

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, HC 488

Tuesday 22 April 2025

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 234-311

Witnesses

I: Shelly Tal Meron מירון טל ליש, Knesset Member, Yesh Atid party.

II: Natasha Hausdorff, Barrister, Six Pump Court Chambers, London.

III: Jonathan Sacerdoti, Broadcaster, journalist and TV producer.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Jonathan Sacerdoti -
committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/133056/html/
- UK Lawyers for Israel -
committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/135895/html/

Examination of witness

Witnesses: Shelly Tal Meron.

Q234 **Chair:** Today the Foreign Affairs Committee is taking evidence about the Israel/Palestine conflict. The Committee invited a representative from the Israeli embassy to appear before us, but unfortunately neither the ambassador nor any of her staff have been able to do that.

We have a panel of witnesses who can explore the Israeli position. I am very grateful to Shelly Tal Meron for joining us today—thank you very much. Would you introduce yourself for the record, and explain who you are and what you do?

Shelly Tal Meron: First, thank you very much for having me. Hello, everyone. My name is Shelly Tal Meron. I am a Member of the Israeli Knesset. I am from the Yesh Atid party, which is a central liberal party—a moderate voice within Israeli politics.

I am a member of the Economic Affairs Committee and of the Gender Equality Committee. I am the chair of the Parliamentary Friendship Group between Israel and the UK. I also established two lobbies that I am the chair of—the first is the caucus for the hostages and the second for men and women who went through sexual assault during this war.

It is nice to see you all.

Q235 **Chair:** It is very nice to see you too. For those of us who get a little confused by the changes of names and positions in relation to political parties, would you mind helping? Who is the leader of your party?

Shelly Tal Meron: The leader of my party is Yair Lapid. He is the former Prime Minister from the previous Government. He was also Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Minister for Finance. It has been 13 years since we established our party.

Chair: An elderly party by Israeli standards, I think.

Shelly Tal Meron: Yes. We are the second-biggest party in the Knesset after the Likud party, which is the party of the Prime Minister today.

Q236 **Chair:** Thank you.

Our inquiry is to understand what the UK Government could do to bring about peace between Israeli and Palestinians, and in what way we can help. The question I always ask is: how do you see Israel in 10 years' time?

Shelly Tal Meron: That is a very good question. One of the reasons that I came into politics a few years ago was because I truly wanted to make a difference and make a change when it comes to the future of the state of Israel and its neighbours—to the peace process.

I am a mother of two daughters. My oldest one is 18 and my youngest is 14, and I want them to have a better future. When you ask me what is



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going to happen in 10 years, I will probably say I want my country to be safe. I want it to live peacefully alongside its neighbours and the entire Middle East, which is going through a lot of changes at the moment. I want my girls to be safe in the state of Israel—to stay here, in their own country, and to establish an even better country for us, in many aspects: when it comes to economics; when it comes to national security, of course; when it comes to education; and when it comes to all the means of life.

Q237 Chair: If you were a Palestinian mother, within the plan that you envisage, what would the future be for you and your family on the West Bank?

Shelly Tal Meron: Maybe it is a little pretentious of my side to speak on behalf of a Palestinian woman, but I think all women, all mothers, share a lot of values. I think the value of life is the most important one. So, I am hoping that a Palestinian mother, much like myself, would want a peaceful and calm future for her children. That means living, for her—if we are speaking about Gaza, then we are speaking about Gaza, but it can be in other areas of the Palestinian Authority—

Q238 Chair: It can mean Gaza and/or the West Bank. When you say you are thinking about a peaceful and secure Israel, how does that come about and what effect does that have on the Palestinians?

Shelly Tal Meron: That is a very big question. I could speak about this for an hour. I think that if we want to talk about the future here in Israel and on the Palestinian side, we need to think about the “day after”—what we call the day after in Gaza. I think that my party was the first one that spoke about the day after in Gaza, very early on in the war, as soon as we discussed the goals of this war. It is not a secret—you could maybe understand that from what I was saying in the beginning—but I think that the most important goal of the war at this moment is, first of all, to bring back the hostages. We still have 59 hostages, and it has been 564 days. For me, that is the top priority and the most important thing. There is no price tag on human life—I cannot put a price tag on their lives and I want them to be back home as soon as possible.

The second one is, truly, to free the Palestinians from the Hamas regime, let’s call it. If we want a future for the Palestinians, we need to eliminate this terror organisation, because Hamas is a terror organisation. We need a new entity in Gaza that will control the civil life of Gaza and the rehabilitation of the Gaza strip. Of course, we need the national security on our side—on the Israeli side. We need our borders to be safe, and we need to demilitarise the Gaza strip from Hamas. In order to do that, my party has presented a plan for the day after in Gaza, which includes mainly the Egyptians rehabilitating the Gaza strip and taking control of it for a limited time—between eight and 15 years—together with the United States and other moderate Arab countries, such as the countries from the Abraham accords and other western countries that want to help with this rehabilitation.



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I am all for letting this plan come through. The plan says that the international community will help the Egyptians with their international debt and they will take control of the Gaza strip, demilitarise it and take care of all the civil mechanisms that need to be taken care of.

I have to mention this because this is the future for the entire world, not only the Gaza strip or Israel: education is the root of everything. I educated my daughters to be decent human beings, to be caring and thoughtful to other people around them. We need to educate the future generations of Gaza not to hate. We sanctify the living. We do not sanctify the dead. I think that education is a key issue that we need to establish in the Gaza strip, because, as you probably know, we have been having issues with UNRWA and the education part of it, because it is impossible for us to accept, when you have staff from UNRWA who participated in the 7 October massacre, and some of them—

Chair: Do you mind if I cut across you? Your answer is very dense, and we have many questions coming out of it, so I ask you to pause there, as I suspect that UNRWA will come up again. I will go to Sir John, and we will try to take this step by step, because your answer raises many questions and we would like some answers to them, if you do not mind.

Q239 Sir John Whittingdale: First of all, we share your wish to see the return of all the hostages and the priority that you attach to that. I also fully understand why Israel could not accept any continuation of Hamas involvement in the administration of Gaza or anywhere else.

Looking at the day after, which you have talked about, and your suggestion that Egypt might play a role, we have been told by the Arab countries that they see the acceptance of a Palestinian state as an essential part of any agreement. Yet when we were in the Knesset, we were told by members of the governing party that that now looked to be way distant into the future, and that they had no confidence in the Palestinian Administration any more than they did in Hamas. What is the position of your party on the establishment of a Palestinian state next door to Israel?

Shelly Tal Meron: First of all, I am so sorry that I did not meet you when you came to the Knesset. I meet so many delegations and I truly feel sorry that I have not met you, but I plan to come to the UK soon, and hopefully we can meet there. I have also heard about your visit to the Knesset, and I am well aware of all the things that happened when you were here.

I just want to say a sentence, and then I will get into the answer. The people of Israel truly appreciate and thank the UK Government—the previous one and this one as well—for standing up for Israel on a few occasions and for helping us out. We appreciate that. I am well aware of the help that you provided in the coalition against the Iranian attack on Israel in April. I thank you and I want to let you know that the people of Israel appreciate that. I wanted to say that.



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I also want to speak about the two-state solution, which you mentioned. My party has spoken many times—before the war, and even after it—about the fact that we support the two-state solution, but the 7 October massacre pulled us further away from that solution. That does not mean that it will not happen; it means that we need to solve the problems of the day after in Gaza, in order to start progressing into planning some sort of solution that will eventually bring us to the two-state solution. In my eyes, that means that we need to have a short-term plan, a mid-term plan and a long-term plan. Those steps are a necessity in order for us to get to the two-state solution. It will just take a longer period of time than maybe we thought before.

On the normalisation with Saudi Arabia, which was on the verge of happening just before 7 October—maybe that was one of the reasons that 7 October happened—let me just say the Israeli people, and Israeli public opinion, were all for it. I think that my party, together with other partners, can bring the Israeli public to accept that, because in the long run, the two-state solution is in the best interests of Israel and of the national security of the state of Israel. It will take time, however. I need to be realistic. I am a member of the Opposition, which means that I have a lot of criticism when it comes to my Government, but I am not in opposition to my country. I love my country. I served my country in the army for seven years, in the Israeli air force, and I have a lot of experience. I can share some of that experience later, if you have questions in that regard.

I see that happening in the future—with this Government, it might be more problematic, if I am speaking realistically. However, we need to establish a new future in the Gaza strip in order to discuss the two-state solution. Right now, we need to ensure that Hamas is not in control of the Gaza strip, neither on the military side—of course not, we need to demilitarise the Gaza strip—nor on the civilian side. We need to free the Gaza strip from Hamas.

There are also challenges with the Palestinian Authority. It would be very difficult for the Palestinian Authority to control the Gaza strip—that is not realistic at the moment. However, together with the moderate Arab countries, and western countries such as the UK, Germany, France and of course the United States, we can discuss how to create a new entity in Gaza and to start progressing in that direction.

Q240 Sir John Whittingdale: Do you think that it is possible to reach an agreement in Gaza without having a clear path set out towards a two-state solution?

Shelly Tal Meron: I think that we should build it step by step and that the first step is the day after the war. As I and the head of my party have said time and time again, we need to have the hostages returned and to end the war. It is no secret that we say that. Once that is on the table, we need to discuss who is the entity in the Gaza strip at the beginning, and then we can discuss the future steps.



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During this war, I have visited many countries in Europe to speak about the hostages, the sexual assaults and what happened to us on 7 October. Almost everywhere I go, I keep being asked if the war will lead to a peace agreement. That is a very difficult question—I will try to explain that to you. The people of Israel—let us put aside the politicians—are very traumatised by 7 October. I am not sure that the world understands that completely, but 7 October was so horrific and took us by surprise. Thousands of terrorists invaded our borders and basically occupied some of our towns—our kibbutzim. They butchered entire families: they burned them, executed them and raped them. It was horrific. I live in Tel Aviv, in the centre of Israel, which is a very liberal and open city, and my two girls are afraid to be alone at home at night because they are afraid that the terrorists are going to come. It is not very rational to think that, but that is the situation. We keep on running to the shelter when sirens go off because missiles are being fired at the state of Israel from Gaza, the Houthis, Hezbollah or Iran.

This is not a normal way of living. Nobody wants to live that way. My oldest daughter, who is 18, enlisted in the army three months ago. Nobody wants to send their kids to war. You want your kids to be safe. Of course, I am very proud of her, and she is very proud to serve her country, but nobody really wants to send their kids to war. We need to end this war. We need the hostages back home, and start building a future. We need to rehabilitate our country from within, and I am sure that the other side—the Palestinian side—need to rehabilitate their future too.

Q241 Blair McDougall: We understand how traumatising 7 October was; we heard that from other witnesses and the families of hostages. You talk about the day after the war, but can I ask you about every day leading up to that point? You have been a critical voice in relation to the conduct of the war, and you have said that we need to get to the point at which Israelis and Palestinians engage with each other again, and try to avoid the cycle of generational violence. Is there a route to the day after the war that doesn't result in the deaths of hundreds or thousands more Palestinians? At the moment, it feels like Hamas—a deeply evil organisation—are getting what they want. They are holding on to the hostages and still have all the leverage of that. Israel isn't getting what it wants either because the hostages and the threat of Hamas are still there. Try to give us a sense of the debate within the Knesset about the conduct of the war and how we get to the day after it in a way that means that we do not have that deeper trauma and have a route to peace in the long term.

Shelly Tal Meron: First, I want to say thank you for helping us out with Emily Damari, a UK citizen—of course, you have probably heard the name. Her mother was very active in trying to get her back home. We are so, so thrilled and happy that she is back home. She is going through medical issues and operations after being wounded on 7 October, but she is truly an inspiration. She is a very inspiring young woman. Thank you for helping with that. I know you have also met the Lifschitz family. The mother and



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father are grandparents—they are elderly people. The mother, Yocheved, was a hostage and was released, but unfortunately her husband, who was a hostage, was murdered in captivity. I just want to say thank you for your help.

These days, it is not easy being in the Knesset. There are a lot of differences of opinion, and internal and political issues between the right wing and the left wing, even though we are a central party. There are differences of opinion about how to deal with the war and how to end it, but we all agree that we cannot end this war if we do not have all our hostages back home. That is in the best interest not only of the state of Israel, but of the UK and other countries, too. Without the return of all our hostages, this war will not end. That is one of the goals of this war, and we also have to insist on the goal of eliminating Hamas' control of the Gaza strip.

Let me just say that Hamas is an ideology. I am not naive—I know that we cannot eliminate it with a magic wand. That would not happen within a week or a month. They might be a guerrilla group. Yes, we have had a lot of achievements when it comes to Hamas, but still there are Hamas terrorists going about in the Gaza strip, and some of them are controlling the civil population. They have a lot of infrastructures that are embedded within the civilian population—in schools, kindergartens, homes and underneath hospitals. That is a problem. In order to have our national security, we have to stop Hamas from fighting against Israel, but it will take time. When it comes to ending the war, we need to be at the negotiating table to reach an agreement with Hamas for the return of all the hostages.

I am not sure if you have heard, but I have seen on the news today that there is a new offer on the table, in which the Egyptians are involved. The offer says that there will be a ceasefire of between five and seven years, all the hostages will be freed, it will be the end of the war and Hamas will let go of control of the Gaza strip. I am not sure whether that is possible and it will happen. Of course, I support an agreement that will free all the hostages immediately and end the war.

I am a member of the Knesset, I am a politician and I am hoping to be in the next Government, but I am also a civilian in my country. Nobody wants to see people killed—on either side. I do not want Israelis to die. On 7 October, we had over 1,500 people killed in one day. That is the worst since the holocaust. We have had over 800 soldiers die during this war. We have 14,000 wounded soldiers. That is a lot. Each and every person is a whole world and a life of its own. Nobody wants to see people killed—not on our side and not on the other side. In that regard, we share the same values. We are a democratic, liberal country—the only one in the Middle East—and we share the same values with the western world.

Chair: I am mindful of time. We only have about 20 minutes left and I know there are still a number of questions. I ask Committee members to keep their questions fairly short, and if you would be kind enough to also keep your answers a little bit shorter, it would also help us to get round.



Q242 Blair McDougall: You said that the war cannot end without the hostages being given up. I think we understand that thinking. What I do not understand is, what is the incentive for Hamas? At the moment, hostages are political leverage for them. They know that the next stage is for Hamas no longer to have any political control in Gaza. This is an unfair question for you, because it is as much a question for the international community, but what is the incentive for Hamas to make different decisions from the ones that they are making at the moment?

Shelly Tal Meron: I cannot answer in their name, but I can tell you that I think that the international community—and, of course, American involvement—is creating a change. President Trump was very involved, even before he came into office, with the release of the hostages, and that did help us with the release of some of them. My request to the UK Government is to be very much involved when it comes to our hostages, speaking about this issue and using your platforms to discuss the hostages. Everybody is speaking about what is happening in Gaza—and I can understand the concerns that everybody has—but we need you to speak about the hostages as well, and we need you to pressure Hamas, Qatar, the mediators and the international community to get involved in ending this. I think that you will play a role in that, and that is my request to you, because we have seen that international influence is significant.

I cannot answer in their name, but I think that Hamas is also suffering from this war, and I think that they do want a ceasefire. They probably want to rebuild themselves; that is their goal. We do not want them to rebuild themselves, but they suffered a lot of loss and they need the time off. I think that is in their interest, but we need the international community to be more involved in that.

Q243 Uma Kumaran: Thank you for your evidence today. Definitely, yours was a voice that was sorely missed when we were in the Knesset, because we did not hear any views like those you have expressed.

You spoke about the pain of 7 October. I absolutely agree with your views here. I went to Hostages Square when we visited, and I felt and saw the pain of the Israeli people. It is quite palpable. And we share your views—we want the hostages out.

However, speaking to members of the Knesset was a stark contrast to speaking to Israeli NGOs and to those I met in the West Bank. The recognition of a state for Palestinians is something that not a single Knesset member was even entertaining. We are talking about a two-state solution, but nobody we met would even entertain that conversation.

How do you think the Knesset can get to that place? For a lasting peace, and to move forward and to talk about all the things you have mentioned to us—re-establishing the relationship with Palestinians to stop the generational conflict and stop that vicious cycle—we need this two-state solution. If the members of the Knesset are not willing to entertain that, how do the Israeli public even shift their opinion? Is there anything that you think we can do? And what do you think members of the Knesset can



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do?

Chair: Ms Tal Meron, could you answer that question at half the length it was asked?

Shelly Tal Meron: I will do my best. First of all, I know that you met some members of the Knesset from the Likud—please remember that the Knesset has many parties and there are a lot of ideologies. Please take that into consideration.

Q244 **Uma Kumaran:** We met a cross-section. Actually, I met your leader in Hostages Square. I bumped into Yair Lapid and it was a refreshing conversation. But those who we met were the Foreign Affairs Committee members.

Shelly Tal Meron: First of all, I am happy that you met the head of my party. I think that we have been discussing this very openly and I do not think that we hide what we feel and what we think. There are partners within the Knesset who think that this is on the table for the future and are willing to discuss it. I am sorry that you felt like you heard only one side of things. But I am telling you, because I work with all the members of the Knesset, that there are partners here to discuss the future.

I think that in order for us to discuss the two-state solution, we have to end what is happening right now. Right now, Israel has a lot of fronts. We have Hamas, we have Hezbollah, we have the Houthis, we have Iran and we had issues with Syria right next to us. There are a lot of things happening at the moment. And around us we see everything that is happening with Russia, Ukraine, China and the United States. There are a lot of things that are happening right now.

In order for us to discuss a two-state solution, we have to finish this war. We have to have the hostages back in order for us to even start thinking and progressing in that way. Also, I think that if we go to elections—hopefully, we will have elections—the political map of the state of Israel is going to change, because we are going to have former Prime Minister Bennett come into the picture and we might have a very different Government come to power.

Things are fluid; when it comes to politics, things can change. I do think that there are options on the table, but we really need to get the hostages back and finish this war in order to even discuss anything that has to do with the future.

Chair: Can I move on to the ceasefire? We have some questions about that as well.

Q245 **Alex Ballinger:** Let me just say that I am sure everybody here shares your ambition to have the hostages released as soon as possible.

Shelly Tal Meron: Thank you.

Alex Ballinger: There was a process during the ceasefire whereby many Israeli hostages were released. I wanted to ask about the end of that

ceasefire on 18 March, when Israel conducted some airstrikes that ended that process.

I think that there are many people in Israel who disagreed with that decision. There are many military people— heads of the security services and others—who have written a letter on that. I will just read out a very short quote: “Renewing the fighting in Gaza for irrelevant considerations and without an achievable political goal will not lead to the release of the hostages. It will not bring about the defeat of Hamas and will eliminate the achievements of the army and security systems in the war.” Do you agree with that assessment? If you do, what are the irrelevant considerations they are talking about?

Shelly Tal Meron: First of all, I supported the ceasefire; I wanted it to come through to the end and have all our hostages released. That for me was a goal. We supported the ceasefire and wanted it to come through. We were very sorry that it did not happen.

Listen, there are complex issues on the table. There are breaches of agreements on the Hamas side as well. They have seized the humanitarian aid many times and sold it, using the money to rebuild themselves. That is very unfortunate and not what should be happening, because humanitarian aid should go to civilians, not to Hamas.

There are complicated issues on the table that we need to solve. For me, we need to end the war. That means that we need to have the ceasefire come through. We can achieve our other goals when it comes to Hamas and all the other national security challenges that we have ahead of us after we finish the war and bring back the hostages.

There are many differences of opinion within Israel on how we can do that. Everybody wants to see the hostages back home. The discussion is about the right way to do that. What is the right way to create a situation where the hostages come back home and we eliminate Hamas? That is the question that everybody has different opinions on.

I support my country for defending itself. This war was imposed on us and we did not want it. But, at this point, a year and a half later, we need to end the war and bring back the hostages. We need a ceasefire. We need the agreement to come through. It is as simple as that.

Chair: Thank you. We also want to ask you questions about getting aid into Gaza. Let us start with Edward.

Q246 **Edward Morello:** I am interested in the casualty rates that we see reported by the United Nations and their accuracy. We see numbers in excess of 60,000 civilian deaths, including 15,000 children. Are those numbers recognised by your party or by Israeli public opinion?

Shelly Tal Meron: I cannot say anything about numbers, because a lot of the numbers being put out there are not established. I do not have information that can show me the true numbers. I do not want anybody to get hurt and I am not saying that nobody got hurt. War is ugly and



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horrible, and people are dying, and that is very unfortunate. I do not want civilians to get hurt. But among the people who died in the Gaza strip there are a lot of terrorists. This is a very difficult war zone. I do not think there is any other war zone around the world that is similar to what is happening in the Gaza strip, because Hamas is so embedded within civilian popularity. It is very complicated.

Q247 Edward Morello: Let us extrapolate from that. One of the stated aims that you outlined earlier was the eradication of Hamas. If you are not able to distinguish between a civilian death and the death of a Hamas combatant, what number do the Government recognise as fatalities for the area? The biggest issue we have is that the only numbers we have to go on are the UN numbers. There is no independent verification. Is the IDF or the Israeli Government producing numbers that are verifiable?

Shelly Tal Meron: That is a question that you need to ask the Government. I am not a representative of the Government. I did not say that we do not distinguish between civilians and terrorists. We aim at terrorists. The state of Israel does not want to harm civilians. I want to get that message through.

Even if you have criticisms of the IDF—I served in the Israeli army for seven years and have a lot of experience. I have sat many times in operations rooms where you control the operations. I had many instances where if someone who was not involved in the operation—a civilian, a child or anybody—came anywhere near, we would stop the operation immediately. The IDF tries its best not to harm civilians. It only targets terrorists; we do not target civilians. Yes, some civilians got hurt—I am not saying that they did not—but we do not target them.

That is something that we need to distinguish between Hamas and Israel. Hamas is a terror organisation that wants to eradicate the state of Israel—they do not want the state of Israel to exist. It was aiming at civilians on 7 October; we do not aim at Palestinian civilians on purpose. We should make that distinction. I cannot tell you about numbers, because truly I do not have enough information.

Q248 Edward Morello: Can we talk about access for aid? Obviously, if I accept your principle that the Government are not trying to target civilians, why are there constraints on the amount of aid that is getting into the Gaza strip? That seems like a deliberate targeting of civilians, if that is humanitarian aid for the population.

Shelly Tal Meron: During this year and a half we have had a lot of humanitarian aid go into the Gaza strip. Hundreds and hundreds of trucks of humanitarian aid went into the Gaza strip. Unfortunately, Hamas were seizing a lot of humanitarian aid and selling it to earn money and re-establish themselves and their infrastructure. That is very unfortunate. Also, every time I go anywhere around the world, people speak to me about humanitarian aid—which I want the civilians to get; I do not want anybody to starve—but our hostages have never received humanitarian aid. They have never received a visit from the Red Cross. Nobody gave



them medicine, clear water to drink or food. They are being tortured. They are being abused. They are being starved. They are, unfortunately, being sexually assaulted within captivity, and there are a lot of testimonies to show that. There is even a report by your own representative; we will speak about that later.

Chair: Given that we only have five minutes left, and there are some very important questions that you are touching on, may I move on and have Aphra ask some questions? I am afraid that these will be the last few questions that we have for you. As you said, we could talk about this all afternoon, and I am sorry that we are limited in the amount of time that we have.

Q249 **Aphra Brandreth:** I am sorry that we are having to cover so many important topics so quickly. I want to touch on the treatment of hostages. In particular, you have spoken before about the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. There have been some horrific reports of sexual abuse by Hamas terrorists. Could you share more of your understanding of the abuse that women held captive have been subject to? Do you have any thoughts on whether the current international conventions are enough to deal with the abhorrent use of gender-based violence that, sadly, is present in conflicts in the Middle East and around the world?

Shelly Tal Meron: Thank you so much for that question. I will probably be emotional when I speak about this, because right now my work in the Israeli Parliament and outside of Israel has to do with that. It is my life's mission at the moment. Unfortunately, on 7 October we had many instances where Hamas used sexual assault as weapons of war. Some of the victims are no longer alive, but we have evidence and testimonies to show that. Some of them went through that during their captivity. We have a lot of testimonies. There are reports issued by UN Women; Pramila Patten visited Israel and issued a report saying that there was sexual abuse in multiple locations around Israel during 7 October. We have hostages who have returned and are sharing their story. It is out there; you can see it and it is not a secret. Some of the hostages were brave enough to come through and talk about this. For instance, Amit Soussana is a young woman who was kidnapped, held captive in Gaza and sexually assaulted.

Because I deal with sexual assault a lot, I met with the Gender Equality Minister in France over a year ago. Her name is Aurore Bergé, and I suggested to her that we form a global coalition that would acknowledge sexual assault as a weapon of war. We established that global coalition. It is not only Hamas and Israel; this has to do with women around the world, in conflict areas, who are sexually assaulted. It happens with Ukraine and Russia, with Yazidi women, with African women, and in a lot of cases around the world.

We formed this global coalition; we had the first assembly in Israel, and we plan to have the next assembly on 10 November at the French Senate. We are of course inviting a lot of politicians from around the world to join us in this assembly and support this cause, because—this is the most



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important sentence I will say—it does not matter which nationality you are or which religion you are: no woman around the world should be sexually assaulted as a weapon of war. We need to unite in that regard and work together to eliminate this phenomenon.

This is not an Israeli-Hamas problem; this is a global problem. We have seen in France, in the past year, that terrorists have kidnapped young women—Jewish women—as revenge for what is happening in Gaza. That is a national security issue. I also address what happened in Israel on 7 October, when it comes to the sexual assault, as a national security threat. This is how the world should address this issue, and I call on any one of you who wants to join me with this effort, because we need to unite and put an end to this phenomenon. That has to do, of course, with legislation within Parliaments, but also international courts. Thank you for raising this issue, because it truly is my life's mission at the moment.

Chair: Thank you so much for giving evidence to us today; we do appreciate it. We will move on to the next witness, but thank you very much for your time, and all the best.

Shelly Tal Meron: Thank you very much for your time. I am available, and you can always speak to me. Hopefully, next time you come to Israel, I will meet you. If not, I will come to the UK, and hopefully we can meet. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of witness

Witness: Natasha Hausdorff.

Q250 **Chair:** Thank you very much for giving us your time today. As I said earlier, the Committee is keen to look at what the UK Government can do to help bring about peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and we are keen to hear your legal perspective. Could you just tell us, for the record, who you are and what you do?

Natasha Hausdorff: I am a barrister in practice at Six Pump Court chambers in London. For about 10 years, I have been very actively involved in a voluntary association of lawyers called UK Lawyers for Israel, working for the proper application of law to Israel and Israelis and to counter antisemitism. In the latter years, I have been privileged to take on the role of legal director at the UKLFI Charitable Trust. I have been asked to address you on matters of international law, but also, I think, on my experience over the last year and a half and on my trips to Israel and indeed Gaza.

Q251 **Chair:** If you do not mind, I will ask you the question that I asked the previous witness: where do you see Israel in 10 years' time?

Natasha Hausdorff: It is a very unpredictable region, but based on some key factors, including, importantly, the relative victories in the last year and a half against a number of Iranian proxies, namely Hezbollah, Hamas



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and the Houthis in Yemen, and the imperative that there now seems to be in the international community to deal with, I think, the major threat to Israel—the existential threat, as some refer to it—which is Iran, most of the indications are indeed to the positive. That is especially the case when we are looking at that longer-term trajectory of 10 years, the fact that Israel's economy grew over the last year and a half despite the unprecedented challenges that this country has been facing—the only democracy in the Middle East, it has been a leading light in many respects—and the prospect, also, of additional peace accords. Following the Abraham accords, there has been some discussion of prospects of peace with Saudi Arabia—also on the horizon in previous Committee sessions. Those indications are very much to the positive, but that is not to say that there are not significant threats and significant problems. The principal one that I am concerned with is the international legal war against Israel and the weaponisation of international law, which poses a significant threat. I should stress—

Q252 Chair: I will move on to that in a minute, but I just want to understand what you see as being the future. Your future for Israel is a fairly positive one: the economy doing well, and Israel being at peace with its neighbours and dealing with the Iranian threat and the threat from Iranian proxies. That is one side. The other side, given that we are looking at peace for Israel and Palestine, is this, what would be the future of a Palestinian living in Gaza? What would be the future of a Palestinian living on the West Bank?

Natasha Hausdorff: I think that ultimately depends on whether the international community continues with the tried and tested mechanism of encouraging extremism, unfortunately, among Palestinian terrorist groups. We have seen that vis-à-vis Hamas; we have seen that vis-à-vis Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Fatah—elements of the so-called moderates in the West Bank. Until and unless the two driving factors of the worsening situation for the Palestinians—namely, indoctrination to terror and incentivisation to terror—are addressed and until international complicity in those issues and the perpetuation of the conflict through that is addressed, my hopes for a similar positive reality are less optimistic. It is one of the reasons why I have made it a significant mission, travelling around the world and meeting politicians and officials, to stress the importance of ceasing funding for UNRWA, which is at the core—

Q253 Chair: Sorry, I just want to get this clear. If I were a Palestinian mother in Gaza or on the West Bank, my future would be what? It all depends on whether the West is helping to develop extremism within Hamas?

Natasha Hausdorff: I think the future of any Palestinian in Gaza ultimately depends on whether Hamas is defeated, which is of course one of Israel's central war aims.

Q254 Chair: You are quite confident that Israel is going to be successful and defeat Iran and Iranian proxies, so the question is: what happens then? What does peace look like for Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza? I am sorry I keep asking, but I just want an answer to that.



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Natasha Hausdorff: I think I would put it in terms of being cautiously optimistic. I would not—

Q255 **Chair:** What does “cautiously optimistic” mean?

Natasha Hausdorff: I do not say that it is easy to defeat Iranian threats—in particular, where one sees the international community moving to policies of appeasement and complacency in grappling with these threats.

Q256 **Chair:** Let’s get away from those sorts of words; let’s just talk about what the future is. You are saying there is a positive future; you are optimistic. So what is the optimistic, positive future for a Palestinian mother in Gaza at the moment or on the West Bank? What is the best thing that could happen?

Natasha Hausdorff: The best thing that could happen is the ending of the indoctrination and the incentivisation to terror, to give ordinary Palestinians a chance, and, through that, the removal of the corrupt—

Q257 **Chair:** What does “a chance” look like? What does that mean?

Natasha Hausdorff: Through the removal of the genocidal Islamist regime in Gaza and the corrupt Palestinian Authority and the creation of a—

Q258 **Chair:** I am so sorry, but what does “a chance” look like? Let’s take away all those words and all those descriptions; let’s keep ourselves calm. This is my last try: what does a positive future look like for Palestinians living in Gaza or on the West Bank? What is the best thing we can hope for?

Natasha Hausdorff: Perhaps I can give you a practical example. When I have visited Ramallah, the biggest cause for optimism I have seen was on a visit to a venture capital start-up fund looking to create Silicon Wadi, a start-up culture in the West Bank, in Ramallah, and specifically looking to create a Palestinian middle class, with a stake in society, that can hold its corrupt leadership to account. Mahmoud Abbas, let’s not forget, is in the 20th year of his four-year term. There is oppression—brutal oppression—and it is remarkable that there has not been more international media attention on the torture that the Palestinian Authority metes out to political opponents in the West Bank. That, if you ask me—and it is reflected in polls across the West Bank by Palestinian organisations—has ultimately got to be the biggest prospect for the chance that I am talking about.

Chair: Okay. The public will have heard your answers to my questions and will decide themselves whether you have answered them.

Q259 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Can I come to what you described as one of your missions, which is to combat the weaponisation, I think you said, of international law?

Natasha Hausdorff: Yes.

Sir John Whittingdale: I read your speech about the legal basis for



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settlements in the West Bank, in which you made the case that Israel's borders were set in 1948 and that, in international law, that should still be the position. However, you also said that that was not the position as determined by the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court and most other commentators. Given that, how can you continue to maintain that, in international law, Israel is not in breach through the settlements in the West Bank?

Natasha Hausdorff: Because I consider, as a legal professional, my first duty to be to the rule of law and to upholding international law. One cannot have a general rule such as *uti possidetis juris*, which you referenced—that is this customary rule of international law, which is universally applicable as a default rule—and in terms of whose application to Israel's formation on 14 May 1948, I have, in a decade of discussing this with leading academics around the world, yet to hear a single reason why it would not apply, although we can certainly go into some of the detail of that—

Q260 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Can I interrupt you? You set out the argument quite clearly in your speech—

Natasha Hausdorff: Sorry, I am not sure which speech you are referring to.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am afraid I cannot give you the precise date, but what you are talking about is exactly the case you put at that time, and I understand it. What I do not understand is that almost all international legal bodies take a different view. Why should that be, when you argue that the case, in legal terms, is very clear?

Natasha Hausdorff: Despite about a decade of seeking to get to the bottom of a plausible reason why this default rule would be disappplied to Israel's formation in 1948, I have yet to encounter one. What has been presented so far is essentially predicated on the partition resolution of 1947. That is a General Assembly resolution—a political resolution, not legally binding—which made a recommendation which was never implemented. So that does not, I am afraid, displace a default rule of customary international law which has been applied from the 19th century through to the dissolution of the former communist federations and indeed to any state emerging from a mandate.

As to the failure to apply this properly to Israel, it is a matter that was called out by Julia Sebutinde when she was vice-president of the International Court of Justice, in her dissenting opinion on the advisory opinion last year dealing with issues in the territories. She not only sets out the application of *uti possidetis juris* but makes a scathing critique of the court's approach to general international law and to fact finding. I think the reason this is not more widely acknowledged stems from politics and from what we have seen happen in the international legal academy and at international courts and tribunals.



Vis-à-vis the ICC, I am afraid to say that the crimes, if you will, are far greater, because it is not just *uti possidetis juris* that is disregarded; it is every basic aspect of international law, including the founding Rome statute of the court, which is essentially predicated on states joining the court. This is a court that gets its jurisdiction from state parties that have delegated their jurisdiction to the court. In Israel's case, of course, it is not a state party. The court has proposed to recognise the Palestinian Authority as a state, even though it does not comply with the recognised criteria for statehood under the Montevideo convention.

Then we are faced with a situation where, despite the absence of jurisdiction, because Israel is not a party and because the state of Palestine does not exist in international law, and despite the bilateral international agreement that was endorsed by the United Kingdom—the Oslo accords, which established the Palestinian authority, with the 1995 Oslo accord making it explicitly clear that there shall be no criminal jurisdiction over Israelis for the PA—that is an agreement that the International Criminal Court has ridden roughshod over. I know that the Foreign Office has prepared a substantial submission calling the court out on its abuse of jurisdiction; that much is public. What is not clear is why there was a U-turn under this Government at the last moment and that submission was never put forward. The reason I consider that to be particularly troubling is that my understanding is that this submission was made in the national interest of the United Kingdom, keeping the ICC to its proper approach to its jurisdiction. Again, we see an inexplicable decision that was made—unfortunately, by this Government—based, I am only able to surmise, on politics, as opposed to the proper application of law. And it is indeed the same thing.

The reason that *uti possidetis juris* is so critical is that it puts the lie to this allegation of occupation in a legal sense; it also puts the lie to this term “illegal settlements”. It is, if you will, a warping of international law that has been advanced, most disturbingly, to seek to justify a position that the West Bank, or Judea and Samaria, ought to be ethnically cleansed of its Jews—*Judenrein*, which may be a term that is familiar to many of the Committee's members—and that is unfortunately a position that was endorsed by the International Court of Justice.

Q261 Chair: Can I just cut across you for a moment? So your position, essentially, is that since the British mandate was all of the land up to the river in 1948, Israel is the whole of that area as well?

Natasha Hausdorff: Well, of course, the original mandate was far bigger—

Chair: Wait a minute—let's not go into past history. Let's just try and stick to the—

Natasha Hausdorff: Can I answer the question? It is important, because this rule applies to the administrative lines of the mandate. The administrative line that had previously divided Transjordan—what later became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan—from the rest of the mandate



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is the line that ran all the way down along the Jordan river to the Red sea. Under this universal customary rule, that is the only line in play when Israel declares independence—

Q262 **Chair:** That is where I wanted to start. Right? So that is your position. We have not heard from the Israeli Government, but that is not the Israeli Government's position, is it?

Natasha Hausdorff: The Israeli Government—

Chair: The Israeli Government's position is not that Israel's borders go from the Jordan river to the sea, is it?

Natasha Hausdorff: May I take a moment to answer, because you are skipping through decades of history and policy?

Chair: Yes, but what I want to do—because we are missing the Israeli Government here—is just make sure that I have not missed something. It is not the Israeli Government's position that Israel begins at the River Jordan and finishes at the Mediterranean sea, is it?

Natasha Hausdorff: I am not here to represent the Israeli Government—

Chair: No. I just want to make sure that I've got that.

Natasha Hausdorff: I am speaking to the application of international law—real international law that is universally—

Q263 **Chair:** Which the Israeli Government is not applying.

Natasha Hausdorff: That is not accurate. If I may be permitted to answer the question, perhaps the Committee will follow the response.

What *uti possidetis juris* does is that it tells us the starting point; this is the position in 1948. It is, in fact, endorsed by all subsequent agreements: the armistice agreements between Israel and Egypt, and between Israel and Jordan, in 1949; and later on, also, the peace agreements only refer back to those mandatory lines—administrative lines of the British mandate. That is significant.

What happens in 1967 when Israel recovers the relevant territory—the disputed territory that had previously been under Jordanian occupation, which is parts of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, or Judea and Samaria—is that it treated those territories differently. The Israeli Government applied its law, administration and jurisdiction in full to East Jerusalem. Critically, Abba Eban, who was the Foreign Minister at the time, writes to the UN Secretary General in 1967 and says this is not annexation.

Chair: Exactly.

Natasha Hausdorff: Because one cannot annex what is already one's own sovereign territory. So, if you are asking if—

Chair: Why, therefore—



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Natasha Hausdorff: Forgive me. The question was: what is Israel's position? That was Israel's position in 1967. Since then, of course, in pursuit of this land for peace formula, Israel anticipated that peace with Jordan would be achieved by giving Jordan some of the West Bank, so a temporary administration was instituted in Judea and Samaria. Now, when that peace with Jordan eventually came along in 1994, it didn't include land to Jordan because it no longer wanted anything to do with that territory, so that temporary administration lasted until the Oslo accords, which I have already referenced in relation to the absence of ICC jurisdiction. Critically, the Oslo accords created Palestinian autonomy in areas A and B, but they did not change the underlying status of the territory. That has always been a matter that the parties and international backers have agreed is for final status negotiations.

Q264 **Chair:** Exactly, so your answer is that Israel has not stated that Israel begins at Jordan and ends at the sea.

Natasha Hausdorff: Forgive me, but Israel does not need to state that—

Chair: Well, it doesn't.

Natasha Hausdorff: I am afraid you are equating two very different things: the legal status of the territory and *uti possidetis juris*, which—let me be clear—is a default rule that applies automatically, whatever Israel says—

Q265 **Chair:** Or whatever anyone else in the world says in international law.

Natasha Hausdorff: Yes, because when the International Court of Justice talked about the emergence of this rule in Burkina Faso/Mali in the 1980s, it talked about the reasons for its emergence: clean lines, stability, certainty, avoiding fratricidal struggles. Its disapplication here—for no reason that can be discerned in international legal analysis—has unfortunately generated all the issues that the ICJ said the rule had emerged to obviate.

Chair: Okay, hang on. Let me just stop you—

Natasha Hausdorff: May I just finish the answer to this question, because it is critically important?

Chair: Go on.

Natasha Hausdorff: When Israel declared independence, it did not reference borders; it simply talked about Eretz Yisrael. Israel is not required to claim that *uti possidetis juris* arises or applies. I am not making a case in any way on behalf of the Israeli Government; this is simply my analysis of the international legal position, which I believe is what I was asked to attend today to provide—

Chair: Okay. Can I just stop you there? There will be some more questions for you.

Q266 **Abtisam Mohamed:** This comes to the crux of the question that you



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answered there. The UN Security Council, the ICC and the ICJ—all the esteemed lawyers there, in their advisory positions—every British Government since 1967 and pretty much every international legal authority have all stated that the settlements in the occupied territories are illegal, yet your position is different. What makes you better than all these other lawyers we have heard from? Perhaps in your view they do not understand real international law. Why should we hear your position, which is different and unique?

Natasha Hausdorff: I have never suggested that I am in any way better, but until and unless I am presented with an argument that makes it clear that this is the wrong application of international law, as opposed to what the UN and these international courts and tribunals have consistently done, with some exceptions—there was the dissent from Sebutinde, and at the ICC in 2021, there was also a very powerful dissent by Judge Kovács—

Q267 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Can I intervene here? Natasha, do you agree, then, that the occupation and the annexation are not legal—yes or no?

Natasha Hausdorff: It is not a yes or no, because one cannot annex one's own sovereign territory. The term "annexation" is misplaced here, and likewise the term "occupation." Let me give you a parallel example, which I know members of the Committee will be familiar with. Russia has occupied Crimea from Ukraine. Why? Because Ukraine's borders were settled by *uti possidetis juris*. If Ukraine were to recover Crimea from Russia, in the same way that Israel recovered the West Bank, Judea and Samaria, and East Jerusalem from Jordan—

Q268 **Abtisam Mohamed:** That is assuming Israel owns that piece of land to start with.

Natasha Hausdorff: Well, yes, but I am saying that the same rules have to apply; otherwise—

Q269 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Can I come on to a different question, Natasha?

Natasha Hausdorff: May I just finish the answer?

Abtisam Mohamed: No, I have a different question.

Chair: We are quite limited on time. I am so sorry.

Q270 **Abtisam Mohamed:** We have five minutes before the next speaker. This is a simple yes/no question on Palestinian recognition. Do you believe that the Palestinians are entitled to a state?

Natasha Hausdorff: Self-determination does not give one a right to a state in international law.

Abtisam Mohamed: That is a no.

Natasha Hausdorff: But would you like to understand why?

Abtisam Mohamed: I would like to know whether you, Natasha Hausdorff, believe that the Palestinians have the right to a state.

Natasha Hausdorff: I have explained that the Palestinians already have self-determination and autonomy.

Q271 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Not self-determination—should they have the right to a state?

Natasha Hausdorff: Not according to international law, no.

Q272 **Edward Morello:** In other places around the world—I am thinking of places such as Kosovo and East Timor—the international community has effectively carved out a new territory or jurisdiction. If we accept that that is within the purview of the UN or the international community—whatever the medium is for doing that—is it perfectly viable, within a peace settlement, for the international community to establish a Palestinian state within Israel?

Natasha Hausdorff: The critical and operative term there is “within a settlement.” Any agreement between parties will, of course, change the default position of *uti possidetis juris*—we just have not had that until now. I know you asked about the solution first and law second—it might have been helpful if it were the other way around—but I am not advocating for any particular solution on the basis of the proper application of international law. However, the proper application of international law is critical if negotiations are to have any chance of success, because you cannot negotiate in good faith when both the law and the history are being misrepresented to this extent.

Q273 **Richard Foord:** I would like to move on to international humanitarian law and ask you some questions on *jus in bello*. If we can agree, first, that there is consensus that a single fighter suspected of being a terrorist operative for Hamas or Islamic Jihad is a legitimate target, and a civilian is not a legitimate target—I think we can probably agree on that much—would terrorist operatives’ homes be legitimate targets?

Natasha Hausdorff: That depends ultimately on the purpose that they are being used for. The definition of a military target ultimately depends on its use in the hostilities. In my time on the ground in Gaza in September, when I went in as part of a military expert panel, I could see that civilian houses were booby-trapped—at least in Rafah, it seemed that more or less every house, or every second house, that we were encountering had been booby-trapped by Hamas. Therefore, much of the destruction that one is seeing in terms of civilian infrastructure is unfortunately a result of the IDF having to disarm these booby-trapped houses, mostly by destroying them.

In terms of targeting, international humanitarian law is very clear that you can only target military targets—that one has to distinguish between civilians and military targets. Certainly, the officers who I was on the ground with—very senior officers from six NATO states, and we spent a week undertaking briefings with the military—were all convinced that there are no issues *vis-à-vis* the distinction element of international humanitarian law and Israel’s application of it, which you have raised.

Q274 **Richard Foord:** Let us say there are terrorist operatives and civilians in a building. In that instance, would the IDF be entitled to target that building?

Natasha Hausdorff: That depends on another very important aspect of international humanitarian law, which is the rule of proportionality. It is probably worth taking a moment to explain what that is, because it is perhaps the most misrepresented element of international humanitarian law.

Q275 **Richard Foord:** We have somebody else who will ask about the business of proportionality being about the military objective, rather than somehow being about equivalent deaths on both sides—of course, that is a very misrepresented principle of international humanitarian law. I want to focus on distinction. If there are civilians in the building and the IDF targets it, you have established that that might be a violation of the IHL principle of distinction?

Natasha Hausdorff: You cannot separate the two, I am afraid; distinction, proportionality, precaution and necessity all work together. If the target in that building is necessary to advance the military objectives of the fighting force—if they have identified terrorist operatives there—then the next two factors to consider are: first, proportionality, which is about, as you correctly indicate, weighing up the importance of that military objective against the anticipated civilian collateral damage on the basis of the available intelligence. That is not an effect-based assessment but an intent-based assessment. However, the other aspect of this—the fourth principle, which is critical—is precaution. This is something Israel does on a scale, I am afraid to say, never seen before, because other modern armies are not in a position to issue the sorts of warnings and evacuation measures that Israel has taken with respect to this urban armed conflict.

Q276 **Richard Foord:** Perhaps we can take an example: the sort of precaution you are talking about is tapping on the roof before ordnance—

Natasha Hausdorff: Knock on roof is one of the distinctive elements.

Q277 **Richard Foord:** One of the distinctive elements of this particular conflict. Could we use the example of the destruction of a 12-storey residential building in the al-Yarmouk neighbourhood in October 2023? The target of the strike was a Hamas terrorist tunnel underneath the building. The building was 12-storeys tall, and the strike resulted in the death of 81 women and children. In that instance, was international humanitarian law applied? Did we see the principle of distinction used here?

Natasha Hausdorff: You are asking me about one particular incident in the last year and a half, which I would be very happy to look into—I certainly would have done had there been any advance warning. Off the top of my head, I am certainly not in a position to say one way or the other. And to be clear, neither are any of the international commentators who purport to give a decided answer on that. There is a very straightforward reason for it: the only way that a proper analysis of your question can be conducted is if the information that was available to the

operatives who undertook that strike, in advance of conducting it, can be properly assessed. We simply do not know what that information is because it is not in the public domain.

However, the two entities with which I am aware that Israel has shared elements of sensitive intelligence of this nature are the UK and US Governments, which have consistently said they do not have concerns about Israel's approach to international humanitarian law so far as targeting—

Chair: No, no, no. That is an extraordinary allegation. Be careful what you are saying.

Natasha Hausdorff: I beg your pardon. I have come here in good faith to answer questions, and from the moment I walked in the room I have been barracked and told to be quiet when I have been trying to answer questions. I will answer this one, with your permission.

Chair: Please answer this question accurately and with care.

Natasha Hausdorff: The UK and the US have consistently said that, so far as targeting proportionality—which is what your question pertains to—there are not concerns. There have been other concerns raised, on the basis of incorrect information. If we have time to discuss detention and aid, we certainly can. Even for the United Kingdom—and I am afraid the Foreign Secretary has had to walk back some unfortunate remarks in the past—so far as targeting proportionality is concerned, there have not been concerns raised—

Q278 **Chair:** Why, therefore, is Britain not selling arms to Israel that can be used in Gaza? Is it not on the basis that there is a risk of breaching humanitarian law?

Natasha Hausdorff: I might ask this Committee to look into that very question, because there is no nexus between the concerns that this Government have raised on detention and aid and the arms that have been embargoed. I have a very great concern that without a nexus, because of the absence of concerns on proportionality in targeting, that is not a decision that can in fact be lawful. It is one that has clearly upended the licensing regulations in this country, which has impacts quite outside of the scope of this Committee's inquiry but are very significant to the UK's ability to export arms confidently to other countries.

This is what I mean about playing fast and loose with real law; it creates very problematic precedents in other respects. The decision on the embargo is a deeply troubling one, because of this absence of a nexus. The Foreign Office has made it very clear in its public statements where its concerns lie on this. They are nothing to do with the arms that have been embargoed—which must, ultimately, have been for political reasons rather than legal ones.

Q279 **Richard Foord:** When you appeared before the Business and Trade Committee this time last year, you were talking prior to the UK's arms



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embargo on Israel, when the UK was still supplying those arms. At that time, you were having to defend Israel's action around distinction and proportionality, by talking about Hamas-run health ministry figures and suggesting that they were perhaps overinflated—perhaps one third greater than your recognised figures. My question is: does Israel have figures on civilians killed in Gaza?

Natasha Hausdorff: No, for the very simple reason that it is not targeting civilians. Therefore, there have been numbers that the Israelis have put out on the terrorists that it knows it has eliminated, which makes sense if you think about it logically because it is targeting these individuals. In my written submission to the Committee, which I ask you all to look at, we address the detail of the problems with Hamas statistics, which have, in my respectful opinion, been repeated in a deeply careless way, and do need to be criticised. Hamas has also subsequently revised them down, but there are, for example, figures from the al-Ahli hospital strike in October 2023 that have not been revised even though it is now clear that the hospital was never struck, and it was in fact a Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket that fell in the car park of the hospital.

That example is, in and of itself, critical, because it indicates that these figures, which Hamas has been putting out and the world has been parroting, do not make clear distinctions or indicate the difference between combatants and civilians, nor do they indicate how the individuals are said to have been killed—we also know that Hamas has been shooting its own civilians, and that its rockets fall short in the Gaza strip. They kill indiscriminately. Unlike Israeli strikes, they do not come with warnings or a proportionality analysis. On that basis, I am afraid that the continued use of these false statistics is deeply problematic.

According to the numbers that Israel has released, even taking a number of those Hamas statistics at face value and setting aside the issue of the inflation of these figures by Hamas, the civilian-combatant casualty ratio is in the region of 1:1 or 1.5:1. That is remarkable for the sort of urban armed conflict that Israel is grappling with, especially when one considers the 9:1 global average that is put out by the United Nations, alongside the American Health Authority's statistics of 3:1 in Iraq and 5:1 in Afghanistan, as well as the fact that Hamas' modus operandi is to increase the civilian casualties as much as it can and, plainly, to lie about the casualty figures when—I am sorry to put it in these terms, but we are short on time—it cannot secure sufficient numbers of its civilian population and their demise. That is its main aim here, which is truly tragic for the Palestinians involved. When it cannot do that, it falsifies the figures. Those are some of the reasons why we need to be very careful.

Chair: We are running out of time, and I have two people who still want to ask questions. If you do not mind, I will move on to Aphra. I will then move to Alex, but we are five minutes over already.

Q280 **Aphra Brandreth:** Thank you for the depth of coverage in your answers. I will not ask you about proportionality, because I think we have now covered that quite fully. I want you to talk about the law in relation to



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Hamas and really think through whether international humanitarian law, in your view, adequately addresses the challenges posed by non-state actors like Hamas in a modern warfare situation. Is it possible that reforms might be needed to clarify what non-state actors' obligations are and how they are accountable?

Natasha Hausdorff: Unfortunately, it does not. It simply works on the basis that armies facing each other in non-asymmetric contexts will apply the laws of armed conflict because there is a mutual benefit to that. The whole framework of international humanitarian law, frankly, fails when you have terrorist groups such as ISIS, Hamas and Hezbollah using the laws of war against law-abiding, moral militaries, such as the UK and Israel. In Israel's case, Hamas knows that Israel is upholding a much higher standard of international humanitarian law than any army has in history. It is therefore using that mechanism and that framework as part of its strategy to survive. Let me be clear: Hamas's main aim here is to survive to see another day. That is why I talk about encouraging Hamas in these circumstances being so diabolical for the Palestinians, who are undoubtedly suffering under them in Gaza.

So far as reforms are concerned, the difficulty is that when you are dealing with terrorist groups, you cannot subject them to the standard censure in the international legal arena. Sanctions will not necessarily work, although when you are dealing with a state terror actor such as Iran, they certainly do, and ought to be deployed. So far as Hamas, Hezbollah or even the Houthis are concerned, unfortunately, it is military action alone that can seek to defeat the terrorist entity, rather than, say, convincing them that there is something for them to gain by complying with international law. So I am afraid that reform would not strike me as particularly conducive to convincing terrorist organisations that they need to amend their ways.

Q281 **Aphra Brandreth:** Is there any mechanism under international law by which Hamas leaders could be held accountable for the atrocities?

Natasha Hausdorff: There is a mechanism under Israeli law. There are many discussions at the moment of the appropriate means and method of trying the Nukhba terrorists of 7 October and those who have been detained subsequently.

The difficulty with an international mechanism is that, frankly, so far as Israel is concerned—I say this trying to put myself in their shoes as much as possible—we come back to this point of the weaponisation of international law. When we see international law being upended and abused to such an extent against the only Jewish state, I don't think there can be any confidence that an international court or tribunal can be properly relied upon with respect to any issue where Israel is concerned.

The International Criminal Court is a case in point. It also has no jurisdiction over Hamas terrorists. The single warrant that it issued is against a dead man, Mohammed Deif, as some sort of grotesque pretence of holding both sides accountable, which in and of itself seeks to draw an equivalence between the only democracy in the Middle East and a terrorist



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organisation that is internationally proscribed. When we see what the International Criminal Court has done, I think it really behoves Israel to treat any international initiative in that regard with some degree of suspicion, and perhaps even angst.

Q282 Alex Ballinger: First, I take your claim that the IDF has the highest standards of IHL for any army in history as outrageous. Having served in the British military myself, I think that is a particularly staggering claim.

I would like to ask about international humanitarian law again, and aid deliveries: 91% of people in Gaza are facing food insecurity; one third of hospitals there are completely out of action, with the other two thirds damaged by the fighting; and 92% of housing units have been destroyed or damaged. For 50 days now, no aid deliveries have been accepted into Gaza. In fact, Israeli Ministers have declared that they are blocking aid to exert pressure on Hamas. In my opinion, and that of almost every aid agency in the world, that is a clear breach of international humanitarian law. I wonder how you think Israel is justifying this.

Natasha Hausdorff: First of all, with reference to the highest humanitarian standards applied by the IDF, that is not just from me. I think you have had Colonel Richard Kemp testifying—certainly at other parliamentary Committees. There is John Spencer, the head of urban armed conflict at West Point in America. Certainly, the members of the military expert panel that I went into Gaza with would give very similar testimony. We will have to agree to disagree on that. I approach this as an international lawyer, looking specifically at the application of IHL.

So far as the aid issue is concerned, the statistics on this have been consistently misrepresented. So far, across the operation period, before the ceasefire, Israel refused to allow into Gaza 1.1% of trucks that came from the international community to aid crossing points—that was it—because they were either dual-use items or because the aid organisation in question did not allow a search to be conducted. Now, those searches—

Q283 Alex Ballinger: The question is about the current blockade.

Natasha Hausdorff: Well, let's be clear, because the reports that you referred to were also erroneous. In fact, many of them, predicting famine in Gaza, have been used to justify the false accusations of starvation as a weapon of war—

Chair: Given how little time we have, I would greatly appreciate it if you could just answer Alex's question.

Natasha Hausdorff: This does require a full answer, I'm afraid.

Q284 Chair: No—answer the question that you have been asked, if you don't mind, given that we are already running over time. You have been asked specifically about aid not getting in at the moment and you are talking about another period of time, which is in itself contentious, and we don't have time to get into that argument. The question you were asked was very precise and carefully put, and I would greatly appreciate it if, in the

few moments we have left, you could answer it.

Natasha Hausdorff: The question I was asked referenced reports of international bodies that have erroneously predicted famine and starvation in Gaza. Our written evidence submission links to our separate review of those aid reports and the famine review that we have conducted, which I would ask the Committee to consider. The IPC report in particular was called out by the famine review committee as being based on only impartial information and implausible in its predictions. That is significant.

To answer your question on what aid organisations have reported, those allegations, I'm afraid, are false and you only need to look at the volume of aid that has gone in—

Q285 **Alex Ballinger:** Are there blockades in place at the moment?

Natasha Hausdorff: I will come to that in a moment; there were several parts to your question. One only has to look at the volume of aid that has gone in—the statistics are publicly available on COGAT's website—and the subsequent analysis of the calorific content of that aid, which found that in the seven months that were analysed, January to July last year, over 3,000 calories per person per day went into Gaza, which is significantly in excess of NHS guidelines. That was the position before going into the ceasefire. As part of the ceasefire, aid was flooded into the Gaza strip, so that even international humanitarian organisations have agreed that there were many, many months of aid available in the Gaza strip.

On the subsequent seizure of aid going in, which is part of an attempt to put pressure on Hamas, let me be clear: Hamas has been stealing the aid, selling it on the black market and using those funds to fuel its war machine against Israel. That is the reason for the aid being turned off: it is on the basis that the civilian population have sufficient because of the flooding of Gaza with humanitarian aid over the course of the ceasefire. I hope that answers your question.

Q286 **Alex Ballinger:** So your position is that, despite the UN reporting that over 90% of people in Gaza faced food insecurity last week, it is acceptable to conduct the blockade because there was lots of aid delivered in the past?

Natasha Hausdorff: The UN reports have been consistently found to be wrong. I ask you to look at the numbers and the data on what has gone in, and the analysis of the calorific content. If there are indeed individuals facing food insecurity in Gaza, then there is a very clear reason for that: Hamas's diversion of aid. The total volume that has been facilitated into the Gaza strip by Israel is far in excess of what is required by individual Gazans. Hamas has been stealing the aid, and I mentioned they were shooting civilians—that includes shooting civilians who were seeking to obtain some of the aid that was brought in by international organisations.

That is the true tragedy here, which in one sense brings us full circle, if the United Kingdom's policy is to continue, I'm afraid, to encourage Hamas. Antony Blinken, in a moment of great honesty, referenced

America's part in encouraging Hamas: every time there was criticism of Israel, Hamas would walk away from hostage negotiations. That is, I think, a very important message for this Committee to internalise, to include in its report and to feed back to the Government to build a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time. Thank you for coming in, and for fighting back. If there is anything further that you believe we did not give you an opportunity to give evidence about, please put it in writing.

Natasha Hausdorff: I would be grateful if the Clerk might email me the individual incidents that I was being asked about because, despite the answer being, "We can't tell unless we have the information that we don't have access to," I would still happily look into what might be publicly available about it.

Examination of witness

Witness: Jonathan Sacerdoti.

Q287 **Chair:** We come to our third panel. Jonathan Sacerdoti is a broadcaster, journalist and television producer. Would you introduce yourself for the record?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I am Jonathan Sacerdoti. I am a writer, analyst and broadcaster who has spent a number of years covering Israel and the Middle East, as well as UK politics.

Chair: Thank you for your time today. I am sorry that we are running late. As I said, the Committee is keen that this inquiry focuses on the UK Government's role, including in helping to find peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, and on what we have done until now and could do in the future as a country.

Q288 **Edward Morello:** Thank you for joining us. It would be helpful to understand what you believe the aims of the Israeli Government are in the conflict in Gaza. What are their stated aims? To what extent is the way in which they are perpetrating the conflict likely to deliver those outcomes?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: The most obvious direct answer is that the Israeli Government were forced into action after 7 October 2023, with the horrific and brutal invasion of southern Israel by Palestinian terrorists who slaughtered, kidnapped, raped, tortured and kept prisoners.

Q289 **Edward Morello:** All of which we have heard a lot of evidence about, but what do you believe the aims of the Government are in Gaza at this time?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: As I was going to go on to say, I believe that the aims of the Government are to react to the threat, which proved itself very formidable on that day, and to try to achieve the return of the hostages—59 of them are still kept in the Gaza strip, which is a humanitarian issue that the whole international community ought to be uniting behind, but it is one that has had relatively little proper support.



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I believe that the Israeli Government and the Israeli military are engaging in a war not just on that front, but to confront other threats, whether that has been Hezbollah in the north, in Lebanon, the direct threat from Iran, which has rocketed the country twice, the Houthi rebels in Yemen or from elsewhere in the region. Israel has been trying to reassert its military dominance in the region in order to protect itself against jihadi Islamic terrorism and forces that are dedicated to the eradication of the state of Israel, and furthermore, to killing Jewish people both in the state of Israel and around the world, as explained by many of those forces, including the Iranians, who are behind all those proxies.

I believe that Israel is engaged in—quite successfully so—reasserting its military abilities to hold at bay enemies on multiple fronts in order to keep the citizens of Israel safe, and to provide a continued homeland for Jews who are at threat from rising antisemitism around the globe. They have their right to go and move to Israel in order to be protected from the kind of genocidal acts that took place both on that day and throughout history on Jews past.

Q290 Edward Morello: In terms of how the IDF or the Government are perpetrating the conflict in Gaza—how they are carrying out the war in Gaza—how effective is that at delivering those outcomes? If, as you have stated, the only outcome is a sense of security and the return of the prisoners—

Jonathan Sacerdoti: Hostages—not prisoners.

Edward Morello: Hostages. If that is the only end game, what is the end game for the Palestinians? There are two elements to that question. Is the way that Israel is perpetrating the conflict at the moment conducive to achieving the release of the hostages? Also, if the hostages and security for Israel are the only desired outcome, what does Israel—to use the Chair's question—look like in 10 years' time?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I will try to answer that, although it is a few questions rolled into one. If you will forgive me, on the intended outcome for the Palestinians, you would have to ask them why they invaded Israel on that day and what their intended outcome was, but the resulting outcome is that the proposition of some sort of negotiated settlement that would work more in their favour than is now the case has been pushed way into the long grass, because of the horrific threats that actually manifested on that day. I do not know what their objective aim was. I think it was to bring back the issue of Palestinian national self-determination, because it had slipped off the world's radar, given the Abraham accords, among other things, which had seen other Arab countries in the Middle East accepting that this intractable problem was due mostly to Palestinian rejectionism and maximalism. They had really bypassed that, following the Trump and Netanyahu agenda of trying to create a regional accord that would allow a Jewish state in Israel to thrive alongside Arab states.

Q291 Edward Morello: We have heard evidence from the Palestinian side as



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well. I am very keen to understand what Israel is trying to achieve and whether the way in which the war is being carried out is a route to the safe return of the hostages, to safety and security for Israel, and to X—to what. What is the 10-year plan?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: It is a mixed forecast on my part regarding those issues. The main restriction or problem for the Israelis in carrying this out properly and effectively is indeed that there are people starving, being raped and being abused in Gaza. Those are the hostages that the Palestinian terrorists are keeping there. They made a great show of how badly they have been treating them, repeatedly through videos and those hideous performances they put on as part of the release part of the ceasefire agreement.

Because of that, Israel has been rather held back from managing to engage in the war in a way that would be more decisive and quicker. I also think that the previous US Administration under Joe Biden, while being very supportive of Israel's war effort, at times throttled Israel's ability to carry out that war in a way that would have been more decisive. I think you are right to point out that there may be some limitations in the way that Israel is undertaking the war. The main reason for those limitations, to achieve its main goals, has been that it is restricted by some very difficult circumstances, most notably the hostages.

Is it working to get the hostages back? I would say yes and no. Obviously, there is a demand among all people of good faith and good will around the world that the hostages be released immediately, without any preconditions. They ought to be just released, because you don't take hostages of civilians from their beds or homes and keep them for well over a year. That is just not something that is done. The world should be putting pressure on all those state actors behind the Palestinian terrorists who are doing that, whether that is Qatar, Turkey or Iran.

There could be more support from the international community, including the UK Government, to try to achieve that, so that Israel's abilities are not restricted to how it can engage in this war. I would say it has been quite successful in that it has got back around 80% of the hostages. There is a big caveat: some of them were dead, tortured or murdered, and some of them are still there. Some of those who are still there are also known to be dead.

It is not totally effective but, as is often the case with Israel's dilemmas and problems, you need to look at the circumstances, which show that it is not offered a very beautiful solution that is going to be easy and a horrid one; it is offered two really horrid ones. In this case, it is trying to conduct itself according to the rule of law, international human rights law, the rules of war and the fact that it is a democratic country that has had this vast hit to it of hostages, murders, and engaging in this ongoing war, which has been brutal on the nation.

It has to try to find a way through those thickets, which is why this Committee's work is so important. Countries such as ours, which are allies

to democratic liberal Israel, ought to be finding ways to support it in that fight, to make it the least bad war it can be, but wars are horrible.

Q292 Edward Morello: You raise an interesting point that some of the hostages, unfortunately many of them dead, were released under a ceasefire agreement.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: Which is the cessation of the brutal war that forced Hamas into releasing them.

Q293 Edward Morello: I go back to my earlier point about what the journey to a safe and secure Israel looks like, and the continuation of the war in Gaza since the end of the ceasefire, and the way it is being perpetrated. Is there any suggestion in your mind that that is bringing about an escalation to a point where you have a ceasefire that is welcomed by the other side, who are willing to give up hostages? Or is the expectation that you just continue to ratchet up, in the hope that at some point—

What I am trying to understand is something that we have talked about a couple of times, even in this session, which is not the next day but how you get to the next day. That is the bit that I want to understand. What is your view of the appropriate route to go from where you are now to talking about the next day?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: If we are going to look at the validity of what they are doing now, and try to assess whether that is a smart way to bring about the release of the remaining hostages, dead and alive, I would say you need to look at the alternative possibilities: an instant ceasefire and withdrawal from the Gaza strip of all Israeli forces and, according to what reports have said the Palestinians have requested, a commitment, with some international backing it up, that Israel cannot go back to war—that this is a permanent end to war.

I would effectively characterise that as a surrender, because what it would do is leave in power the terrorist organisation Hamas, which is not only genocidally intended towards Israel, but is brutal and punishing of Palestinians within the Gaza strip. It does not really guarantee the release of all the hostages, because Hamas does not act like an honest, rational or humanitarian player. Furthermore, what you then have to look at is Israel's security—the other issue I mentioned, other than the hostage release. Not only have you left in place that brutal jihadi force in Gaza, backed by Iran, but you are then faced with the question of what will happen next. What the Arab world will see—what Israel's Arab enemies will see, including Hamas, but also including all the others—is that all they need to do is kidnap civilians.

Q294 Chair: Can I just make sure I understand your evidence? You are not saying that all of Israel's Arab neighbours are enemies, are you?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: No, I said all of Israel's Arab enemies. There are indeed neighbours of Israel who have made peace accords and who have signed up to the Abraham accords. I believe there is a very interesting and thriving part of the Middle East that is very keen to see a Jewish state



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succeeding in the land of Israel and co-operating with them, but if I may go back just to that point?

Q295 **Chair:** I just wanted to make sure that I understood what you were saying.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I think you did, yes—I hope you do now.

Chair: I do now.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: Okay, good. The thing that I would say is that the moment they decide to seize more hostages, this all starts again. What is bound to encourage jihadi Islamic terrorists to seize hostages is the kind of deal that Israel is being forced to make. That has been seen throughout history, from the Jibril deal, which was originally sort of the blueprint for Israel's first decision to swap Palestinian prisoners, terrorists in Israeli jails, for people who are seized and kept hostage by jihadi terrorist groups. That is a pattern that Israel is forced to repeat, but the more that we try and force it to maximise the price for releasing the hostages, the more in the future the security element of that sort of alternative arrangement to the one we are seeing now will be dreadful for Israel and for Israeli civilians who know that given half a chance, those same forces—it is not just Hamas; it is the other terrorist forces in Gaza, even the civilians we watched in the videos they stream themselves—will burst into Israel, rape, steal, kidnap, murder, and take hostages. So, giving in to terrorist hostage-taking is something that Israel also has to weigh very carefully when trying to get back those civilians.

Q296 **Chair:** I am going to ask Edward's question another way. You were asked about the future of Israel in 10 years, and about the objective and how it will work, given the things that you want and that you understand the Israeli Government as it is currently formed wants. You have told us all the things that you do not want but it is not really clear how we are going to get to where you want to get to. So, how, ideally, do you see Gaza in 10 years' time?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: Well, I am not a soothsayer or fortune teller. It is very hard to know.

Q297 **Chair:** What would be a good outcome?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I would say that a good outcome would be the elimination in Gaza of the forces that are committed to genocidal acts on Israel and on Jews, such as Hamas—it is in their charter, and it is also in their actions, as we saw on 7 October. I would say that a Gaza which is meaningfully deradicalised, a Gaza which sees education of its population towards peace and co-existence, a Gaza which is utterly demilitarised, a Gaza which does not just say that it does not have the intention to murder and kill Jews and to eliminate Israel, but has no ability to do so if it is lying or change their mind, and a Gaza which allows Palestinians within it to thrive and live good lives should they choose to forgo those principles of Islamic jihadism is the kind of Gaza that could be achieved and could provide a brighter future, not just for Israelis—the neighbours who they



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attacked on 7 October—but for the people living within Gaza. There are a lot of steps to getting there.

Q298 **Chair:** Would they be Israelis, or would they be within a Palestinian nation? What would be their status?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: That depends—there are an awful lot of steps towards getting there.

Q299 **Chair:** I understand that. I know what I think but tell me what you think. In 10 years' time should Gaza be part of Israel, or should Gaza be part of a Palestinian state—or something else?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: There is not currently a Palestinian state, so the question I suppose you are asking me is whether I believe we should establish one within the next 10 years.

Chair: I am just wondering what the future is. That is what I am trying to get from you, not "This is terrible: we can't have this; we can't have that." I understand all that.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I hope you agree with it.

Q300 **Chair:** Of course. We are looking for what peace looks like, what a positive future looks like and how we get there. In order to be able to get there, we need to be able to understand what we agree on, what peace could look like, and where we have common ground. That is what I am asking you.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I believe that the common ground is the steps that need to be taken towards getting to whatever that 10-year vision is: demilitarisation, deradicalisation, de-jihadism and the education of people towards living peacefully with their neighbours. I believe that all of those things will get us to a solution within 10 years, if the international community, including Great Britain, chooses to prioritise those things rather than choosing to sometimes engage in gestures that run the risk of making either side feel that they are not getting what they want, in terms of an unachievable goal.

If the goal can be peaceful co-existence, and can be a rejection of violence, then, on that 10-year vision, we can perhaps hope that it can be a state, or some sort of emirate situation. I do not know what the solution is. As I said, I really have no ability to foresee it. If you had asked me or any analyst of the Middle East two years ago if they would have foreseen the Middle East as it is today—the fall of Assad in Syria, the virtual destruction of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the situation in Iran where Israel managed to strike and remove so much of the air defence systems, or even 7 October itself—you would be hard pressed to find somebody who could have predicted all that, and that is just two years ago.

Q301 **Chair:** Of course, but the question is this: real political leadership has to have some sort of vision as to where it is that it wants to go. What we are scrabbling to try to find is where it is that the current leadership of Israel want to go. What do they want to achieve? That is the question that Ed



has been asking and that I have been asking.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I think the answer to that is that the state of Israel would like to live in a state of security with any of its neighbours that are willing to commit to that. Furthermore, as it has proven in all of its actions, including with the Abraham accords and throughout its history, where there is an Arab partner for peace or for normalising relations, it reaches out its hand to do so. Indeed, it is a state that has also given away large amounts of land in return for those sorts of agreements, even when they are not particularly rosy. I am talking about, for example, the Sinai peninsular in Egypt.

I would say that the state of Israel's vision is that. The question that I think you are asking me is whether or not the Palestinians have a shared vision. I think that is key. If the Palestinian identity and political mainstream can commit to a similar sort of vision where they co-exist with Israel peacefully, and to some form of compromise towards getting a goal that they want, that can be achieved. But as long as mainstream Palestinian politics—whether that is Hamas, Fatah or any other part—pursues the rewarding of acts of terrorism through so-called “pay for slay” and a number of other means, including preaching in Fatah mosques in the West Bank, Judea and Samaria, and the continuation of terrorism, extremism and jihadism, I do not see how that is going to be possible. If they present a viable option for Israel to co-exist with, I think they will find a partner in Israel in order to reach that. I think that is a question for Palestinian politicians.

Q302 **Abtisam Mohamed:** You mentioned the word rejectionism earlier. How do we deal with Israeli rejectionism in the West Bank, where there is an ever-increasing number of settlements? I think 2024 had the highest number of landgrabs—24,000 dunams were declared as state land. How do we deal with that? Israel does not want to see the West Bank go under Palestinian sovereignty—what are your views?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: At various times in its history, and in the history of the conflict, according to reports from people like Bill Clinton, and even Israeli Prime Ministers, who have recently shown maps and the like, Israel has proposed very favourable settlements to the issues of those disputed territories. I think that, right now, after the atrocities of 7 October, much of the let's say traditionally left peace camp in Israel has really been massively disillusioned by what happened from its Palestinian neighbours.

Abtisam Mohamed: But does that justify violent settlers—

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I am not trying to justify anything. I am not here to defend it or anything; I am just giving you my analysis in answer to your question on what I make of the current situation. I think that the opinion of many Israeli citizens—but not all, as they are certainly not a homogeneous group; it is a thriving democracy—has changed drastically over the last 18 months, since that horrific attack. I think that many who were of the tendency to try to give land in return for peace have found themselves disillusioned again and again over time, so I suspect that the



prospect of trying to convince Israeli people, as well as many Israeli politicians, that land concessions will stop the continued threat—which is very manifest, as we saw on 7 October, and before and after it—will be very difficult.

I would therefore suggest that, if that is one's aim and agenda, especially as allied countries, such as the UK, for example, it would be a really good idea, and a strong idea, to try to convince Israel—we often talk about confidence-building through the actions that states take towards the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs, and I think that, often, that confidence-building has not been enough on the side of building the confidence of the Israelis, who have a very obvious fear of the brutality of those neighbours it is expected to negotiate with and make peace with. If we can give, in any way, diplomatically or politically, some sort of support to our democratic ally in Israel—that they are going to be able to ensure their security—that is more likely, I think.

Q303 Abtisam Mohamed: In terms of settlement expansions, then, do you think that they should come to an end, or do you think that they should carry on as they are?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: Well, I think the issue of the disputed territories in Judea and Samaria—the West Bank—is a live issue that has always been part of the negotiations, when they have been able to take place, between the two sides. I think that there are obviously many good arguments for them to stop. I think there are many good arguments as well, in parts of negotiations, that have been tried and tested by both sides, and they have always been rejected by the Palestinians in negotiations, ultimately. In fact, Bill Clinton recently said that in a public address—that the option offered by him 25 years ago was so favourable that it is extraordinary that anyone should think it should remain today after the complete rejection of it.

Q304 Abtisam Mohamed: Do you think our Government should do more to prevent the expansion of settlements?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I think our Government should very much focus on the cause that might be behind Israeli actions, as I said, which is to build confidence on their part that their security will not be overlooked. So, a lot of the issues to do with the territories in the West Bank—

Abtisam Mohamed: But how are the two related? If there is—

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I'll tell you. A lot of the issues to do with territory in that region are to do with security and safety. Obviously, Israel is a very tiny country, and, at its minimum waist there, should there be, let's say, a surrender of all of those disputed territories, it would mean that the kind of attack that we saw take place—the brutal Palestinian terrorist attack from Gaza that we saw take place on 7 October—could actually take place against Israel's major cities in central Israel from those putative Palestinian territories as well. That is, I think, one of the reasons why the popularity of negotiating over those territories, and Israel giving them away, has really waned in Israeli society, because there is a very



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justifiable fear that, should those pieces of land be given over to people who have still not deradicalised—or decided to stop waging an exterminative war on the state of Israel—there is an increased danger there.

Q305 **Abtisam Mohamed:** So is it your view that everybody who lives in the West Bank—Palestinians who live there—is potentially at risk of radicalisation, and can never—

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I know that you have had written evidence from IMPACT-se about the Palestinian educational curriculum, so I know that you will be familiar, if you have read that evidence, with the incitement and the sorts of claims that are taught to children from a very young age. Indeed, Palestinian television broadcasts as well, whether it has been the sermons from Fatah mosques in the West Bank—Judea and Samaria—or whether it is from Gaza—

Q306 **Chair:** We have done better than that. Nearly everybody on this Committee has had the benefit of being able to visit the area—the disputed area, as you call it—and been able to meet people and talk to them, and to work out for ourselves whether or not they have been radicalised or can potentially be radicalised. It is important, of course, for parliamentarians to visit the area, so they can reach their own conclusions on that matter.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: Yes. And I also have visited those regions and met many people there as well myself, and if you are asking me, “Are there any people who identify as Palestinian in that area who are committed to peaceful co-existence and who are not radicalised?”, I would say that of course there are.

I think that the challenge for those people is that they are very often treated by their own leadership and their own mainstream political parties in a deeply problematic way, which means they are not really able to pursue that agenda, if that is their agenda, because there is so much pushing them and their children and future generations towards the continuation of narrative of infinite and never-ending resistance, which ultimately all too often means resistance to the existence of the state of Israel. I think that that is part of the problem.

Q307 **Chair:** Is it not also because there is no hope?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: But there has been hope many times.

Q308 **Chair:** But at the moment and for the past few decades, if you were a Palestinian living on the West Bank or in East Jerusalem or in Gaza, you would think there was no hope and that there was no possibility of you being able to have equal rights with Israelis or to have your own state, and that is the day-to-day-existence of Palestinians, certainly of those we have met.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I agree with you that if there are Palestinians, who you have met and who I have met, who are committed to peaceful co-existence with Israelis and foresee a situation in the future where the



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conflict is ended and they can co-exist side by side with a Jewish Israeli state, then it is absolutely a massive tragedy that they have not got political leadership that has managed to manifest that with the state of Israel, which has made peace with other Arab neighbours and which has made accords with other Arab countries, in order to prove and just to benefit from the result of those accords and agreements.

There is definitely, within the Israeli population's desires, the desire for all this to end. But I think that anybody who saw what happened on 7 October can be very clear about the fantasy that tomorrow one can simply declare the statehood of a people that literally invaded, raped, murdered and tortured, including civilians from Gaza—we all saw them. I think it is a fantasy at this stage, or at least in the eyes of many Israelis I speak to, both on the street and in politics. Even those who dislike passionately this Government and this Prime Minister in Israel still feel that that fantasy is much, much further away.

I agree that creating hope on both sides is really the key to moving things forwards, but I would say that what has dashed hope, what has ruined hope, what has abandoned hope, what has killed hope for Israelis and for any of the Palestinians you have just described, is the actions of those Palestinian terrorists who have said that they would do it again and again, and who are proving it, backed up by a jihadi, tyrannical, theocratic regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran, who are still engaging in those activities, not just against Israel but against this country. They kidnapped our sailors; they kidnapped Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. They are attacking international trade. This is a problem that all of the world—all of the west—needs to unite behind. It is not just an issue any more about Israel and Jews.

Q309 Blair McDougall: I welcome the fact that you keep coming back to the need to promote peaceful co-existence, and one of the things that we are trying to get to from this inquiry is this: what is Britain's USP in helping to get to that?

One of the things I am concerned about, and I wonder if you share the concern, is the proposed law from the Knesset on taxing NGOs funded from overseas at 80%. It feels like that is sort of a blockage if Britain, for example, wanted to continue to invest in peacebuilding organisations; we obviously have two deeply traumatised communities, so it is more important than ever that that work is supported. I wonder if you share my concern about that law.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I think what Britain can do—especially in terms of NGOs and international bodies—is try to focus on those that are not part of the problem and have not been repeatedly shown to undermine peace. I would list UNRWA among those. Indeed, there were many pieces of evidence provided by Israel, and by the Palestinians themselves in the videos they released on 7 October, showing UNRWA vehicles or even staff engaging in actual acts of terrorism, including dragging a corpse into a car. At least one of the hostages said that they were kept in an UNRWA teacher's house, and another said that they were guarded over by UNRWA



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people. The UK needs to look very closely at international bodies that purport to be helping the Palestinians but actually are doing a dreadful job for the Palestinians and Israel's security. I suppose it would do Britain a lot of good to try to work more actively to dismantle structural biases against Israel in international bodies like the UN, and to cease funding UNRWA because of those sorts of links. Again—

Q310 Blair McDougall: I was looking really at the funding of NGOs and grassroots organisations that do peacebuilding within Israel and Palestine. Does that law make that job more difficult? You have rightly said that that has to be a priority, given the trauma there.

Jonathan Sacerdoti: If you have concerns about a law like that in Israel, the best way to deal with that as part of the international community is to help bolster international bodies that are not compromised in that way.

Q311 Blair McDougall: Just to be clear, I am not talking about international bodies' funding. I am talking about the funding of grassroots projects—civil society organisations—within Israel and Palestine. Is that law potentially a blockage to the international community's ability to do that?

Jonathan Sacerdoti: I suppose what I am saying is that often when members of the international community wish to provide aid or financial aid for humanitarian purposes for Palestinians, they do so through bodies that the state of Israel says, rightly or wrongly—that is something that would need a very detailed discussion between us; we may not have time for it now, but I am very happy to engage with it—are not committed to fairness and peace, but are committed in some way, in Israel's opinion, towards a perpetuation of the conflict. The best way we can target that, other than by having an opinion like yours, that you don't like this action of Israel, is try to bolster the organisations that aren't doing that and try to agree with our ally Israel on why they feel that way about certain bodies so that they do not feel that sort of defensive need to do that kind of thing.

If Israel know that Britain and other nations are able to provide funding for Palestinians in a way that will not be hijacked by Hamas and other terrorist groups and used against them, and if they know that that financial commitment will not be used to educate and indoctrinate against Israel and Jews and in the pursuit of jihadism, they will not even think about those sorts of laws. Instead, they would be first in line to support the bolstering of the parts of Palestinian society that might help to resolve the problem. I am quite sympathetic to them on that front.

Chair: Unless there are any other questions, we will draw this session to a close. Thank you for your time. Once you leave, if you believe there is anything else we should have asked you about, please do give that evidence in writing.