

A proud partnership, a cherished friendship – UK and Israel united for 70 years

Anniversaries are a good time to reflect, to look back on how events have shaped us and dwell on happy memories. They are also a time to look to the future, set goals, and make plans for the future. And it is with that sense of optimism, this week, that we mark the 70th anniversary of the UK opening its embassy in Tel Aviv, beginning the UK's diplomatic relations with Israel.

Over those 70 years we have seen engagements between Her Majesty the Queen and Israeli Presidents Haim Herzog, Ezer Weizman and Shimon Peres. In 2018 HRH Prince William visited Israel and met Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Rivlin, Holocaust survivors, activists and even carved out some time to meet Israeli Eurovision sensation Netta.

The Prime Minister was pleased to host Prime Minister Netanyahu at Downing Street last year, while earlier this year, HRH The Prince of Wales visited Israel to speak at a Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial ceremony and joined world leaders in Jerusalem to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz.

I know what an amazing place Israel is to visit having had the chance to do so shortly after becoming an MP in 2015. A country with antiquity and modernity side by side, things that seem familiar to my British eyes and things which are fascinating and unique. A country proud of its modern science and technology sectors and also home to some of the most holy places in the world.

I had hoped that my work as minister responsible for the Middle East and North Africa might give me the chance to go back to a fantastic fish restaurant on the waterfront at Jaffa, listen to the call to evening prayer from the mosque while watching the sun set over the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately Covid-19 means that I, like people in Tel Aviv, will have to wait before dining there again.

But even in these challenging times, this anniversary week gives us both cause for optimism. The UK and Israel are working side by side in the fight against coronavirus, with our top health and scientific advisers sharing information and exchanging valuable insights into how to manage and ultimately beat the pandemic. Our respective world-class hospitals and laboratories are working together to support the development of antibody treatments for patients and discussing ground-breaking innovations, from tracing apps to potential vaccines.

Of course, the ties between UK and Israel go far beyond scientific cooperation. High tech-collaboration is also thriving, with Israeli start-ups working with the UK's biggest companies in health, finances, pharma, energy

and more. Leading British firm Dyson is using Israeli technology in its appliances and Israeli MobilEye's systems work to reduce road traffic accidents and protect cyclists and pedestrians across Britain. The UK is Israel's biggest trading partner in Europe: our trade has been growing steadily over the years, and in recent years we have seen annual trade exceed £8 billion, according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics. In 2016, the UK signed its biggest-ever trade deal with Israel, with Rolls Royce providing £1 billion of engines to El Al's new Dreamliner planes. UK-Israeli trade and collaboration touches every aspect of our lives and helps build a more prosperous future for both our countries.

Of course, the prosperity of Israel and the UK is inextricably linked to the stability of the wider Middle East. I am a firm believer that a negotiated agreement between Israel and the Palestinians for a two-state solution is the best way to secure enduring stability and success. As Israel's new government gets to work, I encourage both sides to focus on that great, if sometimes elusive, prize; sustainable peace. I urge both to continue to build on the constructive collaboration that they have shown during this pandemic and find ways to return to the table. I hope that steps on the road towards lasting peace are taken, and pathways that might lead away from that goal are avoided.

Much changes over a 70 year period but some things do not change. We will continue to cherish our friendship with Israel, stand united in the struggle against the insidious forces of hate and antisemitism and work towards an even brighter and better future for us all.

Here's to the next 70 years! Am Yisrael Chai.

Further information