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Understanding the Middle East conflict

Reflections of a
Young Fabian
delegation

Edited by Marie-Noëlle Loewe

Young Fabians

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Young Fabians | e-pamphlet

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Introduction

Marie-Noëlle Loewe

Few issues in modern politics are more divisive than the Middle East conflict. When becoming politically aware, many with an interest in foreign affairs soon pick an affiliation to one side – several become pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian, some end up simply pro-peace. I have personally spent many, many hours debating different aspects of Israeli foreign policy, Palestinian lobby strategies, failed peace initiatives and stalled negotiations with fellow comrades who ‘do the Middle East’, accidentally frightening off others in the process. I have gone on a journey from passionately calling for a secular one state solution (we all start young) to properly engaging with the issues and ending up where many are today: the realisation that this specific tale of two peoples in conflict can only end through the establishment of two states.

The tragedy of the Jews and Palestinians is in fact their similarity. Both were denied a country of their own throughout most of history, both have been persecuted, expelled and betrayed. Both share the same affinity to the ‘holy land’, and neither are, understandably, willing to give up what Mark Regev called “the same bit of real estate.” With such incompilant positions, I, as many others, keep on wondering: will peace ever be possible, and if so, how?

The Middle East Programme

The idea behind the Young Fabian Middle East Programme was to broaden the knowledge of Young Fabian members about the Arab-Israeli conflict and give them a space to debate ideas and ask questions. We held a range of panel discussions throughout the year, discussing Gaza, Iran and the Arab League. But in order to even attempt to truly understand the situation on the ground, it was important to actually visit the region.

The delegation

Twelve members of the Young Fabians spent a week in Israel and Palestine in early September 2011, to meet with Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders. The trip included visits to Hebron and Yad Vashem, meetings with peace negotiators in Ramallah and Tel Aviv as well as a tour through the holiest of cities, Jerusalem. Delegates had ample opportunities to ask questions, soak up the often tense atmosphere, and experience daily life in a conflict zone. I cannot claim that we have come back with a solution, but one thing has become clear – that nothing about the situation is easy or straightforward, and those who propagate easy fixes, or are readily willing to attribute fault to only one side, demonstrate a lack of understanding of the conflict.

About this publication

As Young Fabians we do not speak on behalf of our members. This collection of essays is based on the personal impressions and experiences of our delegates. All come from different backgrounds, and none claim to be an expert in the field – however, it is safe to say that an intensive week of high-level meetings with politicians, NGOs and ordinary citizens changed perspectives and broadened knowledge. The Young Fabian Middle East Programme was only a first step on the path

towards understanding this oldest and most complex of conflicts. Through this pamphlet we hope to encourage other young people to get involved and try to visit the region themselves. Only by truly understanding the issues can we act as neutral mediators and communicators. Only through talks and exchange will we be able to reach a lasting peace.

You can read further commentary of the trip on the Young Fabian blog: <http://bit.ly/yfmeblog2011>. If you have any ideas for events or activities inspired by what you read here, or would like to invite a delegate to speak at your own event, do get in touch with the executive committee via the Young Fabian website.

Marie-Noëlle Loewe
International Officer, Young Fabians, 2010/11

1 | Running out of time

Sara Ibrahim

One of the defining points of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the painfully slow progress towards a binding peace settlement. Gilead Sher made one of the most striking statements of the trip, saying that “we are at two minutes to midnight.” His assessment as an Israeli negotiator at Camp David lends greater potency to his suggestion. The position in his mind is clear – time is running out for those who want to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Considering the lull in peace talks since Obama’s efforts to reinvigorate dialogue at the end of 2010, this initially struck me as an odd statement. Since the return of the delegation to the UK, his comments seem particularly prescient. He suggested that Israel needs to guard against becoming isolated within the international community. In the last few weeks, Israel’s relations with Turkey and Egypt, former supporters of Israel in the region, have turned sour. The added complications of the regional shift caused by the Arab Spring have also played its part. So where next for Israel and is a Palestinian state obtainable in the near future?

One thing became evident relatively early on on our visit. The essential ingredients for peace are agreed between moderates on both sides: a two state solution, boundaries along the 1967 Green Line, and land swaps to represent the realities on the ground. One precondition, the development of a vibrant economy and state instruments in the Palestinian areas, is being championed by the Office of the Quartet Representative, led by Tony Blair. There are clearly delineated issues on

both sides – the Israelis we met were concerned with security and the recognition of the right of Israel to exist, and on the Palestinian side, refugees and Israeli settlements. Added to this is how to deal with Jerusalem and forming an authority that will safeguard access to the old city and the hugely important religious sites for Muslims, Jews and Christians. Most negotiations returned to the conclusions set down in the Clinton parameters. The burning question became not what would a political settlement look like but why had one not taken place?

The key breakthroughs in my understanding came during two visits: the first to the religious Jewish settlement of Hebron on the West Bank and the second in Yad Vashem with the academic Jeremy Leigh.

The conflict between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization is hard to grasp without seeing the situation on the ground. Hebron is a visceral example of what the conflict is at its most extreme. The Israeli imperative to protect its own citizens has led to an almost wholly segregated existence between the Palestinians and the Israelis in Hebron. We were shown around by Al Haq, a Palestinian NGO. Our guide was Palestinian and we therefore had to follow the routes allowed to Palestinians through Hebron including going through several checkpoints. The sense of oppression is immense for an individual who takes free movement for granted. Efforts to safeguard the security of the Israeli settlers in Hebron have a widely disproportionate impact on the Palestinians who live there. In some areas of Hebron, Palestinians have to access their homes via the roof as they are not allowed to walk or drive on the streets below. Despite these measures, you get an undeniable sense that the Israeli settlers too are tense about the situation.

Whilst Hebron is shocking, it is best remembered that it is not typical of everywhere in the West Bank with large cities like Ramallah policed by the Palestinian Authorities. It also is worth pointing out that the majority of Israeli settlers in the West Bank are there for economic as opposed to religious reasons. If adequate compensation and housing

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can be provided for the economic settlers then they are likely to relocate. That is not to detract from the very difficult question posed by religious settlers. When a Palestinian state comes into being, the Jewish settlers in Hebron (and elsewhere) will be faced with the choice of leaving the West Bank and moving into Israel or becoming Jewish Palestinian citizens in a newly formed Palestinian state.

The yearning of the people for an internationally recognised Palestinian state and their frustration at stalled peace talks is easy to understand. Comprehending the Israeli mindset initially proved to be a much trickier task for me. This was made more difficult as the Israelis talk about matters of security as though it is common parlance. Whilst the UK had many years of IRA attacks and more recently 7/7, we have never been subject to the prolonged periods of attack that the state of Israel has. No-one has ever questioned the right of the UK to exist. Yet Israel is surrounded by neighbours who implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, suggest that it should never have been brought into existence. Less than 24 hours after the Israeli state proclaimed its independence on 14 May 1948, it was attacked by Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Without understanding Jewish history it is impossible to appreciate the mindset of Israelis: a people constantly under threat.

In the words of Jeremy Leigh, it all seems to come down to power and powerlessness. Jeremy told us that it wasn't all about the Holocaust. This is an important concept to grasp because the West and many Arab states have interpreted the creation of Israel as some form of consolation prize for the atrocities perpetrated against the Jewish people by the Nazis. The creation of the Israeli state was not compensation for the Holocaust but borne from the Zionist movement which became prominent at the end of the 19th century. Zionism proclaims the right of the Jewish people to a sovereign homeland in what is now Israel. This was a response to centuries of anti-Semitism which had eroded the desire among many Jewish communities to integrate, especially in Europe. A culture of being outsiders in the states of others has been a recurring

motif of the Israeli narrative and consequently its politics. The Jewish people have historically been subject to mistreatment or expulsions from areas where they had been well established. There was the Jewish ghetto in Venice in 1516, expulsion of the Sephardic Jews in Spain in the fourteenth century, and the exile to Babylon of the original Jewish community in Jerusalem itself.

Without understanding this viewpoint, the Israeli position can appear irrational. It is not. Currently there is a broad and eclectic range of countries that do not recognise the existence of the state of Israel. These range beyond the well-known – Iran, Iraq, Syria and UAE – to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cuba and Indonesia. Suffice to say Israel's concern over its borders, in light of the hostility both in the region and outside to its right to exist, is legitimate. The apparent excesses of power shown by the Israeli state are borne out of a feeling of powerlessness. Until Israel has genuine grounds to feel free from attack from extremists then it will not have the strength to negotiate a binding peace agreement.

That there is validity in the Israel security fears is unquestioned, at least by me. However, I vehemently disagree with the logic which says that fears over security should be a barrier to peace. The senior members of Fatah, like Dr Mohammad Shtayyeh, were impressive in the position they adopted towards the current state of affairs. There should be no doubt that they are serious partners for peace. The failure of Fatah's bid for statehood or reinstatement of security talks has serious ramifications for Israel. If the Palestinian party that advocates peace is discredited by the statehood bid, then this plays to Hamas' narrative that violence is the only language that the Israelis understand. This would be a disastrous outcome for all sides. Many international stakeholders have quietly expressed the hope that the Palestinian statehood resolution is slowed by the prolonged process of the technical sub-committees at the UN to enable a conflict to be deferred for some months.

My response is that attempts to achieve peace must be made immediately and done seriously. Our last meeting, with the Geneva Peace

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Initiative, resolved this much in my mind. Having visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I would never claim that reaching a binding agreement that secures the peaceful co-existence of two states was easy. The reality on the ground is that the conditions for achieving peace will worsen rather than improve as time continues. Any ongoing failure to accommodate the moderate Palestinian voices who are currently advocating for peace risks playing into the hands of the extremists. Brave political decisions need to be made on both sides but the time to make them is running out. I only hope that politicians across the divide and in the international community will seize the moment.

2 | The challenge of moderation: The role of religion and the failure of leadership

Shazia Yamin

In drawing together my impressions following the trip to Israel and Palestine, I have focused my attention on two key areas: firstly, the distorted role that religion has been portrayed as playing; and secondly, the apparent failure of leadership which exists on both sides, albeit evident under different guises. Overall, both sides face a challenge to ensure that the voices of moderation are heard to enable a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Before this trip, I viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as largely being one between Muslims and Jews, the root cause of which was the unlawful occupation of 'Muslim lands' by the latter. What I learnt during the trip is that the conflict is so much more than a dispute between two religions. In fact, the role of religion almost pales into insignificance as one starts to fully understand the underlying issues of race, nationality and cultural identity. There is an 'Islamisation' of the conflict which seems to cloud over the real issues which lie at the heart of both the conflict and any solution which might be reached.¹

As the week progressed I began to question how I had allowed such an impression to form within my mind, and I believe that the answer to this is largely to do with my own background. Whilst I would not describe myself as being a devout or even practising Muslim, I was brought up within a largely Muslim community. I believe that it is an amplified version of this narrative which feeds the ideology espoused by some Islamic extremist groups and is used in attempting to justify

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the atrocities that are committed in the name of Islam. The issue has recently been discussed within the context of the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.²

I describe the role of religion as being distorted because the Palestinian Authority is seeking recognition of Palestine as a secular state; the importance for them being that a state is created rather than the religion assigned to it. Interestingly, this was advanced as the main reason for not recognising Israel as a state for the Jewish people during the course of our meeting with Fatah Youth. What was not said is that there is an underlying reluctance to recognise the Jewish people in terms of a race as distinct from solely a religion. For me this is one of the key areas where a change in mindset is necessary in order to achieve a true solution to the conflict. However, the argument in itself illustrates how religion is used to cloud over a far larger issue: the recognition of a race.

In addition to being secular, Fatah also say they agree to the Palestinian state being demilitarised and the presence of an international peace keeping force within its borders. These concessions go some way in addressing Israeli security concerns which are regarded by most Israelis as being one of the key issues which need to be addressed for a solution to be reached. I was told that there has been a considerable shift in public opinion within Israel. Today, a two state solution is something that most people accept as being the solution to the conflict, but just twenty years ago it would never have been discussed. I was also struck by the emphasis placed upon time by the individuals and groups

involved in the peace process on the Israeli side, the recurring theme being that the time for a solution is now. Perhaps the most telling reason for this is the recognition that the current Palestinian position is, according to Israeli negotiator Gilead Sher, "as good as it gets." There is a fear that following the recent reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, this position will be significantly altered should the elections agreed as part of the reconciliation actually take place. Whilst the wider ramifications of the Arab Spring are currently unclear, the one thing that

is certain is that it is likely to cause greater short-term instability in the region.

During the week I heard many contradictory reasons as to why the peace negotiations have stalled. It is hard to say where the truth lies, but I do believe that the Israelis should use what is regarded by many as an opportune moment for a successful resolution to the conflict being negotiated. I was left with the impression that there is a discernible failure of leadership on the Israeli side and that the government of the day does not adequately reflect the moderate voices which I heard in my very short time in the country. This can be coupled with a failure of the left and the moderates within Israel to exert any real pressure on the current government. It is also arguable that the proportional representation electoral system leads to a Knesset which is more right wing than the Israeli population as a whole. For me, overcoming this misrepresentation is Israel's main battle in the challenge of moderation.

I am also concerned by the mirrored failure of leadership on the part of the Palestinian Authority. My concern centres on the idea that the Palestinian 'as good as it gets' position may also be too good to be true, and suspect that this is something which also troubles the Israeli side. I question whether the majority of the Palestinian people will accept a solution to the conflict which creates a secular, demilitarised state.

Fatah, and thus by implication the Palestinian Authority, has failed to engender support for their moderate position within the Palestinian people and the Arab world. In my opinion, more needs to be done by the Palestinian Authority in order to combat the 'Islamisation' of the conflict. This is not something which the Palestinian Authority can hope to accomplish on their own; the wider Muslim community and other stakeholders need to work together to counter this development. It is for this reason that I believe the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN should be supported. Whilst it may not change realities on the ground it will prove a key victory in the 'hearts and minds battle' of the Palestinian people and moderate Muslims all over the world. If this is

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not addressed and a two state solution based upon the parameters currently being advanced by Fatah does come to pass, there is a risk of a split within the Palestinian side which may lead to the eventual creation of three states: Israel, Palestine and Gaza. This fear is somewhat reflected in the reality which currently exists on the ground.

There exists a challenge of moderation which faces both sides. The way in which this is overcome by both sides differs, but once overcome I believe there is a sufficient commonality of interests to enable a solution which leads to the successful co-existence of two nations.

3 | Writing on the wall: Israel's Security Fence

Claire Leigh

It's my Promised Land, not yours!

We are told that history repeats itself as tragedy. So it is in Israel.

When Joshua led the Israelites back to the Promised Land over three thousand years ago he took them into what is now the heart of the modern-day West Bank, specifically to the ancient walled city of Jericho. Finding the inhabitants loath to give up their lush 'City of Palms,' the Israelites proceeded to lay siege to the town. The locals were fearful, for the Israelites had just defeated the might of Egypt in what was seen as a miraculous victory in the face of unbeatable odds. Anyone who has ever sung a hymn knows what happened next. On the seventh day of the siege Joshua and his people encircled the city, blowing trumpets and shouting until the walls came a-tumbling down.

Fast forward to 1967 and the descendants of Joshua found themselves in a strikingly similar situation, having once again returned from exile only to find the Promised Land inconveniently inhabited by gentiles. Seizing the West Bank following surprise defeats over both Egypt and Jordan, the proverbial walls once again came tumbling down, setting the stage for today's occupation of the Palestinian Territories. But that is where the analogy ends, because since 2001 the Israelis have set out on an extraordinary reversal of the historical parallel; they have rebuilt the walls of Jericho and have resumed their siege.

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Conquer then divide

When as part of the Young Fabians delegation to Israel in September I first clapped eyes on the 'Security Fence', as it is euphemistically known, I was astounded. Towering some eight metres tall, with a deep trench on one side, topped by barbed wire and guarded by regular watchtowers running as far as the eye could see in either direction, the wall seemed oppressive, almost violent in its vast impenetrability.

Built in response to the terrorism that blighted Israel during the Second Intifada from 2000, Israelis claim that the barrier has led to a 90% decrease in suicide bombings and other attacks within Israel's borders. Like its other historical antecedents- including the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall and the Berlin Wall, it is a device to keep the barbarians out, to demarcate the border between the imperial forces of civilisation and the unconquerable territories beyond.

Good walls make good neighbours?

As the Israeli government's spokesman Mark Regev argued when we met him, misquoting the American poet Robert Frost, "Good walls make good neighbours." Alas, if Regev had thought to read on he would have come to Frost's more telling lines: Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out / And to whom I was like to give offence.

If the wall has been more or less successful in its aims of improving the day to day security of Israel's citizens, at what cost has this security been won?

To the Palestinians the cost is clear. Just 13% of the wall sits on the so called 'Green Line' that marks the borders of the future Palestinian State, as recognised by the Oslo Accords. The rest has been built well within the West Bank in what the Palestinians regard as a poorly disguised land grab. The Israelis justify the deviation of the wall from the Green Line by arguing that the wall does not represent a future border and is designed merely to protect Jewish communities, including

those living inside the West Bank. But Palestinians unfortunate enough to live between the Green Line and the wall are caught in what has become known as the 'seam zone.' Cut adrift from farmland, schools, places of work, Palestinians living in the seam zone can go neither forward nor back without huge inconvenience. Towns, farms and families have been split in two. Some towns are almost entirely encircled by Israel, with nothing but a corridor of land allowing entry and exit. This resumed siege of the West Bank makes imports and exports difficult, the movement of people nearly impossible.

Mental barriers

But the practical inconveniences created and the international law contravened by the positioning of the wall is as nothing compared to the psychological and political impact of its very existence. The wall has made an open air prison of the tiny West Bank, providing a daily reminder of occupation, a physical embodiment of the ever growing divide between the peoples of Israel and Palestine. If people are forced apart, how can they ever come to see their interests as aligned? How can they ever look the enemy in the face and see not a monster but a fellow human being who wants nothing more than the right to live in peace in the land of his forefathers? If mistrust, fear and ignorance are the root cause of both terrorism and failed peace negotiations, then surely the wall can only exacerbate Israel's insecurity in the long term.

The wall is especially problematic for supporters of a one state solution, who make up a significant minority of Israelis on the far right and left and a majority of Arab Israelis.¹ One-staters on both sides of the fence regard the wall as an admission of defeat made manifest in bricks and mortar, making a so called 'bi-national state' an ever more distant dream.

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A gilded cage

Frost reminds us that a wall not only 'walls out' but 'walls in', and as such the costs of the wall are borne not just by the Palestinians but by Israelis themselves. By alienating the international community, driving further distance between Palestinians and Israelis and isolating Israel from its neighbours the wall has made a gilded cage of the country's elaborate security infrastructure. Fast gaining the totemic status and notoriety of its Berlin antecedent, Israel's wall could end up driving the very insecurity it seeks to allay while putting a true and lasting peace further out of reach.

4 | Hearts and minds: selling a two state solution

Joel Mullan

"We know how the agreement will end"

Gilead Sher, Israeli chief negotiator at Camp David

"Everyone knows what the end game is... the tragedy is it is the politicians who are getting in the way."

Senior NGO official

It is often said of the Arab-Israeli conflict that there is greater consensus between the two negotiating teams than among the diversity of elements on each side. Outside of official channels, where there has been very little progress in recent years, there has been much dialogue as to what would constitute a just settlement. One such initiative is the Geneva Accord, the product of hundreds of hours of shadow talks between former top-level negotiators from the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization.¹ Endorsed by former US Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, the Accord provides a detailed blueprint for an agreement which could be accepted as fair by both peoples.

The real challenge lies not in the detail of negotiations, but creating the political will to reach agreement. In the words of Mark Regev, spokesperson for the Israeli Prime Minister, "real peace depends on reconciliation." Compromise will be required on both sides – we are

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asking two peoples to face up to that and put a vast amount of history and mistrust behind them in search of peace.

This essay attempts a brief analysis of the shift in attitudes required to achieve a return to the negotiating table, and subsequently a final-status agreement. We should not underestimate the size of this task. Recent years have seen something of a stalemate – with no meaningful negotiations. As David Miliband recently wrote, “there is no peace process to speak of.”²

Beyond the politics of ‘no’

Both Israel and Palestine need strong leaders; politicians capable of looking beyond the immediate and towards the long term prospects of their people – men and women with both a vision for peace and the credibility to sell it.

The structures of the Israeli political system are not helpful in this regard. A system of proportional representation has elected a Knesset more extreme than most of the population, whilst permanent coalition politics means many Israeli prime ministers pay a high price to keep their government together, sometimes at the cost of a peace deal. Whilst talking the language of the two state solution, current Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu lacks the will to seriously engage with negotiations. He seems content with the status quo.

But the status quo is not sustainable. We are on the cusp of a series of events which will change the dynamic of the region – with the prospect of democratic governments in Libya and Egypt, a serious decay in Israel’s relationship with Turkey, and demonstrations on the streets of Tel Aviv from citizens demanding social change.

Public opinion is starting to turn. On the weekend I left the region, Haaretz the oldest newspaper in Israel, ran a series of articles heavily critical of Netanyahu’s approach, demanding a shift from ‘No’ to ‘Yes but’.³

The cost of intransigence

The risk of the current Israeli administration's approach is increasing disillusionment among Palestinians and aiding radicalisation. Many Palestinians are suffering. The domestic economy is weak, unstable and reliant on aid. Relations with the Israeli army and settlers are ill-at-ease, movement is restricted and some parts of life are devoid of dignity. For them the status quo is tough and will not be tolerated indefinitely.

Gilead Sher told our delegation that "this Palestinian leadership is as good as it gets" for Israel. With Palestinian Authority elections now on the horizon there is hope that moderate politicians might be strengthened, given the actions of Hamas since the last election. Going into elections, the Fatah leadership need to show that diplomatic means are bringing success. Without negotiations this is difficult and explains the motivations behind the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN. They cannot afford not to be engaged in negotiations, but the Israelis must realise that they cannot afford this either. Israel must recognise the value of not frustrating the efforts of Palestine's moderates.

The on-going expansion of settlements, condemned by the international community (including the United States) and contrary to international law, is now the major hurdle to talks. As well as being seen as an act of provocation every new home makes the path to peace more painful, with more families put at risk of having their lives uprooted as part of a just final agreement. There must be an immediate freeze in settlement building and a return to the negotiating table.

The challenge for the Palestinians

The Palestinian leadership will also encounter difficulties selling a final agreement to its citizens. There is a yearning for a 'just solution' as well as an improvement in quality of life. There is much work to be done in battling extremist elements. As Young Fabians International Officer Marie-Noëlle Loewe observed, members of the delegation were surprised at the number of people we encountered who did not believe

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in the two state solution, and in fact questioned Israel's right to exist.⁴ These views are perhaps a reaction to the conditions of the Israeli occupation, but worrying nonetheless.

There is a need for greater cross-community dialogue and the work already happening in this sphere, humanising the other side, should be both supported and scaled up. The Palestinian leadership must also ensure the education system complements these efforts and is not used to demonise.

Winning hearts and minds in Israel

We must also consider the concerns of Israelis – in particular the emphasis placed on security. For Israelis the conflict is not distant: every citizen has served in the military; many in the south live under the constant threat of rocket attack; those in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem remember the fear of suicide bombings during the Second Intifada.

There is a fear that a Palestinian state in the West Bank is not the endgame and will instead be used as a stepping stone and bring further aggression. The Palestinians have set great store on having the support of the international community – they would not risk its wrath and its (and Israel's) military superiority by resuming a claim to Israel, not least because they would have gained too much to lose. The threat posed by Hamas and other militant groups is more cogent, but Israel can marginalise them through constructive dialogue with Fatah.

The religious dimension

Some of the more extremist elements on both sides of the conflict claim the cloak of religion for their actions. Dialogue is needed with religious leaders who, as key figures in their communities, have an important role to play in guiding their people to peace.

Moving forward

I come away from the region with a sense of hope – having seen that the seeds of peace have been planted and that there is a mass of people willing its success. Progress has been made, taboos have been broken. There is recognition of the renewed urgency of the situation and a groundswell of innovative ideas is emerging, designed to break the stalemate.

Some of this new thinking has started to take a hold among parts of the Israeli centre-left but it has by no means become mainstream. There is an important role for British progressives to cajole and encourage our colleagues, in Israeli Labour, Kadima, Meretz, as well as in Fatah, to be brave in the pursuit of peace.

5 | Waiting for statehood: a tale of hope and diminishing patience

Roxanne Mashari

Driving into the West Bank from Israel, the very first thing that struck me was the dramatic and sudden change in surroundings as we crossed the checkpoint. After an Israeli soldier armed with a machine gun inspected the inside of our coach we passed through the border. On the Israeli side of the partition wall, there were tidy streets, flowerbeds and street benches. The picture on the Palestinian side was rather different; rubble and rubbish could be seen everywhere.

This, we were told is a far more developed West Bank compared to 2005, a country on the brink of statehood. I fear that recent development in the West Bank has happened in such a short space of time and at such a pace that it may have been focused in the wrong places.

Maybe it is due to my background as a local councillor in London, but I noticed immediately the many empty, newly built large buildings and Mercedes Benz showrooms, which stood in contrast to the lack of community space, street sanitation and public infrastructure. The West Bank struck me as a society desperately struggling to get on its feet, one that undoubtedly has made large steps in the right direction, but that requires funding, emphasis and design directed towards public amenities. Building strong, safe and sustainable communities has to be part of the development process towards statehood.

The answers we got as to why living conditions were so poor for the majority of Palestinians ranged from blaming local mayors to dismis-

sively pointing to large homes in Ramallah as a sign that such problems were a fallacy. When putting my concerns directly to Mark Regev, spokesman for the Israeli Prime Minister, he told me that Israel wants to see the Palestinians get on their feet as a sustainable West Bank was in her interest, and that they were working with international partners to make this change happen. Unfortunately, generic rhetoric met my queries for details on Israeli action. According to the Oslo accords, parts of the Palestinian Territories are under Israeli civil administration. With poverty and misery providing a breeding ground for extremism, it is frustrating and counterproductive that Israel does not act more resolutely in helping to improve living standards for the Palestinians.

Everyone we met representing the Palestinians on our trip stated that the one thing Israel could do today to help relieve the situation was halt settlement activity. I asked Mr Regev about the one gesture that the Palestinians could make; I was pleasantly surprised to hear the answer 'language'. He articulated a desire for the Palestinian Authorities to speak with an acknowledgment of a historical Jewish connection to the soil and the right to a democratic Jewish state which he argued would begin to change the nature of the peace process immeasurably.

In the UK, the impression that I frequently received from the Israelis in response to criticism of the treatment of Palestinians was that they were acting in the interests of security and defending themselves from extremists who denied Israel's very right to exist. While I do not doubt that these issues play a significant part in her stance in the conflict, I found it difficult to connect them to the actions of the Israeli government and army in Hebron.

Built around what Muslims, Christians and Jews all believe to be Abraham's grave, Hebron is the worst example of a Jewish settlement. Most shocking for me was the extent to which Palestinian business and enterprise was being brought to its knees in the occupied 'H2' area of the city. Muslims were denied access to the holy sites and areas that were once bustling shopping streets lay derelict, closed down for 'secu-

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rity reasons'. Access into and out of the main Arab market was heavily restricted with a metal turnstile, controlled by an Israeli soldier.

From above, Israeli army watchtowers and CCTV cameras littered the skyline. Metal guards had been placed above areas of the market to prevent settlers from throwing large objects down onto traders and buyers. Looking up I saw bricks, stones, chairs, and what our guide pointed out to be a bottle of urine. We were told that settlers had poured down acid into the souks through the mesh only a few months ago. Restriction on free movement in Hebron is intense and yet, remarkably, trade and life continue. A desperate sense of guilt came over me as we, constrained by time, had to hurry through the market place. I felt ashamed knowing that I would be buying similar goods from stalls in safer, tourist areas later on during our trip while residents here haggled in desperation for trade.

The restrictive and divisive conditions in Hebron have got nothing to do with Palestinians accepting Israel's right to exist, nothing to do with rockets from Gaza or Israeli security. Whilst all of the Israelis we spoke to recognised Hebron settlers as extreme, the government continues to defend an unsustainable and oppressive situation there. Hebron, for me, is the ultimate spanner in the works and it will be interesting to see what it will look like as part of a Palestinian state.

There was a real sense of excitement and optimism amongst the Palestinians we met regarding the imminent bid to the UN for official recognition of statehood; a culmination of years of work to establish and strengthen state institutions and maintain law and order in the Palestinian territories. For me, the bid has three highly desirable ingredients: non-violence, multilateralism, and the backing of the politically and religiously moderate Palestinian. A potential Palestinian state would, we were told, take the shape of a demilitarised, democratic state based roughly on 1967 borders and would provide a more solid platform to negotiate a sustainable peace settlement. Perhaps most crucially for Israel, recognition of a Palestinian state at the UN would mean a de facto recognition of Israel by the Arab/Muslim nations. This could help

to stabilise Israel's position in the region and decrease its isolation in the world. Iran and Syria have vowed to normalise relations with Israel should the Palestinians be granted statehood.

I believe that UN-declared statehood presents a unique and historical opportunity for Israel and Europe to engage with the Palestinians to make significant, tangible strides towards a viable two state solution and the reinvigoration of the entire peace process.

6 | Lost in confusion

Natalie Breslaw

Wow, what a week! Visiting Israel and experiencing firsthand the problems and solutions of the Israel-Palestine conflict left me more confused than ever. Travelling around Israel for a month two years ago, I saw a very different country, one which was peaceful and western with gorgeous shops, amazing food and beautiful beaches. No sign of war, social unrest and especially no sign of Palestinians. I was in for a massive shock ...

On my way to Luton airport from my home in London my mind was set. Israel is a country defending itself on a daily basis from terrorists from across the border in Palestine. Ok, this may have been a crazy right-wing opinion, but growing up in North West London, attending only Jewish schools, and, to make matters worse, reading the Jewish Chronicle newspaper weekly, to an extent explained my views.

Once we arrived in Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, delegates with Islamic surnames were questioned continuously for three hours, while European names were let in the country with ease and no fuss. Understandably these delegates were angry and not impressed with their first meeting with the state of Israel and remarks of racial profiling were justified. However, my arguments in attempting to defend the security with phrases like holocaust, daily bombings, and Arab Spring did not convince or satisfy fellow delegates, but nor did it convince myself as even I started to question the extremes of the security.

After a debriefing from BICOM (the Britain Israel Communications & Research Centre) on domestic affairs, the conflict, and the regional crisis on our first morning in Jerusalem, my image of Israel almost immediately collapsed and a much more confusing picture appeared: 70% of Palestinians want a two state solution and the words 'negotiations' and 'failure' appeared too many times. I knew this week would change all my previous conceptions and beliefs of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Up early and after our hummus and cake breakfast, we headed to the capital of the West Bank, Ramallah, to meet with Nidal Fqaha, director general of the Palestinian Peace Coalition (PPC). Driving into the West Bank one would have to be oblivious in the extreme to not see the dramatic differences between the two economies and thus living standards, though it was not as poverty-ridden as I had expected. Shopping malls, Mercedes car dealerships and tall office buildings were a common occurrence. Fqaha spoke passionately about his hope for peace and his dream for the Palestinians. But when he talked about the fifteen years of negotiations about Gaza and the failures of these leading to one year of bombing and the death of over 1,000 Palestinian civilians, defeat, anger and aggravation in his voice became clear. According to him the frustration about the stalled peace process made the Palestinian bid to the United Nations for statehood the only option. 130 individual states have already openly recognised Palestine as a peaceful state. Fqaha understood that Palestine receiving statehood would not immediately create peace, but he hoped it would revive talks again so that actual change would happen on the ground. This was the polar opposite of the Israeli perspective, which demanded talks before any statehood. As a result of the differences, tension is widely spread between the two sides.

The next couple of days were spent having meetings in Jerusalem at the Office of the Quartet Representative, returning back to the West Bank for a tour through Hebron with the Palestinian NGO Al-Haq, and a Q&A with Mark Regev, spokesman for the Israeli Prime Minister.

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Throughout these meetings, the same issues kept arising: Palestinian refugees, settlements and Gaza.

Nidal Foqaha from the PPC stated that there were 9 million Palestinians worldwide, with the majority of them living in refugee camps in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. There were about half a million refugees now living in Chile. He did not expect all refugees to come back to a Palestinian state, as many of them had settled in their new home countries. In principal, however, refugees should have the right to return. Personally, I do not believe that this would be feasible - the land is not large enough for the return of all, making it unrealistic. Gilead Sher, chief negotiator for the Israelis at Camp David, suggested that compensation would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Israel would also consider the resettlement of some refugees, for example for families which have been torn apart. This seems like a fair and realistic solution, however we will have to wait and see if the policy in the future is put into practice.

Due to security reasons, we did not have the opportunity to visit Gaza. As a result, I was left with a million and one questions about the area, its government and governance and how different it seemed to the West Bank. Hamas is a democratically elected terrorist organisation, whose constitution outlines the desire for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish state, whereas Fatah in the West Bank is a secular, peace wanting government. How could such different governments ever act as one state? Hamas refused to get involved in the bid for statehood as they did not believe it would achieve anything. Throughout our stay, I did not receive an answer that satisfied my questions.

Gaza is a real problem for the Israelis. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. The Palestinians, be it Hamas or Fatah, had an opportunity to create an area with a good economy that could live with Israel. Instead continuous bombings into southern Israel continue to occur on an almost daily basis. No country would tolerate this. Why should Israel? But to me, this bomb threat still does not justify the attacks on Gaza during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09.

While writing this essay I came across an article in the Telegraph reporting that the Israeli government has allowed for the construction of 1,100 new homes in the East Jerusalem settlement of Gilo. Settlements are a major obstacle to creating peace. Israelis are digging themselves deeper into a hole that they eventually will not be able to climb out of. If both sides return to negotiations, it will be extremely hard for the Israeli government to ask hundreds of thousands of Israelis living in the West Bank to leave their homes, after they were encouraged to live there through economic benefits. The settlements are a violation of Palestinian rights. In 1991 there were 97,000 settlers, now in 2011 there are 660,000, and this number is increasing. Violence between the settlers and the Palestinians is increasing on a daily basis, from the murder of an Israeli family by a Palestinian, to an Israeli shooting in a mosque. A complete settlement freeze, including new buildings in existing settlements would allow room for new negotiations and hopefully, in the long-term, a lasting peace.

Confused and indecisive is my conclusion. From day to day I change on wanting to protect the Israeli citizens, to defending the human rights of the Palestinians. I do believe that peace can be created, but numerous topics must be addressed and a truth and reconciliation commission must be set up to have the facts out in the open under a consensus from both sides. Hopefully through these peaceful means, harmony will be created in the forthcoming years. I would agree with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, commenting on the Palestinian statehood bid, "In the Middle East, we must break the stalemate. We have long agreed that Palestinians deserve a state. Israel needs security. Both want peace. Talks are the answer."

7 | In search of understanding

Tamsin James

When we arrived in Jerusalem at the beginning of our visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories I was taken ill, put straight into an ambulance and rushed to hospital. Three days later I rejoined the group, but those three days meant that my experience was very different to those of the other delegates. While they were experiencing the frustration and potential fear of armed checkpoints and being shown the settlements of Hebron, I was being treated to world class healthcare by doctors and nurses who always put in the extra effort, whilst I shared a ward with Israeli Jews who were kindness personified. I was being shown the best of Israel as my fellow delegates saw the worst. But it allowed me time for conversations that increased my understanding of the people who live there.

The hardest thing for me to understand was the mindset that allows violence to continue for so long. There have been occasions in the past 60 years when peace seemed within grasp. Who on either side would not be willing to make the final compromise to achieve that? Instead, violent incidents met with retaliations and escalated in an inevitable and depressing cycle, as though no one was really serious about peace after all. Why was this? Far removed, brought up in peace and security, it was incomprehensible to me. And, in truth, I always expected more of Israel in terms of movements towards peace. As a developed and relatively wealthy country, this had seemed a reasonable expectation; it was not meant in disrespect, just in ignorance.

My first visit with the group was to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial on the edge of Jerusalem. Our tour with Jeremy Leigh, a lecturer in Jewish history, helped to clarify some of the thoughts that I had developed in my various conversations with Jewish people in the hospital. He expressed a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, Israel does not want to be defined by the Holocaust; on the other, to ignore this monstrous event when characterising the Jewish nation would be to disregard the historical foundations of the state. Talking politics with everyone I met, I had encountered this same sentiment. Recounting the threats to Israel's security, their isolation in the region, and reflecting on the apparent indifference in the wider world, I was asked more than once, "Do they want to see another holocaust?" The wounds caused in a different time have not yet healed, and the scale of the event is such that it seems naive to have expected them to.

Later during our trip, Lydia Eisenberg introduced us to life at the kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek before leading us around neighbouring Wadi Ara, forcing us to look beyond the various maps of the country that we had been shown to actually understand how borders and barriers affected people's lives on the land. Living in one of the narrowest parts of the country, there was no better way of understanding the insecurity and claustrophobia many Jewish people feel – there was the sea, and a mere 11 miles away were the Palestinian Territories. But she also made sure we understood where the 'Green Line' ran and where this differed from the security barrier, how both of these had chopped up Palestinian communities and lives. She was brutally honest about the contradictions of her life. At the Givat Haviva Institute she works towards increasing Jewish-Arab understanding, yet when her sons were called up for military service, she would be packing their bags. The compromises of peace and security are a personal matter for every citizen.

I never truly appreciated before the extent to which Israel is a militarised society. There is conscription at 18, two years in the army for everybody and regular military service after that. I could not get used to the sight of eighteen year olds wandering around quite cheerfully with

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guns over their shoulders, young women going shopping in their fatigues with their handbags slung over their arms. But it helped me see how conflict could become normal. The military is a common thing, part of everyone's family, not far removed from everyday experience. Does taking military action become easier when nearly everyone you know has been involved at some point, even as your awareness of the likely consequences is far greater?

I was met with generosity and openness from nearly everyone I talked to during our visit. There was so much reasonableness and tolerance that it was hard to remember that these are people whose lives are shaped by conflict. And then, a few days after we returned, I saw a comment on Facebook by an old friend from Nazareth. He is a Palestinian Christian, an ordained priest in the Anglican Church. Christians are a significant minority within the Palestinian population. He recounted an incident on a train where an Israeli woman looked straight at him and commented to her companion that "there are far too many Christians in Israel now." My friend got up and walked to another carriage, choosing not to respond, a strength that I admire and a personal restraint not echoed by national leaderships. But this is not an uncommon incident for him. I visited and, due to the accident of my trip to hospital, was shown the very best but he lives there and is belittled and compromised in his everyday life.

In hospital, I was always told "Be well." It is far more direct than the English 'Get well soon'. It is said with warmth but it is an instruction. I want to find the same tone for the people we met during our trip. Everyone said you will go with questions but you will return with even more. They were right. The more people we met and the more conversations we had, the more confusion I experienced. But no one had any hesitation in telling me to 'be well' however little control I had over this, however complicated this might be. Should I hesitate in saying it in return? 'Find peace.' It is hard and difficult and beyond the control of many people in their everyday lives but they will recognise the voice I

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say it in. It is warm but it is an instruction. However confused and depressed our visit left me, I remain convinced that it is possible.

8 | Supporting the path of diplomacy

Joani Reid

As in any bad relationship, there is a complete lack of trust between the Israelis and Palestinians. Both the Israeli government and Fatah (as opposed to Hamas) claim to be committed to a two state solution, but that the other side does nothing to realise it. Both can outline many reasons why this is the case: the Palestinians point to the continuing building of Israeli settlements; the Israelis to the Palestinians' refusal to accept previous generous offers following negotiations in 1993 and 2000.

I can think of no other issue that is more polarising than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even in the UK it elicits strong reactions. But I was not prepared for the level of feeling I experienced when over there. Ideologies, nationalism, and passion on both sides make it very difficult, if not impossible to have a rational conversation with the citizens in these communities. I learnt this lesson first hand.

Jerusalem, borders, refugees and settlements are the particularly contentious issues and although both sides generally accept these matters need to be settled through negotiations, Israel continues to build settlements and the Palestinians continue to insist on the right of return. These are just two of many flashpoints which put into jeopardy even the beginnings of another set of peace negotiations.

The lack of trust, the passion on the ground and the complete polarisation of ideologies all lead me to the conclusion that it is unlikely, if not impossible to create a two state solution purely through peace negotia-

tions. If Israel continues to build settlements and terrorist attacks continue, the possibility of even reaching the negotiation table is small. One thing is clear to me - there must be a change of tactics and more international pressure on both parties. Therefore, Israel and the US should be supporting the Palestinians' UN bid for statehood, not just because it is the right thing to do but because it is in Israel's interests to do so.

Before outlining why this is the case, I should point out that my argument relies on two key assumptions, which most reasonable people would not contest: firstly, that Israel faces a genuine and very real security threat; and secondly, that she is genuinely committed to a two state solution.

Israel's main arguments against the Palestinian bid for statehood are as follows:

- (a) the bid de-legitimises Israel by putting the Palestinians on equal footing in virtue of now being a recognised state
- (b) the bid is a unilateral move which will undermine peace negotiations
- (c) the bid leads to unrealistic expectations on the part of the Palestinian people, expectations that will inevitably be dashed, leading to a further outbreak of violence.

The underlying fear for Israel in all of the above is that the UN bid for statehood will lead to further attacks on her citizens. Due to the as yet unknown consequences of the Arab Spring, Israel's vulnerability is perhaps now greater than before - she should be embracing what is a diplomatic, non-violent, peaceful move by the Palestinians. It would be demonstrating that diplomacy is in fact more successful and reaps more rewards than violence. Israel claims that this move will threaten any future peace negotiations. I doubt that more participation and representation at the UN would jeopardise future talks. The Palestinians claim that this move would not rule out peace negotiations, but rather would complement them.

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However, Israel's argument that the bid will lead to more violence may be a guise for their genuine fear of increased Palestinian diplomatic power. This, I suspect, is the case. It will lead to an increase in Palestinian power, therefore giving them an advantage in the diplomacy war. Of course diplomacy is preferable to violence, but it is naïve to suggest that it is wholly benign. As the Israelis see it, this move is not harmless, but an attack on their security.

There is of course a genuine and grave security threat from the Gaza Strip and Hamas. Hamas is a threat not just to Israel but also to the Palestinians in the West Bank, to Fatah and to achieving statehood at the UN. Infamously, Hamas do not believe in Israel's right to exist and will not support the proposal as explicit within it is the acceptance of a two state solution. Fatah and Hamas are divided on the issue. Although not supporting the initiative, Hamas have not outwardly opposed it, partly, it is believed, because of the American veto. Anything which weakens Hamas (and strengthens Fatah) is good for Israel. If the bid were successful, it would strengthen Fatah and therefore the argument for a diplomatic and peaceful struggle. However, by opposing it Israel is giving Hamas the opportunity to say 'I told you so', thereby strengthening Hamas and their argument that violence is more effective than diplomacy. Israel should be doing everything in its power to support and strengthen the moderates who support a two state solution.

You only have to look at the West Bank to see that security is becoming less of a threat as society develops. The West Bank has made phenomenal progress over the last few years. It has a vibrant culture and a strong economy with a growth rate of around 9-10%, a figure the UK can only dream of. Palestinians are building a thriving private sector and an expanding infrastructure. I am not underestimating what still needs to be done, but an adviser to Tony Blair in his role for the Quartet stated that the West Bank is on the brink of being ready for statehood. If the Palestinians deserve a state, just as Israel does, they deserve more representation and a say at the UN.

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Barack Obama knows this. It was less than a year ago that he expressed his desire to see full Palestinian membership at the UN. However, since then the American President has also taken a real hit domestically, amplified by the Democrats losing a seat in New York City to the Republicans for the first time since the 1920s. Although Israel's peace with Egypt is now in doubt, its relations with Turkey have soured, and the potential implosion of Syria threatens further instability, the biggest issue is that Obama's less than fulsome support for Israel does not go down well with the large Jewish community. And unfortunately realpolitik proves difficult to overcome.

10 | What chance change?

Adrian Prandle

"If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

Maya Angelou

No-one who the Young Fabian delegation met in the Middle East could say with any certainty what could force change to the conflict between the people and governments of Israel and Palestine. Aside from a couple of Fatah politicians – who articulately characterised the narrative and justification of why they would be seeking recognition of statehood from the UN just a couple of weeks after the delegation met with them – no-one believed change would emanate from the floor of the United Nations in New York.

Approaching the end of 2011 we are not yet in a place to know whether the Palestinian's UN bid is a game changer or not. In a year that has seen popular protests in Israel, and mass movements for democracy across the Arab world, is there a chance that change will be forced from below?

Urgency ... and responsibility

Before visiting the region, it seemed clear to me that there was a certain industry around 'the conflict' – from the international community as well as the stop-start bilateral negotiations. Yet I was still surprised on

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day one by how normalised people appeared to be to what is essentially a crisis. The conflict was the status quo, not a terrible yet temporary situation that is wrecking the lives of Israelis and Palestinians (albeit not temporary enough). In this case there is a fine line between realism and pessimism. I lost count of the number of times the delegation was told that the defining issue of the time we visited - the statehood bid - "wouldn't change anything on the ground." It was unnerving to hear the same phrase said by so many Palestinians and Israelis, as if it was being read from a script.

Though it is not as simple as to use the label optimist, there were differing voices. It was suggested to the delegation that the situation has reached "two minutes to midnight." Lawyer and Camp David negotiator, Gilead Sher, in discussing "a new urgency", explained his belief that "we cannot do it alone anymore - bilateral talks are not going to take it forward." It was not uncommon that those we met would be looking overseas for assistance, in particular to the EU (something the British government might bear in mind amidst its posturing). But could this also be interpreted as the need for public pressure to achieve a two state solution, and swiftly?

Sher's view that there is always lots of rhetoric and excuses for not taking a step forward sat comfortably with the remarks of Gadi Baltiansky, also a former negotiator and now Chief Executive of the Geneva Initiative.¹ Though acknowledging the personal and political risks for leaders, Baltiansky was scathing in his demand for not just negotiations, but decisions. His criticism that leaders on both sides are not prepared to make difficult decisions centred on the view that not making such calls was a higher risk.

At any level of politics, anywhere in the world, office alone is not enough to guarantee responsibility. Leaders may be driven in themselves, but they also rise to the challenge of taking responsibility when their public demands it.

What's happening at home?

From both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, the delegation heard praise for the role of young people and students in political and social activism (including the successful use of social media) as well as hope for their potential role in reaching peace. It is hard not to see the conflict between Israel and Palestine as being about people's lives. Personal and national security are obvious issues but other aspects of day-to-day living are also suffering.

As the delegates arrived in the region the tents were coming down in Tel Aviv following a protest movement that camped out and campaigned against the cost of living. This was sparked – unlikely as it sounds – by a Facebook campaign against the cost of cottage cheese. The protests were the calling card of ordinary, working people (the squeezed middle, if you like) who, struggling to balance income with essential expenditure, we were told, 'couldn't close the month'. With the slogan 'the people demand social justice', the protests made international news and were Israel's biggest ever demonstrations.² At around 7% of GDP, Israel has one of the highest proportions of defence spending in the world.³ It is not surprising then that affordable housing, access to healthcare, and welfare support come lower down the list of government spending priorities. Yet the cost of living has become a massive concern to people at a time when growth in Israel's economy, considering what is happening elsewhere in the world, is holding up well according to the IMF.⁴ Social justice is not just a domestic issue though, and housing in particular is a complex problem – it was economic incentives around housing that saw Israelis move into the settlements developed on the Palestinian side of the 1967 border.

Meanwhile in Palestine the economy continues to grow. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reports year-on-year growth of 10%, with the construction sector's contribution to GDP up 33% in the last 12 months.⁵ Such growth though comes from a low base, the leading sectors are changing frequently, and stability is questionable. What this means for people's lives though, must be a critical question.

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One of Tony Blair's advisers in the Office of the Quartet representative, which works towards opening up the Palestinian economy and building up its institutions in preparation for statehood, described joblessness as "the bane of development". Despite lots of praise for the Palestinian PM, Salmah Fayyad, the fragility of the economy and social progress was characterised by differing opinions on the quality of life. High West Bank unemployment of 15% was reported; 20% amongst young people, who could earn more as construction workers, for example, on the other side of the border. It will be interesting to see whether Palestine can follow Israel's lead in developing a strong IT sector.

Given the situation in Gaza, which Hamas controls, it is important for the Fatah leadership to carry the Palestinian public with them in their quest for a two state solution. What the Arab Spring means for Palestinians is not yet clear. It may not be beyond the imagination though for an outward demonstration of democracy to come in the form of social protests similar to Israel's. Might peaceful protest on the need for jobs, homes, and useful education in Palestine reassure the Israeli government and alleviate its security concerns? Is this the force for change that might renew positivity in the region and highlight the sense of urgency for two peaceful states with residents able to live comfortably and aspire to successful professional and family lives?

Public opinion comes with contradictions. Whether or not the frustration that leads to peaceful social and political demonstrations, and the successes derived from them, are capable of encouraging public protests on the peace issue remains to be seen. Such activity is not unheard of in Israel, but numerically doesn't get close to matching the mainstream support for the 2011 protests.⁶ When asked whether public pressure could help political leaders take tough decisions, Gadi Baltiansky was clear that the Israeli government simply could not ignore the social protests. Yet on peace, "collectively everyone is failing to ignite popular opinion and action ... Leaders who tended to postpone the moment of truth need to be put at a crossroads by growing public pressure in both countries."

Perspective ... and change

You don't become an expert on a weeklong visit, not least on an issue as complex and long-standing as peace in the Middle East. Though one can aspire to providing a small nugget of fresh perspective, one can, as with analysts of decades, merely speculate on the future.

It is worth reflecting though on the comparison Mark Regev, spokesperson for the Israeli PM, made of two peoples with more in common than many choose to admit: attitudes towards patriotism; a feeling of being let down by the international community; the suffering of horrors and atrocities; an affinity to the country. The tragedy of the conflict, we were told, is that it comes down to the genuine attachment and claim to a small patch of real estate. Another literary quotation, from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, might connect this point to the onset of change and peaceful resolution: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Ultimately, if a change to the present stand-off is not forthcoming then new, creative actions – possibly attitudes, and certainly empathy, too – must be sought to secure two strong, peaceful and successful states. The left around the globe should see this not just as an issue of international relations, but one of social justice. Maybe the respective domestic quests for social justice in Palestine and in Israel may soon push people and politicians together in securing peace in a conflict that distracts so much from normal life. The next 'two minutes' will tell.

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The challenge of moderation

1. See 'The Role of Islam within the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict' By Bassam Eid <http://www.ipcri.org/files/p&d/Islam-Eid.pdf>
2. See article written by Robert Fisk: For 10 years, we've lied to ourselves to avoid asking the one real question, The Independent, 3 September 2011. Fisk states 'But I am drawn to Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan whose The Eleventh Day confronts what the West refused to face in the years that followed 9/11. "All the evidence ... indicates that Palestine was the factor that united the conspirators – at every level," they write. One of the organisers of the attack believed it would make Americans concentrate on "the atrocities that America is committing by supporting Israel." Palestine, the authors state, "was certainly the principal political grievance ... driving the young Arabs (who had lived) in Hamburg'.

Writing on the wall

1. March 2010 poll, The Israel Democracy Institute of the Guttman Center

Hearts and minds

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About the delegation leaders

Marie-Noëlle Loewe is International Officer on the Young Fabians executive committee and initiated the 2011 Middle East Programme. Previously she was a Parliamentary Researcher for the Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP and worked on several political campaigns including Rushanara Ali MP's 2010 general election campaign and Oona King's campaign to be Labour's mayoral candidate in London. Marie has a Master's degree from the University of Muenster in Germany and moved to the UK in 2007. She now works in finance.

Nick Maxwell is the Young Fabians Fundraising and Partnerships Officer. This is his second year on the executive committee. Nick was previously the Networks and Schools Officer and established two new member networks – the 'Future of Finance' and 'Technology and Society' Networks. Professionally, Nick currently works for an international research institute on economics and global governance, having worked in business and finance public affairs for four years. Nick graduated from York University in PPE and spent an exchange year studying at Ohio State University. During his time in America he had an academic internship at the US State Department and volunteered for the John Kerry 2004 presidential election campaign. Nick is a member of the Labour Finance and Industry Group.

About the authors

Sara Ibrahim is Vice Chair of the Young Fabians executive committee. She is a barrister working in the fields of employment and commercial law. In her previous Young Fabian role as Embassies Officer she arranged events with the Swedish Embassy on gender equality, the Indonesian Embassy on Islam and Democracy and the US Embassy on the midterm elections. She has also participated in events outside of London, including the Manchester Fabian Society Conference and the Labour leadership hustings in Bristol which the Young Fabians co-hosted. In 2011 she co-ordinated the Young Fabians policy commissions which developed policy ideas under four themes: the economy, international relations, communities, and securing the future of the next generation. She has also spoken to local Fabian societies in Cambridge and Bournemouth on Labour's electoral difficulties in the south and Compass' annual conference on the role of the state.

Shazia Yamin qualified as a solicitor in December 2010 and has been working at Hodge, Jones and Allen Solicitors since 2008. She studied to be a barrister and cross-qualified with the support of the firm. She joined the Fabian Society in 2010 and later joined the Labour Party. She is also a member of the Society for Labour Lawyers.

Claire Leigh is an advisor on government strategy and reform. For the past two years Claire has worked as an advisor to the Presidents of

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Liberia and Rwanda on behalf of the Tony Blair Africa Governance Initiative. Prior to working in Africa she was a Senior Policy Advisor in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, advising Number 10 on foreign affairs and international development. She has also worked for the Foreign Office and for UNICEF in New York. Claire has an MPhil in Politics and International Relations from the University of Oxford and a first class BA in History from the University of Cambridge. Claire is actively involved in a number of charities, civil society organisations and the Labour Party as a volunteer, campaigner and activist. She is currently Treasurer of the Young Fabians.

Joel Mullan is originally from Middlesbrough in the North East of England. He works as an education and skills policy researcher for a think tank in London. He previously worked for the Labour Party on the 2010 election campaign, and on schools policy and corporate strategy for a local authority. He has a degree in Law from the University of Oxford.

Roxanne Mashari was elected as a Labour Councillor in 2010. She currently works as Parliamentary Assistant to a Labour MP in the House of Commons.

Natalie Breslaw has just begun an undergraduate degree in international relations and economics at the University of Birmingham. She previously attended JFS School in London. Natalie is a volunteer for Amnesty International and Greenpeace. She spent one month in South Africa working in a human rights law firm and also spent a month touring and volunteering in Israel in 2009.

Tamsin James is policy and public affairs manager for Breast Cancer Care. She is also a Council member for Unlock Democracy. She has a first class degree in History from Royal Holloway, University of London and an MPhil in Early Modern History from the University of

Cambridge. In 2009, she was shortlisted for the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' Young Communicator of the Year Award. Tamsin is currently studying at King's College, University of London where she will pursue her policy interests in human rights, health and education. She has contributed articles to *Anticipations*, the Young Fabians magazine and she campaigns for the Labour Party.

Joani Reid read Philosophy and Politics at the University of Glasgow and now currently works in policy and public affairs in the housing industry. She previously worked for a child health charity and, prior to that, worked with disadvantaged school children throughout Glasgow as part of a widening access participation programme. It was this work that propelled her into politics and motivated her to join the Labour Party. Joani chaired the 'securing the future of the next generation' policy commission in 2011 for the Young Fabians. She stood as a Labour Party council candidate in East Dulwich, Southwark in 2010 and is a former secretary of Dulwich and West Norwood CLP. She has campaigned in many local and national elections in Scotland and England and also participated in the Obama 08 US presidential campaign as part of the Young Fabians delegation to Ohio.

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Adrian Prandle is the Chair of the Young Fabians and an education policy expert working for a trade union. Previously he was an advisor to Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP and has also worked for Oxfam.. In 2008, Adrian organised the largest delegation from the UK to Barack Obama's presidential campaign, taking 80 people to the swing state of Ohio. Adrian is the editor of *The New Generation*, the Young Fabians 50th anniversary pamphlet; produced three e-pamphlets following the US delegation; and is a co-author of the 2011 Unions 21 publication, *Delivering for Young Workers: How unions can organise the next generation*. He is a regular public speaker and has been interviewed on BBC radio and TV and Sky News. He represented the Young Fabians on Action for Southern Africa's youth delegation to South Africa and Swaziland in 2009. Adrian has a first class degree from the University of Leeds and a first class passion for Everton Football Club.

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Finally, a special thank you goes to Nick Maxwell, Partnerships Officer for the Young Fabians and Deputy Leader of the delegation, for

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all your help, constructive criticism, and keeping me sane during the trip. I could not have done it without you.

Marie-Noëlle Loewe

November 2011

“For over 50 years, the Young Fabians have played a crucial role in developing new policies for the Labour Party. More than ever before their fresh ideas and clear thinking will be important to creating the politics of the new generation.”

- Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP, leader of the Labour Party

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Reflections of a Young Fabian delegation

Edited by Marie-Noëlle Loewe

In September 2011, twelve Young Fabian members visited Israel and Palestine in an attempt to better understand the Middle East conflict. For one week they met with politicians, NGOs and campaigners from both sides.

In this pamphlet, we have captured the impressions and lessons they drew. We hope to encourage more people to learn, get engaged and try to visit the region themselves as it seeks to replace conflict with peace.

"Labour's future depends on the energy of groups such as the Young Fabians, which brings together exciting young thinkers to promote progressive debate and whose commitment, activism and radicalism makes sure we remain at the cutting edge of new thinking."

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