

Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

SCoJeC

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House of Commons Oral Answers

Religious Freedom

Fiona Bruce (Conservative): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what steps the Church of England is taking to promote religious freedom. [907123]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Caroline Spelman): The Church of England welcomes the appointment of Lord Ahmad as the Prime Minister's special envoy to promote religious freedom; the Church called for this and it fulfils a long-standing request from faith communities in this country. I look forward to working closely with him. Next month, the Church of England plans to convene a reference group between its bishops and staff, the legal profession, theologians, ethicists and academics to explore the issues of religious freedom.

Fiona Bruce: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the recent landmark unanimous judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of *Lee v. Ashers Baking Company Ltd* and others and the religious freedom it has confirmed for Christians here in the UK not to be coerced into expressing views contrary to their sincerely held biblical beliefs?

Caroline Spelman: Whatever one's views on marriage, everyone should be equal before the law and, of course, I would argue, equal in God's sight. The Church of England agrees that no one should suffer discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of age, race, gender, sexuality or any other personal characteristic. I think that it is striking that the Supreme Court found that there was no discrimination in this case, but instead found that the key issue was the right to freedom of expression.

David Drew (Labour Co-op): What additional measures does the Church intend to try to put in place to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to visit a place of worship on their preferred day?

Caroline Spelman: It may be of interest to the hon. Gentleman to know that yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury made a speech in the House of Lords about religious tolerance. The Church has consistently made the case that people should be able to worship unimpeded in this country according to their faith. The Archbishop said something very telling; he said that society needs to learn how to disagree well and that we need a society where rich beliefs and traditions can rub

up against each other and against secular ideology in mutual challenge and respect.

Jeremy Lefroy (Conservative): What work is the Church of England doing with other Christian Churches and other faiths—with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and so on—to stand united on behalf of religious freedom around the world and against the persecution of religious minorities in every country, whatever the majority faith? I have to say with great sadness that Christians are the most persecuted minorities around the world.

Caroline Spelman: As hon. Members will know from this Question Time, the Anglican Church around the world regularly speaks up on behalf of persecuted Christians. I regularly take questions from hon. Members about countries in which persecution is an issue. Last Saturday, the Archbishop of Canterbury was invited to speak in Nigeria ahead of the elections there to call for peace. He never misses an opportunity to make the case for persecuted Christians around the world.

Jim Shannon (DUP): As the right hon. Lady knows, people of all faiths and none across the world are subject to persecution for their religion or beliefs. Can she share with the House what the Church of England is doing to support the welfare of non-Christian communities around the world and to advocate for their right to freedom of religion or belief?

Caroline Spelman: I think that particularly in the middle east, where Christians are often a persecuted minority, we speak up regularly about their plight. The Anglican Church also speaks out on the persecution of other denominations. The campaign that Christians have supported for the better protection of the Yazidi minority is just one example in that region of how we must be prepared to speak up for others.

Luke Pollard (Labour Co-op): The recently published commission on religious education set out a framework for updating RE and teaching the importance of religious freedoms. What steps is the Church of England taking to implement its findings?

Caroline Spelman: The Church is very supportive of improved religious literacy in our schools. If ever there was a time to understand better the world we live in, it is now. This is the time when we need to equip our children, whatever their faith or background, to better understand what sometimes underpins the conflicts that exist around the world. So this is a timely intervention and I am pleased we have moved away from a now rather old-fashioned view that, if we just stamped out the teaching of religion, everything would be fine—nothing could be further from the truth.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-10-18/debates/733AA963-299D-46BE-AC25-E991C3070671/ReligiousFreedom>

Business of the House

Jim Shannon (DUP): Earlier in the week, the Home Office published data that shows that there has been a huge surge in hate crime directed at people in England and Wales because of their religious beliefs. Figures recorded by the police show that over 8,000 incidents of this type of hate crime were recorded in 2017-18—up by a whopping 40% on 2016-17. Only yesterday, our noble Friends in the House of Lords had a debate to discuss this growing religious prejudice and intolerance in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House agree to a similar debate, in Government time, on this pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that all forms of hate crime are completely unacceptable. As he will be aware, the Government's hate crime action plan has improved the response to all forms of hate crime. The refresh that was published yesterday ensures a renewed commitment to victims remaining at the heart of our work. As part of that refresh, we have committed additional funding to continue to protect places of worship, alongside just over £1.5 million for projects to tackle racially and religiously motivated hatred. In addition, we have asked the Law Commission to undertake a review of the

coverage and approach of current hate crime legislative provisions. Later this year, we will launch a wide-ranging national hate crime public awareness campaign to address the issue. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing a debate on 25 October on the subject of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-10-18/debates/6E7DEA2E-6C58-41C8-8081-68DC76C49465/BusinessOfTheHouse#contribution-E706C0A1-4394-49C4-8B1C-F57299F595F1>

House of Commons Written Answer

Hate Crime

Mark Hendrick (Labour Co-op) [175967] To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what assessment his Department has made of reasons for the recent rise in recorded hate crimes; and whether the Government has plans to identify crimes committed against people from alternative sub-cultures as hate crimes.

Victoria Atkins: The increases in recorded hate crime is thought to be driven by general improvements by the police in how they record crime, better identification of hate crimes, willingness of victims to come forward, and a genuine increase in these offences around certain events such as the EU Referendum and the terrorist attacks in 2017.

We have recently published a refreshed Hate Crime Action Plan. As part of this, we have asked the Law Commission to undertake a review of the coverage and approach of current hate crime legislative provisions. This will include consideration of whether there should be additional protected characteristics, which could include alternative sub-cultures.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-10-08/175967/>

The Action Plan referred to above can be read at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748175/Hate_crime_refresh_2018_FINAL_WEB.PDF

Home Office

Home Office reopens fund to help communities tackle hate crime

... the Home Office launched the latest round of the Hate Crime Community Projects Fund, which encourages community groups to come up with innovative solutions to counter hatred and prejudice.

The boost comes amid Hate Crime Awareness Week and following the government's publication of the updated [Hate Crime Action Plan](#), which set out new actions to tackle prejudice.

Minister for Countering Extremism Baroness Williams said: The government is determined to stamp out hate crime and I know the power that local communities have in tackling hatred and prejudice.

That is why I am delighted to be able to launch the third year of the Hate Crime Community Projects Fund. I have seen first-hand how the fund has supported vital initiatives across the country and look forward to the new, innovative ideas to help promote our shared values, protect victims and tackle hate crime. ...

To read the full press release, and for more information about the Fund, see

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-office-reopens-fund-to-help-communities-tackle-hate-crime>

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Israel

House of Commons Written Answer

Israel: Bedouin

Richard Burden (Labour) [179088] To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what representations the Government has made to the Government of Israel on the demolition order against Khan al Ahmar village in the West Bank since the beginning of September; and (a) on what dates and (b) to whom those representations were made.

Alistair Burt: I raised our concerns about the proposed demolition of Khan al-Ahmar with the Israeli Ambassador to the UK on 11 October. Our Ambassador to Israel raised the issue with the Israeli authorities on 3 October. Officials from our Embassy in Tel Aviv raised our concerns with the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 September.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-10-15/179088/>

House of Lords Written Answers

Israel: Bedouin

Lord Hylton (Crossbench) [HL10487] To ask Her Majesty's Government what reply, if any, they received to the letter of 31 July from the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister of Israel calling, together with other European countries, for reconsideration of the decision to demolish the village and school of Khan al-Ahmar; and what further steps they plan to take on this issue.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We have yet to receive a response to our joint letter about Khan al-Ahmar, and we continue to call on Israel to abandon demolition plans entirely, and instead provide a transparent route to construction for Palestinians in Area C. Most recently our Ambassador to Israel raised our concerns with the Israeli authorities on 3 October, and the Minister for Middle East and North Africa reiterated our concerns in a meeting with the Israeli Ambassador to the UK on 11 October. We remain in close consultation with likeminded EU partners about what should be done next.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2018-10-09/HL10487/>

UNRWA: Jerusalem

Baroness Tonge (Non-affiliated) [HL10518] To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they are making to the government of Israel following the announcement by Nir Barkat, the Mayor of Jerusalem, that schools, clinics and sports centres, among other services operated by UNRWA in East Jerusalem, will be transferred to Israeli authorities.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We have not raised this issue with the Israeli authorities. We understand that the municipality of Jerusalem does not have the legal authority to shut down UNRWA facilities.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2018-10-09/HL10518/>

Israel: Gaza

Baroness Tonge (Non-affiliated) [HL10521] To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will make representations to the government of Israel about the reported shelling by Israeli forces of medical facilities in Gaza and the reported targeting of health workers in Gaza by Israeli forces.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We regularly raise issues relating to medical facilities and personnel with the Israeli authorities. We have stressed the need for safe and unimpeded passage for medical personnel. In particular we raise our concerns about medical facilities in Gaza, and medical permits, with the office for the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT). Our Ambassador to Israel discussed Gaza with COGAT on 17 September. Officials from our Embassy in Tel Aviv raised our concerns about the targeting of health workers with COGAT on 23 August.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2018-10-09/HL10521/>

Israel: Gaza

Baroness Tonge (Non-affiliated) [HL10522] To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will make representations to the government of Israel about reported attacks by Israeli forces on children during the Great Return March in Gaza on 28 September.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On 6 October the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa expressed our concerns about this issue. The UK has repeatedly made clear to Israel our longstanding concerns about the manner in which the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) police protests and the border areas, including use of live ammunition. While we note the IDF has its own investigations processes, we call directly on Israel to carry out a transparent inquiry into the IDF's conduct at the border fence, and to demonstrate how this will achieve a sufficient level of independence.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2018-10-09/HL10522/>

United Nations

Grave Situation in Gaza Demands Decisive Action, Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process Tells Security Council, Urging End of Occupation

Gravely concerned over escalation of violence on the Gaza border and settlement activity in the West Bank, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process told the Security Council today that the international community could no longer allow prospects for a two-State solution to slip away. ...

"It is our shared responsibility to restore that prospect, to facilitate negotiations, to help the weaker party, to insulate the process from radicals and extremists and to show results," he said. ...

He once again called on Israel to cease demolitions and other measures that are illegal under international law, including settlement construction ...

Condemning violence of the past months in the West Bank, he reported that two Israelis were shot dead by a Palestinian man in the Barkan industrial area, while a Palestinian woman was killed by stones allegedly thrown by Israeli assailants, and there were 23 settler attacks on Palestinians, resulting in one death, as well as 12 injuries and property damage ...

In recent weeks, he said, protests at the Gaza fence have expanded to include night demonstrations, with Hamas and other militants continuing to send incendiary kites and balloons across the border causing fires, with a peak of intensity reached on 12 October with the participation of some 20,000 Palestinians. Israeli forces have responded with riot-dispersal means and live fire, leaving 33 Palestinians dead during demonstrations and other incidents. During the reporting period, militants also fired two rockets that landed in Israel, including one on 17 October that hit a house in Be'er Sheva, injuring three Israelis. Israel responded with a series of air strikes. On 11 October, Israel announced it had destroyed another tunnel extending into the country from Gaza, and

had reduced the fishing zone in response to violence at the fence.

“Gaza is imploding,” he said. “This is not alarmism. It is reality.” The economy is in free-fall, he added, warning of another imminent conflict. ...

Hagai El-Ad, Executive Director, B'Tselem, said it is difficult to convey the outrage, indignity and pain of a people denied their human rights for more than half a century. ...

Noting that all those activities are policy-driven, he said the two most recent and conspicuous examples are Israel’s conduct in the protests at the Gaza border and its plans to raze the entire Palestinian shepherding community of Khan al-Ahmar. ...

Emphasizing that Israel’s High Court of Justice’s approval of those proposed actions makes it complicit in the war crime of forcibly transferring a protected people in an occupied territory, he went on to describe the transformation of the Gaza Strip into, essentially, “an open-air prison”. ...

“I am not a traitor, nor am I a hero.” The true heroes, he said, are the Palestinians who endure the occupation with courage and perseverance. ...

Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine, said ... “Standing up for yourself and your rights should never be equated with disrespect for anyone or misconstrued as a provocation,” ...

Indeed, he said, the right to self-determination — including for Palestinians — has been reaffirmed year after year in the halls of the United Nations. The Palestinian people continue, more often than not, to choose non-violent and peaceful forms of protest, even in the face of their extreme human rights crisis. Meanwhile, Israel, the occupying Power, chooses violence and brutalizes Palestinian civilians. ...

Danny Ben Yosef Danon (Israel) said that today’s debate had a circus-like nature, as B'Tselem is an organization that was funded by foreign countries, but it also showed the strength of Israel’s democracy. ... Turning to Hamas in Gaza, he said 300 rockets had been fired into Israel in 2018, 15 of their tunnels had been destroyed and 8,000 acres of Israeli farmland had been destroyed by incendiary devices. It was Abbas, however, who was pushing Gaza towards war. He has been holding back payments from the Authority for many months and has greatly exacerbated the economic situation there. ...

Abbas is also guilty of continuing the “pay for slay” policy in which terrorists are rewarded for killing Israelis, he said. The most recent budget of the Authority includes \$355 million for such killers, 7 per cent of the total budget of the Palestinian Authority and 45 per cent of foreign aid given to it. ...

Nikki R. Haley (United States) described Mr. El-Ad’s briefing as one of the many distorted and one-sided statements that are too often provided at the United Nations. ...

François Delattre (France), affirming that the status quo covered up deterioration of conditions for peace in the Middle East, noted that now barely half of Israelis and Palestinians have any hope for a two-State solution. It is critical, he said, to open up a democratic space in both societies to allow trust to be rebuilt. ...

Karen Pierce (United Kingdom) said that everything heard today shows how cruel and unsustainable the situation in the Middle East is, and how great the need is for a negotiated two-State solution. She expressed full respect for the need for Israel’s security, and at the same time humanitarian improvement for the Palestinians is critical. In Gaza, she insisted, all parties must implement recent agreements. She called for legitimate Palestinian authorities to return to Gaza and for all sides to work to defuse the situation and alleviate the humanitarian crisis. She also appealed for Israeli authorities not to proceed with the demolition of Khan al-Ahmar. Pledging to continue assistance to UNRWA, she also noted the need for reform in the organization. ...

Bashar Ja’afari (Syria), noting that the Syrian Golan also remains an occupied territory, said the Council must ask itself how many decades Israel’s policies will be permitted and how many lives must be lost before it finally takes action. ...

To read the full press release see

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13544.doc.htm>

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Foreign Affairs

See also the exchange about “*Religious Freedom*” under “*House of Commons Oral Answers*” in the “*Home Affairs*” section above.

House of Commons Written Answer

Middle East: Minority Groups

Jo Stevens (Labour) [179247] To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what assessment his Department has made of trends in the treatment of non-recognised minorities in countries in the Middle East.

Alistair Burt: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Human Rights and Democracy report gives our annual assessment on the situation of human rights internationally, including in the Middle East. We are committed to ensuring the protection of human rights of all minority communities, combating religious intolerance and promoting pluralism in society. We raise these issues regularly with partner countries in the region.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-10-15/179247/>

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Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Bill

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/holocaustreturnofculturalobjectsamendment.html>

Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment) Bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/marriageact1949amendment.html>

Online Forums Bill

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/onlineforums.html>

Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/organdonationdeemedconsent.html>

Scottish Parliament

Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Bill

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/Bills/108681.aspx>

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Consultations ** new or updated today

Reform of the legal requirements for divorce (closing date 10 December 2018)

<https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/reform-of-the-legal-requirements-for-divorce/>

The future of civil partnership in Scotland (closing date 21 December 2018)
<https://consult.gov.scot/family-law/the-future-of-civil-partnership-in-scotland/>

**** 2021 Census: Outputs Strategy Consultation for Northern Ireland** (closing date 9 January 2019)
<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/dfp/2021-census-outputs-strategy-consultation-for-northern-ireland-document.pdf>

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