The meeting opened at 14.00 on Thursday, 23 March 2017, with Chair Neoklis Sylikiotis presiding.

1. **Adoption of the Draft Agenda (PE591.523)**
The Draft Agenda was adopted.

2. **Adoption of the minutes of the meeting of 30 January 2017 (PE591.529)**
The minutes were adopted.

3. **Chair's announcements**
The Chair condemned the attempts by the Israeli authorities to demolish the West Bank Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar and announced that the Delegation had written to urge High Representative Mogherini to act to prevent this destruction. He noted that the forced relocation of this community would violate the Fourth Geneva Convention and further that the forcible transfer of population is a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. He stated that the EU needs to impress on the Israeli authorities that the Union is an essential pillar of the international order and champions and defends it, and it will not stand by whilst such grave violations of international law are carried out with impunity.

The Chair condemned the withdrawal of the UN (UN ESCWA) report which concluded - for the first time - that Israel has established an 'apartheid regime' on the Palestinians. The report by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and entitled *Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid* found that “Israel has established an apartheid regime that dominates the Palestinian people as a whole”, the Chair noted. Israel and the US objected to the report, which disappeared from the webpage two days after it was published. The withdrawal of the report caused the resignation of the concerned UN Under-Secretary Rima Khalaf, who said that UN Secretary-General Guterres had insisted on the report's withdrawal. The Chair announced
the issuing of a public statement on this.

4. **Debriefing on the mission to Palestine of 20-24 February 2017**

The Chair informed that the mission had four very full days of meetings and visits on the ground, including meetings with the Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, Foreign Affairs Minister Riad Malki and Finance Minister Shukri Bishara as well Members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, including Khalida Jarrar, who until recently was a political prisoner in an Israeli jail. The Delegation met a varied cross-section of interlocutors from different generations who provided insights into increasing disenchantment with the Palestinian Authority and the two-state solution. Support for the two-state is still prevalent, but more interlocutors were giving consideration to the one-state solution.

The EU’s work on the ground in Palestine – of which the Delegation saw some very good examples from a humanitarian and human dignity viewpoint – is not geared towards achieving the stated EU policy in favour of a two-state solution. Palestinians continue to show a remarkable resilience in coping with what is a harsh, even surreal, daily reality, but there is a real danger that the two-state solution is at great risk: from the settlement expansion the Delegation saw continuing briskly on this mission – outside Bethlehem and around Jerusalem for instance – but also from the lack of hope and the absence of a peace process. The Delegation upheld Parliament’s unequivocal position in support of the two-state solution on 1967 borders, and supported the latest moves towards a unity government and discussed the possibility of elections this year.

On reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas: there seemed to be very little movement towards a unity government since the deal struck between the two parties to this end on 17 January. No further announcements were made and no agreement even on the municipal elections had been reached.

The Delegation focused the difficulties encountered by students and young people – discussed with students at Bir Zeit University and with the EP’s Young Political Leaders’ programme participants from Israel-Palestine; students at Bir Zeit University told the Delegation they waste an average of two days a week queuing at check points. The Delegation focused on settlements – in relation to which the Chair noted that the Israeli retroactive decision with regard to illegal settlements was unacceptable; and the deprivation and poverty witnessed in Area C where the Delegation visited Bedouin villages and refugee camps.

The Chair noted that the most upsetting part of the Delegation’s mission this year was the visit to the Ofer military court. On the day of the visit, children as young as 13 and young men were being brought up in court on charges ranging from throwing stones, political activism, to social media posts. The Members walked in through turnstiles and barbed wire – having undergone a thorough security check - with basically only pen and paper. The court in session was in a small pre-fabricated room with four young men in the dock, lawyers, family members at the back, and a person the Delegation was told was the interpreter from Hebrew to Arabic, though he was not heard to speak. The prosecution and charge sheets were in Hebrew. The DPAL mission was accompanied by Addameer lawyers, who explained proceedings. One of the lawyers was visibly emotional over the case of a 13-year old boy she had to defend that day. The military courts in the Occupied Palestinian Territory have a 99 per cent
conviction rate. The Chair described this situation as a tragic one and stated that the Delegation will not stop fighting until they get their rights, and this will in turn help achieve peace.

Human rights groups also told the Delegation that there are increasing abuses of human rights by the Palestinian security forces, including torture, the Chair noted.

The Delegation had extensive discussions with human rights groups and civil society organisations who highlighted: the increasing repression of NGOs, and the stifling of the peace camps; the threats to Palestinian communities by increasingly aggressive settlement policies, including in the heart of Palestinian neighbourhoods in Jerusalem; more and more people at risk of losing their Jerusalem residency rights; and punitive house demolitions.

Once again, the Delegation was not granted access to Gaza. This time an explanation was provided by the Israeli authorities: entry is permitted only for professionals performing a humanitarian role or diplomats accredited to Israel or the Palestinian Authority. The Chair stated that the Delegation will not stop insisting on a visit to Gaza.

The Chair gave the floor to Members to discuss the debrief. MEP Ivo Vajgl (ALDE, Slovenia) - who had participated in the mission - noted the demoralising impact of the conditions in the refugee camps and particularly of the Ofer military court where parents and families also undergo a type of humiliation and torture, waiting outdoors in all weather conditions in the hope of seeing their children, and resigned to their fate within a court system he described as ‘cynical’. He noted the signs of apartheid witnessed, and as someone who had seen the war coming in ex-Yugoslavia, expressed his gut feeling that the situation is a ‘train to disaster’.

MEP Edouard Martin (S&D, France) stressed the need for an even-handed approach towards Israel and Palestine. He noted that any criticism of Israeli government policies is seen as anti-Jewish when in fact it is [Israeli Prime Minister] Netanyahu’s policies that are being criticised. He called for a ‘calm exchange’ on relevant issues jointly with Parliament’s Delegation for relations with Israel.

Members also discussed possible events to mark the 50 years of occupation, the 100 years of the Balfour Declaration and other important anniversaries that will be marked in 2017.

5. Exchange of views on the impact of 50 years of occupation and 10 years of the Gaza blockade on Palestinian rights with Naama Baumgarten-Sharon, Civil Society Officer in the OPT and Israel for Oxfam, Birte Brodkorb, Director of International Relations and Advocacy at the Yesh Din Volunteers for Human Rights, and Noam Rabinovich, Director of International Relations at the Gisha Legal Center for Freedom of Movement.

Oxfam underlined that NGOs are under constant attack, through for instance the Israeli law requiring them to list their funding, called a means of delegitimisation, and prohibiting civil service volunteers to certain NGOs.

The exchange of views highlighted a shift in Israeli settlement policy since 2012. Yesh Din noted that up to then official policy had been to remove illegal
settlement construction, though this did not often happen. Now the regulation law has been passed and Israel is moving towards the legalisation of illegal outposts with one third of them being legalised or having already been so, so that they are 'stretching like fingers across the West Bank'.

Gisha focused on the urgent need to lift restrictions on Gaza, to avoid it becoming uninhabitable and to prevent another war, of which there is increasing threat. The speaker noted the recognition by the Israeli security establishment, and also by the political establishment, that current Israeli policy towards Gaza has failed, and the closure of Gaza has not made the Israeli public feel more secure. However, the recognition of this failure has not led Israel to change its policy and act to allow the economy to function, despite fearing another war. Gisha reported a 50% drop in February 2017 of traders exiting Gaza, compared to 2016, noting that their business activity keeps Gaza’s economy alive. Gisha noted that it is in Israel’s interest to allow more access to the people of Gaza and to allow the economy to function.

In the debate, Members raised questions concerning unemployment and increasing suicides in Gaza; on who are the majority of settlers and what motivates them; on the speakers' positions on EU action and with regard to boycott, and on how difficult it is now for NGOs to speak up. The speakers noted that whilst efforts including EU projects help the situation in Gaza, Israel is responsible by virtue of its control when it comes to basic needs such as water. They emphasised that the only solution to keep Gaza liveable is to lift the blockade. The speakers noted that the majority of settlers are so-called quality of life settlers who have financial incentives to settle in land Israel assumes would become its territory along the Green Line in any eventual agreement including on land swaps. The speakers noted that settlers are not well-perceived by other Israelis as they get many benefits and settlers are sometimes seen as putting Israel under threat. It was noted that Israelis do not perceive these settlements as illegal and that it is the settlers in outposts who are generally seen as a problem by Israelis. It is this more extreme group that is responsible for settler violence. The NGO speakers said that as human rights defenders they had no position on boycott, rather they ask the EU to pressure Israel to uphold international law and to put pressure against the occupation, which is a source of many human rights violations. NGOs themselves are increasingly under pressure by the Israeli authorities, but they are supported by that part of the Israeli society that wants these NGOs to represent its views of what Israeli democracy should be. The NGOs called for the EU to go beyond statements and take action on the ground against settlements.

The EEAS and the Palestinian and Israeli Embassy representatives were invited to comment. The Israeli embassy representatives declined. The Palestinian Embassy representative emphasised that the EU Member States may act to save the two-state solution by recognising Palestine as a state. The EEAS referred to a consolidated EU position against settlements, and noted that the EU's statement on Israel's controversial regularisation law was issued by the EU spokesperson for the High Representative, not as an EU 28 statement since one Member State did not support it.

6. Any other business
None

7. Date and place of next meeting
None
24 April 2017 in Brussels.

The meeting closed at 15.35.
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Anna Zammit, Lars Nielsen

Сътрудник/Asistente/Asistent/Assistenz/Borštec/Assistant/Assistente/Palīgs/Padėjējs/Assisztens/Asystent/Pomočnik/Avustaja/Asistant

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