

Press release: Minister for Human Rights visits the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel

I have just returned from my first official visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) and Israel.

I was pleased to meet Palestinians in East Jerusalem, Hebron, and Abu Nuwar Bedouin Community in Area C of the West Bank. I heard from human rights defenders about the impact of Israel's occupation and saw the assistance that UK aid is providing to some of the most vulnerable in Palestinian society. I had a positive first meeting with Prime Minister Hamdallah to discuss these issues, the situation in Gaza and reaffirm the UK's commitment to strengthening the UK-Palestinian Authority relationship. In my role as Minister for Human Rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, I met with the Palestinian Minister for Religious Affairs Youssef Ideiss, and hosted an interfaith roundtable.

In Israel, I was humbled to attend the State Opening Ceremony for Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day at Yad Vashem. I had constructive meetings with Israeli ministers Tzachi Hanegbi and Ayelet Shaked, re-affirming the UK's commitment to our bilateral relationship with Israel, and raising our human rights concerns relating to the occupation, including the issue of Palestinian children in Israeli military detention. I also met with Israeli companies working on counter terrorism technologies, to discuss what more we can do together to prevent terrorist use of the internet.

I remain deeply concerned about the situation in Gaza, and in particular by the high number of Palestinian deaths in recent weeks. With the Palestinian leadership I reaffirmed the right of the Gazan people, as indeed all peoples, to protest peacefully. It is important to understand the role Hamas continues to play in fomenting the violence. The UK recognises that Israel has the right to protect its borders against Hamas and other terrorist groups but as I said to Israeli Ministers, they must show restraint and consider carefully its use of force in response to future protests.

In my engagement with both Israelis and Palestinians I stressed the importance of addressing the underlying causes of the economic and humanitarian situation, and in particular to improve movement and access for people and goods.

My visit illustrated the urgent need for progress towards a two-state solution, so that Israelis and Palestinians can finally live with the peace and dignity they deserve.