

Submission to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Inquiry on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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About the author

I have written and lectured extensively on Israeli-Palestinian issues since the early 1970s when I embarked on a doctoral thesis on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. My first publication was a 1973 Fabian pamphlet, "A Tale of Two Peoples", which called for a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside Israel (known in later years as the "two-state solution"). I have been a senior advisor on the Middle East to the Oxford Research Group and a consultant to the Palestine Strategy Group and to the Israeli Strategic Forum. For many years I worked at Amnesty International, where I headed the international development programme. I believe I can provide the inquiry with some useful insights and suggestions that draw on some 60 years of involvement with both sides of this tragic conflict.

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Pioneering the two-state proposal

1. In February 1975, I met with foreign minister Roy Hattersley to discuss my advocacy of a Palestinian state on the Israeli-occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He had read my Fabian pamphlet and thought the reasoning was sound but that the time was "not right" for the Labour government to adopt it as policy, let alone to consider recognizing a Palestinian state. Later that year, I had an almost identical conversation with David Ennals, the other Labour foreign minister, who proffered the same advice. Fifty years on, government ministers are still stuck in the same groove.
2. At this time of writing, 146 of the 193 member states of the United Nations have recognized a Palestinian state. The UK is not among them. Yet, on 18 April 2024, the UK, unlike the US, did not veto a draft UN Security Council

resolution that would have accepted Palestine as a full member of the United Nations, implying that the UK government, despite its vote in abstention, or rather because of it, was sympathetic to this development. This stance does not appear to be consistent with the UK's persisting reluctance to explicitly recognize a Palestinian state, for which there is a growing domestic lobby. But does one more endorsement really matter? While the difference between 146 and 147 may be arithmetically trifling, politically it is far from negligible in this case as UK recognition could be a turning point in the resolution of the conflict.

3. Hattersley told me he could probably arrange for me to meet the prime minister, Harold Wilson but, "frankly speaking", there was no point as UK policy was firmly to follow the lead of the US on matters pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If I really wanted to influence policy, I should head to the US.

Destination Washington DC

4. I took Hatterley's advice and flew to Washington DC the following week. After several false starts, I finally gained entry to the State Department where I met, individually and collectively, with every member of the Policy Planning Group on the Middle East and other senior administration officials. At the time, US policy was to support the "Jordanian option" but, during the weeks of my sojourn there, the burden of opinion appeared to shift bit-by-bit towards my line of thinking. I was informally allocated a desk and typewriter and asked to outline different scenarios.
5. I mention this background because I believe one reason doors opened for me – a young Brit - was that I hailed from the UK. Repeatedly, regret was expressed that Britain, with all its history, experience and knowledge, seemed to have lost all confidence and contributed little or nothing to the formulation of western policy in the region. Its almost blind support for US policy was not so much admired as lamented. The US was a relative newcomer and its policy wonks, in most cases, were acutely aware of their

shortcomings. Had I been of any other nationality, I'm not sure they would have given me the time of day.

6. Whether the UK's history in the region helps or hinders UK involvement depends on how it is leveraged. The UK is not just another player in this area. It has a special status and a special responsibility as the country that issued the 1917 Balfour Declaration that paved the way for a Jewish state, that was the mandate power from 1922 to 1948 and that established the Peel Commission which, in 1937, recommended partitioning Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, a proposal subsequently adopted by the United Nations. The Jewish state soon materialized; the Palestinian Arab state never has. This has been the vital missing parameter ever since then and is the chief reason why all peace initiatives have failed. They never really stood a chance as the framework for negotiations was fundamentally distorted. It is way past time for the UK to regain its confidence and consider where and how it could make a difference.

Restoring two states to the Israeli agenda

7. The most effective contribution it could make at this stage is to publicly declare its recognition of a Palestinian state. That could open the gate for other holdout countries to follow suit. It matters because the international community, at every level, needs to make it abundantly clear to the Israeli population that it will not entertain a future that does not include a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The current Israeli government is determined to eliminate this possibility. The rest of the world needs to be even more determined to uphold it in a battle of wills. The unequivocal aim must be to put a Palestinian state solidly back onto the Israeli political agenda in advance of the next Israeli election. There is limited time, a maximum of two years.
8. The importance of the two-state paradigm – or a possible variation of it in the form of a confederation (see below) – is that it is the only plausible solution to the conflict. What I mean by that is that no other formula is capable of satisfying the minimum core aspirations of both peoples for self-determination in their own state in the country that

each regards as its own. These are, and always have been, the vital ingredients and lay at the core of my 1973 pamphlet. Nothing that has happened since then has, in my opinion, given cause to view the matter differently. If anything, the national sentiments on both sides have hardened over this period.

9. Other proposals, such as the one-unitary-state idea which would atomize everyone down to the level of the individual and discount collective identities, are solutions from the outside-in rather than the inside-out. They are not plausible because they disregard the basic aspirations of either or both peoples who will have no interest in making them work. Rather, they will invite sabotage. Other one-state proposals would subordinate one people to the other, an outcome that is not just loathsome but unsustainable as the subordinated party would never submit to it, as Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation – sometimes peaceful, sometimes violent - attests to. It would be no different if the boot were on the other foot.

Updating the paradigm

10. It is important to recall that the two-state idea was originally conceived as a way of bringing the two peoples closer together on a basis of parity, not as a way of separating them, as certain Israeli politicians damagingly misrepresented it in later years. In any case, in the light of the many changes on the ground over the past 57 years, the shape and character of the two-state idea needs an injection of fresh thinking. An apt model today may be the 1993 division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This was a peaceful transition based not on enforced population transfers, but on mutually approved jurisdictions, with open borders and free movement. It was about political sovereignty over agreed demarcated territory, not ethnic purity.
11. In practice, in the Israel-Palestine case, there may be a supplementary need for equitable land swaps coupled with strictly time-limited compensation for recalcitrant Israeli settlers in the West Bank plus a firm deadline for the withdrawal of the army – the protector of the settlers - from

the territory. Such powerful incentives should largely obviate the need for physically removing individual settlers by force as was done when Israel evacuated its citizens from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

12. The two-state formula, as indicated, could also take the form of a confederation, for which there is growing support in some circles. To be credible, however, the inclusion of Jordan might need to be contemplated from the outset, for otherwise it would mean the Palestinian state constitutionally affixing itself to a western-style, predominantly Jewish state and commensurately distancing itself from the predominantly Muslim Arab state to its east, with whom Palestinians have close cultural, linguistic, religious and familial ties. Indeed, fellow Palestinians constitute the majority of the Jordanian population. So, as they reflect on it, a confederation with just Israel would seem an unlikely choice for Palestinians.
13. With or without Jordan, it is imperative that the first step is Palestinian statehood, for a confederation is a voluntary arrangement between two or more independent states. Given the huge power imbalances, what should be scrupulously avoided is either an Israeli hegemonic state masquerading as a confederation or an Israeli-Jordanian condominium over Palestine in a similar disguise.
14. An optimistic template for a future confederation could be Benelux, comprising the sovereign states of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. This might sound over-ambitious, but it is easily forgotten that wars, invasions and annexations marked the common history of these three countries in the past. Once the basic structural relationship is put right, even the strongest emotional attitudes can fade in the course of time, as witness French-German relations in recent years or, even more aptly, Israeli-German relations.
15. It is also worth recalling that during the Oslo years in the 1990s, until it all went dreadfully awry, the political culture was transformed. Hopes for an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel were aroused and co-operative Arab-Jewish projects were fostered and personal

relations across the divide began to blossom. Delegations from Northern Ireland and South Africa visited Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers to pick up tips on how to do it. Research institutes noted a global decrease in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents.

16. Two grass-root works in progress, jointly spearheaded by members of both societies, take into account both peoples' affinity to the whole land. The "A Land for All" initiative proposes that all inhabitants, including Palestinian refugees and Israeli settlers, may live anywhere in the proposed confederation but may only vote in the state of which they are citizens. There would be relatively open borders and Jerusalem would be the shared capital of both states. The "Holy Land Confederation" proposal envisages the future relationship between the two confederated sovereign states as one of "cohabitation" rather than divorce and calls for close economic cooperation.

17. The main impediment to these sort of initiatives is that everywhere the political grain is moving in the opposite direction. Without a profound change of wind, the situation is likely to get worse and worse. But where might the lead come from? Certainly not from Israel or Hamas or Hizbullah. While none of these parties has the capacity to sustain their senseless conflicts for much longer, their current leaderships do not have the capability, imagination or will to end them either. I return to this point below.

Plausibility v Feasibility

18. A major concern is that the feasibility of the only plausible solution is rapidly declining. This is mainly due to the relentless Israeli settlement programme in the West Bank coupled with an accelerating policy of annexing the territory in whole or in part, whether de facto or de jure. This can only entrench the problem, make it irresolvable and guarantee a future of perpetual conflict. The toxins

would leach into other countries, as they are already doing, fomenting unrest and seriously infecting societal relations, giving a sturdy boost to the related phenomena of antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Arab bigotry, which invariably rise and fall together.

19. So everyone, not just the regional protagonists, has a strong vested interest in bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a swift end. Like other major 20th century conflicts – South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Cold War – it should have been solved in the century that fomented it and not have been allowed to seep into the 21st century, which has its own formidable challenges to contend with.
20. It's time to get serious before it's too late. Apart from prompt recognition of a Palestinian state, the UK and allied states need to distinguish sharply between the internationally recognized Israel in its June 1967 borders and the occupied West Bank. This should be applied consistently in all its dealings, including trade, commerce, culture, sport, and travel including visa-waiver rights which should not be extended to settlers who do not live in Israel. UK companies should be prohibited from any dealings with the settlements, including construction and demolitions.

Lessons from the past

21. When the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat flew into Israel in November 1977, he addressed the Israeli government and the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. But his true purpose was to speak over their heads to the Israeli people in the full knowledge that the recently elected right-wing Israeli government under the leadership of Menachem Begin had no intention of returning the whole of the Sinai peninsula to Egyptian rule (as Begin had affirmed to me personally earlier that year prior to the election). In recognizing the innate fragility of Israeli Jews – Sadat suggested that the psychological dimension was “90 per cent” of the conflict – the Egyptian president effusively welcomed them home after an absence of two turbulent millennia and offered them a grand bargain: full withdrawal from Sinai for full peace and full acceptance. Israeli public

opinion ultimately forced Begin into a historic deal that he tried his best to avoid. I witnessed the mind-blowing impact at first-hand myself while on a research visit to both countries.

22. It was an exceptional piece of statesmanship that has important lessons for now. One of them is to be upfront from the start about the endgame, including the envisaged grand bargain, and reserve direct negotiations for the logistics and timing of implementation rather than the substance. A second is that satisfying the minimum core aspirations of the principal parties – as fundamental as this is – is not enough. It is also vital to address and allay their maximum fears. Targeted pressure in the form of rewards and penalties needs to be tempered with an aliveness to this imperative and applies equally to Israelis and Palestinians. A third inference is that a peace initiative that emanates from within the region - that is presumptively in touch with the region's impulses – is far more likely to prosper than one that is imposed from the outside, even with the best will in the world. Probably none of the US-led peace initiatives over the years ever really stood a chance of success.

Regional ownership

23. Which leads to my final observation that this is the time for the region to step up and assertively own the conflict. Sadat stepped up and owned the Egyptian-Israeli conflict and we saw the result. While his initiative was viewed at the time as a betrayal of the Arab cause, the Arab League launched its own initiative in 2002 in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative which, in essence, offered Israel comprehensive peace with all Arab states in exchange for Palestinian statehood. But the effort was feeble. The product was commendable but the marketing was abysmal. No serious attempt was made to convince the Israeli public of the seriousness of its intent. Indeed, very few people in Israel were even aware of the initiative. The Arab world was not yet ready to resolutely step up – to showcase the courage of their convictions.

24. Relations between various Arab states and Israel have dramatically transformed since then and a revised and reinvigorated Arab Peace Initiative is precisely what is needed today. The actions of all other countries should be guided by and be synchronized with it.
25. There are some indications that the region, under Saudi leadership, is alert to the need to take a strong lead. In a burst of activity, Saudi Arabia announced in September 2024 that it had formed a “global alliance” together with a number of Arab, Muslim and European partners, to push for a two-state solution, with the first two meetings slated for Riyadh and Brussels.
26. This was followed two months later by an Extraordinary Arab and Islamic Summit in Riyadh which referenced the Arab Peace Initiative and called for the launching of a plan, with specific steps and timing, to end the Israeli occupation and establish an independent, sovereign Palestinian state based on the lines of 4 June 1967. Moreover, on the sidelines of the 2024 UN General Assembly, the Jordanian and Saudi foreign ministers affirmed that, provided Israel takes steps toward establishing a Palestinian state, they and other Arab and Muslim countries would guarantee Israel’s security. This is all to the good, but who would know? Such assurances need to be widely, repeatedly and effectively trumpeted in Israel, à la Sadat. It is equally important that the Saudis in particular stick to their pledge that the kingdom will not recognise Israel without a Palestinian state.
27. There is no time to lose. The region needs urgently to decide if it wishes merely to roll with the conflict or finally to resolve it. There are important complementary roles for other players but the prerogative should now lie firmly with the region. Outside powers should urge the region to take the lead and they should respect it when it does. What outside powers don’t do can be as important as what they do do.

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