

I share your passionate concern about Palestine. Given the importance of the issue and my longstanding interest in human rights for all communities I hope you'll excuse me for giving you my own personal response using my own words rather than hiding behind either a party line or something written by others on my behalf. This is such a critical issue that I really don't like either borrowing answers from anyone else or indeed limiting what I say to responding to set questions that might not properly reflect where I stand.

I believe in the right of the state of Israel to exist. I believe in the right of the state of Palestine to exist. I also believe in the rights of the citizens of both places and of all religions and races to live their lives in peace and security. I cannot see how the settlement programme can be justified in those terms. Nor can I see how the blockade of Gaza can be justified in those terms. I also can't understand how imposing a reality on the ground via force of arms is in the long term interests of people from any of the local communities. I want Israeli people to be able to live in peace and security and I don't think they can ever do so if the security of the country is based on having stronger armed forces. It needs to be based on a peace settlement that reflects the best long term interests of both sides.

I have been extremely worried to watch the rise of a belief in certain sections of Israeli society that only the rights of one race matter. That doesn't seem to me to display much understanding of what happens when one race ignores the rights of another. Something that we should have all learned from the all too real horrors of the holocaust.

I have also been worried to see the rise in some sections of the Palestinian community of a similar failure to recognise the full humanity of people from other communities. Terrorist atrocities can only be carried out by people who have given in to that kind of thinking.

As someone who came into politics as a fiercely enthusiastic anti-apartheid campaigner I sometimes fear that I detect much the same separatist thinking coming from some sections of both communities. I don't like it when it comes from people inside Israel who are currently in power. I would also not like it if something similar was put in place if the boot was on the other foot.

Because of these views I am extremely cautious about the idea of the UK selling arms to Israel that could be used in ways that are not remotely related to normal peacekeeping activities. I would be equally opposed to selling arms to Hamas. There are some forms of protective clothing or equipment I would have no problem about being sold to anyone but I would

never favour selling of weapons to either side that could be used to enforce the will of one community.

I have very similar, if not even stronger, concerns about selling weapons to a number of other countries. I simply cannot see how we can carry on selling arms to Saudi Arabia when it has been one of the key sources of succour for Islamic extremism across the world. One of the many advantages of investing in alternative energy and in energy conservation is that becoming a world leader in this would stop us needing to send cash for oil and gas to regimes most people in this country are deeply distrustful of such as the Saudis and indeed Putin's nationalist autocracy.

I don't favour bans on speakers holding views I disagree with.