

Sandra in Gaza

Sandra Osborne MP reports on her recent visit



The visit was organised by the Council for European Palestinian Relations and the delegation consisted of Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament. I have tried to provide a record of the visit as it happened but with comment where appropriate.

Background

Some background may help with the context for this visit. Peace and justice in the Middle East can only be achieved through the implementation of international law and respect for human rights. In respect of Palestine this means a viable two state solution that delivers justice and freedom for the Palestinian people as called for by the overwhelming international consensus and enshrined under international law and in UN resolutions.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip have been under Israeli occupation since the 1967 war, and today are referred to as the "Palestinian Occupied Territories". The settlements that Israel has built in the West Bank are home to over 400,000 people and are deemed to be illegal under international law.

A moratorium on Israeli settlements was introduced as part of the peace process. After the Israelis refused to extend their settlement freeze last September, leading to the break-up of the peace talks, the Palestinian Authority announced that it would seek recognition as an independent state and membership of the United Nations at the General Assembly in September 2011. Already well over 100 countries (representing 80-90% of the world's population) have recognised Palestine and have said they will vote for Palestine to become a member of the UN.

There will be two votes in September: one on recognition of Palestine as a state and, if that is passed; another on admission of Palestine as a member of the United Nations. The UK is still undecided and its vote could be very influential. 116 countries have so far said they will vote to admit Palestine to the UN and two thirds (128 or up to 134 if all countries are present) is needed to be certain.

The West Bank settlements; the situation in Gaza and the lack of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation remain key factors which undermine the peace process. Our visit particularly focused on the latter two.

Egypt and the Arab Spring

Israel does not allow entry to Gaza through the Erez crossing which is the most convenient entry point so it was necessary to go via Egypt and make the long bus journey from Cairo to the Rafah crossing. However it did give us the opportunity for meetings in Cairo to get a feel for the Egyptian perspective on the situation in Gaza. We were also able to discuss the events in Egypt following the uprising which led to the removal of President Mubarak amid popular demands for democracy in the first wave of rebellion which has become known as the Arab Spring and has spread throughout the

Middle East.

We met with the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic group which is re-launching itself as the Freedom and Justice Party. Their President explained that the new party will not be theocratic though its rules will be based on the principles of Islam. It has become more moderate than in the past and has strong support. They can expect a strong showing in the coming elections although they do not intend running a Presidential candidate. On the situation in Gaza the President was, of course, against the occupation of Palestine by Israel and in favour of legal resistance, but supported a one state solution. He favoured one state based on citizenship although he accepted the two state solution as an interim measure if it can be achieved

We then met with the Trustees Committee of the Revolution who are organising the protests in Tahrir Square. As you can imagine this was an inspirational meeting with some extremely brave professional young people including a journalist, an educationalist, an artist, four doctors who tend the dying and the wounded in Tahrir Square, a pharmacist, and a representative of a charity They take the view that the military council reflects the previous regime and is more interested in self preservation than in moving the country forward. Bizarrely one decision they took was to end the summer time-change of GMT plus two. They are now one hour ahead of the UK which I only discovered after getting up an hour too early. Egyptians are looking for their revolution to bear far more substantial fruits than have been forthcoming so far. Many lives have been lost with many more injured due to the crackdown

Finally on Gaza the committee's view is that the Israelis are failing miserably and their refusal to engage with all sides is stagnating progress. After fifty years of suffering there should be no preconditions on the Palestinians. Israel cannot be classed as a democracy. A country which practises apartheid cannot be called a democracy.

However they felt that Arab leaders have used the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as cover for their own rotten regimes. They also believe the Rafah crossing to Gaza should be fully open

And so to Gaza.

We travelled by bus across the Sinai Desert but it took us three and a half hours to get out of Cairo. Traffic management will need to be high on the priority list for the new government!

We had to stay overnight in Egypt about an hour from Rafah as it was too dangerous to go any further in the dark. So far it had taken ten hours and we went to bed at 2am and left at 7am the next morning.

On reaching Rafah Crossing the first thing we saw were three large trucks from Scotland driven all the way with much needed medical supplies donated by Scots. They had been waiting for two days to get in. We later found out they were refused entry because of two items the Egyptian authorities were not happy with but when they agreed not to take them they simply named another two items. We can only assume they had to turn round and go all the way home.

There were crowds of people who had been waiting since 5am to get over the border and home to Gaza. There were women with small children and elderly people standing in the baking sun or sitting on the ground. The whole process took three to four hours until we could enter Gaza and start our first meeting of the visit. When we arrived at the other side we were met by a welcoming party of local members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.



The Palestinian Legislative Council has a base in Gaza city as well as Ramallah in the West Bank. In the last election in 2006 Hamas the Islamist movement which is classed as a terrorist organisation by the US; EU; Canada, Israel and Japan took 74 of the 132 seats leaving the previous ruling Fatah with 45. Although Hamas had been expected to put up a strong show, few thought it would achieve an overall majority. Gaza is run by Hamas which is the movement's stronghold.

Our first meeting was with the Palestinian Legislative Council in the Chamber of the Parliament in Gaza city. It was originally in a three storey building which was destroyed in Israeli attacks. The main priority for the Council is national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah after internal violence has paralysed progress in the struggle and allowed Israel to divide and rule. Reconciliation can only work with international support and they therefore called on us to provide an 'incubator' to enable reconciliation to take place.

Many in the UK are campaigning for our Government to support statehood recognition for

Palestinians when it goes to the UN in September. It is currently supported by 122 countries. We were keen to hear the views of the Legislative Council on this. They felt there was no point in declaring statehood if it is not accompanied by implementation all UN resolutions, complete Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, right to return for refugees and acceptance of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

The Palestinians want full sovereignty and full control as a state. We also discussed the 40 Palestinian parliamentarians still detained by Israel...



UNWRA

UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) provides assistance, protection and advocacy for some 5 million registered Palestine refugees throughout the Middle East.

Everyone we spoke to in Gaza had one wish – the lifting of Israel's blockade of Gaza which is keeping 1.5 million people under siege. UNWRA provide basic food supplies, have job creation programmes and are involved in reconstruction of 10,000 houses or shelters as well as building 100 schools. There are 300 illegal tunnels from Egypt to Gaza through which all manner of goods are transported which are not allowed through the official crossings by Israel. It is cheaper to get reconstruction materials through the tunnels. Meanwhile UNWRA can't get access to the materials to rebuild the 50,000 homes that are needed. UNWRA faces a current funding shortage and will be forced to cut all food assistance and job creation from October if not resolved.

Gaza is a coastal area with pleasant beaches and used to have a thriving fishing industry. Israel has now lowered the limit restricting fishing to three nautical miles which has all but destroyed any remnants of a fishing industry.

The majority of arable land where cut flowers; strawberries and grapes have been grown is near the Green Line buffer zone where you can be shot on entry. The agricultural industry has suffered badly as a result. It is impossible to export and the main markets were the West Bank and Israel with a minority of goods going abroad.

Israel has deliberately pursued a policy of making the people of Gaza dependent on welfare which is unsustainable. Unemployment was 45% in last quarter of 2010 with 60% youth unemployment.

Meeting with Local Businessmen

Gaza used to have a thriving private sector. One man told us he started a cable manufacturing business in 1996. Eventually he invested in a new factory at a cost of 2m dollars. It was demolished during the Israeli attacks and he received no compensation. They said it was for security but there is no evidence that the factory had anything to do with rocket attacks on Israel. If you try to take the matter to court they cite 'security' and it goes no further. His company experiences the direct effects of the siege. Some materials needed for production do not get in. 2 million dollars worth of spare parts are sitting on the other side of the crossing. Despite complying with lengthy bureaucratic procedures they still can't get in. He asked UNWRA to at least put the materials into storage but they didn't help. They have been lying there outside the Gaza border for three months.

During the Israeli attacks 1480 factories were destroyed out of 2800 including every sector of the economy. The cost of the damage is estimated at 184m dollars with indirect costs upwards of 1 billion dollars.

Before the blockade in 2005 the industry sector employed 135,000 now not more than 15,000. The businessmen asked that they be allowed to fill containers with goods at the factories as Israelis are sabotaging them at the border. Even if they do get the goods out they cannot guarantee the quality as goods get damaged. Gaza used to have a thriving furniture sector with quality monitored on site. They want compensation for the destruction and help to start again. When the blockade is lifted the tunnels will close. The tunnel people compete with business people on a totally unregulated basis and also undercut them and charge high prices for goods businesses need. They do not want to act

illegally. They believe that the economic situation cannot be separated from the political. The problem is not only the siege but internal Palestinian conflict. They see a reconciliation agreement as a high priority for implementation.

OCHA (Organisation for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs)

We then met with OCHA who are part of the UN. According to the Oslo Accord, the Palestinian Territories are treated as one entity and there were plans to build a 40 kilometres connection between Gaza and the West Bank. It hasn't happened and Gazans live under siege unable to access the West Bank where many have relatives. And people on the West Bank cannot enter Gaza. If the physical gap hasn't been bridged, since 2007 there have been no political connections either. Since Hamas won the election there have been deliberate attempts to isolate Gaza in an act of collective punishment which has succeeded. There are 1.5m people in Gaza, 70% of whom are refugees and 54% under 18... There are 6 official crossings by land. There is no port so exports go by land (the airport has been bombed). In the 1980s 100,000 workers a day passed through the crossings – today it is a trickle. There has been some easing at the Rafah crossing although it is still very restricted at about 12,000 a month...

Fatah

The Fatah representatives who are in the minority in Gaza reported on an informal meeting held recently in Istanbul regarding reconciliation between the factions. They reached agreement on most of the problematic issues such as security, the role of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), elections, and the need to seek national reconciliation on a popular level. There has been external pressure on Fatah to promote the candidacy for President of Salam Fayyad. This brought Turkey to the table to try to convince Hamas and other European nations of his potential for that role. Fatah proposed delaying the formation of a coalition government until September. Hamas have agreed to this. There will be elections at national council, parliamentary and presidential levels in June 2012 under proportional representation. Fatah are asking the international community not to squeeze them into a corner. If they cannot negotiate a peace they will lose control of the situation. They seek a reconciliation process on the lines of what took place in South Africa. The aim is to provide moral and financial support for the families of victims - 30m dollars will be needed. So far there are only pledges of support - nothing concrete. The most important part of the process will be bringing people together to promote conflict resolution. There are joint workshops taking place with Fatah and Hamas sitting down together. There have been 3 meetings so far. The atmosphere is tense but progress is being made and the intention is to keep meeting. Fatah asked us to play a role in facilitating meetings between Fatah and Hamas and that is something we will pursue on our return. They also stressed that security is as important to them as to the international community - as important as social integration. Fatah did not insist on Fayyad in particular as a candidate for President but it is certainly true that he is the preferred candidate of the international community. His record in the West Bank is good as far as security and he projects a confident professional image. I saw this for myself when we met on my last visit to the West Bank. President Abbas has been criticised by Palestinians for making too many concessions in seeking peace but that criticism doesn't always take account of the wider international picture. One representative gave us an example of Israeli intransigence. One of his constituents has a child suffering from a phosphorous injury following an Israeli attack. Because the Israeli deny any use of white phosphorous they would not allow the child to go to hospital in East Jerusalem. They had to take the child to hospital in Egypt even though they did not have the facilities there needed to treat the child. Finally we asked them what their priorities were. They said the economy would improve fairly quickly once the blockade

was lifted. Top of their list was reconstruction and the import of goods like medicines.

Meeting NGOs

We met with a variety of local human rights and international aid organisations including Oxfam. They stressed that their task is to promote basic human needs. The big issues of self determination and other matters we take for granted are luxuries beyond their current reach. They are frustrated by the international communities' assumption that the siege has been lifted – which it has not.

Women's Groups

Given my own involvement in women's equality I was particularly interested in meeting their representatives. They stressed the burden of responsibility on women in Gaza given that so many men cannot work to support their families and many have partners who are held in Israeli jails or have been killed. They want to be treated as equals and play a full part in the political process



including the reconciliation process. Women are advanced in Gaza compared to other parts of the Arab world and very much reminded me of Scottish women with a 'no nonsense' 'feisty' spirit. They resent a welfare dependency culture and go to great lengths to secure educational opportunities – flouting tradition on the way if needs be. However, in reality, women and children suffer most from the blockade. Sadly, some of the women involved in politics are acting on a male agenda and the women's organisations authentic women's voices to be heard and a quota system for women's representation.

Prisoners' Families

Animated is how I would describe our fairly chaotic meeting with prisoners' families. Emotions ran high as they tried to get over their message and their concerns for individual family members. Some had not seen sons and husbands for years with no visiting rights and no letters allowed. Israel is in contravention of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners. Although tried in military courts, Palestinians are not afforded the status of prisoners of war.



Visit to hospital

One of the most distressing parts of our stay was a visit to the Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City with Health Minister, Bassem Naem. The hospital serves half a million people. They lack basic medicines and equipment including disposables like rubber gloves. This means they are unable to provide basic treatment at times. They have some dialysis facilities on site but the generators at the hospital frequently shut down for 8-10 hours per day interrupting treatment. There is a sophisticated radiology department donated by the Saudis which can't be used due to Israeli blocks on essential components. This is under the spurious definition of 'dual-use' materials that could be used for civilian and military purposes. Very ill patients have to go to Egypt for cancer treatment often waiting there weeks for treatment that only takes minutes to administer. Only patients are allowed out of Gaza and relatives have to wait behind at home. During our time there we talked to patients and heard their stories including a number of children and elderly patients who clearly pose a threat to no-one.

Coastal Municipalities Water Facility

The Gaza underground water table is greatly depleted and is only half replenished each year. There are also major health issues resulting from the deterioration in water quality due to increased chlorine and nitrates. The response to this is the development of a Desalination Plant using sea water which we visited.

University visit

We visited a University built on the former site of a Jewish settlement near Rafah. There was an impressive range of faculties and 70% of the students were young women. Many of them will be the teachers of tomorrow's generation.

Refugee Camp

I had previously visited a refugee camp in the West Bank and found the conditions appalling. I can truly say the one we visited in Gaza was far worse. I visited the house of an elderly woman with a 40 year old disabled son which can only be described as squalor.



Meeting the Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh

We were also able to meet with Ismail Haniyeh who is recognised as PM in Gaza (while Fayyad is still seen as PM in the West Bank), who heads up the successful Hamas Parliamentary Group. He is a popular figure, living modestly locally in Gaza. He has been pivotal in taking Hamas down a more moderate road leading to a renunciation of violence and keeping the more militant factions within Hamas under control while promoting engagement with rival Fatah. We discussed a wide range of issues but he made it clear that some of the most important could not be seriously addressed until Israel recognised the Palestinian State and real progress was made. We also met with Jamal al-Khoudary, an 'independent' presidential candidate for the forthcoming election.





Return Journey

Needless to say the return journey saw us held up for several more hours at the Rafah crossing out of Gaza into Egypt.

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