

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Israeli-Palestinian conflict, HC 488

Monday 27 January 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Alex Ballinger; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Dan Carden; Uma Kumaran; Blair McDougall; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; and Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 103 to 146

Witnesses

[I](#): Bassam Aramin, Spokesperson and International Relations Manager, Parents Circle Families Forum; Robi Damelin, Spokesperson and International Relations Manager, Parents Circle Families Forum; Rula Daoood, National Co-director, Standing Together; and Alon-Lee Green, National Co-director, Standing Together.

[II](#): Amnon Be’eri Sulitzeanu, Co-CEO, The Abraham Initiatives; John Lyndon, Executive Director, Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP); and Shahira Shalaby, Co-CEO, The Abraham Initiatives.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robi Damelin, Bassam Aramin, Rula Daood and Alon-Lee Green.

Q103 **Chair:** We are meeting today on Holocaust Memorial Day and the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Many of us had that in our thoughts today, and we meet against that backdrop.

We also meet against the backdrop of the great relief on both sides to see a ceasefire, and hostages and prisoners going back to their families. This is a further session of our inquiry into the conflict in Israel and Palestine. We have two panels. Will our witnesses from the first panel introduce themselves for the record? Robi Damelin may begin, please.

Robi Damelin: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for inviting us. I am from the Parents Circle-Families Forum.

Rula Daood: Hi, and thank you for inviting us. I am from Standing Together, a Jewish-Palestinian grassroots movement within Israel.

Alon-Lee Green: Hi all, and thank you for inviting us. My name is Alon-Lee Green and, together with my colleague here, Rula Daood, I am the national co-director of Standing Together, which is a Jewish-Palestinian grassroots movement fighting for peace, equality and social justice.

Bassam Aramin: I am Bassam Aramin. I am from the Parents Circle-Families Forum.

Q104 **Chair:** Thank you for your time. We all appreciate you giving it at such an important moment. I begin by asking the two witnesses from the Parents Circle-Families Forum, what happened in your life that led you to start working for that organisation? Will you answer that briefly first, Robi?

Robi Damelin: We are a group of Palestinians and Israelis who have all lost an immediate family member. The vision is to create a framework for a reconciliation process to be an integral part of any political future peace agreement. That is all the work that we do on the ground on both sides. I joined when my son was killed by a Palestinian sniper. Actually, one of the first things that I said when the army came to tell me was, "You cannot kill anybody in the name of my child." I think it was pretty prophetic that I would land up in this organisation.

Bassam Aramin: Unfortunately, I joined the Parents Circle on 16 January 2007 after I lost my 10-year-old daughter, Abir, to an Israeli border policeman in front of her school at 9.30 in the morning—she was 10 years old. I was familiar with the Parents Circle two years before I lost my daughter, because I was one of the co-founders of Combatants for Peace, but in my worst dreams I did not want to join this amazing group. It is a long process to reach this point. I said to the killer of my daughter that it is almost the same, that I consider him a victim—both of them were victims of the occupation—and that if he could not ask me to forgive him, he can always find me. Because I loved my daughter very much and



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because I have another five kids, I do not want them to grow up as victims of him.

Q105 Chair: Given how fast things are moving at the moment and with so much else happening in the world, perhaps the UK media can be forgiven for not giving us full accounts of what is happening on the West Bank, but we hear enough to be very concerned.

I wondered whether you are in a position—perhaps you might be able to help us, Alon-Lee Green—to give us a description of what is happening on the West Bank at the moment. Once you have done that, perhaps we might also have some evidence as to whether you believe that the increased military activity by the Israelis will endanger the Gaza ceasefire.

Alon-Lee Green: Thank you for the question. We are very worried about the recent developments in the West Bank. I will give just a brief context. I am sure you are all very well informed and understand the reality there, but the West Bank has been controlled by the Israeli military for the last six decades, and 3.5 million Palestinians are living there under the control of our army, without being citizens of the Israeli state. We have seen in recent days, starting last week, growing tensions in the West Bank. Something that we are worried about is an attempt by the right-wing Government in Israel to roll, to translate, the war, the fronts, from Gaza to the West Bank and to maybe jeopardise the ceasefire agreement. We see that happening in two major ways.

One is the military campaign started on the ground just a day after the ceasefire kicked in last Sunday—a military campaign that is centred around cities like Jenin. We have seen a growing number of casualties, a growing number of roadblocks and growing attacks from airstrikes. We are seeing innocent civilians being targeted and ending up dead. We also see an immense attempt to narrow down the freedom of movement of Palestinians in the West Bank—something that is causing a lot of tensions among the Palestinian population there.

Q106 Chair: I am sorry, but would you mind pausing there? This is just for people who perhaps have not visited recently. It is right to say that every town, every village and every road has gates that can be swung across in order to stop movement in and out. Those have been closed, have they?

Alon-Lee Green: Exactly. For example, Ramallah, one of the largest cities in the West Bank, the capital of the West Bank, has been closed—all entrances and exits—so people there are dependent on the Israeli army to allow them to move in or out. You see huge traffic jams, lasting hours. People post videos of themselves sitting for seven hours just to move from the school of their child back to their town or home. It is creating a lot of tensions, which are rising. We are speaking about hundreds of checkpoints that are not located between the West Bank and the entrance to Israel, are not on the border, but are between Palestinian towns themselves. This is the reality right now over there.

The second way—



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Q107 **Chair:** I am sorry to interrupt you again, but you said that many people had been killed. Are there any reliable estimates of how many people have been killed or injured, since the ceasefire in Gaza, on the West Bank?

Alon-Lee Green: Bassam, you can correct me if I am wrong, but according to the Ministry of Health of the Palestinian Authority, we are talking about more than 22 casualties since last week. One of them, for example, is a two-year-old child, Laila, who was killed with a bullet shot directly in her head. Her mother, who is pregnant, was also injured. That was in a village next to Jenin.

Robi Damelin: Excuse me for interrupting, but I think it is terribly important to talk about the West Bank. I think Bassam lives there and so does Rula, or maybe not, but I think Bassam could tell you about the closure that has been ongoing since 7 October, about the dire situation economically, about children who are not going to school regularly and about settlers who are behaving in a vile manner, rampantly, all around the West Bank, with no accountability and in some cases with encouragement by soldiers. Bassam lives this on a daily basis. Why don't we allow him to tell us what it's really like to be there?

Q108 **Chair:** There are two questions in a way, Bassam. There is what has happened on the West Bank since the ceasefire in Gaza, but there is also the wider context.

Bassam Aramin: If we talk about the ceasefire especially, since then, directly, the war has started in the West Bank. They admit 900 gates—this special day is remembering the liberation of Auschwitz; it is the international memorial day for the Holocaust. I have just, two months ago, come back from Auschwitz, so I just want to express my empathy with my Jewish brothers and sisters—the survivors. We said, "Never again". It is never again for everyone.

We are living in a big jail, with each city separated. For example, Jericho, which is the corridor to Jordan for the 3.5 million people in the West Bank, has six gates. No one is allowed to enter or leave without the permission of the soldiers, and it takes hours. When we talk about the settlers, you need to understand that we are facing military gangs. There are no consequences and no rules—they can do whatever they want. They come and take goats and sheep from farmers, who cannot do anything—for example, near Jericho.

You can imagine that they can carry out a pogrom with the sponsorship of the Israeli army. They come suddenly after about two hours, and it takes one or two minutes. There are no rules, and no security for anyone to leave his house, inside the Palestinian cities; it is not between the Palestinian cities. It is simply unbelievable.

Q109 **Alex Ballinger:** With all these terrible developments—the fighting in Gaza and what is happening in the West Bank at the moment—it would be interesting to hear from Robi and Bassam a bit more about what the Parents Circle-Families Forum has been trying to achieve.



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Robi Damelin: Basically, since 7 October, we have been inundated from all over the world with people asking us to come and give dialogue meetings. But before we go into that, I really would like very much, on behalf of the Parents Circle, to thank your Prime Minister for endorsing the international fund. This is terribly important for us, and it has become much more important since the American President, in his great wisdom, decided to stop all foreign aid. More than ever, we need you now.

The Parents Circle has not stopped working for one minute since 7 October, because of this desire to have some hope. We have a project that might be of interest to you. Because of all the polarisation that is happening today all over the world and in your country, we created a programme called "Listening from the Heart". It is an online education programme that we created with Georgetown University because we had so many people from all over the States asking us to give dialogue meetings. It was not possible to do that, so we have filled three dialogue meetings with questions and answers, and we have a manual that Georgetown helped us make for the facilitators.

This should go to the Education Department. It is online and has been endorsed by the Federation of Teachers union in the States. NYU actually presented it in September, and it is something that could easily be used in your situation, given the polarisation. This is one of the things that we have done, and it is very important.

Chair: In the second session, we have John Lyndon of the Alliance for Middle East Peace giving evidence. We may be able to ask him wider questions in relation to that during the second session.

Robi Damelin: I think so, but this is actually the baby of the Parents Circle. The most extraordinary thing is that we have more than 80 new members who have lost members of their family since October, and many of them have already been speaking up for peace. We have two new board members who lost their parents on 7 October. We have Palestinians who have lost a huge amount of family members in Gaza, yet they are still in the Parents Circle. We have been working, even though each side watches the media from their point of view, which is like living in a parallel universe.

So I must say that I am very proud that only three families, out of 800, have left the Parents Circle and that, despite the powers that be in Israel, who are trying to keep us out of the schools, we are continuing to do dialogue meetings. They tried to stop us, even with a debate in Parliament, from having our summer camp. Fortunately, the American Government, American embassy and German embassy intervened, and we had the summer camp. This year, because of the situation with the closure, we took all the children to Cyprus.

We have a new relationship with NYU, which invited 40 kids to come to Prague, where there is a branch of NYU. Some of the students, Muslim and Jewish, joined the Palestinian and Israeli kids. They had never met each other before. They came back, and we are going to have a continuation of



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this programme. In short, we have not really stopped working. We have a meeting of all the new Israeli members this Friday. If you are looking for hope anywhere, that is where you should be looking.

Q110 Alex Ballinger: Thank you very much, Robi. It is very helpful for us to understand what you have been doing in the United States. You talked about opportunities to work in the UK. Are you doing inter-community work in the UK now? Could you say a bit more about that?

Robi Damelin: We would very much like to present this programme to whoever you think is relevant—whether a teachers' union or the Minister of Education. We would be delighted to present the programme and allow you to use it in universities and schools, just as is happening now. We went to Harvard, Columbia, Amherst and Barnard; I think that it will now be the seventh time I have been to America since October. They are also asking to have it in Italy and Germany. I cannot see a reason not to use it in such a polarised society as you are experiencing.

Q111 Alex Ballinger: I am sure we can facilitate an introduction. I have a similar question for Rula and Alon-Lee about the work of Standing Together; could you say a bit more about what your aims are?

Rula Daood: We are a grassroots movement that works within our society—within Israel. Since 7 October, the only thing we have been doing as a Jewish-Palestinian grassroots movement is building political power in our society for our demands. The first demand was for a ceasefire, the second demand was for an agreement to stop the war, and the third and most urgent demand is to have a real future for people living in Israel and Palestine.

Both of us have lived through too many wars, on both sides of the border, to put it like that. Too many people have lost their lives. The leaderships in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza have not been able to bring us a solution. This war between Israel and Hamas was not the first one. We really hope it will be the last one, but as long as our leadership still sits around the same table and does not speak about real solutions, nothing will change.

The real solution is to have a real Israeli-Palestinian peace: a peace that will give the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza the ability to have their own independence, not to have military occupation in their lands; rebuild the lives of the people in Gaza, in the south of Israel and in Israel; and continue from there to an understanding that, for both of us to have real security, we must have peace. For people in Israel to feel safe, Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank need their own freedom and independence; for Palestinians to have their own freedom and independence, Israelis must have their own security. That will come only with the achievement of real diplomatic agreements and real Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The very basic fact is that none of us on this Zoom talk is going to pack up and leave the place that we call home; it is home for all four of us. We need to understand what path will lead to that change. As a grassroots



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movement in Israel, we have been going out in the streets since 7 October, demonstrating each and every week, and demanding a ceasefire and a yes to Israeli-Palestinian peace.

It is not just that; we are building our political power. We are building it by organising people from different communities within Israeli society. We have been building a new and different leadership of younger people who will be able to demand freedom, security and peace for all of us. We believe that the most essential work that needs to be done is within grassroots movements, organising people within our society. Right now, our politicians are not speaking of different solutions. They see victory as eliminating one side.

The Israeli Government—the Bibi Netanyahu Government—has sat down with Hamas, come out with a deal and are celebrating it, and calling victory on both sides. At the same time, tens of thousands of people have lost their lives or homes, and there is total destruction. There is no victory in images of people returning to destroyed homes, nor in images of hostages coming back after 15 months underground. This is not the victory that we want. The victory we want speaks about a life of safety for both of us. It will happen only by achieving real Israeli-Palestinian peace.

This is what we do at the grassroots level. That is important work because we understand that the most essential thing is that the people in this land fight for these principles. If we are not convinced as people that the only way we will have a different future is by stopping these endless wars and reaching a real Israeli-Palestinian peace, nobody is going to come from outside and help us. Our main work, for the last 15 months, has been building that political power within our society.

Q112 Chair: May I follow up on what you said? There is a question—a challenge. We hear—do tell me if we have got it wrong— that increasing numbers of people in Israeli society have wanted a ceasefire and everybody has wanted the hostages home, but the number of people who see the long-term future as Israel living at peace with a Palestinian state as neighbours has gone down dramatically. Indeed, when there was a vote in the Israeli Parliament, everybody voted against the idea of a Palestinian state, from what I understand. Is that correct?

Robi Damelin: Yes.

Alon-Lee Green: There is a discrepancy here between the leadership of the Israelis and the Israeli people. We are seeing solid support in every poll for the last eight months, showing that more than 70% of all Israelis support the hostage deal and a ceasefire deal. Even if the question says, “Do you support a hostage deal that includes ending the war in Gaza?” the answer of most Israelis is yes. If you ask Israelis, “Do you support a two-state solution, together with a regional peace and some reassurances from the Saudis, the EU, and the UK and US Governments?” more than 50% of Israelis—a slight majority—in opinion polls say yes. It is going down, but we still hold a slight, slight, slight majority.

Q113 Chair: Are you able to share that data with us, or at least refer us to where we can find it?

Alon-Lee Green: Yes—

Chair: It contradicts what we are being told about Israeli public opinion.

Robi Damelin: Would it not be very difficult now to make this kind of research? We are still at war, if you look at what is happening. If you think about what happened on October 7, the Israeli army was defeated then, and when you are defeated, there is humiliation, and when there is humiliation, there is revenge. There is so much anger from both sides. Let us have a little time to breathe before we come in. Let us grieve. Let us be quiet. I cannot describe to you how extraordinary it is not to think that there will be a siren in another half an hour, or that nobody is being killed.

I ask all of the wonderful people sitting around your table to think about the human consequence and find out the names of those who have been killed. So many people talk in numbers and statistics, but each person that died, each child that died—I ask people to find the name of one child who died in Gaza or Israel so that they can tell me their story, or one hostage or one mother. We are the consequence of this madness, and it has to stop. We need to breathe. There are no instant solutions. Time—it is going to take time. The anger has to quieten down a little bit from both sides.

Bassam Aramin: If I may say a few words, of course I want to criticise Israel. Honestly, I want to say that for me it is a sick society. I do not blame them for being sick under the leadership of a war criminal, according to international law. According to even the Israeli regime, they consider two Ministers from the Israeli Government as terrorists, as criminals. Imagine they are the leaders of Israel today.

I just want to say that we need to learn from history. Even you, the British, tried not here, but in Afghanistan, for 20 years. You want to teach them values; then you fail. Then come the Russians, and they want their own way for another 20 years. Then the Americans say, “Let us go for another 20 years.” They invested \$41 billion to build the Afghan army to fight the Taliban. You know the result. They fell in one week without fighting. Imagine if they invested this \$41 billion to rebuild Afghanistan.

It is not that I do not agree with my sister—it is not only the Palestinians and the Israelis. Unfortunately, it is not up to us. We are waiting for Uncle Sam to solve it. It is in the hands of the Americans. It is very clear. And the Americans announced that—it is not a secret. What will happen if you have the independence or whatever you call it to recognise the Palestinian state that you believe in? You believe in the two-state solution. Why can you not recognise Palestine as a state? You would save thousands and thousands of lives—especially as the UK, with your moral and historical responsibility.

Q114 Alex Ballinger: Thank you, Bassam. I have one final question for Rula and Alon-Lee. It is really interesting to hear about the work you are doing in Israel at the grassroots level. Have you been able to do any work in the



West Bank or Gaza? What have you achieved there?

Alon-Lee Green: Just a brief example of the work we did in the last 15 months: it was a very long campaign that we led around the question of aid to Gaza. This is also a question of the West Bank. Why? Because organised Israeli settlers from the West Bank have been trying to block, as you are well aware, the aid that made its way either from the Jordan border or from Palestinian cities in the West Bank. They tried to block it inside the West Bank and at checkpoints. After it escalated, groups of extremist settlers started to set the aid trucks on fire to send Palestinian truck drivers to hospital. Even Israeli soldiers were sent to the hospital.

We built and initiated the humanitarian guard that within six weeks started to recruit 1,000 members from our movement to stand in daily shifts between the aid trucks and the settlers, facing the settlers, and blocking them from attacking the aid trucks. At the beginning it was extremely violent, including knives and attempts to stab. The police did not show up. It was an order from the Minister of Police, Ben-Gvir, not to interfere and not to stop or arrest any of the settlers.

We suffered from a lot of violence, but afterwards, because Israeli citizens were clashing with other Israeli citizens—us and the settlers—the police started to show up and separate us and make arrests. We paid with some unpleasantness and turbulence, but eventually the police showed up in the mornings, not allowing us to go on the road, but also not allowing the settlers to go on the road, and we won. Since 27 May, all the aid trucks have been able to go to Gaza.

Another part of the campaign was to call on Israeli citizens to insist on our humanity and to recruit and donate aid ourselves—mainly Palestinian citizens. People from the West Bank donated so much aid to Gaza in hundreds of trucks. That was an act of solidarity, but also an act of self-interest. It is a question of what kind of society we remain in the face of trauma, fear and grief.

Alex Ballinger: Thank you.

Q115 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Both your organisations are seeking to bring together Israelis and Palestinians, but on both sides there must have been a degree of further polarisation. The Israelis witnessed the horror of what happened on 7 October, and Palestinians have seen huge numbers of casualties killed in Gaza. To what extent has your task has been made 1,000 times more difficult? How optimistic are you that it can be done?

Robi Damelin: If we weren't optimistic, we would stay at home and drink tea. I can't tell you how much Alon, Rula and Bassam have done in this country; I am so proud to see what they are doing every day.

The Parents Circle will continue to work regardless, but give us time to grieve and, now more than ever, don't look for instant solutions. Because the US aid has stopped, some of the wonderful NGOs on the ground will not be able to continue with their work. We have been stopped in the middle of a narrative project. They awarded us \$550,000, and overnight



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that has gone. We are now in debt: we have to pay all the people who are working. Fortunately, we can manage at the moment, but there are NGOs that have lost everything. You need to know about these things. Yes, maybe America is our future, but the whole world has to understand that we have to stop investing in weapons, with such a small percentage in peace, and start investing in peace and in these organisations.

It is the first time in so many years that Palestine has been on the map. Could you imagine what would happen if all these wonderful kids who are demonstrating understood and started to support the organisations on the ground that are working to end this conflict? It doesn't have to be the Parents Circle: it could be Alon's movement, Combatants for Peace, Women Wage Peace or Breaking the Silence. How powerful it would be if students started to support that morally. That would make the difference in our lives. That is what we need.

Q116 Sir John Whittingdale: Alon-Lee referred to Israeli public opinion, where this is still a majority that appear to want a peaceful settlement. Robi, your organisation has been harshly criticised by the Israeli Government, who have claimed that you are equating people who have died as a result of terrorism with people who have died supporting terrorism, and for that reason they took action against what you were doing in schools. Is that a widely held view, or do you see that as an extreme element within the Israeli Government that is not supported elsewhere?

Robi Damelin: It is an extreme element in the Israeli Government. Whatever Government has been in power before this, the Ministry of Education has never banned us from schools. We had to go to court, we won, and now the whole thing is starting up again. We definitely do not have support from the Government—I can tell you that very clearly—but that cannot stop what we are doing. If we don't, who will? It has to start from the ground.

Q117 Aphra Brandreth: Obviously, since 7 October, the conflict has led to so many deaths. In one of your previous answers, Robi, you said that you have had 80 new members, and just three have left. Can you confirm that that is the change in membership that you have had? I want to ask you and Bassam whether you have seen a change in attitudes, in both Israel and Palestine, affecting the nature of your work or the things you are focusing on.

Robi Damelin: Well, there is still the anger. It is what I said before; you cannot really judge who people are now. There is still this overlap of the hostages and of people dying every day. Such is the element of trust between the Palestinians, our organisation and the Israelis that we continued to work. We had meetings two days after the war began, having watched the terrible media on both sides, yet we continued to work. Because there is an empathy, even if you do not agree. And when there is no empathy, there will be barbarism. And that is what there is.

Q118 Aphra Brandreth: Bassam, could you come in on that as well?



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Bassam Aramin: It is always difficult; it was not easy at all, but since 7 October—which has become the “beginning” of the conflict, but it was not, it was 75 years before—it has become more difficult. It has become more important that we continue to raise our voice up. As Robi mentioned, from day one, we continue to raise up our voices because, simply, we have no fear, because the worst has already happened to us. It is a matter of responsibility.

We know that, in the end, we will sit down and sign the same agreement. In the Irish case, it took 800 years, and like I always say, the Palestinians did not kill 6 million Israelis, and the Israelis did not kill 6 million Palestinians—yet—but there is a German ambassador in Tel Aviv and an Israeli ambassador in Berlin. That means that we can do it. We only need a brave leader to lead us towards the future and to release us from the very painful past—which is past. We will never change it.

So, in spite of the difficulties, we continue to spread this message, and it is logic. When people hear “logic”, it sounds familiar in spite of the pain. I am not saying that they become Martin Luther King. Is there more extremism, more anger and more fear? Absolutely. But they have no hope. When they have hope, the same people—the same fanatical groups—will change their minds, because each one wants to live in peace, security and stability.

Robi Damelin: One small thing that I wanted to tell you is that, the prisoners who perpetrated the murders are being released, and I can tell you that within our group, including myself, we already had five members who said—I wrote an op ed—that they should free the prisoners if that would bring back the hostages, and I am so proud that they understand the sanctity of human life.

Bassam Aramin: And I am proud of you.

Robi Damelin: And I love you, but that is beside the point.

Q119 **Blair McDougall:** Bassam said something there that, to me, was very interesting—that what you need is brave leadership. It feels often, for us as outsiders, that the leadership that is not committed to peace is much more effective at creating the political realities than the majority in civil society, which Alon described, who are committed to peace.

I was a campaigner before I was a Member of Parliament, so I want to ask a campaigner’s question: what is your theory of change? Notwithstanding Robi’s point about the need for grieving in this moment, what is your long-term plan for how the activities that you undertake will change that reality and encourage that type of leadership that Bassam describes? Maybe we can start with Bassam.

Bassam Aramin: Again, to have hope, to have a political process. If, for example, France, UK and Germany, as the leaders of Europe, recognised a Palestinian state that they believed in, instead of continuing to fight for another 100 years, we could solve the problem in 10 years, or less than 10 years.



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People are very keen to see a solution. You will find people in Gaza even now who have more hope than people in Tel Aviv because they are suffering more—it is very obvious—but the people lack the words. They did not understand that. We think that we deserve to live as the rest of the world does, and we do not have anything to lose. Jabotinsky said that oppression creates resistance. I always say to my Israeli friends that as long as the Israeli occupation continues, believe me, we will continue to sacrifice the blood of our kids from both sides to protect the holy stones of Jerusalem, and I am not sure whether Jerusalem knows who we are at all.

We can exist together, or side by side, on one condition: without oppression. I do not want my beloved Robi, for example, to control my life. I want to live free. At the same time, to see the rest of the world—when you are pro-Palestinian, which is perfect for me, when you are pro-Israeli, it is perfect for Robi and others, but we always say, “From the river to the sea, everyone should be free.” Otherwise, we will continue to suffer—both of us.

Robi Damelin: Please stop importing our conflict into your country and creating hatred between Muslims and Jews, because that is what is happening everywhere all over the world. If I have to have two police guarding me in Italy, that is pretty sad, I think.

Blair McDougall: As a Member of Parliament who represents a large population of both Muslims and Jews, I certainly endorse that. Alon, you seem to want to come in on this question of the theory of change.

Alon-Lee Green: It is a good question, because it does seem that we are all stuck from all directions, even though the will—the simple will of simple people on both sides, just to live safely, prosper, raise a family and be able to take care of your family—exists on both sides. What I think we lack in Israel is a political competition to the dominant idea that our right wing suggests.

I am in my 30s. I was born on the day the first intifada started; I had my bar mitzvah two months after the second intifada. In between, I was not allowed to go on buses, because buses exploded. I have a slight memory—people younger than me will not remember this—of our Prime Minister back then shaking the hand of the Palestinian leader Arafat. That was Rabin and Arafat. I remember our leaders speaking about peace, presenting the idea as an alternative to the reality we are suffering from.

But younger people than me have grown up with one dominant political figure in their life: Benjamin Netanyahu. They do not know a different Prime Minister that is dominant since then. They know one idea, and it says, “Jewish life is worth more than a Palestinian life. If you, as a Jewish person, want to be safe, we need to control them—the Palestinians. We need to send our soldiers to their villages and towns. We need to build walls to the sky and barriers to the ground. That is the only possible idea.”

Our political theory of change is the political theory of competition and weight. If there is only one weight on the right side, the entire political



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arena is tilting to that side; the centre becomes more right, the left becomes more centre and nothing balances the arena. What we want to start with is presenting a new option on the menu for people to be able to choose from. People do not choose something that is not on the menu. No one goes to a restaurant and does that.

The very simple option is this: only peace will bring us security. We will be safe only if we do not control millions of people—a different people that is not free, not independent and not equal to our rights. This is not something new. It is a very basic idea. It has existed for so many decades, but it has been forgotten in our political discussion and our public discussion. That is the beginning of the political theory.

The second level is to organise and to build power, because it seems as if people do want to have a better life. But even when we see masses of people going out to the streets in Israel, they shout “Democracy” sometimes about the Supreme Court in Israel, but it is easy to forget that there cannot be democratic freedoms and democratic life as long as we have occupation and as long as the occupation moves from the West Bank and trickles down into our society. Rula here does not live in the West Bank; Rula, you live as a Palestinian citizen of Israel, and maybe you can speak about it. But we see oppression moving deeply into our society as well.

Q120 Blair McDougall: Can I ask one more question to build on that analysis, Rula and Robi? Robi spoke about the need for a period of mourning and to allow the dust to settle a little bit, but the people who are less committed to peace and the ideals that Alon-Lee has just described are still moving at pace. We have seen lots of discussion of the annexation of the West Bank, and we have seen some pretty horrifying comments from President Trump about moving the whole population out of Gaza. How, in this moment when the dust is settling, can you shape the discussion to create that counterweight that Alon-Lee was describing?

Rula Daood: The theory of change that speaks about “What do we need in order to be secure?” is very simple. It speaks about peace. We do need peace in order to live in security. This is the work of the people living here, the people within Israel and Palestine: to make that change. But there is one thing that is really missing, and that is some kind of pressure that can be put on the Israeli Government. We have not really seen that in the past 15 months.

We came to England, we went to Germany, we went to the US and we sat with many officials in different Governments. Many told us that after 7 October, Israel has the right to defend itself. We answered, “What about Palestinians? Do they also have the right to defend themselves? How can we come to a place where people are really equal if we only stand on the side of one Government?”

Then comes the real question of how you can really be a good friend of Israel or the people who are living in Israel, or even the Government of Israel. Does it mean giving this Government a blank cheque to do



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whatever it seeks to do? All we have seen for 15 months is real destruction.

You have a huge power to impact and affect the lives of people living in Israel-Palestine. What we demand from you, and what we really need from you, is not just to be there when a ceasefire is signed. It is not enough for us to have just a ceasefire; we want an end to these wars. We believe that in order to have a real peace, you, as officials and Governments, should be helping us by giving more place to an independent Palestinian state.

There could be a committee with a huge and very strong voice that says that the security of Israel will be there 100% only when there is an independent Palestinian state. Then, pressure can be put on the Israeli Government from different Governments, from Europe and from the US, and it can start affecting the decisions that are made here.

We need to understand that the real solution is to step on from just a ceasefire, from phase 1, 2 or 3 of this war, and into ending all of these wars. This will only happen by a process that will bring two independent states.

Israel is a state. It is independent, it has its own army, it has its own economy, it is very strong and it has its own society. It is about time for Palestinian people to have their own freedom and independence.

We need that kind of pressure from you on our Government. It would be very helpful to our theory of change, because it would not just be us—the people living here—demanding it, but other Governments all over the world, especially Europe and the US, putting pressure on that Government. This can have an effect and make a change for us in Israel-Palestine.

Q121 Uma Kumaran: Thank you all for your evidence today, especially Robi and Bassam: you have overcome such personal adversity, and you are using your voices for common good and for peace. It gives us real hope, so thank you.

My question, which is for all of you, links with what you have just been speaking about. If you could make one request to the UK Government that is within their control, what would you ask our Prime Minister to do to support both your organisations' objectives?

Robi Damelin: I think the circumstances are so difficult on the ground. When I look at what Gaza looks like, we have to change the circumstances of the lives of people on the ground. We have to start understanding why people do things. How is it possible that 7 October started?

If you are a child growing up in Gaza, and every two years there is a war and you have nowhere to run, and you watch your mother and your siblings, and you have no hope and you have no freedom of movement, what kind of adult will you be? If you have been living on a kibbutz in some safety for many years, and suddenly 7 October happens, what kind of person will you be? If you grow up in Ashdod, Ashkelon or one of the



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cities around the tunnels around Gaza, and you have been exposed to rockets since you were a small child, what kind of adult will you be? You have been wetting your bed since you were 12. All of these stories are a mix-up. As for the role that we can play, we do not have the monopoly on truth or how to solve the whole problem. All we can do is what we can do.

There are so many bereaved families now. I can tell you that the people who gave me the most solace were other bereaved mothers, because they actually understood. You, as a Government, have to pressurise to end this madness, to end the war, but also to change the circumstances for people growing up now. If a kid in Gaza does not have any hope, then we can easily have another attack. If there is not enough therapy given to both sides, I do not know what will be. I really do not.

Actually, I have a solution. We might as well end this on a light note. When the Iranians decided to bomb us, I was in Ben Gurion airport. We all went to the shelter, and an ultra-religious Jewish man started talking to me. He said that his wife had just died. I said, "I'm very sorry." He said "I've got 43 grandchildren." I don't know—maybe he thought I was going to come and cook for the 43 grandchildren, but it was a way of talking to each other. We do not talk to each other, but that has to be encouraged. This man would never have started a conversation with me if we had not both been in a shelter in Ben Gurion airport.

We have to talk to each other from both sides and within our own society. We have to learn the question "What is empathy? How can I listen to you—even if I don't agree with you—with empathy?" Actually, most of the work that we do is the telling of personal stories. Please humanise the conflict, and let's hang on to our humanity.

Alon-Lee Green: The very urgent things that I believe should be done, and should be addressed by foreign Governments for our Parliaments, involve looking at the very specific moment that we are at right now. Two things are happening at the same time.

One is that we are in phase 1 of the ceasefire agreement, which releases the 33 hostages; some of them have been released already, and others will be released in the next 30-something days. That ceasefire phase also allows Palestinians to go back to their villages, cities and homes, although I think that that is too much of a word to use, because most of them will find a destroyed home. It is very sad. The ceasefire also releases the Palestinian prisoners.

The second thing that is happening is the expansion of the military campaign in the West Bank. I have just read on the news that the IDF campaign was expanded to another city in the West Bank in the last hour: to Tulkarem from Jenin. This is dangerous.

We see two trends. One is that we can continue the ceasefire and make it move from phase A to the second phase, a permanent ceasefire. That is not guaranteed. The right wing in Israel, some of whom are very high-ranking Ministers, are working to make it fail, so we need to put pressure



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on. Your Prime Minister, your Parliament, your Government can do a lot by saying, "We will support rebuilding Gaza. We will support Israeli civil society. We will support Israel in many different ways, but you need to move forward. End this war, bring back all the hostages—not only some of them—and do not continue fighting in Gaza." But it must also include not moving the war from Gaza to the West Bank.

If what we see now is 10 months or five months of devastation, of starvation or of destruction in the West Bank, we will all lose. We need to remember that the West Bank is a place where millions of people have been living for decades without basic human or civil rights. We need to understand that this reality is not a solution to the violence; it is the reason for the violence from which we are all suffering.

If someone in the Israeli Government tells me that the only solution to the violence with which we are threatened is this military campaign, I will tell them, "You are creating more violence right now with these acts, and not solving any problems." Please think what leverage you can use to speak with our Government and force our Government to continue the ceasefire, and not to go to full-on war in the West Bank.

Rula Daood: I will add my voice to Alon-Lee's. You have a lot of ways to influence the Israeli Government, and the main demand should be one that sees the lives of the people. Right now, our Government and the leadership of Hamas—which remains and will become strong in the coming years, because that is what happens after each and every war between Israel and Hamas—need a much stronger voice from other countries and other Governments telling them what path they must lead to, and telling them what it means to be supported, to support this deal and to be supported in government by your Government, and what kind of limits you will put in place.

We have a crucial need for that voice, because whenever there is a voice for a solution, for real peace and for continuous ceasefire, it opens more space for us to work within our societies, because it puts more pressure on our Governments. I think and believe that you have the leverage to put that pressure on our Government, and it is very much needed right now. If there is one thing that we understand and that we see, it is that people understand that the status quo from before 7 October cannot be maintained any more. We need different solutions, and it is time for these solutions.

Bassam Aramin: Martin Luther King said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Believe me—you know the truth—never keep silence. This is one of our problems.

The fighters of Hamas, the people of Hamas or the terrorists of Hamas—whatever you call them—who committed the attack on 7 October were 10 to 12 years old back in 2014 when Israel attacked Gaza. Now, when more than 50,000 people have been killed, and with this destruction, imagine your children or yourself living in Gaza. They just invest in more hatred, in more revenge for the future.



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How do we solve this problem? Only by giving them hope and justice, to end this occupation. With the Americans, they invest billions and billions of dollars, especially between Gaza and Israel. Again, it fell down in two hours. Imagine if there were a peace agreement, with a Palestinian state, between Palestine and Israel: we will never see 7 October. Hamas, Fatah, the PLO—they are all the creations of Israel, only because of the occupation. End the occupation and Hamas will disappear, al-Fatah will disappear and the PLO will disappear. We will live in a normal situation.

Israel has tried to make peace with all the Arab states, Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, whatever—but not with the Palestinians. The only guarantee for Israeli security is the freedom of the Palestinians. Even if they make peace with the rest of the world, the Palestinians should be free. Then they will feel safe and at peace. Again, just recognise the Palestinian state, which is very easy for you; I know that.

Uma Kumaran: Thank you, Bassam, and thank you all.

Chair: Thank you all very much for your time today; we really appreciate it. If there is anything additional that you think we should perhaps know about, please feel free to write to us, and we will take your written evidence as well as your oral evidence. We are very grateful to you for being with us today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John Lyndon, Shahira Shalaby and Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu.

Q122 **Chair:** We now move on to our second panel. Would you be kind enough to introduce yourselves? We will begin with the person in the room. John Lyndon, would you like to explain who you are and what you do?

John Lyndon: My name is John Lyndon. I am the executive director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, ALLMEP, which is the largest network of Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilding organisations, with over 160 NGO members. All of the NGOs that you are hearing from today are among ALLMEP's membership.

Shahira Shalaby: My name is Shahira Shalaby. I am a co-director of the Abraham Initiatives, a shared organisation. I am co-director with Amnon Be'eri, my partner, who is with me here.

Chair: I do not want to guess at how to pronounce your surname, Amnon; please excuse me. Would you introduce yourself?

Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu: My name is Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu, and I am Shahira's co-CEO at the Abraham Initiatives.

Q123 **Chair:** What is the objective of ALLMEP, and which organisations are a part of it? You have said that all the organisations that are giving evidence today are members, but could you explain what the overall purpose is, particularly given what is going on at the moment in the Middle East?



John Lyndon: Our theory of change is around trying to empower and radically scale the sort of work you are hearing about today, in order to make participation in these sorts of programmes reach critical mass, rather than being a rare privilege enjoyed by a small number of Israelis and Palestinians.

Today we are going to speak about the level of trauma that you see in both Palestinian and Israeli society, particularly among younger people. We want people to be impacted by our work, and to have their attitudes and behaviour change. We fundamentally believe that the politics—or the lack of politics or a diplomatic horizon—are downstream from a lot of the social and political realities bedevilling diplomats over decades. If you can build up resilience and strength at grassroots level, it makes diplomacy much more viable—it attracts diplomacy, to be blunt, and makes it more sustainable and likely to succeed.

We know that extremist actors will emerge to try to destroy any diplomatic effort—that is what happened in the '90s and the early '00s. To be blunt, there are more extremists now than there were then. So without that deeply rooted societal and attitudinal reality of support for peace and for humanism—pushing back against the de-humanisation that now exists between both peoples—it is very hard for us to move policy conversations towards meaningful diplomacy.

We work with our members in the region to strengthen their work. We have capacity-building research programmes to make them much more effective on the ground, and to bring 160 organisations together into a genuine community of solidarity on both sides of the green line—Palestinians and Israelis.

Finally, we work with Governments to encourage that perspective among key diplomatic actors, so that they understand that real diplomacy requires both the bottom-up strategy and the top-down strategy. Too often, people assume that one is the skeleton key, but unfortunately you need both in tandem. We have never had that with Israel-Palestine. We have had elite-level diplomacy over and over again that has no ground game, and as a result we have seen the population move further away from supporting the sort of ideas that are the subject of consensus here in Parliament. We know from other conflicts around the world that have been much more successfully resolved that the sophisticated formula of bottom-up and top-down in tandem, together, makes conflict resolution infinitely more likely to succeed. That is what Israelis and Palestinians deserve.

Q124 **Chair:** People talk about—we have heard it this afternoon—a hollowing-out of politics in both Palestine and Israel. There are severe criticisms of the leadership on both sides. It is in some ways reminiscent of the criticism of the political leadership in Northern Ireland. Might there be any parallels in terms of the work that was done by civic society in Northern Ireland that might point to the way to how things might work in Israel and Palestine?



John Lyndon: It is an excellent point. Although no two conflicts are the same, I believe that human beings are fundamentally motivated in many of the same ways, regardless of their nationality, religion or geographic location. In Northern Ireland, from the mid-1980s we saw a radically scaled civil society strategy that was taking place during a period of diplomatic inertia. In the mid-1980s, most academics actually thought of Northern Ireland as being less resolvable than Israel-Palestine. The International Fund for Ireland was created in 1986, and it went on to directly invest over \$2.4 billion and leverage towards civil society peacebuilding. That resulted in around \$44 per person per year, for 20 years, to make participation in these programmes a rite of passage for many people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Q125 **Chair:** Give us examples—what sort of things were happening?

John Lyndon: A lot of it actually echoes the organisations you have elected to look at. Take, for example, Parent Circle, which shows the power and moral authority of bereaved families to traverse sectarian lines and really speak to the shared humanity and grief. Those families were vitally important in Northern Ireland in pushing for the Good Friday agreement, and really critical in sustaining it after the agreement was reached and in removing extremists from their communities post-agreement.

The Abraham Initiatives, which you will hear about shortly, are a best-in-class organisation working to develop a shared society between Palestinian and Jewish citizens inside Israel. That is one of the issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that most closely resonates with Northern Ireland, where you have proximity between minority and majority communities, deeply different ideas about the past and sometimes the future, as well as structural racism and inequality in how resources are allocated. The work the Abraham Initiatives does builds solidarity between these groups, which can then also be a route and a base for joint political action and community transformation.

In Northern Ireland, we saw similar organisations that broke down the sectarian barriers. In terms of its relationship between it and elite-level politics, right now in Northern Ireland, the political success story over the past decade has been the Alliance party. I am non-partisan and I am not trying to favour any one party, but it is a non-sectarian party that is made up of both and every faith and national identity on the island. For a while there, it was the fastest growing political party in western Europe.

If you think about it—actually, we do not need to think about it; we have evidence—many of the Alliance leaders are alumni of these programmes. They are the parallel in Northern Ireland. They participated in the sort of activities you heard about in the last session as teenagers and during their 20s, and then they became and emerged as political leaders rooted in that interdependence and solidarity across different faith lines. In Northern Ireland—again, there are differences—what you saw was a soup-to-nuts theory of change that was driven by civil society.



Chair: A what?

John Lyndon: Sorry, it is kind of an Americanism—the idea is that it is from start to end. You had the ideas around the Good Friday agreement, such as parity of esteem, which were generated by civil society, not by political leaders. It was then taken on the road to over 500 town hall meetings to socialise it by civil society, not by political leaders. We then had a referendum after the Good Friday agreement which was run by civil society, not by political leaders. They developed the ideas, the leaders and then the popular consent to get it over the line.

It took the 12 years between the foundation of the international fund and the resolution of the Good Friday agreement to see the full fruit of that, but Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief negotiator, called it the great unsung hero of the Good Friday agreement and recommended that a similar instrument be created for Israel-Palestine.

Q126 **Chair:** You talk about the Alliance, but what about the sectarian leaders that we still have in Northern Ireland? In what way did it influence people who believe themselves fundamentally to represent one particular part of society?

John Lyndon: That is a great question. Ultimately, you are all elected politicians, so I will not pretend that I understand this better than you do, but I understand that you are limited by what you can and cannot do by consent and the constituencies you represent. Fundamentally, civil society shapes constituencies that can push people towards peace.

You heard from Alon-Lee earlier on about the era of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in what is now Rabin square, with 100,000 Israelis in attendance calling for peace—that was the reality—driven by civil society. Our members were in that square that day. That can be achieved again by growing a base that can push. Rabin was a hawk for most of his career, and he felt changes within his own society and his own political base that pushed him towards making compromises.

We have that right now, but, unfortunately, it is on the wrong side of the ledger within both societies. There are highly mobilised political communities that put pressure on elected officials to take more extreme positions. You mentioned the vote in July in the Israeli Knesset on a two-state solution. Only nine Members of the Knesset voted for it, many abstained, and many MKs I know personally who support a two-state solution did not go on record with it as they were afraid, because the constituencies were not pushing them towards those positions of compromise. If we want different decisions in the Knesset, or in Palestinian political-elite discussion, we have to create different incentive structures within society, and reward and incentivise politicians to take risks.

I don't happen to think that the political leadership in Northern Ireland were particularly heroic. In fact, they were the last lagging indicator; the society changed to a great extent before they did. I do not think we can wait for the Nelson Mandelas and the de Klerks to emerge. We have to

generate the change under their feet in order to push politicians to make different decisions.

Q127 Abtisam Mohamed: Shahira, I have watched a number of your interviews where you speak about the inequality that you have experienced through the work you have done at the Abraham Initiatives. Can you talk about some of the work you have done in that area and how you have managed to reduce community tensions?

Shahira Shalaby: First, thank you very much for hosting us. I want to say something about our organisation: as I said, we are a shared Jewish and Arab organisation in which we work together to ensure equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

As you mentioned, Palestinian society suffers from unequal rights in Israel. The mission of the organisation is to work together with Jewish Israeli partners to push and struggle for equal rights for Palestinians in different fields, such as education and political rights in the state of Israel. Our work includes gathering together leaders from both societies and working together in order to change the policy of the Government to ensure equal rights for Palestinians in Israel.

Q128 Abtisam Mohamed: How are you engaging Palestinians in the West Bank in the work that you do?

Shahira Shalaby: We work inside Israel—our activities are only in Israel. We do not engage Palestinians from the West Bank in our activities. We understand the connection between the conflict in the West Bank and in Gaza, and how that affects the relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel, but our aims, our work and our target groups are inside Israel.

Q129 Sir John Whittingdale: Amnon, could you build on what Shahira has said about the work to achieve equality? How do you think that will help to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians?

Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu: The fact is that about 20% of all Israelis are Palestinians. They are Palestinian by nationality, language, heritage and culture. The Abraham Initiatives models shared society in education, services, representation and participation, the public service, universities and hospitals. We design viable models that serve as a demonstration and an example of how Jews and Palestinians should live, work, spend time and simply interact in a positive way and on equal terms together.

We maintain that our examples, which we hope will be, and are gradually being, adopted by the Israeli Government and extended throughout Israel, will eventually be very useful under any possible future solution between Israel and the Palestinians. If we see a two-state solution, Israel will remain a state in which almost a quarter of the population are Palestinians. If it is one state, a confederation or a federation, the proportions may differ, but the bottom line is that Jews and Palestinians will have to co-exist on equal terms in whatever political entity we find ourselves in at the end of the day.



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We design models that enable Jews and Palestinians to interact in a positive and equal way together. The bottom line is to experiment with our ideas and get decision makers to recognise the benefit of those ideas, and hopefully get them adopted, funded and implemented throughout Israel.

We do that in education, as I said. For that, Northern Ireland has been an inspiration for us because part of the political solution in Northern Ireland is also based on education—how do you deal with separate schooling systems for Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and for Jews and Palestinians? That separation in education is one of the sources of alienation, anxiety and hostility between the populations in Israel. We try to erode that segregation.

One of the ways to do it is a project called shared learning. We actually imported that idea from Northern Ireland. It is based on the idea that separated schools in the same area, in close proximity to each other, offer their students the chance to study one, two or even three subjects together on a weekly basis. We bus Arab and Jewish students to the other school every other week, so they simply learn to meet each other, get to know each other and develop friendships. That is one of our ways to deal with the separation in education. Fortunately, the Israeli Government have been gradually adopting the programme and now it is being scaled throughout Israel. That is just one example of our successes.

Shahira Shalaby: May I add something?

Sir John Whittingdale: Of course.

Shahira Shalaby: You asked how our work affects the general—we call it the original—conflict between Palestinians and those in Israel, and how we can contribute to the peace process. We need to understand that Palestinian citizens in Israel are part of the original conflict; they are part of the Palestinian nation, so any regional solution should also include dealing with the problem of the Palestinian citizens in Israel. That is our main duty. We know that improving the relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel will contribute to the general solution and the peace process.

One of our main programmes is about strengthening. We are calling for political co-operation between Palestinians and Jews in Israel. We try to strengthen the Palestinian parties and encourage co-operation between the Zionist Jewish parties and the Palestinian parties in order to build political power and influence the policies of the Government of Israel, including the peace process. Our work clearly includes working with the people on the ground—grassroots work, changing policies and political empowerment for Palestinians and for the central-left parties in Israel.

Q130 **Sir John Whittingdale:** But there appears to have been a polarisation taking place. We heard in our previous panel about the work of the Parents Circle-Families Forum and the opposition that they had encountered from the Israeli Government towards the work that they were doing in schools. To what extent do you think that the Israeli Government,



and indeed the more radical Palestinians, are signed up to your agenda?

Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu: I would say that 10 years ago, there was a consensus in Israel that co-existence or a shared society was a desired future for Israel. Probably 80% of 85% of Israel, both Jews and Palestinians, would have agreed to that assumption or aspiration, but today we are in a completely different reality. The notion of equality between Jews and Palestinians, or Jews and non-Jews in Israel, is a controversial one. The majority among Jews would not subscribe to that aspiration today. Our job is to change that reality, and to convince people that the only way to live in a prosperous, secure future for Israel will be through the creation of a truly shared society, built on equality between Jews and Palestinians. This is what we do. It is an uphill battle, but we strongly believe that since it is the only viable programme for our future, eventually we will succeed.

Q131 **Chair:** Can I ask a question arising out of that? I had the honour of going to see a project similar to the ones you are talking about, where Israelis, both of Palestinian and Jewish origin, were at the same events and the organisation had tried to get them to work together. It seemed to me that it worked fine until the Israeli Jewish kids went off to do their military service. Once they came back, they did not come back to the group and they were not seen again.

It was as if any work that had been done to try to undermine the sense of otherness had been blown away because they went off and did military service. At that point, it was just checkpoints, but obviously now you are working in completely different circumstances, where youngsters have been in Gaza and have done several tours of duty there—so bringing them back together again is even more challenging. That is just on the Israeli side, leaving aside what the challenges may be on the Gazan side.

Shahira Shalaby: I think you are right. You are targeting here one reality we live in: we live in the same society, but we are not living the same reality. The Palestinian young people who live in Israel finish high school and go to university or work, and the Israelis go to the army. Bringing them back is a huge mission: we need to work hard in order to encourage and convince Palestinians and Jewish people to work together to achieve our common goals. This is the work that we do.

When we talk about promoting a shared society, we are not talking about only being in a good relationship; we are talking about changing the structures that shape the reality, the relationship and the rights of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. It means that, sometimes, for me as a Palestinian, I do not need just to work with Jewish groups in order to do our work; I need to work with partners who want to change the reality. That is why we define it as a shared society and not as shared living, because we are not only talking about good relations between the two groups; we are talking about changing and reshaping the way that the state of Israel treats the Arab minority in terms of attitudes, rights, political co-operation and partnership. We are talking about sharing power more than bringing about, and being in, a good relationship.



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In the long term, we believe that the more that we work together, the more that we can build the shared space as an equal and safe space for both communities. As was mentioned in the previous session, Rula I think said—or Alon-Lee said; I do not remember—that none of us is going to leave. That is why we are the people who are in charge of building this reality, the future for the next generations. The way that we are doing this is by being aware of the different narratives. We know that the Palestinians who live in Israel and the Jews who live in Israel do not listen to the same news, do not see the same pictures and, now, are not analysing or judging the war in the same way. Each community has its own way of seeing reality.

Our mission is to understand that they do not have the same narrative, but they have the same place to live in. They live in the same society and with this mission—that is what we call it—we are trying to build shared and common interests. Because at the end of the day, if we want to live in the same place, we have the same needs—we want a safe life: to live with our neighbours in a safe place, to go to work and to send our kids to school and higher education. That is how we try to convince people that it is worth it, that we will win—it is a win-win situation for both societies.

Q132 Abtisam Mohamed: If I may, I will go back to the Chair's initial questions to you, John, on ALLMEP and some of your work. We have heard from the charities today, and the work on the ground sounds excellent and very empowering to the communities involved. It is not new, though; people-to-people programmes have been going on for many decades, since the Oslo accords, when investment was initially initiated.

Some individuals' criticism, from organisations, has argued that the whole approach might be structurally flawed if we do not deal with the elephant in the room—previous speakers have spoken about this—in relation to occupation and settlements. How can we go about moving the resolution programmes forward to the extent that the underlying causes of the conflict are addressed and dealt with as one of the root issues?

John Lyndon: That is an excellent question. The field has evolved significantly since the 1990s, although I would note that there is an idea out there that we tried this and it did not work—I hear that often. The data does not really support that observation. I mentioned that we spent \$44 per person, per year in Northern Ireland for 20 years—I say “we”, meaning the international community—but the number in Israel-Palestine is \$2 per person, per year. So it is very modest, particularly when you consider how much money is sent to Israel and Palestine, largely for weapons, settlements and all sorts of very sub-optimal priorities. If you look at the balance sheet, we are investing in war and conflict in Israel-Palestine; we are not investing in peace.

That said, there is at the heart of your point a very important criticism, which we need to understand: you cannot fix this issue via these programmes alone. I want to be very clear: this is necessary, but it is insufficient. We need diplomacy married to it, as I mentioned: the top-down and bottom-up parts together. To your question, what happens



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inside the room is also very important, and this is part of the challenge. I am in these rooms all the time, and I can tell you that probably the most powerful Zoom call of my life—which is a weird sentence—was right after 7 October. There were 85 Israelis and Palestinians together on Zoom; everybody was in tears, dealing with very difficult, deep and political issues. Every room that has Israelis and Palestinians in it—always, but definitely now—is political. We are talking about occupation, settlements, injustice, rights and historical narrative.

There is a cliché that it is all people eating hummus or playing football. That is sometimes the entry point, and I will defend it, because it can sometimes be the first encounter that will then facilitate a very substantive conversation. It does not always result in agreement—that is not necessarily the goal—but it creates the connective tissue for dialogue and discussion: the idea that you are going to engage the other population, and negotiate and discuss these very difficult things. That is a very dependable barrier against support for dehumanisation and violence. It might not make everyone support a two-state solution, but it makes them very unlikely to support violence against the other.

We also see, although this is not the case for everybody, that around 80% of alumni stay active for at least five years after initial engagement. That is quite a significant data point. It means they are getting something they value and are returning to it, with no material incentive, and very often with social pressure not to engage. What we find is that a group of those people become incredibly engaged.

You heard from Standing Together earlier today. It is probably the most impactful activist organisation on the ground in Israel. It has doubled its number of city guards, which protect Palestinian and Jewish communities in shared cities, and their university chapters. Very many of its leaders are alumni of some of the youth-focused programmes. Those were sometimes a very non-political entry point, and they resulted in Jewish-Palestinian solidarity—people being beaten while protecting convoys of aid into the Gaza strip. That shows you the direction of travel.

The final point I will make is this. We need to be self-critical about how the programmes change, and examine what has shifted following 7 October and the war in Gaza. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has moved into a different category from the one it was in 15 months ago. What we were doing beforehand, which was obviously insufficient, still needs to change, evolve and adapt.

Over the summer, we conducted the largest dialogue of Israelis and Palestinians since 7 October. It used artificial intelligence, which is quite interesting. People cannot be in the same room as each other, and there is a very interesting technology called Remesh, which allows people to find hidden consensus; basically, the technology identifies things that you might not hear or pick up on in the conversation, and serves them back to Israelis and Palestinians to vote on and see whether they represent their opinion.



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We found a huge number of shared values. It was not necessarily that they wanted exactly the same political thing to happen, but there was opposition to violence, the targeting of civilians and the taking of hostages, and there was this idea of equality, which you have heard about from Amnon and Shahira. Beyond that, there was support for a ceasefire and a real diplomatic agreement.

The polling that we have seen is kind of jumping all over the place—different polls give different results—but the Accord institute, one of our members, found that 67% of Israelis support a demilitarised Palestinian state in the context of a Saudi normalisation deal. That is quite a caveated statement, but none the less it is during a war, and 67% of people are saying they would support what is, in essence, the policy priority of this Government in the UK.

Q133 Edward Morello: Was that their No. 1 preference though?

John Lyndon: It was not framed in that way; it was given as a binary. On the other side, we conduct our youth polls among 15 to 21-year-old Israelis and Palestinians, roughly every two years; if you are worried about the current reality, things are going to get much more difficult unless we intervene. Among 15 to 21-year-olds—young Israeli Jews—support for an unequal single-state outcome is significantly higher than support for any kind of two-state solution. In Palestine, support for an unequal—

Q134 Chair: Sorry, when you say “an unequal single-state solution”, what do you mean?

John Lyndon: I mean a single state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, where Jews have political rights and Palestinians do not. There are words for it.

Chair: I thought that is what you meant, but I thought it should be spelled out.

John Lyndon: It is also important to note that, on the Palestinian side, we saw almost parity between a two-state solution and a Palestinian version of one state, where Jews do not have political rights. Majorities of young Israeli Jews and young Palestinians deny the other’s historical connection to the land. That is not about two states or one state; that is a very zero-sum outlook. We know that these programmes are incredibly effective at disrupting those attitudes and creating more support for negotiated non-zero-sum political outcomes.

Q135 Abtisam Mohamed: Have any of the programmes that are part of ALLMEP actually made a difference or had any specific outcomes in addressing some of the structural issues?

John Lyndon: Absolutely. One of our members, Sikkuy, managed to lobby the Israeli Government to radically increase funding for Palestinian citizens of Israel via the largest ever budget allocation to Palestinian citizens. Regrettably, the current Israeli Government reversed that, but it did some good before it was reversed.



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Another of our members, EcoPeace, managed to double the water allocation for Palestinians in the West Bank and also managed to clean Gaza's beaches via the introduction of new technology that took sewage out of the water. That is another win/win, because it is the same Mediterranean, whether you are an Israeli Jew or a Palestinian. It increased water quality for everybody.

I can give you many other examples. None of them has ended occupation and achieved a two-state solution, but nobody has managed to do that. Humbly, I would say that civil society is outperforming almost every other actor in having material improvements sub a final status agreement. Our hypothesis is that if you radically increase the resources, capacity, diplomatic support and protection for this work, you will see further policy wins. Right now, the situation is so malleable. What is going to happen in Israel-Palestine has never been more plastic or up for grabs, so civil society can really push things in a much better direction.

Chair: I know that Abtisam has more questions, but before I go back to her, Ed has a follow-up question on an earlier one.

Q136 Edward Morello: On the data, you referred to the hardening of support among the 16 to 25 youth group. Have you seen any evidence to suggest a hardening of support for a single-state solution as a result of the October attacks? How far has the dial moved?

John Lyndon: I will just pull up a stat. It is important to note that the youth poll that I mentioned was conducted in July 2023, so before 7 October, but during a big military operation in Jenin. It was not comparable to 7 October, but it was a high-intensity moment.

Since then, the joint poll that was conducted by Khalil Shikaki in Palestine and by Israeli polling partners shows that, among younger Israelis, only 19% support a two-state solution, although that does not necessarily suggest that the other 81% support a non-democratic outcome. There is a large amount of support for the status quo.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has been politically successful in sustaining that up to this point. The status quo is one unequal state, essentially; there are not two states. If you put together support for the status quo and support for a single state with permanent inequality, that is quite a large number of people, but the silver lining is that support for the status quo is evaporating. Nobody thinks that we can go back to the reality that existed on 6 October. That means that there is now a competition—you heard about it earlier in the session—of alternative ideas.

The ideas that the radical right wing wants to see in Israel, or that Hamas wants to see in Palestine, are very extreme. It seems to me that a negotiated two-state solution, which has the support of many security elites inside Israel and many international partners, can be seen as much more feasible and sensible by people who are genuinely scared about extreme ideas resulting in further violence.

Q137 Edward Morello: But when you have the President of the United States of



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America talking about depopulating Gaza, which is about creating a single ethnically homogenous land, for want of a better word, does that lend weight to those people who are advocating for a single-state solution? Do you expect to see that moving the dial further? Does it push the conversations that your groups and other civil society groups are having in trying to promote a two state-solution further off into the distance?

John Lyndon: Yes. Also, I would say that President Trump is quite popular in Israel, relative to almost any other country that I am aware of where they collect polling data like this. If he supports something, it can encourage people who might be more sceptical to get behind it, so that is very dangerous.

The other point I would make, though, is that the people who will be out on the streets dependably opposing annexation every day, putting their bodies on the line at demonstrations, are our members. It is sad to say this, but maybe the most effective way to deter annexation is going to be what happens inside Israel rather than what happens internationally, particularly if the United States decides to support or look the other way. I think that is where these movements can really make a difference—not just by demonstrating, as important as that is, but by educating. The facts are on our side.

Annexation is a very bad idea, on Israeli self-interested terms. Israelis, in Hebrew, giving a security analysis and national self-interest analysis, can be more effective at shifting the dial than Security Council meetings can be. Unfortunately, we saw—I will not get into the details; it's very bizarre—a vote in the Knesset in recent days where parties perceived to be more centrist supported the idea of annexation of the Jordan valley. They were playing politics a little bit, but that shows that right now there is not a strong enough opposition—one where there is an electoral base, a civil society movement, groups of retired generals and academics all making the case for how bad an idea this is, but also that there is an alternative.

One of the dangers of annexation is that—this happened in 2020—the debate becomes annexation or the status quo. That is not good enough. We need to have an alternative that is about transforming towards a negotiated two-state solution and an end to the conflict that can provide security, rather than thinking that simply deterring annexation is success in its own right, because it is not.

Chair: There is a lot of interest in what you are saying, as you can imagine. I want to go back to Abtisam, then to Alex and then Phil.

Q138 **Abtisam Mohamed:** On the point of annexation, how do we deal with the reality that is happening now? Linking that to the earlier question that I was going to ask, on the programmes that your organisation delivers, or your members deliver, how do we ensure that this does not normalise the status quo? It does not really address the imbalance of power between Palestinians and Israelis.



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John Lyndon: Again, sometimes I think this is an idea that people have about these programmes that I do not see reflected in the reality of them; I kind of wish that everybody could be participants or flies on the wall in the conversations.

When an Israeli-Palestinian encounter is happening, the Palestinian has usually traversed many checkpoints to be there. The first conversation almost immediately is about the structural inequality, because one person drove there in their car and it took 20 minutes; the other person might have had a rifle pointed at their face and crossed a checkpoint. So it is not subtext; it is text when people come into the room.

There is a power differential, but one thing the Palestinians have is the ability to explain to and educate Israelis who are not aware—and it really is not their fault. This is not in the media. It is not in the forefront of the discussion inside Israel about the reality of occupation in the West Bank or the reality in Gaza.

One stat that we found in a youth poll was that the population of youth between the Mediterranean and the Jordan that was most supportive of these programmes were Gazan Palestinians. That was not because they wanted to make an Israeli friend; it was because they wanted to tell Israelis what their life was like. They wanted to shout and scream, but they wanted to engage.

The power dynamic is real. The differential has only grown greater, but it cannot become a barrier to engagement between both sides. If we want to close that power gap and equalise that dynamic, there needs to be engagement and an understanding of it, as well as ways to disrupt and change it. I do not think that will come from the outside; I think that will come from the bottom up and the kind of work you are hearing about today.

Q139 **Alex Ballinger:** I want to come back to the funding point and your comparison about the small amount of funding that comes into grassroots organisations compared with Northern Ireland. Where does that money come from? We also heard from Robi earlier that the American pause in US aid funding could have a big impact. What sort of impact will that have on the work of your members?

John Lyndon: The first thing to note is that the largest budget line from the United States towards this programming is something called the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, or MEPPA. It is a bipartisan piece of legislation. In fact, it was signed into law by President Trump at the very end of his first term. It has the support of all Democrats, but also a significant number of Republicans; dozens of House Republicans signed an appropriation letter last April for it.

We are going to work very hard, but are also confident that we can ensure that when Secretary of State Rubio delivers his recommendations in about 85 days to President Trump, MEPPA will be in there and will be continued. So it is a pause rather than a cut; it is important to note that.



However, that on its own being sustained is not success. The UK has reduced its support for this sort of work by over 60%, at a time when we really are seeing much greater need than I think was the case in 2018, when those cuts began—and it is a relatively modest investment, relative to what else the UK is funding. I would also say that from a tax efficiency perspective—the impact of investments for the taxpayer—we are spending extraordinary amounts of money on dealing with the outcome of this conflict not being resolved and very, very little on trying to resolve it.

If the UK was to lead on any one ambition within this space, I believe, first of all, that civil society has one of the highest returns on investment. It is also one of the most modest investments relative to the other priorities. The Prime Minister, as we heard earlier today, has endorsed the idea of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace and said that the Foreign Secretary will host a meeting at some point. We think that would be a chance for the UK to really lead on this issue, to leverage what the previous Labour Government knew worked in the Good Friday agreement and to bring together Gulf allies, the United States, other European partners and G7 leaders.

It is important to note that last summer the G7 adopted new language on the centrality and importance of civil society peacebuilding, and the need to institutionalise and co-ordinate it as part of the strategy towards Israel-Palestine. However, it is a priority that requires a leader. I think it is unlikely that President Trump and the United States will lead it, and I do not see another Government within the G7 with the stability, or the focus, or the statement that we have seen Prime Minister Starmer make. That is a real opportunity and the investment will need to be there.

I want to be clear as well—this is a difficult point to make—that I really hope that any such investment does not come at the expense of other important priorities. We need to see Israel-Palestine and its centrality with regards to security and global priorities reflected in spending that sees civil society as being very, very important, but also that sees other priorities—reconstruction, human rights, all of them—as important and needing to be there.

Finally, there is co-ordination. I will not bore you with all the detail; I can send documents on this. We have a lot of inefficient investment. We have different donors investing and sometimes duplicating what they are doing, and different Governments doing things—at a relatively low level, but when you sum it all together it is a bigger number that could be so much more efficiently invested without the number getting bigger, just by having everybody around the table sharing their different investments and ideas, pooling resources and strategies. That requires a Government to decide that co-ordination is a priority and to convene a meeting to do it, and then to pool monitoring and evaluation.

Q140 Chair: Sorry—when the Prime Minister said the Foreign Secretary was to convene a meeting, is that precisely the point of that meeting?



John Lyndon: That is my hope. We will have further conversations with the FCDO and with No. 10 about it, but one of the main points is to bring everybody together to co-ordinate, not just the investments but the impact.

We can do extraordinary things now that were not available in Northern Ireland in the 1980s around data and understanding very large datasets. What is working in this very transformed moment? What is persuading Israelis and Palestinians? That can then be socialised among other donor states and we can then help to socialise it to 160 NGOs who, even if they do not get a grant, can none the less improve their activity and its effectiveness thanks to the data that this co-ordination would help to create.

Q141 **Chair:** Before you get the next question, I want to ask something in passing. You referred to Rubio going back in 85 days to Trump with recommendations. What is the event? Why are you saying 85 days? What has been the announcement in relation to that?

John Lyndon: The executive order that President Trump announced last Monday had a 90-day term and then that was confirmed in a leaked cable on Friday that came from the State Department. Essentially, funding is being frozen—not all, but almost all global funding is being frozen. This is not about Israel-Palestine; this is every funding priority. And then an evaluation will take place. Now it is 85 days, or 84 days perhaps today. Then Secretary Rubio will issue his recommendations to President Trump on what gets resumed, added or cut.

Q142 **Chair:** Internationally—not just in Israel?

John Lyndon: No, globally. In fact, there was a carve-out—an exemption—for security assistance to Israel and Egypt.

Q143 **Phil Brickell:** Thanks, Chair. This question is for John Lyndon. Moving in a slightly different direction, to what extent do you think that the work that you and your member organisations are undertaking, in working with communities to build bridges in Israel-Palestine, can also contribute to greater community cohesion here in the UK?

John Lyndon: That is a great question. It is a double bottom line in my view. I mean, the No.1 reason to do it is that it can really move the needle in Israel-Palestine and make diplomacy and a just and equitable peace possible; that should be our focus. But without spending any more money, what you are also doing is demonstrating, first of all, that the UK is leading on this priority of bringing Israelis and Palestinians together, of creating solidarity, interdependence and a real sense of community between Palestinians, Muslims, Christians and Jews.

That would actually change, I think, the way our communities here are perceiving the UK's position towards the conflict. You then bring them here. I do this work with other countries, where they do not speak English as their first language, but so many Israelis and Palestinians you are hearing from today are able to speak fluent English to communities here



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straight away; that is one of the great benefits. They can talk to synagogues, mosques, churches, community groups and councils, and they can thank them for the UK's leadership in scaling this work and tell them how it is transforming their cities, towns and communities by providing a model for how we can conduct inter-community relations here in the United Kingdom.

You heard Robi say earlier, "Please don't import our conflict into your communities." This is a way of us exporting resources for peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine and importing peacebuilders. There are some great organisations here in the UK doing it, such as Solutions Not Sides, that bring peacebuilders to British schools.

I have witnessed these sessions and seen young British citizens spend 90 minutes with Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders. They see them as fully rounded human beings rather than caricatures, and they understand the nuances and the friendship of these Israelis and Palestinians, which is not just at a superficial level. They are partners in working for justice, equality and peace, and it gives them something to be in solidarity with.

I have seen them; they take selfies, they join Facebook groups and they reach out to them really beautifully during moments of acute violence and ask how they are, what they are doing and how they can help. If we had 10 times as many peacebuilders in Israel-Palestine and 10 times as many of those relationships with UK communities, imagine how different our communities might be as a result.

Q144 **Phil Brickell:** Just following on from that, what do you think the UK Government can do to support those endeavours to increase that partnership working?

John Lyndon: The first is to lead on the creation of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace to be able to scale the work in the region that is required. It is then about developing, as a component of that, an internal strategy here in the UK with the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Education on how it is integrated within how we do community engagement and education in the UK, and to encourage other countries to do it too. That is an additional benefit of this work that could transform events on the streets of Paris, Berlin and New York.

This is a problem globally. I think you also heard in the last session about the power of not only being able to transform the relations in the UK but the sense of strength you get if you are an Israeli or Palestinian activist, which is hard to measure. They are taking risks very often to do this work, and it really matters to know you have this community that backs you overseas, and that you have the political support of not only the Government but communities in the UK. It sometimes provides protections, quite physically, against some of the threats that peacebuilders face.

Q145 **Blair McDougall:** Edward touched on the thrust of my question earlier on,



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which was about the risks of the prospect of annexation for the peace process. John, you put it succinctly, saying, "It is a very bad idea." I wanted to ask Amnon and Shahira why annexation is such a terrible idea for the prospects of peace, just so that we as a Committee have that on the record. I will go to Amnon first.

Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu: I am sorry; I did not hear the question.

Q146 **Blair McDougall:** Just so we have it on the record, because we touched on it earlier, why exactly is the annexation of the West Bank, proposed by some, such a bad idea for the prospects of peace in the region?

Amnon Be'eri Sulitzeanu: It is very simple. Annexation will not bring us to a situation of living in a fully secure society that is based on equality between Jews and Palestinians. Eventually after three negotiations, if the Palestinians and the Israelis agree on a solution based on merging the two entities—Israel and Palestine—into one large entity, which is again based on equality and equal political rights, that is okay, as long as it is done through an agreement. Otherwise, if Israel decides to annex the West Bank without an agreement or the consent of the Palestinians, it will be a huge mistake and tragedy, and it will never get us to a future that is secure for Israelis and Palestinians.

Shahira Shalaby: I would add that annexation means Israel building an apartheid state, because the idea of annexation is just to have one state, without giving the Palestinians citizenship of Israel. They would not influence the political arena in Israel; they would not have the right to vote. That is the idea of annexation.

Another thing is that the dream of the Palestinians, as has been mentioned in the previous session, is to have their independent state. Palestinians have been fighting for around 80 years in order to have their independent state. They came and said to the Israeli people, "Okay, we will share with you our homeland. For us, this is our homeland, from the sea to the river, but we are willing to share the land with you. But the one condition is for us to have our independent state." That is what we support as an organisation; the main thing is that we support the idea of a two-state solution.

We do not know what the agreement on the ground will be—maybe it will be to have shared institutions to lead these two states; maybe it will be like a confederation; maybe it will be a federation—but we believe that the first thing that we should do is to support the Palestinian people to have their own state.

The idea of a one-state solution is very bad, not only for Palestinians but also for Israelis. We need to understand that the Israeli people, especially after 7 October, are threatened. They do not trust Palestinians. There is a lot of tension between the two groups. So, the first thing that we should do is have separation for co-operation. We cannot talk about co-operation between Palestinians and Israelis without further separation. We are talking about logistics; let's call it a logistic separation for a period of time—maybe 10 or 20 years—in order to build trust.



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And I want to say something about something that was mentioned a few minutes ago. You asked why Israeli people, especially young people, do not support the two-state solution. It is because for more than 20 years, they have not heard the word "peace". They were born into the conflict. Most of the young people—the students in the universities and the young people in the labour market—were born after October 2000, after the second intifada, and the only thing that they have heard is "the conflict," and "the war".

Our main mission today is just to bring the dream back to the youngest people in Israel—to imagine the reality that they can live in peace, without really reshaping the idea of the two-state solution. It could ensure safety for the Israelis, first, and then safety for Palestinians, with independence for Palestinians and separation for the Israelis. Then, we can start to talk about the peace process, or building peace between the two nations. But for now, you need to understand that the settlers in the West Bank are bringing a lot of damage and are very violent against Palestinians, so we need a real solution and not annexation.

Chair: Very good. That brings us to the end of our session. May I also say that, if there are any points that you believe we should have asked you about and we did not, or anything that you want to clarify, please do give us some written evidence. That will have equal standing with the oral evidence that you have given today.

We have had a really interesting session, and I know that I speak on behalf of the whole Committee in thanking you for your time and your commitment to this, and for the evidence that you have given us today. Thank you all very much indeed.