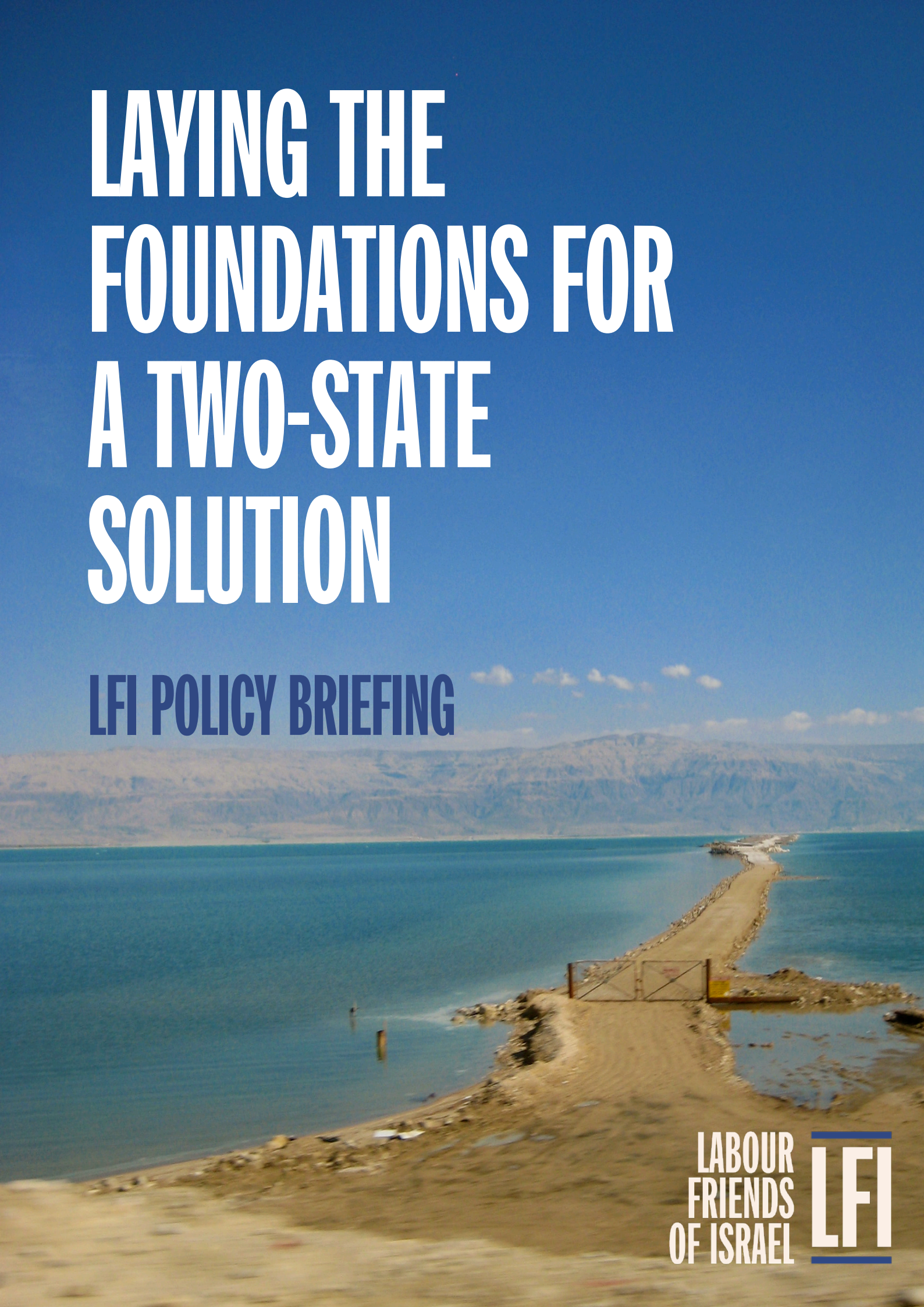
LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A TWO-STATE SOLUTION

LFI POLICY BRIEFING



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WORKING TOWARDS A TWO-STATE SOLUTION

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A TWO-STATE SOLUTION: AN INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

BY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Keir Starmer's recommitment of Labour's support for an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace at last December's LFI annual lunch, and his pledge that the foreign secretary will host an inaugural meeting in London, offers the promise of the UK leading the creation of a brand new institution, focused on a top-tier international issue that urgently requires new ideas and greater international coordination. Crucially, this initiative would be designed in light of 7 October and the war in Gaza, reflecting their profound impact on societal attitudes and political realities.
- Civil society lends legitimacy, sustains dialogue when official talks stall and crosses divides that politicians fear. Northern Ireland is a prime example. In Israel-Palestine, it is invariably civil society which is actively making the case for peace, diplomacy, non-violence, and conflict resolution. It is educating people about, and advocating for, these concepts. Civil society makes these ideas widely acceptable, and builds constituencies that politicians can then work with, in the knowledge that popular support exists and public awareness has been created.
- No single donor, especially with shrinking budgets, can alone shift the trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And yet, together, EU member states, the UK and Norway still contribute over half of global ODA spending, and around 60–70 percent of non-military aid to Israel-Palestine. They also maintain a shared commitment to the two-state solution and the rules-based international order.
- By pooling their limited resources into a dedicated multilateral fund, such as the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, these states could scale up peacebuilding efforts tenfold without spending more. Such a fund would protect civil society from political volatility, align fragmented donor strategies and finally ensure funding matches the scale of the problem.
- Rigorous academic studies consistently demonstrate that peacebuilding initiatives in Israel-Palestine are remarkably effective at fostering empathy and trust, building core "conflict-resolution" values, and, crucially, disrupting and reversing the entrenched attitudes which make diplomacy so difficult.
- The UK, with its history, credibility and convening power, can and must lead. It has the legacy of the International Fund for Ireland, the infrastructure to coordinate allies and the political momentum to drive the International Fund for Israel-Palestine forward. In an age of austerity, multilateralism is not idealism, it is efficiency.
- The inaugural meeting in London provides the crucial next step, a launchpad for establishing the International Fund as a flagship multilateral institution. With civil society at the core and diplomacy as the vehicle, this meeting offers the UK an opportunity to shape an institution that could transform the Israeli-Palestinian landscape.
- This meeting must be more than ceremonial. It should serve as a strategic inflection point and its format must reflect the kind of institution it seeks to build: inclusive, rigorously data-driven, and anchored in a hybrid model that brings together top-down diplomacy with bottom-up peacebuilding.
- Attendees should include both key donor states and Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders. Civil society must not merely be a recipient of the fund; it must also be both a stakeholder and architect.

- At the heart of the meeting, the foreign secretary should announce an initial UK funding commitment, paired with matching pledges or political endorsements from partner governments. British leadership will thus be key to unlocking coordinated international momentum.

> “British leadership will be key to unlocking coordinated international momentum”

The prime minister, Keir Starmer, recommitting his support to the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace at the LFI annual lunch in December 2024

INTRODUCTION

The campaign to establish an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace has been a long one, but there is now some light at the end of the tunnel.

LFI has led the UK advocacy for the fund for nearly a decade. We're proud to have supported this groundbreaking idea – which is pioneered by our friends in the Alliance for Middle East, whose executive director, John Lyndon, is the lead contributor to this report.

ALLMEP is an inspiring coalition of Israeli and Palestinian grassroots organisations and its conception of an international fund to super-charge and scale-up their work was inspired by the example of the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). Established in the darkest days of the Troubles in the mid-1980s, its work building bridges between communities in Northern Ireland and growing the constituencies for peace proved pivotal in helping to bring about – and sustain – the Good Friday agreement. As Jonathan Powell, Britain's chief negotiator, later suggested, the IFI was the "great unsung hero" of the agreement.

> "LFI has led the UK advocacy for the fund for nearly a decade"

Given that peace in Northern Ireland is one of the greatest achievements of the last Labour government, it is natural that LFI and our supporters have found the concept of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace so appealing. Our former chairs Joan Ryan, Louise Ellman and Steve McCabe were relentless in their efforts to raise the profile of the fund – staging debates, writing articles and letters, asking parliamentary questions, and speaking with decision-makers. Their Labour parliamentary colleagues – many of whom now serve in government – were equally enthused by the idea.

But this has also been a cause which has received cross-party backing: from Conservative ministers to MPs from Northern Ireland, we've seen a high level of engagement with, and support for, the vital work of Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders.

This publication comes at an important time. The appalling events of 7 October 2023 and the ensuing tragic conflict have made the case for an international fund ever more vital. At the same time, the prime minister, who, like the chancellor and foreign secretary, strongly supported the fund in opposition, has rightly recognised this. At LFI's annual lunch last December, he pledged that the foreign secretary would hold an inaugural meeting in London, as part of the government's commitment to a negotiated two-state solution.

John's essay and the contribution from Rev Gary Mason, a leading peacebuilder from Northern Ireland who writes eloquently of the transformational impact of the IFI, provides a wealth of evidence that this is truly an idea whose time has come.

Michael Rubin
Director, Labour Friends of Israel

FROM RHETORIC TO ACTION: ESTABLISHING AN INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE

JOHN LYNDON

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

We are living through one of the most disruptive and transformational geopolitical moments in living memory. Conflict is proliferating. Long-standing international norms and alliances are dissolving. But, at the same time, many of the institutions created decades ago to manage such challenges are under attack or ill-equipped to address the realities of this moment.

Few issues illustrate this crisis more sharply than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Decades of neglect, international inattention and diplomatic can-kicking have culminated in its most devastating chapter to date. Over 50,000 Palestinians are estimated to have been killed in Gaza, and most of its buildings have been destroyed or damaged. Its people marked their second successive Ramadan living in tents and rubble, without adequate food, sanitation, or water. For Israelis, the trauma of the 7 October Hamas attacks remains an open wound. Fifty-eight hostages are still in captivity in Gaza, at least 24 of whom are believed to be alive. They spent their second successive Passover – the festival of liberation – in captivity, while, at the time of writing, a recklessly resumed war endangers their lives and those of countless Gazans.

Throughout this devastating war, much of the international community have focused on humanitarian aid and reconstruction, while institutions have documented the myriad human rights violations, tragedies and injustices. These efforts are worthy and necessary – but entirely insufficient. Without a focused and institutionalised approach to resolving the conflict, the sum of our collective global action merely measures, judges, or ameliorates its consequences, at mounting cost to increasingly constrained donor states. More importantly, it perpetuates suffering for millions of Palestinians and Israelis trapped in the dead-end of "conflict management".

It is within this context that Keir Starmer's recommitment of Labour's support for an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace at last December's LFI annual lunch, and his pledge that the foreign secretary will host an inaugural meeting in London, should be viewed. It offers the promise of the UK leading the creation of a brand new institution, focused on a top-tier international issue that urgently requires new ideas and greater international coordination. Crucially, this initiative would be designed in light of 7 October and the war in Gaza, reflecting their profound impact on societal attitudes and political realities.

Each society is going through enormous transformations, framed by fear, trauma and an implicit, universal understanding that there can be no return to the status quo that existed before this war. Enormous questions about war and peace, borders and security, governance and ideology, and

humanity and inhumanity are currently being wrestled with. We are seeing protestors on the streets of Gaza and Tel Aviv, with both Palestinians and Israelis angry with the status quo and their leaders. The marketplace of ideas involves a contest between outcomes as distinct as annexation and forced displacement at one end, and, at the other, a bold regional peace process that delivers normalisation for Israel with the entire Arab and Muslim world, statehood for the Palestinians, and security for all.

> “We are seeing protestors on the streets of Gaza and Tel Aviv, with both Palestinians and Israelis angry with the status quo and their leaders”

In such a context, the creation of an international fund would scale up and strengthen the work and impact of those striving in each society for a just and secure future at a moment when these ideas – and much darker ones – hang in the balance. Just as importantly, it would enable the UK to partner with like-minded nations, pooling constrained budgets and resources into a mechanism which offers the prospect of far more impact than any one donor could achieve alone. As David Lammy, the foreign secretary, stated in his January Locarno speech: “What matters is not just what Britain wants but what it builds. And what matters, what makes us matter, is having a strategy.” The international fund would be that strategy in action.

ALLMEP members and partners gather in Jerusalem for an interfaith demonstration in Jerusalem

THE POWER OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In deeply divided societies, where political leadership is paralysed by fear, populism, or electoral risk, civil society movements have repeatedly stepped in – challenging entrenched narratives, introducing necessary but politically unpopular ideas, and shifting public attitudes. Although lacking formal power, these actors can transform the social fabric. When supported at scale, they lay the psychological and relational groundwork essential for political solutions.

A 2012 study found that peace agreements involving civil society actors are 64 percent more likely to succeed. Civil society lends legitimacy, sustains dialogue when official talks stall and crosses divides that politicians fear. Often, they are the only ones who can.

Northern Ireland is a prime example. The Community Relations Council, Women's Coalition and initiatives like the Corrymeela Community helped foster dialogue across religious divides. They took the risk out of controversial ideas and shifted public sentiment, paving the way for the Good Friday agreement. As a 2003 Carnegie UK Trust report concluded: "Without the trust-building, cross-community work of countless local groups and networks, the political process would have found no firm foundation to stand on."

> "Peace agreements involving civil society actors are 64% more likely to succeed"

But Northern Ireland is far from alone. In Colombia, civil society sustained momentum in the peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, while in South Africa, the United Democratic Front mobilised millions against apartheid before political leaders dared to imagine a settlement. These movements challenged inertia and changed the game.

Such movements are even more prevalent in Israel-Palestine. Despite immense challenges, civil society continues to grow and innovate, both within each society, and cross-border with those reaching beyond the chasm dividing Israelis and Palestinians. Each is vital, and, when taken together and blended into the sort of scaled and cohesive strategy that an International Fund can unlock, represents a coherent theory of change.

If you look at both Israeli and Palestinian discourse, it is invariably civil society, rather than politicians or the media, which is actively making the case for peace, diplomacy, non-violence, and conflict resolution. It is educating people about, and advocating for, these concepts. Civil society makes these ideas widely acceptable, and builds constituencies that politicians can then work with, in the knowledge that popular support exists and public awareness has been created.

One factor that should engender cautious hope is the existence of a cohort of civil society peacebuilders in Israel and Palestine who are already doing this groundwork. While chronically underfunded, and often the victims of attacks from extremist actors and politicians, they are dedicated, highly innovative and deeply networked with one another.

Even amid these most challenging of times, the civil society peacebuilding field is still functioning, and even accelerating. The Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) is a coalition of Israeli and Palestinian civil society groups. Since 7 October, our surveys show only five percent of ALLMEP members have suspended operations, while over 25 percent have increased their activities, including providing emergency relief across Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel's kibbutzim and other

communities impacted by 7 October and the ensuing conflict. This demonstrates their capacity to act – jointly – where governments have failed, and offers a powerful example of what true "triple nexus" programmes – those which bring together humanitarian, peace and development work – can and should look like.

Some of this work is cross-border, showing that partnership is indeed possible and necessary. For example, Ecopeace, which brings together Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians, successfully led a campaign to get the three water pipes to the Gaza Strip running again, and the resumption of fuel provision to allow for desalination and sewage treatment, while the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, which is located on an Israeli kibbutz and seeks to advance cross-border environmental cooperation, and the Palestinian Damour for Community Development charity formed the "Jumpstarting Hope in Gaza" coalition to meet the need for off-grid water, sanitation, hygiene and energy in the Gaza Strip. Standing Together, a grassroots movement of Palestinian citizens of Israel and Jewish Israelis, challenges extremists trying to prevent the entry of aid to Gaza, succeeding in ensuring safe passage from the West Bank to Gaza of hundreds of aid trucks. They also launched a food aid initiative for Gaza, collecting over 400 trucks-worth of aid donated by tens of thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel and Israeli Jews.

Beyond immediate humanitarian efforts, civil society organisations are at the forefront of leading longer-term projects to shape the region's future. Created by young Israelis and Palestinians, the Phoenix Plan, for example, is a five-part framework for a diplomatic and sustainable resolution to the conflict. Other initiatives, such as Anahnu's vision of a two-state solution designed to appeal to, and address the concerns of, the national-religious community, and Combatants for Peace's nonviolent movement of Israelis and Palestinians against violence, home demolitions, and settler aggression in the West Bank, are working to influence public discourse and transform political and societal dynamics in Israel-Palestine.

But much of what needs to happen more urgently is happening – and growing in strength – inside each society with Israelis addressing Israelis, and Palestinians addressing Palestinians. A cohort of Palestinian ALLMEP members is currently working on a series of policy proposals that can address some of the most fundamental social, political and economic challenges in the West Bank, while also developing ideas for Gaza reconstruction, governance and an end to violence. In July 2024, over 6,000 people – and a coalition of dozens of ALLMEP member organisations – gathered in Tel Aviv for the first "It's Time" peace rally, calling for a ceasefire, a hostage deal and a diplomatic resolution to end the conflict. Even amid war and deep trauma, Israelis stood together, publicly opposing the violence. The second iteration took place this month, calling for a bold regional diplomatic process that can deliver security, sovereignty and recognition for all. Israel and Palestine are both teeming with such organisations, movements and leaders. What they lack is scale.

A SMART SOLUTION IN AN ERA OF SHRINKING AID BUDGETS

In February 2025, the UK, the only G7 member to have codified its 0.7 percent commitment in law, announced yet another reduction in its overseas development assistance (ODA). Already lowered from the 0.7 percent benchmark to 0.5 percent, it will now fall further to 0.3 percent. UK peacebuilding and conflict-prevention funding had already dropped by nearly two-thirds between 2016 and 2021.

This trend is mirrored across Europe. Over the past five years, the continent has retreated from its leadership role in global development. Economic pressures, security threats and rising nationalism have led to widespread reductions in ODA spending.

Italy cut its ODA from €6.12bn in 2022 to €5.5bn in 2023. The Netherlands plans €3.2bn in cuts by 2027. France's 2025 budget includes a €2bn reduction, with aid projected to fall by 11 percent. Finland and Belgium each announced 25 percent reductions by 2027. Germany, Europe's most generous donor state and the second largest ODA contributor globally, has announced budget cuts of around €1.6bn from its key aid ministries this year.

These cuts coincide with a historic crisis in Israel-Palestine. No single donor, especially with shrinking budgets, can alone shift the trajectory of the conflict. And yet, together, EU member states, the UK and Norway still contribute over half of global ODA spending, and around 60–70 percent of non-military aid to Israel-Palestine. They also maintain a shared commitment to the two-state solution and the rules-based international order.

By pooling their limited resources into a dedicated multilateral fund, such as the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, these states could scale up peacebuilding efforts tenfold without spending more. Such a fund would protect civil society from political volatility, align fragmented donor strategies and finally ensure funding matches the scale of the problem. It is clearly also an idea that enjoys wide support across Parliament. A Westminster Hall debate in March showcased cross-party enthusiasm for the establishment of an international fund, which Steve Yemm, the Labour MP who secured the debate, termed "at its core an initiative designed to give agency to those often overlooked grassroots communities of Israel and Palestine".

Many speakers in the Westminster Hall debate cited the model's precedent. Backed by the UK, EU, US and Canada, and founded in the darkest days of the Troubles in the mid-1980s, the

Activists from ALLMEP member Combatants for Peace join a demonstration

International Fund for Ireland (IFI) supported over 6,000 grassroots projects and laid the groundwork for Northern Ireland's peace process. Jonathan Powell, then the UK's chief negotiator in Northern Ireland, and today the prime minister's foreign policy and national security advisor, rightly called it the "great unsung hero" of the Good Friday agreement. Considering the geopolitical importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over successive decades, it is odd that the logic of a multilateral fund, applied so often elsewhere, has yet to be brought to bear on this issue.

> "The International Fund for Ireland laid the groundwork for Northern Ireland's peace process"

The international development minister, Baroness Chapman, seemed to acknowledge the particular utility and value for money associated with multilateral commitments when she confirmed in a letter to the international development committee, that "for multilateral payments... initial 2025/26 ODA allocations have been set at the full planned level" – whereas bilateral aid spending has been set to meet only existing contracts. This perhaps suggests that, with difficult choices to be made, multilateral funding is being understood as a higher priority, with a greater return on investment, lower staff overheads, and the ability for the UK to leverage and pool its support alongside that of its closest allies.

This prioritisation of multilateral funding appears to have cross-party support, with the former deputy foreign secretary, Andrew Mitchell, saying that they are "very effective ways of spending British taxpayers' money and getting real results" in his evidence to the House of Commons' international development committee.

Globally, the utility and impact of pooled funding is proven far beyond the IFI: the UN Peacebuilding Fund, the Syria Recovery Trust Fund, the Global Environment Facility, the Global Fund for AIDS, and the World Bank's State and Peacebuilding Fund have all maximised collective impact. In 2022, over 40 percent of global ODA was channelled through multilateral mechanisms, including about 30 percent of aid to the West Bank and Gaza. But civil society peacebuilding has never had such a mechanism. That's what makes the prime minister's commitment in December that the foreign secretary will host an inaugural meeting of the international fund so vital.

The most important variable in this context of shrinking ODA budgets is, of course, impact and efficacy. Will this intervention work? And, just as importantly, will it help resolve the problem rather than simply mitigating its most devastating consequences? Rigorous academic studies, including by experts at Notre Dame University (2019) and George Washington University (2017), consistently demonstrate that peacebuilding initiatives in Israel-Palestine are remarkably effective at fostering empathy and trust, building core "conflict-resolution" values, and, crucially, disrupting and reversing the entrenched attitudes which make diplomacy so difficult. Research by the aChord Centre has also shown that Israeli and Palestinian alumni of these programmes don't just have transformed attitudes. They are also exponentially more likely to take concrete actions in service of peace and equality than their non-alumni peers. So, pooling contributions from allies, and then focusing them via an institution dedicated toward scaling such projects and creating the conditions that final status diplomacy requires, is one of the smartest ways to leverage and direct shrinking resources, while maximising their collective impact in pursuit of conflict resolution, rather than management.

THE UK AS THE INDISPENSABLE CONVENER: MOVING FROM RHETORIC TO ACTION

If lasting peace is the goal, civil society peacebuilding is an indispensable tool, and pooling donor efforts is the most effective path: then what is required is action, not further analysis. The UK, with its history, credibility and convening power, can and must lead. It has the legacy of the IFI, the infrastructure to coordinate allies and the political momentum to drive the International Fund for Israel-Palestine Peace forward. In an age of austerity, multilateralism is not idealism, it is efficiency.

The prime minister and foreign secretary have already shown leadership in convening allies over the issue of Ukraine. With London and Paris emerging as hubs for "coalitions of the willing", that same spirit should now energise the delivery of the UK's pledge for the international fund. It aligns perfectly with the foreign secretary's vision of "progressive realism". As he said: "When the world changes, you need to see it as it really is – and the same goes for your institutions."

The need for institutional renewal and re-creation in Israel-Palestine is self-evident. As is the need for such an institution to focus on creating the conditions for conflict resolution, rather than simply mitigating the impact of conflict's continuation. That is clearly both a financially and ethically unsustainable proposition.

But that commitment must now move from vision to action. The inaugural meeting in London provides the crucial next step, a launchpad for establishing the international fund as a flagship multilateral institution. With civil society at the core and diplomacy as the vehicle, this meeting offers the UK an opportunity to shape an institution that could transform the Israeli-Palestinian landscape.

This meeting must be more than ceremonial. It should serve as a strategic inflection point – clear in hindsight as the moment the international fund was born. Its format must reflect the kind of institution it seeks to build: inclusive, rigorously data-driven, and anchored in a hybrid model that brings together top-down diplomacy with bottom-up peacebuilding. Attendees should include key donor states, each of whom shares the UK's concern at the growing crisis in the region, as well as similar fiscal constraints that demand the partnership, scale and efficiency that an international fund can catalyse.

But attendees should also include Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders. Civil society must not merely be a recipient of the fund; it must also be both a stakeholder and architect. Just as civil society shaped the Good Friday agreement, the Colombian peace accord and post-apartheid South Africa, it must now be empowered to help design the mechanisms that will support its work in Israel-Palestine. Attendees will bring ready-to-scale projects that can together be harnessed toward a strategy that has both an immediate and long-term dimension. These organisations can work within each society, in the here and now, to deter annexation, incitement, violence and extremism, and the forced displacement of civilians, as well as to educate, and advocate to their peers, about the need for diplomacy and non-violence, and for a process that can deliver security and self-determination for all. At the same time, they can also put in place programmes and strategies – many of them cross-border – that can gradually rebuild trust and address trauma over time, with the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace deploying assets for both aspects of this hybrid strategy.

At the heart of the meeting, the foreign secretary should announce an initial UK funding commitment, paired with matching pledges or political endorsements from partner governments. British leadership will thus be key to unlocking coordinated international momentum.

CONCLUSION

This approach is consistent with the G7's June 2024 commitment to institutionalise and integrate civil society peacebuilding into the broader diplomatic strategy on Israel-Palestine. It echoes lessons learned in every successful peace process of the past half-century. And it reflects the UK's best traditions of global leadership: convening, catalysing, and building the institutions that a rapidly changing world needs, sometimes before others realise that they are necessary.

If designed with ambition and integrity, this inaugural meeting can be more than a milestone – it can be the start of a new era in Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding; one that places the central focus on the people on the ground, builds a multilateral infrastructure around them, and does so with the strategic clarity and efficiency of resources that this moment demands. The UK has taken the first step. Now it must follow through: by hosting a meeting that lives up to its promise, and begins the work of building the shared, peaceful future that Israelis and Palestinians each deserve.

ALLMEP meet with members of the US Congress in Washington DC

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CIVIC SOCIETY PEACEBUILDING WORKS: THE CASE OF THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR IRELAND

GARY MASON

> "The Good Friday peace agreement was a high-wire triumph for political leaders. What is less well-known is the fact that this accord was built upon the work of countless community activists who had been working on the ground to create the conditions for peace. There were the women's groups who regularly crossed the interfaith borders to pursue issues of common concern. There were the mass trade union rallies at town halls when atrocities took place. There were church groups meeting to pray together. There were the youth groups who met to explore each other's cultures and to imagine a life beyond the Troubles. And, after the deal was struck, it was the people of Northern Ireland who came together to endorse it in a referendum. History was made by the Good Friday agreement, and it was made from the bottom up before it was made from the top down."
>
> Dr Paul Nolan, chair of the 'Yes' campaign for the Good Friday agreement

INTRODUCTION: AN ESSENTIAL INNOVATION

The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) was established by the British and Irish governments in the mid-1980s, with financial contributions from the US, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. I have often described the IFI as an innovative resource that began to break up the hardened soil of sectarianism, allowing fresh shoots of peacebuilding and hope to develop throughout the 1980s into the 1990s, to the signing of the Good Friday agreement and indeed until this very day.

The fund addressed three key priorities: creating economic opportunities; focusing on disadvantage and need; and promoting contact, dialogue and reconciliation. It should be remembered that the context in which the fund was established was a fractured, polarised community, deeply divided by suspicion and continuous political violence on a daily basis. Despite this, the IFI began to spearhead new and innovative approaches to addressing numerous social challenges.

On the day of the signing of the Good Friday agreement in April 1998, Senator George Mitchell, the former US Democrat senator who chaired the talks, commented: "If you think getting this agreement was difficult, implementing it will be even more difficult." That is why, even today, four

Reading Tom via Flickr

A peace mural in Kenilworth Place, Belfast, photographed in 2014

decades after it was established and nearly 30 years after the breakthrough agreement, the IFI still plays a crucial role in embedding the peace process and strengthening civic society.

While it has not delivered utopia, the Northern Ireland peace process has been one of the more successful of the last half-century anywhere in the world. Many commentators have rightly suggested that one of its defining characteristics, has been the role and leadership of civil society as the social glue that holds the peace process together, and this is why the IFI has played a crucial role in cementing grassroots peacebuilding.

The importance of civil society has also been recognised by many of the leading political players in the agreement, from the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, and his top negotiator, Jonathan Powell, to the Irish taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. Ahern, a co-signatory to the Good Friday agreement, argues:

> "Through the 1990s the one constant in the Irish peace process was the positive role played by civil society bringing together different elements of the community and constructively delivering a message of hope and peace. While political voices are important and vital in building progress, the voice of the community, translated through civil society, is paramount. Whether it is trade unions, women's groups, business organisations, [or] youth leaders, civil society translating the wishes of the community and the desire for peaceful progress is absolutely essential. In the case of Ireland, the role played by civil society was a key component in our efforts to end violence and make a peaceful society."

BUILDING A CLIMATE FOR SUCCESS

Those of us associated with IFI from its early days soon realised why civic society was so important and why it needed to be engaged. If the network of organisations and groups – from churches to trade unions and women's groups to business organisations – which constitute civil society and a critical mass of the public themselves are sufficiently engaged in peacemaking, it can both create a climate to open up the space for successful negotiations and help to ensure that the social infrastructure is developed for voices beyond politicians to be heard at formal peace talks.

As the Northern Ireland process highlights, a combination of internal and external influence encouraged representatives of armed non-state combatant groups to come to the table. But while the role of external brokers and mediators can be helpful, that is only the case if the process itself is "owned" by people within the conflict zone. The IFI approach assured grassroots ownership of an evolving peace process through its strategic and thoughtful investment.

Political actors are essential to a peace process, but they will not evolve or be sustained without an active civic society building and maintaining peace on the ground. As Professor John Brewer, a leading sociologist at Queens University Belfast, argues:

> "The negotiated settlement is never the end of peacemaking, for accords mostly leave unresolved the processes for realising social healing. This is what I refer to as the social peace process, by which I mean reconciliation between erstwhile protagonists, social relationship-building across a communal divide, civil society repair, and replacement of brokenness by the development of tolerance and compromise. The sorts of actions that focus the social peace process include truth and reconciliation procedures, forgiveness and atonement strategies, policies that facilitate and encourage public tolerance and compromise, new forms of memory work, memorialisation and remembering, public apologies, attention to cultural symbols, such as national flags, anthems and the like, and the reassessment and re-evaluation of identity."

However, as Brewer rightly recognises, "societal healing" is either ignored by negotiators in the political peace process or it is assumed that it will "naturally" and "effortlessly" flow from the signing of the agreement itself and the sorting out of "problematic politics". That assumption, he notes, is "rather naïve".

Indeed, it is crucial that – however important and vital their role – politicians and governments are not left to assume sole responsibility for the task of building and sustaining peace. Thus, suggests Brewer:

> "If we focus attention on the political peace process, the domain for its operation and implementation is naturally political. Peace processes become the responsibility of governments, and the political actors that make up, or aspire to be, governments. Political actors negotiate the settlements, they occupy the new governance structures and oversee the new institutions, and they either endorse or collapse them, making political decisions about whether to abrogate or stick with the new political arrangements. In this view, peace processes are political affairs, commanded over by politicians, the future success of which is the responsibility of politicians. However, once we recognise there is also a social peace process, a need for healing within society, peace processes become the responsibility of people who live in societies emerging out of conflict, and the domain in which they function, and are consolidated, widens to include civil society. Social peace becomes my responsibility and yours; it is everyone's, not just the politicians."

The work of IFI is a sterling example of the social peace process in action. As the writer Colin Irwin rightly suggests, peace processes are a 50-year project. The IFI realised this from its very early days: that long-term commitment has undoubtedly paid substantial dividends. "Effective peacebuilding requires the reestablishment of all those elements of a society that make it a functioning success," Irwin argues. "Once the talking has begun in earnest, discussion must lead to real negotiations and decision-making on each element of an agreement that provides remedies for every failed social practice and inoperative political institution." And, as he notes, "once the agreement is reached, it must be implemented in full, with as much rigour, care and attention to success as the negotiations themselves. Peacebuilding and peacemaking requires both vigilance and patience and, in this, the support of all of the elements of the society and the international community must be encouraged to play a constructive role if a return to violence and war is to be avoided."

LESSONS FOR ISRAEL-PALESTINE

It can be argued that many efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have failed due to a flawed methodology of pursuing a peace process – where the conflict is dealt with as if it were a technical problem that can be resolved by a selected and exclusive leadership. Such a strategy fails to address the complex entanglement of grievance, belief and ideology which characterise the region's context, and which are at the root of this conflict. An inclusive peace process is therefore required: one of societal shift, where senior and mid-level political leaders, community leaders, religious leaders and civil society all have a role to play in communicating the need for real, difficult action in pursuing peace.

> "Leaders on all sides of the conflict must be willing to take risks to achieve peace"

This was exactly the process that IFI undertook as the bedrock of grassroots peacebuilding, starting in those dark and fractious times of the mid-1980s and through the 1990s, during which time there was a gradual evolution of a successful social peace process. On a personal note, I spent 27 years as a Methodist minister, serving a parish in Belfast. One aspect of my role in the peace process was as a close advisor to Protestant ex-combatants on the civilianisation efforts of paramilitaries. In 2009, my church provided the stage from which loyalist paramilitaries announced the decommissioning of their weapons.

I was also able to play a key role in the leadership and development of the Skainos project. This is a £21m post-conflict, shared space urban village in inner-city East Belfast. It addressed economic deprivation and facilitated conversations between protagonists, helping to continue to cement the nascent peace process. This project would never have happened without IFI, which, in the very early days of this vision, was happy to put £3m on the table as a catalyst. This enabled me to approach other funders, allowing this dream to eventually develop. Today, the project is acknowledged as the largest faith-based redevelopment project in western Europe

So, has the IFI model applicability in the context of the Israeli Palestinian conflict? The best answer to that lies in the conclusions of key actors, over 1,200 of whom have visited Belfast to learn from the Northern Irish peace process in the last decade, hosted by my organisation, Rethinking Conflict.

Diverse actors from all strands of Israeli and Palestinian society, they highlight five aspects that provide lessons for their own region. As they suggest, although every conflict has its own unique features and history, they are bound by common features and, at their core, all are defined by a breakdown in human relations which allows violence to emerge. Those five lessons are:

First, political leadership is essential to achieving peace. Leaders on all sides of the conflict must sincerely believe that change is preferable to the status quo and then be willing to take the risks to achieve peace, while providing the vision that ensures they maintain the confidence of their grassroots supporters.

Second, a desire to break the cycle of violence to save future generations from endless conflict emerged in both the nationalist and republican and unionist and loyalist communities and played an important role in creating an environment for peace. This desire for a better future encouraged leaders to take the risks, and face down accusations of betrayal from within their own communities, to work for peace and a better future.

Third, a lack of trust between opposing sides is an inevitable feature of building peace and cannot be used as a justification for not beginning the process. Trust does not come at the start of the process, but only over time through dialogue (at times conducted secretly), by making and meeting commitments, and by building confidence through concrete actions.

Fourth, attempts to resolve the conflict through military force were ultimately futile and did not result in sustainable security for either community. Instead, a cycle of violence flourished where each side sought to "hurt the other side as much as they hurt you". Real security was only achieved when dialogue was prioritised and the root causes of the conflict were addressed by the establishment of new frameworks and political institutions that gave space for each community to peacefully pursue their vision for Northern Ireland.

Finally, grassroots organisations and civil society had, and still have, a particularly important role to play in helping society to find a way past historic animosities and to build a more positive shared future. Allied to this, civic society also has varying roles of influence in relation to each of the four lessons above.

But this final lesson underlines the unique aspect of IFI specifically and civil society, and the very strategic benefits of a fund, targeting grassroots on-the-ground peacebuilding, and its benefits for a very fractured and divided Israeli-Palestinian region.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Thousands of Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders convene at the It's Time conference, Tel Aviv, July 2024

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