



The Hon Marise Payne

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Dear Senator Payne,

I write on behalf of the *Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network* (PIEN). The world again watches as violence and acts of warfare escalate in Israel and Gaza. Actions and counteractions have led to the present situation, encompassing events in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood and the al-Aqsa Mosque Compound, both in annexed East Jerusalem. Palestinians and Israelis suffer as the Israeli Government continues its policies of Palestinian dispossession and the extension of Israeli settlements. This is not just a simple matter of Hamas rockets and Israel's right to defend itself.

There is no understanding of the present intensification of hostilities without an acknowledgement of context and causes. The Israeli Government has long facilitated Israeli settlers moving into annexed East Jerusalem. I myself have seen the proliferation of Israeli flags on residences in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, even more evident on my second visit in 2017 than in 2015. The flags are hung in what I would call an ostentatious manner.

The East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah has been the focus of evictions of Palestinian families and the demolition of homes built or extended without the almost-impossible-to-obtain permits. Israeli authorities are now, however, planning the eviction of hundreds of Palestinians from their homes for a new Israeli settlement. The violence of the Israeli settlers and the use of force by the Israeli military have not quelled the Palestinian protest at what is happening. Governments around the world have urged caution on the Israeli Government in relation to what is happening in Sheikh Jarrah, to no avail.

A second element of understanding the current context is the storming of the al-Aqsa Mosque Compound by Israeli soldiers. 300 people were injured as rubber bullets were fired along with tear gas and stun grenades [SMH 12/5/21]. The images have been widely broadcast.

For the Hamas Government in Gaza to then call on the Israeli Government to withdraw its troops from the Compound was timely. The threat of rocket fire was given at that stage. The Israeli Government and military took no action. Whilst I, and we in PIEN, do not condone the firing of rockets, we do acknowledge that this initial action was not an isolated one.

The Prime Minister has joined other leaders in saying that "Israel has a right to defend itself" [SBS News 14/5/21]; such a statement could be seen to deflect attention from what is truly at stake. For the Prime Minister to have also said in this context recently, "We believe in a two-state solution" [SMH 14/5/21], is laudable but is now almost impossible to achieve because of the extension of Israeli settlements throughout the occupied Palestinian Territories, including in annexed East Jerusalem. This issue is at the heart of the current escalation of violence. Lamentably, the unrest which this continues to cause has now spread to towns within Israel.

We urge you, Senator, to be mindful of the whole context as you communicate on these matters.

Sincerely,

Helen Rainger

President-Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN)