

Thank you for writing to me about your concerns for human rights in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to seeing a negotiated peace settlement with a two-state solution. This will involve difficult, but necessary compromises on both sides of the conflict in order to respect the rights of both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

As Liberal Democrats, we have continued to condemn disproportionate force used by all sides and have always stood firmly in support of the indivisibility of human rights and the rule of law.

We do not support trade sanctions on Israeli settlement goods, as we fear this would make achieving a peaceful solution harder. We are supportive of voluntary guidelines which enable customers to identify whether goods come from the Occupied Palestinian Territories and decide for themselves if they want to buy them. Since 2007, the Liberal Democrats have been taking every opportunity to call for the blockade of Gaza to be lifted and for trade routes to be reopened. It is vital for the UK to work with the EU and the UN to put pressure on Israel for this to happen, while recognising Israel's legitimate security concerns.

Liberal Democrats believe that there should be a presumption of denial when considering whether to grant arms export licenses for equipment bound for any countries that are listed in the Government's Human Rights and Democracy Report as countries of concern, which currently includes Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Under our proposals, it would be up to the Secretary of State to lift the ban on a license if he or she were certain that the weapons would not be used in contravention of international law.

Reports of child prisoners in any circumstance are extremely worrying to hear. The Liberal Democrats have always put human rights and international law at the centre of our foreign policy. These are some of our core values and we would always ensure that international law was at heart of our relationship with Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and every other country around the world. We are facing a situation around the world where international humanitarian law is being increasingly undermined. This is dangerous and unacceptable. We strongly believe that human rights should be at the centre of all future UK trade deals, not just with Israel or the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Our priority now is to see a return to talks that bring a lasting end to the violence, improve the lives of ordinary Palestinians and address both parties' security needs. It is vital that the international community boosts its efforts at bringing both Israeli and Palestinian delegations back to the negotiating table.

It would be deeply worrying if the region entered into another period of sustained conflict as has been endured previously, and therefore both sides must work for sustainable peace.

If I might sum up my own view: All the evils in this situation come from the lack of a peace settlement – and all policies, on either side, that tend to prevent a peace settlement are to be condemned.

It is intolerable that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the occupation, have continued for so long. There is no solution other than a two-state solution, with exchange of territory so as to create two independent states, each with contiguous territory, with a cross-over point with guaranteed crossing rights.

Israel has a right to exist as an independent state, just as Palestine has a right to exist as an independent state. All parties need to recognise these realities. And the international community has rights too – the present situation cannot be allowed to continue to create political and religious tensions worldwide, to disrupt international trade, and to undermine the possibility of peace and prosperity in the Middle East region, including, most notably for the Palestinian people.

Sincerely,  
Chris Bramall