

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, HC 488

Tuesday 3 December 2024

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Aphra Brandreth; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; Matthew Patrick; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 1-25

Witness

I: Rt Hon Alistair Burt, Former Minister of State for Middle East and North Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witness

Witness: Alistair Burt.

Q1 **Chair:** Today the Committee is holding its first evidence session on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We will hear from Alistair Burt, the former Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Alistair Burt: Not at all. Thank you very much for asking.

Chair: The UK has been calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, but that has yet to be successful. What levers does the Government have to pull to achieve it?

Alistair Burt: On its own, not many. It is important for the UK's voice to be out there calling for the obvious, but most of us appreciate that in relation to Middle East policy as a whole, and not least Israel, acting in concert with others is very important. As we know, ceasefires are complex. A ceasefire arises when it is of advantage to one side or the other, or usually both. Each is worried about how a ceasefire might be used and whether it weakens them or causes any problems further on. It is the right thing to do because, in pure humanitarian terms, stopping the killing of people, particularly innocent civilians, is paramount to all of us, so it is natural that the appeal will be there, but the levers to secure a ceasefire are much more local than they are international.

Q2 **Chair:** The public are always challenging us and saying, "The UK is on the Security Council. There are very few countries on the Security Council; it is a very powerful position. Isn't there something the UK can do at the UN? Can't we bring a resolution? Can't we do something like that?"

Alistair Burt: We can, but again, there is a practicality to it. Bringing a resolution that will not get anywhere and will be vetoed is relatively pointless. Most of the diplomats work on the basis of what is achievable rather than what makes a statement. Sometimes it is important to make the statement, and we are all aware of resolutions that have been brought forward in order to produce the inevitable veto. If it is on Ukraine or eastern Europe, it will be Russia and China that produce a veto. On Syria, Russia and China produced a veto. Anything that is critical of the state of Israel will produce an American veto.

The diplomats work on the basis that while there is some point to that, surely our time is better spent behind the scenes: "What can we do practically that may be short of a resolution, but actually achieves something on the ground?" As I am sure the Committee is well aware, it can be completely assured that a huge amount of work is done on that behind the scenes, with various envoys out there—people talking to people trying to find the key to bringing about a cessation of the hostilities, as we saw just last week in relation to Lebanon.

The point there, as I would characterise it, is that Israel has proved its point in being able to reduce Hezbollah's attacking capability very



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markedly, and it has reduced its leadership very dramatically. Hezbollah really had nowhere to go and Israel could withdraw from territory that was not its—sovereign territory of Lebanon—and reinforce what had been resolution 1701. Gaza is very different. The stars were aligned in relation to Lebanon. That brought the possibility of the ceasefire, and we will see how it holds. There is no reason why it should not; it is in both their interests. But getting a ceasefire where it is not in the interests of both parties is quite difficult.

Q3 Chair: Can I take you back to the UN? It is hard because the public listening to or watching this so desperately want there to be a ceasefire, and they hear us talking about it and calling for it, but they do not see the other work that is being done. If there was to be more obvious work on the international stage, such as Britain trying to put forward a resolution and gather support for it, at least people would see evidence of what we were doing. At the moment, they see so little evidence.

Alistair Burt: I think you had the Foreign Secretary here last week, who can answer in relation to that. Understandably, of course the public want a cessation of violence in all circumstances. They look at the tragedy of what is happening in Gaza at present, mystified as to the scale of it, even after the horrors of 7 October, and of course they want it stopped. But again, for a Foreign Secretary, doing something for the sake of it has limited value.

The Foreign Secretary will want to make sure that the United Kingdom has achieved something, which is why he will presently seek to work in company with others to achieve something, but very often you will not know until something emerges from all these conversations round the back to get a pause or to get the next stage going. As everybody is aware, the situation surrounding Gaza, and everything that led up to where we are, is incredibly complex.

Chair: You talked about Lebanon. I think that Aphra particularly wanted to ask some questions about that.

Q4 Aphra Brandreth: Yes, I have a question about that, but I also have a follow-up on this point. Obviously, the US and Israel have an incredibly strong relationship, and under the incoming Administration it is likely that US support and resolve for Israel may get firmer. Are there any steps that the Government could be taking now to work with the transition team of the President-elect to support work towards a ceasefire?

Alistair Burt: Yes, we are blessed with an exceptional ambassador in the United States—as I am sure you are all aware—named Karen Pierce.

Chair: We met her last week.

Alistair Burt: I am sure you were all very impressed. She knows the scene very well, and she and the embassy team have worked incredibly hard to make sure that the United Kingdom was not over-identified with one party or another. It is absolutely vital for diplomats that that takes place. I know—again, having listened to the Foreign Secretary and read



about this—that he has made efforts to make sure that he is in touch with the new Trump team and everything else.

Between now and the new Administration taking office, I think a lot of work will be done, because the big mystery, as we all know, is: just what is President Trump going to do? He is not a conventional politician. We are not dealing with the situation that we thought we might have been after 5 November—a disputed election. That is over and done with. President Trump will be there for the next four years—a very secure electoral victory. Now there are a series of appointments, and the question is arising: just what will he do? That is on the mind of every state, I think, with an interest in the region as we head towards January and beyond.

Q5 Aphra Brandreth: Absolutely. I am thinking a bit about how we all work towards achieving the goal we want—a ceasefire. The UK often has a role as a convener, and we have been talking a lot in this Committee about soft power. How could the UK use our connections with other countries—such as Jordan, perhaps—who are keen to work towards a resolution to try to bring some kind of pressure towards the outcome that we would all like to see?

Alistair Burt: It is a very important point, and I am sure that the Committee is already aware that the United Kingdom's relationship with the region is singular. We have been there longer than anyone else as an external force—with mixed results, again, as the United Kingdom recognises.

What is always of interest to Ministers when they begin to go and form a relationship there is that, despite a lot of history being uncomfortable in the region, we are trusted. The diplomatic strength is very important. We have exceptional ambassadors: they speak the languages, they are in tune, and their teams work very hard. There is something about the United Kingdom. We are not the richest, we are not the biggest, we are not the most powerful, we are not the most militarily strong, but we do have long-term relationships.

The monarchies are very important in those states where that is their system of government, and they look to the United Kingdom. Sometimes they use the history; they know that there are things that we did not do very well, and they say, "It's time to put these things right." But essentially they see the United Kingdom as different from both the European Union and the United States. They indeed will say that there is more we can do in certain circumstances, and I think it is important that we listen.

At the moment, everyone is on tenterhooks about the United States, but there are still other states that matter. In terms of the United Kingdom using its influence to draw people together, the relationships with the Arab states and the relationship with Israel, which is important to those states in the region—we will no doubt talk about the Abraham Accords and things like that—are important. They know that the United Kingdom is in a position to have been less demonstrative than the United States, and



therefore has the ability to bring people together, perhaps for a series of individual bits of work on the elements that need to be taken forward.

I put it to you that at the moment we do not know what the political horizon is going to be in Gaza, and I think we need to know that. We need to know what will happen to the civil authority when the conflict stops. We need to know what Israel's intentions are: is it for annexation and resettlement or not? If it is to be part of a Palestinian state, how is that going to be achieved? All these things are matters that will follow on one from the other, but the work needs to be done in parallel, and it needs to be done now. The United Kingdom can play a part in that by talking to people about the individual component parts and how, when the opportunity is there, they can be brought into place.

This will not end with everybody looking at their feet. It can only end when people know what is going to happen the next day, because this is about the security of everyone involved, not least Israel, whose citizens also need security and need to know that 7 October must never happen again. It is about security for them and security for the civilians in Gaza and the West Bank. People are going to want to know what is going to happen. That work needs to be done now, and the United Kingdom can certainly play a part in pulling all that together.

Q6 Aphra Brandreth: Those are all topics that we are going to come back to. I just want to think about Lebanon. The ceasefire is an extremely positive sign, and we hope it is indicative of future deals to bring an end to the violence in the region. We need to recognise that Israel is, of course, a country at war, and therefore there will be strategic implications for the concentration of force towards Gaza. Do you think that this shift of force will weaken the resolve of Hamas and hopefully bring us closer to the release of hostages, and then a ceasefire?

Alistair Burt: I genuinely don't know. It is difficult to know what the structure and leadership of Hamas looks like at the moment. Certainly, there are still individual fighting groups in Gaza that keep getting uncovered and keep fighting, and there is the occasional rocket, but I genuinely would not know about the structure or anything else. The political structure has obviously been weakened by the action that Israel has taken against those it holds responsible for 7 October.

The return of the hostages should be, in humanitarian terms, absolutely at the top of the list. It is impossible to say, "It is the only priority," because of course there are innocent civilians who have suffered from bombardment and the targeting of political or terrorist figures caught up in this, and it is all a priority for them and their families and everything else, but the hostage situation is particularly appalling to all of us. The hostages should never have been taken. They have no role in the conflict or anything like that. The return of those hostages would be an important signal and might be part of a process. But again, as the Committee will know very well, that will not be done without a discussion on the release of Palestinian prisoners. Everybody knows that, and both sides have to get on with that if they want to see any progress on the hostages.



Q7 Aphra Brandreth: Absolutely. Do you think that the ceasefire in Lebanon has any bearing on whether we are more or less likely to have a ceasefire in Gaza?

Alistair Burt: I am fairly cautious on that, simply because I think the two circumstances are different. Hezbollah acted from 8 October onwards in support of Hamas, but Hezbollah's beefs with Israel go back a long time. Hezbollah is not constituted as Hamas. It is a Shi'a force, created and supported by Iran, but it is Lebanese. It protects the Shi'a interest in Lebanon. It is constituted very differently from Hamas. In terms of "my enemy's enemy is my friend", Hezbollah saw the opportunity to work on that, but it has been exposed by Israel's tactic, which has destroyed its leadership and seems to have destroyed a large amount of the armaments that were used to fire on Israeli citizens. That is quite different from what has been happening in Gaza.

As I say, it seems to me that Hezbollah has nowhere to go. I think its supplies from Iran were probably running low. Iran has also been much weakened by what has happened. If you can get an end to those hostilities, then do—it is good for the civilians in those areas. Whether it indicates a willingness to compromise, I do not know, because the circumstances of Gaza are different, but you take any cessation of violence where you find it.

Q8 Chair: So those people who think that Hezbollah has the capacity to inflict so much more damage on Israel than Hamas ever did are wrong, because they are out of date given what has happened—as you said, given the killings of the leadership, the destruction of armaments, and so on, Hezbollah is a very different force from the force that it was before the Israelis invaded.

Alistair Burt: I think that is right. If you had asked me several weeks ago what I thought about Israel launching an attack on Hezbollah, I probably would have been cautious and said, "Well, we don't know exactly what they've got. We have read all the stories saying that this is the best-equipped non-state force in the region, with huge capacity to inflict damage on Israeli cities. Is this what people want?" It turns out it has not quite been like that—a little like Iran's defences not being what they might have claimed. Iran is much weakened as well.

What we know is that if there are other armaments available to Hezbollah, they have not been used. Israel has always made it very clear that any attack on Israeli cities and civilians produces a maximum impact. Having done what they did in southern Lebanon, and doing what they are doing in Beirut, that message will have been very clear, so maybe that has stopped. For most of us, that would be the point to say, "Well, if these conflicts don't end, they are just going to go on forever. Why don't we take this opportunity to resolve the politics behind this, and then maybe people in the area can live normal lives?"

Chair: That takes us neatly on to what Abtisam wants to ask about.

Q9 Abtisam Mohamed: You spoke earlier about the peace process and



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potential recognition. For many Palestinians, recognition has become a distant idea, especially with the annexations and the increased annexations in the West Bank. Should the UK recognise Palestine, given that the majority of UN members now do?

Alistair Burt: I will probably end up giving you almost the same answer as the Foreign Secretary gave last week. Having given that answer for most of my life, I will repeat it—but I think it now has some nuances.

The reason why the United Kingdom has not recognised the state of Palestine is that the UK recognises that to do so is a very important gesture in this whole peace process, and it has always wanted to make sure that when it did recognise the state of Palestine, it did so at a time of maximum advantage to the process. Calls have always been made to say, “There is a logic to this. If you support a two-state solution, by and large there have to be two states. There is one, so why don’t you formally recognise the second, because it’s obvious that that is what you believe in?”

My sense is that the UK’s position would now be that it is looking for one or two others to take a step, because there is a further nuance. If you really think the prospect of a two-state solution is disappearing completely, then in order to keep it alive you might recognise the state of Palestine—but, again, you will know very well, as I do, that the UK recognising the state of Palestine changes absolutely nothing. It changes nothing on the ground, does not bring it about, or anything like that. That is why the UK has always been hesitant.

I think the UK would seek to work with others—France and Australia are two likely candidates at the moment—but in recent months we saw Norway and Ireland recognise the state of Palestine, and there was no implication for the peace process or anything like that. That is the reason for hesitation, but I think you could always press a Minister and a Foreign Secretary. There is a logic in this. Presumably, if you support a two-state solution, you support a Palestinian state, so you will at some stage say that you recognise it, but what will it take to get you there?

What is changing at the moment is what we are hearing from some Israeli Ministers about annexation—the reoccupation of Gaza—which would seem to remove almost entirely the prospect of a territorial state of Palestine. It may be that the time has come for the United Kingdom and others, in order to prevent it from being completely removed as a possibility, to say, “We’re prepared to recognise it to keep it alive.” It will not make it happen, and other things need to happen, but the argument may be changing.

Q10 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Do you think, if there is a strong prospect of annexation taking place next year, that recognition should take place before then?

Alistair Burt: We can only go off what we are hearing. As people are now keen to say, when people tell you what they are going to do, you ought to listen to them. Ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have made no secret of



their belief that annexation should take place, because their belief is not in a 1967-borders Israel, but in a different one. They have some popular support for that, particularly because the security situation has changed and everything else.

Q11 Chair: It is worse than that, isn't it? I thought the current Netanyahu Government had backtracked from the idea of being in favour of a two-state solution as well. Although they may not be using such florid language as the two Ministers you mentioned, the Government themselves now seem not to be in favour of two states.

Alistair Burt: It is certainly true that the public policy of Israel now is to assert its sovereignty—I am afraid I have to use the phrase—from the river to the sea. That is the position of the Israeli Government on sovereignty. As you say, even though we now know that Prime Minister Netanyahu's commitment to a two-state solution, if it was ever there, is certainly not there now, that begs a whole series of other questions.

Looking at what the United States might do, I believe that Ministers in Israel have already said that President Trump would back annexation. But if he did, that would be different to where we were on the Abraham accords, because they did not do that. Again, as the Committee will be aware, the discussions, particularly with the UAE, were designed to prevent Israel from moving for annexation at that stage.

So there is a debate as to what the United States would do. I think it would change the nature of relationships with Israel quite markedly. It is one thing for us to work with an Israel that wanted a two-state solution, wanted a partner for peace, wanted to see a territory called Palestine side by side with Israel, with mutual guarantees for security and everything that we all know so well, and another for us to move to a situation where it does not actually want that any more. I am not sure what recognition of that could follow from western European states in particular. It would change the situation quite markedly, so I hope that is not a route they go down.

Q12 Edward Morello: Do you recognise that there are two things happening here? One is that we are closely approaching the point at which recognising anything is to recognise a state that cannot exist because Israel has fully annexed it, at which point it has no value whatsoever. The other is the fact that at this point, where we are in a minority at the UN, it does not look like any form of global leadership at all. It looks like rank cowardice that we are not doing it when everyone else has. You started off by saying that there are very few levers that the UK has to pull, but we are a P5. Probably the last remaining ability to provide any comparable support to the process at this point is for the UK to recognise Palestine.

Alistair Burt: First, you are absolutely right that the UK is far from powerless. It is a member of NATO, the European Political Community, the Commonwealth, the Security Council and all that, and that is recognised by other states. But the question was precisely about what influence or leverage we had in relation to the state of Israel. That is limited, in terms



of everything we have seen in recent years and looking forward to what a peace process might be. We have always given massive support to the peace process. In preparation for this, I was looking back at some of my notes from the briefings I got, and the peace process was right up there—right up until I left in 2019. It has always been front and centre.

On the point of recognition, I suppose I am hesitant—it would be strange if I came here and reversed something I had said for years. There will be one or two things that I wish we had changed. As I say, recognition is symbolic, but it does not do anything else. But the timing of comments to Israel is very important. Israel is influenced. It wants to know that if it is hearing criticism, it is from those who are acting in good company, so that it cannot simply say, “Well, they would say that, wouldn’t they?” Israel has a very long list of countries it just does not listen to, because it believes they are all against it for antisemitic and other reasons. But if the United Kingdom—a friend—was to say something in company with other friends, it is going to listen very carefully. That is leverage.

On what the P5 and the Security Council can do, this issue has been through the UN endlessly, as we know. It wants to see some further action, but we need first to deal with the things that I mentioned a moment ago. What is going to happen in terms of civil authority? What is going to happen to Gaza? What is the future political horizon? What about rebuilding? At the moment they are estimating hundreds of billions of pounds. No Gulf state is going to put any money into rebuilding Gaza if it is going to be destroyed in three years’ time, so what is going to happen to that state?

We have seen the pictures. Not everybody in the world has seen the pictures—Israel does not see many of the pictures of what is happening in Gaza, we understand—but we have seen the pictures. How is it going to be repaired and restored unless there are the processes that I mentioned earlier? That is where I think the United Kingdom can be involved, and maybe recognition is a part of that process.

Q13 Chair: Before we go back to Abtisam, you said there are one or two things you wish you had done; do you want to tell us what they are before we move on? Were they in relation to the Middle East?

Alistair Burt: I am even-handed, because I think you need to be in these complex circumstances. Let me say two things. First, the polarisation of the debate now is as acute as anything I have ever seen. It has changed the way in which we deal with the debate in the UK and all over the world. It is hardly possible to be in my position of expressing empathy for the victims of 7 October without someone saying, “Oh, so you support a genocide nation, do you?” If you express empathy for those who have been killed in Gaza, someone says, “Oh, do you want Hamas to win?” We all know it. You will be reading it in the stuff that comes to you, and we read it on the internet and everything else. I have never known it so polarised.



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Most of my working life in politics has been dealing with people who have seen it from both sides. There are injustices for Palestinian people dating back to 1948, but they will not be solved by pretending Israel can be erased or anything. Equally, we want to live in peace with our neighbours, but we have to be secure. How can we achieve that? It is now much more difficult. Being even-handed and recognising faults on all sides is still important.

There are two things I would specifically look at in relation to policy on Israel and Palestine. We should have taken action against settlements much earlier. I think the fact that settlements have been allowed to grow with no consequence has done a lot of damage: it has fuelled a sense of impunity among certain politicians in Israel. If you have significant condemnation but no action, what is anyone going to do when you take the next step?

Q14 Chair: What should that action have been? We now have sanctions; are they sufficient?

Alistair Burt: I think we should have moved on sanctions much earlier. We did not move on sanctions because of the immense pressure on any sanctions policy: the claim that it is motivated by the wrong determination, and that all sanctions were an expression of antisemitism. That was the case put by the state of Israel. We now know this to be wrong. You cannot have the criticism we have seen of Israel over the past year, particularly from those in Tel Aviv who are protesting about the Prime Minister, and then be told that all criticism of Israel is antisemitic. Plainly it is not, and I think we have now moved past that.

I think we should have been clearer that international law matters. The settlement process was advancing quite genuinely under our noses, and there should have been action. You can start with sanctions on individuals, but you can spread it to wider trade sanctions. This would be a massive change in policy, but what do you do? Because, as Mr Morello said, you needn't talk about annexation; it has already happened. There are plenty who say that formal annexation is unnecessary: it is already there. What are we going to do with that situation? We could have challenged that earlier, and that might have helped in dealing with the sense of impunity in certain politicians, which has now reached the stage of annexation.

On the Palestinian side, I think we could have been much sharper with the Palestinian Authority on its structure, its democratic failures and everything else. We supported it physically and financially. I think that was the right thing to do—we were state building—but, as we all know, in just over the past decade or so, it went through a number of different Prime Ministers but not a different President. The democratic deficit of the PA is terrible, and it has done damage.

We are also now aware that, at the same time as that, Israel was covertly supporting and financially aiding Hamas in order to provide a contrast to the Palestinian Authority and to make it even more difficult for them. We knew a certain amount of that, but I am not sure how much we knew. Of



course, there were times when the PA was in dispute with the Hamas authorities on the payment of civil servants, and there was a complex relationship between the Palestinian leadership and others. The way in which that was allowed to develop meant there was never a partner for peace, and that was quite deliberate. Perhaps we should have seen that at an earlier stage and said to the Palestinian Authority, "You've got a responsibility in this too. It's not all one-sided."

On working with Arab states, they also allowed the issue to drop down the agenda. The marginalisation of the Palestinian issue was not the invention of the Abraham Accords or anything like that. It had been going on for some time, and if Arab states had really wanted to see the Saudi peace process develop, I think there was more we all could have done. Instead of trying to support those on both sides who were arguing, "We need more time. We are trying to get there," we should have seen that for what it was—it was not happening.

Maybe there was more we could have done at an earlier stage to press the case and to say, "We all believe the only safety and security is in a situation where Israel is safe and secure and there is justice and a secure state for the Palestinians," which we are now beginning to see from the coalition for a two-state solution put forward after the last UN General Assembly. You remember Ayman Safadi, the Jordanian Minister, saying publicly that you have got 57 Arab states that are willing to defend physically the state of Israel if we see a Palestinian state.

Q15 Chair: I promise I am going to go back to Abtisam, but I have one more question, because I just want to make sure we are absolutely clear about what you are saying. You are saying that we should have been tougher in relation to settlements and that we should have made sure that we had sanctions against individuals, but I think you also talked about trade sanctions as well.

Alistair Burt: Again, we avoided that.

Chair: Are you saying we should have insisted on the labelling of goods so that we could have a boycott of settlement goods?

Alistair Burt: We did not do that.

Chair: Is that what you are saying?

Alistair Burt: Yes. What would have been better is what we have now or a policy that would have called out the settlements at an earlier stage. There would have been a huge campaign, but it would have been better to do that and to say that the reason why we think settlements are wrong and illegal is so and so, and we are keeping alive the possibility of two states. I think that would have been better. Dealing with the exceptionalism of Israel 10 years or so ago might have helped, but you have always got to recognise that there are others who have not done their part in this process as well.

Q16 Abtisam Mohamed: Going back a few steps, how do we create a balance



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in the negotiations so that it is not solely about whether Israel wants Palestinian recognition? How do we create that balance that supports the Palestinians to be on a level playing field in the discussions? Because at the moment, from what you are saying, it sounds very much like, "Well, it kind of depends on whether Israel is ready for this."

Alistair Burt: If it solely depended on whether Israel was ready for this, it would never happen. What is happening in the region is of great significance. I think the Abraham Accords were deficient in that they did not deal with the Palestinian issue. It was at a time when people believed it could be marginalised. I do not know whether you have heard me say this on more than occasion in the House of Commons, Chair, but I am on record saying that you cannot manage this issue. It cannot be pushed aside. It will not be regularised that way. It has to be politically resolved.

Chair: I think I have, yes.

Alistair Burt: What the Arab states have begun to do is want a different future in the Middle East. They want to involve Israel, as we have seen from the UAE, Bahrain and others, but the belief that this could be done without the Palestinian issue being resolved is now gone. Saudi Arabia is key. We are all aware that Israel would like a relationship with Saudi Arabia, which would mean a great deal for recognition and Israel's position in the region. We know that the United States is keen on this, and we know that Saudi Arabia had got quite close and there had been a lot of discussion. My understanding is that 7 October, and the response to it, has changed all that. Public opinion in Saudi Arabia, and opinions from diplomats and others, has made it very clear that there is no prospect of normalisation unless there is recognition of a Palestinian state. I think the terms of the discussion have changed, and there is a determination among Arab states now to see this.

But to come back to two key points, it will require different Palestinian leadership as well. They have to be able to demonstrate that the Palestinian leadership has been democratically chosen, and it is for the people of Palestine to choose their leaders, no one else. How is this process to come about? Who will these leaders be?

The second thing is that Israel has to know that it will be safe. You cannot force a country to feel safe; the people themselves have to believe it. Again, this Committee will know the immense trauma in the state of Israel from what happened on 7 October. It is a small country, and everybody knows somebody who was involved, and the stories are terrible. Israel may not be seeing what is happening in Gaza on its television screens, but it is certainly seeing everything that happened on 7 October on a regular basis.

The impact of this has been huge. No Israeli leader, nor any democratically elected leader here, would agree to a situation where their people were not safe. Again, how are Arab states going to deliver on that promise of Ayman Safadi to make people safe? All this has changed the terms of the possibility of recognition with the Palestinians, because



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everything is different post 7 October. I think there are new forces in play that will make this a more likely possibility, even though it seems remote at the moment.

Chair: Can I stop you there for a second? We have a structure, which is not working, of a number of questions that we want to ask. Your answers are really good and very dense, but they are quite often dealing with issues that we were thinking we would ask about later.

Alistair Burt: I am so sorry.

Chair: I am just recognising the situation.

Alistair Burt: If I had a brief of your questions, I would know what to answer and what not to.

Chair: Well, tough. *[Laughter.]*

Alistair Burt: Just stop me when I am veering off course.

Q17 **Abtisam Mohamed:** I have one more question on humanitarian aid. What actions do you think the Government could take to make sure that humanitarian aid gets into Gaza, especially when Israel is preventing it? Do you think the FCDO has any other levers that could perhaps force aid to go in?

Alistair Burt: As far as I am aware, the FCDO is trying to do everything that it can. I cannot think of anything different that it could do. It is right to back UNRWA and the distribution that way, it is right to back the other aid agencies that are involved, and it is right to be doing everything it can to ensure that there are no blockages, either before aid gets to the border or inside. The situation within Gaza, as we know, has also deteriorated quite significantly because of the nature of gangs. If there is restricted food, it is always going to be in demand. Certainly, the UK seems to be doing everything it can.

Q18 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You have been critical of the Abraham Accords for failing to incorporate a way of moving forward on the Palestinian issue, and obviously they ground to a halt after October. Is there a way in which they can still play a part in finding a lasting settlement? In particular, I am interested in what you think is the future for Gaza. Israel clearly will never accept Gaza remaining under Hamas control, and equally it is highly critical of the Palestinian Authority and whether they could ever play a role. Is there perhaps an international role, maybe with the Arab states, in a future for Gaza?

Alistair Burt: I said the Abraham Accords were deficient in not dealing with the Palestinian issue, and thus it being marginalised. But there were other elements in the Abraham Accords that were very good. I agree that there has got to be a future for the Middle East that is economic, not based on conflict. The whole region would benefit from Israel being part of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, and there being a lack of conflict, where we could start to think about what we do with Iran and the like—all that had



opportunities through the Abraham Accords. That was very positive; there was just one thing missing, which we now know.

In relation to Gaza in the future, I can't see that it is likely to happen without an international force. Again, states have made it very clear that they are not willing to go in on the back of an Israeli tank. For public opinion's sake, in Arab states that is very difficult. Israel is not going to want to relinquish control of Gaza until it knows it is safe from Gaza, but this does not seem to be impossible to produce. Going back to what I said earlier, that also depends on what the political horizon is. There will be a distinction between immediate civil authority and what the longer-term prospects are. I think it has to be international, and it has to be coupled with political change that recognises that we cannot go back to where we were—October 7 has changed everything. I think there is an international role; yes.

Q19 Sir John Whittingdale: How do you see the international role? Are we talking UN, or are we talking the Arab states coming together? What kind of international presence do you think would be most effective?

Alistair Burt: This is an area where I do not have any particular expertise or insight at the moment, because people have shied away from talking about it. The UN is a good cover—you can bring nations there. But remember how Israel views the UN: either ineffectual, as in UNIFIL in Lebanon, or politically hostile. But international forces can still be brought together under that particular flag. If you do it any other way, what flag would it be? Would the GCC, as a group, do it? Certainly, the Arab states have got a real role to play, both in security and in finance. I think that is the route to go down. The other side of it is that it has got to be absolutely clear that those who have been engaged with Hamas are not going to do it any further. There is no point in going in knowing that terrorism—or that way of dealing with the issue—is going to continue.

Chair: I will squeeze a question in from Edward before he goes off to vote.

Q20 Edward Morello: I was quite interested to link a couple of things that you said together. You mentioned earlier that the Palestinian people need to choose their leaders, but at the same time, Hamas won an election and then there was not an election ever after. Obviously, we have had the same leader of the PA for a number of years, despite Prime Ministers changing. There is also the issue of whether the Arab states are going to step in to be the provider of a security guarantee. Whatever you want to say about the Arab states, paragons of democracy they are not. So, when you say that Palestinians need to choose their leader, how does that actually come about?

Alistair Burt: There are plenty of thoughts out there about this. There are people who want to get into the Palestinian community to begin the process of talking to the population about different political parties. This has long been thought through. I remember in 2013, being in Gaza at a meeting of prominent businesspeople, not involving Hamas, and a young woman there of about 13 or 14 suddenly shouted at the older men and



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said, "Why do we have to choose between Hamas and Fatah? Look what's going on. Why are we forced to do this?" There are people who want to talk. We lump people together—Gaza—but there are people working there who want different futures. The business community is obviously much damaged by what has happened, but there was a thriving business community there. They want an opportunity for expression that does not involve the old parties and the old fights. So there are people who would go in and do polling and work on the building up of political parties; there are community organisations and the like, but trying to press people on who might come in and lead this—you will be aware of some of the names. Is it Dahlan, who is supported by the UAE? Is it Barghouti, who is in jail? Who are the people who might command support? We won't know until the public are asked.

We got fairly close to technocratic Governments in the past. It was originally thought that Hamas and Fatah could come together to form a technocratic Government away from the terrorism. It is difficult to see where Hamas could be now but, as we know, Hamas still has support in Gaza and more widespread. But there are individuals who could not possibly—in my view, but I am an outsider—be part of a Government process. But unless we start talking to the Palestinian people and getting their views on it, we will not find out the answer to this.

Q21 Edward Morello: You were talking earlier about how a number of Arab states had de-prioritised the Palestinian cause, with a lot of them choosing to emphasise trade with Israel, and Pegasus and all the other things that were available through those relationships. In your view, where are the Arab states now? Is Saudi Arabia the key to the solution?

Alistair Burt: I think it is. When you talk to people from the region, their sense of where the Arab population is, seeing what they are seeing on an everyday basis, can be imagined. They are horrified. I was talking to a friend this morning who said, "They think that their lives are not worth the same as those of other people." That is what they feel. Unless you change that and give people a sense that they are worth the same, you are always going to be pushing water uphill. That has been the damage. States are not going to back a solution that leaves people in that situation. The damage has been absolutely enormous in relation to that.

Do I think Saudi Arabia is important? Yes, I do. Remember, in the region as a whole, yes, we talk about democracy, but there are people who want stability as much as anything else. They want to live normal lives. States that may not be democratic can still provide their people with security and safety. No one would claim that the Gulf states are in turmoil or anything like that, so we have to be a bit cautious about this now. I think that their vision for the future, which involves an economic vision for the whole region, is the basis of change and change for the future. I have always felt strongly that this cannot come about through conflict. That is why they are reaching out to Iran, and Iran is reaching out to them. Iran will form part of your discussion. What is Iran going to do in the future? I won't take us down there in case there are concerns that I am wandering again. The whole basis of what the Arab states are doing is, it promises a future



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without conflict if we can make progress now on the politics of the Palestinian people. And it is really worth going for.

- Q22 **Sir John Whittingdale:** The UK and the international community have always focused on the two-state solution as the best outcome, but as you were saying earlier, that is looking more distant. Are we right still to say that is the only solution?

Alistair Burt: I think we are, but there is no doubt that you will hear many voices who think it has gone. I have not been able to come across what seems to me to be a credible one-state solution. There are plenty of voices now— I was in Doha recently for a conference, and I spoke to quite a number of young Palestinians who said, “It is a two-state delusion. We don’t want two states; we want one. Everybody can live here, side-by-side together”—but of course, that is not a Jewish state.

- Q23 **Chair:** Or democratic—you can either have a democratic state or a non-Jewish state.

Alistair Burt: Exactly, and again, I have not spoken to anyone who thinks it will be credible for Israel to agree to a situation in which it does not have command of its territory, and safety and security, for historical reasons and everything else. Even so, there are plenty of quite angry voices saying, “Why shouldn’t there be just one state, and we can all live together? We will have the same rights. What has anybody got against us having the same rights?” The practicalities would appear to be that it is just not going to happen. That is why two states is still, for me, a better answer than anything else.

- Q24 **Matthew Patrick:** I am interested in what you just said about the Arab world and what they are seeing, and what Israel is seeing. It sounds like they are seeing different things.

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Matthew Patrick: I am also struck by a conversation I had with a politician in the West Bank back in March, who told me that October 7 was some soldiers fighting some soldiers, and a couple of hoodlums doing some bad things, but that was all it was. It struck me in that moment that it is going to be intensely difficult if two people do not even see the same reality. What needs to happen about that? To what extent should we be worried? If the steps towards getting our hostages out, getting aid into Gaza and getting towards the two-state solution, require the buy-in of those other states, and the populations there are seeing very different things from the truth, that sounds deeply concerning. What are your thoughts?

Alistair Burt: You are absolutely right. We work through our lives and experience, and certainly—

Chair: May I pause for a moment? Members of the Committee are going to vote in the House, so I will need to suspend the sitting.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.



On resuming—

Alistair Burt: In answer to Mr Patrick's question, we have got used to a situation whereby you put competing evidence to people, they can draw their own conclusions, and they may shift their view depending on the evidence. My feeling about what has happened on 7 October and following is that there is such polarisation that people are simply not going to believe anything other than what they already believe. We live in a world in which people are told that if they see something they do not like, it isn't true; the only thing they can believe is what people like them are telling them. From all the things I have read on both sides of this, I think it is so polarised that no one is going to listen to the other. That is deeply worrying for people who are trying to find a pathway through, so we have to look for the individuals involved in these states who do want to see something different.

Chair: That takes us very neatly to the last question, which is: what next? What do we do?

Q25 **Matthew Patrick:** I made a commitment to Mandy Damari, the mother of Emily Damari, that I would raise her case whenever it is appropriate to do so. How do we best secure her release and that of the other hostages? Abtisam spoke eloquently about the requirement to get aid into Gaza. How do we achieve that? If I can tie this into the broader end question, what are the building blocks for us to get towards a rebuilt Gaza, which to my mind is inherently intertwined with a Palestinian state eventually, with the required leadership of the Palestinian people? I tied three questions in there because the Chair said there is one question left, so that's what you have to do.

Chair: Well done.

Alistair Burt: I will try. First, the lesson of the past is: don't give up. I have written regularly that one of the reasons we are where we are is that when things got difficult with previous peace processes, they collapsed. Whether it was John Kerry, who cared so much about this, in 2014, whether it was Oslo and what happened after that, or whether it was happened after Madrid, you reached a sticking point and people just gave up. There were all sorts of excuses and reasons why people gave up, but then we got to where we are. The first thing is: don't give up. That is the best support that can be given to Emily and others. Don't give up on this.

Secondly, look for where there are things happening. I would turn to civil society and what is happening through ALLMEP—the Alliance for Middle East Peace—and the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, which I introduced in 2018 and spoke of. I understand that the Prime Minister endorsed it last night at a meeting. That is the building of civil society. There are people working across communities now in the West Bank and Israel, and it is very important that that keeps going because it is an opportunity.



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Thirdly, don't neglect the absolute basics. The people of Israel who were so traumatised by 7 October need to know that it is not going to happen again. The people who have been denied, quite deliberately, the opportunity for their separate state over the years need to know that that block has gone, and that there is a political horizon that means that they need not listen to the men of violence any more. And it is men: it is men, money and ultimately power, and you throw in religion.

Finally, on religion, keep away from people who think the end of the world is a good thing, because they are knocking around. They are knocking around in Jerusalem—we haven't spoken about Jerusalem and the risks with what is happening with extremists active at Al-Aqsa. That remains important.

The fundamental advice that you should urge your Ministers to follow is: don't give up on it this time. The best hope for peace is to look at the people who are working with each other now. We haven't tried bottom-up. A lot of it worked in Ireland. Look at some of the people who worked there. I again mention Oliver McTernan and the people who worked so hard on Forward Thinking. There are examples there. The only potentially positive thing from 7 October and following is that it has been so dreadful and awful, and everyone knows we can't go back to where we were. The only point is to go forward for something better, and the United Kingdom can play a part in that.

Chair: Thank you so much, Alistair. It has been a pleasure to see you and learn from your experience and wisdom. Thank you for giving us your time. If there is anything that you would like to add or clarify, please do write to the Committee.