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British Parliamentary Speech on the Middle East Peace Process!!

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SPEECH MADE DURING THE DEBATE ON THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

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I tabled this debate because I visited recently the Palestinian occupied territories with a delegation organised by War on Want. It consisted of War on Want staff, myself, and Rodney Bickerstaffe, the former general secretary of Unison. I am grateful for the opportunity to report on our findings, and I hope that the Minister will take account of them.

I have previously visited the west bank and Gaza on a number occasions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the time of the first intifada—a Palestinian uprising involving peaceful disobedience or, at worst, children throwing stones at soldiers. Despite the injuries inflicted on children by the Israeli army, the intifada was full of hope, and it led to the negotiation of the Oslo peace accord and the return of Yasser Arafat to Palestine. I was hopeful at that time that a two-state peace—Israel and Palestine—was possible, that the new Palestinian state would be based on 1967 boundaries with East Jerusalem as its capital, and that there would be a negotiated settlement on Palestinian right of return. Those are the three essential components of a negotiated peace. I was hopeful; but it is now impossible to believe that there will be such a peace. Instead, I fear that unless we change policy, we face the prospect of years and possibly decades of bloodshed and conflict.

I have followed developments in the middle east carefully over many years, and I was well aware before my recent visit how bad things are for the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, I was deeply shocked by Israel's blatant, brutal and systematic annexation of land, demolition of Palestinian homes, and deliberate creation of an apartheid system by which the Palestinians are enclosed in four bantustans, surrounded by a wall, with massive checkpoints that control all Palestinian movements in and out of the ghettos.

The Israelis are clearly and systematically attempting to take the maximum amount of land with the minimum number of Palestinians. As things stand, Israel has taken 85 per cent. of historical

Palestine, leaving the remaining 15 per cent. for Palestinian ghettos. More shocking than that is that the international community, including the UK and the EU, does nothing to require Israel to abide by international law, despite all the claims made about European support for human rights and international law.

During its visit, the delegation spent a day with the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is the agency responsible for humanitarian emergencies. It briefed us on the way in which the wall, the closures, the settlements and the separate system of settler roads were imprisoning the Palestinians. It published a map in the Financial Times to mark the 40th anniversary of the occupation, which is available for all to see.

The delegation spent the second day of its visit with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, an organisation that I greatly admire. The committee took us on a tour of East Jerusalem and showed us how the combination of formal and informal settlements, and systematic house demolition, was encircling East Jerusalem and how that constrained, displaced and ethnically cleansed the Palestinian population. When we were with ICAHD, we witnessed a house demolition. A massive machine with “Volvo” emblazoned on its side destroyed a substantial house that was built by a Palestinian family on their own land and in territory that belongs to the Palestinians under international law—formally, it is occupied territory.

Women relatives of the occupants quietly wept at the side of the road. Later, a young man was held back by his friends—he wanted to throw himself at the soldiers who were protecting the demolition, to do something about the destruction of his family home. The representative of ICAHD, a young Israeli, said that the demolition was, of course, a war crime. The point about that is that under the Geneva convention, an occupying power is not entitled to impose new laws or to settle in occupied territory. Houses are being demolished because Palestinians do not have permits to build, even on their own land. However, Israel is not entitled to introduce such a permit system. It never gives a permit to build a house, or after a house has been built. When Palestinian families expand, they must live somewhere, but Israel will never issue a permit because of its determination to drive Palestinians out of East Jerusalem.

According to ICAHD, Israel has demolished 18,000 Palestinian homes in the way I described since 1967. Each demolition was a war crime. More shocking than that is the fact that no action is taken to force Israel to adhere to international law. Later, the delegation visited a family whose house had been demolished and rebuilt by volunteers from ICAHD—Israelis and Palestinians worked together to rebuild a home for a Palestinian family. ICAHD is committed to acts of peaceful civil disobedience in order that international law is upheld. The family said how grateful they were to once again have a home. A Palestinian who works for ICAHD said that his house had been demolished four times. He said that most Palestinian homes in Jerusalem were subject to demolition orders, so everyone lives with the fear and insecurity that when they arrive home, they might find that their home has been destroyed. He said that when the Israelis arrive to demolish a person’s house, they give them 15 minutes in which to collect their family and belongings.

Normally, people refuse to co-operate. The ICAHD worker told me that in such a situation, the demolition people use tear gas. He told me that he stood there, with his wife fainting and his

children crying while their property was being thrown out of their house on to the ground. He said that it made him feel like a useless man who could not even protect his family in their home, and that three possible courses of action passed through his mind. First, full of hate and anger, he thought about obtaining a suicide vest and destroying his own life and that of others. Secondly, he thought about whether he could get out of Palestine and Jerusalem, being unable to bear the pressure being put on him and his family, but that would be to co-operate in the ethnic-cleansing that he opposed. Thirdly—he said that this kept him sane—he said he thought about working for ICAHD to rebuild the demolished homes in peaceful civil disobedience.

I understand that ICAHD has given a pledge to rebuild all the demolished homes in this, the 40th year of the occupation, and that—poignantly—an American holocaust survivor is funding the work. I hope that all people of good will will support ICAHD financially and politically in that endeavour. Importantly, the organisation brings radical Israelis and Palestinians together and creates a space for hope in an otherwise hopeless situation.

The delegation's third day was hosted by the Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, which is War on Want's partner in Palestine. We were briefed about how the closures have destroyed the Palestinian economy—that has subsequently been underlined by a World Bank report—and also how more and more Palestinians are forced to work for the Israeli settlements to produce agricultural products and other goods that are exported largely to the European market, to which trade agreements give Israel privileged access. Illegal settlements using Palestinians as cheap labour is another element of the new apartheid system in which the EU and the UK fully collude.

The delegation went to visit the Jordan valley with a representative of the Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign. The situation there is truly terrible. All fertile land near the river has been confiscated by Israel, supposedly for security purposes under the Oslo peace accords. In the remaining territory, there are occasionally settlements, some of only one person, which lead to Palestinian families being removed from their land for security reasons. There are acres of plastic greenhouses that are organised and worked by settlers and which are strategically located over water sources. They grow organic herbs and other agricultural produce for the European market and yet, when we visited a totally impoverished nearby Palestinian village, we found that there was no school and, that day, no water—the one tap in the village gave no water. The impoverished Palestinians must buy water by the bucket from the settlers.

We visited farming families whose relatives had lived on the land in the Jordan valley for generations to grow crops, herd sheep and goats, and to make cheese. They were being threatened and moved constantly as new settlements of only one or a few people brought in the army, which claimed that they had to move for security reasons. We stopped to talk to another family who had a compound at the side of the road. A house bought for their son and his family on their own land had been demolished, and their aubergine crop was rotting in a heap in front of the house because they could not get it to market.

There is terrible poverty and abuse of human rights in the Jordan valley. The people there are being grossly neglected. I appeal to the Minister, the Department for International Development and all the humanitarian and non-governmental organisations to do more in the Jordan valley—it

is in a terrible situation, and more could be done to bring instant relief.

My conclusion is pessimistic, and the prospect of a two-state solution is being destroyed. Instead, we are allowing a new, brutal apartheid regime to be created with the Palestinians being confined to ghettos and used as cheap labour by the settlers. The Hamas takeover in Gaza is not the cause of the problem, but the consequence of it. The refusal of the UK and the EU to provide aid to the Palestinian Authority following the Hamas election victory has helped to create the problem. The arming of Fatah by US and Israeli forces to enable it to fight Hamas in Gaza made the takeover inevitable. Now it seems that efforts are to be made to offer money and inducements to President Abbas to accept the monstrous ghettos as the promised Palestinian state. As Uri Avnery, the great Israeli peace campaigner, said, they want him to act as a quisling, and that will not bring peace.

In conclusion, the situation in the Palestinian territories is deeply distressing and depressing, and the Government and the EU are colluding in that oppression and the building of a new apartheid regime. In particular, Israel has privileged access to the EU market under a trade treaty that, like all EU trade treaties, contains human rights conditions. I hope that the Minister will explain why those conditions are not invoked to insist on Israeli compliance with international law. That is a big lever, and Israel would be frightened of losing access to the EU market. I wish that we would make use of that for everyone's benefit.

I fear continuing bloodshed and suffering, and further destabilisation of the middle east. The situation in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories is fuelling the anger of the Muslim world, which is acting as a recruiting sergeant for the ugly ideology of Osama bin Laden and those who advocate similar ideas.

It is in the interests of the people of Israel, the Palestinians and the wider middle east that there should be a two-state solution to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that possibility is being thrown away by Israel, which is determined constantly to expand its borders in total breach of international law. The UK and the EU are, sadly, colluding in that, and the consequences are causing terrible suffering, and endangering the future. I truly hope that our new Prime Minister will reconsider that policy, and that the Opposition parties will reconsider and bring pressure to bear to bring the situation back from the brink and to ensure that the centrepiece of UK policy is a just peace and Israeli compliance with international law.

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