

House of Commons debates

Thursday, 15 January 2009

Point of Order: Gaza

2:24 pm



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Gaza.

The situation in Gaza and southern Israel is a grave crisis of enormous concern to every Member of this House. The Government know that hon. Members wanted an opportunity to debate the situation and to question the Government. I am pleased that we have been able to make Government time available during the first week back to enable that to happen. Accordingly, I shall be as brief as I can to allow as many hon. Members as possible to contribute. I ask hon. Members to take account of that need when it comes to making interventions.

The [Prime Minister](#), the [Foreign Secretary](#) and I have all come to the House this week to reiterate the Government's determination to achieve an immediate and sustainable ceasefire in Gaza. We have been working intensively since the crisis began to end the violence but, as everyone in the House is all too well aware, the situation is not improving. The Palestinian death toll has passed 1,000—including a chilling 300 children—and dozens more rocket attacks have been fired into Israel in recent days.

The conflict has had a devastating impact on innocent civilians, women and children among them. Gazans have no way of escaping the violence. They are trapped as services collapse still further, as food and medicines dwindle and violence surrounds them. But this did not begin on 27 December. For many months, rockets fired from Gaza have terrorised the citizens of southern Israel, and Gazans have lived under suffocating restrictions that have deprived them of even the basics.

The Gaza ceasefire between June and December 2008 provided only a very limited lull. Over 300 rockets and mortars were fired into Israel. Over 15 Palestinians were killed as a result of Israeli action, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza continued its decline. Few were surprised when that unhappy lull finally cracked, first in November and finally with Hamas declaring it "dead" on 18 December, after which it fired almost 300 rockets in eight days.

Hamas made a brutal choice to step up attacks against innocent civilians. Its whole ethos is one of violence. It has rejected the legitimate [Palestinian Authority](#) and ejected that authority by force from Gaza. Nothing, not the restrictions on Gaza nor its frustration with the peace process, justifies what Hamas has done and continues to do. In December, I was in Ashkelon near the Gaza border and I heard the sirens. The fear was palpable: this is daily psychological and actual warfare.



[Andrew Robathan](#) (Deputy Chief Whip, Whips; Blaby, Conservative)

I am grateful to the [Minister](#) for giving way so early in his speech. I understand and appreciate the fear felt by Israelis, but reports that appear to be substantiated suggest that white phosphorus is being used in the very cramped areas of Gaza. I have used white phosphorus: it is legitimate only as a smokescreen, although it is an incendiary. If it hits a person's skin, it will burn until it is washed out. That appears to be happening and it is, I fear, totally unacceptable. Will he confirm whether he knows that white phosphorus is being used in civilian areas?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I share the view expressed by the hon. Gentleman, and I shall deal with that point explicitly later in my speech.



[Chris Mullin](#) (Sunderland South, Labour)

My hon. Friend mentioned Hamas a moment ago, but is he aware that the former Foreign Office diplomat, Sir [Jeremy Greenstock](#), takes a quite different view? He has very detailed knowledge of the area, and his characterisation of Hamas is very different from what the [Minister](#) has put to us today.



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I know former ambassador [Jeremy Greenstock](#) very well, as does my hon. Friend. I believe that Hamas has a consistent track record of using terror and violence. We should oppose that, but I shall try to give a more balanced picture as I develop my remarks, and to take some other interventions.

However, it is also true that the Israeli operation has wrought a terrible toll in Gaza. With the conflict continuing and journalists barred from entering, the picture that we have is partial, but the reported death toll has risen past 1,000 dead, including over 300 children. In Gaza, 80 per cent. of the drinking water is not safe for human consumption. Gaza's already crumbling infrastructure has been degraded still further. Those trying to help must run the gauntlet of fighting or work only during the inadequate three-hour window. Too many are paying with their own lives—13 medical personnel have been killed since 27 December, and attacks on medical personnel and ambulances have hampered organisations' ability to assist the injured.



[Karen Buck](#) (Regent's Park & Kensington North, Labour)

I, too, have been in both Sderot and Gaza and I accept that there are two sides to the story, but they are not equal—100 Palestinian children have died for every Israeli citizen. Will my hon. Friend comment on the legality of the collective punishment of the civilian population of Gaza, which is what we are witnessing?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

rose—



[Alan Haselhurst](#) (Deputy Speaker)

Order. Before the [Minister](#) replies, the House will have noticed that Mr. [Speaker](#) has put a time limit on Front-Bench speeches, but under the ruling one minute is added for every [intervention](#). If there are too many interventions, much as the [Minister](#) is amenable to taking them, I am afraid that other Members who want to make a contribution later in the debate may be prejudiced by that.



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

That point is well made, Mr. [Deputy Speaker](#).

In answer to my hon. Friend [Ms Buck](#), I should say that I understand the concerns about disproportionality. We have made clear our view that the Israeli reaction is disproportionate. I will come on to address the other points as I make progress.



[David Drew](#) (Stroud, Labour)

Before my hon. Friend moves on—



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

No. I shall make progress, if I may. The point about the number of hon. Members wishing to speak is clear.

We recognise Israel's right to self-defence but, as I said, the EU presidency stated on 27 December that the Israelis' use of force is disproportionate. We supported that statement and we continue to support it.

There has also been a real concern about the use of white phosphorous by Israel. The use of white phosphorous is not banned under international law, but we have made it abundantly clear to the Israelis that it should not be used as an anti-personnel weapon, and most certainly not in a civilian environment. Its use in built-up areas such as Gaza is, bluntly, unacceptable.

The shelling this morning in Gaza of the UN compound is indefensible and unacceptable, and Israel has acknowledged that fact.



[Derek Wyatt](#) (Sittingbourne & Sheppey, Labour)

Exactly. Is it my hon. Friend's intention to report the [Israeli Government](#) to the [International Crisis Group](#) or to the war crimes tribunal?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

If I may make some progress, I shall address that specific point later in my remarks.



[Tom Levitt](#) (High Peak, Labour)

Will my hon. Friend [give way](#)?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

Very briefly.



[Tom Levitt](#) (High Peak, Labour)

Anyone who has visited Gaza knows exactly how dependent ordinary people are on the work of the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#). Is not the bombing of the [UNRWA](#) compound the height of cynicism in what is already a very cynical military attack?




[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I have made it very clear, and it is the collective view of the Government, that that bombing is indefensible and unacceptable.

As the [Foreign Secretary](#) said earlier this week,

" Hamas has shown itself over a number of years ready to be murderous in word and deed. Its motif is 'resistance' and its method includes terrorism. Israel is, meanwhile, a thriving, democratic state with an independent judiciary. However, one consequence of the distinction between a democratic Government and a terrorist organisation is that democratic Governments are held to significantly higher standards, notably by their own people."—[[Hansard, 12 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 23.](#)]

 [Lyn Brown](#) (PPS (Rt Hon John Denham, Secretary of State), Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills; West Ham, Labour)

Will my hon. Friend consider economic sanctions? They are an effective tool of non-violent [intervention](#). Surely with the right to trade comes the responsibility to uphold basic humanitarian principles.



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I respect the passion and conviction of my hon. Friend. She has spoken to me privately about her concerns. I genuinely do not believe that economic sanctions will help us. There is nothing like consensus for them within the European Union, and our overriding focus at present is to get that urgent, immediate and sustainable ceasefire. I do not believe that sanctions would help us to do that.



[Angus MacNeil](#) (Spokesperson (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Fishing and Tourism; Transport); Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Scottish National Party)

Will the [Minister give way](#)?

[Add your comment](#)



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I will make some progress and take some more interventions.

One of my real fears is that current actions risk fuelling extremism in the region and undermining those who argue for negotiation and peace.



[Lee Scott](#) (Ilford North, Conservative)

Does the [Minister](#) join me in hoping that the peace negotiations currently going on in Egypt, which I am sure everyone in the House prays will bring peace to the region, must include firm commitments that Egypt will police its border to make sure that much needed humanitarian aid gets in, but that no weapons get in with it.



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I will take care with what I say on that. The talks that are taking place are critical. We are doing our level best to push those talks forward and I hope that they can reach a conclusion very shortly.

There needs to be a balance in this debate. We should be absolutely clear that Hamas is not a benign organisation. It commits acts of terrorism, it is committed to the obliteration of the state of Israel and its statement last week that it was legitimate to kill Jewish children anywhere in the world was utterly chilling and beyond any kind of civilised, humanitarian norm.

All this has to stop. A ceasefire is an absolute imperative if innocent civilians are to be spared. We have long called for an end to the rocket attacks on Israeli civilians and for greater access to Gaza. And since the Israeli operation began, we have consistently called for an immediate and sustainable halt to the violence, and we have been at the forefront of those arguing for this to stop.



[Jim Cunningham](#) (PPS (Mr Mike O'Brien, Minister of State), Department for Energy and Climate Change; Coventry South, Labour)

How near are we to a permanent ceasefire as a result of the current discussions in Egypt? What Israel is doing in Gaza at the moment is totally unacceptable.



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

It is unacceptable on all sides. In the midst of this, and given the incredibly detailed and sensitive negotiations that are going on, it would be foolhardy of me to pluck a prediction out of the air. What I can promise my hon. Friend is that the Government, through the [Prime Minister](#), the [Foreign Secretary](#), me and others, are doing everything they can to bring forward the ceasefire.



[Angus MacNeil](#) (Spokesperson (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Fishing and Tourism; Transport); Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Scottish National Party)

Sadly, Israel's behaviour at the moment makes it look like a rogue state to those of us who have not been involved with the situation. I am hearing the Government's words of condemnation, but what will they do to make Israel understand that its behaviour is beyond the pale for a democracy?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

We have communicated that directly to the [Israeli Government](#) both privately and publicly in respect of the use of white phosphorous. On the other issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, I should say, as I have said a number of times, that I will come on to address them directly.

Several hon. Members:

rose —



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I shall make some progress, then take a further [intervention](#).

On 27 December and with our support, the [UN Security Council](#) called for an immediate halt to the fighting. Since then, the [Prime Minister](#) and [Foreign Secretary](#) have been working intensively with their international counterparts to deliver such a ceasefire. In a meeting with EU Ministers on 30 December and at the UN Security Council on 8 January, the Foreign Secretary secured international consensus around that call. I am proud that our Government led the way in securing last week's Security Council statement urging a ceasefire. The British-drafted Security Council resolution 1860 shows real agreement on a clear set of objectives: first, an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire; secondly, meeting the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people in Gaza; and, thirdly, meeting Israelis' security needs, which must be tackled through new measures on illegal arms trafficking.



[Fiona Mactaggart](#) (Slough, Labour)

When that resolution was being negotiated, I was meeting some 30 constituents in Slough. The carnage wreaked by Israel in Gaza has created a sense of alienation among them, because they believe that our Government are not delivering peace and security for the people of Palestine. They believe that we ought to be able to do that and feel let down by the Government, because there has been so little effect.



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I say in all sincerity to my hon. Friend that I understand that concern. In the past two weeks, I have talked with numerous groups in detail about the issues. I cannot give a guarantee; the British Government do not have the capacity to mandate a ceasefire. We are doing our level best in the circumstances. We were at the forefront of those calling immediately for a ceasefire. We led the way at the United Nations to secure resolution 1860. Whatever people feel and whatever criticisms they may have made in the past—about what happened in Lebanon in 2006, for example—that is not where we are today, and that is not what the British Government are doing.



[Sarah Teather](#) (Shadow Housing Minister; Brent East, Liberal Democrat)

Will the Government take a lead on a further UN resolution? The [Minister](#) has called the attacks with white phosphorous unacceptable, but he will be aware that Israel has not ratified the treaty setting up the [International Criminal Court](#). The only way for the court to have jurisdiction to investigate the matter is if the UN refers it via another resolution. Will the Government take a lead on that issue and ask the UN to do that?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

We have consistently argued that all states should accede to the [International Criminal Court](#), and we will continue to make that call.

Several hon. Members:

rose —

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[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I shall make some progress and then take a couple more interventions, but I am very conscious of the time scale this afternoon.

The final objective is that we must re-energise the peace process. The crisis is an indictment of the international community's collective failure—over years and decades, not just months—to bring about the two-state solution and create a positive vision for the future. The [Foreign Secretary](#) has set out our vision for a more comprehensive approach bringing peace between Israel and the whole Arab world. The crisis has deepened popular scepticism about such a peace and further entrenched the [division](#) in Palestinian politics, with real economic progress on the [Palestinian Authority](#)-controlled West Bank while Gazans suffer ever more. We do not underestimate the challenge, but we must ensure that we work to resolve the real issues at stake, or we will simply stumble on to the next crisis.



[Louise Ellman](#) (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

Will my hon. Friend accept that Israel is correct in trying to stop its citizens being the target of Iranian rockets—that it is right to take that action? Will he also accept that the Israeli action will stop when the rockets stop?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

Let me say to my hon. Friend that I understand that concern. Israel does have a right to self-defence. I was in Ashkelon, and I have experienced the psychological and military aspects of the terror on Israel—but the

Israeli action has been disproportionate. On both sides, we need to get to that ceasefire as quickly as we possibly can.

Several hon. Members:

rose —



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

With respect, I want to proceed with my speech, and then I will take one more [intervention](#).

It is now a week since the Security Council passed resolution 1860, but the violence goes on. Every day that it does, more people suffer. Egypt, which brokered the previous lull, is now leading efforts to broker a more sustainable ceasefire. The issues are complex. We all wish that these talks would move faster, and we are doing everything we can to bring that about. [The European Union](#) is ready to send its border mission back to the Rafah crossing or to expand its mandate. We are pressing hard for action and ready to assist in making a ceasefire sustainable.

Very serious allegations have been made against both sides. We take those allegations very seriously indeed, and they have to be fully investigated. The reality is that the allegations cannot be properly investigated while the violence continues. The Israeli authorities have said that they are already investigating specific incidents raised by the aid agencies. [The United Nations](#) human rights bodies also have a mandate to report on any such violations. As soon as there is a ceasefire and proper access to Gaza, thorough investigations must—I repeat, must—begin in earnest. We will consider very carefully the results of investigations once they are available, and that stage the parties and the international community will need to decide on further action.



[Simon Hughes](#) (Shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change; North Southwark & Bermondsey, Liberal Democrat)

All of us who have been to Israel and Palestine know the yearning and the need for peace, but many of us have been here and heard talk of Quartets, route maps, Annapolis and all these things, and they have not delivered. Can the [Minister](#) take the message that once we have a new President of the United States there will need to be more serious commitment by our Government and by other Governments, with the new [Government of Israel](#) after the elections, to make sure that there is progress—not just talk of a future that is peaceful but actual pressure so that there can be no option but a peace settlement in the foreseeable future?



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

I share the view that part of the reason we are where we are today is a collective failure on the part of the international community, not just over months, but over years and decades. With a new Government in Israel, with a new President in the United States, and with our commitment as a Government, we have to re-inject urgency into this Middle East peace process.

In recent debates in this House, some have suggested that by sanctions or embargoes we could accelerate the process. I do not believe that that is the case. We have made it clear that we agree with the EU presidency that the Israeli action is disproportionate, and we have been clear in our calls for a ceasefire, but there are real issues at stake that need to be tackled. They undermined the ceasefire last year, and they will undermine a future deal if they are not tackled. The answer to this crisis lies in bringing people with us. Sanctions and embargoes on Israel will not make Israeli citizens safer, nor will they re-establish normal life in Gaza. We already have a very vigorous and rigorous arms export regime, and we already speak very frankly to those at the heart of the conflict. The genuine way forward is to work with those committed to peaceful progress towards a two-state solution, and with them immediately to find practical ways to end the violence, stop arms smuggling and open the crossing—and, in the longer term, to work with them to strengthen the political process and create real hope that justice for Palestinians and security for Israelis is possible. That is what is so desperately needed.

2:44 pm



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

Anyone who has followed the crisis in Gaza over the past few weeks will have been confronted by a spectacle of horror and of the most appalling human suffering. Even before the outbreak of this war, the people of Gaza had to bear the impact of economic isolation over many months. Food, fuel, clean water and medical supplies were already subject to severe shortages and frequent interruptions. Now those people, including many who wish no part of violence and did not vote for Hamas, are caught in the crossfire and fear for the lives and safety of themselves and their families.

As the [Minister](#) said, anyone crossing the border and going to Sderot, where I was some months ago, will experience the anger and terror of Israeli civilians and understand why there is overwhelming pressure on the [Israeli Government](#), from their own citizens, in support of the current military action. Anyone wanting to bring about an immediate end to the fighting must take on board the fact that opinion surveys are showing that more than 90 per cent. of the Israeli public remain in support of the action that their Government are taking.

[Paul Rowen](#) (Shadow Work and Pensions Minister; Rochdale, Liberal Democrat)

Will the [Minister give way](#)?



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

I shall [give way](#) to the hon. Gentleman, but although I am normally willing to take many interventions, like the [Minister](#), I shall be parsimonious because to do otherwise would be unfair to other Members who wish to speak.

[Paul Rowen](#) (Shadow Work and Pensions Minister; Rochdale, Liberal Democrat)

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I shall be quick. Does he not agree that notwithstanding his comments, the [Israeli Government](#)'s response has been totally disproportionate?



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

The key point to make is that we need an immediate end to both Israeli military action and rocket attacks on Israel. I would make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that the [Opposition](#) condemn the disproportionate use of force, and particularly the targeting of civilians. We regard the attack today on the United Nations headquarters in Gaza as wholly unacceptable, and it is welcome that the Israeli authorities have swiftly recognised the folly of that step. I hope that it will not be long before a ceasefire can be reached.



[Michael Fabricant](#) (Whip, Whips; Lichfield, Conservative)

Will my hon. Friend also condemn Hamas's disgraceful habit and tactic of planting its rockets in civilian areas, storing them in hospitals and blocks of flats and putting civilians at risk? Secondary and tertiary explosions occur, causing collateral damage.



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

The actions of Hamas in the current conflict and in the past have demonstrated that it is an organisation that is prepared to use violence in the most ruthless fashion against not only Israelis, whether military or civilian, but the Palestinian people themselves. We have to understand the sort of organisation that it is and the events that took place when it staged its coup d'état in the Gaza strip a couple of years ago.

The trouble is that the longer the violence continues, the greater the anger and the deeper the bitterness on both sides of the conflict and throughout the region. It is in the strategic interests of both Israel and those Palestinians who genuinely want their own sovereign state, rather than to engage in a never-ending campaign of violence, to see the war brought to an end as swiftly as possible. The truth is that more Israelis today are now asking whether the experience of Gaza shows that the very idea of swapping land for peace is fool's gold, and more Palestinians are questioning whether Israel will ever permit a truly independent Palestinian state to come into existence.



[James Clappison](#) (Shadow Minister, Work & Pensions; Hertsmere, Conservative)

My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, because at some time in future, there must be a settlement on the West Bank, and Palestinians' legitimate aspirations must be addressed. However, the Israeli evacuation from Gaza and the removal of settlements was followed by Hamas causing or permitting an ever-increasing number of rockets to be fired over a wider and wider area of Israel. That does nothing to advance the cause.



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

My hon. Friend explains the reason for the genuine resentment and anger—even among Israeli parties and citizens who have been committed to a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians for many years—about what happened after the disengagement from Gaza. However, it is essential not only to get a settlement in the West Bank, as he said, but to ensure that the Palestinian state includes Gaza.

There will be enormous risks for Israel if the violence persists. The longer the fighting continues, the more Hamas can claim victory simply by surviving. The temptation for Israel to press on until, as some say, Hamas is deposed, carries even greater risk. If Hamas is removed from power, who will govern Gaza in its place? How will that happen? The prospect of Somalia in Gaza is even worse than the position in recent months.

Israel needs to be aware of the risk of violence spreading to her other borders. The position on the Israeli border with Lebanon is already fragile, and there have even been incidents across the Israeli-Jordanian border in the past week. There is also a risk for Israel that continuing violence in Gaza will undermine the entire Middle East peace process, on which hopes for Israel's long-term security must rest.



[Martin Linton](#) (Battersea, Labour)

Would not it have helped if the evacuation of 8,000 settlers from Gaza had not been followed by an increase of 12,000 settlers in the West Bank, many of them the same settlers who were moved from Gaza? Is not that the reason for the Palestinians remaining suspicious of the peace process?



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

I have said in other debates in [this place](#), and I am happy to repeat it, that I believe that the [Israeli Government](#) should have made concessions on the illegal settlements much earlier and that their failure to do that, even after the Annapolis conference, is one reason for even the most moderate Palestinian leaders, such as President Abbas and [Prime Minister](#) Fayyad, feeling that their position has been undermined. However, instead of arguing about the events of the past and trying to attribute blame, we should argue today for the immediate cessation of violence and then for energetic diplomatic and political activity towards the comprehensive peace that the region needs.



[Tobias Ellwood](#) (Shadow Minister, Culture, Media & Sport; Bournemouth East, Conservative)

My hon. Friend talks about looking to the future, and we are certainly going through a bleak period of Middle East history. However, should not we also try to ensure that the Qassam and Katyusha missiles that are manufactured in Iran and end up in the hands of Hezbollah and Hamas are prevented from coming into Gaza and Israel?



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

My hon. Friend is right. It is not possible to separate the different parts of the Middle East dispute from one another. Any permanent settlement to the Israel-Palestine question must somehow involve addressing the role that Iran plays in regional politics.



[Alan Beith](#) (Berwick-upon-Tweed, Liberal Democrat)

The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful speech. Is it not worrying that the possibility that is emerging in Cairo of some serious discussion between Hamas and the other partners has been created by Israeli violent attack, and that that is a mark of the international community's failure to get Hamas talking, unwelcome and difficult though that process is, until now? It should not be only violence that can achieve that.



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

The right hon. Gentleman is right that it should not only be violence that achieves that, but many countries and individual envoys have been able to talk to Hamas in recent years. The essential problem has been the refusal of Hamas to accept those Quartet conditions and to recognise that the way forward is through the renunciation of violence and a wholehearted commitment to achieving Palestinian national aspirations through politics and negotiation, rather than through the bomb and the bullet.



[Louise Ellman](#) (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

The hon. Lady must forgive me.

We need an immediate cessation of violence, the implementation of that ceasefire by both sides and immediate access to Gaza to be given to the emergency relief that is now desperately needed. There must follow, as quickly as possible after that cessation of violence, the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, monitoring arrangements to ensure that rocket attacks cannot be resumed and agreement on measures to allow the reopening of border crossings, so that reconstruction work and normal economic life can start to be renewed. That agreement on the crossings will once again have to include measures to stop the use of tunnels to smuggle arms and explosives into Gaza.



[Clare Short](#) (Birmingham, Ladywood, Independent Labour)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?

[Add your comment](#)



[David Lidington](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Aylesbury, Conservative)

No, I am not going to [give way](#).

The [Minister](#) in his comments today and the [Foreign Secretary](#) earlier this week talked about the welcome commitment on aid that the Government are giving to the people of Gaza. I would be grateful if the [Minister](#) replying to this debate can say something about the Government's estimate of whether the attack on the UN headquarters today is likely to cause serious disruption to the distribution of essential United Nations aid. I would also be grateful if they can say what help the Government are now providing, either bilaterally or through multilateral institutions, to offer immediate relief to suffering civilians and how far the Government's plans have now advanced to contribute to the large-scale relief work and longer-term reconstruction work that will be essential if, once a ceasefire is achieved, we can start to recreate anything resembling a normal life and hopes for a better future for the people of the Gaza strip.

But we need not just to provide practical, material relief. The history of Gaza shows us that a truce is inherently unstable. The weaknesses in the old ceasefire arrangements, which collapsed three weeks ago, were analysed well by the [International Crisis Group](#). The [ICG](#) pointed out that the ceasefire was unwritten, that it was negotiated via a third party and that the interpretations of its terms, by Hamas on the one hand and Israel on the other, differed substantially. Hamas believed that it had achieved a six-month period providing phased access to and for Gaza, whereas Israel viewed the agreement on a ceasefire as open-ended, with a modulated opening of the crossings, depending on the degree of calm in the south and progress towards the release of [Gilad Shalit](#). The incompatibility of those differing interpretations of a ceasefire agreement that was never written down is an important part of the explanation of why it collapsed when it did.

It is dangerous to think that if we can get a new ceasefire in place, the international community can then sit back and take its time before making moves to rekindle the broader peace process. As [Sir Alan Beith](#) and others have said, what we have seen in recent years and even decades is a failure of political energy and political will by the entire international community.

Efforts to seek a comprehensive peace settlement should be a priority for the new United States Administration and for the European Union. I do not pretend for a moment that that will be an easy and straightforward task. I spent most of last week in Syria and Lebanon, and I saw how the Arab media are using images of death and mutilation in Gaza that are far more vivid than anything published or broadcast here. I got a sense of the rage being felt by Governments and ordinary citizens in those countries, and we have to remember that in virtually every Arab country 60 per cent. of the population is under 30. Moderate Arab leaders are fearful of the impact of Gaza on opinion in their countries, and even states such as Turkey and Malaysia have denounced Israel's action in the most strident language.

Yet the signs are not altogether those of pessimism. The Syrian leaders to whom I spoke told me that they certainly could not talk to Israel now, but that they would be willing to return to talks about Golan in the future, after a ceasefire in Gaza had been re-established. We all know the political objective: an Israel living safely behind internationally recognised borders and alongside a Palestinian state that is sovereign, and economically and politically viable. That has to be coupled with Israel's right to live in peace and security, recognised by all of her neighbours. In essence, we need to ally the Oslo-Annapolis process to the regional settlement proposed in the Arab peace initiative, which involves tackling some difficult issues that are worthy of another day's debate in themselves. The process has to address the issue of Hamas and

the rejectionist Palestinians. We have heard frequent statements from Hamas, [Islamic Jihad](#) and others calling for an end to the state of Israel, saying that there can never be any compromise and using language that, at times, moves from being anti-Israeli to being forthrightly anti-Semitic. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that those organisations enjoy a measure of genuine electoral support in the Palestinian territories. Are those organisations prepared to commit themselves genuinely to a political process whose objective would be a two-state solution and the recognition of Israel?

The role of Iran was pointed out by my hon. Friend [Mr. Ellwood](#). Iran, with her population, natural resources and the entrepreneurial traditions of her people, could be a key economic and political force for good in the region, but at the moment Iranian policy far too often exercises a malign influence on the search for peace and stability. Iran has got to choose what type of influence she wishes to exert. Does she want a durable peace in the region and the recognition of her role as a significant player in regional affairs, or does she seek the path of confrontation? I have believed for a long time that the policy of seeking to isolate Iran—refusing to engage with her—was a mistake. I welcome the fact that the new US Administration are committed to a policy of engagement, and I hope that they will test to the full the readiness of the regime in Iran to work for peace, rather than for instability and confrontation.

To conclude, the interests of the United Kingdom lie not only in a ceasefire, and not only—vital though it is—in bringing an end to the suffering of 1.5 million people, but in an enduring peace that will at last give to all the countries of the Middle East the assurance of security and the chance for their people to prosper.

Several hon. Members:

rose —



[Sylvia Heal](#) (Deputy Speaker)

Order. I remind all right hon. and hon. Members that Mr. [Speaker](#) has imposed a six-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

3:05 pm



[Gerald Kaufman](#) (Manchester, Gorton, Labour)

I was brought up as an orthodox Jew and a Zionist. On a shelf in our kitchen, there was a tin box for the [Jewish National Fund](#), into which we put coins to help the pioneers building a Jewish presence in Palestine.

I first went to Israel in 1961 and I have been there since more times than I can count. I had family in Israel and have friends in Israel. One of them fought in the wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973 and was wounded in two of them. The tie clip that I am wearing is made from a campaign decoration awarded to him, which he presented to me.

I have known most of the [Prime Ministers of Israel](#), starting with the founding [Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion](#). [Golda Meir](#) was my friend, as was [Yigal Allon](#), [Deputy Prime Minister](#), who, as a general, won the Negev for Israel in the 1948 war of independence.

My parents came to Britain as refugees from Poland. Most of their families were subsequently murdered by the Nazis in the holocaust. My grandmother was ill in bed when the Nazis came to her home town of Staszow. A German soldier shot her dead in her bed.

My grandmother did not die to provide cover for Israeli soldiers murdering Palestinian grandmothers in Gaza. The current [Israeli Government](#) ruthlessly and cynically exploit the continuing guilt among gentiles over the slaughter of Jews in the holocaust as justification for their murder of Palestinians. The implication is that Jewish lives are precious, but the lives of Palestinians do not count.

On Sky News a few days ago, the spokeswoman for the Israeli army, Major Leibovich, was asked about the Israeli killing of, at that time, 800 Palestinians—the total is now 1,000. She replied instantly that

"500 of them were militants."

That was the reply of a Nazi. I suppose that the Jews fighting for their lives in the Warsaw ghetto could have been dismissed as militants.

The Israeli Foreign [Minister Tzipi Livni](#) asserts that her Government will have no dealings with Hamas, because they are terrorists. Tzipi Livni's father was [Eitan Livni](#), chief operations officer of the terrorist [Irgun Zvai Leumi](#), who organised the blowing-up of the [King David](#) hotel in Jerusalem, in which 91 victims were killed, including four Jews.

Israel was born out of Jewish terrorism. Jewish terrorists hanged two British sergeants and booby-trapped their corpses. Irgun, together with the terrorist Stern gang, massacred 254 Palestinians in 1948 in the village of [Deir Yassin](#). Today, the current Israeli Government indicate that they would be willing, in circumstances acceptable to them, to negotiate with the Palestinian President Abbas of Fatah. It is too late for that. They could have negotiated with Fatah's previous leader, [Yasser Arafat](#), who was a friend of mine. Instead, they besieged him in a bunker in Ramallah, where I visited him. Because of the failings of Fatah since Arafat's death, Hamas won the Palestinian election in 2006. Hamas is a deeply nasty organisation, but it was democratically elected, and it is the only game in town. The boycotting of Hamas, including by our Government, has been a culpable error, from which dreadful consequences have followed.

The great Israeli Foreign [Minister Abba Eban](#), with whom I campaigned for peace on many platforms, said:

"You make peace by talking to your enemies."

However many Palestinians the Israelis murder in Gaza, they cannot solve this existential problem by military means. Whenever and however the fighting ends, there will still be 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza and 2.5 million more on the West Bank. They are treated like dirt by the Israelis, with hundreds of road blocks and with the ghastly denizens of the illegal Jewish settlements harassing them as well. The time will come, not so long from now, when they will outnumber the Jewish population in Israel.

It is time for our Government to make clear to the Israeli Government that their conduct and policies are unacceptable, and to impose a total arms ban on Israel. It is time for peace, but real peace, not the solution by conquest which is the Israelis' real goal but which it is impossible for them to achieve. They are not simply war criminals; they are fools.

3:10 pm



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

[Sir Gerald Kaufman](#) has made a powerful speech containing a great deal of knowledge and feeling. While I may not choose all the words that he chose, I entirely share many of his sentiments, and particularly agree with his point about the arms embargo. All the [Liberal Democrats](#) agree with him on that point of substance.

I also agree, however, with much of what the [Minister](#) said. I thought that he had the balance right in some of his criticisms of Hamas, which were very valid and must be made—were, indeed, made by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. He was right not to shirk from using the word "disproportionate" to describe the Israeli action. But I urge the Government, in their discussions with the [Israeli Government](#), to make clear that we in the [House of Commons](#) consider the Israeli action to be a disaster for Israel. It may achieve some tactical victories in destroying Hamas infrastructure, it may succeed in killing Hamas fighters and it may even reduce the frequency of some of the rocket attacks, but I believe that this is already a strategic defeat for Israel. I believe that we are seeing Hamas strengthened, not just in Gaza but on the West Bank and elsewhere. I think we are seeing serious international damage done to the reputation of Israel. I really am very sorry about that, and hope that Israel will begin to realise that it is happening.

When I visited Israel and the West Bank last November and talked to people at the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and to Dr. Fayyad of the [Palestinian Authority](#), there was a feeling that Hamas was beginning to lose the [PR](#) war and the support of many Palestinians, and was becoming isolated internationally. It was not being seen as delivering, and even on the streets it was being opposed by increasing numbers of Palestinians. The effect of the Israeli action has been to reverse that in just a few days.

The Israelis ought to know better. Hamas is an organisation that enjoys martyrdom, and seeks it for many of its activists. Unfortunately it is strengthened by that, despite all the efforts of the Israelis to put their side of the argument—and there is a side. We all know of the horrendous nature of the rocket attacks on Ashkelon and Sderot, for instance. We know about the civilian casualties—about the 311 children killed, the 76 women killed, the 1,459 children wounded. Numbers like that are unacceptable, and we should say loud and clear to the Israelis that this does their case no good whatsoever.

There is suffering on a scale that I do not think we have seen in recent times. There is a humanitarian catastrophe, with a lack of food, clean water, electricity and medicine. Blockades are preventing people who are wounded from seeking treatment. There is trauma for children and families. This is something that we cannot sit back and allow, and our voice should be loud against it.



[Richard Younger-Ross](#) (Shadow Culture, Media and Sport Minister; Teignbridge, Liberal Democrat)

My hon. Friend has made the point that the Israelis are not learning lessons, and that their actions strengthen not just their enemies but their enemies who are extremists. The invasion of Lebanon led to a strengthening of Hezbollah, and not just in Lebanon: Hezbollah posters were seen in Ramallah for the first time. Is that not a lesson that the Israelis need to learn?



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

I fear that my hon. Friend is right. According to the assessments that I have seen of what has happened to Hezbollah's strength in Lebanon, it has already been politically strengthened and is now being militarily strengthened. It is rebuilding its arsenals, which is completely contrary to the intentions of the Israeli attack. I am not sure if there are direct parallels with the attack on Hamas in Gaza, but I think that, certainly in terms of the politics of the situation, the Israeli invasion is very counter-productive.



[Julian Lewis](#) (Shadow Minister, Defence; New Forest East, Conservative)

The hon. Gentleman is making a very sensible argument about how terrorist organisations—and in the case of Gaza, a terrorist regime—deliberately try to provoke overreaction from their enemies, but I think he should pay more attention to the following aspect of the Israelis' point of view. I doubt if they ever thought they were going to win a propaganda war in the current situation, but let us consider it in relation to the invasion of Lebanon. That met with a similar degree of [opposition](#) worldwide, but is it not the case that there was an element of delayed deterrence in that the rocket attacks from that part of Israel's neighbourhood have almost died away completely? Should we not recognise that if the primary purpose of the current Israeli action is to stop the rockets, they may be making the calculation that it is worth losing a propaganda war in order to achieve that?



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

The hon. Gentleman studies these issues in great detail and has a great deal of knowledge and understanding of them, but I fear that the reduction in the number of rocket strikes from southern Lebanon—indeed, there has been a period of calm there—is not necessarily because Hezbollah cannot fire the rockets, but because it is choosing not to do so and is biding its time. Therefore, I do not think the case the hon. Gentleman makes is necessarily backed up by the fact that rockets have not been fired.

I do not think Israel has a real solution to the endgame in Gaza. What is the objective? We hear three different options from Israeli commentators and politicians. The first—and perhaps the most realistic—option is that they want to teach Hamas a lesson, get some good ceasefire terms and get the rockets stopped. To a certain extent, that would seem to be a reasonable objective, but the problem is that Hamas would claim a victory in those circumstances; it would be strengthened, and it would, therefore, get more legitimacy as a result of this escapade than it ever had before. This action is very counter-productive, and there is a danger that even if Israel gets that outcome, with some messy ceasefire terms, the legitimacy and strength of the [Palestinian Authority](#) of President Abbas will be seriously undermined, and the Israelis may find that they end up having to talk to Hamas, which is something they have refused to do for many years.

Some Israeli politicians put forward a second objective: that they want to destroy Hamas, to replace it in Gaza with Fatah, and to have the peace talks only with Fatah. While people might think that is a desirable objective in many respects, it is so unlikely as to be ridiculous. The idea that a movement such as Hamas can be defeated in a military sense is nonsense. Hamas does not just exist in Gaza; it exists in people's minds—it exists in the West Bank. Therefore, that is a ludicrous objective—although we do hear it being put forward.

I also think Fatah is too weak to take control in Gaza if Hamas were defeated. That is partly because of some of Hamas's appalling activities in executing Fatah activists, but it is also because Fatah lost the

political support of many people in Gaza. I fear that if the Israelis defeat Hamas, rather than it being replaced by Fatah, there would be something far worse: there would be the danger of some al-Qaeda-type offshoot taking its place. That would set back the cause of peace many years.

A third, and possibly even more ludicrous, option is being touted around by some commentators: that Israel could force Egypt to take responsibility for Gaza. That is madness, but it is being advocated. [President Mubarak](#) simply would not agree to that. One problem is that this action is undermining him; it is playing into the hands of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). What does Israel want? Does it want a radical Islamic Government in Cairo? How damaging would that be to Israel's security? But if it continues along this path, that is what will happen. It has simply not thought this attack through.



[Andrew Pelling](#) (Croydon Central, Independent)

In terms of dealing with the unintended consequences, is there not also a danger of spreading the loss of political security, even for us in this country? Are we being asked to underwrite the risks that our constituents now face as a result of this irresponsible behaviour by Israel in Gaza?



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, and I shall come on to that later. I just want to deal with one other explanation for this particular conflict that one hears from some Israelis. Some people argue that because Iran is getting closer to obtaining nuclear weapons and because, in its appalling way, it funds and supports Hamas, nuclear weapons would get into Gaza and Iran would use it as a launching pad. I have heard that argument advocated by, among others, [Binyamin Netanyahu](#). There is no doubt that Iran is a serious threat—I understand how and why such people see Iran as an existential threat—but linking Iranian nuclear weapons and this attack on Gaza is a theory that is not backed up by any evidence or, crucially, by any logic.

First, it is not clear that Iran would need Hamas to launch a nuclear attack if it were minded to do so; unfortunately, Iran has far too many other options. Secondly, exploding a nuclear device anywhere in Israel would not be a particularly clever act for people who care about Palestinians to carry out. This is a small territory, so it is beyond me why Hamas, which is fighting for Palestinians, would want to kill Palestinians and see the fallout spilling out all over Gaza and the West Bank. We have to say to the Israelis, who are making this bizarre argument, that it does not justify their actions, because it does not stand up to any analysis.



[Clare Short](#) (Birmingham, Ladywood, Independent Labour)

A number of hon. Members have said that Iran is funding and arming Hamas. Could anyone explain how Iran gets the primitive explosives into Egypt, up to Rafah and through the tunnels in order to make these primitive rockets? How do such weapons possibly come from Iran? This is just a scare story, for which there is absolutely no evidence.



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

I do not agree with the right hon. Lady. Some of the rockets being used by Hamas, such as the Katyusha and Qassam rockets, are primitive and appear to be made within Gaza. However, some of the Grad rockets and others that have been used genuinely appear to have come from Iran.



[Alan Beith](#) (Berwick-upon-Tweed, Liberal Democrat)

My hon. Friend is making a powerful case about the dangers to Israel in the current strategy, but I think that he is looking too hard for explanations. Most ordinary Israelis want somebody to do something to stop the rockets, and they have been told by their leaders that not only is this action more likely to reduce the amount of rockets, but Hamas is much more likely to seek some kind of peace settlement if the military action continues. Unless the international community offers Israel a better option, many Israelis will continue to believe that.



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

I certainly agree that the international community needs to offer a better peace settlement, but the Israeli people are being told these things by Israeli politicians—I am not making them up—who are seeking election next month, and they are confusing the argument. We need to enter that democratic debate to tell the Israelis, "These are not excuses. They are not justifications. They are completely wrong."



[Louise Ellman](#) (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

Is the hon. Gentleman concerned that two months ago [President Ahmadinejad](#) told Hamas that Iran would continue to support it until Israel was obliterated?



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

Of course one is very concerned about many of the statements that [President Ahmadinejad](#) has made over the years, but I do not think that is relevant to this particular battle and the way in which Israeli is going about it.

I believe that friends of Israel—people who believe in Israel's right to exist and want to support Israel—have to be very frank with her at these times, because she is making such a historic mistake. In doing that, we must put strong pressure on Israel, as well as on Hamas, to stop its actions. Israel needs to know that it is not just dealing with words; we will take actions and there are consequences to what she is doing.

[Paul Rowen](#) (Shadow Work and Pensions Minister; Rochdale, Liberal Democrat)

rose—



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

No, I will not [give way](#) for a while.

Israel needs to be reassured that we are with her against the Hamas rockets, but she needs to know that we will not stand by and see her jeopardise her own long-term future. We need to put pressure on Israel for another reason: the rest of the world needs to know that we mean it. The truth is that this action is radicalising, and will radicalise, people across the world. They are being radicalised not just against Israel, but against the west. They are blaming us too, as happened with the disastrous war in Iraq. For our security and global security, we need to use foreign policy to prevent a further spurt in the growth of extremism throughout the world.

What should that pressure be? We started with a resolution from the [United Nations Security Council](#). We strongly welcome that, and the Government's role in securing resolution 1860. We wish that it had come sooner, and we wish that there had been no United States abstention, but it is clearly a step in the right direction. However, we need to go further, and [Liberal Democrats](#) have argued from almost the beginning of the conflict that there are two measures that the Government should take. The first is suspension of the new upgraded EU-Israel co-operation agreement, and I was pleased that the European Union agreed to that yesterday afternoon. Interestingly, when my right hon. Friend [Mr. Clegg](#) first proposed that on 30 December, the [Foreign Secretary](#) said that he was naïve. It now seems that he was not so much naïve as right. The Government and the EU should lead public opinion, but their decision eventually to suspend that new agreement suggests that they are following public opinion, so the measure is not as powerful as it should be.

Our second proposal for action is an arms embargo. It is inconceivable for Britain to send arms to Israel now. How can we condemn its action as disproportionate, as the Government have done, when we are willing to send arms? That is ludicrous. Even if the Government reject that embargo proposal, as it appears they will, the House needs to be assured that arms control policy on Israel is being strictly enforced.



[Marsha Singh](#) (Bradford West, Labour)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

No, I will not [give way](#).

On Monday, the [Minister](#) gave me some reassurance, but we need to hear more about how we are monitoring the use of British arms that are sold to Israel and how the inspection process works. The Minister should give more detail. Will he also tell us how we can be assured that arms that we sell to other countries—whether the United States or elsewhere—do not end up in Israel's hands? We sell components

for F-16s to the United States, which we know it has sold to Israel. There are concerns, and I hope that the [Minister](#) will reassure me.

[Paul Rowen](#) (Shadow Work and Pensions Minister; Rochdale, Liberal Democrat)

Does my hon. Friend agree that a third area in which the UK should take a lead is in ensuring that the Security Council refers the atrocities on both sides—by Hamas and by Israel—for proper investigation as war crimes, because they are unacceptable? I agree that Britain should lead public opinion and not follow it. It is clearly unacceptable that more than 1,000 people have been killed—the UN headquarters in Gaza was bombed today—and nothing is being done about it.



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

I completely agree with my hon. Friend, although I would not necessarily use all his words. However, we need an investigation. I wrote to the [Foreign Secretary](#) early this week, following his statement on Monday that the Government support an investigation as soon as possible. I am grateful for the Minister's elaboration on that, but I urge him or his colleague, when responding to the debate, to say a little more. He rightly said that the investigation would have to wait until there is a ceasefire, but who does he envisage carrying out the investigation, and under what remit?



[Andrew Murrison](#) (Shadow Minister, Defence; Westbury, Conservative)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?

[Add your comment](#)



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

I shall [give way](#), but this is the last time.



[Andrew Murrison](#) (Shadow Minister, Defence; Westbury, Conservative)

I am sure that most hon. Members agree that Israel has a right to defend itself against almost uniformly hostile neighbours, and that we must view arms exports in that light, but does he agree that a litmus test might be the veracity of the story from Israel that white phosphorus has not been used as a munition? That is the Israeli army's line, and if it is true we might take one view, but if it turns out to be false, as the UN is saying, we might have to take an entirely different view.



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat)

Our position on an arms embargo is not related to the use of white phosphorus, but to the need to get a ceasefire and to put pressure on Israel to move towards that ceasefire. The use of white phosphorus should be the subject of an investigation, because, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, white phosphorus can be used in a way that is against international law, particularly if it is used against civilians, and that would have to be investigated.

We also need to be putting pressure on Hamas. We should use our contacts, particularly in Damascus, to urge Hamas to come to the negotiating table and to push for a ceasefire. Hamas needs to know that unless it makes it clear that it will end violence, it will not get the legitimacy that it seeks in the eyes of the outside world.

If we use the tools of diplomacy to put pressure on Israel and Hamas we can bring about a ceasefire more quickly. I know that an awful lot of democratic action from our Government and others is under way and we hope that that will be successful as soon as possible. Many of us suspect that there will miraculously be a ceasefire in the run-up to next Tuesday and the inauguration of the next President of the United States. That is perhaps a happy timing, but it might also explain why Israel took this action at this time. Let us hope that we can bring about the ceasefire before next Tuesday, because with every hour and every day more people are dying, more children are dying and more people are suffering.

After the ceasefire, we need to redouble our efforts for a permanent peace settlement. The [Minister](#) was quite right to say that this is not just about the last few weeks, but is about months, years and decades. When I was in Israel and Palestine last November, I spoke to Dr. Fayyad, the [Prime Minister](#) of the [Palestinian Authority](#), who is central to the peace negotiations on the Palestinian Authority's side, and to Dr. Tal Becker, the policy adviser to [Tzipi Livni](#), who is in the room during the negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and was in the room during the [Camp David](#) negotiations. The message I got from both sides was that they were making real progress with the negotiations. Some of the substantive detail was being taken forward. They were both saying the same thing to me, even though they were not in the same room at the same time, which I took as rather a good sign.

There are some substantive positive developments, but they are not well known, because the parameters within which the negotiations are being undertaken means that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. That means that press releases about the progress that has been made cannot be issued. I was convinced by both sides, however, that there has been progress. However, the problem is that behind the secret progress the Palestinian Authority of President Abbas have not been able to show progress on the West Bank to the wider international community or the Palestinian people. The economic progress that [Tony Blair](#) has been trying to pursue as a Middle East peace envoy has not really happened. The improved security that we have sought is in place in Jenin but in few other places.



[Stephen Crabb](#) (Preseli Pembrokeshire, Conservative)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?



[Edward Davey](#) (Shadow Foreign Secretary; Kingston & Surbiton, Liberal Democrat) [Link to this](#) | [Hansard source](#)
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No, I want to finish. Most importantly, the freeze on settlements that was crucial to the Annapolis agreement has not happened. Illegal settlements continue. That has seriously undermined the peace negotiations and seriously undermined President Abbas. What I fear most of all is that that episode has cut

the legs from under President Abbas. I hope that I am proved wrong but I think that the Israelis have made a serious error and they will rue the day that they decided to take this action.

3:33 pm



[Roger Godsiff](#) (Birmingham, Sparkbrook & Small Heath, Labour)

I am most grateful to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. The recent pictures that we have seen on television and the harrowing stories that we have read in the press have shocked and angered many people in this country, not least in my [constituency](#). The pictures are so shocking that it could be easy to assume that all Israeli citizens support the actions of the [Israeli Government](#), and it would also be easy to assume that all the people living in Gaza support the elements in Hamas that have been firing regular salvos of rockets into southern Israel. I do not believe that that is the case.

It has been said on many occasions that the first casualty of any conflict is the truth and that would certainly appear to be the case so far as the bombardment by the Israeli army and air force is concerned. Israeli Government spokespersons make nightly appearances on television seeking to justify why, for example, a UN school which had been assigned as a temporary refuge, and whose [GPS](#) co-ordinates were given to the Israeli army, was bombed, or why Shifa hospital in Gaza city was attacked. Those justifications are not only disingenuous, but are vehemently challenged by the UN and other aid agencies on the ground. They refute the allegations that those, and similar facilities, are being used as a cover for Hamas military activities. The conclusion that many people have drawn is not only that the "justifications" of the Israelis are untrue, but that they mask the real intention of the onslaught, which is to destroy as much of the civilian infrastructure of Gaza as possible as a form of collective punishment of the people of Gaza for electing an Hamas Government.

The first duty of all Governments is to protect the integrity of their country and to protect their people from attack. I do not mean to trawl through the history of the last 60 years, ever since the United Nations decided to partition Palestine and to approve the creation of the state of Israel, or the subsequent history of conflict and missed opportunities for a lasting settlement based on the creation of a Palestinian state and the so-called two-state solution. However, we surely need to question whether the killing of more than 1,000 Gaza civilians is a proportionate response by Israel to the provocation of missiles being fired into southern Israel.

We also need to question whether the onslaught is not—I regret to say this—part of a parting shot from a thoroughly discredited [American President](#) and Administration who have singularly failed, throughout the past eight years, to understand the complexities of Middle East politics, and who have naively believed that the promotion of democratic elections in countries with little or no history of democracy will solve everything. That is, of course, exactly what happened in Gaza. Unfortunately, the people elected a Government who were unacceptable to the discredited [Bush Administration](#).

A second question that has to be considered is whether the policy of isolating Gaza and imposing an economic blockade has not been a major factor in precipitating the current carnage. Of course Israel and its protector, America, would have been concerned by the rhetoric of Hamas when it was elected, and its avowed commitment to destroying the state of Israel, but many seasoned commentators on the Middle East have pointed out that Hamas was elected by the people of Gaza as a reaction to the incompetence and corruption of the previous Fatah Administration, and because of the work that Hamas carried out on the ground in helping ordinary people. The [IRA](#)'s political wing, [Sinn Fein](#), won political support in [Northern Ireland](#) using the same tactics.

Many people would argue—I have come to this view myself—that if Israel had sought to engage with the Government and people of Gaza when its troops and settlers left; if it had, as a gesture of good will, left intact the illegal settlements for the people of Gaza instead of pursuing a scorched earth policy of destruction; and if it had subsequently sought to promote trade and economic development with the people of Gaza instead of building a wall around Gaza and taking even more Palestinian land to construct that monstrosity, there would have been a better chance of persuading the people of Gaza that co-operation was better than continuing conflict.

Prior to 1967, Israel was surrounded by four countries, three of which—Egypt, Jordan and Syria—opposed its right to exist. However, that has not stopped Israel from making lasting peace with both Egypt and Jordan, or from entering into negotiations, albeit through intermediaries, with Syria to bring about a lasting peace with that country. The idea that the people of Gaza should suffer collective punishment for electing an Hamas Government, and that they should be blockaded into submission until that Government renounce their reason for existence, was frankly disingenuous and symptomatic of the simplistic view of the world that the Bush Administration have had, particularly since the traumatic events of 9/11.

The most pressing need is for a ceasefire, properly monitored by the United Nations. Above all, there has to be a just settlement with regard to the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, so that there can be lasting peace in the Middle East.

3:39 pm



[Michael Ancram](#) (Devizes, Conservative)

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I apologise in advance, Madam [Deputy Speaker](#), because I cannot be here for the winding-up speeches, as I have to catch a train.

The events of the past three weeks in Gaza are a tragedy in which there are no winners, except those who do not wish to see a peace settlement in the Middle East. There will be time for recriminations when the fog of war clears, but it is vital that we understand the depth of tragedy. It is a tragedy for the people of Gaza, who cannot even become refugees, because there is nowhere for them to flee to in the face of bombardment. It is a tragedy for Israel, of which I have been a friend for a long time and whose great peace rally in Trafalgar square five years ago I not only attended but addressed. It is a tragedy for Israel, because it has forced it from the moral high ground of self-defence into a strategy in which it has met terror with greater terror. By following that course, it has lost many friends, and I still ask how a member of the United Nations can turn its back on a [UN Security Council](#) resolution.

It is a tragedy for President Abbas who, for all the co-operation that he has tried to achieve with Israel and for all the protestations that he has made over the past three weeks, has not been able to protect the Palestinians in Gaza. It is a tragedy for the elements of Hamas—and there are such elements, because I have spoken to them—that sought to direct that movement towards the democratic path and that saw themselves ostracised when they won their election victory. That handed power to the militants. It is a tragedy for them, because it will be much more difficult for them to return to that path. It is a tragedy for the peace process, because peace processes, as I know, depend on confidence, which has been shattered by what has happened over the past three weeks. It is a tragedy for the security of the international community, because of the radicalisation of many people in the Arab world, as a result of which, in the end, we will all suffer.

What we have seen is a dark moment in the effort to try to find a peaceful solution in the Middle East. Many people say that it may well have derailed a two-state solution. I sincerely hope not, but there are steps that must be taken if we are to see this dark night end and a new dawn come. First, Israel must be persuaded as a member of the UN to accept the UN ceasefire, to open the borders and to allow Gaza to exist again socially and economically. If it does so, we can put pressure on Hamas to abide by agreements that weapons will not be transferred into that state, and we can make sure that we use our influence to that end. I would like efforts to be made, because one problem in the Middle East peace process is Israel's inability to find the partner with which it can make the deal. I would like efforts to be made to bring together a representative body of Palestinians which does not, as is the case at the moment, represent Fatah on one side or Hamas on the other, but which genuinely represents Fatah, Hamas and [Christian Palestinians](#) on the West Bank, as well as the 11,000 prisoners, and with some form of representation from the refugee camps, so that when an agreement is made, that is done not on the basis of Israel and one faction but Israel and a body that represents all the Palestinian people. That is an essential part of the way forward.

I would like the international community to begin to engage with Hamas. It should look behind the rhetoric, about which we hear so much, at the reality of what its members talk about privately. As hon. Members know, I have been talking to Hamas for two years, and it talks about accepting the existence of the state of Israel, and accepting that a Palestinian state will live alongside the state of Israel. Those may not be the words that the Quartet is looking for, but surely it is enough to open a dialogue and take the matter forward.

I should like to press the new United States Administration to make a real effort to bring about a settlement. I was involved in [Northern Ireland](#), and in the end what really helped was the US sending [Senator George Mitchell](#) over. He did not just turn up for two or three days here and there—he came over permanently, and he presided over a peace process that, in the end, was successful. That type of commitment is needed, and I hope that, under the new US Administration, we will see that level of commitment again.

We must accept, too, that any settlement must be comprehensive, not just between those Palestinians and the Israelis, but including the surrounding states, including Syria and the political entities in Lebanon. Those are areas where there is a sense of hope for the future, but the night is very dark at the moment. It is also very dangerous, for the region and for the rest of the world.

When the ceasefire comes, I hope that our Government will be able to use their influence to move the process forward—not in the piecemeal fashion of the past but in a comprehensive way that might at last remove this terrible situation from the face of the earth. In that way, we can create peace in a land where no one deserves the horrors of the past three weeks.

3:45 pm



[Mike Gapes](#) (Ilford South, Labour)

It is a pleasure to follow [Mr. Ancram](#), and I agree very strongly with what he said. He referred to [Northern Ireland](#), and one of the lessons of that conflict is that sometimes one needs channels for engagement with people. That need will not always arise at times of one's own choosing, but such channels are a necessary preparation for political solutions later on.

One of the tragedies of the situation today is that everything could have been so different after the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005. The [Foreign Affairs Committee](#) went to Gaza in December 2005: we drove from north to south, and we were able to see the greenhouses left behind by the settlers after they had left, and to get to the Rafah crossing. We saw the controls that were in operation there, and they were a bit like the controls at an airport terminal. [The Italian](#) carabinieri were in charge, and police officers from Romania and Denmark were working with them as part of the EU mission to Gaza. They were all performing a very important role. Coaches would arrive from Egypt, and people would get off and go through the Rafah crossing. Their bags would be checked and scanned, and sometimes goods would be held back because they were being proposed for sale or importation illegally. Those goods could be collected later.

Families were being reunited at that time. The House must understand that, for many years, the town of Rafah had expanded into Egypt, with the result that families had members on both sides of the crossing. As a senior Israeli politician who was in London this week told me, many of the tunnels in the area run from a family's home on one side of the crossing to its home on the other side. The tunnels were used to bring food through, as well as weapons of all kinds. Those weapons included things from Iran via Yemen and Sudan, which presumably came through Egypt before being sent through the tunnels.

The circumstances of what is happening in Rafah today are very different, because of the closure of Gaza and the incidents that have taken place. It is not only after the breakdown of the latest ceasefire that we can talk about people dying: in 2006, more than 680 Palestinians and more than 20 Israelis were killed as a result of the continuation of the conflict.

[The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice](#), got engaged, briefly and actively, in trying to work out a channel with regard to the Philadelphia corridor. There were further breakdowns but finally the ceasefire was agreed that lasted for six months between June and December last year. I do not have time to go into all the circumstances of how that broke down, but it is clear that, even before the [UN Security Council](#) adopted resolution 1860, we needed a ceasefire to stop the conflict in Gaza and the deterioration that will follow.

In the past week, we have seen the impotence of the international community, which the general public around the world do not understand. They believe that our Government and other Governments must be able to do something to stop the fighting. They see pictures of the horror every night on their televisions, and they do not understand why it continues.

Yet the conflict in Gaza is not the only one going on in the world. Today, as part of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the [Sri Lankan](#) army is bombarding areas in the north-east and killing many people—but we are not seeing that because the television cameras are not there. Only members of the Tamil community in this country and a few others are really engaged with what is going on in Sri Lanka.



[Angus MacNeil](#) (Spokesperson (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Fishing and Tourism; Transport); Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Scottish National Party)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?

[Add your comment](#)



[Mike Gapes](#) (Ilford South, Labour)

I am afraid I do not have time.

Killing is still going on in Darfur and in Congo. The international community needs to engage and to be more active. We hope that when President Obama comes to office on Tuesday, he can make a difference, but let us not be misled. He is not a miracle worker. It will take sustained engagement—sustained engagement by the United States, unlike the disasters of the past eight years, when there has been sporadic engagement from time to time.

We will also have to make sure that the Arab world takes a more responsible attitude to a solution to the conflict. We need a comprehensive agreement between Israel and its neighbours. We need a two-state solution. Reference has already been made to Syria, and Egypt has a key role in providing the guarantees for security to allow the opening up of Gaza for trade with Israel and with Egypt—the opening up of those borders, but the prevention of the weapons coming in.

The British people, and particularly many of our young Muslim people, are very angry. We need a political solution now.

3:51 pm



[James Clappison](#) (Shadow Minister, Work & Pensions; Hertsmere, Conservative)

The subject engages sympathies across the House and there is often a marked lack of detachment. On this occasion, however, I commend—it is not often that I commend the Government—the speeches from the [Minister](#) and from my hon. Friend [Mr. Lidington](#). We have had balanced speeches from two of the Front Benches in the debate.

I support what I regard as the pragmatic search for a solution that will bring an end to the scenes that we have seen over the past few days and over the longer period in which the rockets have been fired. I urge the Government, through their representations, to seek a sustainable solution. The key to the durability of a solution is an end to the firing of the rockets and an end to the supply of armaments into the Gaza strip. What on earth do people want weapons coming into the Gaza strip for? What possible purpose can that serve? That should be followed in short order by the supply of humanitarian aid, which is much needed, to the population of Gaza.

The key to the matter is how it began. It began with the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel over a long period. What on earth were the Israelis supposed to do? Were they expected to put up with that over a longer and longer period? When was action expected to be taken on it? We have to see the situation from the Israeli point of view.



[Angus MacNeil](#) (Spokesperson (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Fishing and Tourism; Transport); Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Scottish National Party)

I hear the hon. Gentleman's concern about arms. Given the deaths of 1,000 civilians in the Gaza strip, does he still think the UK should be selling arms to Israel?



[James Clappison](#) (Shadow Minister, Work & Pensions; Hertsmere, Conservative)

I want to stop the current situation, and the hon. Gentleman wants to stop it. The key to that is removing the conditions in which the immediate conflict began. It began through the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel. The objective is to stop that. The Israelis are satisfied with that solution. They withdrew from Gaza, they removed their settlements, and they have no wish to expand into Gaza. The conflict is not part of an Israeli attempt to take over Gaza. They simply want to see the end of rockets being fired at their citizens. I ask hon. Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches how thrilled members of the public in their constituencies would be if they were subject to rocket attacks. Would hon. Members expect their constituents to come to them and ask would could be done about the matter?

Let us see an end to the bombardment and a sustainable solution. That will be a first step towards a wider solution. I do not yet have a great deal of confidence in Hamas. I listened to the very interesting speech from my right hon. and learned Friend [Mr. Ancram](#) and I pay tribute to his expertise on the subject. Judging Hamas by its actions and its words, as we must inevitably do, we have not yet seen much open evidence of its peaceful intentions.

I hope very much that a leader of Hamas will feel able to come forward, as my right hon. and learned Friend indicated, and say publicly that they recognise the state of Israel, that they are prepared to abide by the conditions that the international community have set them, and that they are prepared to abide by previous conditions and give up terrorism as a starting point; then, there can be talks. There is little point in Israel's having talks with Hamas before Hamas recognises it and those fundamental conditions are observed. However, I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend is right and that Hamas will soon do that. It has certainly had no shortage of opportunities to do it in the past.



[Mohammad Sarwar](#) (Glasgow Central, Labour)

Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the crisis in Gaza and the Middle East is due to the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories and the refusal of the [Israeli Government](#) to accept United Nations resolutions and withdraw to pre-1967 borders?



[James Clappison](#) (Shadow Minister, Work & Pensions; Hertsmere, Conservative)

I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. As I hope I made clear in an earlier [intervention](#), I would like a resolution of the situation and I fully accept that there has to be a viable and sovereign Palestinian state and that there will have to be territorial adjustments. I am not going to stick firmly to one propaganda position or another.

On the other hand, the hon. Gentleman and his supporters have to recognise that Israel has to be secure; that is uppermost in Israelis' minds. That is the solution before us, and it can be achieved. However, rockets have been fired, a pledge to destroy Israel has been made in the Hamas charter, anti-Israeli

propaganda has been put out and the Iranian leadership has given words of support for Hamas. None of those things does anything to advance us towards the pragmatic solution that I would like to see.

First, there should be an end to the conflict on that basis and to the suffering on both sides, including among the population in Gaza—suffering that I believe has been caused by Hamas. Then, there should be a wider solution that removes the seeds of conflict and provides a better future for all the people in the Middle East. The fact is that what we need to do is simple, although certain hon. Members fail to do it: bring all the pressure possible on Hamas to stop firing rockets, which created the conditions that brought about the current conflict.

3:56 pm



[Marsha Singh](#) (Bradford West, Labour)

What is important today is not any discourse on the past or on what may happen in future, but how we get a ceasefire and stop the carnage in Gaza. Let me say at the outset that Hamas has to bear some of the blame for what has happened; if somebody fires a rocket at my house, I am going to fire one back.

However, the actions of the [Israeli Government](#) and military have been completely and utterly disproportionate. The situation is not the result of an aberration on the part of the Israelis—it is not something new. On 30 April 2008, John Ging, the director of the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) in Gaza, told the [International Development Committee](#) that the humanitarian situation was extremely grave. He said:

"I would characterise the situation here as shocking in terms of the deterioration in the humanitarian situation. I also have to say it is shameful, what we are now witnessing first-hand here and on the ground. Both the principal issues continue to be the access issues, whether it is for equipment or whether it is for supplies. Also the violence underpins the humanitarian situation here in Gaza. When it comes to violence and that pervasive sense of fear and danger that is created in every household by any situation here, I will just update you on the latest statistics. From January of this year 344 Palestinians have been killed and 756 have been injured, and in those figures are the deaths of 60 undisputedly innocent children and a further 175 children injured."

What did the international community say? Nothing. What was our response to the crisis that was already happening? Nothing. He went on to say:

"What we are not seeing is the accountability that one would expect when it comes to the use of lethal force, and that is leaving an ever-growing sense of impunity, bad faith and a sense of despair among the general population."

This was the situation of the Gazan people at that time. In March 2008, [Christian Aid](#), with other [NGOs](#), published a report that said that

"the severity of the situation has increased exponentially since Israel imposed extreme restrictions on the movement of goods and people."



[Stephen Crabb](#) (Preseli Pembrokeshire, Conservative)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?

[Add your comment](#)



[Marsha Singh](#) (Bradford West, Labour)

No—please let me proceed.

The report outlined the gravity of the situation: the rising unemployment, lack of basic medical supplies, blackouts, economic collapse and denial of emergency treatment outside Gaza. It described the situation as a "humanitarian implosion". The blockade of Gaza turned Gaza into one huge prison, and that is the reality that the Gazan people have faced in 2008. The Palestinian people of Gaza were already living in a humanitarian hell, and I cannot find the words to express what they are living in now.

I said earlier that the Israeli response was disproportionate, but I find that word completely inadequate to describe what the Israelis are doing. They have used F-16 jets, helicopter gun ships, missiles, artillery, tanks and even phosphorus. What is the result? One thousand dead and thousands injured; utter destruction of the civilian infrastructure, including schools and power stations; and utter collapse of the sewerage system. Save the Children said in a briefing yesterday that at least 184 children have been killed—I think that the figure is now over 300—and more than 600 injured. An estimated 80,000 to 90,000 people have been displaced, among them 45,000 to 50,000 children. Health services are collapsing, ante-natal care has been suspended, and all vaccination programmes have been interrupted. The list goes on and on, and so does the killing, the brutality, the inhumanity and the disregard for the rules of war.

Yesterday, I read an even more chilling account in [The Independent](#), which quoted [B'Tselem](#), an Israeli human rights group, as saying that at least three Palestinians in Gaza were shot dead yesterday as Israeli soldiers fired on a group of residents leaving their home on orders from the military and waving white flags. That is absolutely disgraceful. I described the situation as a humanitarian hell. Is there anything worse than hell? Well, if there is, it exists now in Gaza, and the Gazan people are living in it.

Israel is committing war crimes in Gaza. It must be held to account by the international community. What we have to do today is send the strongest possible message to Israel. Arms embargoes or other embargoes are fine, but we must say today that we will expel the Israeli ambassador and recall our ambassador. That will be a shock to the Israeli system, and they may then begin to listen.

4:03 pm



[James Arbuthnot](#) (North East Hampshire, Conservative)

I am, and I am proud to be, the chairman of [Conservative Friends of Israel](#).

[Mr. Singh](#) said that Hamas must bear some share of the blame. I will read to the House what the Egyptian Foreign [Minister](#) said a couple of weeks ago:

"The Israelis have been warning you that this was coming if you continue your cross border rocket attacks. Egypt has been imploring you to stop firing rockets into Israel, but you ignored our words. We have been

urging you to renew the cease-fire with Israel, but you refused. You have brought this upon yourselves. You are responsible for what is happening to the people of Gaza."

I will read what an adviser to President Abbas said, also a couple of weeks ago:

"The one responsible for the massacres is Hamas, and not the Zionist entity, which in its own view reacted to the firing of Palestinian missiles. Hamas needs to stop treating the blood of Palestinians lightly."

Concentrating on the word "massacre", there is no doubt that that is what it is. It is awful to watch. During the British involvement in Iraq, there has also been a terrible massacre of civilians, as well as of fighters. The same is true of Afghanistan. The same was also true of the second and the first world wars, but that does not make it wrong for the British to have fought. The distinction lies between those who set out to kill and maim civilians and children, and all too often succeed, and those who set out to avoid doing so, and all too often fail. I know which side I am on.

The situation is awful, and it is not as though the Israelis do not know that it is awful. It is not as though the leaders of Hamas do not know that, either, and I have the appalling impression that Hamas has come to a calculated opinion that the more Palestinians who die, the more extreme Israel appears and the better Hamas's cause is served. That is why it uses civilians as human shields and schools from which to launch rockets. In 2007, I visited Sderot. I spoke to schoolchildren and went into two of their bomb shelters. I spoke to parents and learned about the daily trauma with which their children grow up.

There is absolute unity in Israel on the issue. Any [Israeli Government](#) who had failed to react very strongly to the barrage of rockets would have immediately been removed and replaced with a much harder-line Government than one led by [Tzipi Livni](#) or [Ehud Olmert](#). Tzipi Livni has been seriously trying to negotiate with the Palestinians, and none of us in the House should wish to see a more hard-line Government.



[Chris Mullin](#) (Sunderland South, Labour)

I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but does he think that what we have seen in Gaza in the past week is likely to reduce the number of rockets being fired into Israel or increase it?

Hon. Members:

Reduce it.



[James Arbuthnot](#) (North East Hampshire, Conservative)

Some of my hon. Friends are saying that it will reduce it, but I really do not know. All that I can say is that the awful carnage can stop, but there is no point in a mere ceasefire if it merely creates a temporary lull. If we go back to the constant cycle of Israel leaving Gaza, Hamas rearming, Hamas killing Israeli civilians so that Israelis live in constant fear and Israel going back into Gaza, everyone will continue to suffer and we will be no further forward. That is not sustainable, and action must be taken now to address the long-term concerns and break that cycle.

On the other hand, the discrepancy between the economic performance of Israel and the grinding poverty of Gaza is also unsustainable. It cannot be acceptable for people living in Palestinian areas to have an

income one tenth of that of people living in Israeli areas. We have to address those living standards, but we cannot do that without the international investment that will come only when the security situation is improved. It cannot be acceptable for the free movement of Palestinians to be constrained for ever.

The borders of Gaza have to open, but not for the smuggling of explosives and suicide bombers, as happened all of last year. Until that stops, no [Israeli Government](#) will allow free passage, and why should they? To the people of Palestine, we must send this message: there can be hope for the future, but it has to be in your hands. When Israel leaves Gaza, as it no doubt soon will, you have the opportunity to turn away from rockets, terror and death and towards development, education and prosperity. The history of the area is littered with missed opportunities. Please let this not be another one.

4:09 pm



[Richard Burden](#) (Birmingham, Northfield, Labour)

I listened carefully to the speech of [Mr. Arbuthnot](#). May I make a suggestion to him, in a spirit of understanding? Although I recognise the pictures of Sderot that he painted, because I have also been there, he may benefit from going to Gaza and speaking to Palestinians there to ascertain whether he has a legitimate and genuine understanding of their position.

To avoid doubt—because of time I cannot take interventions—let me preface my remarks with several matters that I want to put on the record. First, all states, including Israel, have the right to self-defence and a duty to defend their citizens from attack. Secondly, the Palestinians also have the right to defend themselves from attack and, under international law, the right to resist occupation. Thirdly, civilians should not be targeted or have their presence wilfully or recklessly disregarded in conflict. I therefore do not believe that firing Qassam rockets from Gaza at or near predominantly civilian areas in Israel falls within the definition of acceptable resistance.

However, the fact that those rockets are fired provides no justification for the massive attacks by air, land and sea that have already killed more than 1,000 people, 322 of them children. When medical staff, aid convoys, United Nations schools and installations have been hit, even when the high-tech Israeli army has the [GPS](#) co-ordinates for those installations, it suggests that Israel is acting in contravention of the provisions of the Geneva convention on the protection of civilians in time of war, and that the term "war crime" should be used.

I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the [Foreign Secretary](#) is making major efforts to secure a ceasefire on both sides and to get the blockade lifted, so that the 1.5 million people in Gaza will not be forced in future to live in an impoverished prison 25 miles long and between three and seven miles wide. However, people in the UK and those whom I met in the Middle East last week are not asking when the international community will express disapproval of what is happening in Gaza, but when we will put a stop to it. We need to do more to show that we are serious.

I therefore welcome the [EU's](#) decision to defer upgrading its relationship with Israel, but we need to go further than putting it on hold. Under the EU-Israel association agreement, Israel has clear obligations to respect basic standards of behaviour and of human rights. If Israel is not prepared to fulfil those obligations in practice, it cannot expect to keep receiving the privileges of the agreement, and it should be suspended. If the Geneva convention and international law are being breached so blatantly, proceedings must be brought to hold people to account.

If, as many hon. Members have suggested, there is to be an embargo on smuggling into Gaza weapons which threaten the lives of Israeli civilians, there should also be an arms embargo on the commercial or subsidised sale of arms to Israel when foreign-made F-16 fighters are attacking Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

However distasteful Israel's actions have been in past three weeks, and, I would argue, before that; however unacceptable is its refusal to renounce violence to achieve its ends; and however much it has refused to meet its obligations under UN resolutions, the road map, the Annapolis treaty or the agreement on movement and access, the Israeli people still have rights, and we should not put pre-conditions in the way of their elected representatives being a party to the negotiations that must take place or deny them a stake in the final agreement. However, if that is the case with Israel, it must also apply to the Palestinians.

I want Hamas to accept the Quartet's three conditions in theory and in practice, just as much as I want Israel to match its theoretical acceptance of those conditions with abiding by them in practice. Israel has not done that. That means finding ways in which to bring Hamas into the process, not excuses for keeping it out, and not as an alternative to dealing with President Abbas or Fatah. Unless there is unity among Palestinians, no deal will ever stick. We did not respond positively when Hamas moved to electoral politics or when it declared several unilateral ceasefires in the past few years. We squandered a second opportunity for progress when a national unity Government, involving Fatah, Hamas, independents and others was agreed in the summer of 2006. Let us not make that mistake again.

I welcome the comments that the [Minister](#) for the [Middle East](#) and Africa made in the [other place](#) recently, when he said that the British Government would welcome a national unity Government and deal with their membership. When my hon. Friend the [Minister](#) makes his winding-up speech, will he assure me that we will not only welcome such a development, but do what we can to bring it about?

4:15 pm



[Malcolm Bruce](#) (Gordon, Liberal Democrat)

I am pleased to speak after two of my colleagues on the [Select Committee](#) on International Development, the hon. Members for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) and for Birmingham, Northfield ([Richard Burden](#)), both of whom made very pertinent contributions in their own way. Importantly, we on the Committee, which has produced two reports on the occupied territories, have been increasingly depressed at the deterioration of the situation over a long period, and we are obviously horrified at the current situation.

The Department for International Development allocated \$10 million for emergency relief, mostly through [UNRWA](#), on top of £243 million that has been allocated over three years to support aid and development in the occupied territories of Palestine. However, not a penny of that money would have been needed if there had been peace. That money could have been spent in parts of the world where poor people need it just as much. It is frustrating for us that aid resources are being channelled in that way—not for development, but simply for first aid—and that conflict is costing our taxpayers.

I pay tribute to John Ging and the UNRWA team in Gaza, who are not only supporting the Gazan people through this time, but effectively sharing their suffering. UNRWA has given us detailed day-to-day information on just how horrific the situation has been. Bad and intolerable as the situation has been over the past two years, what has happened in the past three weeks has escalated the suffering, stress and humanitarian trauma to the civilian population beyond anything that can be justified by any provocation. Indeed, I am appalled at Members of this House trying to justify that degree of disproportionate action.

Those 322 children have absolutely no responsibility for anything that has happened, and they are now dead. The House should acknowledge that we cannot stand by and accept that.

Not only that, but comments have been made about the role of Hamas. Hamas was democratically elected, and however much we might dislike it or condemn some its utterances and many of its actions, the actions of the past few weeks are likely to make Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank more likely not only to support Hamas rather than less, but even to begin to wonder how they will ever live in an independent Palestinian state alongside an Israel that behaves in the way that it has behaved in the past two or three weeks. It is important to recognise that if we do not take firm action and give a lead in delivering a proper peace process, we may well create a united Palestinian unity, albeit one under Hamas. Then the international community will have to determine how to deal with it.

Our Committee did not agree on how we should deal with Hamas, but most of us took the view that we had to engage in some way. The irony is that the United Kingdom has a long history of doing precisely that kind of thing. We had to deal with [Mau Mau](#), with [EOKA](#) and with the [IRA](#). No agreement was ever achieved other than by talking to those groups before agreeing the conditions for concluding an agreement. That seems to be a lesson that we can reasonably take from history.

In a very good statement on Monday, the [Foreign Secretary](#) said that the United Kingdom

"supported resolution 1860—to uphold the standards on which Israel and the rest of us depend."—[[Hansard, 12 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 23.](#)]

However, I would suggest that that resolution goes further than that. This is the crucial point that the Foreign Secretary was making. It is not just that Israel must recognise its responsibility as a legitimate state and a member of the United Nations, with all the obligations that that entails. The point is that the international community, particularly the United Kingdom, which played such a crucial role in creating the state of Israel, would be tainted by association with breaches of international law, flagrant disregard for UN resolutions and the possible perpetration of war crimes if we failed to ensure that a member state with which we are closely associated complied with international law on terms that we subscribe to. If we fail to act, we will be tarnished with collective guilt by association.

That is what our citizens are saying so strongly to the Government. They feel that they share responsibility for the conflict, and they want the Government to accept their responsibility to use their initiative, in concert with others, to try to ensure a resolution. Surely we have to seize an opportunity from the worst and darkest hour. All this death and conflict—and the possibility, as my hon. Friend [Mr. Davey](#) said, that Israel has made a tactical error—can be turned around if the new Administration in the United States, with a lead from the United Kingdom and Europe, say that Hamas has to recognise the mistakes it has made, that Israel has to recognise its responsibility and, above all, that we all have to recognise that the Palestinian people should not be exposed to this degree of suffering in future. We have to ensure that the regime that operates in Israel and the Palestinian states is designed to give prosperity, peace and a functioning state to Israel and Palestine, because the alternative is the disintegration of the entire region.

4:20 pm



[Louise Ellman](#) (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

There is no doubt whatsoever that the loss of civilian life, particularly that of children, as shown on our television sets every day, is truly horrifying. It is extremely important that we understand who is

responsible for this deplorable situation. Responsibility in general for what is happening lies firmly with the Iranian-backed Hamas. Hamas is recognised as a terrorist organisation by the European Union, Canada and the [USA](#), and it is an uncompromising Islamist, anti-Semitic organisation, as shown by the principles set out in its charter and shown through its actions. That includes sending out suicide bombers with the deliberate intent of murdering as many Israeli civilians as possible, calling for jihad as the only solution to what it calls the Palestinian problem, seeing martyrdom as the greatest of virtues, and stating that Jews worldwide are corrupt, control the media, run the world through the protocols of the elders of Zion and stir up revolutions throughout the world. It refuses to recognise the existence of the state of Israel on the grounds that it is a religious edict to refuse to do so and states that the day of judgment will not come until the Muslims kill the Jews.

Hamas is not only about what is written in its charter, but its actions, and it has sent more than 5,000 rockets and missiles, targeted at Israeli citizens, since Israel—correctly—left Gaza. It used the ceasefire to extend its rocket range, importing Chinese and Iranian rockets with longer and longer ranges. Indeed, there are now 900,000 Israeli citizens in the range of rockets being fired from Gaza by Hamas, and it was Hamas that refused to extend the ceasefire. The action that Israel is now taking, difficult as it is, concerns targeting not civilians, but Hamas activists, its weapons, its infrastructure and its tunnels. The reason why so many civilians are tragically being killed is that Hamas callously places them in the line of fire.



[David Winnick](#) (Walsall North, Labour)

Will my hon. Friend [give way](#)?



[Louise Ellman](#) (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

No, I have no time.

That is why on 14 January, Israel made a complaint to the [United Nations Security Council](#) about Hamas using children as human shields. There is a Hamas war room under the Shifa hospital—an absolute disgrace. On 9 January, the Israeli defence forces found a map of al-Atatra, a neighbourhood of Gaza, which was used by Hamas to record the location of explosive devices. That map showed that houses in that area were booby-trapped to put civilians in the line of fire, knowing that that would cause the maximum number of civilian deaths. That is callous, outrageous and deplorable. I am surprised as well as outraged that the same people who express genuine concern about the loss of civilian life—I share those concerns—do not also condemn Hamas for its callous use of civilians as a human shield. Let us remember that the organisers and leaders of Hamas not only extol the virtues of martyrdom and jihad but proclaim, "We love death. You love life." That is what Hamas is all about.

When we rightly show our concern about the number of civilians who are injured and who die, we should remember the complaints made by Egypt, on 28 December, that Hamas has been preventing the injured from going across the border into Egypt for treatment. That is the nature of Hamas. When people jump so readily to condemn Israel for protecting its civilians, after claiming that it has a right to do so, they should not ignore the nature and deeds of Hamas, which sets out deliberately to kill as many civilians as possible.

What is the way forward? It is through the enactment of resolution 1860 by both Hamas and Israel. That can only be done through steps being taken so that rockets stop being fired on Israeli citizens on a

permanent basis. Hamas has no right to fire rockets and missiles on Israeli civilians. The Israeli settlers and soldiers have left Gaza: 8,500 settlers left, many of them removed by force, yet Hamas—



[Sylvia Heal](#) (Deputy Speaker)

Order. The hon. Lady's time is up.

4:26 pm



[Elfyn Llwyd](#) (Parliamentary Leader; Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, Plaid Cymru)

The bombing of the Shij'ia family health care centre in Gaza city, run by the Near East Council of Churches, was an outrage. The Israelis rang 15 minutes before to say that an attack was imminent. Why, therefore, was a deliberate attack being made on such a centre?

Journalists are not allowed into Gaza, as is the case in Zimbabwe, and precious little is being reported as it happens. We see things on television, but we are given only a partial view. There are many Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, including democratically elected members of Parliament. Will Israel confirm the number of Palestinian prisoners it currently holds, and when, if ever, it will release political prisoners? My party has always campaigned for a two-country solution, which is the only common-sense approach.

[Mrs. Ellman](#) was saying that innocent people will be killed from time to time. However, as Gaza is only the size of Wrexham town in north Wales, with a population of 1.5 million any bombardment is bound to create collateral damage, as anyone can see. I echo the many calls for a ceasefire, but I am not optimistic that it will happen immediately. One concrete step that has been referred to is for the European Union to suspend Israel's privileged trade agreement with Europe, which requires Israel to respect human rights. That would send a clear signal of the need for an urgent ceasefire.

There is a great deal of urgent feeling in the House about the issue, and I refer hon. Members to early-day motions 400, 408 and 423. What is the Middle East envoy—the ex-[Prime Minister](#), Mr. Blair, who has not yet set foot in Gaza—currently doing? His premises in Jerusalem occupy the entire floor of a hotel at a cost to the public purse of £700,000 per annum. I ask myself, "Is that proportionate?"



[Robert Marshall-Andrews](#) (Medway, Labour)

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. [Mrs. Ellman](#) would not [give way](#) to answer questions, so I wonder whether he will have a shot at answering this one. If there is any truth in the allegation that there is a deliberate and normal use of civilians as human shields—in other words, that they bring the attacks on themselves—why are journalists banned from Gaza when they could see precisely what is being alleged?



[Elfyn Llwyd](#) (Parliamentary Leader; Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, Plaid Cymru)

The hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right. If there was nothing to hide, journalists would obviously be free to go in. Indeed, it would be in Israel's interests to allow them free access, so that the whole world could see that, transparently, there was nothing going on that should not be going on.

Several Members have pointed out that more than 1,000 people in Gaza have been killed, including many women and children. A United Nations watchdog said recently that Israel was showing a "manifest disrespect" for the protection of children in Gaza. [The United Nations](#) Committee on the Rights of the Child has said that although Israel signed a UN protocol condemning its acts in places where children were likely to be present, they are still continuing, day after day. Obviously I want a ceasefire. I believe that we need an accord between Israel and Palestine, but of course there must be a ceasefire first.

I am disgusted by the present situation, with Israel's complete disregard of the Geneva convention in respect of protected people and with its continued illegal occupation of territories outside its pre-1967 borders. What is the [United Kingdom Government's](#) position on Israel's targeting of United Nations schools? Do they support calls from United Nations officials for a full UN-backed investigation of the bombing of Palestinian schools by Israel, with the aim of bringing those responsible to book? How do they view Israeli claims that Hamas fighters were present at al-Fakhura school in Jabaliya before it was bombed? Do they believe that the presence of fighters legitimises the bombing of a United Nations school? Those are some of the questions that urgently need answers, and no doubt they will be answered in due course.

We now know that white phosphorous is being used. Unless it is being used for shielding purposes, that in itself constitutes a contravention of the Geneva conventions.

I ask the Government to consider immediately an arms embargo on Israel similar to those imposed in 1982 and 1994. We all want to see a ceasefire, but previous calls for one have been totally ignored. The disproportionate—I use that word again—military [intervention](#) in Gaza is nothing short of a war crime, and it galls me that the international community's call for a ceasefire is being studiously ignored by Israel.

A couple of years ago, we debated whether Iraq had been in breach of United Nations resolutions. Indeed, it was the alleged breach of those resolutions that led to the British Government's justification for the subsequent attacks. On 8 January, the [United Nations Security Council](#), through resolution 1860, called for

"an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire, leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza".

Israel's Foreign [Minister](#), [Tzipi Livni](#), responded that Israel would continue its campaign, and the [BBC](#) reported that at least 50 air strikes had hit Gaza as the United Nations was passing the resolution.

Israel has form, in that its current conduct clearly mirrors its conduct in Lebanon in 2006. Why do we have these double standards? Why is Israel considered to be above international law? Could that be linked to the fact that Britain exported nearly £19 million-worth of arms to Israel in the first quarter of last year? Is that the reason? I do not know what the reason is, but it is apparent to me that Israel is acting as though it were above international law, and that cannot be right. I believe that until it starts acting responsibly and comes to the table to discuss peace, it should be considered an international pariah.

4:34 pm



[Andrew Dismore](#) (Hendon, Labour)

The violence that we continue to see in Gaza and Israel is a horrible tragedy. While no one can help but be moved by the tragic images of dead and injured innocent Palestinian women and children and the large loss of civilian life, it is important to understand why Israel felt forced to embark on military action.

For the past eight years, Israel's southern communities have faced more than 8,500 rocket, missile and mortar attacks. Over 5,500 rockets have been fired since August 2005, when Israel withdrew from the [Gaza Strip](#) in a bid to stimulate the peace process. That means, on average, one missile being fired at Israel every three hours for each of the last three and a half years. The rockets have brought death, injury, destruction and disruption to the people of southern Israel, including both Jewish and Arab people.

Despite the continual rocket fire, Israel agreed a ceasefire with Hamas. When that ended six months later, in December last year, imperfect though it was, Israel wanted to renew it. This was despite the fact that Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups used the ceasefire to fire more than 400 rockets at Israel, to build more illegal tunnels, to rearm with smuggled Iranian weapons and to train their fighters for future terrorist attacks against Israel. It was Hamas that rejected a renewal of the ceasefire—indeed, it fired 60 rockets at Israel while Foreign [Minister](#) Livni was going to Egypt to try to renew it. Along with other Palestinian groups, including [Islamic Jihad](#), Hamas fired more than 170 rockets, missiles and mortars at Israel in the six days that followed. Israel submitted two protest letters to the [UN Secretary-General](#) and the president of the [UN Security Council](#) about the increase in rocket fire. In an interview on Arabic television, Israeli [Prime Minister](#) Olmert warned Hamas to stop the rocket attacks. Both Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian Foreign [Minister](#) Aboul Gheit have put the blame for the current escalation of violence squarely on Hamas. It is clear that the international community ought to have been more engaged earlier, as the confrontation in Gaza and southern Israel developed over the previous months.

Israel's operations in Gaza have attacked Hamas command centres, weapons-smuggling tunnels, training camps, rocket-manufacturing facilities and armament storage warehouses. Israeli forces alerted Palestinian civilians ahead of planned targets, using leaflets and phone messages to urge civilians to leave the immediate area, yet a further 500 rockets have been fired from Gaza at Israel, killing four Israelis and injuring many others since 27 December. Hamas is firing Iranian Grad-Katyusha missiles, which are hitting Israeli cities almost 40 km from the Gaza strip. Almost 1 million Israelis are now in range of rocket fire. No Government can sit idly by as their citizens come under attack from rockets, missiles and mortars on a daily basis. Israel has the right to defend herself.

Attributing blame does not end the fighting, however, and I fully support our Government's efforts in working for an immediate and permanent ceasefire. I welcome the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1860, which called for just that. The text, which was introduced in Britain's name, should be immediately implemented by both Hamas and Israel.

To achieve a sustainable and durable ceasefire, there must be an end to arms trafficking. This means a complete arms embargo on Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups in Gaza. No longer can rockets be permitted to be fired at Israel, and no longer can the dire economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza be tolerated. That is why we must also see a full reopening of the Gaza crossings, with safety and security for both sides. There must be increased and improved access for humanitarian and economic assistance for

Gaza, which must be properly distributed. Neither side can secure peace and a solution to their problems through military action.

Israel did not seek this war and wants to live in peace and security with her Arab neighbours. Peace agreements were reached many years ago with Jordan and Egypt. Israel has been actively pursuing talks with President Abbas since the Annapolis conference in November 2007, and also indirect talks with Syria.

In stark contrast, Hamas, while originally democratically and fairly elected, carried out a coup in the Gaza strip in June 2007. Since then, Hamas has suppressed all forms of [opposition](#), including killing Fatah activists. Hamas uses its own people as human shields, positioning its firing positions and arms dumps among homes, schools and hospitals, inevitably increasing civilian casualties, which it then exploits for its own propaganda aims. It is Hamas whose charter still calls for the destruction of the state of Israel. It is Hamas which persecutes its own people in Gaza who are Christian, trade unionists, Fatah members or gays.

Hamas knows what it must do if it wants to be accepted into the international community. The Quartet principles require it to renounce violence, recognise Israel and accept previous international agreements and obligations. This asks no more than was asked of the [Palestine Liberation Organisation](#) in 1988, and which the [PLO](#) accepted.

However, in these depressing times it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that there is still an [Israeli-Palestinian](#) peace process. That process needs the full support of the international community and renewed and increased engagement by the incoming President Obama Administration if we are to see real progress.



[Robert Marshall-Andrews](#) (Medway, Labour)

I wonder if my hon. Friend can answer the following question, which I also put earlier. If there is systematic use by Hamas of civilians, schools, hospitals and the like in order to shield weaponry, why are journalists not allowed into the Gaza strip so that that can be verified independently?



[Andrew Dismore](#) (Hendon, Labour)

It might surprise my hon. and learned Friend to learn that I agree with him. I think journalists should be allowed in, because I think that would be in Israel's interests. Indeed, I understand that [The New York Times](#), no less, which has a reporter in Gaza, has confirmed Israel's account of the use of a school as a missile-launching site.



[Louise Ellman](#) (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

It might be helpful for my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to note that journalists have now been allowed into Gaza; indeed journalists from, among others, [The Times](#) and [TV](#) stations are there.



[Andrew Dismore](#) (Hendon, Labour)

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her [intervention](#).

The Gaza tragedy should make the international community more determined than ever to facilitate a negotiated settlement between Israel and the [Palestinian Authority](#). Israel, together with the Palestinian Authority, must actively demonstrate progress in their ongoing negotiations. Only a process that demonstrates real improvements in the situation on the ground will have the support of both the Israeli and Palestinian people, with increased security and better lives for both. The ultimate goal is that elusive two-state solution: the creation of a viable Palestinian state living next to a safe and secure Israel.

We also need more active engagement from the Arab world. In that context, I welcome the Government's actions in supporting the Arab peace initiative, which offers the full normalisation of relations in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from occupied land. My right hon. Friend the [Foreign Secretary](#) is absolutely right when he speaks of

"a 23-state solution—22 members of the [Arab League](#) plus Israel".

Only a peace agreement that has the support of the wider region can succeed.

In the few moments left available to me, I simply wish to refer to some of the impacts of the conflict in the United Kingdom. Since the start of the fighting in Gaza, more than 150 anti-Semitic incidents have been reported to the [Community Security Trust](#) from around the UK; more than 130 incidents have been reported in January, making it the worst month on record. The Gaza conflict is being used as an excuse for racism; anti-Semites are using an overseas conflict to justify their actions. Although most demonstrators voice their protests in an entirely legitimate way, there have been reports of many examples of anti-Semitic chanting, and of anti-Israeli demonstrations where Jewish, rather than specifically Israeli, symbols have been used on placards. It is despicable that we hear people on demonstrations outside the Israeli embassy in Kensington calling for the closure of Jewish shops in that area, that we hear incitement to violence and that there is violence against the police as a consequence. That is not the way that people in this country should behave. We have had a passionate but measured debate in this Chamber, and that is what we should see in the outside world. People feel strongly on both sides of this argument—Jewish people and Muslim people, those who support Israel and those who support the Palestinians—but the UK is a democracy and we must debate these issues properly and fairly, without anti-Semitism and without homophobia interfering in the discussions, passionate though they may be.

4:42 pm



[Hugo Swire](#) (East Devon, Conservative)

Those of us who were rather cynical about the prospects of the Annapolis conference always thought it was not a question of if Israel went into Gaza, but when. It has been clear for some time that America has decided that the only way to deliver a two-state solution is to marginalise Hamas and promote Fatah. It is worth remembering that almost 43 per cent. of the people of Gaza voted for Hamas, largely because of the corruption and inefficiency of the Fatah-based Government in Ramallah. Unpalatable though it may be to

some, although Israel is always cited as the only democratic country in the region, Gaza is being run by the representatives for whom it voted— Hamas won 74 out of 132 seats.

In fact, if there is a democratic deficit anywhere in the region, it is, unfortunately, perhaps in Ramallah itself: the [Palestinian Legislative Council](#) has not met for more than 17 months; not a single piece of legislation has been passed in 2 years; and President Abbas has ruled by decree since 2007, when Hamas took over Gaza. The greatest irony is that it could be argued that under basic Palestinian law, President Abbas is no longer legitimately President, as his term of office ran out last week, on 9 January—I do concede that the law has been amended in order to say that presidential elections and legislative elections should take place at the same time. Violence has been meted out in equal measure by Hamas senior figures to Fatah senior figures and vice versa.

It is also worth remembering a point that I raised with Majalli Whbee, Israel's deputy Foreign [Minister](#), when I was last in Jerusalem: that 46 democratically elected members of the [PLC](#) are under arrest in Israel, most of whom are from Hamas, including the PLC's [Speaker](#). The deputy Foreign [Minister](#) told me that he had no knowledge of that, which was curious, and that he would get back to me. If he is listening to this debate, I am still waiting.

I was cynical about Annapolis because of the weakness of President Abbas and his ability to negotiate, even on behalf of the West Bank. I was cynical about Annapolis because I could not understand how President Abbas could negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians when no one from Gaza was represented at the conference. I was cynical about Annapolis because it was [President Bush](#)'s last desperate throw, and I was cynical because it was [Prime Minister](#) Olmert's last throw.

Why did Israel decide to go into Gaza with such violence now? It would be interesting to know whether it had planned to do so before, during or after Annapolis, and again I ask the [Minister](#) whether he has any knowledge of that. It is a good time for Israel because Livni, Barak, Netanyahu and Mofaz can show how demonstrably strong they are in the run-up to the February elections. The Israeli defence force had to show that it could reach out and hit hard against its enemies following the failure of the last war in Lebanon. It needed to demonstrate to Iran, through Iranian-backed Hamas, that Israel retained the ability, capability and desire to hit out at its enemies. It took the opportunity to fill a vacuum in the [White House](#), created by an inert outgoing President and an incoming President who, regrettably, has given mixed messages to date on his attitude to the Middle East process.

I have the honour and pleasure of being chairman of the Conservative Middle East council. I, too, have visited Sderot, and I agree with my right hon. Friend [Mr. Arbuthnot](#) that what happened there is intolerable. I have met children who are traumatised by what happened, and I have seen their parents and their teachers. No one can defend what happened. However, unlike my right hon. Friend, I heard from people there who felt let down by the [Israeli Government](#) because they were not given sufficient early warning or sufficient protection. It is no good saying that the Israelis cared for them in the way that has been suggested this afternoon.

It is worth pointing out that, according to Israeli Government figures, the number of rockets fired from Gaza was reduced from hundreds in May and June to total of less than 20 in the subsequent four months. Twenty is still unacceptable, but can the Israelis be sure that they were launched by Hamas? Could they conceivably have been launched by another organisation, such as [Islamic Jihad](#), over which Hamas has little or no control? As there was no international monitoring mechanism, it is difficult to say with authority who is to blame for the breakdown of the ceasefire, although it clearly broke down when the Israeli forces launched major air and ground attacks on 4 November, killing six Hamas operatives.

It is impossible in the short time that we have been given this afternoon to discuss what is going on in the Middle East. I have been to Gaza, and the problems have not arisen in the past 19 days; they have gone on for the past 19 months.

4:48 pm



[David Winnick](#) (Walsall North, Labour)

I am certainly not an apologist for Hamas. I do not support its general attitude towards Israel or its philosophical attitude in wanting a religious state. I certainly do not support rocket attacks on Israel. They are not right, and I doubt whether that is how the Palestinian people in general want the dispute with Israel to be pursued. In view of what my hon. Friend [Mr. Dismore](#) said, there can be no justification whatever for attacks on individuals in this country, whether Jews or Muslims, because of the situation in Gaza or anywhere in the world. Such attacks must be deplored, and I am sure that we all do so.

The way in which Israel has acted, however, since the invasion of Gaza has rightly horrified international opinion. It has certainly horrified me. Israel has demonstrated what can only be described as a totally callous indifference to civilian casualties. I do not accept the view that has been expressed by some who have put the Israeli viewpoint today that the reason for the civilian casualties is that Hamas has used schools, mosques and so on. I believe that Israel simply does not care how many casualties it has caused among civilians. It is indifferent, unfortunately, to Palestinian lives.

Reference has been made to the 315 Palestinian children who have been killed, as well as the 95 women, quite apart from the number of those who have been seriously injured. Some have been paralysed for life. I read yesterday of a four-year-old who has been paralysed for life, since her chances of a successful operation are very remote indeed. Her two sisters, aged eight and two, were killed outright as a result of Israeli action attacking their house. Can that be described as collateral damage?

I referred to international opinion, and if I am horrified by what has happened it is easy to understand what is felt in Arab streets. Would things be any different if what was happening had resulted in so many Jews around the world being treated in such a way? What would be the attitude of the international Jewish community if that was the case? I know what I would feel, and I am of Jewish origin. I would be protesting in the strongest possible way. If I do that, should I not protest today and at every opportunity about what is happening to Palestinians? Are the lives of Palestinians worth less than those of Israelis? I cannot accept that for one moment.

In view of the excellent speech by my right hon. Friend [Sir Gerald Kaufman](#), let me say that it is wrong to come to the conclusion that Jews all over the world somehow unanimously support what Israel is doing. Quite a number of Jews, in Britain and elsewhere, are not only opposed but are strenuously opposed, in every possible way, to what is being done. It certainly should not be considered that it is being done in the name of Jews.

[Mr. Swire](#) is right. Inevitably, there is a cynical feeling that as the election in Israel approaches, rival attempts are being made to show who can be stronger and who can stand up more to Hamas. It is very difficult to come to any conclusion other than that what has occurred since 1 January has to some extent at least been determined by the coming election.

Again, incidents have occurred and I want to mention just two, apart from what has happened today to the United Nations headquarters. Two UN schools were bombed, and 40 died. One other incident should not

be overlooked. Israelis took more than 100 Palestinians to what was considered a safe house. What happened? Twenty-four hours later, the Israeli military shelled that same house, killing 30 or more. I only wish that my hon. Friend [Mrs. Ellman](#), who put the Israeli point of view—I respect her point of view, however much I disagree with it and however strongly I feel that she is wrong—had found herself in some way able to criticise what Israel has done.

I have always advocated a political solution. There cannot be a military solution. Israel cannot be destroyed and can defend itself against any group or state, so we need a political solution. I am afraid that I am not persuaded that Israel has yet reached the point where it generally wants a Palestinian state—not some kind of statelet or satellite, but a genuine, viable and independent state. When Israel comes to that point of view, and is really willing to negotiate in an honest manner to end the injustice that the Palestinians have suffered for so many years—more than 60, now—that will be the time for a political solution that, hopefully, will end the kind of bloodshed that we have seen in the past few weeks.

4:54 pm



[Alistair Burt](#) (Shadow Minister, Communities and Local Government; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

It is a privilege to take part in a debate in which extraordinarily well-crafted and well-expressed strong views have been stated with passion and honesty on both sides. I am a Conservative Friend of Israel, and have been for as long as I can remember. The organisation was started by my Conservative predecessor in Bury, [Michael Fidler](#). I do not know any friend of Israel who is not profoundly saddened and distressed by the events that led up to the conflict in Gaza, and by the conflict itself.

I am also a strong supporter of the Christian relief organisation [World Vision](#), and I have visited its work in Bethlehem. I was in touch with [Charles Clayton](#), the director in Jerusalem, only today. I support the statement that World Vision issued, which says:

"World Vision continues to hold all parties to the conflict responsible for protecting the rights of children. The life of every child in Gaza is currently endangered. The safety of Israeli children in areas near the Israeli-Gaza border is also at risk. World Vision is increasingly concerned about the lasting psychological impact of the current crisis amid reports of severe trauma among children."

We pray for all the work that the people in that organisation do, and for their safety.

My stance is the same as that which we have heard expressed by so many others. There is no argument about the horror of Gaza. The issue is what can be done to prevent the conflict from being yet another bloody chapter in a cycle of bloody chapters, with more still to come. I was at school in Bury in north Manchester. I grew up with the 1967 war, not as a gentile inflicted with the guilt of the holocaust, but understanding what the phrase, "sweep Israel into the sea", actually meant to the families of the Jewish children with whom I was at school. As I became an adult, I thought that that expression of feeling about Israel had gone for ever. There was slow, gradual progress in the Middle East, as enemies became perhaps not friends, but at least partners in doing something about the situation. Bilateral agreements were made, land was given back, and Israel came out of Sinai and Gaza. Slowly but surely, people managed to make something of the tragedies of the past.

However, there have always been those who would undermine that progress; those who resorted to terror—to suicide bombings or indiscriminate terrorist acts—and those who used terror as a cover for their state's views. There were those who had a mindset that just could not accept 1948; it was not that they did

not know what to do with the occupied lands, but they actually did not accept the fact of 1948 at all. Eventually, it became possible for a state, Iran, to say, at the highest level that the state of Israel should be wiped from the map—again, that phrase comes back. Iran's proxies, Hamas, took action.

What was Israel to do about that, time and again? Nothing? Should its hands be tied? [Sir Alan Beith](#) put it accurately: what do the [Israeli Government](#) do when their citizens are constantly terrified? Nothing? Do they say, "There's nothing we can do?" What is a state to do when its opponents hide their weapons among children and in villages? Should it say, "We can't attack because there's a disparity in firepower?" That did not stop the [NATO](#) allies from attacking Serbia. Disparity in firepower does not stop our work in Iraq and Afghanistan. So what is Israel to do?



[Alistair Carmichael](#) (Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland and Northern Ireland; Orkney & Shetland, Liberal Democrat)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?



[Alistair Burt](#) (Shadow Minister, Communities and Local Government; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

No.

Sooner or later, the attacks and the rockets become Gaza, today. If the tragedy of Gaza, and the lives now being lost, are not to be part of a bloody chapter and lost in vain, the peace and the ceasefire that come about as a result of the conflict have to be lasting. There is only one way in which that can be ensured. Hamas, its allies and the states that support it have to move, and have to be seen to be moving, inexorably towards an acceptance of the state of Israel and an absence of terror. The situation has to stop. If that acceptance were stated tonight, the Israeli troops would be out of Gaza. We have to find a way in which that can be done.

It has started to become acceptable to say, "Perhaps there's an answer with no Israel." That mindset has crept into world politics again; it has to go. The terrible conflict will continue until those who give any form of support to that mindset can be prevented from going to the people who have it and saying, "Israel has to go."

History in the Middle East is important. It is important anywhere, but perhaps it is more important in the Middle East than in most places. However, sooner or later, the past of our fathers and grandfathers has to be seen as less important than the future of our children. Every great conflict between peoples and nations has had its answer, with somebody, somewhere being prepared to let go.



[Mark Hendrick](#) (PPS (Rt Hon Jack Straw, Lord Chancellor & Secretary of State), Ministry of Justice; Preston, Labour)

rose—



[Alistair Burt](#) (Shadow Minister, Communities and Local Government; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

Over a period of decades, Israel has let go a number of times. Now we have to see another side be prepared to let go of its past to make progress in future. Only if the future and the present become more important in the Middle East than the past will we see an end to this.



[Mark Hendrick](#) (PPS (Rt Hon Jack Straw, Lord Chancellor & Secretary of State), Ministry of Justice; Preston, Labour)

Will the hon. Gentleman [give way](#)?



[Alistair Burt](#) (Shadow Minister, Communities and Local Government; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

The hon. Gentleman can make his own speech.

5:00 pm



[Parmjit Dhanda](#) (Gloucester, Labour)

I was fortunate to represent the Government for a year as [Minister](#) for community cohesion. One of my roles was to try to tackle radicalisation, particularly in the Muslim community, and to work with the Jewish community to try to protect it from anti-Semitism. I support but also pity my successors, because what is going on in Gaza will make their lives extremely difficult. I am pleased and proud about the bonds and relationships that we managed to strike up, not least those with the [Chief Rabbi](#) and the Board of Deputies, and I think that we achieved some great things. However, I am afraid that we are going to see—and Jewish friends tell me that it is already starting to happen—a greater incidence of anti-Semitism as a consequence of what is happening and, I can only assume, greater radicalisation in the UK, as people become angry about the scenes that they see on their television sets.

What of Gaza itself? If things carry on as they are—I would not just call it something disproportionate or call it a war; it has become a slaughter, it is so severe—I fear that Gaza will end up as nothing but bandit land when this all over and done with. Ultimately, it will not be Hamas that the Israelis have to deal with but far more extreme organisations such as al-Qaeda—both the core organisation and its derivatives—which will make life much harder.

In my [constituency](#), in the past few days, I was fortunate enough to spend some serious, good time with young Muslims who are trying to do everything that they can to keep the bonds of community in the local area. Three young girls—Afifa, Tasnim and Suphiya—took it upon themselves to organise a march in the town centre last Saturday. Nearly 300 people attended, and they were determined that it should be about children, women and people of all faiths showing sympathy for people who had been killed on all sides of

the conflict. They wanted to make it clear, too, that they condemned the rockets from Hamas, as well as the disproportionate action by the Israeli military.

The [TV](#) pictures are graphic. We have seen footage of children with bullet holes caused by bullets that have not ricocheted but have gone clean through their bodies. [The United Nations](#) has used the most condemnatory language imaginable after its schools were hit in the incident described by my hon. Friend [Mr. Winnick](#). Constituents have raised another incident with me that disturbed them a great deal. Children were left starving, clinging to their mothers' dead bodies, as the Israeli military would not allow rescue workers into a building for four days. All those things, I fear, are likely to heighten the radicalisation in the UK and across the world and, ultimately, will not help the Israeli people or their Government.

There is no military solution. At the end of the day, all parties must get together and talk, and I must tell my hon. Friend the [Minister](#) that we have heard some extremely interesting contributions on the subject of Hamas and the fact that it is a democratically elected organisation. What do we do, and what will the incoming [US President](#) do, with regard to the dialogue with Hamas? As difficult as elements of Hamas are to deal with, what do we do to ensure that that dialogue takes place?

In the very brief time that I have left, I want to talk about the meeting that I and a delegation of [Labour Friends of Israel](#) had with [Shimon Peres](#). It is worth looking at some of the things that he has said and written over the years about the relationship of Israel and the Palestinian territories with Europe. He has proposed that Israel might one day become a member of the EU, and I have no problem with that. However, we would have to ensure that the necessary leverage and strict provisos were in place to ensure that Israel lived in harmony and peace with its neighbours and that it respected the human rights and territory of the Palestinian people.

If we could get those safeguards in place, it might be that Shimon Peres is on to something. Right now, when so much carnage is taking place, that sounds as realistic as any other solution.

5:05 pm



[Clare Short](#) (Birmingham, Ladywood, Independent Labour)

I want to use the six minutes available to me to report on a recent visit that I made with European parliamentarians to Gaza, and to try and correct some of the propaganda and untruths that have been spread across the airwaves and that have been repeated here in the Chamber today.

We visited in early November, and we found Gaza to be besieged, with people suffering acute shortages because Israel had closed the crossing-points. Schools lacked paper, pencils and pens, and there were shortages of food, drinking water, drugs, medical equipment and virtually everything else. As a consequence, nearly half the children and most of the women in Gaza are anaemic. The main hospital was under great strain even before the present terrible bombardment began, and the president of the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) testified yesterday that it is now in an absolutely terrible condition.

There is also a terrible smell of sewage along the sea front, because Israel will not allow the importation of the parts needed to build an essential sewage treatment plant. Civil engineers are available and money has been committed, but Israel blocks the project, with the result that raw sewage goes into the sea. Also, the Israeli navy fires on and attacks fishermen if they go beyond a few miles out. Hungry people therefore eat polluted fish and are constantly sick.

As we left, Israel blocked the import of EU-supplied fuel, with the result that the power plant—which had already been partly bombed—had to stop operation and most of Gaza was cast into darkness. Thus, the people of Gaza were besieged and suffering even before the terrible bombardment began on 27 December.

The present problems all flow from the response by Israel, the EU and the UK to the Palestinian people daring to vote for a Hamas Government in January 2006. Those elections were monitored by large numbers of international observers, all of whom said that they were free and fair. After the elections, however, the UK and EU adopted an approach that cravenly supported extreme Israeli and, of course, US policy. They refused to recognise the properly elected Hamas Government and instead set out to divide and rule the Palestinian people.

That approach was justified by the claim that Hamas is a terrorist organisation. The claim has been repeated today, but what does it mean? As [Richard Burden](#) said earlier, international law holds that people in an occupied territory are entitled to resist occupation. They are not entitled to target civilians—no power is, although Israel is never held to account for what it does. In fact, Gaza's home-made rockets cannot be targeted accurately, so they illegally injure civilians. That is wrong and has been denounced by everyone.

However, we need to be clear about proportionality, which is one of the conditions of the international rules of war. According to the Israeli human rights organisation [B'Tselem](#), in the seven years between the first of those primitive rockets being launched and the start of the current massacre, the rockets killed 13 Israelis and one foreigner. That is terrible but, in the same period, Israel killed 4,781 Palestinians: nearly 3,000 of them were in Gaza, and one in seven of them was a child. How can the rockets justify the current slaughter? It is all regrettable, but the slaughter is not justified by the rockets. It is disgraceful that the claim that it does has been repeated constantly in this Chamber.

In addition, there was a ceasefire negotiated through Egypt. Hamas held to it for five months, but Israel breached it in an amazing assault in early November and by its intensification of the blockade. The fact that Hamas agreed to the ceasefire and held to it has been written out of the picture and is never brought to public attention. So all these claims that the rockets justify the attack or that Hamas would not agree a ceasefire are untrue. Just as in the case of the Iraq war, the slaughter is justified by a constant litany of lies. That is one of the things that is enraging young Muslims in our country and across the world.

Once we were in Gaza, we met the elected parliamentarians who were not in prison—there were pictures in the Parliament of all those who had been imprisoned by the Israelis—and we had detailed discussions with [Prime Minister](#) Haniya. He said that the west had asked three things of them before it would recognise Hamas's authority and negotiate with them: first, to recognise Israel; secondly, to halt violence; and thirdly, to accept all previous agreements negotiated with the [PLO](#). He said that Hamas had responded by saying, first, that if a Palestinian state was established on 1967 boundaries, they would recognise the agreement and declare a long-term ceasefire. It has already been made clear that that is their position. That is another thing that is lied about.

Secondly, Hamas had negotiated and held to a ceasefire. That, therefore, dealt with the claim about violence. Thirdly, on previous agreements, notably Oslo, which it thought a very bad agreement—and I agree; it undermined the position of the Palestinian people—it recognised that the agreement was properly reached by the PLO, which had the authority to do so at the time. So it seems to me that Hamas has met the demands of the west, yet still no negotiations and no contact occur. Instead, the present massacre is allowed to take place.

Why will the UK and the EU not recognise Hamas? Why will the UK not hold Israel to international law? Why do we not take action under the Geneva convention? We are completely unbalanced. On the basis of

international law, there could be a settlement. [The UK](#) and the EU allow Israel to break the law, so there cannot be peace and a settlement. The trouble will go on indefinitely and we will all reap the wreckage of it.

5:11 pm



[Chris Mullin](#) (Sunderland South, Labour)

[Clare Short](#) has put some valuable first-hand information on the record this afternoon in what has been a pretty good debate. [Alistair Burt](#) asked what Israel was to do in response to the rockets fired at it. In the 1970s and 1980s in this country, we suffered a number of terrorist atrocities that killed large numbers of our citizens and were indiscriminate and absolutely unforgivable, but we did not go and level west Belfast in response. Governments of both persuasions looked for a way of establishing contact with the perpetrators and at seeing what could be done to engage with them. Ultimately, after 20 patient years, we achieved peace.

I hold no brief for Hamas, but I am sorry to say that Israel has only itself to blame for the rise of Hamas. If Israel had made more effort to engage with moderate Palestinians and dealt with its own fundamentalists, the extremist virus, if that is what it is, would have never have taken hold in Gaza.

I shall make three points. The word "unacceptable" has been used by spokesmen on all three Front Benches this afternoon. In the circumstances, the word "unacceptable" is not wrong, but it is wholly inadequate, given what we have witnessed in the past few weeks. I, like others who have spoken, believe that what we have witnessed are war crimes. They are out of proportion to the undoubted provocation that has occurred.

The use of white phosphorous flares has been mentioned. Those are imported from the United States, incidentally. The other day the Israelis dropped a 1 tonne bomb on the house of a Hamas leader in a crowded residential area. They killed him, they killed his family and they killed many of his neighbours. Anyone who drops a 1 tonne bomb on a crowded residential area is not entitled to be surprised by the consequences. Today, I gather, they have been shelling multi-storey housing blocks, in addition to the UN compound. I accept that they do not target civilians, as Israeli spokesmen repeatedly say, but they do not care whether they hit civilians or not. That has been clear. I also agree with those who said that it is utterly counter-productive from the point of view of Israel to proceed in this way. It will not stop the rockets and it will recruit a new generation of young men and women to extremist causes because of the experience that they are undergoing now.

My second point is that I do not believe that, under its current management, Israel has any intention of allowing a viable Palestinian state to be built. One has only to look at the advance of the settlements across the West Bank—330,000 people are living there at the moment, and 12,000 came immediately after Israel pulled 8,000 people out of Gaza. It has been importing zealots from all over the world. They are not the original citizens of Israel or their heirs; people from comfortable addresses in Brooklyn have been brought in to colonise the West Bank—and those people have a fall-back position if it all goes wrong.

A while ago in my [constituency](#), I attended a talk given by a Christian woman from Bethlehem. She brought slides that showed how this accursed wall that Israel has built surrounds the city and described the humiliation that its citizens, Christian and Muslim, have to go through to get in and out. She told of how the situation has collapsed the economy. The wall appears to be in large part about stealing Palestinian land, because it separated a lot of farmers from their olive groves. The wall diverts to take in places of

historic interest and goes right up against people's houses. It may be about defence in part, but I believe that it is also to a large extent about stealing land. I do not believe that the people who built the wall are fundamentally interested in achieving a two-state settlement.

I understand the position of [Her Majesty's Government](#). They have tried to adopt a balanced and restrained approach. I commend their efforts to achieve a ceasefire, but it is time to recognise that we and the European Union have no influence whatever on the current [Israeli Government](#). The only country in the world with such influence is the United States, which has chosen consistently and over a long period not to use it.



[Clare Short](#) (Birmingham, Ladywood, Independent Labour)

The EU has a trade treaty with a human rights conditionality that gives Israel privileged access to our markets. Should we not just invoke the conditionality? That is serious leverage, and we should use it.



[Chris Mullin](#) (Sunderland South, Labour)

The right hon. Lady anticipates me—we should indeed do exactly that, and one or two other things besides.

I was discussing America. I hope that things will be different under President Obama, but I am not optimistic given the extent to which the Democratic party is dependent on Jewish votes and how well organised that lobby is in the United States. The only influence that we can use is with the new Administration in the United States; we do not have any serious influence that I have noticed with the [Israeli Government](#), and neither does any other EU country.

Finally, the only way forward for us, faced with what we have witnessed in recent weeks, is sanctions of one sort or another. They could be economic and relate to trade agreements with the EU, as the right hon. Lady mentioned. They could be military—we certainly should not be selling weapons to the Israelis; why we are still doing so is a mystery to me. Sanctions could also be diplomatic. In the circumstances, it would not be unreasonable to think of withdrawing our ambassador to Israel and sending the Israeli ambassador home.

5:18 pm



[Richard Younger-Ross](#) (Shadow Culture, Media and Sport Minister; Teignbridge, Liberal Democrat)

There have been a number of excellent speeches this afternoon. I commend [Mr. Mullin](#) for making some excellent points and I should like to bring light to what was said by [Clare Short](#), who spoke with passion about the reality on the ground in Gaza.

[Mr. Swire](#) touched on the historic nature of the issue, and a number of Members have tried to clutch at some point at which all this started. There is a great temptation for some to say that it all started when

Hamas, or whoever, started firing rockets into Israel. That is a very simplistic way of looking at this conflict, and it takes us nowhere.

A couple of years ago, I visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, I bumped into an old lady on the streets and was introduced to her as a British [Member of Parliament](#). She said, "I'm glad you've come because you need to sort out the mess that you started." In some people's view, the history of the problem goes right back to the 1920s. To argue that a person is guilty for this or that action takes us nowhere.

I wish briefly to discuss a small incident that affects a constituent of mine, and then touch on a general point about war crimes. On 30 December 2008 at about 05:30 hours [EMT](#), an aid ship, the [MV Dignity](#), was 53 miles off the coast of Israel when it was rammed by a coastguard cutter vehicle from the Israeli navy. It bore a Gibraltar flag and therefore sailed with British protection. There were 16 passengers on board, and aid to be taken to Gaza. There were three doctors—one Irish, one English, and one Palestinian. Also on board was [Cynthia McKinney](#), an American Congresswoman, and reporters from [CNN](#) and al-Jazeera. The ship was organised by the Free Gaza Movement.

The ship left Larnaca, Cyprus, at 7 pm on the evening of 29 December. At 4.55 am on 30 December, it was about 70 miles off the Israeli coast when those on board saw big searchlights at the stern. For about 30 minutes, the searchlights hovered around them, occasionally being taken away and brought back on. Flares were put up into the air by the Israelis. Two gun boats had been circling them for this period, with no radio contact despite calls from the master of the Dignity. The Israelis turned off the searchlights and all went quiet. Then, without warning, there was a massive crash in the bow, the Dignity began to splinter and suffered severe damage to the bow. The Dignity began to take on water but, thankfully, was not sinking. The master of the Dignity immediately put out a mayday call but got no response. The Israelis eventually spoke, stating that those on board were terrorists and threatening to shoot at the Dignity. They demanded that the Dignity return to Larnaca, but it did not have enough fuel to do so. Eventually, the Dignity received help from the Lebanese and headed for Lebanon guided by the Lebanese navy.

That prompts serious questions about the conduct of the Israeli navy, in that it can make an unprovoked attack on a ship taking aid and supplies to the people of Gaza. If the Israelis genuinely thought that there were terrorists on board the ship, why did they not do what any British naval vessel would do—try to board it? Why did they not try to find out what was being carried on the ship? No—instead they rammed it, putting everyone's lives at risk. I know that the [Foreign Secretary](#) has promised to look into this incident, but I hope that there will be a full investigation. If these events are proved to be true, I hope that the Israeli ambassador will be called in to see the Foreign Secretary so that it can be explained to him that this is not acceptable behaviour and is against the [laws](#) of the sea.

Let me turn briefly to the issue of war crimes. If white phosphorous has been used—it looks very likely that it has—and one looks at the overall way in which the Israelis have hemmed in and treated the Palestinians in Gaza, they have committed war crimes. People will argue that it was a one-off, that it was an accident and they did not mean to do it, or that it was justifiable in the circumstances. However, if a nation has a track record of breaking international law in such incidents, one has to question what people's motives were and whether they really knew what they were doing. In Lebanon, 1 million unexploded cluster bombs were left lying on the ground, 90 per cent. of which were fired in the last 72 hours before the deal was done in New York and the start of the ceasefire. If that is not using cluster bombs as mines, I do not know what is, and that is a war crime.

5:24 pm



[Phyllis Starkey](#) (Milton Keynes South West, Labour)

We have heard some excellent speeches, and I associate myself with the remarks of [Mr. Ancram](#). I add my voice to his in saying that the moderate elements of Hamas must be engaged in the discussions on the way forward.

I wish to make three points to which I hope the [Minister](#) will respond. First, after the ceasefire—we all hope that it will be immediate, although we have been saying that for rather longer than we ought to have to—it is absolutely imperative that measures are put in place to stop the previous cycle. In that cycle there has been a ceasefire, then measures put in place that create a period of quiet, during which the underlying cause of all the problems, which is the Israeli occupation, is deepened, not lightened. The violence then breaks out again and we go through the cycle for the nth time.

The conditions that are put in place after the ceasefire, with international observers, must protect not just the rights and security of the Israelis by preventing armaments from being smuggled for use against civilians, but the rights and security of Palestinians. Thus far, all agreements have failed to respect and protect their rights and security, and the Israelis have no interest in doing so—quite the reverse. The international monitors, observers, forces or whatever they are must protect the rights and security of the Palestinians not just in Gaza but in the West Bank and [East Jerusalem](#): only then will we stop the continuous expansion of settlements, the roadblocks and the Israelis' ability to nip in any time they fancy and assassinate somebody whom they think might be about to threaten them.

My second point is about the serious allegations of human rights abuses, which have been detailed by a number of hon. Members. They have been made by the UN, which we have a duty to support, not by some tin-pot reporter from [The New York Times](#). They have been made also by the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) and a variety of human rights organisations, including Israeli ones. There have been attacks on a [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) convoy and on [UNRWA](#) schools. I am sorry that [Mr. Dismore](#) is no longer [in his place](#), because UNRWA was there at the time and states categorically that there were no militants in that school or anywhere near it. I really do not know how some reporter from [The New York Times](#) coming in afterwards, presumably embedded with the Israeli troops, has anything to offer.

There have also been attacks on [ICRC](#) and UN personnel and ambulances. Children and other civilians have been shot in the chest and head. There was the white phosphorus attack on the UNRWA headquarters, which halted all aid, as well as attacks on a media building and a wing of the Shifa hospital. The most sickening thing was that at the very moment today when the Israeli Defence [Minister](#) was at last admitting that Israel did hit the UNRWA site and that it was a "grave error", the Israeli spokesperson Mr. Regev was still on television saying, "Oh, well, it wasn't us. It was probably Hamas. How do you know it wasn't them who were dropping phosphorus?" I hope that that destroys his credibility, if he had any, once and for all.

The Israelis have a stated policy of what they regard as acceptable civilian deaths. It was printed in the [Washington Post](#) in 2006. At that time, the agreed Israeli policy was that it was okay to attack militants, as long as only up to 3.14 innocent civilians—a precise little figure—were killed for every terrorist killed. If children were killed, the number was a bit more stringent. The exact figure was not given, but it was fewer than three civilian deaths allowed. That was the Israelis' policy, in writing, in 2006. I have no idea what it is now, but it seems to have been multiplied by about 100. The [UK Government](#) must support independent investigations into the abuses and make sure that Israel is held accountable.

My final point is about the EU trade agreement. I am glad that the [European Parliament](#) has held back from ratifying it and that the [European Commission](#) has stopped all discussion. The trade agreement is a privilege, not a right. It for us in the European Union to give, not for Israel to demand. It has human rights clauses, and when it was introduced in Parliament, the then Conservative [Minister William Waldegrave](#) gave Members clear assurances that if those clauses were breached, the agreement could be suspended. That is what we should do now, as they have clearly been breached. Israel has breached and effectively suspended the agreement by breaking its part of the bargain.

I want our Government to insist that the EU convokes the responsible human rights sub-committee to examine the evidence of human rights abuses. It should examine not just those in Gaza but, for example, the fact that Israel has just banned the two Arab parties in Israel from participating in the elections, thus effectively disfranchising the one fifth of the Israeli population who are Arab-Israelis. That is not in line with EU principles of human rights and democracy. Such actions have disqualified seven elected Members of the Knesset from standing again. All the examples that I have outlined are unacceptable and contrary to Israel's claims to be a beacon of democracy. The human rights abuses have breached the agreement, and we must work in the EU to suspend it; otherwise, all our human rights clauses become dead letters and the EU will be unable to uphold its intrinsic values of human rights and democracy.

5:30 pm



[George Galloway](#) (Bethnal Green & Bow, Respect)

I say to the Chair of the [Foreign Affairs Committee](#), who is not [in his place](#), that the international community is not impotent, but merely feigns impotence as an excuse for its failure to carry out its duties. Although the Minister's words were more robust, he essentially masked the same inaction as the languid and complacent [Foreign Secretary](#), who performed in front of us on Monday.

Compare and contrast British diplomacy on the subject that we are discussing with our response to Zimbabwe or, more particularly, the Russian conflict with Georgia. The Foreign Secretary was everywhere then, lecturing the Russians on what they must do. He even flew to Kiev, stood on the dividing line, and told Russia what the international community required of it.

On Gaza, our Ministers boast of writing a UN resolution, which has been completely ignored. I would be embarrassed to say that I was the author of a resolution—which passed, not with international consensus, as the [Minister](#) claimed, but with the abstention of the United States, the only vote that mattered—if it were then ignored and the Government had no intention of doing anything to make its terms effective. That is what we have.

The Foreign Secretary says that he does not want what he calls gesture politics, which were supported widely in the House today, such as an arms embargo, recalling ambassadors and requiring the withdrawal of Israeli ambassadors, because he does not want to isolate Israel. However, he and the Government were at the forefront of those who isolated the elected Government of Palestine, which was Hamas. They do not like to talk about it now. They prefer to talk about President Abbas, who illegally occupies the presidential seat in Ramallah. They refuse to acknowledge that the Palestinian people voted for Hamas.

I have never been a supporter of Hamas. Like the noble and right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir [Gerald Kaufman](#)), I was, all my life, a supporter and friend of the late President Arafat. The Israeli attitude to President Arafat and Fatah when they were in power was exactly the same as their attitude to the Palestinian Administration of Hamas. Israel drowned Arafat's Administration in blood through a

policy of assassination, settlement, wall-building and economic embargo. [The British Government](#) wholeheartedly supported the embargo on Gaza to punish the Palestinian people for voting for a Hamas Administration.

The Government's double standards in this affair are so brazen that people outside are boiling with rage. If that is not so clear in this building, people outside are furious. The danger of radicalisation, especially of the Muslim youth in this country, is clear and present. The Government are always looking for some cleric to whom to refuse a visa, or some Islamic organisation to proscribe to try to curb radicalisation. How radical does the [Minister](#) believe that [British Muslims](#) feel now, as they watch on the news the bombing of the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) and the slaughter of children that has been adumbrated here today? The Government's policy of tackling extremism and radicalisation has been set back by their complacency and ineffectual policy on Gaza, especially when compared with their militancy on subjects such as Russia and Georgia.

I do not have time to say all that I have to say, but I want to say something to those who have been boasting about going to Sderot. I am amazed at how many [Members of Parliament](#) have been to Sderot. Did any of them see the ruins of the Palestinian villages on which Sderot is built or the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people from Sderot and the south of Israel? Did any of them know that the refugee camps of Gaza are filled with the people who used to live in the villages on which Sderot is built?

This did not start on 27 December. With respect to [Dr. Starkey](#), who made a great speech, it did not even start in 1967, when Sderot and other places were cleared. It started in this building, when [Arthur Balfour](#), on behalf of one people, promised a second people the land that belonged to a third people. We are the authors of this tragedy.

Everything that has flowed has flowed as a result of that declaration. For that reason, if for no other, the [British Foreign Office](#) needs to pull its finger out and stand up and be counted, alongside the British people demonstrating on the streets of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Edinburgh, Glasgow and elsewhere. Let us see some urgency from the [Minister](#). Action speaks louder than words. So far, we have had no action from this Government at all.

5:36 pm



[Mohammad Sarwar](#) (Glasgow Central, Labour)

The sustained acts of brutal aggression to which the inhabitants of Gaza are being subjected at the hands of the [Israeli Government](#) are simply unacceptable and must be condemned. Such acts of aggression are not just disproportionate; they are outrageously disproportionate.

In its heavy-handed approach, the Israeli military has given a terrifying display of its military might, killing more than 1,000 people, including 300 children. Does the Israeli Government truly believe that those innocent young children were terrorists firing rockets? The Israeli Government are also responsible for injuring more than 4,000 people, destroying thousands of homes and reducing countless buildings to their foundations. In doing so, not only have they broken established rules of international law, but they have brought shame on humanity and the entire world.

The brutal scenes that we have witnessed on our television screens and read about in our newspapers have horrified the vast [majority](#) of the British public, including in my [constituency](#), who support the Palestinian cause and feel strongly that we have so far failed the Palestinians in the current crisis. I pay tribute to the

tens of thousands of people who have peacefully marched and demonstrated throughout the UK to show their solidarity with the people of Gaza at this difficult time and to demand an end to the bloody violence.

The call for peace has come from members of all faith communities. I would like in particular to thank the group [Jews for Justice for Palestinians](#) for its recent statement in *The Times*, which was signed by more than 500 Israeli academics, artists and writers, calling for an immediate end to the slaughter in Gaza. They have asked for an end to the blockade, the opening of dialogue with Hamas, without which there can be no durable peace, an investigation into war crimes that may have been committed by any party to the conflict and the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement until Israel fulfils the basic human rights conditions on which it is predicated. I congratulate Jews for Justice for Palestinians on issuing that statement.

It is important to stress that the actions of the Israeli Government should not reflect negatively on Britain's Jewish community. As my right hon. Friend [Sir Gerald Kaufman](#) pointed out, such acts go completely against the ethos and morals of the Jewish faith. The atrocities being committed by the Israeli Government will do nothing to achieve peace and stability in the region. They will only cause more hatred and suffering, further damage and delay any possible peace process and make the world a more dangerous place, giving a propaganda victory to terrorist groups, which will use them to mobilise more support and radicalise young people around the world. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is now desperately dire as several aid agencies have reported that Gaza's population of 1.5 million is in urgent need of food, shelter, fuel and basic medical aid. That follows on from months of deprivation arising from Israeli restrictions and the siege.

It is important to clarify a couple of myths put forward by the Israeli Government. This conflict did not begin 19 days ago with the firing of Hamas rockets into Israel. It began 60 years ago with the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. The ceasefire in Gaza was not broken 19 days ago by the firing of Hamas rockets into Israel. It was broken 10 days into an agreement previously made by Israel to end the inhumane siege of Gaza. The Israeli Government have, throughout the current crisis, used their military might to cause the relentless destruction of infrastructure and they have inflicted misery on innocent Palestinian people. In their excessive use of military force, they have shown little, if any, restraint while wreaking utter carnage in Gaza. It is time that we began to hold them to account. After 60 years of waiting for peace and justice—60 failed years—we owe it to the people of Palestine to find a lasting solution to this conflict.

5:40 pm



[Keith Simpson](#) (Shadow Minister, Foreign Affairs; Mid Norfolk, Conservative) [Link to this](#) | [Hansard source](#) | [Video match this](#)

As a number of hon. Members have said, this has been an excellent debate. There have been somewhere in the region of 20 speeches, many of which were made with great passion. In the two years in which I have been a member of the [shadow](#) foreign affairs team, I have attended many debates on the Middle East, and I recognise that many hon. Members who speak in these debates often take one side or another, but they usually speak with a great deal of generosity. This week we have debated the tragic subject of Gaza three times: after the statement on Monday, during Foreign Office questions on Tuesday and in this debate.

I shall touch briefly on the contributions of five of my right hon. and hon. Friends. My right hon. and learned Friend [Mr. Ancram](#) spoke with a great deal of knowledge not only of the Middle East, but of the difficult task of trying to negotiate between two groups of people whose policies and views it is almost

impossible to reconcile. He has done that in [Northern Ireland](#), and he is doing it now in the Middle East. My hon. Friend [Mr. Clappison](#) has always been a staunch supporter of the state of Israel, and is a pragmatist in many respects. He argued strongly that whatever immediate solution came about, we needed to move beyond a ceasefire.

My right hon. Friend [Mr. Arbuthnot](#), Chairman of the [Select Committee](#) on Defence, is a firm supporter of the state of Israel, and he spoke in a considered, sympathetic and balanced way. My hon. Friend [Mr. Swire](#) spoke with great conviction and knowledge about the situation in Palestine, and emphasised the point that, in many respects, the situation among the Palestinians in Gaza was more representative and democratic than that in the West Bank. Finally, my hon. Friend [Alistair Burt](#), who is also proudly a keen supporter of the state of Israel and—I say this in the best possible way—a true Christian gentleman, argued about the almost conflicting situation of bringing together an independent state of Israel and a truly independent state of Palestine.

I want to touch on three or four themes. Hon. Members quite rightly emphasised the impact of the killing of hundreds of Palestinian civilians under the assault of the Israeli defence forces. I recognise that most hon. Members have accepted that that is perhaps down to the law of unintended consequences, and that those civilians were not directly targeted. Hon. Members on both sides know, however, that fighting in built-up areas with a civilian population will lead to civilian casualties. As my hon. Friend [Mr. Lidington](#) and the [Minister](#) said, if accusations are made about war crimes or the breaking of the rule of the law of war, they should be fully investigated and, if necessary, charges should be brought.

One of the problems in this debate is how, if we are to hold Israel to account, we are to hold to account a political party such as Hamas, which might also break the [laws](#) and rules of war. How are we to bring to account people who use civilian sites and use weapons against civilians? That is much more difficult to achieve, and we should not resile from that point of view.

The [Minister](#) and others argued about how to establish a ceasefire. I am with the [majority](#) of colleagues who spoke in today's debate in saying that a ceasefire or truce will once again be only a temporary band aid to the problem. In the case of other ceasefires, not only in Gaza but on the border with Lebanon, the problem has merely been freeze-framed for a certain period. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Devizes and others have said, we will only succeed if we involve the international community directly, and it will take many months, if not years, of great commitment.

As several Members have said, without such commitment by a [United States Government](#) over a long period, I suspect that we will not get the movement that we want, on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side. It is not just a question of the United States of America bringing pressure to bear on Israel, but of the United States having the political, diplomatic, military and economic clout to bring pressure to bear on other regional powers. Several Members referred to the importance of the role of Egypt and Syria, but countries such as [Saudi Arabia](#) and the Gulf states must also be directly involved. If we do not do that, we will be back here in a few months' time, having had a ceasefire or a truce. Another international problem will have emerged, while this one will have gone back down the agenda, and we will face another crisis.

I am particularly concerned about the state of public opinion in Israel. As a consequence of any immediate ceasefire, it seems to me that the Israelis will think that they have only bought themselves a temporary truce. They will not have beaten Hamas militarily—they will perhaps have pushed Hamas back through a limited military action. However, as many Members have said, they will have been damaged in world opinion as a result of the images that have been projected of the suffering of the Palestinian people. That will be a political defeat.

What is the role of the United Kingdom? We have diplomatic influence. We have a great commitment to humanitarian aid, which is of fundamental importance and is supported overwhelmingly by the British people, who want to see more of it. We also perhaps have some influence over an [Israeli Government](#), who, I fear, will get into a siege mentality. As several Members have emphasised, our own Jewish and Muslim communities will be continually radicalised by the escalation of the conflict. The blowback from that will affect all of us. Any young Muslim or Jewish person watching the conflict is in danger of bringing it back here on to our streets and into our schools. It is therefore in our most narrow, pragmatic interests to be seen to be doing all that we can to resolve the problem.

My final point is that we have so far been fortunate that the conflict in Gaza has not spread to the West Bank, or, apart from a few rockets, to the border with Lebanon. We are always in danger of an outbreak of conflict, as we have seen, developing into a regional war. A regional war with missiles, and with at least one country possessing nuclear weapons, and another that might be about to have nuclear weapons, is a frightening prospect.

5:45 pm



[Bill Rammell](#) (Minister of State, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; Harlow, Labour)

With the leave of the House, Mr. [Deputy Speaker](#). We have had a good debate, but the [division](#) of opinion that it has revealed across all parties underlines the difficulty of securing a resolution of the problems in the Middle East. Powerful contributions, demonstrating real concerns, were made by [Mr. Godsiff](#), [Mr. Arbuthnot](#), [Mr. Swire](#), my hon. Friend [Mr. Winnick](#), [Alistair Burt](#), my hon. Friend [Mr. Mullin](#), [Richard Younger-Ross](#), [Mr. Llwyd](#) and my hon. Friend [Mr. Sarwar](#). I shall try to respond to all the specific questions that I was asked; I hope that I shall have enough time in which to do so.

[Mr. Lidington](#) began by asking me about the attack made on the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) today, and the effect that it would have on the distribution of aid. The honest answer is that it is too early to make an assessment of the impact of the bombing. Nevertheless, it will undoubtedly have some impact, and it reinforces the calls that we have made urging all parties to respect their obligations and ensure the safe and unimpeded passage of humanitarian aid.

My right hon. Friend [Sir Gerald Kaufman](#) made a very powerful contribution. He rightly referred to the equal importance of Jewish and Palestinian lives. He also referred to the Hamas boycott. We need to be clear about the fact that the [Arab League](#) has mandated Egypt to talk directly to Hamas. We are in regular contact with both parties, and I think that that is the right thing to do.

[Mr. Davey](#) made a balanced contribution. I think that when he said that the Israeli action was a disaster for Israel, he was at the very least advancing a powerful argument that needs to be listened to. There is, I think, a real risk that as a result of actions that are being taken, extremists will be strengthened and the moderates will be undermined. The hon. Gentleman referred to the European Union upgrade suspension. Let me make the position clear. Neither the [European Commission](#) nor the European Union more widely has made any decision on the future of the EU-Israel relationship. The context of the EU-Israel upgrade, as set out in the conclusions of the General Affairs and External Relations Council in December, was that a backdrop of continued progress on the Middle East peace process was important in parallel. [The European Union](#) will in due course rightly revisit the question of the upgrade, given that the context has clearly changed, but I strongly believe that for the present we should focus all our energies on securing and sustaining the ceasefire.

The hon. Gentleman also asked for reassurance on arms sales. Let me repeat what the [Foreign Secretary](#) said in the Chamber on Monday. Several Members referred to the arms embargos of 1982 and 1994, but they were established before the consolidated criteria introduced by the Government post-1997. We have some of the toughest arms export controls in the world. We do refuse export licences when we believe that they would be used for the purpose of internal repression or external aggression. I know that to be the case: as a [Minister](#), I have refused such applications. We assess applications against the risk of licences being used in operations such as Operation Cast Lead. I think that that provides the reassurance that Members have sought.

My hon. Friend [Mrs. Ellman](#) presented some powerful arguments in support of Israeli citizens who have been and are under constant rocket onslaught. I say to her, as a friend, that I do not think she helps the legitimate cause that she advocates by sidestepping the genuine horror that members of all parties feel about the loss of 300 innocent children, and the absolute necessity for Israel to do everything possible to avoid such deaths.

I recognise the passionate commitment of [Clare Short](#) on these issues. I am not arguing on the basis of equivalence in terms of loss of life—we have made clear our view that the Israeli response has been disproportionate—but I think that the right hon. Lady does her argument a major disservice if she downplays and under-represents the impact of the rocket attacks on the state of Israel, involving 6,000 rockets affecting 10 per cent. of the Israeli population. A number of Members have been there and have experienced that. Anyone who sees it on a daily basis will know that it undoubtedly has an impact. We must address that problem as part of the solution that we seek.

My hon. Friend [Mr. Dhanda](#) spoke of the importance of community cohesion. I pay tribute to the work that he did on this issue when he was a [Minister](#). He highlighted his concern that what is happening will lead to greater levels of anti-Semitism and radicalisation. I acknowledge that that is a real concern. The Foreign Secretary and I, and Ministers at the [Department for Communities and Local Government](#), have been talking to community groups in the last two weeks. I urge all Members to help us make clear what we are doing to try to assist in this situation; we are making the strongest possible calls for a ceasefire—we are leading the way at the UN and using every ounce of political and diplomatic capital at our disposal to try to achieve that ceasefire. I wholly agree with my hon. Friend that there is no durable military solution to the situation in Gaza.

I welcomed the statement of my hon. Friend [Richard Burden](#). He demonstrated his enormous concern for the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza, but he also recognised that the launch of rockets into southern Israel is unacceptable—and I agree with my hon. Friend [Mr. Mullin](#) that the word "unacceptable" does not do justice to the genuine concerns that people have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield also asked about the national unity Government. [The British Government](#) will do everything we can to bring that about, and we welcome the prospect of Hamas—signed up to a non-violent path, and recognising the state of Israel—being part of that national unity Government. Palestinian reconciliation was at the forefront of resolution 1860.

[Mr. Galloway](#) raised the issue of the United States abstention. Let me be clear—the Foreign Secretary said this in the Chamber on Monday—that we put forward that resolution and we would have preferred the United States to have voted for it. Nevertheless, a reading of the explanation of the vote from [Condoleezza Rice](#) makes it clear that the United States did support the intentions of that resolution. To be blunt, in similar situations in previous circumstances, we may well have been facing a veto, and the fact that we did not is, I think, in part due to our efforts and the leadership we gave on this issue.

I know that my hon. Friend [Mr. Dismore](#) is a strong supporter of Israel, and in that respect I very much welcome his call for the implementation of resolution 1860 by both Hamas and Israel. One of the things that need to happen in the current situation is that the [Government of Israel](#) must listen to their friends throughout the international community.

My hon. Friend [Dr. Starkey](#) made a powerful address in which she asked me questions about the ceasefire, and stated the need for it to be sustainable and to address all the key issues. I can certainly give her the confirmation that that is what we are looking for. She also asked about allegations of human rights abuses, and I repeat what I have said earlier: serious allegations have been addressed to both sides, and it is vital that they are properly examined and that we get to the bottom of them.

[Mr. Ancram](#) rightly underlined the fact that what is happening in Gaza is a tragedy for all concerned—Gazans, the Israelis, President Abbas, and all of us in the international community. I also wholly agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the confidence that is a necessary precondition for a peace process has potentially been shattered by what is happening at present, and that is why the situation is so serious.

My hon. Friend [Mike Gapes](#) demonstrated his understanding of these issues, referring to the tunnels going from one family home to another. That is why the smuggling issue is so serious and so difficult for us to resolve. He also made the comment, which is worth repeating, that President-elect Barack Obama is not a miracle worker. My spirits were lifted beyond the roof when he was elected—I will remember that night for the rest of my life—but I say in all sincerity that no democratically elected politician could fulfil the aspirations that exist both in the United States of America and in the whole of the international community, and we need to ensure that we are not, of our own volition, sadly disillusioned, because the problems we are dealing with are incredibly difficult.

We have had a good debate, which has demonstrated that there is concern in all parts of the House. The Government will continue to do everything in their power through advocacy and diplomacy and at the UN to try to get us to that ceasefire that is so desperately needed.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)) .