had changed the situation by allowing citizens of Israel and people in the West to see the actual situation and influenced public opinion. He said that, although, the change in opinion brought about by social media was not of the degree desired by Palestinians, it was still important. He also reiterated Pakistan's efforts in bringing about the ceasefire. Ambassador Javid Hafeez also spoke about the importance of the role of social media in presenting the true picture of on-ground events to the whole world.

Mr. Nader Alturk said that every Palestinian speaks of peace and in their heart is a freedom fighter. According to Dr. Mohammad Makram Balawi, Israel had been working on changing the face of the Palestinian lands over the years, in particular Al-Quds.

All panelists appreciated Pakistan's efforts in upholding the Palestinian cause in all its diplomatic endeavors. Dr Bilal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan remarked that Pakistan's position regarding Palestine was entrenched in its history promoted by its forefathers and had remained unwavering since 1920. Dr. Mohammad Makram Balawi thanked Pakistan for refusing all attempts to recognize Israel despite many other countries doing so.