

Political Affairs Brief

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

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UK Parliamentary Questions

Middle East

1. Mr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political situation in the middle east; and if he will make a statement. [14846]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): The launch of direct talks is an important and welcome step in the search for lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians. The parties have been meeting again today in Sharm el Sheikh. We look to Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas to show the perseverance, commitment and courage needed in the weeks and months ahead to achieve a two-state solution.

Mr Offord: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his response. On the day on which the peace talks resume in Sharm el Sheikh, will he tell the House whether he shares my view that the settlements remain a major barrier to peace in the region?

Mr Hague: The issue of settlements will come to the fore very rapidly again, because the immediate challenge is the expiry of the settlement moratorium at the end of this month, on 30 September. The road map makes it clear that Israel should freeze all settlement construction, including the natural growth of existing settlements, and dismantle all outposts built since 2001. Our view is that all settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territories is illegal and an obstacle to peace.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): But if the Israelis defy President Obama and the Quartet by resuming settlement building on 26 September, is there not a serious danger that that would scupper the current peace talks and make future talks more difficult? Would there not also be a danger, because of the population growth among the Palestinians, of eventually ending Israel as the Jewish state that it proclaims itself to be? Given that the Jewish day of atonement comes before 26 September, will the Foreign Secretary urge the Israeli Government to observe their own religion and repent at this stage?

Mr Hague: The right hon. Gentleman's question encapsulates why it is in Israel's long-term interests to seek agreement on a two-state solution. He is quite right to say that there is a danger to the talks, and therefore to any subsequent talks, and it is vital that all the parties involved are able to get through the end of September with the talks alive. We therefore look to the Government of Israel to take all the steps necessary to renew the settlement moratorium; we have made that quite clear to them. If they were able to do that, it would no doubt contribute enormously to the talks being able to proceed further.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with the recent statement by the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States that the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran would constitute such a threat to the security of all the states of the middle east that all options-including, if necessary, military options-must be considered if it became necessary to prevent such a situation from arising?

Mr Hague: I have always argued that all options should be kept on the table, and that the option of military action should not be withdrawn from the table. I have also always stressed that we are not calling for that or advocating it. We do not want to relieve any of the pressure that is currently on Iran, but I must emphasise that I am not advocating military action.

David Miliband (South Shields) (Lab): I am sure that we will all be relieved by what the Foreign Secretary has just said at the end of that response. I think it would merit at least an oral statement if he were going to advocate military action.

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us whether it is true that Mr Frattini, the Italian Foreign Minister, proposed to lead a delegation of European Foreign Ministers, including the Foreign Secretary, to Israel and the occupied territories in the first half of September, but that the Israeli Government would not co-operate with such a visit?

Mr Hague: No, it is not true. Mr Frattini proposed a visit by EU Foreign Ministers at the very beginning of September, but it turned out that it clashed with the direct talks that were starting on the other side of the Atlantic. The proposed trip was therefore abandoned. There has been no proposal for a trip by the EU Foreign Ministers since then. Such a proposal has been reported in one or two newspapers, but I am afraid that it is not accurate.

David Miliband: I am glad to hear that from the Foreign Secretary because the Foreign Office was not able to explain it yesterday. Of course the Israeli Government have said that European Foreign Ministers are standing on the sidelines at the moment, so the question is why a delegation of European Foreign Ministers, including the Foreign Secretary, is not heading out to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories as soon as possible. Prime Minister Netanyahu said on Sunday that Israel would not extend the moratorium on settlement building and Mr Abbas has threatened to quit the talks if construction resumes. Is it not true that there is a real danger of having an absent Foreign Secretary and not an active Foreign Secretary when the people of the middle east most need an active one?

Mr Hague: No. I know we have little soundbites before the Labour leadership election-we are bound to have them-but in a way this is too serious an issue for things like that. Neither EU Foreign Ministers nor the UK Government are in any way on the sidelines. We have played an important role-a supporting role-to the United States, which has shown such leadership on this issue, in getting these direct talks going. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was, I think, held to be instrumental in that through the telephone calls he undertook in the summer with both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. I am in close touch with the talks through Secretary Hillary Clinton and Senator Mitchell; indeed, we are in constant touch with all involved. We play a strong supporting role, as do many other EU countries, in the continuation of these direct talks. As the right hon. Gentleman can see from the answers I have given, we are emphatic about what needs to be done next.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that one of the biggest obstacles to peace in the middle east is the outrages committed by Hamas, which represents such a threat that we need to bolster the moderate ranks of the Palestinians to ensure that a proper two-state solution comes about? If he does agree, what action is the Foreign Office taking to ensure that the moderate elements of the Palestinian cause are promoted?

Mr Hague: We give a great deal of support to those moderate Palestinians and my hon. Friend will be aware of the aid that goes in from here and from the rest of the European Union to help the Palestinian Authority. He is right about Hamas.

The terrorist outrage of two weeks ago was specifically designed, in my view, to disrupt the start of these direct talks. Hamas does not want to see these talks succeed and that fact should redouble the determination of all involved to make sure that they do succeed.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100914/debtext/100914-0001.htm#10091432000015>

UK-Iranian Relations

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): If, as expected, Iran looks as though it will acquire nuclear weapons capability and if all other avenues have been exhausted, will the Government support Israel if she takes military action to deal with that terrible threat?

Mr Hague: I hope, Mr Speaker, that I dealt with that in answer to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind). I stress that we are taking a twin-track approach to the Iranian nuclear programme. One of those tracks is sanctions, and we agreed in the European Union at the end of July a strong and wide-ranging set of sanctions that puts additional pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme. The other track is to remain open to negotiations about that nuclear programme. It is on that twin track that we must concentrate now.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100914/debtext/100914-0001.htm#10091432000025>

Topical Questions

Mr Cunningham: What role is Britain playing in the peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis? In particular, what is the Foreign Secretary doing to facilitate the delivery of aid to the Palestinians?

Mr Hague: Britain plays an active role in ways that I described in previous questions. In particular, we played an energetic role in encouraging Israelis and Palestinians into those direct talks. We now remain in close touch with what is happening in them-ready to assist in any way-as do so many other European nations.

We are major contributors of aid to Palestinians, and one of our concerns is that there should be a greater flow of goods into Gaza. We welcome the statements that Israel has made, since the Gaza flotilla incident, about improving access to Gaza, but we now want to see that really happen in practice. ...

T2. [14870] **Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):** On 2 September, Karel De Gucht, the European Commissioner for Trade, told a Belgian radio station that there was little point in trying to engage in rational argument with Jews and that peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians were doomed to failure because of the power of the Jewish lobby. Is the Foreign Secretary surprised to hear those sentiments and has he heard them before?

Mr Hague: I have not heard them before. I totally disagree with those sentiments. I think that the direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians now represent a genuine opportunity. There is a long way to go, and one should not artificially raise expectations about the results of those talks, but they have begun in a very good atmosphere. If the quote that the hon. Lady gives from the European Commissioner is correct, I flatly disagree with it. ...

Mr Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Palestinian and independent sources estimate that 50,000 settler homes are under construction in East Jerusalem, where the moratorium does not apply, and more than 2,500 in the west bank, where it supposedly does. If the Government believe that the freeze should be extended to East Jerusalem and beyond September, but the Secretary of State is not prepared to go to Israel to say that, what is he doing to ensure that those two things happen?

Mr Hague: The Israeli Government are in no doubt about our views, which I stated at the beginning of Question Time. We regard all settlement in the occupied Palestinian territories as illegal, and we clearly want the moratorium on

settlements to continue. No one can be in any doubt that that is the very emphatic view of the United Kingdom, which is regularly expressed to Israeli Ministers, and a view that I believe they will receive from most of the world. I hope that they take heed of it. ...

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Foreign Secretary take the opportunity to update the House on the kidnapping and unlawful detention of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit? What steps can the UK Government take to secure his release?

Mr Hague: Obviously, we are not able directly to secure his release, but that matter is one of the deeply aggravating factors that mean that Gaza remains such an immense international problem. We have called repeatedly for the release of Gilad Shalit and will continue to do so, and the international community will continue to work towards that end. If Hamas and other forces in Gaza were remotely interested in a political settlement and in coming to terms with Israel and the rest of the international community, they would wish to do that. ...

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Given Iran's support for organisations such as Hezbollah, what actions are the Government taking to prevent nuclear proliferation across the wider middle east, particularly from Iran into Syria and from Syria into Lebanon?

Mr Hague: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the whole EU has joined in very strong sanctions on Iran, backing up UN Security Council resolution 1929, which imposes obligations on all UN members to take various actions to prevent nuclear proliferation. The powers given under such UN resolutions include responsibilities and powers to interdict suspect shipping, and one or two instances of that have occurred. The UK takes part in that and will encourage other countries to do so. Nuclear proliferation is one of the biggest threats to the future peace of the world, and we take our responsibilities very seriously.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100914/debtext/100914-0001.htm#10091432000028>

Middle East

Mr McCann: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the effects of terrorist acts by Hamas on the Middle East peace process. [14867]

Alistair Burt: The UK along with international community recognise Hamas retain the ability to damage the peace process. We condemn the recent acts of terrorism and they must not be allowed to derail the talks. We call on all parties to refrain from any activity that could undermine the search for a just and lasting settlement.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100914/text/100914w0002.htm#10091445000008>

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Relevant Legislation ** New or updated

UK Parliament

Daylight Saving Bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/daylightsaving.html>

Face Coverings (Regulation) Bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/facecoveringsregulation.html>

**** Fixed Term Parliaments Bill**

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/fixedtermparliaments.html>

Notice of amendments

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmbills/064/amend/pbc0640914a.161.html>

**** Identity Documents Bill**

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/identitydocuments.html>

Notice of amendments

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmbills/001/amend/pbc0011309a.145-149.html>

**** Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill**

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/parliamentaryvotingsystemandconstituencies.html>

Notice of amendments

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmbills/063/amend/pbc0630914a.163-165.html>

Scottish Parliament

End of Life Assistance Bill

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/bills/38-EndLifeAssist/index.htm>

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Consultations

** new or updated

**** closes in 5 days**

Policing in the 21st century: reconnecting police and the people

(closes 20 September 2010)

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/consultations/policing-21st-century/>

Taking action on rights, support and protection of victims of crime and violence

(closes 30 September 2010)

http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/news/consulting_public/news_consulting_0053_en.htm

Data protection legislative framework (closes 6 October 2010)

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/dpa-call-evidence-02-07-2010.pdf>

General Medical Council (GMC) Equality Scheme 2011 – 2014 (closes 15 October 2010)

https://gmc.e-consultation.net/econsult/consultation_Dtl.aspx?consult_Id=140&status=2&criteria=

Guidance on Concessionary Schemes for Surface Water Drainage Charges

Applies in England only (closes 22 October 2010)

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/surface-charges/index.htm>

Consultation on the change to policy direction for the Big Lottery Fund (closes 29 October 2010)

<http://www.culture.gov.uk/consultations/7313.aspx>

Equality Act 2010: The public sector Equality Duty: Promoting equality through transparency (closing date 10 November 2010)

http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/402461_GEO_EqualityAct2010ThePublicSectorEqualityDuty_acc.pdf

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