

## **Written evidence from Dr Roger Higginson (IPC0003)**

### **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

1. Submission by Roger Higginson, Ph.D. graduate from Sussex University on the early years of the British Mandate in Palestine: and former Government official involved, inter alia, in trade promotion to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs). He is also a former board member of the Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) and has made six visits to Israel and the OPTs since 2009. He currently researches conflicts in the Middle East. The submission is made in a personal capacity.

#### **Summary**

2. The UK needs to more publicly and emphatically set out its Middle East policy, and be less inhibited in its criticisms of Israel where these are merited. A clear distinction needs to be made between Israel as a country and the specific policies of its current government: in particular Prime Minister Netanyahu, Security Minister Ben-Gvir, and Finance Minister Smotrich.

3. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be resolved in isolation as it is impacted by events elsewhere in the Middle East. Other interlocutors need to include Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and Iran. The UK also needs to closely monitor developments in Syria following the demise of the Assad regime. It is too early to know whether a second Trump administration is going to be helpful or a hindrance in bringing peace to the region, which makes it all the more important that the UK charts a steady course – albeit being realistic about what it can achieve.

4. The submission starts with some historical background and then addresses the specific questions on which the Committee has welcomed written evidence.

## **Background**

### ***Historical Context and Current Events***

5. The issues facing Israel and the OPTs today are basically the same as those with which the British Mandate grappled in Palestine during the thirty years following the end of World War I. The Mandate formally came into being in Palestine just over a hundred years ago in September 1923. Those searching for 'solutions' to the irreconcilable demands of Arabs and Jews over the same territory would do well to bear this sobering fact in mind.

6. A century ago the British Empire was approaching the height of its territorial powers and controlled large swathes of territory in the Middle East. Today it has a much reduced presence, with a legacy but no significant influence independent of any American initiatives which Washington may propose. The United States itself has today limited aspirations in the region as it becomes more preoccupied with its growing rivalry with China. This then is the wider geopolitical context in which British policy towards Israel - Palestine must be considered.

7. The context is further complicated by a combination of a long term trend in Israel and the unprecedented scale of the Hamas attack on southern Israel carried out on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023. First the trend. Since the Likud party first won the 1977 election, Israeli politics has maintained a slow but steady drift towards the right. Nevertheless, this process has accelerated under Binyamin Netanyahu who has either won elections or managed to create coalitions in more recent years by offering government posts to representatives of settler-religious fringe parties on the extreme right of the political spectrum. **As a result, the current government in Israel today is the most right-wing and hardline vis-à-vis the Palestinian Arabs since the inception of the state in 1948.**

8. It was within this radical political environment that Hamas launched the largest scale attack on Israel in the whole of its history, initially killing some 700 people including 44 soldiers.<sup>1</sup> A further 200 civilians were captured and taken hostage.<sup>2</sup> The inevitable retribution was swift and brutal. By November 2024 over 44,000 Palestinians had died in Gaza as a result of Israel's bombing campaign<sup>3</sup> and the government in Jerusalem has drastically reduced supplies of food, fuel, and water to the Gaza Strip.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the population of over two million crammed into the territory face a humanitarian disaster.<sup>5</sup>

### **What can the UK do in cooperation with its partners ?**

9. What the UK seeks to achieve was succinctly set out by Barbara Woodward in her statement to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 25 November 2024.<sup>6</sup> In essence, a ceasefire, release of hostages, the lifting of restrictions on aid to Gaza, freezing West Bank settlements, and enabling a Palestinian state on the territories seized by Israel in the course of the 1967 war.

10. Prior to the current Gaza conflict the **Abraham Accords**<sup>7</sup> represented an attempt to normalise relations between Israel and the Arab states in the MENA region on the at least tacit understanding that there would be a Palestinian state based on the principles set out in UNSC resolution 242.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Guardian newspaper, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2023: [Death toll rises to more than 1,100 after surprise Hamas attack on Israel | Israel | The Guardian](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Grandmother released by Hamas 'very sharp' and 'keen to share information' \(msn.com\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> UNRWA Situation Report no. 149 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> [The nightmare in Gaza must stop, urges UN deputy chief | UN News](#)

<sup>6</sup> [An immediate ceasefire and the immediate release of hostages is the best way to achieve peace: UK statement at the UN Security Council - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Abraham Accords: UK government policy - House of Lords Library](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Search | Security Council](#)

That the accords have made little progress is largely due to Israel's failure to withdraw from the territory acquired by military conquest in 1967. What is important however from a UK policy perspective is the linkage that has been established between a satisfactory resolution of the Palestinian issue and Israel's capacity to live in peace and security with its neighbours. The problem we face today is that a government strongly influenced by religious settler extremists is leading Israel in the opposite direction, attempting to impose its will by the use of overwhelming force accompanied by de facto -if not de jure- annexation of the post 1967 territories. **The UK must be unremitting in its efforts to convey the message that this is a disastrous and barbaric course of action. The destruction of Gaza will never bring the peace and security the Israeli population rightfully seeks.**

11. This message must be reinforced in collaboration with other states in the region. A clear example in this respect is **Saudi Arabia**, which recently launched the **Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two State Solution**.<sup>9</sup>

12. Other interlocutors include **Egypt, Jordan, France, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)**. It is worth briefly considering these in sequence.

13. **Egypt** is of critical importance to the Israel - Palestine issue due to its north eastern border with the southern end of the Gaza Strip along the so-called Philadelphi Corridor<sup>10</sup> which is the primary route employed for smuggling arms to Hamas via subterranean tunnels. Its secular government led by General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi was responsible for ousting the administration of Mohamed Morsi, an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>11</sup> Sisi is consequently no friend of Hamas, which is a Palestinian off-shoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> A shared interest in peace and tranquillity in Gaza and hostility to Hamas gives it a firm basis for negotiating with Israel.

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<sup>9</sup> [The First Meeting of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution Continues its Work with the Participation of the Deputy Minister for Multilateral International Affairs, Senior Officials, and International Organizations](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Why the Philadelphi corridor is a focus of the Israel-Gaza ceasefire deal | Reuters](#)

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Bowen: The Making of the Modern Middle East, Picador Books 2023, pages 194 - 195

14. There are some similarities with the latter's relationship with **Jordan** where both countries have a shared interest in peaceful conditions in the West Bank, and the UK has a long and close relationship with King Abdullah. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars live in Jordan, and are sensitive in particular to events in Jerusalem<sup>13</sup>. It is to be regretted that the current Israeli administration, some of whose Ministers talk of annexation<sup>14</sup>, do not take this into account.

15. If the UK engages with Egypt to the south of Israel and Jordan to its east, then logically it should do the same with **Lebanon** to its north. This however is challenging for us for two reasons. First, Lebanon is divided and unstable between its Sunni, Shia, and Christian Maronite sects in a way that Egypt and Jordan is not. Furthermore, we do not have the long historical connections with Lebanon that we enjoy with the other two countries. For this reason we are more likely to achieve results by coordinating our policy and messaging with **France** that has a similarly long and close relationship to Lebanon as the UK has with Jordan. This would have the added value of integrating the UK's approach with that of the EU in general, given that France is the leading European continental power with a history of involvement in the MENA region. It must be hoped that its current internal budgetary problems<sup>15</sup> do not form too much of a distraction from its Middle East policy.

16. The **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** is important as a regional trading entrepot investing its oil wealth across the region and further afield. The UK has long standing relations with the Emirates dating back to the days of empire, and it is interesting to note that Dubai has considered the introduction of English common law to its free trade zones.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, they have

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu: Gaza A History, Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2015, page 50

<sup>13</sup> Jordan was created by the British in 1920 as part of the Mandate system, and has a long and at times challenging relationship with the West Bank. For a good overview across the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Philip Robins: A History of Jordan, Cambridge University Press, 2004

<sup>14</sup> [Two settlement leaders, Ben Gvir call to annex West Bank after Trump victory | The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Michel Barnier: Macron to address nation after government collapse - BBC News](#)

<sup>16</sup> Economist magazine, 21 – 27 October 2023 edition, page 69

played the role of mediator between Hamas and the Israelis, having established full diplomatic relations with the latter in August 2020.<sup>17</sup> The UAE furthermore is somewhat unique in the region in its capacity to leverage its relations both with Iran<sup>18</sup> and Saudi Arabia following the rapprochement between those two strategically important countries.<sup>19</sup> For all of these reasons it is important that the UK builds on its long standing relationship with the Emirates when disseminating its key policies and messaging on the Israel - Hamas conflict.

17. Beyond Europe and the MENA region itself there is of course the **USA** as the leading military power in the Middle East, and Israel's staunchest supporter. It is at the time of writing in December 2024 unclear what the notoriously erratic and unpredictable Donald Trump plans for the region.<sup>20</sup> The UK is too small to influence the administration in Washington but needs to ensure that its position is robust and coherent and to stick to it notwithstanding the geopolitical volatility that can be expected during a second Trump Presidency.

### **What can be learned from the record of UK Government policies to date ?**

18. The UK has a long history of involvement in the Middle East, dating back to at least World War I. But like France, the other European colonial power in the region, its reputation in the Arab world is not especially positive. In particular, its notorious Balfour Declaration,<sup>21</sup> designed to enable the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine finished up with the Jewish

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<sup>17</sup> [The UAE's Crucial Role in the Israel-Hamas Conflict | by Laiba Amir | Medium](#)

<sup>18</sup> Although outwith the scope of this paper, the UK must consider its policy towards Iran if tensions in the Middle East are to be reduced. Demonising Teheran is counter productive, and Iran's legitimate security concerns need to be addressed.

<sup>19</sup> [What Does Saudi-Iranian Détente Mean for the UAE's Regional Ambitions - Gulf International Forum](#)

<sup>20</sup> [What does Trump's return mean for the Middle East? – Mondoweiss](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Microsoft Word - BD article for website Dec 2016](#)

immigrants achieving the state of Israel and the Palestinians either scattered as refugees or under Israeli control.

19. Following World War II, the end of empire, and the 1956 Suez Crisis<sup>22</sup> British influence in the MENA region entered a path of steady and significant decline. By the time Ariel Sharon was Prime Minister of Israel from 2001 - 2006 he was to describe both the UK and Europe as 'payers, not players' in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> Little has changed in that respect over the past twenty years.

20. The Labour party that came to power in July 2024<sup>24</sup> had earlier been mired in controversies relating to its former leader, Jeremy Corbyn, as to whether or not the party had failed to condemn anti-semitism. In his determination to condemn anything that could be construed as anti-semitism the current leader, Keir Starmer, has been slow to condemn the destruction of Gaza following the Hamas attack of October 2023. This has reinforced a perception that the UK has a tendency to indulge the Israeli state for actions that would be roundly condemned if carried out by other countries in other contexts – such as Russia in Ukraine.

21. More importantly from a policy perspective this has given the Israeli government the impression that the UK will always pull its punches, and can safely be ignored. To take an obvious example, only around 30 out of a total of 350 export licences to Israel have been suspended during the hostilities in Gaza, and of those 30, components and spare parts for the F-35 joint strike fighter programme have been exempted.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> [Why Was The Suez Crisis So Important? | Imperial War Museums](#)

<sup>23</sup> [From Payer to Player in the Middle East by El Hassan bin Talal - Project Syndicate](#)

<sup>24</sup> [General elections - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>25</sup> [UK suspends around 30 arms export licences to Israel for use in Gaza over International Humanitarian Law concerns - GOV.UK](#)

22. A tendency to worry more about the concerns of the Jewish community in the UK than the lives of Palestinians in Gaza might be discerned in the Prime Minister's recent meeting with Jewish community leaders.<sup>26</sup> There has been no similar meeting with representatives of the UK's Muslim and Arab communities, nor with those Jewish groups who strongly oppose both the war and the policies of the Netanyahu administration<sup>27</sup>. Any perception of bias in favour of Israel or pro-Israel status quo groups risks weakening the impact of the UK's key messages on its Middle East policy. **There is a need to be firmer, more forthright, and more hard headed about where British interests lie. They do not lie with the actions of Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir, and Smotrich, who are no friends of the Jewish people.**

### **How can the UK assure the resilience of its efforts at a time of uncertainty ?**

23. Today, and especially where the Middle East is concerned, we have the misfortune to live in interesting times, as the Chinese would say. But the path to resilience in diplomacy is well trodden and achieved through clarity of objectives pursued even in the most challenging of conditions. The UK must ensure a coordinated approach is maintained via both some of the key bilateral relations outlined above and through the multilateral agencies such as the United Nations. Our permanent seat at the Security Council offers significant advantages in this respect, and we should not hesitate to distance ourselves from the positions of other members should we conclude that it is in our long term interests to do so.

24. **Engage above all, and maintain the key message that permanent war and domination should not be the objective of any country, nor the result of its policies.** All people have a right, and most certainly the desire, to live in peace and security. **Iran** has already been mentioned in a footnote to

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<sup>26</sup> [Prime Minister asked to 'celebrate as well as defend' Jews in meeting with communal leaders - The Jewish Chronicle. The meeting took place at 10, Downing Street on 29 November 2024](#)

<sup>27</sup> UK Friends of Standing Together might be a case in point: [About UK Friends of Standing Together | UK Friends of Standing Together](#)

this paper.<sup>28</sup> It falls outwith the scope of the specificities of the war in Gaza but cannot be ignored if the region as a whole is to have any hope of stability. Iran fears American military power, and opposes Israel as its client state. Mutual hostility dates back to the 1979 revolution. Each side demonises the other.

25. This is counter-productive. Ayatollah Khamenei is aging. Born in 1939<sup>29</sup> he is now 85 years old, and so some change in Iran's government is inevitable. The UK needs to continue to be proactive in its engagement, which should not be reduced to arguments about whether or not it obtains nuclear weapons. That Iran may seek them reflects feelings of insecurity, and these need to be addressed. Iran "is one of the most invaded and revolution prone countries in world history, a debatable merit with lasting consequences."<sup>30</sup>

**The west needs to engage, not simply accuse and sanction.**

26. Finally the situation in **Syria** needs to be closely monitored. Following the demise of the Assad regime the UK should support implementation of UNSC resolution 2254<sup>31</sup> for a peaceful and negotiated settlement. It should also oppose the recent Israeli occupation of the buffer zone on the Syrian border within the occupied Golan heights.<sup>32</sup> **We cannot condemn Russia's territorial aggression if we fail to do the same for Israel's without facing accusations of double standards.**

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*8<sup>th</sup> December 2024*

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<sup>28</sup> Footnote 18 on page 6 above

<sup>29</sup> [Biography of Ayatollah Khamenei the Leader of the Islamic Revolution - Khamenei.ir](#)

<sup>30</sup> Abbas Amanat: Iran, A Modern History, Yale University Press, 2017, page 2

<sup>31</sup> [Resolution 2254](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Israel PM Netanyahu orders military to 'seize' Syria buffer zone | Mena – Gulf News](#)