

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, HC 300

Tuesday 27 February 2024

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Dan Carden; Neil Coyle; Fabian Hamilton; Bob Seely; Royston Smith; Henry Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 221 - 249

Witnesses

[I](#): Gershom Gorenberg, journalist and historian, author of *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977*; Dr Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies, Columbia University; Colonel (retired) Miri Eisin, Managing Director, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

[II](#): Rt Hon Alistair Burt, former Minister of State for the Middle East; Dr Gershon Baskin, Co-Chairman, Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information; Samer Sinijlawi, Founding Chairman, Jerusalem Development Fund.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gershon Gorenberg, Dr Rashid Khalidi and Miri Eisin.

Q221 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, in which we will be looking at the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. We have a really fabulous set of guests to hear from today, and I am going to ask each of them to introduce themselves. Gershom, would you kindly kick us off?

Gershom Gorenberg: My name is Gershom Gorenberg. I am an Israeli journalist and historian. I am the author, among other books, of two successive histories of Israeli settlement in the occupied territories.

Dr Khalidi: My name is Rashid Khalidi. I am the Edward Said professor of modern Arab studies at Columbia University. I studied in the UK, and I have written eight books, three or four of which deal with Palestinian history.

Miri Eisin: Good morning. My name is Miri Eisin. I am Israeli. I am a retired colonel. I served in the Israeli intelligence community and then as the Israeli Prime Minister's international media adviser. I teach narratives at Reichman University. I teach a lot of Rashid Khalidi's books.

Q222 **Chair:** It is always good to start with a point of agreement. Gershom, let us start with you, please. How do we reconcile Zionism with Palestinian nationalism to ensure that we end up with a peaceful resolution?

Gershom Gorenberg: The basic starting point is the reality of today: there are two national groups located in the same land, each with very different but valid claims to that as being their homeland, and neither is going anywhere. Therefore, the political necessity is to find a way for those two national movements to achieve at least some of their goals and national self-determination while recognising the rights and existence of the other.

Chair: Does anyone else want to comment on that at all?

Miri Eisin: Can I step in with a small thing? I agree with Gershom said. I would add that it is also about calling out on both sides what I am going to call the spoilers—the forces, which can be very violent, that are against these aspirations. Calling them out is also a part of how you arrive at a resolution.

Q223 **Chair:** Do you think the international community has failed as yet to call out these spoilers?

Miri Eisin: The international community has very clearcut ideas of what should be done, but I think there is a difference between what should be done and what can be done. In that sense, you do not necessarily call out all the spoilers by their names. Each side, in its own way, does not usually view what I am going to call spoilers as being spoilers. It is not about the



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international community in that sense; it is really about how each domestic side views it and, as I said, the difference between what you can do and what you should do.

Chair: I may take you back to that comment later.

Dr Khalidi: It is important to bring in something that is generally ignored: the balance of forces. There are two national projects, obviously. One of them has always been backed by the world's most powerful states—the United Kingdom for decades and then others, most importantly the United States. The other has never been able to achieve any of its national objectives, partly for reasons to do with great powers, partly for reasons having to do with the desire of the Zionist movement to take over all of Palestine, and partly because of its own failures. But I think it is incumbent on the international community, which played an enormous role in creating this problem, to help to bring about a solution. It has manifestly failed to do that over many decades.

Q224 **Graham Stringer:** Miri, it was a long time ago, but are there any lessons that can be learned from the failure of the Peel plan in trying to build to a two-state solution?

Miri Eisin: To me, the Peel plan at its heart is what we talk about when we talk about two states. As Rashid said, the British from their outside viewpoint looked at this and said, "Two different nations." The British also supported something that I like: the idea of Jerusalem being something that belonged to the world—though maybe not in the Peel commission, which said it was to belong to Great Britain. Those are lessons that we should be looking at today. I say this as an Israeli who is very aware that the Jerusalem issue is one of the things that Israelis do not know how to compromise on, and we need to. That international voice that comes out and talks about Jerusalem as being something otherworldly that needs to have something different within a resolution is very important for both sides.

The additional aspect is that partition is a compromise, not a Disney happily ever after. I think that both the Peel commission and all the partition plans as they went on saw it as it being about what should and could be done as opposed to what each side wants. There are Zionists; I am a very proud Zionist who is very liberal and absolutely wants two states, and I have done for my entire life. There are other Zionists who want the whole thing. I acknowledge that in that sense. The Peel commission looked at two different peoples and said, "Here is the compromise," not "Here is the happily ever after."

Dr Khalidi: If I could add to what Colonel Eisin said, I think one of the problems with the Peel commission—with every one of the proposals for partition, but the Peel commission in particular—is that it initiated the idea that in order to have the compromise that Colonel Eisin talked about, enormous harm had to be done to the Palestinians. It came up with the idea of transfer, which in this case meant the expulsion of hundreds of



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thousands of Palestinians—200,000 Palestinians—from what was to have been a Jewish state in 1937. I think that is part of the problem.

What has actually happened has been put forward in the name of compromise, but it has involved enormous harm to the majority population of Palestine, whether that was in 1937 with the Peel plan, which of course never eventuated, or in 1947 with the United Nations General Assembly partition, which would have created a Jewish state almost half of whose population was Arab. That necessitated, in effect, the transfer—the expulsion—of those people. That is a problem that the Peel plan in fact initiated and which we have been living with ever since the expulsion of people from their homes in 1948 and again in 1967, and the kind of dispossession and expulsion we see now in the Gaza strip.

Gershon Gorenberg: May I add two points to that? In relation to what Miri Eisin said, it is important to stress this idea that we are not looking for a utopia. The late Israeli political scientist Yaron Ezrahi would say that politics does not contain solutions; it contains better and worse arrangements. We are looking for the least bad arrangement, rather than perfection.

Secondly, in relation to 1948, I would note that the result of the partition enacted by international fiat, but with no international involvement to ensure that it was carried out, was in fact the flight and expulsion of most of the Palestinian-Arab population of what became Israel. On the other hand, the Israeli archival record shows clearly that the plans of the Zionist leadership at the beginning of the state were that the Arab population would stay put—in fact, the administrative plan for the state of Israel found in the Israeli state archives shows that there was planning, including how to take care of the educational, medical and other needs of the Arab population of all the towns and villages that were supposed to be included in the Jewish state.

One of the implications of that is that international decisions that involved no follow-up and were not carried through by any attempt to bring about the peaceful enactment of those arrangements were disastrous. It is not enough, in that case, for the United Nations or any further international involvement to propose a solution or arrangement if it will not stay involved and ensure that that arrangement is carried out in a peaceful fashion.

Q225 **Bob Seely:** Tell me if I am getting this wrong, but as an outsider I see one side that thinks that it is too powerful to have to compromise and a weaker side that is so embittered that it is almost impossible to compromise with any sense of dignity left, because it has so little to compromise over. Do you think that is an unfair comment? How would you finesse and improve that? Is there anyone who wants to answer on that point?

Dr Khalidi: I would agree that there is an enormous imbalance, but the enormous imbalance is partly due to the power of Israel itself, obviously, and to the big fat thumb of the United States and the international



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community—or, I should say, the western countries that support the United States—supporting Israel to the hilt. The Palestinians feel that they are not only up against one of the most powerful armies in the world, but up against the United States, Great Britain, Germany and all the countries that support and arm Israel, that fund the settlements in the occupied territories and that issue veto after veto in the UN Security Council. So there is an imbalance, but that imbalance could be corrected, at least in part, if that big fat thumb were removed from the scales and there were a bit of impartiality and respect for UN resolutions that call settlements illegal or the occupation illegal.

The international community has issued statements with absolutely no power behind them. If occupation is illegal, end occupation. If settlements are illegal, stop funding them and stop arming the people who defend them. That in and of itself would help somewhat to right the balance and to bring Israelis to reason. They think that they can play with the power of the greatest superpower on Earth behind them. Palestinians feel not only that they are overwhelmed by Israel, obviously, but that they are facing this panoply of western countries that support Israel.

Bob Seely: Thank you. Does either of our other two guests want to come in on that?

Miri Eisin: I would like to jump in for a moment. As I listen to you say that, and as I was listening to Professor Khalidi, I think that perhaps this is one of those biggest gaps. I am going to say something as an Israeli: the oddest part—and I say that it is odd—of the Israeli psyche is that we do not think of ourselves as powerful. We think of ourselves not as weak, but we have a need, in that sense, to have our strength versus what we perceive as our enemies—not just the Palestinians, Professor Khalidi. Our strength is not just about the occupation, the West Bank, the Gaza strip or East Jerusalem. It is about our entire location and surroundings. It is a very deep sense, which I think the international community does not recognise.

It is not about agreeing with it. It is about there being vastly different ways of looking at this. We do not perceive ourselves as strong. We do not perceive ourselves as having a strength that comes from the outside. Au contraire, if anything, right now we need to be strong on our own. The saying in Hebrew is that, in the end, we are going to be standing alone. It is very Jewish: “Im ein ani li mi li”—if I do not have myself, who else do I have? I just put that in there as an observation, not from the expert point of view, but as an Israeli.

Gershon Gorenberg: May I add two points on this? One is about the actual geopolitical situation. In the Israeli perception, even I would say that the view reflected by professionals in the field is that, yes, there is an alliance with the United States, but there is a very strong awareness of powerful enemies in the region that strongly affect the balance—in particular today, Iran and its allies—which reduces the sense of protectiveness or power.



The second thing is that I agree with Miri Eisin about the psychological level. The best formulation of this was the title of a book by historian Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims*. The phrase “righteous victims” could apply to the consciousness of both sides. The irony that you discover in the consciousness of each side is that it is the righteous side and it has been victimised. I would say that, historically, there are flaws in all that, both in the “righteous” and in the “victims” part, but I think that any international player coming into the situation has to deal with what both my colleagues have talked about: the actual power situation and the perceptions or self-consciousness of the group involved. Ignoring the latter factor is, in the stories told by each side, one of the reasons for the failure of diplomatic peace efforts in the past.

Q226 Dan Carden: Good afternoon. Gershon, in the context of the history of this conflict, how important is the settler movement in the West Bank? In a future resolution of the conflict, can the settlers remain where they are?

Gershon Gorenberg: The settlements are obviously a crucial factor. I would not isolate them, as some have, and make them into the only factor. To make the settlements the only issue ignores other crucial issues in conflict resolution, including Jerusalem, which has been mentioned, and the refugees, and I could add to that list. However, the project of settling Israelis in the occupied territories, and particularly in the West Bank, since 1967 is a deliberate barrier to a territorial compromise, and the increase in their numbers is a project intended from the beginning either to limit the degree of compromise possible or to eliminate it entirely. That is an important distinction: moderates who backed settlement in specific areas sought to limit the amount of land that Israel could give up, in a sense tying the hands of Israeli Governments in the future, and hard-liners aimed to prevent giving up territory in general.

However, I would add one more factor to that. The claim that it is impossible for the number of Israelis living in the West Bank to return to Israel proper ignores the experience of other countries. The best example I can give you here is a historical example—I am not claiming that anything is a precise parallel, but it is an example worth looking at. In 1975, an estimated half a million Portuguese colonists from Africa returned to Portugal, a country that had a population of less than 10 million at the time, and Portugal has survived. I am sure it created tremendous social and economic stress, but it took place and it allowed Portugal to proceed into its future without continuing its colonial project in Africa. For the settlers, or a large portion of the settlers, in the West Bank to return to Israel is a possibility that must be entertained, and is not a reason to give up on the idea of a peace agreement based on territorial compromise.

Dan Carden: Thank you. Would anyone else like to come in on that?

Dr Khalidi: I agree with what Gershon said in certain respects. The settler project is not just a project of an extreme wing of the Israeli political establishment; it is the Israeli state since the Allon plan—since 1967. The objective has been clothed in the mantle of security, but it was always—I agree with Gershon—to make handing over this territory



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impossible. In recent decades, it has become more than that. It has become the spearhead of an effort to do what Ze'ev Jabotinsky said way back in the 1920s: to transform Palestine into the land of Israel—to make real on the ground a reality whereby there is really only one sovereign people. If they obey Israeli laws and do what the Israelis say, the Palestinians can live around that area, which constantly expands.

Some 60% of the West Bank is under Israeli control. There are 700,000 Israeli settlers between the occupied West Bank and occupied Arab East Jerusalem. They are not there simply to prevent the Palestinian state from being established. They are there to establish the complete hegemony of the Jewish people over the entirety of what is called the land of Israel. Again, this goes back to the very earliest ideas of the very earliest Zionist leaders, from Herzl through Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion and Weizmann to the present—to Begin and Shamir and the current Prime Minister.

Q227 Dan Carden: Dr Khalidi, sticking with the historical context, can you tell us about the origins and the development of Palestinian nationalism?

Dr Khalidi: Palestinian nationalism, ironically, develops pretty much at the same time and under many of the same influences as Zionism and every other nationalism in the Middle East. My great-great-great grandfather, and probably those of my two distinguished co-representative speakers before your Committee—our grandparents—did not think of themselves as Israelis or Palestinians. They thought of themselves in entirely different senses. They thought of themselves as Jews. They thought of themselves as Muslims or Christians.

These national identities are entirely recent. People thought of a place called Palestine, and Falastin existed in people's minds, but the idea of Palestinian identity as your primary focus of identity is a late 19th/early 20th century idea, as is Zionism. Both claim ancient roots, of course, and both claim ties to the land, but they are, ironically, rather similar national movements. Obviously, Zionism grows up in eastern Europe. It is a response to the persecution of Jews in eastern Europe, to the antisemitism of millennia in Europe, generally.

Jews were kicked out of England in the 12th century, out of France in the 13th century, and out of Portugal and Spain at the end of the 15th century. That is in part what Zionism is a response to. Palestinian nationalism has other roots, but both of them are relatively recent national projects, which, as I say, the great-great-great-grandparents of all your witnesses would not have seen as their primary focus of identity. They would not have seen themselves as Israelis who have to live in a Jewish state in the land of Israel, nor would they have seen themselves as part of a Palestinian nation or state.

Dan Carden: Would anyone else like to come in on that?

Gershon Gorenberg: Yes, I would like to add two glosses to my colleagues' comments. First, regarding the settlements and the project of the settlements, I would agree that this was and continues to be a major project of the state, not just of extreme political elements. The first



settlements in occupied territory after 1967 were, of course, established under a Labour party Government. In fact, the prime advocates within that Government of settlement in the occupied territories were those who were identified as most left-wing in the Government, whose conception was that the mandatory borders and the partition borders were an imperialist imposition dividing up the Jewish homeland. This is all very ironic in terms of today's thinking, but that is what the situation was then. However, one of the results of the settlement project has actually been to encourage the development of more extreme ideology, because the settlements themselves have become a hotbed of extremism.

I would not agree that that was always the view of all Zionist leaders. I think it is worth looking back, for instance, to 1949. The first motion of no confidence in the first Israeli Government followed the signing of the armistice agreement with Transjordan. The right wingers, led by the leader of a then small minority party, Menachem Begin, challenged this concession of part of the homeland. Ben-Gurion said, "We were faced with a choice between the whole land without a Jewish state"—that is to say, without a Jewish majority—"or a Jewish majority without the whole land. We chose a Jewish state without the whole land." The concept of pragmatic compromise on perhaps larger aspirations was there from the beginning, and there has been an oscillation in Israeli politics ever since then between those two camps.

One last comment about national consciousness: nationalism in the modern sense of belonging to a nation means that you have to have sovereignty—I certainly agree with what Professor Khalidi said. One of the things that is interesting about the history of the conflict is that the process of Jewish immigration into Palestine or Eretz Israel actually began throughout the 19th century in a slowly developing pattern. The early immigrants—many of them coming from elsewhere in the Islamic world—wanted to live in that land, but preceded the idea that this was a political project to gain sovereignty. That consciousness developed in a back-and-forth process, a dialectical process, in which the aspirations of each national group tended to intensify the national consciousness of the other group. There is a very close relationship between the development of national consciousness and its intensity among Jews and Palestinians.

Q228 Chair: Dr Khalidi, the PA Government resigned over the weekend. What does a future Palestinian leadership look like, when you look to the next few months? How are the Palestinian nationalist ambitions realised?

Dr Khalidi: Any Palestinian Government that does not represent the entirety of Palestinian opinion and is not ultimately the result of a democratic process will essentially represent funders, donors and great powers. I am afraid that is where we may be going, whether they are Arab powers or the United States or other countries. The Palestinians have often suffered from a democratic deficit. There have not been elections since the presidential election in 2005 and the parliamentary election in 2006. This is partly the fault of the Palestinians themselves and the PA leadership, and it is partly the fault of powers that should be pushing for a



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democracy rather than encouraging the kind of autocratic regime that has developed in the PA.

We will not resolve this unless everybody is represented. Ireland was not solved in the '20s, and the troubles were not resolved in the '80s and '90s without everybody at the table. South Africa was not solved without everybody at the table. That is going to be necessary sooner or later, on a democratic basis, as far as Palestine is concerned. If you do not bring the representatives of the people involved to the table, you will not get a deal that is worth the paper it is written on. I am afraid that may not be happening soon enough, and that is largely a Palestinian problem. Palestinian divisions are a Palestinian problem, but they are encouraged and exacerbated by external intervention—vetoes on this or that or the other participant.

Palestinians do not particularly like sitting down with Israelis, whom they may consider war criminals, but they have no choice. Those would be the generals, the officials, and the elected members of the Knesset or the Government, whom the Israeli people have chosen. That is the way it is and the way it has to be, but with the Palestinians, unfortunately, that is not allowed to be the case. To my way of thinking, that is a problem. A Government is about to be formed, but it will not be based on any kind of democratic process. It will therefore lack legitimacy, so the deal that it may cut—if it does, in fact, do that—will not have the support of the Palestinians, because they were not consulted.

Chair: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Q229 **Henry Smith:** Colonel Eisin, can I turn to you? What do you believe the Israelis and the Palestinians have in common, even if that is a desire for stability and peace? Is there a great desire among the Israeli people and the Palestinians for a settlement to the solution?

Miri Eisin: It is such a wonderful question, and the one that we all want a happy answer to. I am so glad that I am the one who gets to dive into this one right now.

We are in 2024—I cannot ignore where I am and how we are living in 2024—but I will say that the following are things that we have in common. I think that both peoples—and I say this as peoples—have multiple identities, and within us the capabilities to change. I do not say that lightly. I think that over the last 120 years of conflict, this conflict has evolved and the peoples have evolved. I say this as a positive thing. I may not like the present evolution of Hamas—to me, going much more extreme than they were in the past, in the way that I viewed them as an expert. That is part of my own, in that sense, mistake, but looking towards the future, both sides have a capability to change, which is very important in any kind of conflict.

I think that both of them want to live within the land. That common ground means that we need to reach out and talk to each other. It is very hard right now, in 2024, to look just at those points. I have to point out



for a moment some of the things that may look the same—I listen both to Professor Khalidi and to Gershon, and I wonder, in what ways?

In Israel right now, the presence in the last four and a half months has made what I would call central Israelis, the ones who were for two states and were willing to reach out—the voices that we hear right now are much less nuanced, and this conflict is about having nuance. If you have multiple identities, you are not just Israeli: you are Israeli, you are yes-or-no Zionist, you are Jewish, you are Arab. There are so many different identities that we bring to the table. I think that multiple identities are something that we need to have to be able to reach and look and see each other.

But in the commonalities right now, both sides need to sideline their extremists. We each have extreme voices. I still strongly believe that in Israel, in a democracy, we may not do enough, but I think that we do a lot against the extreme voices. We try to call them out. We were out on the streets for 10 months talking about the extreme voices within our own society. What we need to do is to have those common voices come together and talk. I think in your next session you will have some of those talks. There are people on the Palestinian side also who understand that. But the bulk of people on both sides right now do not want to reach out and talk to each other, so I am not in an easy position to be able to find the commonalities at the moment.

Q230 Henry Smith: In terms of people on both sides of the conflict finding it difficult to reach out—human nature is quite understandable—obviously there are a lot of external actors over the situation, whether that be Iran and its support for Hamas or, as was discussed a few moments ago, the United States and its significant influence over what goes on. Are those external forces part of the solution or part of the problem? I suspect both, but I would be interested to get your perspective on that.

Miri Eisin: I am going to zoom in and zoom out. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one that has two sides. Between the river and the sea—the term being used so often right now—are 15 million people. In addition, you have diasporas and refugees that are outside that. So that is the zoom-in, when you look at that, and all of these people in their different locations are impacted by the outer factors. As an Israeli, I look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one that needs to be resolved between these two people. That does not make it easy, but I am very impacted by the outer forces.

I am going to say again that for me right now the war that is going on, a war of Israel against Hamas, is horrifically impacting not just in the Gaza strip—I am very aware of that—but right now, as we are speaking, this morning and throughout the day, Hezbollah is attacking deep inside Israel, and it is as if everybody is ignoring that as an outer force. Go into their website right now, the al-Manar Hezbollah website. They state it clearly in a way that you will not necessarily hear, not even from Hamas right now—that call for our immediate destruction. It is written in English so that you will be able to understand it. I listen to what the Supreme Leader of Iran



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says. I listen to the different voices of what we can call spoilers, but they are clearcut forces that are in alignment with some of the forces within the Palestinian arena—certainly not with all of them.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is very much an Iranian proxy. It is not necessarily a large group. Hamas is very Palestinian; it is a clearcut voice. Sadly, it calls for my annihilation. I thought until October 7 that there was the possibility to arrive there. As Professor Khalidi said before, if we do not talk to them, who else are we going to talk to? But I do not feel that I can talk to them right now. So when we look at those outer forces, don't we want to strengthen the voices that want to arrive at a resolution? That does not make it easy. That does not mean that we love each other and hug each other, but it does mean that in the Middle East right now there are voices that acknowledge Israel. It may be because of our strength, but they acknowledge our existence.

I want us to not just acknowledge Palestinian existence. This is about the right and it is something they deserve. But we have to have outer forces to strengthen the dialogue. That is the kind of force that I want to see. I want to see the spoiler forces like Iran, like the proxies, and like Syria, for that matter, being sidelined and the voices that call for a resolution to be the ones that are heightened by the international community.

Henry Smith: Thank you. Mr Gorenberg, I think I saw you trying to come in. Over to you.

Gershon Gorenberg: I stress that public opinion on each side is also extremely volatile, particularly during wartime. There are core groups on either side of public opinion that tend to remain fixed in their views. There is a large number of people whose views can shift with the circumstances. War tends to bring people to more hard-line positions. We see this not just in the current situation, but in polling figures from previous wars. The possibility of actually achieving an agreement tends to increase support for such an agreement.

The most extreme example I can give you of this is what happened following the previous cataclysm of the 1973 war and its aftermath. Before Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Sadat was talking about making peace with Israel, and Israeli polling showed that 85% of Israelis thought that he was not sincere in saying that. The week after his visit, a follow-up poll showed that 85% of Israelis thought that Sadat was sincere in seeking peace.

The difference in these numbers, in my mind, was connected not to the specific symbolic act of the visit, but to whether peace seemed like a possibility. When it doesn't seem like a possibility, it's easiest to stress your absolute aspirations for everything. When it seems like you might be able to get a better future for yourself and your children, it's easier to consider compromises. So, as utterly horrifying as the current situation is, I think that it's critical that people looking at it not be frozen in the picture of public opinion at this moment, but ask themselves what political moves can shift and change the balance of that opinion.



Henry Smith: Dr Khalidi, do you have any comments?

Dr Khalidi: I will add a couple of things. The first is that if we want to create an atmosphere for anything better than what we are seeing, we have to stop this war. The shilly-shallying and dilly-dallying of the international community on this is, frankly, appalling. The fact that the war cannot be brought to an end by the countries that arm—I don't expect Iran to end the war. I expect the United States to end the war. I expect the United Kingdom to help in that process. Stop the war and you stop this tendency that has increased on both sides towards a more and more extreme view of the situation.

That is the first thing I would say. This war should be stopped now; and obviously, prisoners and hostages should be released and the starvation, immiseration and the use of horrible means to cause famine in Gaza has to be ended. The United Kingdom has a fleet. The United States has a fleet. Why can't supplies be landed on the shores of Gaza—they have to be checked by Israel? They are coming from US or UK naval stores. This is a humanitarian catastrophe caused by Israel. It has to be ended. It has to be ended if you want to prevent people from becoming more extreme. The same thing is obviously happening in Israel. Ending the war would, I think, help immeasurably towards bringing us to the kind of development that—I agree with Gershon—has happened in the past on both sides.

You can look at how optimistic Palestinians were in the early 1990s. I was involved as an adviser to the Palestinian delegation in Washington and Madrid. Palestinians were extremely optimistic about the possibilities of peace and of a Palestinian state. I would argue they were prevented from having a Palestinian state and that turned them in another direction. That is why the second intifada was as brutal and violent as it was—because Palestinians were convinced that they were not going to get what they had understood at the beginning of the '90s they were going to get. They haven't had any hope, as far as I can tell, since the early 2000s that the occupation would be ended, that this metastasising settlement process would be stopped, or that the Palestinians would ever enjoy equal rights and sovereignty and statehood.

If you don't offer them that opportunity, of course people who advocate force as the only option are going to win out. That is why they have been winning out—because no other option has been offered. That is not only the fault of Israel; that is also the fault of the international community and, in my view, also of failed Palestinian leadership.

Q231 **Bob Seely:** Let me talk a little about religion, because we have talked about secular national identity—actually, we haven't talked about Iranian identity, which I think is a part of this in relation to Hezbollah, although maybe less so in relation to Hamas. To what extent does religion, either on its own or as a marker of identity, play a role in the current but also the historical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians?

Gershon Gorenberg: Religion is clearly a major aspect of the conflict and a major piece of identity on each side, despite the strong secular



elements in the history of both national movements. But I would also say that the division between religion and nationality, or national identity, is very difficult to make in stark, simple terms. Elements of Jewish religious identity remain even in the most secular perceptions of Israeli Jewish identity and nationalism has become integrated in the religious identity of hard-line extremists. Jerusalem, which is one of the critical issues in the conflict, is both a national and religious symbol on both sides. This needs to be taken into account.

It also needs to be understood that religion itself is not a static force. Religion has, in effect, become more extreme as a result of the national conflict. Religion has been reinterpreted as a hard-line nationalist doctrine on each side, in my view. Under other circumstances, and with the right encouragement, religion can be reinterpreted in a more moderate fashion. Religious traditions are storehouses of contradictions and of opposing texts. When the mood is extreme, the most extreme texts can be pulled out of the national or religious attic and used to prove that there is no possibility whatsoever of compromise. Under other circumstances, other texts can be pulled out. One must not view the religious element ahistorically as a fixed issue.

In any kind of discussions, it is extremely important to pay attention to the religious symbolism and meaning of particular issues for each side. For instance, trying to talk about Jerusalem without recognising the symbolic importance of the holy places is a dead end. It's not just a dead end; it's disastrous.

Q232 Bob Seely: If I understand you correctly, you are saying that when it comes to Israel and Palestine, one shouldn't interpret it as just Jews versus Muslims. Does that also work for the dynamic between Israel and Iran?

Gershon Gorenberg: I would say that that is also true. Let me put it this way: when one looks at Iran, the ideological element in the Iranian pursuit of greater power and hegemony in the region is obvious, but with a longer view of history, one must understand that Persia as a power in our region goes back far longer than the Islamic revolution of 1979. Persian aspirations to reach the Mediterranean are much, much older than that.

There is a tendency in modern discussion to look only at the ideology of the current players, not the long-term geopolitical interests. The Russians want a stake in the Mediterranean. That preceded the fall of the Soviet Union, and it preceded the rise of the Soviet Union. Egypt, Persia and other powers in the region go back much further than our current ideological or religious conflicts, and one must take that into account.

Bob Seely: It is a bit of a red herring, but I think Cyrus got quite a good write-up in the Old Testament. Or am I misremembering? I thought the Persian king was a model for kingship among Jews at one point a long time ago.

Gershon Gorenberg: Yes, as a Persian king who had hegemony all the way to the Mediterranean.

Miri Eisin: He was the good guy. He was the one that we all love and talk about. It was religious openness before we knew what that meant.

Bob Seely: Good for Cyrus! Gershon, had you finished at that point?

Gershon Gorenberg: I was simply saying that even if the regime in Iran were to change overnight, its interests in what is going on in the region and its desire to affect that—the way that would be expressed would change, but the desire to do that is part of the facts of where Iran/Persia is located geopolitically.

Bob Seely: Miri, would you like to add anything?

Miri Eisin: I am going to do an enormous zoom-out from Iraq and through Iran, the different countries that we are talking about, which are overwhelmingly Muslim in different types—both Sunni, both Shi'a, more religious, less religious. Half the population is under the age of between 25 and 30, which is vastly different from the western world and from the UK, or for that matter even Israel, even though we are an exception.

I say that because a country like Iran is now topping 90 million and a country like Turkey is topping 90 million. We are talking about very populous countries. Turkey is Sunni; Iran has a Shi'ite majority. Again, they all have minorities, but I set that in the background because religion is an issue. Do you want to argue with somebody about religion, about the diversity of religion or about the different interpretations of religion? The five largest—most populous—Muslim countries in the world are not in the Middle East and they are not Arabic-speaking. They are mostly in Asia—Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh—and then you get to Nigeria and Egypt.

I say that as background, because when we talk about religion, the religious issue is in the conflict. Any time something happens—if you call an event the al-Quds or al-Aqsa Flood or Tufan, if that is what you call it, and you say the words "al-Aqsa" and "al-Quds", you are not just talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. You are not just talking about something that is local; you are making a statement that will touch a nerve for 2.2 billion Muslims in the world. I understand that, but to me that is part of the challenge.

Israel took responsibility, took authority, conquered Jerusalem, applied Israeli law to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is beyond the jewel in the crown. On the one hand, it could be this amazing aspect, but to say all the different terms for Jerusalem, both in Arabic and in Hebrew—"al-Quds", "al-Aqsa", "Yerushalayim"—means that religion is in the room. We cannot disconnect it.

It goes beyond the immediate Israeli-Palestinian conflict and who gets the honour of being sovereign over the holy places. It is something that ignites the world. Iran is the one that put together in this Islamic regime



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the al-Quds day, which the Shi'ite regime under Khomeini established in and around 1980 or 1981 in the upcoming Ramadan. In the UK, the al-Quds day, which was instigated—again, this isn't about the religious aspect—it was done as the last Friday of the month of Ramadan, no matter when that is. It is a relatively new anniversary. It is in the religious realm of Ramadan. It is specifically the al-Quds/Jerusalem day. It is now used as a very strong political element: as a Palestinian political element worldwide, as a Muslim one against, again, the Israeli rule over Jerusalem. Don't ignore it; it is part of it, and it's a touchy one, because it goes way beyond the immediate conflict of Israel-Palestine. It goes into the realm of belief, of religion, of al-Quds/Jerusalem as a city. Yerushalayim—I mean, what do you do in that sense with that holy city and who gets the honour of being sovereign there?

I jumped all over the place on that one—sorry.

Dr Khalidi: Could I just say a couple of words here?

Chair: Go on, although we are starting to run out of time—

Dr Khalidi: As the only Muslim in the room.

Bob Seely: Yes. Sorry, I should have come to you—apologies.

Dr Khalidi: It's okay. There are a couple of things. First of all, of course religion is important. It has always been part of what is at stake here. These were largely secular national movements, although religion was always a part of them, but religion as an element in this war has increased on both sides as a result of the failure to end this conflict.

If you go back and look at the role of religion, it played a role in 1929 and it played a role in other periods in history, but it has grown more and more important, especially in recent decades, as a result of a failure to end this conflict. The international community, which helped to create this conflict, has an obligation to bring it down, to end it. I do not think that that obligation is seen as seriously as it should be, whether by the United States or by other countries.

The other thing I would say is that for all of its exploitation of religion and for all of the importance of religion to the Iranian regime—it is an Islamic Republic, after all—I see Iran as a state operating on the basis of *raison d'état* or national interest. It is playing a game in the Middle East that I do not think is entirely or even largely driven by religion. It is obviously able to use religious tropes in different ways with its different allies all over the Muslim world. If this conflict could be ended in a just and sustainable manner, it would remove any possibility of its exploitation for religious purposes.

The last thing I want to say is about Jerusalem and the kind of creeping takeover that turned a mosque in Hebron into a place of Jewish worship and Muslim worship. The takeover of the Haram al-Ibrahim in decades past is something that people see happening in the Haram al-Sharif—the al-Aqsa mosque—today. I was there less than a year ago, and the



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beginning of Jewish prayer there, which had never happened previously, is an enormous provocation to Muslims worldwide. Iran and other countries may be stirring this up on a religious basis, in my view for entirely cynical *raisons d'état*.

The way to deal with this is first of all to end this conflict, which the international community has an obligation to do, since it helped to create it; and secondly to stand up to the kind of moves that are being made systematically by Israeli Governments to slowly but surely erode the protections for worship by Muslims and expand this area into a jointly shared prayer area.

We are not talking about the Kotel plaza or historical areas of Jewish worship; we are talking about the Haram al-Sharif and the area around the Dome of the Rock. That area has now become a contested area in religious terms, essentially because of actions taken by this Israeli Government and earlier Israeli Governments. I do not see the international community saying or doing anything about this. If you want to stop religion creating an even greater level of conflict, something should be done about this.

Chair: Thank you, Dr Khalidi. I want to get through two more questions, on something that is very important, but we are going to need very concise answers, please.

Q233 Henry Smith: Talking about a sustainable and stable future, we often hear about a two-state solution. What are the panel's thoughts about a three-state solution, about a confederation, and about the West Bank returning to Jordan and Gaza returning to Egypt? I am just looking to the future, and I am interested to get your perspectives on what that might look like.

Miri Eisin: In a Dr Seuss sense, I am going to say, "One state, two state, three state, four." I have already said that two states is something that I would call a compromise—a historic compromise, not a happily ever after. It is a historic compromise that I also support because one state is either one Palestine, the Hamas version—I am not alive then; I do not like that version—or one state where Israel is the Jewish dominant force and the Palestinians are either second-class citizens or transported, as Professor Khalidi said, and I oppose that completely.

As I am a very proud Zionist, and I think the idea of having one Jewish nation state is as relevant in 2024 as it was from the 19th century and onward, I arrive at two states as the compromise. One state either is not democratic and Jewish, or it is not Jewish and you lose that Zionist idea, or it is everybody killing each other. In that sense, I think that the UK ruling here from the 1930s, the international community in 1947 as an idea, and the continuation of that two-state resolution is the one that stands. But as I said, it is not a happily ever after.

Why "three state", or four? The separation of the Gaza strip from the Palestinian Authority in 2007, when Hamas took over, has put us in this



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present situation where you have these two separate entities. I absolutely do not think that is the endgame, but I say it right now because I think that the Israeli policy over the last 15 years has very much been about separating the two. It has definitely brought us—in that sense, the Israeli position—further to where we are.

How do you put the Gaza strip back into it? I think that the Gaza strip needs to be a part of future Palestine. Egypt never wanted it, does not want it and will not want it in the future. Egypt did not allow in Palestinian refugees in 1948. It has built up, right now, several very big walls—not that you cannot get over a wall—to ensure that no Palestinians can get there again. It is not about the Gaza strip being part of Egypt. It never was: Egypt always separated it. But how do you arrive at getting back into a connection between the Gaza strip and the West Bank/East Jerusalem area? I do not have the solution right now on hand. I think it is doable, but not right now; I agree with both Gershon and Professor Khalidi. We are too emotional about it right now, but it needs to be done. How do you do it? Yes, you deal with Hamas, but you have to sideline in that sense to be able to bring them together.

That is “One state, two state, three state.” I should just say that “four state” is an Israeli term that I have used. Those extreme Messianic Jews who live in the West Bank and are part of the people who live in the West Bank—they certainly do not represent all of them—have stated themselves that they are going towards a Messianic Jewish state. That is not one I want to live in.

Dr Khalidi: As Colonel Eisin said, Egypt does not want the Gaza strip, never considered it part of its territory and will not in the future, I would argue. The same is true for Jordan; King Hussein separated Jordan from the West Bank. I have not seen any indication that Jordan would under any circumstances accept taking the West Bank or any other part of what was Mandatory Palestine. That is not on the cards.

Personally, I feel that whether we are talking about a one-state, two-state or confederal or cantonal solution, the most important thing is that everybody has absolutely equal rights: that the national, political, civil and religious rights of everybody be respected, and that they have equal rights.

The last thing I will say—I know that you have another session—is that anyone who talks to me about a two-state solution has to talk to me about ending the occupation and removing the settlements that were created to prevent a two-state solution. A two-state solution would oblige the Palestinians to accept 22% of their ancestral homeland. If 60% of that is taken up by settlements, you are not talking about a two-state solution.

If you are not ending occupation and ending Israeli security control—which this Government has said it wants to extend indefinitely, and which every previous Government, going back to Rabin, has said that it would continue—you are not talking about a state. You are talking about a



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Bantustan or an Indian reservation; you can describe it as you will. You are talking about a one-state and one-Bantustan solution.

You have to end the occupation, and people do not talk about that. People do not talk about settlements when they talk about a two-state solution. This airy-fairy discussion of two states does not come to grips with the reason that we do not have a two-state solution. That is because you have 70,000 Israeli settlers. That is because you have a permanent occupation, a 56-year occupation; three generations of Palestinians have grown up under it.

I could go on about what you would need to do to have a just two-state solution or a just one-state solution. The basic, absolute necessity is equal rights for everybody. If the solution does not embody that, it will not be sustainable, it will not last and it will not be just.

Chair: I will bring in Mr Gorenberg for the last word.

Gershon Gorenberg: On the comments about Jordan and Egypt, I agree completely with what my colleagues said. I agree with Colonel Eisin that the proposal of one state is a proposal for continued conflict. The one-state idea solves the issue of borders and leaves all the other issues, including settlements, holy places, refugees and so on to supposedly be worked out by a Government in which Jews and Palestinians are virtually equal. That is not a proposal for an end of the conflict, but a proposal for continuing the conflict in a different form. A two-state agreement, in fact, requires the end of the occupation. I have already commented on the fact that I think that, difficult as it would be to return settlers to the state of Israel, it is a realistic possibility, and one that should not be seen as the absolute hurdle to a two-state outcome.

Finally, regarding the idea of a confederation, a confederation is an agreement between two sovereign states. The EU is a confederation. The confederation is not an alternative to a two-state agreement, but a variation on it. It is perhaps a very positive variation on it, but it cannot be discussed as being something other than a two-state outcome. What we need to talk about is the means, including international involvement, security arrangements and return of settlers. That would bring about a two-state agreement that in fact provides for the realisation of the individual, but also the national rights of both peoples.

Chair: I had two more questions to ask, but I am afraid we will have to wrap up. Thank you all ever so much for giving evidence; we are very grateful for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alistair Burt, Dr Gershon Baskin and Samer Sinijlawi.

Q234 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Will you all please give a quick 20-second introduction of yourselves? We will then go straight into questions.

Dr Baskin: I am Dr Gershon Baskin. I am currently working for a UK NGO called International Communities Organisation. We work in conflict zones with failed peace processes, so I am very much in the right place.

Samer Sinijlawi: I am Samer Sinijlawi, a Palestinian political activist from East Jerusalem and the chairman of the Jerusalem Development Fund.

Alistair Burt: I am Alistair Burt, a former Member of Parliament in the UK. I was Minister for the Middle East for five years, on and off, between 2010 and 2019. I am still engaged in travelling and talking about the region and working with a number of NGOs there.

Chair: We are grateful to have all three of you here. As we know, this is about focusing on what we can do going forward.

Q235 **Royston Smith:** Alistair, how far do you think the Abraham accords and perhaps the potential for Saudi-Israel normalisation have improved the prospects of a resolution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Alistair Burt: There were positive aspects to the Abraham accords, and other aspects. The positive ones were that they gave a projection of a Middle East that could look different—a Middle East in which Israel was plugged in firmly as part of a new economic region, very much to the benefit of both Israel and the Gulf states that were engaged with it. It gave a sense that the Middle East could move on. There was also a security aspect to it in relation to the Gulf states' relationship with Israel, which had been going on for many years but not necessarily as publicly as it became.

However, it was not the answer, for two reasons. Firstly, and mainly, it ignored the Palestinian issue. It gave a sense that the future of the region could be sorted without dealing with the Palestinian issue. That did a couple of things. In Israel, it reinforced a view among certain Israeli politicians that they had been right all along. The Palestinian issue was marginal, it could be put to one side, it could be managed and controlled, and they would have a good relationship with Arab states regardless. So it gave sense to that. For Palestinians, it looked as though this was another abandonment and this was an abandonment by those immediately around them.

It was part of President Trump's desire to create the deal of the century and to sort it all out. I remember going to see Jason Greenblatt on a number of occasions as they were negotiating about the deal of the century, and I always told him three things: firstly, do not humiliate the Palestinians when you produce the deal; secondly, make sure there is



something for us to work on—we know it will lean more towards Israel than the Palestinians, but leave us something to work on; and thirdly, do not think this can all be solved by a cheque—it is not all about money.

To a certain extent, the good things of the Abraham accords showed the way forward. If only more leverage was used in the compiling of the accords and then afterwards by the states who obviously want a relationship with Israel. That Saudi relationship that you mentioned could be absolutely fundamental, but the Saudis had always made it clear that the Palestinian issue had to be an element of it. It seemed to me that it waxed and waned a bit—sometimes it was very important; sometimes it was slightly less important—but now it is clear that in any future normalisation between Israel and the neighbouring states, the Palestinian issue now has to be part of the resolution. That, I think, is a good thing.

Q236 Royston Smith: Do you think the 7 October massacre, and the subsequent awful, terrible war that we are seeing unfold, has made a two-state solution more or less achievable? I know that there are people in Palestine—in the West Bank and elsewhere—who are saying that a two-state solution is no longer the solution.

Dr Baskin: I think it is quite the opposite. I think it is very clear that while over the past years the two-state solution was thought by many, including myself, to no longer be viable, the October war has brought the two-state solution back to the international table, and to the Israeli and Palestinian table as well, even though it is very difficult for Israelis and Palestinians to confront it because we are dealing with two traumatised peoples.

It is clearer than ever that while it was generally thought that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needed to be resolved between the Israelis and the Palestinians alone—it was always said “They have to want it more than us,” with “us” being the international community—that is no longer the case. This war, as we have seen, has gone beyond the borders of Israel and Palestine, and it affects regional security, international shipping, and global security in general.

In the international community, essentially what you are doing here today in Parliament is a very important step in the right direction towards understanding the international dimensions of this conflict and the urgency of bringing it to a resolution, which has not been the case in the last years. The two-state solution is back, up front and centre, and there is probably no other credible resolution to this conflict.

Samer Sinijlawi: We need to learn something from the Abraham accords and the experiences of the United Arab Emirates. More importantly, if we are judging the possibilities of the Saudis coming on board, especially now after the crisis of 7 October and the war in Gaza, the Saudis are becoming the rescue boat for both Israelis and Palestinians. It is maybe the exit out of this war, because they are the ones who may be able to motivate Israelis to go into a major political breakthrough that includes the Palestinians. They are the ones that can play a big part in the reconstruction of Gaza, and they are also able to create some kind of

Arab-Palestinian arrangements that will unlock the necessity of creating security arrangements that will satisfy the Israelis so that they are able to withdraw.

We need to listen carefully to what the Saudis say, and we need to believe what they say. They say that without a clear recognition of a Palestinian state on the borders of '67, with East Jerusalem as the capital, they are not interested in being part of any kind of process. This is their condition, not only because it is based on the Arab Peace Initiative, but also because the war in Gaza is becoming a domestic issue—it is a very sensitive issue among the Saudi public.

Whether 7 October and the war can be seen as having either distanced us from a political breakthrough, or brought us closer to it, depends on how major influential western powers react—especially the UK and USA. There is now only one tool that can help to bring the Saudis or the region more into a dynamic of expanding the Abraham accords, and that is recognising the Palestinian state. The two-state solution could be saved by a critical-mass recognition of the state of Palestine, especially by the UK and USA. This will turn the current breakdown into a breakthrough towards peace.

This recognition cannot be more easy and straightforward, since the state of Palestine designates territory and population, and has significant international recognition, which fulfils the attributes of statehood according to international law. In fact, today, we have 30 countries that have diplomatic missions in Ramallah, and more than 130 states recognise the state of Palestine. The UN recognised the state of Palestine as a non-member observer state.

But the UK needs to do this right, and I suggest the following recommendation. First, the UK, and the USA of course, should not condition this recognition to Israel's consent; second, they should keep the borders of the state of Palestine to be determined in negotiation based on United Nations Security Council resolution 242; and third, this recognition should lead to concrete steps, including inviting the state of Palestine to establish an embassy in London and transforming the consulate general of the UK in East Jerusalem to be the embassy of Palestine. This is very important to help dynamics that will create a possibility now to end the war and end this conflict forever.

It has been proven that this conflict cannot be managed and it has been proven that any peace development and normalisation among Arab or Muslim states with Israel without having the Palestinian element solved will not bring any peace or security to the Israelis and will not fulfil the national aspirations for Palestinians.

Alistair Burt: Let me go back and concentrate a bit on the impact of 7 October on a potential solution. Firstly, I take the view, which has come from talking to so many people in the region, that 7 October has changed everything. There is no going back to 6 October. There is no going back to a faux status quo, where the situation could be managed and would just drift on. No Arab state is going to put money into rebuilding Gaza if it is



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going to be destroyed again in two or three years with a further outbreak of the conflict, and no one I have spoken to can see a possibility of resolving the issues in Gaza without also including West Bank occupation, East Jerusalem and Jerusalem.

So it is absolutely as Gershon said: something that had indeed slipped down the agenda is now back on the agenda. It is absolutely true to say that over the years, when a point has been reached at which it is just too difficult to go on, people have not gone on. It was inevitable that sooner or later something catastrophic would happen. People have been warning about it for years. Looking back over my notes, I was talking about urgency in 2011 when I was making visits to Israel and to the occupied territories. We all knew it was underlying, but it slipped down everybody's agenda, including that of the Arab states.

The awfulness of 7 October has changed everything, I think. If it has changed everything, what are the ways forward? I have always believed that two-state has the best opportunity in the absence of anything else. I am sure you want to explore that, but before we go on I would just say that it is very easy here not to fully understand the degree of trauma that is affecting both Israel and Gaza. The degree of trauma in Israel is immense. Talking to friends there, people can barely think about anything but security. This is not the time that rational decisions are going to be made about the long-term future, which means other people have to be involved in that process.

It is the same in Gaza, for obvious reasons, as we see happening every day. But also, in this country, we must not underestimate, either, the impact on the Arab world, which has been immense. There is only one narrative in the Arab world and it is not about 7 October; it is about occupation. It is very clear. Therefore, the idea of resolving this in some artificial way—we sort of manage Gaza and we go on—is impossible.

That throws up, out of all these awful circumstances, the opportunity finally to do something and not to turn away when it is too difficult. I think that opens up new opportunities for the United Kingdom and for friends both of Israel and the Palestinians and the Arab world to reach the conclusion that we have not been able to do in the past and to play a part. It is not for us to decide: there must be a determination by the Israelis and Palestinians themselves. Friends have failed in the past, but maybe this time we can help.

Chair: I am desperately aware of the lack of nuance and detail in discussions around this issue, but I am also aware that we have a lot of questions we want to ask you today, so I am going to ask for nuanced, short answers if possible.

Alistair Burt: Nuanced and short?

Chair: I know—I recognise that I am testing.

Alistair Burt: You are a stern Chair.



Q237 Bob Seely: Samer and Alistair, I completely understand and accept the argument that the two-state solution is back on the agenda, in part because of the horribleness of what has happened. The argument is that if you recognise a Palestinian state now, you are effectively reacting to Hamas's violence, and therefore diplomatically now is not the time to recognise a Palestinian state. I want to ask Samer first and then Alistair what you would say to that.

Samer Sinijlawi: I have been facing this argument from lots of Israelis. My answer is as follows: if you recognise a Palestinian state now, you don't give a prize to Hamas, because Hamas doesn't have a two-state solution on its agenda; you are giving a prize to moderate Palestinians, just like me, who are ready to live in coexistence with Israel, side by side. It is very much the wrong conclusion that recognising the Palestinian state is giving a prize to Hamas. I think Hamas has a different agenda.

Q238 Bob Seely: Thank you—that was a great short answer. Very quickly on that, if you do it with the boundaries that you want, isn't that going to badly damage the UK's relationship with Israel, which is clearly important to this country?

Samer Sinijlawi: Well, then you need to decide. If you really support the two-state solution, you need to take some steps towards it. We have a short window of time. If the train leaves the station of the two-state solution, it will be too late. We in this room, and every policymaker in the world, can either be those who signed the death certificate of the two-state solution or the ones who saved it and signed its birth certificate. It is now or never, forever.

Alistair Burt: The Hamas attack of 7 October was not in pursuit of a Palestinian state. It was an act of terror, and it was to pursue Hamas's ideology of the elimination of Jews. Recognising a Palestinian state is not connected with that in any way. I entirely agree with what Samer said.

Q239 Bob Seely: So you would do it sooner rather than later—you would do it now.

Alistair Burt: No, that wasn't your question. What David Cameron has done has changed the nature of a potential recognition. It had always been assumed that recognition would come towards the end of a negotiated process. In effect, that put the power in the hands of those who were negotiating and, I put it to you, particularly those who did not want a Palestinian state at all. If you make sure your negotiations are not going to end, you are never going to get the recognition of a Palestinian state. Clearly, some Israeli politicians wanted that.

Q240 Bob Seely: Right, so Hamas and the Netanyahu Government, effectively.

Alistair Burt: I don't consider Hamas a state entity that can take part in negotiations such as this.

Bob Seely: Well, there are two people who don't want a two-state solution: Hamas, who want the destruction of Israel—



Alistair Burt: And certain elements in Israel.

Bob Seely: And the Netanyahu Government.

Alistair Burt: That's right. Bringing the potential for recognition at an earlier stage in the process as a catalyst rather than a conclusion changes the nature of how that decision would be made and what would follow from it.

Dr Baskin: I want to respond to the notion that this would be a prize for Hamas. Hamas can be defeated militarily, and perhaps Israel can ensure that Hamas cannot govern in Gaza, but defeating the idea and ideology of Hamas is done by making Palestine real for Palestinians. Palestinians need to understand that they can begin to live for Palestine and don't need to die as martyrs for Palestine, and that is done through the recognition of the state of Palestine.

Let us not forget that, as Samer said, 139 nations in the world have recognised the state of Palestine. With the exception of Sweden, none of the OECD nations have done it. It is time to take yourselves seriously. You have talked about a two-state solution for 30 years. It is time to remove Israel's veto on the question of statehood. This should not be an Israeli decision: it should be a decision of the international community.

In order to counter Israeli claims that this is against Israel, I would, at the same time as recognising the state of Palestine, call on the nations of the world who have yet to recognise the state of Israel to do so. I believe that there are 160 or 166 countries of the 193 member states of the United Nations that have recognised the state of Israel, but there are states that have not. So while Britain goes ahead and recognises Palestine, which should be done now—it shouldn't be postponed, and we should not talk about some imaginary path to statehood; Palestinians have to know that statehood is being taken for real and that the Israelis are going to be challenged on the need to roll back the occupation—at the same time it should call on the states that have not recognised Israel to do so as well.

Q241 **Henry Smith:** On preparing for a two-state solution now, what realistically needs to happen? Is that an end to the settlements in the West Bank and, indeed, Israeli settlers leaving those places in the West Bank? In terms of the other challenge, who should be representing the Palestinian state? We have already heard that it cannot be Hamas, but in your opinion who should be doing that?

Dr Baskin: First, I think it is important to realise that Prime Minister Netanyahu's days are numbered. It is not tomorrow, and maybe not the day after tomorrow, but we are at the end of the Netanyahu era and Netanyahu's ability to block the future negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and the other Arab states is going to end sooner rather than later. There will be mass demonstrations as soon as there is a serious pause in the war, calling for new elections in Israel—it is already beginning.



The current Palestinian Authority Government has resigned. Samer will speak to the need to push President Abbas to the side to be a ceremonial President. The Palestinians need representative leadership that is acceptable in the West Bank and Gaza. That is their decision and they will make those choices, but there will eventually be a need for elections there.

In future, negotiations need to take place on a regional basis, not a bilateral Israeli-Palestinian basis—the table is too unbalanced for that. We need a regional architecture for security, stability and economic development. It must include Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Emirates and Bahrain, and especially the Saudis. This will be the framework for future negotiations between the state of Israel and the state of Palestine—negotiations which are based on two member states of the United Nations, with one member state of the United Nations occupying another. That automatically changes the parameters and the dynamics of the negotiations, which until now have been between a recognised state and a disputed territory. It is not a disputed territory; it will be the state of Palestine. The borders will have to be determined in negotiations, but Palestine must be on an equal footing in terms of statehood in order to produce a successful negotiation.

Q242 Chair: I have a quick question for you, Samer. Does Palestine need, essentially, a Mandela figure? We have the likes of Marwan Barghouti, Nasser al-Kidwa and Mohammed Dahlan—I have mispronounced all their names, for which I apologise sincerely. Does it need a unifying figure who can realise Palestinian aspirations? Given the resignation of the Prime Minister and the PA, are we further away from that than ever before?

Samer Sinjlawi: It is clear that all the recent polls in the last 10 years have showed that 90% of the Palestinians would like to see President Mahmoud Abbas leaving political life. They consider the current regime in the West Bank as a corrupt regime. They accuse the current regime of President Abbas of being one that violates human rights. He has cancelled the Legislative Council and he has control of the judicial system, so there is a lot of criticism from the Palestinian side. Unfortunately, the elections that were fixed for 2021 were cancelled.

Now, it is not the time for elections, because Gaza will not be able to participate in any national elections until we bring back life to Gaza. We need to find a way to allow Mr Abbas to transfer himself into being an honorary President, a ceremonial President—just like the President in Israel, Italy or Germany—and hand over all his power to a Prime Minister who can form a Government that can unify Palestinians, geographically and also all the factions. This is possible, but he will not do it voluntarily; it needs some kind of pressure. It is not only a Palestinian, internal issue; I think it is now a regional and international issue. We expect that donors and those who are now studying the possibility of recognising the state of Palestine could do some kind of diplomacy in this direction.

There are a lot of names that can unify the Palestinians. You have mentioned some of them. There are Dr Nasser Kidwa, Mohammed



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Dahlan—Mohammed Dahlan doesn't want to take any position, but he can help a lot. Dr Nasser Kidwa is a diplomat. He is from Fatah. He is accepted by the street, in the West Bank and in Gaza. He can be the perfect person to form such a Government.

Dr Baskin: He is also the nephew of Yasser Arafat. Don't forget, Samer, that the nephew of Yasser Arafat is also symbolic.

Samer Sinijlawi: Yes. There was the news yesterday about the resignation of the Government of Mohammad Shtayyeh and the expectation that President Abbas will ask Mohammad Mustafa to form a new Government. This is cosmetic change that will not be satisfying—not for the Palestinian street, in the West Bank and Gaza, or for the international community. It should be serious changes that can give the Palestinians hope that now they can replace the corruption in the West Bank and the destruction in Gaza with a path of construction.

Chair: That is very helpful. Alistair?

Alistair Burt: You were asking about the steps to two-state negotiations. Could I first say this in answer to your question? For there to be a Mandela, there has to be a de Klerk, and we don't see that either.

In relation to the steps to two-state negotiations, I have argued or put to the Foreign Office over the past few months a sense, which I am sure is shared by everybody, that a series of parallel conversations need to be going on. First and foremost, you have to end the conflict, as Samer and Gershon said. You end the conflict; you return the hostages.

Secondly, you have to consider what will happen to Gaza the day after. Everybody we have spoken to in the region says that in order to deal with the day after in Gaza, you have to have a horizon that is longer term, because that is the way to get the agreements you need on Gaza. Thirdly, you have the discussion about the longer-term future of Gaza—not just the immediate authority but the longer term. Fourthly, that has to be as part of the overall settlement, which will involve the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as Gaza. These can't be sequential, because we don't have the time; they have to be parallel. The talks on all these things need to be going on now, because they are all equally important, but of course the most immediate is the conflict. But that is why the conversations need to be taking place at the same time.

The international community clearly has a role. The friends in the region are vital, as both Gershon and Samer made clear. There is a role for western states, which should be involved. I think the United Kingdom has a serious convening role to play and should be doing so. I think this needs a lot of envoys, a lot of people working on it at the same time and with a common purpose.

But those are the steps. As part of that, the overall settlement, the overall resolution, which may be two states or something different, that clearly



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has to be part of it, but it can no longer be a veto to dealing with the other conversations.

The last point I would make is this. Don't neglect civil society, either. Civil society should play a large part in this. We were the first Government to recognise something called the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, in 2018. That has got a lot of support. And there are groups—remember that 20% of the population of Israel are Arab Israelis. One of the things that hasn't happened post 7 October has been the intercommunal violence that we saw in 2021. There are those who are living together in those communities, self-policing at the moment to make sure there is no trouble—so I hear from people in the area. When people are trying to make out that nobody can live with each other anymore, that is blatantly not true for those who are living together.

So that field, civil society, the work of ALLMEP, the Alliance for Middle East Peace, and those who work in that sort of area—there is something called the Arab initiative. It's not the Arab accords or the Abraham accords; it's the Abraham initiative—people working together. Civil society should play a part, and that needs to be parallel with the political negotiations. But the opportunities are there, and this time we must not miss them.

Chair: Thank you. Fabian wants to pick up exactly that issue.

Q243 **Fabian Hamilton:** Thank you, Chair. Gershon, it is good to see you again; it is a while since we last met here in the Houses of Parliament. That reminded me that 20 years ago we were sitting in this room having almost the same conversation, with one difference: we did not have the horrors of what is going on today in Gaza.

What I wanted to ask you all first is this: if there is a two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living together, how do you think conflict could be prevented between them? Is it realistic to suggest that a state of Palestine should be demilitarised? If so, how could it really be independent? What about an international peacekeeping force at the start? We know that has not succeeded; it has failed more than once. What would be different this time? How can we actually achieve what everybody in this room wants and which you have all put to us so clearly and articulately? Gershon, do you want to come in first?

Dr Baskin: Sure. First of all, we start with what Samer said: there needs to be a legitimate and accepted Palestinian governance in Gaza and the West Bank, replacing what currently exists. That government would be inviting a multinational Arab-led force to Gaza. We have indications that several of the Arab nations would agree to come in if they were invited by the Palestinians. They would need a limited mandate of one or two years maximum, of course, during which time they would help to create stability and security. That would also enable Israel to withdraw from Gaza, and that has to happen; the longer Israel stays in Gaza, the more we can be 100% sure that there will be armed insurgency.

On the question of a demilitarised Palestinian state, in all negotiations that have taken place between Israel and the PLO over the past 30 years, the



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Palestinians accepted the idea of a non-militarised Palestinian state. They would have an effective police force, would need to deal with issues of terrorism and co-operate with Israeli intelligence, but it would not be a militarised state in the sense of having an army with offensive capabilities.

I think this is acceptable to most Palestinian negotiators and it can be explained to the Palestinian public as well. There is essentially no one to defend themselves against with an army. As the late Faisal al-Husseini used to say, "It would be a waste to spend our resources on a Palestinian tank when we really need to put them into developing a Palestinian computer."

We will need some kind of international third-party roles along the Jordan river—perhaps on both sides of the river—along the borders between Gaza and Israel and between Gaza and Egypt. We can talk about different kinds of forces, but they are going to have to be temporary because in the end the Israelis and Palestinians have to provide security for each other. If Israel does not allow the Palestinians to have freedom and dignity, Israel will not have security; if the Palestinians do not allow Israel to have security, they will not have freedom and dignity—that is the basic bottom line here.

Lastly, when we do negotiate, we are going to have to do it very differently from in the past. There have to be negotiations first on the lack of trust because we signed six agreements in the past and breached them all. We are going to need benchmarked agreements that will be determined by third-party monitors and verifiers—very much of the kind that existed during the arms control talks between the US and the USSR, when third parties played a role in monitoring and verifying the implementation of agreements.

We have a history of not implementing our commitments and we cannot allow that to happen again, so we will need trusted third parties to play that monitoring and verifying role before we are required to take additional steps that are dangerous and risk our security. We need to learn from the lessons of the past.

By the way, I have written extensively on this. I was told that I could mention my book *In Pursuit of Peace in Israel and Palestine*, published by Vanderbilt University Press. It basically contains 38 years of insights and lessons learned from the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Samer Sinjlawi: It is a very complicated issue. Let me start by saying that it is a matter of urgency that we should now create a mechanism of security arrangements inside Gaza and on the borders with Israel to allow this war to stop. For us, it is so urgent. Each hour counts, because currently we have 200 victims a day in Gaza. A child is killed every six minutes in Gaza. On the Palestinian side, we need to see an end to this as soon as possible. Without providing some security arrangements that convince the Israelis to withdraw, we are not going to be there.



The only way is that a reputable, acceptable Palestinian political body—Government—that is accepted by the Palestinian street and by donors and countries like Saudi Arabia calls and asks for an Arab force to come at the beginning, gradually take the keys to Gaza from the Israelis, and then deliver it to the new Government. In this process, we can create a security mechanism that can guarantee and satisfy the security needs of Israel. It is very simple: 7 October would not have happened if there were 30 Israeli tanks and some Apache helicopters on the borders with Gaza. There was no army there.

So in one way or another, everybody learned some lessons from 7 October. The Israelis cannot take away their security arrangements, in addition to the Arab force on the other side of the borders. More importantly, if the Palestinians start feeling a hope—a light at the end of the tunnel—then the dynamics and depression among Palestinians, which are the weather for violence, will disappear.

We need also to work very hard on the education system on both sides, and we need to fight the incitement that exists both on the Palestinian and on the Israeli side. We need also to work very well on the media. The media always shows the bad side of the opponent. We need to start making good media tools that show the good side of the opponent. A lot of things need to happen, but what is most urgent now is that we create a mechanism that is such that the Israelis are happy to withdraw from Gaza and stop a catastrophe of starvation and health problems there. This needs to be done immediately—now, not tomorrow.

Q244 Fabian Hamilton: Thank you very much, Samer. Alistair, it is great to see you. Do you think that in this—hopefully not hypothetical but soon to be real—two-state solution, Palestinians will feel secure if they are demilitarised? Would that also be an opportunity for the Israelis, not to demilitarise, but at least to tone down some of the immense force that they have?

Alistair Burt: I think, Fabian, that we are some way from that. Remember Miri's comments in the session that we have just heard. As far as I am concerned, she described accurately the sense in which, at the end of the day, Jews feel alone. Who stands with them? Who is going to provide their security if they do not themselves? I think, at this stage, it is asking a great deal to get to the answer to that question by easing their defences or changing anything.

Of course, ultimately, security comes from the fact that you do not believe that your neighbour is going to threaten you. That is when most of us feel secure. That is what has happened in Europe, at least until very recently, which is changing our perspective on things. That is the heart of it, but we are nowhere near that confidence at this stage.

I think the central point of your question, about how people feel secure and the importance of that, was answered by both colleagues: it is in recognising that both Palestinians and Israelis have a vested interest in each other's security. I wrote to the Foreign Secretary when he was



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appointed, and I said to him, "We should be aiming for this: there is no justice or security for Palestine without security for Israel, and no security for Israel without justice and security for Palestine. Ultimately, each must be as convinced of the need to deliver for the other as for themselves, for they cannot have what they wish for unless the others have what they wish for also." That is the key: getting that sense of confidence that what I want for myself is good for you and that what you want for me is good for you too. That is a build-up of trust over a period of time, and that is what many people have to work for. Ultimately, that is where you want to get to.

I think the external threat is still there for both. As long as there are states talking about the destruction of the state of Israel, Israel is going to want to be protected, and it is entitled to feel that. Equally, there are dangers from within, extremists who exploit. We have not yet explored the risks and dangers of what may happen in Jerusalem. Certainly, Palestinian politics can be destabilised by extremists, who will say that they haven't got the horizon—the hope that Samer spoke of. Until that is dealt with, the risk of extremism and violence within is there as a threat to security. I go back to what I said earlier, that there are several things to be discussed in parallel.

Q245 Fabian Hamilton: Is it true to suggest that for many decades—certainly the past 20 years—that the extremes in both Israel and Palestine have dictated the agenda for the more moderate elements? Yes or no?

Alistair Burt: I think the evidence would suggest the answer is yes, on both counts.

Israeli politics has got more extreme. The elections of November 2022 demonstrated that, and the addition in Cabinet of those who are extreme and, indeed, Jewish supremacists, to a degree of risks. The fact that some would say that Judea and Samaria are at war with the state of Israel. There is that extremism, and we have seen what has happened in relation to Hamas. There is also the rise in support for Hamas in the Arab world, because they are seen to be the resisters. As for the Palestinian Authority, the sense among Palestinians has waned because the Palestinian Authority had not been seen as being able to protect Palestinians from the IDF or the settlers.

The rise in extremism in all different elements has helped create the awful circumstances we have now, but also the opportunity finally to deal with it, because things cannot go on as they are for the people who are suffering most, the victims on all sides.

Q246 Chair: Alistair, can I take you back to something you said to Fabian? We are talking about two-state solutions. You said earlier it was miraculous that we have not seen conflict within communities in Israel, given that 20% of the community are of Arab background. Lots of people lost faith in the concept of a one-state solution before 7 October. As you said, 7 October does change everything.

Essentially, how would we have, long term, a state where you do not see



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conflicts? A lot of the people speaking to us about a one-state solution were young Palestinians saying, "We have given up hope on the idea of a two-state solution." How would you have, in the long term, a state where you did not see mass civil war within one state?

Alistair Burt: I do not know, Chair, to be honest. That is why I have always tended to believe that a two-state solution was more likely, because I was not sure I could see a one-state solution that would satisfy both the state and nationalistic aspirations of the Palestinian people and their civil rights, and at the same time deliver a Jewish democratic state for the Israeli Jewish population. I could not see how both could be worked out. A state in which everybody has the same rights, I cannot see the present structure of Jewish Israel feeling safe or secure with that. That is why the two states might have been a better answer.

From what we know about what is going on inside Israel at the moment, there are the things that we spoke of. Whether or not that could be a national movement, I am not close enough to say. We have two people more expert than I am in relation to that.

Samer Sinjlawi: Let me tell you something. I really know Palestinians very well; I know Israelis very well. If the two-state will not be activated or implemented before the end of this year, you should say goodbye to that option. The younger generations of Palestinians think more of the one-state option. We have a limited time window, and we have this current political elite generation that is able to negotiate and settle into a two-state solution.

Most Palestinians would welcome a two-state solution, and welcome a one-state with equal rights solution. What they refuse is the current two-floor state solution, in which the Israelis are on the noble floor and the Palestinians are on the servant floor. That cannot continue and it is a matter of urgency.

I am 52 years old and was born in Jerusalem. Until now, I am not a citizen of any state. Israel does not guarantee me citizenship and Israel is preventing the creation of a Palestinian state where I can be a citizen. It is a basic right for any human being in the world to be a citizen of at least one state. This is an urgent issue and it should be addressed with a lot of responsibility from the international community, especially the UK, in relation to the long history of involvement of the UK in Palestine-Israel.

Dr Baskin: I think that the one-state democratic option is perhaps the utopian solution, but we live very far away from utopia. We have been killing each other for more than 100 years over a territorial expression of our identity, in which both people claim the same territory and claim that they give their identity to that territory and take their identity from it. The international community is determined, over and over again, that the best way of moving forward is through partition and through a two-state solution. I have always believed that the best road to a one-state solution is through a two-state solution where we have decades of peace and normalcy without conflict. Then, perhaps we can begin to drop borders.



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But we need to imagine a two-state solution that is built on bridges and co-operations, and not two states that are built on fence and walls that separate contact between people. We need to be very clear when we talk about a two-state solution. We are talking about reaching two states, like in Europe, that live side by side and trade with each other and share research, economy, education and so on. The two-state solution vision needs to be one that provides hope for people and one that provides opportunities for movement, social upward movement and interaction. Israelis and Palestinians need to learn each other's language; they are sister languages. We need to have active programmes, as Alistair said, in civil society that are building bridges between these communities.

The last thing that is really important to say is that I think we all have to take ourselves a lot more seriously. We have been talking about two states. We have been talking about the illegality of Israeli settlements. We need to turn those statements that we believe in into action. The occupation needs to be rolled back. There are solutions for dealing with 75% to 80% of the settlements by annexing part of the territory and doing land swaps on a one-to-one basis. There are ways to deal with the future of Jerusalem because it is a very segregated city. There are ways of dealing with the holy places. This has been mapped out. It has been worked on through 20 years of negotiations in track 1 and track 2.

In fact, I would propose a document that we encouraged former Prime Minister Olmert to draft, which concluded where his negotiations with President Abbas led to and what it would take to close those negotiations. We have shared that document both with President Abbas and with a number of other Palestinian leaders, and we find very broad acceptance of the ideas that are presented there. It is a short paper that I will send to the Committee that you could perhaps consider making part of your report to the Government. I think it is worthwhile your looking at this framework as issues that are resolvable.

Q247 Chair: Very briefly on that—I am going to take us back to Jerusalem before we finish the session—on the state of Israeli politics right now, Gershon, does it really allow for a two-state solution, or are we doing what I think is happening in whispered diplomatic corridors and talking about a post-Netanyahu two-state solution? Where are we?

Dr Baskin: We are talking about a post-Netanyahu situation and probably a post-Mahmoud Abbas situation as well. There will be changes on both sides. I think it is very important to mention that when the Palestinians eventually refine their election law, they are going to need to adopt a clause that will not allow political parties that support the armed struggle to participate in those elections. In a state, there is one sovereign and one gun, and you cannot have multiple militias.

Israel has gone through political upheavals. We saw 40 months of massive demonstrations and hundreds of thousands of Israelis taking to the streets against the proposed judicial revolution by the Netanyahu Government. That is beyond us. When we get back, when the reservists come home and we have a pause in the war—hopefully a ceasefire very soon—we are



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going to see those massive demonstrations even bigger on the streets of Israel. Eighty per cent of Israelis hold Netanyahu directly responsible for what led us to 7 October. We will have a post-Netanyahu era in the not too distant future.

Chair: What you say is interesting because, again, when Rabin was assassinated, Arafat felt he had lost his partner in this. That point about actually not only talking about post-Netanyahu but, to Samer's point again, also about post-Abbas is really important in terms of having that partnership.

Q248 Royston Smith: Which countries do we think are best placed to play a part in any future resolution? Former colonial powers, Turkey, the UK, emerging Arab powers, the United States, or even Russia or China? What sort of countries do we think are going to be part of the solution?

Dr Baskin: I will start. I think we are talking, first, about the region. We have the countries that are at peace with Israel. Egypt, Jordan, the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco all have very important roles to play. The Saudis have a crucial role to play because of the emergence of their power and the reforms that are going on in Saudi Arabia, led by Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Of course, the United States has to be involved in the process, together with the European Union. On a personal basis, I would say that we do not want American mediators at the table. They have done a horrible job in trying to negotiate this conflict in the past, but we need them to organise the guarantees that are necessary. The European Union has to stop being a payer and be a player. The UK has a crucial role to play because of historic consequences. My assessment is that the US is listening and watching very carefully what the United Kingdom is doing. I think that the United Kingdom can be very influential in leading the United States to recognise Palestine.

Lastly, it is very important to find a way to get China involved in the reconstruction of Gaza, because no one in the world knows how to build infrastructure faster, more efficiently and cheaper than the Chinese. With all the global difficulties with China these days—between the United States and others and China—that might be a good way to help the entire global economy. I think Gaza really needs Chinese ingenuity to move this forward.

Samer Sinijlawi: I think the global south is irrelevant in the Middle East. Normally, I would say that the leadership should be from the US towards achieving a breakthrough. But these days, after the amazing steps that David Cameron has been showing the whole world since he assumed his new position, I think that, for the first time, the UK is a step ahead of the Americans. If we look back to the days of Tony Blair, there was another problem in Europe that was solved because the UK led the USA towards serious involvement, and I think we can repeat that now. The UK can start some steps and motivate the Americans to follow it, and this can lead to a solution and a breakthrough. We appreciate your leadership, and we



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appreciate that you support your Government in taking these steps. I think the Americans are wishing now to see the UK taking a step ahead of them.

Alistair Burt: I would agree with all of that. Absolutely, the keys are those closest to this—Egypt and Jordan. Jordan in particular has an existential relationship with Jerusalem and the outcomes there. Egypt is obviously threatened by what is physically happening at the moment. The Gulf states are crucial; Saudi Arabia will lead those and the finance. The US and the UK have historical roles, but it is not the same as before, because there is, I think, greater regional engagement on this issue than there was 20 or 30 years ago. I think all those things are valid, and Samer's point about the global south is important as well.

It is interesting to note that people do see a role for the United Kingdom, and I am pleased with that. I have mentioned that in articles over the past year or so. I was always impressed when I was Minister that, although we are not the richest, we are not the most powerful and we are not the strongest military power, people come to us in the region because of our long history—it has not always been good, but we do know the area and we are trusted. I think this convening role that is possible for the United Kingdom is very important, and I think the Foreign Secretary has taken it on extremely well since November.

Q249 **Chair:** We have very little time left, but I just want to talk about Jerusalem. As you pointed out earlier, Alistair, it is an underlooked-at area. Could you kick us off, and then I will turn to Gershon and Samer?

Alistair Burt: Okay—I will be very brief. Danny Seidemann and Terrestrial Jerusalem were visiting a number of capitals over the last 18 months, long before 7 October, and the concerns that were building up were about the West Bank and about Jerusalem—particularly al-Aqsa and the issues that were arising there. We thought this was very much underestimated by those who were watching the situation, and that's still the case.

I have a good phrase from Terrestrial Jerusalem—it is from 2018, but it is as pertinent today—that says: "Past experience, both distant and recent, teaches us that Jerusalem is a stable, viable city when allowed to speak in its multiple voices. However, when there is an attempt to exclusively possess Jerusalem in the name of some higher order, the city erupts, often sending shock waves throughout the region and beyond." That has been happening: the attempt to exclusively occupy areas of Jerusalem that were not previously Jewish; the work of the planning authority in building out more of the population from Jerusalem; and the pressures of the Christian community, the Armenian community, in the centre of Jerusalem. This has been noticed. It is not good, and there is not enough calling out of it.

Jerusalem remains key. Al-Aqsa—the pressure is on there. We have heard voices, in particular Itamar Ben-Gvir, and what he has said about the exclusive use in Jerusalem. These are all dangerous things. When the eyes of the world are on Gaza, we must not neglect what is happening in



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Jerusalem. We must protect its opportunity to speak with its multiple voices, because it is a city for all, and if it speaks that way, it speaks well for us.

Chair: That is a beautiful way of putting it. Gershon and Samer?

Dr Baskin: I think that the Clinton parameters from the year 2000 still hold firm, because Jerusalem is such a segregated city. What Clinton said—what is Jewish to Israel, what is Arab to the Palestinians—was with regard to sovereignty outside the old city of Jerusalem. The old city is less than one square kilometre. What Prime Minister Olmert has discussed with President Abbas, which he agreed to at the time, was a five-nation guardianship over the old city and the holy basin, which would be the United States, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Saudi Arabia—I think Morocco, maybe, as well. It would be some kind of non-sovereign situation. There would be no flags over the old city, the holy basin and the holy places, but a five or six-nation guardianship protecting the rights of all to pray in all the holy places in Jerusalem.

It is a political problem. It is not a religious problem in terms of the holy places, because they are holy to the same God and for the same monotheistic religions. But it is a question of control, and that needs to be taken away from Israel having unilateral control over all these places. That is the spark here. We have to recognise that what the Jews call the Temple Mount and the Muslims call al-Aqsa is the nuclear raw nerve of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Every time there has been a major eruption, it has been because someone has tried to change the status quo there. That is what we need to be careful of and not allow to happen.

Samer Sinjlawi: I hate to see Jerusalem divided. Even in a two-state solution, I think Jerusalem should be united. Now, it is divided. It should be a city for two peoples and a capital for two states, and it should be the capital for the three religions. It is very important for Jews, Muslims and Christians. There is no way that any side can claim exclusivity on this city, so it should be shared by everybody.

What is most important now to be able to reach some kind of political breakthrough? I think the two main obstacles are two leaders. One, on the Israeli side, is Netanyahu; apparently, the Israelis are now recognising and realising the urgency of changing power in Israel, so we will leave it to them. The other is Mr Mahmoud Abbas. I wrote an op-ed on 21 December in *The New York Times* under the title "Mahmoud Abbas Must Go", in which I explained how we can motivate the president to exit in an easy way, while giving him respect, where he stays as a ceremonial president and gets lifetime immunity with his friends, aides and family, and, against this, he delivers all his power to a new Government. Without these changes, we will all be hostages to the current leaders, who are not capable of achieving any progress.

Chair: Thank you all. Go on, Alistair—last 30 seconds.



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Alistair Burt: Please, in your recommendations, your main recommendation to the world should be, "Don't give up. Don't give up." When we have given up in the past, that is one of the reasons we are where we are. We mustn't give up now.

Fabian Hamilton: Can I encourage Gershon to carry on with his excellent newsletter, which I read every time I receive one? Thank you.

Chair: On that note of optimism, thank you all ever so much for such a sensitive discussion on what is truly a very important topic.