

# Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

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### House of Commons Oral Answers

#### **Urgent Question: Gaza Border Deaths: UNHRC Inquiry**

**Emily Thornberry (Labour):** ... To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on the vote at the United Nations Human Rights Council this morning.

**The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):** ... The Government remain deeply concerned about the situation in Gaza. The violence over the past year has been and continues to be shocking, and the loss of life and large number of injured Palestinians are devastating. Since 30 March 2018, more than 23,000 Palestinians have been injured and 187 killed.

We have been clear that the UK fully supports the need for an independent and transparent investigation into last year's events in Gaza. Our Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the former Foreign Secretary, made that position clear to Prime Minister Netanyahu last year, and we continue to urge the Israeli authorities to look into the Israel Defense Forces' contact at the perimeter fence.

We have repeatedly made clear to Israel our long-standing concerns about the manner in which the IDF policed non-violent protests and the border areas, including the use of live ammunition. We call on Israel to adhere to the principles of necessity and proportionality when defending its legitimate security interests. It is totally unacceptable that Hamas and its operatives have been cynically exploiting the protests for their own benefit. Hamas and other terrorist groups must cease all actions that proactively encourage violence or put civilian lives at risk.

We welcome the fact that the Israeli Military Advocate General has recently ordered five criminal investigations that relate to 11 separate instances of Palestinian fatalities during the Gaza border protests. Those investigations are ongoing. Given the importance of accountability, it is vital that the investigations are independent and transparent, that their findings are made public, and that, if wrongdoing is found, those responsible are held to account.

In May 2018, the United Kingdom abstained on the UN Human Rights Council resolution calling for a commission of inquiry on the basis that the substance of a resolution must be impartial and balanced. We could not support an international

investigation that refused to call explicitly for an investigation into the action of non-state actors such as Hamas. This morning, the UK abstained on the item 2 accountability resolution at the 2019 Human Rights Council, which included references to the commission of inquiry report. Although the report looks into Israel's actions, it is highly regrettable that it did not look comprehensively at the actions of non-state actors such as Hamas.

The perpetual cycle of violence does not serve anyone's interests, and it must end. The impact of the protests has been severe and catastrophic, particularly on Gaza's healthcare system. I am considering what more the United Kingdom can do to support those in desperate need in Gaza, and I hope to be able to make a further announcement in the coming days.

The situation in Gaza remains unsustainable, set in the context of a stalled middle east peace process that remains, in the view of the UK, vital to pursue and preserve. A long-term strategy for Gaza itself is desperately needed to improve humanitarian and economic conditions and reduce the restrictions that are damaging the living standards of ordinary Palestinians. Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live their lives in peace and security. It is vital that all parties redouble their efforts to move towards renewed negotiations and the shared goals of peace and a two-state solution. ...

**Emily Thornberry:** ... a few days ago, Dr Tarek Loubani came to see me. He is a Canadian who was volunteering in Gaza last year. When the protests began on the border last spring, he went to help the many protestors who had been wounded by gunfire or affected by tear gas. He said that, on 14 May, the situation was relatively calm. He stood chatting to his colleagues 25 metres away from the protestors, wearing his green hospital scrubs. He said: "We could clearly see the IDF sniper towers...And they could see us". When he turned sideways, that was when they shot him—one bullet, through both legs. The paramedic who came to his aid, clearly marked in high-vis clothing, treated his injuries, then resumed his work elsewhere and was shot dead an hour later. That paramedic was one of 189 Palestinians killed during last year's protests— 35 of them children—while Dr Loubani was one of 6,000 shot by snipers.

The UN report into these actions may have its faults—I accept that, and I agree that it plays down the role of Hamas in orchestrating these protests, but it provides clear and compelling evidence that live ammunition was used in a way that cannot be explained or justified against individuals such as Dr Loubani and thousands more like him. Yet this morning, as the Minister said, the Government have abstained on a resolution endorsing that report, in effect telling the Israeli authorities, "We refuse to find fault with your actions."

**Alistair Burt:** *indicated dissent.*

**Emily Thornberry:** I believe it does. Yesterday, we read the explanation for that decision in an article by the Foreign Secretary, along with the announcement that the UK would vote against all resolutions before the Human Rights Council under standing item 7 of its agenda—even those in line with official UK policy.

I want to ask the Minister about the logic of the Foreign Secretary's argument. He argues that because item 7 gives disproportionate attention to the situation in Palestine above all other conflicts, on principle the Government will veto all resolutions falling under that heading. By that logic, would it have been this Government's position to veto all Council resolutions on apartheid, which was a standing agenda item for 26 years, or all Council resolutions on Chile under Pinochet, which was a standing item for 15 years, simply on a point of principle?

Even if we accept that argument, let us look at what the Foreign Secretary says next: "Britain will continue to support scrutiny of Israel...in the HRC, so long as it is justified and not proposed under Item 7."

But the report into events in Gaza debated at the Council today is being considered under item 2, not item 7. Surely the Minister cannot deny that its criticism of the use of live

ammunition is justified. By the Foreign Secretary's logic, why have the Government refused to support the report? If Dr Loubani cannot be given justice for the injuries he has suffered and the killing of his colleagues, surely he deserves at least to hear the world, including our country, unequivocally condemn it.

**Alistair Burt:** I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's remarks, some of which I very much agree with. I also met Dr Tarek Loubani and colleagues from Medical Aid for Palestinians during the week. There is no doubt about his sincerity and the pain that he has experienced in relation to his injuries and the death of his friend. Any encounter with those who have been involved in the actions that resulted from the protests and the move towards the fence brings into sharp relief our discussions, when we confront the reality of what has happened—the loss of life, the life-changing injuries to a child hit by a bullet, a lifetime of disability and the loss of paramedics. Whatever the context of a right to protest and a right to defend, if such things result that is a tragedy, and such actions are shocking and appalling in equal measure. Whatever the context, that cannot and should not be an end result.

In relation to the procedural matters that the right hon. Lady raised, there are two parts to dealing with matters at the Human Rights Council: the vote itself, and the explanation of vote. The United Kingdom has not been alone in abstaining in relation to this accountability, and the votes were spread across the Human Rights Council. There are reasons for both.

The United Kingdom has taken a principled position in relation to item 7 for a period of time. When item 7 was introduced, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, Ban Ki-moon, the then UN Secretary-General, voiced his disappointment, given the range and scope of allegations of human rights violations throughout the world, that there was one specific item relating solely to Israel, and Israel was the only country that faced that. That has been the long-standing concern about item 7. At the same time, we have been at pains to make it clear that when issues came under other items, as with item 2 and this accountability report, the matter would be looked at entirely on its own merits, and we would support those actions that we believed we could.

In relation to this particular matter, at the time the inquiry was set up, we said that because of the nature of the inquiry—it would not be looking at the actions of those who were responsible for taking people to the fence and took some complicit action in relation to what happened—the inquiry could not be even-handed and balanced. That is why we abstained in the first place, and it is why we abstained again. If I may, I should put the explanation of vote that has been given in Geneva on to the record so that colleagues here can read it. It says:

“Our vote today follows on from our position in...2018 when we abstained on the resolution that created the Commission of Inquiry into the Gaza protests. Our expectation is that accountability must be pursued impartially, fairly, and in a balanced manner. We did not and cannot support an international investigation that refuses to call explicitly for an investigation into the action of non-state actors such as Hamas, and we cannot support a resolution that fails to address the actions of all actors, including non-state actors. The UK continues fully to support an independent and transparent investigation into the...events in Gaza. We note the IDF opening potential criminal investigations into a number of cases...But equally we have publicly and privately expressed our longstanding concerns about the use of live ammunition and excessive force by the Israel Defence Forces. Our decision to abstain reflects”—

our concern and our balanced position. That is the reason for it, but it does not stop us calling out those actions we consider to be wrong. We welcome the fact that there will be some criminal investigations, and we wait to see the result of them.

**Julian Lewis (Conservative):** I agree with every word of the Government's position, as

just read out by the Minister. I therefore do not understand why we just abstained, instead of voting against the proposal. If we felt that this particular organisation would produce only a partial and unbalanced report, and if we want an impartial and balanced report, would it not have made more sense to vote against the proposal?

**Alistair Burt:** No. We maintained the position of abstention because that reaffirmed our position in relation to the nature of the inquiry itself. However, the inquiry produced matters of concern to the United Kingdom in relation to what it did, such as listing those who were killed and wounded. The nature of the account led us to the belief that our concern could properly be expressed not by voting against it, but by maintaining our previous position.

**Stella Creasy (Labour Co-op):** The Minister is right to call for accounts of the conduct of Hamas in this situation, but this report also gives us clear evidence about the consequences for the people in Gaza of what happened last summer. It also gives us evidence of what is happening now; in particular, we see that the healthcare system in Gaza is still not able to cope with the consequences, with 8,000 elective surgeries being cancelled because medical staff have had to deal with the aftermath of the violence. May we press the Minister? He may not agree with the report, but we can all agree that we should take practical action in the light of what it shows us. Will he do more to help those struggling with healthcare in Gaza as a result?

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Lady is right, and that is what we have sought to do. When I was last in Gaza, I went to one of the hospitals that have been involved and met two of the patients who were still being treated there for bullet wound injuries. We have provided £1.5 million to support the International Committee of the Red Cross appeal in 2018, which targeted several of the most urgent needs in Gaza, including drug supplies, emergency fuel and physical rehabilitation. I have taken a particular interest in the physical rehabilitation side, because it is one thing to treat people's injuries, but quite another to recognise, particularly for growing children, that they are going to need support over a lengthy period of time. We can indeed separate the two, and we are doing what we can in relation to support for Gaza, but we must remember the context. These injuries should not be occurring, and there are widespread reasons why these protests should be handled in a different way if they are not to risk people's lives in future.

**Rachel Maclean (Conservative):** I very much thank the Minister for his comprehensive answers so far. Will he please update the House on what steps the Government are taking to push for the comprehensive and independent report into the events he mentioned earlier in his remarks?

**Alistair Burt:** The Government have repeatedly called for an independent and transparent investigation at the highest levels and in multiple forums, including here in Parliament and at the UN Security Council. The Prime Minister and former Foreign Ministers have raised the issue directly with Prime Minister Netanyahu. Our position has not changed, and we will continue to do that. Earlier this week, British embassy officials raised the issue of Gaza with Israeli authorities, highlighting the importance of proportionality, and concerns about the volume of live fire used against unarmed women, children and medics.

**Richard Burden (Labour):** The Minister said that he has met Dr Tarek Loubani, who was shot in both legs despite wearing clothes that clearly marked him out as a medic and therefore a protected person under international law. Does the Minister accept that Tarek Loubani is one of 600 health workers who were wounded last year, three of whom were killed? In what other situation would the Government refuse to vote to hold accountable those who flagrantly breach international humanitarian law? Is the fact that the Government refused to do so on this occasion nothing short of disgraceful?

**Alistair Burt:** I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and he knows this issue well, but I do not accept that charge. I have made it clear that our reasons for not

supporting the inquiry are in relation to the nature of that inquiry. No medic should ever be targeted—I can make that statement clearly; it does not need a commission of inquiry to say something like that. There should clearly be accountability for any such actions, but this commission is not that.

**Alex Chalk (Conservative):** The use of force, including the robust use of force in self-defence, is the legitimate right of every sovereign nation, and that applies to Israel and the United Kingdom. However, the use of disproportionate force is not. Will the Minister join me in deprecating the use of live ammunition in all but the most extreme and volatile circumstances?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes. ...

**Louise Ellman (Labour Co-op):** I welcome criminal investigations where they are warranted, but the report does not seem to take into account the fact that this was an organised demonstration that threatened an internationally recognised border, and that 150 of 187 people on those demonstrations had been recognised as operatives of Hamas, or of very similar organisations.

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Lady points out one of the major difficulties in the United Kingdom accepting the commission of inquiry as a full commission. All the available evidence from open sources, and other sources, accepts that Hamas played a part in pushing people towards the border, and that circumstances in which death or injury were likely to result were deliberately created and exploited. Whatever accountability and criminal investigations there will be regarding members of the Israel Defence Forces, we can be certain there will be none in relation to Hamas, which is an imbalance. None the less, nothing justifies the circumstances, and all parties should be doing what they can to ensure that although there is a right of protest and—rightly—a right of defence, that should not end with the tragedies that the commission has had to document.

**Kevin Foster (Conservative):** I appreciate the Minister's responses and his overall tone. Does he agree that although the report rightly points in some cases to the disproportionate use of force, it does not look at the whole picture, which is what we would want from a fully independent and transparent process? Although there are some issues that clearly require a criminal investigation, just as for difficult issues in our own past, any inquiry must consider all factors that took place.

**Alistair Burt:** As my hon. Friend and other Members know well from their own experience, the tragedy of the area is that the sheer practicalities prevent the sort of inquiry process we would expect, and it is very difficult to gain evidence of what might have inspired those who went to the fence, propelled by Hamas. That there were legitimate protests is not in doubt. The organising committee and those legitimate protests have no connection with those of violence. That we know, but we cannot know too much about what Hamas did, the exploitation of people and the results, because it will never be possible to get that sort of investigation. That is why I seek to set this in the context of needing to end the situation overall, because until there is a comprehensive peace agreement—a two-state solution, with justice for the Palestinians and a secure and safe Israel—we will not see an end of this. That is why the United Kingdom, and I suspect this House, must want us to continue to press for that above all.

**Paul Sweeney (Labour Co-op):** The ongoing programme of demolitions, illegal settlement building and annexations by the Netanyahu Government is threatening the territorial integrity of a future Palestinian state, so will the Government take action in solidarity with the Palestinians and recognise the state of Palestine?

**Alistair Burt:** Again, that is another familiar request. Our position—and my position—has not changed. The right to recognise the state of Palestine is something that can and should be exercised at a time that is most advantageous to the peace process, and the United Kingdom does not judge that to be yet. In

relation to settlements and everything else, we share the hon. Gentleman's view. We condemn settlement expansion as one of the barriers to peace. We provide support for those who are being unjustly threatened and evicted, but again, this will be settled only in the overall agreement that we are seeking to see moved forward, and that is essential for the peace and security of Israel and also for justice for the Palestinians.

**John Howell (Conservative):** The situation is certainly a tragedy, but should the UN not also have taken into account the flaming kites, the hurling of explosives and the clearly audible cries of "Get closer! Get closer!" that were issued by Hamas officials?

**Alistair Burt:** My hon. Friend is right. Indeed, the commission did refer to those aspects and spoke about the damage done, saying in paragraph 109:

"The police force of the de facto authorities in Gaza bears responsibility for failing to take adequate measures to prevent incendiary kites and balloons from reaching Israel, spreading fear among civilians in Israel and inflicting damage on parks, fields and property. Similarly, the police force failed to prevent or take action against those demonstrators who injured Israeli soldiers."

Some of that is touched on, but the underlying issue remains that Hamas has a credo of violence against the state of Israel, which is at the heart of its actions and sustains those involved in terror. That has to end, as part of the process that will see peace and security in the region.

**Stephen Twigg (Labour Co-op):** Both the Minister and the shadow Foreign Secretary have said that it would have been better if the inquiry had also looked into Hamas's involvement. I agree, but I do not believe that justifies or excuses our abstaining on the resolution. I, too, met Dr Tarek Loubani in London last week, as I know the Minister did. What message are we sending to the Palestinians if peaceful, diplomatic routes via the United Nations are being closed off to them, as we are doing now?

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Gentleman understands the area extremely well. We are not sending a message that that is all closed off. We sent a clear message in relation to an inquiry that could do only one side of the job, but we have also made it clear that our opposition to item 7 being directed solely at Israel is mitigated if other items come into other parts of the agenda and that they will be considered by the United Kingdom on their merits, and we will continue to do that. There must be avenues—they will not all be closed down—but those that, from the outset, will not do the job are a false premise for seeking international observation. We must do all we can to prevent that and to ensure proper and proportional scrutiny if we are to get to the bottom of these issues and, above all, prevent them in future.

**Edward Davey (Liberal Democrat):** Ten years ago I visited southern Israel to see the Israeli bombing, the Hamas attacks and the effect of the blockade on Gaza. The humanitarian crisis was appalling then: all the evidence that I have seen since is that it has got worse, and that has partly led to the protests, so what are the Government doing to put pressure on Israel to lift the blockade of Gaza?

**Alistair Burt:** I think that the right hon. Gentleman's observations about the nature of Gaza are entirely fair. They are borne out by my own observations, from my first visits in 2010 and 2011 to my most recent visit last year. The sense of a decline in hope and an increase in despair was palpable, both in Gaza and on the west bank. I met Minister Hanegbi from Israel, and I met the head of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, the organisation that deals with the transfer of goods to and from Gaza. I also met representatives of the Palestinian Authority, although of course they do not have control in Gaza.

We continue to exert pressure and make appropriate representations to Israel about what can and should come in and out of Gaza that will assist the economic situation, and we continue to support UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov and his long-term plans for reconstruction and support, but ultimately, only the balance of trust that can lead

to the end of violence will produce a viable opportunity for Palestinians. In that context, it is not just the Israeli authorities who have a responsibility. It is important for us to put pressure on all to seek to resolve what is an utterly miserable and wretched situation for the average person in Gaza.

**Rosena Allin-Khan (Labour):** I, too, have met the fantastic Dr Loubani. As an emergency field doctor myself, I cannot fathom what it must be like to listen over the radio waves as your colleagues die, and to have to wait until they are dead before you can go and collect their bodies. I am ashamed that the UK abstained today. Will the Minister tell us how the Government will protect civilians, how they will protect medics, and how they will ensure that humanitarian law is upheld?

**Alistair Burt:** I am sorry that the hon. Lady is ashamed, and I commend her for her extraordinary work in the field, which we have discussed on a number of occasions. The explanation of vote makes it clear, as does our contact with Dr Loubani and others, that we are not seeking a procedural reason not to accept a report which was flawed from the beginning. It only distracts people from concentrating on finding out what really happened and being able to make some changes.

We are very clear about the fact that international humanitarian law must be upheld, and we have commented on the deaths and injuries of medical workers. Let me say again from this Dispatch Box that no medical worker should be a target, and that when that happens, there must be independent accountability for it. We will wait to see what arises from the investigations that have been started on the other side. Those who bear some responsibility for putting people in a position of risk must also be considered, but no medic should ever be shot. Something, somehow, went wrong in relation to that, and it is not conscionable in any terms.

**Cat Smith (Labour):** The Minister will be aware that, as of December last year, there was less than a month's supply left of 42% of the essential medicines in Gaza. Indeed, in the 11 years since the illegal blockade, the Gazan medical system has reached the verge of collapse. If the Government will not vote for the recommendations in the report, to what concrete actions will they commit themselves?

**Alistair Burt:** The issue of support for medical supplies and the like is completely outside the report. I meet those responsible for the health situation in Gaza; that is why I went to the hospital. We make sure that some of our aid goes directly to support the International Committee of the Red Cross and others who are providing assistance as necessary. We have made it clear that we are looking into whether we can do more in order to counter any shortages that have occurred because of the intense pressure on the system, and we continue to make all the political representations that the House would expect us to make to those over whom we have influence to bring the situation to an end, but it is complex, and it is not one-sided. Everyone must recognise that violence is not the future of Gaza and there has to be a political solution, and one of the developments that must start that process is the end of Hamas's commitment to violence and the extinction of the state of Israel.

**Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Labour):** Those of us who have read the report will no doubt be very moved by the passages mentioning the stories of some of those who have been killed or injured. Over and over again, we see the names of people who were shot dead hundreds of metres from the fence—I raised this issue with the Minister in the House last year—when engaging in activities as mundane as smoking a cigarette or rescuing friends. Was the Minister as disturbed by those reports as I was, and, if so, why did the Government not vote in favour of the report?

**Alistair Burt:** The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is, yes, of course I was disturbed. Section 6 on protected groups is a large section that goes through the children shot and either killed or injured, and there are also the medical personnel and those with disabilities; no one in human terms could be unaffected

by this. I made clear earlier in my remarks why we made the extension but that does not stop the concern about what happened, the need for accountability and our calling out of those who have been responsible.

**Naz Shah (Labour):** Prime Minister Netanyahu recently said that it would be “helpful” to his chances of re-election if the Bedouin town of Khan al-Ahmar could be destroyed and its residents forcibly displaced before the election in April. Does the Minister agree that that is a disgraceful statement and will he join me in condemning it and accepting that this shows that Netanyahu is no longer fit for office?

**Alistair Burt:** I have visited Khan al-Ahmar on two separate occasions over a number of years, and we maintain a presence to support those trying to ensure there is a different solution. We have maintained our support for the Bedouin community there and said people should not be moved and not be affected. I am not going to comment on the election remarks of a foreign leader. Our stance on Khan al-Ahmar has been clear and our condemnation of settlement processes in Israel has also been clear, and we stand by those remarks.

**Afzal Khan (Labour):** The recent resumption of protests in Gaza and the preparation of the Israeli military for conflict scenarios inside Gaza are both highly worrying signs. Does the Minister agree that instead of a descent into conflict, long-term peace talks are urgently needed, and will he update the House on what action the Government are taking to achieve that?

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Gentleman is right. The individual daily tragedies of Gaza highlighted in this report stem from exactly what he refers to: the failure of those involved—the international community or whoever—over 40, 50, 60 years, to end this. Our efforts include regular contact with those working for reconciliation among Palestinian factions at the moment—an important factor—regular contact with the Government of Egypt, who are doing valuable work in relation to that, regular contact with the United States and its envoys who we continue to talk to about their proposals, although they do not give much away, and contact with others in the region. I was recently at the League of Arab States and EU conference in Sharm El-Sheikh where I took the opportunity to speak to Arab Foreign Ministers about ensuring that the middle east peace process remains at the top of the agenda in the region. So we do all we can to encourage this process. I suspect that nothing will happen until after the Israeli elections, but after that the world must not look away again and must do what it can. Until we do that, the increasing violence is likely to continue; the situation in the west bank and Gaza remains very volatile.

**Andy Slaughter (Labour):** The UK mission to the UN in seeking to explain the extension this morning says:

“It is a source of great concern that, since 30th March 2018, over 23,000 Palestinians have been injured and 187 Palestinians have been killed during these protests. Hamas of course bear principal responsibility as their operatives have cynically exploited the protests.”

Does the Minister seriously support that? Even if he regards this report as incomplete it is robust in what evidence is in it, which suggests that children, medics and civilians have been gratuitously executed by Israeli snipers over a long period. It appears that the Government are looking for an excuse not to condemn the Netanyahu Government; having had one removed, they now have an even flimsier one. Does the Minister not realise that this gives a green light to Israel to continue murdering civilians and maiming people in this way, and that his Government will bear some responsibility for that?

**Alistair Burt:** No. Of course I stand by the “Explanation of vote” given by colleagues in Geneva, which drew attention to the serious nature of the matters raised by the commission report but also dealt with its glaring omission, which was in relation to Hamas, whose responsibility is known by those in the region and which is excluded from inquiry or investigation or accountability into anything it does. We set it all in the context of explaining our concerns about the disproportionate use of live fire

and the other things I have mentioned that we will continue to raise with the state of Israel, but until there is an end to Hamas's commitment to exterminate the state of Israel, to the violent rhetoric that goes with that, and to the placing of people in vulnerable positions, it does bear part of the responsibility for what has happened.

**Bill Esterson (Labour):** I agree that the role of Hamas should have been part of the investigation, but by abstaining, have not the Government undermined what the Minister said, and what was in the article yesterday, including about the fact that the demonstration and its organisers were legitimate and that the use of live fire and excessive force were inexcusable?

**Alistair Burt:** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments, but no, my remarks were not intended to convey that. I have explained why, procedurally, we believe that it was right to abstain in relation to a report that was bound to be flawed from the word go. We were not alone: eight states voted against the report, 23 states voted in favour of it and 15 abstained. I think this proves the point that it is important for the Human Rights Council to act in a manner that all its members will be able to support. This report, from the outset, did not do that. Accordingly, we are having an argument over the terms of the report instead of doing what we should do, and what everyone in the House wants to do, which is to concentrate on how the deaths and injuries came about and, above all, on what we can do to stop them. That requires a balanced understanding, not something that is inherently flawed by being one-sided from the beginning.

**Christian Matheson (Labour):** Does the Minister share my concern that in this situation the numbers tell their own story, given the gross asymmetry and imbalance between the casualties on one side and the other? Does he also share my concern that, because we do not have unanimity and because the Government failed to vote in favour of the motion, the Israeli Government will simply do what they normally do—that is, ignore this and carry on regardless?

**Alistair Burt:** The figures are striking, and they speak on their own. The thousands of injuries and the number of deaths tell a dreadful story, and of course that asymmetry is at the heart of our concern about the disproportionate use of live fire, as I say again from the Dispatch Box. No, I do not think that Israel can or should draw any comfort from the United Kingdom's position. That is why we continue to pursue the state of Israel in relation to the inquiries that it is doing itself. Criminal investigations have been started in relation to this, and where they end up will be a matter of interest to us all.

**Louise Haigh (Labour):** The former Foreign Secretary intended to convene a summit of European and Arab Foreign Ministers and the Trump Administration to lay out his red lines for the US peace plan. Can the Minister confirm what those red lines are?

**Alistair Burt:** The former Foreign Secretary's letter made reference to "familiar parameters" in relation to the middle east peace process—the two-state solution, the 1967 borders and the like—because it appeared in the first instance that the envoys, Mr Kushner and Mr Greenblatt, wanted to take a different approach. They took the view that the cleverest minds in the world had been at this for 50 years without finding an answer, and that just maybe it was worth while looking at something different. They started with that approach, only to be reminded by everyone in the region that, while their approach had an honesty of its own, they could not neglect history, they could not neglect what had happened over the years and they could not neglect Oslo. What the former Foreign Secretary was seeking to do with states was to remind us that they still provide a foundation, whatever imaginative ideas the envoys might come up with and which we should encourage. Consequently, those talks have continued but they have not happened in a manner to bring everyone together, because the time is not yet right for that. However, the UK—myself and the current Foreign Secretary—remain of the view that the middle

east peace process absolutely has to be at the top of the agenda in the region, and we will do everything we can to work towards that.

**Mike Kane (Labour):** Does the Minister agree that in this polemic debate there is still a role for neutral mediation in finding Israeli and Palestinian peace, even though some of our world partners have abandoned that notion? What steps can the UK practically take with our partners to fill that void?

**Alistair Burt:** Good question. I might want to do more of that in the future myself, and I am interested in this whole process. Everything in relation to the issue gets pushed into the binary sides, and that suits those who wish to see the conflict continue—of course, there are people who wish for that. I suspect that what needs to happen is that the envoys should come up with a proposal and we should then get behind what elements we can. With the United States no longer being the sole broker, there will be a role for others. The EU, and the United Kingdom, I hope, will have a role, and I commend the UN envoys who work so hard. We need a willingness on both sides to say that they want to bring it to an end. I used to say in relation to almost everything that you cannot want peace more than the people involved, but sometimes you can. We need to keep working on this, and some of us will have a role to play in that in the future.

**Alex Cunningham (Labour):** I also had the privilege of meeting the doctors from Gaza and hearing the anguish of the one who was unable to save his friend's life because he had been shot in the legs himself. The Minister said that the Government were deeply concerned. Therefore, given the indiscriminate shooting and killing of doctors by the Israeli military, how can the Minister justify the UK Government sitting on the sidelines and what he said earlier about the Government having taken a privileged position?

**Alistair Burt:** I wish there was a different answer from those that I gave before. As I say, the Human Rights Council procedure can look a bit arcane, in terms of the vote and then the explanation of the vote. As we all know in this House, abstention is sometimes not about sitting on the sidelines, but is about making a positive point. The positive point that we sought to make was that here was a report into something incredibly important that was fatally flawed from the outset, and our abstention maintains that position.

On the deaths and injuries involved, the concerns about disproportionate use of live ammunition and some of the incidents reflected there, we would expect to see that covered by other tribunals. We welcome the fact that Israel has opened some criminal investigations into some of its activities, but again I say that there are many responsible for the issue and we need never to forget those who have been involved. The work of Dr Loubani and others brings that to mind, and we need to ensure that we concentrate on concluding it rather than just debating these issues.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's regular concern and interest in these matters.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-03-22/debates/44C1497E-59CA-42A7-97F3-3B6A2F054B86/GazaBorderDeathsUNHRCInquiry>

*The commission of inquiry report referred to above can be read at*

[https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session40/Documents/A\\_HRC\\_40\\_74\\_CRP2.18March.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session40/Documents/A_HRC_40_74_CRP2.18March.pdf)

*The article by the Foreign Secretary referred to above can be read at*

<https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/jeremy-hunt-un-human-rights-council-ignored-our-concerns-on-its-israel-approach-now-we-must-act-1.481829>

## House of Commons Written Answer

### UNRWA: Finance

**Bill Wiggin (Conservative)** [233476] To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, what recent assessment she has made of the long-term viability of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees.

**Alistair Burt:** Following US cuts in 2018, the international community was able to step up and meet the shortfall to UNRWA's budget, allowing it to continue to provide essential basic services to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. However, we recognise that these refugee populations need UNRWA to be on a more secure financial footing. To that end, the UK is working with UNRWA and other donors to help ensure its sustainability. This includes finding further cost savings reforms, diversifying donor income, and encouraging multi-year funding commitments. The UK is a leading donor to UNRWA and we plan to provide up to £80m to UNRWA overall over the next two years. However, a long-term solution requires a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for Palestinian refugees. Until that happens the UK remains firmly committed to supporting UNRWA and Palestinian refugees.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-03-18/233476/>

## UK Parliament Early Day Motion

**Richard Burden (Labour) (2216) Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights** – That this House reiterates its support for the long-held international position that Israel is in occupation of the Golan Heights and has been for nearly 52 years; notes that such an occupation should be temporary and that all Israeli settlements there are illegal under international law; urges the UK Government and European partners to oppose the new position of the US Government recognising the Golan as Israeli territory; and calls on the UK Government to reiterate the vital nature of the land-for-peace formula based on UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the UN Security Council Resolution 497 of 1981 calling on Israel to rescind its illegal annexation to be implemented.

<https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/52734/israeli-occupation-of-the-golan-heights>

## Foreign and Commonwealth Office

### UK statement on the Golan Heights

Following US President Donald Trump's comments on Thursday 21 March, a Foreign and Commonwealth Office spokesperson said: The UK views the Golan Heights as territory occupied by Israel. Annexation of territory by force is prohibited under international law, including the UN Charter.

We did not recognise Israel's annexation in 1981 and have no plans to change our position.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-statement-on-the-golan-heights>

## UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Human Rights Council closes fortieth session after adopting 29 resolutions, including on Syrian Arab Republic, Nicaragua, And Occupied Palestinian Territory**

... In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.25) on ensuring accountability and justice for all violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem,

adopted by a vote of 23 in favour, eight against and 15 abstentions, the Council requests the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to strengthen the field presence of her Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in the occupied Gaza Strip, and to deploy the personnel and expertise necessary to monitor and document the ongoing violations of international law in the context of large-scale civilian protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in accordance with the findings of the independent international commission of inquiry on the protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. ...

In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.4) on human rights in the occupied Syrian Golan, adopted by a vote of 26 in favour, five against and 16 abstentions, the Council expresses grave concern about the Israeli practices in the occupied Syrian Golan described in the report of the Secretary-General submitted to the Human Rights Council at its fortieth session, highlighting the arbitrary arrests of Syrians, the lack of due process guarantees afforded to Syrians and the unlawful mine-laying practices of the Israeli occupation forces in the occupied Syrian Golan, and requests the Secretary-General to bring the present resolution to the attention of all Governments, the competent United Nations organs, specialized agencies, international and regional intergovernmental organizations and international humanitarian organizations, to disseminate it as widely as possible ...

In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.26) on the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, adopted by a vote of 41 in favour, three against and two abstentions, the Council calls upon Israel, the occupying Power, to immediately end its occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and further reaffirms its support for the solution of two States, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security; and expresses grave concern at the fragmentation and the changes in the demographic composition of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, which are resulting from Israel's continuing construction and expansion of settlements, forcible transfer of Palestinians and construction of the wall. The Council confirms that the right of the Palestinian people to permanent sovereignty over their natural wealth and resources must be used in the interest of their national development, the well-being of the Palestinian people and as part of the realization of their right to self-determination.

In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.27) on the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, adopted by a vote of 39 in favour, three against and five abstentions, the Council demands that Israel, the occupying Power, withdraw from the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, so as to enable the Palestinian people to exercise its universally recognized right to self-determination. The Council demands that Israel cease all of its settlement activities, the construction of the wall and any other measures aimed at altering the character, status and demographic composition of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and cease immediately its imposition of prolonged closures and economic and movement restrictions, including those amounting to a blockade on the Gaza Strip.

In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.28) on the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan, adopted by a vote of 32 in favour, five against and 10 abstentions, the Council demands that Israel, the occupying Power, immediately cease all settlement activities in all the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan; and calls upon business enterprises to take all measures necessary to comply with their responsibilities under the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and relevant international laws and standards with respect to their activities in or in relation to the Israeli settlements and the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. The Council requests the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to report to the Human Rights Council on the implementation of the provisions of the present resolution at its forty-third session, with particular emphasis on the policies and practices linked to the settlement enterprise that discriminate against the Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. ...

**To read the full press release see**

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24400&LangID=E>

**Resolution A/HRC/40/L.25: Ensuring accountability and justice for all violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.25>

**Resolution A/HRC/40/L.4: Human rights in the occupied Syrian Golan**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.4>

**Resolution A/HRC/40/L.26: Right of the Palestinian people to self-determination**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.26>

**Resolution A/HRC/40/L.27: Human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.27>

**Resolution A/HRC/40/L.28: Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.28>

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## Other Relevant Information

### United Nations

**‘Mosques should be safe havens, not sites of terror’, says Guterres announcing UN plan to help safeguard religious sites**

... The UN chief spoke, with a [“heavy and full heart,”](#) of the grief and sympathy felt for the families of the victims, and the moving displays of “leadership, love and community from the people of New Zealand.”

Although the attack was “utterly appalling,” he said that it was not utterly surprising, because “around the world, we have seen ever-rising anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Semitism, hate speech and bigotry.”

Reminding the press that he has repeatedly warned about these dangers, Mr. Guterres said that hate speech is “spreading like wildfire,” whether via social media or public discourse, with many political movements admitting neo-Nazi affiliation. He described the phenomenon as “a cancer,” and declared that “it is our duty to find the cure.” ...

Mr. Guterres called for a reaffirmation of the sanctity of all places of worship and “the safety of all worshippers who visit revered sites in a spirit of compassion and tolerance. People everywhere must be allowed to observe and practice their faith in peace.”

The Secretary-General [announced](#) that he has asked the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Miguel Moratinos, to develop an Action Plan for the UN to be fully engaged in support of safeguarding religious sites. The Alliance, he said, will reach out to governments, faith-based organizations and religious leaders to explore ways to prevent attacks and guarantee the sanctity of religious sites. ...

**To read the full press release see**

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1035261>

## UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

### **Human Rights Council closes fortieth session after adopting 29 resolutions, including on Syrian Arab Republic, Nicaragua, And Occupied Palestinian Territory ...**

In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.17) on the freedom of religion or belief, adopted without a vote, the Council condemns all forms of violence, intolerance and discrimination based on or in the name of religion or belief and any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence and decides to extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief for a further period of three years and requests the Special Rapporteur to report annually to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly in accordance with their respective programmes of work. ...

In a resolution (A/HRC/40/L.3) on combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief, adopted without a vote, the Council condemns deeply any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, and calls upon all States to foster religious freedom and pluralism by promoting the ability of members of all religious communities to manifest their religion and to contribute openly and on an equal footing to society. ...

**To read the full press release see**

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24400&LangID=E>

### **Resolution A/HRC/40/L.17: Freedom of religion or belief**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.17>

### **Resolution A/HRC/40/L.3: Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/40/L.3>

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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>

#### **International Development Assistance (Palestinian National Authority Schools) Bill**

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

## **Palestinian Statehood (Recognition) Bill**

<https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/palestinianstatehoodrecognition.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

**\*\* closes in 7 days**

**Scottish charity law** (closing date 1 April 2019)

<https://tinyurl.com/y9ln88df>

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The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC029438