

Statement by Gisha Executive Director, Tania Hary, at the UN Security Council, November 20, 2019

Thank you Madam President and thank you to the Council.

I was born in Haifa, in northern Israel and became a US citizen at the age of five. My parents had moved to Los Angeles in pursuit of a better life. Their parents before them fled to Israel to escape conflict and poverty. Like most of us in this room, I took for granted that the ability to travel shaped every aspect of my life.

I moved back to Israel in June 2007, just days before Hamas took power in Gaza and Israel's subsequent imposition of a near-total lockdown on the Strip. Over the past 12 years, I have seen the devastating impact that Israel's closure policy has had on Gaza, and also on Israel. Three major military operations and several smaller operations, like the one that took place last week, have taken the lives of thousands of people. I don't believe we are better off or safer for it.

Gisha means access or approach in Hebrew. We are the only human rights organization in Israel focusing on the situation in Gaza and on how reality there is shaped by our government's actions. The prominent discourse about Gaza, especially in Israel but also here, revolves around terror or crisis. We are lucky at Gisha to see nuance, entrepreneurship, resilience and potential in Gaza through our broad caseload and range of contacts.

In my comments here today, I hope to share with you a sober analysis of where we are but I also hope to convey my optimism for what the future could hold. There is much that can be done to meaningfully alter course, given a broader understanding of what is at stake and political will.

Today, Israel continues to exercise control over many aspects of daily life in the Strip. Rafah Crossing, which connects Gaza to Egypt, is vital; however, Israel controls all access to the West Bank, movement of commercial and humanitarian goods, and, Gaza's sea space, airspace, access to farmland, civilian infrastructure, and the Palestinian population registry.

In 2007, Israel further reduced access to the point of closure. Entry of civilian goods was restricted, all exit of goods was stopped and travel of people was allowed only in what Israel called "exceptional humanitarian cases." Far beyond just protecting legitimate security concerns, Israel defined its approach as 'economic warfare' and also 'the separation policy' – it was an effort to apply pressure and simultaneously reinforce Gaza's isolation from the West Bank, primarily to achieve political goals.

Certain practices have changed, but the overall picture remains the same: Israel believes that it can "manage" the humanitarian situation in Gaza and it has an interest in maintaining the physical and political fragmentation of Palestinians, which allows it to pursue annexation in the West Bank.

The changes that have been made to the closure, while important, have not been significant enough to alleviate humanitarian concerns, let alone address wider needs. Unemployment in the Strip remains among the highest in the world, electricity is available for just half the day, and families struggle to secure clean water. Hopelessness and despair have increased, particularly among young people, who account for 70% of the population. They see no future and feel abandoned by regional leaders and the international community.

Access is repeatedly cited by the World Bank and also Israeli security officials as a catalyst for well-being and stability and yet, as the situation in Gaza continues to deteriorate, counterintuitively, obstacles are placed on people trying to improve their conditions and live their lives peacefully.

To give a few examples, last year, Gisha invited 24 people from Gaza to a meeting of Israeli, Palestinian and foreign stakeholders about the situation in the Strip. Only four received permits, all men, while the state claimed that "women play too minor of a role in the economy" to be relevant to discussions about improving economic activity. If you are a woman in Gaza, you are less likely to meet Israel's criteria for work-related travel. Our own field coordinator was also blocked; he and other human rights defenders do not meet the criteria for travel.

We recently represented a company in Gaza wishing to sell its cookies in the West Bank, but an ongoing ban on exit of food products continues to undermine the once-thriving food sector in the Strip. Madam President, I am honored to be here today to share the stories of these courageous men and women who joined us in challenging movement restrictions. It gives me no joy to expose the senselessness, and even cruelty of decisions made daily, ostensibly in my name.

In 2018, Gisha was contacted by a man in Gaza whose father, in the West Bank, had suffered a debilitating stroke. His urgent application for a permit went unanswered for two months until the army responded that the father was not "sick enough" to justify a visit. Two petitions to the district court and an appeal to the High Court were unsuccessful. Security had nothing to do with it.

These stories are not just the unfortunate by-product of conflict, they are an expression of Israel's intent to maintain control of the West Bank, while locking out Palestinians in Gaza.

I am certain that many of you will want to make statements today reaffirming the illegality of settlements and citing that they are the primary obstacle to peace. I encourage you to note that the isolation of Gaza is also a primary obstacle, aggravated by Palestinian division but also driven by deliberate choices on the part of Israel. In March of this year, in defending his decision to allow funds from Qatar to enter the Strip, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was cited as saying that, "whoever is against a Palestinian state should be for' transferring the funds to Gaza, because maintaining a separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza helps prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state."

In the absence of self-determination, millions of Palestinians cannot vote for the government with so much power over their lives and different legal standards are applied to people literally living side by side. This situation cannot be anything other than cause for further instability, in the region but also in some of your capitals. The erosion of norms entailed in maintaining the occupation undermines the universal values of security and human rights on which this very institution was founded.

So what can be done?

First, access. Rather than allowing the minimum access necessary to prevent further crisis, we believe the international community should insist that Israel allow the maximum access possible, subject only to necessary and reasonable security procedures.

Since 2014, we've seen the rate of exit of goods from Gaza increase, but it remains a fraction of what it could be. Restrictions could be lifted on the types of goods that can exit and to which destinations. Also vital for industry, construction, and civilian infrastructure is entry of building and other raw materials, which remain heavily restricted by Israel's broad definition of what constitutes 'dual use' items.

When it comes to movement of people, Israel must remove obstacles on people traveling to reunite with family, reach jobs, or other professional opportunities, especially women who, as I noted, are disproportionately denied access. Israel must improve access to medical care and also access for companions of patients, including parents who are routinely denied permits to accompany their children to treatment. Israel must allow safe and reliable access to Gaza's sea and farmland.

Egypt has operated Rafah Crossing consistently since May of 2018, allowing many to travel abroad. It should be encouraged to continue and expand operations.

Palestinian authorities should refrain from leveraging critical services needed by the civilian population in their factional dispute, such as electricity supply and medical care. I also believe that the two Israeli civilians allegedly held in Gaza should be released immediately.

The humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza is not an act of nature. It is the result of deliberate choices made by policy makers, Israeli, but also Palestinian and regional actors, and the international community, which has helped keep people's heads above water with critical aid it provides, but must leverage its influence for more sustainable change.

Given recent statements by Israeli officials and their supporters in the current American administration, we can't delude ourselves that a peace process is just around the corner. In the absence of peace and also to catalyze it, the international community must confront the de facto annexation of the West Bank and Gaza's isolation together, taking action to reverse these trends by abiding by its obligations to protect civilians.

It should also provide support to civil society. A vibrant community of civil society organizations operates in both Israel and Palestine, but we and our allies are

targeted for our work. We are outraged at the expected deportation of our Human Rights Watch colleague, Omar Shakir. As much as these actions are cause for concern, they are also an indication of our growing influence.

Many people in Israel may see my appearance here today as an act of disloyalty, because we've been taught that it's us or them. In fact, it's just the opposite. The well-being of Israelis and Palestinians is interlinked and we should address Palestinian security just as much as we address Israeli security.

To conclude, the international community has a claim, a moral responsibility, and a vested interest to pursue peace and with it, accountability for rights violations. If nothing else, the desire of some to undermine the foundations on which this institution, the United Nations, rests, should be a loud wake-up call and should unite the international community in action. Young people in Palestine and Israel will thank you for it.

Thank you for your attention.