

## **BASIRA**

### **SUBMISSION TO THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

**Written evidence submitted by Ahlam Akram and Sayyed Nadeem Kazmi, esq (authors, on behalf of BASIRA) (IPC0034)**

2,600 words

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is asking, among other things, how the UK and its allies can help to achieve a ceasefire and a lasting end to the war in Gaza and Lebanon. As Nicholas Kristof wrote in *The New York Times (How to Think Through the Moral Tangle in Gaza, June 1, 2024)*, ‘Zionism is not a form of racism. And criticism of Israel is not antisemitism. .. Peace ‘won’t be achieved tomorrow. But **there are peacemakers on each side.**’ In response to this, and in the spirit of promoting a permanent peace in the region, BASIRA (a British-Arab association that supports universal women’s rights), submits the following in response to this question in the hope of assisting the Government’s thinking towards a rational resolution of the crisis.

## **RATIONALE AND SUMMARY**

There are several priorities that need to be addressed, top of which must be **an immediate ceasefire with terms that envisage a permanent solution, including the release of hostages and detainees.** For this to succeed, the ongoing rhetoric between all belligerent parties needs to end. The release of both Israeli hostages & detained Palestinians must remain a primary concern for any mediator; in the case of Palestinian detainees this includes children as young as twelve who are subject to hunger and abuse, including sexual violence, at the hands of the Israeli military (*Save The Children, 22 July 2024*). However, so far the UK voice in bringing perpetrators to account has not been effective, notably because a ceasefire has not been achieved. An immediate ceasefire with the release of hostages and detainees would lend credibility to any attempt at a permanent peace.

The second top priority is the **acceptance of a two-state solution** based on a shared vision and integrity of purpose from both sides as well on the part of third parties / honest brokers. This would necessitate a simultaneous formal recognition of Palestinian Statehood as the only viable option for a permanent peace. Both steps will earn the trust and confidence of all countries in the region.

**The UK's apparent support for Israel's right to self-defence is neither fair nor just;** the disproportionality of the Israeli military actions cannot and should not be deemed as equivalent to the Hamas terrorist attacks, which all people of conscience condemn. As reported by Tom Hussain (19 October 2024, South China Morning Post), the West's 'collective refusal to pressure Israel into ceasing hostilities in Gaza, and subsequent support for its objectives in Lebanon, has deepened GCC leaders' fears that their long-standing oil-for-security arrangements may be faltering', and has led to a 'diplomatic thaw between Gulf states and Iran.'

According to a recent (October) statement from the US-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, the US has, 'a one-sided policy that blindly supports Israel at the expense of Palestinian lives.' We echo MPAC's concerns and support their **call for a balanced perspective, especially in relation to the UK's role** moving forward. The UK may have been less unwavering in its support for Israel than the US, but it too has helped shape a narrative that largely overlooks the plight of the Palestinian people. The UK can and should be in the vanguard of promoting a balanced perspective in relation to the conflict, enabling it to earn the trust and confidence of its diaspora citizens, whether Jewish or Arab, who are calling for peace and an end of the conflict.

In the longer term, issues such as oversight over the region, including **the status of Jerusalem** as a potential corpus separatum, can be tabled more clearly and with less ambivalence than previously. What is **required now is a serious mechanism for achieving peace.**

Maria Abi-Habib and Ismaeel Naar wrote in the *The New York Times* (October 20, 2024), 'The Abraham Accords were not substantive enough.' Having assessed the various peace processes of the past, including the Abraham Accords, we believe that **the Arab Peace Initiative, also known as the Saudi Initiative, offers the best potential for a permanent solution.** It is our contention that **such a mechanism should begin with the people directly affected by the crisis - the region's dynamic civil society; it should be led directly by regional actors such as the countries of the GCC; and it should be supported by those with de facto historical, present and future interests in the region, such as the UK.** Indeed, the UK could strengthen the GCC to play a facilitating role in realising peace. The

UK can help countries re-evaluate their strategies. Such a step would help bridge the gap between the people in the region and their governments, creating lasting stability and security for all.

### **BASIRA's TRACK II PROPOSAL: Laying the Foundations for an Axis of Hope**

Whilst we recognise that ultimately **there can only be a political solution to the crisis**, for this to happen - as well as to be self-sustaining, **a pathway to peace needs to be developed**. Since October 2023, BASIRA and its advisers have been convening a series of meetings with leading members of British society, including parliamentarians, lawyers, and academics, community and religious leaders, to gauge their insights and expertise in relation to the crisis. Following these meetings, a proposal has been put together which aims to establish the framework for an eventual political resolution through Track II civil society engagement and direct people to people contact. The project, which we are tentatively calling **The Axis of Hope Initiative** will consolidate the ongoing work and efforts of peacemakers, such as A Land for All, Palestine Civil Society Movement for Peace, and Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), to name a few, and dovetail into Track I diplomatic efforts that will realise a permanent solution to the Middle East crisis. These organisations 'aim to engage representatives of both Palestinian and Israeli communities to contribute to a shared vision that optimises what unites rather than divides them'.

We believe that this methodology provides not only the best hope of achieving a political solution in the long term but also builds a secure springboard from which a roadmap for a two-state solution can be adopted by future authorities, both Israeli and Palestinian. **Our project therefore takes the hope of civil society through representative organisations and marries them with the real-politik of the political process to realise that evasive long-term solution.** The project also hopes to utilise the resources of international and regional organisations such the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), for example, to help document and monitor developments, particularly in the legal, social and economic realms.

There are issues on both sides that need to be addressed, including but not limited to the rise of Islamism among Palestinians, itself a reaction to provocative Israeli military actions in Gaza and elsewhere, illegal settlements and their expansion, war crimes and crimes against humanity, and so on. But the project must be based on certain non-negotiables, such as all parties eschewing violence and notions of superiority and exceptionalism, or a regionalised manifest destiny on the part of one community over the other. **All parties must be assured of a level playing field and equitableness.** Moreover, our project will also work in the context of all participants' commitment to international law and the UN Charter, advocating respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-aggression, both in the context of current realities as well as any future manifestations of statehood.

BASIRA's Axis of Hope Initiative is not only inspired by the hopes and ideals of most people in the Middle East - the region's civil society - but is guided by a specific political process that we believe offers the most realistic way to achieving a breakthrough, namely the Saudi Initiative. Our proposed project offers to work within the context of the terms of the Saudi Initiative which is a widely accepted plan both regionally and globally, including by Muslim religious leadership. The project we propose to sit alongside the Saudi Initiative and to support its aims and objectives is one in which civil society participants in different spheres of influence are 'activated' to establish cooperative programmes across the divide through direct engagement overseen by trained facilitators who provide quantifiable feedback through measurable outcomes. Organisations already working towards such cooperation will be co-opted into our programmes, as will leading civil society stakeholders (such as civic and religious leaders) and officials (ambassadors). No one will be excluded; becoming a stakeholder will be voluntary and all participants will need to commit to our declared 'non-negotiables'.

BASIRA foresees **a fundamental role for the UK in securing regional peace** based on what Prince Faisal, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, has called '**strategic reality**', possibly **leading a coalition of states** that would be as inclusive as possible and supported by Jewish and Arab diasporas.

The Axis of Hope Initiative will require **the participation of British parliamentarians, Friends of Israel and Friends of Palestine** in the first instance to explore, with civil society experts from both sides, specific themes around the current call from the Foreign Affairs Committee. One of the key roles that the UK can play is to convince the Israeli side that this initiative is in their long term interests; adopting it at a time of lost confidence and growing unease following the Israeli military's disproportionate actions in Gaza would be a significant signal to the world – Arab and Muslim countries in particular - that Israel has no intention of becoming a pariah state in the eyes of the international community. Our proposal would suggest supporting **a Parliamentary-led delegation**, involving members of key constituents from civil society such as lawyers, academics, religious and community leaders from the UK (representing Jews, Muslims, Christians and others) to visit Israel, Palestine and other countries with a view to working towards universal acceptance of the Saudi Initiative.

As the Axis of Hope progresses, the suggested Parliamentary delegation would become part of a **committee, organised and facilitated by BASIRA and its partners from both diaspora communities**, that undertakes **a series of dynamic and far-reaching programmes** which will bring civil society participants from different disciplines and from both sides of the divide together. These programmes would take the form of collaborative ventures, workshops, religious and cultural exchanges, and formal meetings over the next three years;

rapporteurs from all these programmes would feed their outcomes to a central committee which would, in turn, engage with the political actors, building effective alliances between civil society and policymakers. In this way, civil society would be empowered to keep an eye on the political process, helping ensure its success; decisionmakers, in turn, would be more attuned to the needs of their civilians and their feet kept to the fire in terms of guaranteeing progress and results.

## CONCLUSION

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, in his March 14, 2024, speech, stated that, ‘Palestinian civilians do not deserve to suffer for the sins of Hamas, and Israel has a moral obligation to do better. But for a two-state solution to work over the long term, it has to include real and meaningful compromises by both sides.’

The first step for the UK as an honest broker is to help bring about a ceasefire, followed by the immediate release of hostages and Palestinian child prisoners as a goodwill gesture towards an honest start to engagement through broad-based cooperation with both regional and international partners; in both cases, UK support for the Saudi initiative would show leadership and integrity of purpose, arguably for quite different reasons.

In addition to asking how the UK and its allies can help to achieve a ceasefire and a lasting end to the war, the Inquiry also looks at how the UK can work with regional and international partners to achieve sustainable peace. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries recently reaffirmed their support of Palestinian sovereignty, implementing a two-state solution, and ensuring refugees’ rights in line with the Arab Peace Initiative and international resolutions. As reported by CNN’s Mostafa Salem, (October 22, 2024), ‘growing unease over the US’s inability to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East is prompting Arab allies to significantly increase engagement with Iran. Arab nations are now signalling neutrality’.

Formal recognition of Palestinian statehood is necessary not only to plant the seed of trust between Arab government leaders and their people, but also to break the stalemate in the peace process, in which dangerous conspiracy theories have taken shape among many ordinary people. But, as Professor Yossi Mekelberg of Chatham House has echoed, recognition of Palestinian statehood has been constantly blocked by the UK, among others. Recognising Palestinian statehood would ‘help rebalance the asymmetry in the power relations between Israelis and Palestinians in future peace negotiations.’ We urge the UK Government to follow in the footsteps of Ireland and Norway to **formally recognise Palestine** which would make the UK’s forward engagement at several levels with the region, including economic and social, more meaningful and equitable.

Given its history and status, the **UK is in a good position to provide cohesion to the various efforts** being currently undertaken aimed at bringing peace in the region. This is partly because the UK's history in the area is unique, albeit controversial. The **UK has leverage in the region because of its colonial past**. By acknowledging its historical link to the region and being prepared to learn the lessons of its past involvement, the **UK can play the role of an honest broker** which, despite its past, is determined to help all communities build a new future in a new era. The updated GAPS Statement on Violence in Palestine and Israel (dated 7 November 2023) reiterates the international community's 'failure to act decisively in the face of these atrocities' and the UK's responsibility to learn from its past and think about a viable resolution.

The Axis of Hope Initiative will be reaching out to GCC leaders as well as others in the region, including Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. It is our hope that the UK Government will support our efforts, which, among other things, will place women at the heart of meeting the challenges and solving the problems. We highlight the Women, Peace and Security agenda created by GAPS to respond to the disproportionate and specific impact of violence upon women and girls as well as the need to 'promote women's equal and meaningful participation in peace processes.'

As Dr Turki Faisal Al Rasheed stated recently in *Arab News*, 'The Middle East is a region of profound contradictions, where the potential for peace coexists with the persistent threat of war'. However, 'the international community plays a vital role' in shaping its future. Our simple footnote to this is, so do the people of the region. **Trusted mediators are needed now**. The UK has an historic duty and a potential current role alongside civil society projects such as the Axis of Hope Initiative. We look forward to your positive response.

With our highest regards,

Ahlam Akram, founder / director, BASIRA an Arabic word meaning a vision to a future with wisdom and humanity for all to co-exist in peace and dignity.

Sayed Nadeem Kazmi, esq., senior adviser / author

**Authors:**

**Ahlam Akram**

Founder / director of BASIRA (British Arabs Supporting Universal Women's Rights), an organisation that fights for the social, cultural, economic, gender and human rights of women and girls around the world. A published writer, philanthropist, and women's rights activist, Ahlam is British-Palestinian.

**Sayyed Nadeem Kazmi, esq.**

British-Pakistani lawyer, policies adviser, and published writer with over 30 years' experience working with civil society, thought leaders, and governments. Nadeem is founding partner of The Resolution International, and former senior adviser to HRH Prince Hasan of Jordan.

*30<sup>TH</sup> December 2024*