



The Middle East: How to make peace possible
A Speech by Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP
To the Fabian Society, Foreign Policy Centre and Young Fabians

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Thanks to the Fabian Society for hosting this event. I am both delighted to be here in such illustrious company, and especially, to be sharing a podium with Tony Klug, but also profoundly depressed by the further tragedy unfolding in the Middle East before our very eyes.

So we meet here tonight in two minds. I have read your inspiring piece Tony. Your vision renews our hope that peace may be possible.

But at the same time, we have all been watching the news over the last week which shows how far away that peace is. We have seen the devastation wrought by the battles in Gaza. Masked gunmen on street corners shooting down the foundations of hope in a place where there was not much hope to start with, above all, the hope of ordinary Palestinians for a better life.

And it is the human cost to the people suffering in Gaza and elsewhere that is the real scandal.

Sderot is a small Israeli town near the border with Gaza. When I visited last December, its mayor told me how they had seen 3,500 rocket attacks and 16 deaths in the last six years. Recently of course, two more people have died and part of the town has been evacuated.

A few miles away in Beit Hanoun in the Gaza strip I met a Palestinian family. They tragically lost 19 members when IDF shells fell on their home. A mother showed me where her young son had died as he slept.

Families – either side of the politics, either side of the border – both suffering and both wanting things to change.

So we start from a very tough place. There is deep despair on both sides - and in Gaza the structures of law and society are breaking down under the weight of the violence - but there is also responsibility on both sides.

Hamas has failed to meet international principles on committing to non-violence, accepting previous agreements and recognising Israel's right to exist. This serves only to fuel Israeli fears.

Militants opposed to the peace process have increased rockets attacks on Israeli civilians in recent weeks. The horror of suicide bombings stays fresh in Israeli memories. And now we have seen pictures of Hamas gunmen killing fellow Palestinians in the streets.

Israel, on its side, has reacted to all this – and I don't mean immediate events - with a military response that has led to a mounting toll of civilian casualties, including children.

It has pressed ahead with settlements in defiance of UN resolutions and international law. There are now almost 450,000 Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

And Israel has built its separation barrier well beyond the 1967 borders, deep into the West Bank. This, combined with 550 roadblocks and checkpoints; restrictions on permits for Palestinians; and roads reserved for Israeli settlers, mean the West Bank is carved into ever smaller and more restricted cantons.

This system cuts Palestinians off from each other and their land, quenching hope and fuelling despair. It makes economic activity almost impossible. That creates unemployment. That fuels a sense of hopelessness. And so it goes.

What is needed immediately is the following:

- free and unfettered access for humanitarian supplies into Gaza
- the opening of the Karni crossing so those supplies and food can come in and goods can leave
- keeping the Nahal Oz oil terminal open for fuel supplies

What is then needed is:

- support for President Abbas and PM Salam Fayyed
- dialogue between all sides
- release of the Palestinian revenues by Israel
- a commitment to negotiation.

But what Tony's recent article reminds us is that, despite the despair, peace is possible. But his vision is of a peace process that would require three great acts of political courage, which he describes as: Israel agreeing to a full withdrawal from the West Bank, subject to agreed land exchanges; President Abbas inviting settlers to stay within a new Palestinian state; and Saudi Arabia talking peace in both Israel and the Occupied Territories.

It is, of course, for the parties to the conflict to take these or other steps. But the absence of them – and Tony's description of what could flow from them – which points to the central problem in the Middle East Peace Process. And that is a failure of politics.

It is the inability of political leaders to sit down and talk through their differences that has caused the conflict to fester for so long. And, as we have seen with Northern Ireland, only courageous political leadership will show the path to peace.

So what needs to happen?

First, let us not pretend that Hamas is going to disappear. But it needs quickly to make the journey that the PLO made over 30 years - committing to non-violence and embracing negotiation.

And Palestinians need to remain united and focused on the goal of a state. The current violence between Hamas and Fatah only helps the extremists and rejectionists.

Second, Israel needs to stop building settlements. Every new settler in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, makes it more difficult for any Israeli government to

make the concessions that a peace deal will require. And settlements directly lead to security and access restrictions that are a major cause of Palestinian suffering.

Finally, we may have to accept that, right now, Israel and the Palestinians alone may not be able to bridge the gap. The international community, including the UK, has a huge stake – political, economic, security – in ending this conflict.

We have common cause in tackling terrorism and its international backers. We can fill roles that are difficult for the two parties – the EU Border Assistance Mission at Gaza's border with Egypt is one example.

And as good friends of both Israel and the Palestinians, we need to be honest friends. This means supporting them, but also speaking frankly when we need to.

Civil society organisations provide the essential link between government and the people. Pressure, as well as encouragement, needs to come from all sides, and civil society has a vital part to play in this.

The UK supports organisations on both sides that are committed to furthering the cause of peace. For example, we provide funding to Breaking the Silence, a group of former Israeli soldiers who aim to make Israelis aware of human rights violations in Hebron and elsewhere.

We all know that a Middle East settlement; a peaceful Palestine living alongside a peaceful Israel, would not just change the lives of the people of the region. It would transform the politics of our age.

As Tony has so eloquently put it, we need leadership on all sides. I agree.

We need leadership that is able to say, 'We understand the history, the hurt, the suffering, and the sense of grievance, but this is what we must now do to bring peace.' Leadership that recognises that Israelis and Palestinians will, one day, have to find a way of living side by side with each other.

Our task is to help both sides find a way through, because when we do, we will all ask each other: Why did it take so long?

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