



Foreign, Commonwealth
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Julie Elliott MP and Colleagues
House of Commons
London
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Our ref: MC2022/32208
Your ref: MP77171

13 February 2023

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your correspondence of 21 December 2022 about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs).

I understand, and share, your frustration at the lack of progress in the Middle East Peace Process and at growing instability in the West Bank. Let me reassure you that the UK is committed to making progress towards a Two-State Solution. A just and lasting resolution that ends the occupation and delivers peace for both Israelis and Palestinians is long overdue. To this goal, we will continue to press Israel and the Palestinians on the urgent need to refrain from taking any actions, which make peace more difficult, and to refrain from inflammatory language.

We congratulate Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on his election victory and look forward to working with the new government to strengthen our excellent bilateral relationship and on our shared interests in the region, including advancing peace.

In addition, the Minister for the Middle East, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, visited Israel and the OPTs on 10-13 January. In his meetings with Israeli and Palestinian counterparts including Israeli Foreign Minister Cohen, Palestinian Prime Minister Shtayyeh and Palestinian Foreign Minister Malki, Lord Ahmad set out the UK's unwavering support for a Two-State Solution and urged all parties to avoid any unilateral actions that make peace more difficult.

The UK government has not engaged Itamar Ben-Gvir in his role as Minister of National Security, and we have no current plans to do so. We call on all Israeli parties to refrain from inflammatory language and demonstrate tolerance and respect for minority groups.

Settlements

The UK's position on settlements is clear. They are illegal under international law, present an obstacle to peace, and threaten the physical viability of a Two-State Solution. We urge Israel to halt its settlement expansion. We are also clear that Israeli outposts in the West Bank, are illegal under international law and should be removed entirely.

We routinely update our guidance to British businesses on the Overseas Business Risk website. We advise British businesses to bear in mind the British Government's view on the illegality of settlements under international law when considering their investments and activities in the region. Ultimately it will be the decision of an individual or company whether to operate in settlements in the settlements, but the British Government would neither encourage nor offer support to such activity.

The UK is aware of the decision by the Israeli Supreme Court on the Masafer Yatta eviction case. We are monitoring this issue closely given the increased risk of the forced transfer of over 1000 Palestinians and the demolition of their homes. We are clear that in all but the most exceptional of circumstances, demolitions and forced evictions are contrary to International Humanitarian Law. The practice causes unnecessary suffering to Palestinians and is harmful to efforts to promote peace. During his recent visit Lord Ahmad visited Masafer Yatta and met with Palestinian families affected by the ongoing demolition and eviction orders. We continue to raise the issue with the Israeli authorities.

Apartheid

We do not agree with the use of the term "apartheid" on this issue, and maintain that any judgment on whether serious crimes under international law have occurred is a matter for judicial decision, rather than for governments or non-judicial bodies.

However, as a friend of Israel, we do have a regular dialogue on human rights. This includes encouraging the Government of Israel to abide by its obligations under international law and do all it can to uphold the values of equality for all.

The Government takes its defence export responsibilities seriously and operates some of the most robust export controls in the world. All applications for export licences are assessed on a case-by-case basis against strict criteria. If extant licences are found to be no longer consistent with the Criteria, those licences will be revoked.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

The UK recognises that Jerusalem's holy sites including Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount hold particular significance for many around the globe, especially the three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The UK is committed to working with all parties to uphold the Status Quo in Jerusalem. All parties must avoid actions which inflame tensions, undermine the cause of peace, or unilaterally seek to alter the Status Quo.

The UK has a strong and historic relationship with Israel and the OPTs. We will judge all parties on their actions, and we will work to advance the cause of peace. As the Prime Minister has made clear, we oppose any actions which harm the peace process and the Two-State Solution.

My team will be placing a copy of this letter in the Commons library.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Cleverly', written in a cursive style.

THE RT HON JAMES CLEVERLY MP
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Secretary