CIVIL SOCIETY AND A NEW ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE PROCESS: AN AGENDA FOR A LABOUR GOVERNMENT

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL LFI

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WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

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BY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since 7 October, Israelis and Palestinians have seen catastrophic violence and injustice, eclipsing the already bleak precedents of recent decades. There is now an urgent need to launch a diplomatic process towards ending this conflict.

- If a renewed diplomatic process is to succeed where all its predecessors have failed, then it must be very different to what has come before. Civil society must be put at the core of any strategy, rather than at the margins as has been the case in every single previous attempt at final status diplomacy.

- Successful peace processes, such as those in South Africa, Colombia and Northern Ireland, reveal that civil society peacebuilding played a core role in each instance. It had a key impact on both the attitudes and political context which are the oxygen that real peace processes depend upon; proved critical for societal resilience; transformed the political incentives within conflicted societies, creating constituencies – and indeed leaders – who support peace and reconciliation; developed many of the ideas that leaders ultimately borrowed and presented as their own; and helped to create a counterweight to the spoilers that exist in every conflict.

- The International Fund for Ireland (IFI), established 12 years before the peace agreement, built the foundations and civic capacity that successful diplomacy needs. The UK's chief negotiator, Jonathan Powell, rightly called the IFI "the great unsung hero" of the Good Friday Agreement. The IFI began its work in the late 1980s, when Northern Ireland's Troubles were, within their own context, in a place that elicited similar levels of pessimism and despair to that which we have seen in Israel and Palestine in recent years. The IFI catalysed a sustained, long-term effort to build relationships and trust even as rejectionists attempted to push back against progress.

- Inspired by the IFI, and pioneered by the Alliance for Middle East Peace, there is a huge opportunity for the creation of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace - an initiative bolstered by the success of the bipartisan 2020 US Middle East Partnership for Peace Act which is already investing an unprecedented $250m in peacebuilding work.

- Keir Starmer and shadow foreign secretary David Lammy have endorsed an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. A Labour government could make the realm of civil society its priority, and position the UK as the leading voice, convener and architect for civil society in the region, working to position this agenda at the core of a wider diplomatic process that it works to shape, alongside its closest allies.

- Upon taking office, a Labour government could take a leading role in bringing together allies to establish a mechanism aimed at effectively pooling and strategically coordinating the combined strengths, resources, and legitimacy of a collaborative effort involving the US and other members of the G7, EU, and the Arab League. The shadow foreign secretary could announce that he would invite this broad and inclusive group of countries for an inaugural meeting in London, within the first 100 days of Labour taking office, to map and coordinate support for civil society in the region as part of restoring a diplomatic horizon for Israelis and Palestinians.

- Setting up the International Fund as an institution need not be the first priority. Instead a more informal working group – which would be easy to assemble, could start its work immediately, and could later be formalised into something more permanent – could be the first, eminently achievable, goal within Labour's first 100 days in government.

INTRODUCTION: A BROADER, DEEPER PEACE PROCESS

Since 7 October, Israelis and Palestinians have seen catastrophic violence and injustice, eclipsing the already bleak precedents of recent decades. The toll is devastating, and still rising by the day. It is marked by an unfathomable loss of life, dehumanising violence, hundreds of hostages, millions of displaced persons, and the greatest humanitarian crisis this conflict has yet known, with no end yet in sight. The notion that this conflict could be managed or that the status quo was sustainable – an idea that far too many in the region and in Whitehall increasingly subscribed to – has been exposed as a deadly fallacy.

All of this, along with the wider regional escalation and the international spill-over of antisemitism and Islamophobia, has resulted in this conflict re-entering the top tier of foreign policy issues, despite the long list of crises elsewhere in the world. We are also seeing the shockwaves emanating from the region create serious political tremors in our own societies, dividing communities and empowering extremist voices and political charlatans who seek to profit from these divisions. There is now an urgent need to launch a diplomatic process towards ending this conflict, but we must be clear-eyed about how challenging a task that is. Although the belated attention of prime ministers, presidents and foreign ministers is welcome, the scale of the challenge is now far greater than was the case when they last allocated significant diary time to this issue. Nor should we forget that a record-breaking number of relevant governments – including the US, EU, and Britain – will be increasingly distracted by the electoral calendar this year.

So, if a renewed diplomatic process is to succeed where all its predecessors have failed, then it must be very different to what has come before. It must be much broader. The US' historic leadership on this issue must be buttressed by the creation of a more multilateral and inclusive framework, incorporating the Arab states, the EU and its members, and, of course, the UK, which could play a key role in convening and bridging differences among such a group. And it also must be deeper. Civil society must be put at the core of any strategy, rather than at the margins – as an afterthought or absent altogether – as has been the case in every single previous attempt at final status diplomacy.

We have precedents for this type of conflict-resolution project, and they should be studied carefully by those considering the Labour party's approach to this issue should it find itself in power in the coming months. There is ample evidence that demonstrates the successes of conflict resolution when civil society peacebuilding is included in peace processes; and, conversely, its failure when its role is neglected. In Sudan, for example, a recent report highlights the disastrous effects of the UK abandoning its peacebuilding programme ahead of the outbreak of the civil war. Sarah Champion, chair of the House of Commons International Development Committee, which investigated the Sudan pull-out, stated: "Hindsight is a wonderful luxury, but one that will not benefit the people of Sudan. The CSSF fund supported civil society and removing that took away a literal lifeline." (The Conflict Security and Stability Fund is a UK cross-government programme).

On the other hand, successful peace processes such as those in South Africa, Colombia and – most notably, as it was a Labour government which secured it – Northern Ireland, reveal a common denominator. While rarely receiving media attention, civil society peacebuilding played a core role in each instance. First, it mitigated and rolled back violence and it had a key impact on both the attitudes and political context which are the oxygen that real peace processes depend upon. Second, it created deep roots that, in each instance, proved critical for societal resilience over the long and bumpy road that conflict resolution entails. Third, over time it transformed the political incentives within conflicted societies, creating constituencies – and indeed leaders – who support peace and reconciliation. Fourth, it developed many of the ideas that leaders ultimately borrowed and presented as their own, having helpfully been established, popularised, and made less politically risky by civil society first. Finally, it helped to create a counterweight to the spoilers that exist in every conflict, and which have grown in strength in recent decades in Israel-Palestine and stand ready to disrupt and oppose any diplomatic process.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND EXAMPLE

For those who baulk at the comparison, it is undoubtedly true that events since 7 October have plunged Israel-Palestine into a crisis unlike any ever faced in Northern Ireland. But, up until that point, Northern Ireland was, in relative terms, categorised as the more violent conflict, with 36,000 shootings, 16,000 bombings, 30,000 political prisoners and almost 4,000 dead. In 1972 alone, there was a terror attack every 40 minutes. Two percent of the population was killed or maimed. If the same level of violence had been visited on the UK as a whole, it would have meant 100,000 fatalities.

In the 1990s, we had an unusual coincidence of two starkly different theories of conflict resolution being applied to two similarly intractable conflicts at precisely the same historical moment. In both Israel and Palestine and Northern Ireland, we had two peace processes with deep US engagement and leadership. We also had two parallel populations with seemingly irresolvable claims and narratives, and deep misgivings of the intentions and reliability of their adversaries following generations of bloodshed and mistrust.

However, three decades on from those diplomatic processes, Northern Ireland enjoys an imperfect and fragile peace. The institutions and ideas that the Good Friday Agreement put in place remain intact. Nationalists and unionists share power at Stormont democratically. And the threat of violence, while always present, has receded to levels of which previous generations could only dream. At the same time, 3,000 miles away, the architecture of the Oslo Accords is in ruins; Israelis and Palestinians are more divided and hostile toward one another than ever before; and the worst crisis since 1948 is playing out before our eyes.

There are many variables that explain this discrepancy. The very different role played in each case by the US as mediator; the failure of both Israelis and Palestinians to implement important parts of the Oslo Accords; and the determination of extremists on both sides to use violence to overturn the peace process each played a critical part. One additional variable, however, receives comparatively little attention, and it speaks to the qualitative difference between the Oslo Accords and the Good Friday Agreement. While they were both essentially interim agreements, Oslo appeared out of nowhere, shocking the world as well as Israelis and Palestinians, with no civic preparation or grassroots capacity ready to sustain it. By contrast, the agreement in Northern Ireland was the conclusion of more than a decade of huge investment in civil society and grassroots peacebuilders. These peacebuilders formed core parallel constituencies demanding that their leaders take risks to achieve peace. Civil society provided many of the concepts within the Good Friday Agreement itself, and even ran the referendum campaign that saw 71 percent of the population endorse those concepts. Learning this lesson from Northern Ireland, if no other, is key to understanding how real conflict resolution can be achieved for Israelis and Palestinians.

At the very centre of that story is the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). Established 12 years before the peace agreement, it built the foundations and civic capacity that successful diplomacy needs. The UK's chief negotiator, Jonathan Powell, rightly called the IFI "the great unsung hero" of the Good Friday Agreement.

The IFI began its work in the late 1980s, when Northern Ireland's Troubles were, within their own context, in a place that elicited similar levels of pessimism and despair to that which we have seen in Israel and Palestine in recent years. Once it was underway, the IFI catalysed a sustained, long-term effort to build relationships, economic development, interdependencies and trust between unionists and nationalists, cementing the gains achieved even as rejectionists attempted to push back against progress. Most importantly, through the IFI, the international community provided the backing for a durable institution with the mission and resources to focus beyond the current news cycle or the short-term politics of the moment. The IFI took on the far-sighted and critical task of investing in the creation of a civic foundation for peace, rather than being seduced and engulfed by the short-termism of crisis management.

By combining contributions from multiple donors, especially the US, the EU, the UK and others in the Commonwealth, the IFI reached a transformative and unprecedented $1.5bn in direct funding, and $2.4bn overall. This translated into more than $44 per person per year (compared with around $3 in Israel-Palestine). Funding more than 6,000 peacebuilding projects for a population that, at the time, was just over 1.5 million, the IFI transformed the civic landscape, and changed the political boundaries within which politicians operated, as well as the incentives to which they responded. Before long, participation in these programmes became a right – and eventually a rite of passage – for young Catholics and Protestants, rather than a privilege enjoyed by a tiny minority.

THE URGENCY FOR ACTION

Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian reality today, there are some parallels with how grim the prospects for peace seemed in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s. There have not been direct negotiations between the parties for over a decade. Violence and dehumanisation are at the highest levels we have ever seen. And the political instability plaguing both Israeli and Palestinian polities – with deep divisions within each society, never mind the chasm that exists between them – makes the talk of final status negotiations one hears in London or Washington seem untethered from the day-to-day reality in Israel or Palestine. Even using the word "peace" has become a signifier of naiveté, and this was before Palestinians were mourning the loss of so many innocent lives lost in Gaza, or Israelis were reeling in shock from the levels of depravity they saw on 7 October.

Those of us lucky enough not to be living in the centre of this unfolding nightmare must grasp two key insights that should inform everything that we do in the months and years that will follow a ceasefire that cannot come soon enough. Firstly, no military or paramilitary solution that can achieve the goals of Israelis or Palestinians, and the carnage of recent months should make that clear. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians can have true security or dignity without a conclusive diplomatic agreement that addresses the core issues of this conflict, rather than its symptoms. Second, such a process cannot succeed without a strategy that directly tackles the fear, dehumanisation and trauma that has engulfed both societies – and then builds, from the bottom-up, constituencies that can support a real diplomatic agreement.

The first priority must be a strategy for engaging Israeli and Palestinian young people. The generation born since the Oslo Accords collapsed into the Second Intifada, and who have no real memory of meaningful diplomacy, were already scarred before the horrific events of the last six months. It is worthwhile remembering that both the Israeli and (especially) Palestinian societies are far younger than Britain's. The median age in the UK is 40. Yet in Israel it is 29, in the West Bank it is 20, and in Gaza it is 18. A large majority of the people who are living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean today were not yet born when the Oslo Accords were signed. Every year, older Israelis and Palestinians – who remember better days and are statistically more likely to support a two-state solution – are replaced by a younger cohort whose attitudes, conditioned now by the grim reality of 7 October and its aftermath, often paint a frightening vision of the future. Left uninterrupted, escalation, rather than resolution, of the conflict appears far more likely.

This generation of Israelis and Palestinians have grown up separated from one another. They have never experienced meaningful Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, functional diplomacy, or a realistic expectation of conflict resolution that could suggest a more hopeful future. Polling of young people aged 15-21 commissioned by the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) in July 2023 showed that 74 percent of Palestinians and 80 percent of Israeli Jews believe the other side "only understand force"; while only two percent of Palestinians and eight percent of Israeli Jews have personal friends from "the other side". Seventy percent of Palestinian young people and 65 percent of Jewish Israeli young people said that they "do not believe the other side intends to reach peace".

Against this backdrop, elite-level diplomacy – even if much more serious, rigorous and determined than we have seen before – has a poor chance of success. After 7 October and the Gaza war, the international community has finally come to recognise the inherent instability and danger entrenched within the status quo that they have allowed to fester. Yet, before diving back into the same diplomatic efforts that have previously failed, lessons must be learned as to why they did not succeed.

Toward the end of his term, the US secretary of state, John Kerry, reflected on his energetic, quixotic and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to secure an Israeli-Palestinian agreement in 2014: "In the end, I believe the negotiations did not fail because the gaps were too wide, but because the level of trust was too low. Both sides were concerned that any concessions would not be reciprocated and would come at too great a political cost. And the deep public scepticism only made it more difficult for them to be able to take risks." Bill Clinton's former ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, who also served as Kerry's special envoy in 2014, similarly concluded: "The difficulties we faced were far more because of the 20 years of distrust that built up than because of the core issues that divide the two sides."

The events of the last six months will have only increased that distrust and trauma. But it is possible that these events may also lead to an understanding among Israelis and Palestinians that we have reached the end of a road, and that a radical change is needed. There is some evidence in recent polling to suggest this might be the case. A survey, conducted by Mano Geva Institute on behalf of the Geneva Initiative in January, found that 51.3 percent of the Israeli public would support an agreement backed by the US that includes the return of the hostages, a demilitarised Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and normalisation with Saudi Arabia. Just under 30 percent opposed an agreement along these lines, while 19.8 percent said they don't know, so perhaps could be persuadable. In Gaza, a poll in March by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research found that 62 percent of Gazans "support a solution based on the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, known as the two-state solution," representing a 27 percent increase since the same question was asked in December.

Final status negotiations may be difficult now, but we can see that attitudes are in flux. They are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, as each society deals with unprecedented trauma, and, as has previously occurred after seismic events in the conflict's history, old ideas and leaders perhaps get swept away. Once a permanent ceasefire is concluded, there will likely be a reckoning within both Israel and Palestine. Failed political leaders and their concepts are likely to be faced with angry and grieving populations. Some of those people may be swayed by even more hardline ideas and leaders and seduced by promises of revenge or outright victory. But – as was the case after the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and when the First Intifada came to an end in the early 1990s – others are likely to be open to proposals that hold out the hope of actually ending this conflict.

What is already clear is that the people most forcefully promoting a vision of security, peace and equality – and the utility of diplomacy as the primary tool to achieve it – will, at least at first, overwhelmingly come from Israeli and Palestinian civil society, not from the political opposition in either society. However, as we have frequently seen in other conflict-resolution paradigms, the opposition may then be swayed to follow the path that civil society clears for them. It is thus vital that we bolster those civil society voices now, so that they can play a profoundly important role in the coming period. They will be the ballast on the ground that steadies and strengthens any elite-level diplomatic process conducted overhead. The earlier these forces are strengthened, and the greater their centrality and the level of resources they are given, the more significant their contribution will be over the months and years to come.

THE DISRUPTIVE PROMISE OF PEACEBUILDING

One factor that should engender cautious hope is the existence already of a cohort of civil society peacebuilders, many of them members of ALLMEP, who stand diametrically opposed to the despair, hatred and violence that has engulfed so many of their counterparts. They stand willing and ready to educate and mobilise their communities around the need for a diplomatic agreement to end this conflict, once and for all. They are fragile, chronically underfunded, and often the victims of attacks from extremist actors and politicians. But they are also dedicated, highly innovative and deeply networked with one another. This is what makes the Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding community so special. It comprises individuals from both societies who intimately understand each other, work together, and are deeply invested in finding a way to deliver peace, equality and security for all. Uniquely in each society, they are simultaneously feeling the deep tragedy and trauma of "the other side", at the same time as their own. Of course, this has created challenges and tensions. But it has also fostered levels of solidarity, empathy and partnership. This shows an alternate reality that is both possible and could easily be grown in size to have an impact upon the lives of many more people.

This community represents the embryo of an Arab-Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian partnership that is not only viable but can, and must, be scaled up exponentially as a prerequisite of any real strategy to achieve a genuine peace in the region. Perhaps most importantly: this community is very effective. Even in the midst of these most challenging of times, the civil society peacebuilding field is still functioning, and even accelerating. Only five percent of ALLMEP members surveyed have suspended their work since 7 October, while over 25 percent of them have increased their activity, including providing emergency care to some of the most vulnerable people in Gaza, the West Bank and the kibbutzim in Israel's south. And all these projects are predicated on, and powered by, Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Jewish partnership.

Investment in this work is needed to keep pace with the challenges of this moment, and the opportunities which may develop in the coming months and years. More than half of these peacebuilding organisations have a budget of less than £400,000 and fewer than five team members. When surveyed, most of these groups list the availability of sufficient funds – not opposition to their work, the depth of the political challenge, or polarisation within the communities where they work – as their primary challenge. In the long list of problems to be addressed in the region, adequate resourcing for peacebuilders is surely one of the easiest for us to solve.

Time and time again, the work peacebuilders lead has been demonstrated to be remarkably effective. Rigorous studies, including by experts at Notre Dame University (2019) and George Washington University (2017), demonstrate that peacebuilding projects – which range across a wide variety of fields, including tech, the environment, health and young people – significantly disrupt and reverse the same attitudes which make diplomacy so unlikely to succeed right now. They reverse fear and dehumanisation, create ideas and institutions that can break the political deadlock, and produce citizens who place resolution of the conflict at the top of their political agenda, and as a core part of their very identities.

Programme participants leave these initiatives with far higher trust and willingness to work with "the other side". Take, for instance, the Parents Circle, a group of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians who channel the power and moral force of their grief toward conflict resolution. Eighty percent of the Israeli and Palestinian young people who participated in their History Through the Human Eye dialogue project were more willing to work for peace, 71 percent reported more trust and empathy for "the other", and 77 percent had a greater belief that reconciliation is possible.

Another of ALLMEP's members, the Near East Foundation, has worked with 3,400 Palestinian and Israeli olive producers since 2013, facilitating the export of 4,500 tonnes of olive oil from the West Bank to Israel and producing $25m in income for Palestinian farmers. In addition to the vital economic support it

provided, 90 percent of participants reported increased trust in "the other", and 77 percent indicated their intention to continue cross-border cooperation after the project's conclusion, without the need for continued oversight or encouragement.

Typically, these new beliefs are remarkably long-lasting, persisting for years after participation has ended. A poll that ALLMEP commissioned in 2023, conducted by the aChord Centre at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, surveyed alumni from various peacebuilding programmes, and found that graduates of such interventions were completely transformed by the experience, compared with their peers of similar demographic, ideological and socio-economic backgrounds. For example:

- Palestinian peacebuilding alumni were 21 times more likely to want to get to know an Israeli, 10 times more likely to get into politics, and 53 times more likely to get involved with organisations promoting peace.
- Jewish-Israeli alumni were 23 times more likely to volunteer for organisations promoting peace, and over 13 times more likely to donate to, or collect funds toward, projects supporting a peaceful outcome to the conflict.

In another study, commissioned by the US international development agency, USAID, the Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development found that, three to five years after engagement, participants in a variety of different programmes:

- had continued positive feelings about "the other";
- felt that this was a unique opportunity to know "the other";
- stayed connected with one another;
- had an increased belief that peace is possible; and
- held a changed perception of "the other" thanks to the programmes' activities.

Many participants, moreover, translate their new, positive attitudes into active, long-term work for peace. Indeed, many of the most steadfast, consistent voices for peace among Israeli and Palestinian politicians are alumni or lay leaders of people-to-people programmes, including Israeli Knesset member Ayman Odeh, the former MK Stav Shaffir, and the late Dr Saeb Erekat. We know that such peacebuilding projects transform the course of an individual's life, but we have never provided anywhere near enough funding or political support to allow them to transform whole communities, or critical masses of Israeli and Palestinian society. Why not?

With a recent, and not so recent, past littered with ineffective investments and interventions, policymakers are now finally beginning to understand the unparalleled return on investment that these programmes can provide, and the essential, foundational role that they play in any workable strategy to end this conflict. This was true before 7 October, but within a context where the world was simply investing much less time, resources, and urgency to this issue. In the aftermath of these devastating events, it is vital that this recognition is now applied with a level of scale and ambition that is commensurate with the size of the challenge that those who care about Israeli-Palestinian peace and equality now face.

A HISTORIC BREAKTHROUGH: THE MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE ACT

A second connected variable that should give cause for hope is the emergence of a new policy initiative that is not only based on the transformative power of civil society, but is finally funding them at a level commensurate with their importance and centrality to a realistic theory of change for the region.
The 2020 Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) is a $250m bipartisan law enacted by the US Congress in December 2020. Inspired by the IFI and pioneered by ALLMEP as part of the project

to create an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, MEPPA provides unprecedented levels of resources that are creating an environment conducive to peacemaking. It specifically directs funding for the kinds of projects described above, namely: "projects to help build the foundation for peaceful co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians and for a sustainable two-state solution", "shared community building, peaceful co-existence, dialogue, and reconciliation between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel", and "investments in, and support to, entities that carry out projects that contribute to the development of the Palestinian private sector economy in the West Bank and Gaza", with a particular priority on "projects that increase economic cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians".

The first MEPPA grants were awarded in 2022 and have provided funding to 22 organisations in the last two years. With grants of up to $5m being issued, this is the very first time that resources have been made available that are at the same scale as the problem peacebuilders are working to solve.

For example, Project Rozana, an international organisation promoting access to quality healthcare through joint initiatives between communities in conflict, received $3.25m in 2022. That has allowed 500 nurses to engage in shared learning and training, joint research, real-time consultations, case sharing, and collective peacebuilding activities in order to ensure quality care for both Palestinians and Israelis through health diplomacy. The Interfaith Encounter Association, which seeks to foster dialogue between different religious groups within the Holy Land and works in both Israel and Palestine, was awarded $500,000 in September 2023, and has already run eight interfaith cross-border programmes. And, in late February 2024, PeacePlayers, which uses basketball to unite and educate children and their communities, was awarded $1.6m. Within a few weeks, it had hosted its first large-scale Palestinian-Israeli Peace League event, a monumental achievement given the current circumstances. The event brought together PeacePlayers All-Stars and unaffiliated athletes, engaging some 50 Palestinian and Jewish youth inside Israel in basketball and peace education training.

The legislation enjoys not only the support of some of the most senior foreign policy voices in Congress, but also an unprecedented coalition of US advocacy organisations that ALLMEP has helped to shape, many of whom seldomly champion the same piece of legislation. From AIPAC to J Street, the American Jewish Committee to the New Israel Fund, and Churches for Middle East Peace to the Israel Policy Forum: this project has allowed a broad network of groups who often disagree to come together to support scaling up the work of the region's peacebuilders, recognising the urgent need to avert the growing crisis among young Israelis and Palestinians.

Perhaps most critically, the legislation allows for international partnership and multilateral cooperation. This opens up the potential for the pooling of not just resources, but also legitimacy, expertise and personnel. If we are to see the work of peacebuilders reach the scale that is required, we will need the international community to work together, harnessing each other's comparative strengths and insights, and fusing the entire effort to a diplomatic process that Israelis and Palestinians can believe in – and for which these peacebuilding organisations can help lay the groundwork. Just as the IFI brought together Commonwealth nations, the EU and the US as core funders, allowing greater trust to be engendered among nationalists and unionists, so an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace can pool contributions from the US, UK, Europe and now, following the Abraham Accords, wealthy Arab states. Each can bring resources, insights, relationships and legitimacy that not only increases the budget and ambition of the projects, but the impact and reach within both Israeli and Palestinian society.

A long-term peacebuilding effort can never work if it is constantly held hostage to short-term investments and policy agendas. It requires constructing a durable institution with a long-term view, field-wide strategy, and pooling resources from a coalition of donors. This approach creates efficiencies, leverages opportunities, and fosters strategic partnerships that are simply unattainable within the current framework of diffused and uncoordinated donor entities.

CONCLUSION: A CRITICAL ROLE FOR THE UK

MEPPA was passed after a decade of US advocacy around the concept of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. With growing support in key capitals around the world, the utility and urgency of establishing a single institution that pools the resources, legitimacy and expertise of various donor states – and brings them together with a real diplomatic process for ending this conflict – has surely never been greater.

Thanks in large part to the partnership of Labour Friends of Israel, which was the first UK organisation to champion the concept of an International Fund, there is now a real opportunity for the UK to lead in such a project.

The UK played a pivotal role in the IFI and has continuously stated its commitment to doing the same for peace in Israel-Palestine. Leading the way, the UK was the first country to officially endorse the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace in 2018, long before the MEPPA legislation had been enacted in the US. Ever since 2017, when LFI's then-chair, Joan Ryan, introduced a cross-party bill backing the International Fund, the strong cross-party support it attracts has been shown time and again. During a 2020 parliamentary debate, every participating MP, regardless of party affiliation, endorsed the concept. Ahead of the UK hosting the G7 in 2021, 65 parliamentarians urged the then foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, to establish the International Fund. And in 2023, we saw this same multi-party support during a House of Lords debate when many peers called for its establishment. The only two British MPs with parents from Israel and Palestine, Layla Moran and Alex Sobel, are staunch supporters, and MPs and Lords from across the political spectrum, including Stephen Crabb and Steve McCabe, Catherine McKinnell, Diana Johnson, and Lord Alderdice, have consistently voice their support for it in the media.

In December 2022, Rishi Sunak restated his government's support for the idea. Seldom has an idea had so much rhetorical support, yet so little concrete evidence of action. It is worth asking what might be different today had the government immediately followed through six years ago, when it endorsed this idea, and set about building such a fund. Yet six years – and six foreign secretaries – later, it is never too late for an incoming Labour government to do the right thing.

At Labour Friends of Israel's annual lunch in November 2023, against the backdrop of the Israel-Gaza war, Keir Starmer and shadow foreign secretary David Lammy once again voiced Labour's endorsement of an International Fund. What is now required is for Labour's foreign policy team to begin to flesh out how the UK, under their leadership, will not only speak, but act. And not just follow: but lead.

It is highly likely that other actors will take responsibility for various priorities within any larger multilateral approach to Israel-Palestine. The US will most probably continue to dominate when it comes to final status negotiations. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will possibly play an outsized role in Gaza reconstruction. The EU will likely remain the largest funder of the Palestinian Authority. Nobody has yet assumed responsibility for the realm of civil society, despite it being one of the most important components in any wider strategy to address the unfolding tragedy in the region, and a prerequisite for any diplomatic effort worth its name. A Labour government could make this priority its own, and position the UK as the leading voice, convener and architect for civil society in the region, working to position this agenda at the core of a wider diplomatic process that it works to shape, alongside its closest allies.

The utility of such an approach was recently recognised by former Middle East minister Alistair Burt – widely recognised to have been the best custodian of that office in recent memory – and the man who actually endorsed an International Fund on the floor of the House of Commons back in 2018. Writing in Arab News in March, he noted that "while relationship-building must be locally led, the international community has a role to play. The UK has long championed the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace". He argued

that Britain could now help lead an "international contact group, integrating civil society peacebuilding, convened by the UK and drawn from G7, EU and Arab states. Such a group could be invited to the G7 Summit in June, in what we all hope will be a time when the conflict has ended and serious negotiations have begun. With the limitations of the existing political leaderships so apparent, it is not unreasonable to demand that civil society efforts be fed into the horizon of a revived peace process. Amid failure, their efforts have been a success. There are precious few other successes to which to point — they have earned their right to be heard."

Upon taking office, a Labour government would be poised to take a leading role in bringing together allies to establish a mechanism aimed at effectively pooling and strategically coordinating the combined strengths, resources, and legitimacy of a collaborative effort involving the US and other members of the G7, EU, and the Arab League. As an initial move, the shadow foreign secretary could announce that he would invite this broad and inclusive group of countries for an inaugural meeting in London, within the first 100 days of Labour taking office, to map and coordinate support for civil society in the region as part of restoring a diplomatic horizon for Israelis and Palestinians. Setting up the International Fund as an institution need not be the first priority. Instead a more informal working group – which would be easy to assemble, could start its work immediately, and could later be formalised into something more permanent – could be the first, eminently achievable, goal within Labour's first 100 days in government. It would also serve as a striking contrast to the lack of material progress by successive Conservative governments over the past six years.

A Labour foreign secretary should also make clear that this work can take on much greater energy and effectiveness if it is fused to a real diplomatic process – absent for so many years – that is clear and unambiguous in its goal of an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement that ends the occupation and delivers peace, security, and self-determination to both peoples. And, as foreign secretary, he will take on the unique opportunity to lead this effort from its foundation, working closely with Lisa Nandy as international development secretary, and drawing upon the UK's expertise in the Middle East, as well as its diplomatic strengths as a key convener, longstanding architect of innovative multilateral initiatives, and as a bridge both across the Atlantic, and from the western hemisphere to the Arab world.

By starting with civil society, such a working group can secure early "wins" as well as fostering greater coordination among key states on issues that are less divisive than others, and with Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders who are more aligned with this vision and with each other than is the case with the governing authorities in Jerusalem and Ramallah. Focusing on civil society can also cement the vital priority of multilateral cooperation, something we have not really seen brought to bear in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the Madrid Conference in 1991. It is likely that such an approach will be more welcome on the theme of civil society than on other, more divisive, issues. But such a working group, gathering a broad swathe of key international actors, could potentially be used for other, more difficult political and governance issues that will need to be addressed later, as we build toward the final status agreement – an agreement to which a Labour government should be bold and clear in its commitment. That clarity should be coupled, however, with a recognition that it is solidarity movements, justice movements and peace movements that so often build the foundation on which a real diplomatic solution can thrive. Talk of a diplomatic solution without a concurrent strategy that catalyses, scales up and empowers these key actors increasingly looks unserious. After 30 years of failed diplomacy and broken promises – and the greatest tragedy in the history of this conflict – we owe Israelis and Palestinians a strategy that finally learns this lesson.

Finally, the horrific violence and dehumanisation between Israelis and Palestinians is reverberating within Britain's Jewish and Muslim communities, fomenting antisemitism and Islamophobia. Spearheading this strategy – one which supports civil society, disrupts hate and dehumanisation, and establishes the groundwork instead for a widespread Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Jewish partnership – holds the potential to reshape the discourse in the UK, too. It can prompt a fundamental shift here, when Israelis and

Palestinians assert their commitment to peace over hatred over there. Supporting the work of the peacebuilding community in Israel and Palestine can ripple out into our own streets, giving those concerned with events in the region a joint movement for Israeli-Palestinian peace, security and equality with which they can show solidarity, traversing ethnic and religious lines. All of this is, of course, very much in line with Labour's values and its commitment to drawing communities together rather than pushing them apart.

As foreign policy thinkers in the Labour party consider a strategy for Israeli-Palestinian stabilisation and conflict resolution, it is imperative that they take a fresh approach and a long-term view. We must learn the lessons from past diplomatic failures which neglected bottom-up dynamics and multilateral engagement. And we must examine closely the examples we have of more successful conflict resolution exercises elsewhere in the world, and finally apply those lessons in the Middle East.

But it is also vital that Labour's own values inform that rethink. Equality, justice, dignity, multilateralism and internationalism, and the empowerment of communities rather than elites; these are bedrock ideals that characterise every Labour government since Clement Attlee's. The last time a Labour government came to power following a prolonged period of Conservative rule, they brought these values to bear and, within 12 months, secured the Good Friday Agreement. Nobody is suggesting that conditions are ripe for as rapid a breakthrough in Israel-Palestine. But there is nonetheless an enormous opportunity for Labour to bring those same values – and that same sense of purpose and ambition – to its approach to this issue. With it, a Labour government can create a new, legacy-setting approach to an issue in need of new ideas, for the benefit of millions of Israelis and Palestinians emerging from the most traumatic period in their tortured and intertwined histories

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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