

1 August 2008

John Carter's report on the IPU mission to the Middle East comprising John Carter, leader of the mission; Ann Clwyd, committee member of the IPU Middle East Committee; and Anders Johnsson, Secretary General of the IPU.

The objective of the mission was to meet with representatives of the Knesset and the Palestinian Parliament in an endeavour to arrange ongoing dialogue between the two parliaments.

To that end the mission was an outstanding success.

On Tuesday 22 July 2008 in the early afternoon we met with the Knesset representatives: Silvan Sahalom, Chair and former Minister of Foreign Affairs; Ronit Tirosh, Chairman of the Lobby for Promoting Education in Israel; MK Gideon, Sa'ar Chairman of the LIKUD Faction. On Wednesday 23 July at 11am we met with the members of the Palestinian Legislative Council: Azzam Al-Ahmad, Chairman of the FATAH Parliamentary Bloc; Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the Political Affairs Committee; Abu Leila, Member of PLO; Dr Faiisal M Abushahla; Khalida Jarrar, head of PLC Prisoners Committee; Dr Bernard Sabella PLC Member.

We proposed to both groups that meetings supported by the IPU's Committee on Middle East Questions be held on a regular basis, four times a year. Two of the meetings would take place at the IPU regular assemblies and the other two meetings would take place at sites to be arranged and agreed.

It was also discussed and agreed that both parties would put forward items in advance to be considered for the agenda for these meetings. These proposed agenda items would be shared between the parties until an agreement has been reached on an item or items to be discussed at the meeting.

It was agreed that the role of the IPU's Committee on Middle East Questions would be to act as facilitator and arbitrator if required. The Committee would also ensure that there was ongoing contact and dialogue between the meetings, either by way of email or conference calls.

Both parties accepted that while the Committee had not functioned adequately in the recent past, they were only too happy to be willing participants in the future direction suggested by the mission. Full agreement on the way forward was given by both the Knesset representatives and the Palestinian Legislative Council members.

Personally, as leader of the mission I came away feeling very buoyed with the reception that we had and the way in which our proposals were accepted.

I am confident that, provided that committed effort is made for the Committee to function as proposed, we will have a successful opportunity for dialogue and an understanding that may well contribute to the move towards a peaceful and prosperous future for both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

The mission also took the opportunity to meet with a number of other people with the goal of fact finding and becoming as fully informed as possible about current issues in Israel/Palestine.

We met with Qaddura Fares, Chairman, Palestinian Society of Prisoners Club; Dr Saeb Erakat, Head of Negotiations Affairs Department and his assistant Muzna Shihabi; Fuad Kolaly, Legislative Deputy Bethlehem Governorate; Nidal Al Azza, Aida Camp; Barbara Shensone, Director, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East; Tom Phillips, Ambassador, British Embassy; and Ana Gallo-Alvarez, Office of the Quartet representative of the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

All these people were helpful and instructive and have agreed to keep contact with the IPU Committee with a view to updating the Committee with issues as they arise.

Observations

It is obvious to me in the short time we had in the Middle East that there is much to learn for a person such as myself and that the matters are very complex.

However I make these comments: although obviously there is a religious component involved in the issues, the main drivers are those of race and of land ownership. Even more crucial than both of these is the fact that until both parties (that is, the Israelis and Palestinians) are prepared to recognise each other as independent states, then there will continue to be disagreement.

The situation is further complicated by the existence of factions within the Palestinians; the main factions being Hamas and Fatah. These factions have serious differences to overcome before it could be considered that they are truly representatives of the people of Palestine domiciled in the West Bank and Gaza. This is also compounded by the current occupation of the Palestinian areas of the West Bank and Gaza by the Israelis.

It is a positive step that both the Israeli and Palestinian representatives agreed to put forward items to be considered and that those items will be agreed upon by both parties prior to the IPU Committee meetings taking place. However, the IPU and particularly the Committee on Middle East Questions need to consider that the Committee's primary objective is to work towards both the Israelis and the Palestinians giving each other full recognition as nations and, as a consequence of this, the achievement of a peaceful settlement and an opportunity for both nations to move forward.

Having now had the opportunity to visit as part of the mission, I am confident that the IPU and particularly the Committee on Middle East Questions have a significant role to play. This role may be at a lower level than some of the other groups undertaking dialogue with a view to achieving a settled outcome, but the Committee has an important contribution to make in providing an opportunity for dialogue between the parties at parliamentary level and with the support of parliamentary colleagues from other countries.

However, the IPU and the Committee on Middle East Questions must be prepared to accept that there is a need for a serious effort to be put in if this is to be achieved.

John Carter MP