

Written evidence from Martin Linton, Palestine Briefing (IPC0012) (2,841 words)

Introduction: I am a former Member of Parliament (Lab, Battersea, 1997-2010) and have spent the time since then editing a parliamentary newsletter and arranging fact-finding tours of the Occupied Territories for MPs, councillors and others, though tours are currently suspended on account of the Foreign Office travel advice.

Reason for submitting evidence: I have responded to previous calls for evidence and make no apology for the fact that my submission is essentially unchanged. The situation is immeasurably worse but the solution is the same. And it can get worse still. I agree with John S. Hall who said: "If you think things can't get any worse, you have no imagination and no sense of history."

My evidence is summarised in 11 points which are briefly explained below:

1. The solution to the conflict is known to both sides.
2. It can be achieved if sufficient pressure is applied.
3. The US is not willing to apply the pressure needed.
4. The EU has enough bargaining power, but will not use it.
5. The UK is the country best placed to take the lead.
6. It should do so in the interests of both Israel and Palestine.
7. In the period 2010-2015 it took some small steps in the right direction.
8. In the last ten years it has taken several steps in the wrong direction.
9. The Palestinian Authority may be a problem, but is not the problem.
10. The root problems are Israeli impunity and Western weakness.
11. We need a strategy of incremental pressure.

1: The solution to the conflict is already known to both sides.

The solution has been known for 30 years: two states based on pre-67 borders with agreed adjustments, with Jerusalem as the capital of both and with negotiated compensation or return for refugees. My preferred option and probably the preferred option for most people in this country would be a one-state solution where everyone has the vote. But that is not on offer. Nor is it ever likely to be. The choice is either A: two states, or B: the status quo.

2: It can be achieved if sufficient pressure is applied.

The main physical obstacles to a two-state solution are the 150 Israeli settlements in the West Bank and potentially now in Gaza. There is evidence that they were built for the very purpose of being obstacles to a solution [\[ii\]](#). It was part of the plan of the original settlers. But the West Bank settlers account for only 7.5% of Israel's population. Most live there only because of the subsidised housing and would prefer to live in Israel. The minority are religious settlers and the Netanyahu government is dependent on their support, but other governments would be less so.

Some fear that economic pressure would be counterproductive, but it has only been tried once, and on that one occasion it worked. President George Bush (Snr) threatened to withhold US loan guarantees if Israel did not freeze settlement building and attend the Madrid peace talks in 1991. They did.

3: The US is neither willing nor able to apply the pressure.

Although Bush's threat worked, Clinton accused him of being 'anti-Israel' and this undoubtedly contributed to his defeat in 1992. Since then no president has used economic pressure against Israel. They have all condemned Israel's settlement policy but continued to

give Israel military aid of approximately \$3½ billion a year. AIPAC, the main Israel lobby in the US, with an annual budget of \$500 million, has tried successfully to ensure that nearly everyone elected to Congress is an unquestioning supporter of the Israeli government. Only a handful of Democratic Congresswomen (known as “The Squad”) have publicly supported the Palestinian cause – and at least one of them represents a largely Arab-American district.

4: The EU has enough bargaining power but will not use it.

The EU is Israel's largest trade market and accounts for about 30% of Israel's trade. But Israel's trade amounts to only 0.9 % of the EU total, so Brussels is in a very strong negotiating position. As a result the Israeli government is very sensitive to any threat to its trade with the EU. Even simple labelling rules issued by the EU in November 2015 requiring settlements goods to be labelled as such caused an “explosion” in Israel. The EU is a constant critic of settlement building, of house demolitions and of abuses of human rights. It is also the biggest financial contributor to the Palestinian Authority. Yet it rarely uses its negotiating position to bring about what it says it wants. Unanimity is required on major foreign policy issues and usually at least one country will block action against settlements.

5: The UK is the country best placed to take the lead.

Faced with the horrendous situation in Gaza, where 30,000 women and children have been killed by Israeli bombs, and the deteriorating situation in the West Bank, where hundreds have been killed by Israeli settlers or soldiers, some UK politicians have buried their heads in the sand on the basis that “it's none of our business” or “it's awful, but there's nothing we can do”. Both are wrong. Human rights are everybody's business, including the UK's. And the UK is better placed than almost any other country to do something about it.

This is not based simply on the historical fact that Britain has a special responsibility because of the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate (though both are true). It is a conclusion reached by a process of elimination. The Palestinians, alone, have zero bargaining power. The US will never put enough pressure on Israel. That is partly for demographic reasons. It has the world's largest Jewish population, higher than Israel itself. The EU is constrained by its own constitution which requires unanimity of member states – which it will never achieve - to take decisive steps in foreign affairs.

For years the UK has hidden behind US inaction and EU indecision, but those excuses have gone. The only countries that command sufficient trust on both sides and sufficient authority to restart the peace process are the major European powers, Germany, France and the UK. The Germans feel unable to take a lead on this issue for historical reasons. The French have tried to take the initiative from the Paris peace conference in 2020 to Macron's call for a ceasefire in 2023, but the UK undermined them on both occasions by siding with the US. The only way forward is for the UK to take the lead.

6: It should do so in the interests of both Israel and Palestine.

The advantage of a UK (or UK-French) initiative is that it could take a wider perspective on the conflict – presenting it not as the Israelis versus Palestinians but as a search for peace and security in the interests of the whole world. Given the extent to which the Israel-Palestine conflict infects the whole region and fans the flames of radicalisation, it should not be difficult to make the case that a solution is in Israel's interests too.

Any peace initiative must include a stage where the Israelis and Palestinians sit down at the same table and negotiate the details – no one can do that for them – but now that we have passed the tenth anniversary of the collapse of the Kerry peace talks in April 2014 it should be clear to everyone that peace talks will never happen without a strong lead from one of the major powers. By elimination that has to be the UK.

7. In the period 2010-2015 it took some small steps in the right direction.

During the Obama years the UK took three positive steps to bring the two-state solution closer. They adopted a diplomatic strategy of keeping a step ahead of the Americans on the Middle East. If the US voted against, the UK abstained. If the US abstained, the UK voted for.

In November 2011 Foreign Secretary William Hague announced that Palestine was “ready for statehood” and that “we reserve the right to recognise a Palestinian state bilaterally at a moment of our choosing when it can best help bring about peace.”

In December 2013 Hague told UK business that "we do not encourage" firms to trade with illegal Israel settlements in the West Bank and "we do not offer support" to firms that do.

In the dying days of the Obama presidency in December 2016, when the US agreed to abstain rather than use its veto at the UN, the UK not only voted in favour but helped to draft a resolution damning Israeli settlements as a ‘flagrant breach’ of international law and calling for a total freeze on new settlement building.

8. In the last ten years it has taken several steps in the wrong direction.

Since 2016 successive UK prime ministers have taken a series of backward steps, aligning the UK more closely with the US and even with Israeli policies.

In January 2017 Theresa May distanced the UK from Senator John Kerry’s strong criticism of illegal Israeli settlements, effectively placing the UK a step behind the Americans rather than a step ahead.

In April 2021 Boris Johnson announced in a letter to the Conservative Friends of Israel that the UK no longer supported the International Criminal Court investigation of war crimes allegations in Gaza.

In August 2022 both Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak told a Conservative leadership hustings organised by the Conservative Friends of Israel that the UK would vote against an International Court of Justice ruling on the legality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

In September 2022 Liz Truss told the Israeli prime minister that she was reviewing the relocation of the UK Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, following in the steps of Donald Trump – a promise that was quietly dropped after her resignation.

In November 2022 Rishi Sunak changed the UK’s vote on the ICJ ruling on the legality of Israel settlements from “abstain” to “against”.

In January 2024 Keir Starmer backtracked on his party’s promise in its 2017 and 2019 manifestos to recognise Palestine “immediately” saying that recognition would come only “as a contribution to a renewed peace process”.

This differed little from the Conservative 2011 promise to recognise Palestine “when it can best help bring about peace” – a formula that enabled them to turn down every opportunity - in April 2014 when the Kerry talks broke down, in October 2014 when the House of Commons voted for recognition and Sweden recognised Palestine, in June 2024 when Spain, Ireland, Norway and Slovenia recognised Palestine – when it could have made a real difference.

9. The Palestinian Authority is a problem, but not the problem.

Nothing in this evidence is intended to deny that Palestinians can make things worse for themselves or to imply the Israelis are always to blame. Fatah and Hamas are both very old-fashioned organisations. Corruption has not been effectively dealt with. Both have fallen into the bad habit of

postponing elections they don't think they can win. Accusations abound of the abuse of legal process and human rights. But we should remember that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation renounced violence in 1988 and recognised Israel as a sovereign state occupying 78% of historic Palestine (including more than half the land that the United Nations had promised to the Palestinians). The Palestinians have made their historic compromise. They have said they will accept just 22% of the original country despite being two thirds then and still more than half the population.

When the last round of peace talks collapsed in April 2014, John Kerry made it clear that Netanyahu caused the collapse when he approved 700 new illegal settlements and failed to honour the deal to release the last batch of prisoners. It is still the Israeli government that is refusing to engage seriously in the peace process. President Abbas has made it clear he will resume talks "the minute" the Israelis agree to honour the deal and stop building settlements.

10. The root problems are Israeli impunity and Western weakness.

For nearly 20 years since the death of Yasser Arafat, President Mahmoud Abbas has pursued a dual strategy of non-violent protest at home backed by international action to achieve a two-state solution. Whatever people think about his policies at home – and he has many critics – he has been let down badly by the international community who fail to follow the logic of their own policies. When there is no international action to support a peace process, this hangs moderate Palestinian politicians like Mahmoud Abbas out to dry. His strategy is rendered ineffective, his authority undermined, his political enemies vindicated. Hamas is strengthened.

Indeed some Israeli commentators believe that it has been Netanyahu's deliberate strategy not to stop Qatari money from reaching Hamas. In a private speech to his Likud party in March 2019 he is reputed to have argued that those who oppose a Palestinian state should allow the transfer of funds to Gaza, because maintaining the separation between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza would prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Palestinian Authority has become very weak and authoritarian. But that is because the Fatah leadership has remained committed to non-violence while the international community has lost interest in the peace process. The dual strategy works only if both are working in tandem.

The UK, the EU and the US are all still claiming to support a two-state solution, but they are putting no muscle behind it. The UK government makes frequent condemnations of settlements and demolitions, but they are empty phrases. If someone condemns something often enough without taking action against it, it is a fair deduction that they don't really mean it. That is the deduction that the Israelis have made. When the Israeli ambassador is called in to the State Department to hear protests about new settlement approvals, Israelis say: "We know they don't really mean it." When Arab Israeli MKs point out in the Knesset that the UK has condemned settlement building, Jewish Israeli MKs just laugh. "The UK may say that, but they don't do anything about it," they say.

11. We need a strategy of incremental pressure.

The logic of the government's own policies require a readiness to exert some form of pressure on the Israeli government. William Hague talked about "incentives and disincentives" in 2011. The business guidance not to encourage or support settlements is a step along this road. Whether it is called "disincentives" or "sanctions" is a matter of semantics.

We could start by strengthening existing business advice, so that we discourage and advise against trade with illegal settlements. Another approach would be to stop public procurement contracts with companies operating in illegal settlements or supplying checkpoints or walls inside occupied territory.

It took the EU only 18 days following the arrival of Russian troops in February 2014^[iv] to impose economic sanctions on Crimea. They did not immediately reach for the heaviest sanctions but used

their imagination to devise appropriate actions, such as travel bans and asset freezes. They banned cruise ships from docking at five Crimean ports and they suspended Visa and MasterCard services.

A similar step-ladder approach could be adopted, targeting banks that offer mortgages in the settlements or outposts, travel bans could be extended from leading settlers to politicians. Asset freezes could be imposed on companies benefiting from resources taken from the occupied territories.

It may be unrealistic to expect travel bans and asset freezes to have sufficient effect on the Israeli economy to bring an end to 58 years of occupation, but that is an argument for tougher sanctions. And it is not as though sanctions have been tried and found not to work. All the evidence is that they do work. Israel has modified its policies in response to sanctions and it has itself imposed economic sanctions on the Palestinians which have had a dire effect on the Palestinian economy.

The problem is a failure of courage by Western leaders. There can be no one who doubts that international humanitarian law has been broken on an unprecedented scale by Israel. The same is true of Hamas, but that is a very low bar and Hamas has itself supported the call to the International Criminal Court to investigate crimes against humanity by both Israel and Hamas.

What is missing so far is a clear acknowledgement that the UK is a part of the problem, not just in the historical sense of the Balfour Declaration and the occupation of Palestine during the British mandate, but in the sense of being guilty here and now of crimes of omission in failing to put the pressure on Israel to bring itself into compliance with international humanitarian law.

No-one denies that the situation has changed dramatically for the worse since the Hamas attack on October 7th 2023 and the war on Gaza which ensued, but what have not changed by anything like as much are the opinions of politicians. One would have expected many of them to revisit and revise their earlier opinions on issues such as the supply of arms, UK trade with illegal settlements, the recognition of Palestine and the treatment of Palestinian prisoners, but this has happened only to a limited extent, leading to limited actions, begging more questions than they answered.

Why only a partial arms ban? Why exclude parts for the F-35 which do the most damage? Why sanction settlers but continue to trade with the settlements? Why hold back on recognition when this is patently the best time to do it? And why call only for the release of hostages without mentioning thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli jails, many without charge?

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/>

[ii] Ariel Sharon, in a letter to a friend in 1973: “We’ll insert a strip of Jewish settlements in between the Palestinians, and then another strip of Jewish settlements right across the West Bank, so that in twenty-five years’ time, neither the United Nations nor the United States, nobody, will be able to tear it apart.” Hansard <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090721/halltext/90721h0002.htm>

[iii] For details see Ilan Pappé: The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, New World Oxford 2006

[iv] Unmarked Russian troops entered Crimea 27-02-2014, EU sanctions passed 17-03-2014

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