



Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

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House of Commons Written Answers

The following two questions both received the same answer

Religious Buildings: Business Rates

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [171473] To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Valuation Office Agency's process for assessing non-traditional buildings which are places of worship.

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [171474] To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Valuation Office Agency's requirements for signage in designating places of worship.

Victoria Atkins: Schedule 5 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 sets out what conditions must be met for a religious building to be exempt from business rates. The main requirements are that the building should be a place of public religious worship which either belongs to the Church of England, the Church in Wales, or is certified as a place of religious worship by the General Register Office. It must also be used for the conduct of public religious worship.

The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) recognises that not all places of public religious worship will be in buildings that have traditionally been considered places of worship, such as purpose-built churches, temples, or chapels. The assessment of whether a property is used for the conduct of public religious worship is considered on a case-by-case basis, according to the facts. This includes consideration of any signage that is in place inviting public worship.

Should a ratepayer be unhappy with the VOA's assessment of their property, they can formally challenge the decision through the Check, Challenge, Appeal (CCA) process.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-03-22/171473>

and

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-03-22/171474>

The Schedule referred to above can be read at

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/41/schedule/5>

Scottish Government

First Minister nominated

Humza Yousaf has been nominated to become the sixth First Minister of Scotland, following a parliamentary vote ...

Mr Yousaf also announced his intention to appoint Shona Robison as Deputy First Minister. ...

First Minister-designate Humza Yousaf said: "This is a really proud day for me and my family. I hope it is also a proud day for Scotland, as it speaks to our values as a country as I stand here as the first ever Muslim to lead a western democratic nation.

"A key priority of my government will be to protect every Scot, as far as we can, from the harm that has been inflicted by the cost-of-living crisis. We will protect and we will reform our NHS and social care and other vital public services – to support our wellbeing economy to improve the life chances of people right across our country. We will rapidly develop plans to extend childcare, improve rural housing, support small businesses, and boost innovation. ..."

To read the full press release see

<https://www.gov.scot/news/first-minister-nominated/>

Welsh Senedd Oral Answers

Antisemitism

Darren Millar (Conservative) [OQ59334] What action is the Welsh Government taking to promote the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism by organisations in receipt of Welsh Government funding?

The First Minister (Mark Drakeford): ... The Welsh Government has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism in full and without qualification. Our 'Anti-racist Wales Action Plan' provides the framework through which we will take concerted action to tackle antisemitism, including our ongoing support for victims of hate crime.

Darren Millar: I'm very grateful for that response, First Minister, and I applaud the leadership that the Welsh Government had shown back in 2017 when it did adopt the IHRA definition in full, but we are six years on, and there are still organisations across Wales that are in significant receipt of funds from the Welsh Government that are yet to adopt the IHRA definition; and indeed, some of them have outright rejected it.

This is particularly concerning, I think, in our higher education sector. We have eight universities in Wales; only one, Bangor University, has adopted the IHRA definition, and that compares extremely badly to the higher education system in other parts of the United Kingdom. Can I ask you, as a condition of funding being given to organisations like our universities, colleges, other places of learning, and indeed, the wider public sector, that you require those organisations to adopt this very important definition of antisemitism, which will help to put to bed some of the horrors that we've seen in our society in recent years?

The First Minister (Mark Drakeford): Well, I share the Member's view of the horror of antisemitism and there's no doubt at all that there has been a rise in such incidents, and that we all have an obligation to play our part in resisting that. Universities, in the end, Llywydd, are autonomous bodies. The Welsh Government cannot instruct, but the Minister has made it clear in his dealings with universities that while he respects their autonomy, the Welsh Government is keen for them to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism.

We don't intend to pursue this through the funding route to which Darren Millar referred, but this is how we intend to take that conversation further forward: higher

education institutions in Wales have an obligation to carry out their functions in full recognition of their obligations under their public sector equality duty. We are to carry out a review of that duty here in Wales, and in that review, we will make sure that we engage with those organisations in Wales in receipt of Welsh Government funding—including the university sector—to make sure that the review of the equality and human rights duty in Wales includes consideration of relevant definitions such as the IHRA, so that that definition will be part of the review, universities are obliged under the public sector equality duty to have regard to their responsibilities, and we will be exploring that with them as part of that review.

<https://record.senedd.wales/Plenary/13267#C495651>

The Action Plan referred to above can be read at

https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-06/anti-racist-wales-action-plan_0.pdf

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Israel

House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee

Work of the FCDO

Q352 Chair (Alicia Kearns, Conservative): ... this Committee in our review of the last Integrated Review ... criticised the fact that we saw the tilt towards the Indo-Pacific as a tilt away from the Middle East. ... Never before has it felt that we are so far away from a two-state solution. We have historic commitments to Israel and Palestine. Do you think we have the right posture towards Israel? I, for my part, feel that we have failed to be a critical friend. We have a very close and important security friendship but we have yet to adopt that critical one, not least, given the incredibly concerning announcements made by Netanyahu last night and, in general, his agenda. How can the Foreign Office justify continuing to do what I believe to be a tilt away from the Middle East, given our enduring responsibilities and the heightened hostilities, particularly at the moment, around the Middle East peace process?

Philip Barton (Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office): ... I am not sure I recognise the phrase about tilting away from the Middle East. ... We remain engaged on the Middle East peace process; you know our long-standing position. We do have a deep partnership with Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu was here the end of last week. He saw the Prime Minister and you will have seen what was said in the wake of that around our views on the importance of democracy in Israel.

Q353 Chair: I do welcome the fact that Rishi Sunak, as should be the case with a good friend, was clearly critical of the judicial reforms and clearly critical of some of the other efforts of the current Israeli Government. ... If I am honest, it feels increasingly to me that the reason we are silent around the Middle East is because there is no Instagram diplomacy to be won. There are no easy wins. ...

The silence on the Middle East to me is really concerning because we know that what happens in the Middle East has a direct impact not only on the feeling of communities in our country, and therefore the stability and cohesion of our society, but on our security. So on the Middle East peace process, how can I feel reassured that we are not forgetting it? The strategy document that we are going to be assessing yourselves against and which we will be holding you to account on in a year's time does not in any way talk about the Middle East peace process being important.

Philip Barton: As I said, the overall policy remains unchanged. We have a presence in Jerusalem; we have a very close relationship with the Palestinian Authority. We use the influence we have, including in our discussions with the Israelis around the day-to-day issues that we have seen across the board. ...

Q354 Chair: I think you have to take away from this session a plea, because what I am hearing from Arab Foreign Secretaries, whom I have met at the Munich peace conference and around the world, is that the UK is not engaged in the Middle East. Liz Truss did not meet the Arab ambassadors' group once when she was Foreign Secretary. We have not seen the current Foreign Secretary visit the Middle East, and let me be clear, if they visit Israel, they must also visit an Arab nation at the same time. Will you please take away a plea from me that it feels like we need to see more engagement. It is not just about suddenly turning up and signing a treaty; we need meaningful hard work and diplomatic effort behind the scenes from Ministers, not just civil servants.

Philip Barton: I will absolutely take that back to the Foreign Secretary. Lord Ahmed was in Israel and the occupied territories in January, and I know the Foreign Secretary is very keen to go. He had to postpone a visit that was on his schedule when we managed to reach agreement on the Windsor framework and he needed to be here. It is at the forefront of his mind to go to both. Chair, when I see him next, I will reflect back to him your strong views. ...

To read the full transcript see

<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/12940/html/>

The Foreign Affairs Committee Review referred to above can be read at

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33283/documents/180231/default/>

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Human Rights Council Hears that the Current Israeli Plan to Double the Settler Population in the Occupied Syrian Golan by 2027 is Unprecedented, and that 700,000 Israeli Settlers Are Living Illegally in the Occupied West Bank

... The Council has before it the report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan (A/HRC/52/76).

Also before the Council is the report of the Secretary-General on human rights in the occupied Syrian Golan (A/HRC/52/77).

Christian Salazar Volkmann, Director of the Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said the High Commissioner's report on Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan, analysed developments related to settlement advancement over the last decade. From 2012 to 2022, the population of Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, had grown from 520,000 to over 700,000. These settlers lived illegally in 279 Israeli settlements across the occupied West Bank, including 14 settlements in the occupied East Jerusalem, with a total population of more than 229,000 people. At least 147 of these settlements were outposts, illegal even under Israeli domestic law. The establishment and expansion of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory was prohibited under international humanitarian law and such transfers amounted to a war crime. Israel had expanded control over large swathes of the West Bank through a variety of means, including declaration of lands as "state lands", construction of infrastructure to connect settlements and outposts to each other, as well as the retroactive legalisation of outposts. The takeover of land and resources consolidated Israeli presence while severely infringing upon Palestinians' freedom of movement, and their access to and the enjoyment

of resources.

The report documented a correlation between the expansion of outposts and settler attacks against Palestinians. During the past decade, the United Nations had verified 3,372 violent incidents by settlers, injuring 1,222 Palestinians. Last year, settler violence reached the highest levels ever recorded by the United Nations. Israel had failed to investigate and prosecute crimes against Palestinians committed by settlers and Israeli forces. The report covered three cases of imminent forcible transfer, which was considered a war crime under the Fourth Geneva Convention, in detail: Masafer Yatta, Ras al Tin and Wadi Qaddum in East Jerusalem ...

Mr. Volkmann said some recommendations in the report which would make an immediate difference included that Israel must cease immediately and reverse all settlements development and related activities, in accordance with relevant United Nations' resolutions. ... Israel, as the occupying power, needed to protect the Palestinian people and their property from settler violence, and ensure that all incidents of violence were investigated. Perpetrators need to be prosecuted, and victims provided with effective remedies. ...

Israel was not present to take the floor as a country concerned.

State of Palestine, speaking as a country concerned, said the information in the report was important as it tracked the expansion of settlements and the widespread violation of civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights of the Palestinian people, as well as the violation of resolutions by the Security Council, the Human Rights Council, the International Court of Justice, and other international bodies. ... The recently established new Government in Israel had effectively given rise to the return of settlements that had been vacated in the north part of the West Bank: this was Israel's project of imperialist occupation. The international community should put in place punitive measures to put an end to these crimes. ... There had been a fresh wave of theft of Palestinian assets, and the Government had agreed to establish terrorist groups named "the National Guard". Israel claimed that Palestine was an invention that was less than 100 years old.

Syrian Arab Republic, speaking as a country concerned, said it was time to take concrete measures ... This unprecedented situation of unlimited impunity had allowed Israel to continue its unprincipled attacks against Syria, with the deaths of civilians and the destruction of infrastructure. ... Syria reaffirmed its inalienable right to retrieve the Syrian Golan. ... Israel must be held accountable for all its crimes. ...

Speakers supported the establishment of Palestine as an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital, calling upon the international community to find a peaceful and just solution to the conflict, in line with the respect of the human rights of the Palestinian people. The attacks of Israel had left scores of civilian victims. All policies resulting in the destruction of places of worship were condemned, in particular with regard to the Al-Aqsa mosque. Israel must cease its illegal settlement policy, which was a violation of international law and of international resolutions, including those of the Security Council. That some States declined to participate in the debate was regretted. ... Israel had a policy of storming Palestinian places and places of worship, which, along with the 16-year blockade of the Gaza Strip, constituted crimes against humanity. The continuing settlement policy, as well as the fact that more and more racist laws were being adopted in Israel, showed that it was committed to deepening apartheid. ...

To read the full press release see

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/03/human-rights-council-hears-current-israeli-plan-double-settler-population-occupied>

Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan (A/HRC/52/76)

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session52/advance-version/A-HRC-52-76-AdvanceEditedVersion.docx>

Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Bill of Rights Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3227>

Education (Non-religious Philosophical Convictions) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3186>

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2862>

Holocaust Memorial Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3421>

Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3325>

**** Online Safety Bill**

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3137>

Notice of amendments

<https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/49991/documents/3239>

Palestine Statehood (Recognition) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3217>

Private Burial Grounds and Cemeteries Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3188>

Same Sex Marriage (Church of England)

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3438>

Schools Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3156>

Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3163>

Scottish Parliament

Charities (Regulation and Administration) (Scotland) Bill

<https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/charities-regulation-and-administration-scotland-bill>

Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill

<https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/gender-recognition-reform-scotland-bill>

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Consultations

** new or updated today

Prospective Scheme of Delegation for the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (closing date 15 May 2023)

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-prospective-scheme-delegation-charity-commission-northern-ireland>

Review of the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 (closing date 18 June 2023)

<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-review-race-relations-ni-order-1997>

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