

Interview with outgoing HM Consul General in Jerusalem

First of all, we thank you, Mr. Philip Hall, British Consul General in Jerusalem, for giving us this opportunity for Zawaya to host you and ask some questions about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as topics about your cultural and social experience in Palestine – on this your final day as Consul General!

1. As you are almost at the end of your posting as a Consul General, do you feel that there is still hope for a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

Palestinians are the best teachers of the truth that there is always hope. It does sometimes feel as though the two state solution is impossible, but then we have to consider the alternatives. If we look at the polling, Palestinians and Israelis want to live separately, not together. People say to me: “We just want to be able to get on with our lives”. So yes, there is hope, but it is certainly not going to be easy.

2. But the geopolitical facts imposed on the ground, the Israeli settlements, and the continuous confrontations with the Israeli forces witnessed in East Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Palestinian territories, aren't these indications that the two-state solution has become an unrealistic option?

Settlements create a massive obstacle to the two state solution, yes. The other points – the confrontations – are a problem, but not really an obstacle to the two state solution.

3. If there is an alternative to the two-state solution, what is the most realistic option in your opinion to solve the conflict? And why?

The first and obvious alternative is the One State Solution, in which all citizens enjoy equal rights in one state. I think that is unlikely, at least within any timeframe I can foresee. The second alternative is the range of options between one integrated state and two wholly independent states. The third alternative is to carry on without solving the problem – continuous occupation. None of us wants to see the last of these. So I think the Two State Solution remains the best way to think about a solution, with careful consideration needed to the agreements between the two states that will enable them to live and prosper alongside one another.

4. Twenty-five years after the Oslo agreement and the establishment of the PA, there is a general Palestinian frustration with international community mechanisms and the ability of the active states in this world to pressure Israel to stop settlement activities and actions that harm the two-state solution. What's your comment on the role of the international community?

I understand and share the frustration. I well recall the hope of achieving a permanent status agreement in 1999 and 2000. I agree that settlements make it very difficult to reach peace and a two state solution. It's often said that the international community cannot want peace more

than Palestinians and Israelis. The governments on both sides, as well as the people, need to want peace. It does not feel as though that is the case at the moment, but I think the situation is beginning to improve.

5. How can hope be restored for the Palestinians in peaceful solutions and the ability of the international community to guarantee them justice in any final agreement with the Israelis?

Hope has to come from Palestinians, and I think it does. I do not think the international community can guarantee justice. It can work for and support justice, but ultimately an agreement requires compromise. The international community can help to promote an agreement with as much justice as possible.

6. Palestinians see that the UK holds a historical responsibility for what they have been subjected to from the Israeli occupation. How does London work to retract this on the ground to enable Palestinians to obtain their rights?

Historical responsibilities, especially from the colonial era, are hotly debated, including in London. I think we have to remember that no-one alive today was of voting age at the time of the Balfour Declaration, so we are really asking how much responsibility people today have for the actions of their great grandparents. London has long taken the view that Palestinians have a right to self-determination, so political rights, alongside the civil and religious rights acknowledged by the Balfour Declaration. We want to see those rights respected and fulfilled.

7. Do you think the recent events in the OPTs are forcing countries around the world to think in a different way /move the political track in a new direction to guarantee a more just political solution?

It's very early to say. Events before the Gaza conflict, in Jerusalem in particular, did start to reshape thinking. People around the world saw that many Palestinians are facing injustice, and they were shocked by what was happening on the Haram Al Sharif, in Sheikh Jarrah and elsewhere in Jerusalem. There was increasing talk of the need for equal rights for Palestinians and Israelis.

Unfortunately the Gaza conflict was very damaging for Palestinians. It caused great suffering in Gaza, and Hamas firing missiles enabled many countries to revert to a simple analysis: Palestinians who deny Israel's right to exist attack Israel; Israel has the right of self-defence. It might be different if those firing the missiles recognized Israel's right to exist and did not resort to violence, but that is not the case.

So the Gaza conflict was a setback for everyone, and for Palestinians in particular. But I think events before then were making people think differently, and there is a gradual shift in thinking in other countries.

8. Mr. Hall, can you shed some light on the economic and development activities that you do through the British Consulate General in the Palestinian Territories?

We support UNRWA and so the refugees in Gaza, the West Bank and elsewhere. We provide humanitarian assistance. We support education and culture through the British Council. We support the Palestinian Authority to improve trade and customs arrangements. We assist the PA on financial management, to help it recover the revenues which should belong to Palestinians, and to create a wider revenue base. We assist the PA and civil society to work together constructively, with assistance for transparency, evaluation and accountability. We assist the PA Security Forces with a strong emphasis there too on Accountability, Sustainability (so affordability) and Inclusion (so gender and other equality). We provide support to those affected by Covid, to women facing gender based violence and to those threatened with demolition of or eviction from their homes. So we provide a wide range of support which I think is important.

9. Let's talk a bit about your personal experience during your work as a CG in the OPTs, how would you rate it?

This is a place of contradictions, and my experience here has been both extraordinarily rewarding and frustrating. Palestinians have made me very welcome everywhere. I have seen both extraordinary success and suffering. I have done my best, recognized that my best has not been good enough to achieve the real change needed, and known that my only option is to continue to do my best. I may be wrong, but that feels a very Palestinian experience.

10. How did you find the Palestinian people when you dealt with them closely?

Warm, friendly, welcoming, and many are exceptionally talented. So the people – certainly the vast majority of them, as in any society – are good. As a diplomat, certainly one representing a democracy, you have to believe in people, and I do – and I believe in the Palestinian people as much as in any other people, and in many ways more. My respect for Palestinians is enormous. However a bad system can beat good people. We know that the system – occupation, and a Palestinian Authority with limited powers – is bad. It was the best achievable at the time of Oslo, and no-one has been able to find a better one since, but we need to keep trying. We need to find a way for Palestinians to govern themselves. Realising a Palestinian state will not be easy, and it will not be pretty. But it is the right goal, and I am hopeful for it.

11. Which Palestinian food do you prefer? And why?

Zayt and Zaatar. And local fruit in season. My children would give you the right answers (makloubeh and knafeh) but I am of an age when I have to watch my waistline, and there is nothing better than zayt, zaatar, some fawakih and qahwa in the garden on a beautiful Palestinian morning. I shall miss them, and Palestine.

We were pleased to meet you, Mr. Philip Hall, British Consul General in Jerusalem. As you prepare to leave your post, we wish you all the best in your next chapter.