



The Elders

“You all humble us. We come to listen, hoping to encourage you in what appears a thankless task. We come not to be oracles, but hope we can encourage you that while it is hard, your difficulties are not insurmountable. Don’t give up. The sea is just drops of water that have come together. But a little bit here, a little bit there does extraordinary things.”

– ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

People and Peace in the Middle East

REPORT OF THE ELDERS’ VISIT TO
ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES
24-28 August 2009

About The Elders

The Elders are an independent group of eminent global leaders, brought together by **Nelson Mandela**, who offer their collective influence and experience to support peace building, help address major causes of human suffering and promote the shared interests of humanity.

The Elders are **Martti Ahtisaari, Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gro Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jimmy Carter, Graça Machel, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu (Chair)**. **Nelson Mandela** and **Aung San Suu Kyi** are honorary Elders.

www.theElders.org

“It is easy to talk to people you agree with, and everyone feels good afterward. But it doesn’t reflect the reality and complexity, the real pain and emotion of this region. We can all gain by listening to those who are different from us.”

– Fernando Henrique Cardoso

“It’s clear that there is both a lot of despair, a lot of feeling of limitations – of wanting to break out of the chains that are holding them back – but on the other hand, we have also seen the determination, the optimism among young people. It made us feel that there is hope in your hearts; but in fact it just illustrates the great necessity for the benefit of future generations that something has to happen, and happen quickly.”

– Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland

Contents

Contents	5
Introduction	7
Background and context	9
General impressions and findings	10
Impressions and findings from Israel	16
Photographs	19
Impressions and findings from the West Bank	23
Impressions and findings on Gaza	30
The future	35

Annex

Summary of Programme	36
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“Peace making is too important to be left to politicians alone. It needs the active, sustained involvement of all sectors of society – civil society, business, young people, women’s groups – supported by all international friends of peace and justice.”

– Mary Robinson

Introduction

Six members of The Elders¹ visited the Middle East in August to meet as wide a range of Israelis and Palestinians as possible. We were of course acutely aware of the high level diplomatic efforts underway to re-start direct peace talks. However our aim was to learn about the people's perceptions – their hopes for the future, their fears and concerns. It is a cliché, but too often forgotten, that peace agreements don't work without the people. We left both moved and inspired by our experiences. We were amazed by the many brave women and men we met who believe peace is possible and are working to achieve it, often at great personal cost.

The aim of this report is not to give a detailed analysis of the political situation in the Middle East; more newspaper column inches, policy reports and regional experts are devoted to this conflict than perhaps any other. Rather, having listened and learned more about the complexities of the region, we want to share our personal impressions of how this conflict is affecting ordinary people – men and women trying to live normal lives; parents trying to provide for their families; children and young people wondering what their future will be; older generations who, having lived through decades of conflict, question whether they will see peace in their lifetimes. By sharing these stories we hope that this report will spur leaders and ordinary citizens alike to actions that will further peace, human rights and justice for all in the Middle East.

¹The Elders' delegation was led by former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and included Mrs Ela Bhatt, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, President Jimmy Carter, Mrs Mary Robinson and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They were joined by business leaders Sir Richard Branson and Mr Jeff Skoll, who are members of The Elders' Advisory Board, and Elders' CEO Mabel van Oranje.

“I see that there is a great desire for peace among Israelis and Palestinians. So don’t give up. Maintain an attitude of optimism not despair as much as possible.”

– Jimmy Carter

Background and context

Our visit to the region came at an important time in international efforts to create the conditions for the resumption of direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. While we fully support these efforts aimed at achieving a comprehensive peace, we were not involved in any political negotiations. Rather, we wanted the focus of our visit to be on the people, whose support is essential if any peace deal is to succeed. Believing in the value of hearing different voices, we met a wide cross-section of Palestinian and Israeli society, seeking to better understand the reality of their daily lives, as well as adding our support to peace efforts.

From both Palestinians and Israelis, we heard a consistent message that peace is possible and achievable, but that the political process needs to be more connected to, and reflect the wishes of, the people. Many people with whom we spoke lacked confidence in the ability of their leaders to deliver a sustainable agreement and as a result felt disempowered. For us, it is clear that peace cannot be made by politicians alone. It urgently needs the active, sustained involvement of all sections of society – civil society, business, young people, women's groups and others – supported by all international friends of peace and justice.

While we hope major steps will be taken in the coming weeks to re-start direct peace talks between the leaders of the two communities, the politics won't succeed unless society is also ready to make peace. This is why we chose to reach out to ordinary people, to listen, engage and connect. Hearing many speak of their frustrations at the lack of progress on the ground in ending the conflict, we also came away with serious concerns that if there are not tangible changes to the lives of ordinary people very soon, simmering frustration may once again boil over into violence.

General impressions and findings

1. Growing scepticism about the peace process

Years of failed peace efforts have made people sceptical that peace talks can succeed. They lack confidence in their leaders and feel that their own efforts will make little difference.

Although the majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace and agree on a two-state solution, experience has made them sceptical that agreement can be reached. Those who are working actively for peace feel distant from the process, and disempowered. One young Israeli we met commented: “What I need the most is a leadership who can make me believe that I can make a difference and as things stand now, in the public and especially in the leadership, I can’t see a situation where my will to make a difference can actually make one.” Another young Israeli added, “Our politicians are regurgitating the same ideas. There’s a lack of vision. We need outside ideas and help.” From Palestinians, we repeatedly heard concerns that the status quo benefits only Israel and that without international support it will be extremely difficult to see a timely resolution of the conflict. As one Palestinian civil society representative put it: “We have to help hope to prevail otherwise extremism and worse will develop. On the other hand, there is a lot of pessimism and scepticism because people have not seen any improvements on the ground. New negotiations, new hopes – then the negative situation continues, which is why addressing the settlements issue is so important.”

Looking at previous peace processes, too often negotiators become disconnected from the realities on the ground. While high level diplomatic efforts might ultimately bring leaders closer together, if the situation for the people continues to worsen, peace efforts rarely succeed. The people of Israel and the Palestinian Territories are not looking for another process, but tangible improvements to their lives – specifically an end to conflict and occupation.

2. Enforced separation is increasing isolation

There is a strong desire among many Palestinians and Israelis to overcome divisions and work towards peaceful coexistence, but both communities are increasingly frustrated.

Throughout our visit we saw the reality not only of the two very separate narratives of the conflict, but the way in which this schism is physically enforced. To prevent suicide bombings in Israel, which since the end of the second Intifada (circa. late 2006) have steeply declined, Israel has built a heavily patrolled wall – or separation barrier – of 413 kilometres (with an additional 73 km under construction and 223 km planned)². There are 634 obstacles blocking access and internal Palestinian movement throughout the West Bank. These include 93 staffed checkpoints and 541 un-staffed obstacles such as roadblocks, road barriers and trenches³. Palestinian men, women and children are required to apply for increasingly restrictive permits to cross into Israel and even to travel between the Palestinian areas of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. At each crossing or checkpoint they are often subjected to prolonged delays, intimidation and humiliation.

We also heard from Israelis who are trying to reach out to Palestinians but face great difficulties in doing so. It is illegal for Israeli citizens to enter areas designated as “Area A” (cities administered under the Palestinian Authority such as Ramallah). Permits for Israelis to enter such areas can be arranged, but applications must be made several days in advance and the reason for the visit must be specified in detail. Israelis are completely prohibited from visiting Gaza, including business people who would like to build links but are legally and physically prevented from doing so.

²: OCHA, Five Years after the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion: A Summary of the Humanitarian Impact of the Barrier, July 2009.

³: OCHA, West Bank Movement and Access Update, May 2009.

To promote reconciliation we hope that it will soon be possible to see an end to the conflict and these barriers removed. People must be able to mix, for business and social reasons. Children must get to know each other. This is a system that is trying to keep people apart rather than help them come together. Its effect is to further isolate Israelis and Palestinians from each other.

3. A strong and engaged third party is needed

Among the Israelis and Palestinians we met, there was firm support for the United States' involvement in helping to resolve the conflict.

There was widespread support for President Obama's efforts to reinvigorate the peace process among both the Palestinians and Israelis we met. Speaking with a group of Israelis directly affected by the conflict, some of whom had survived suicide bombings and rocket attacks, one man offered this perspective on the importance of international pressure, especially from the U.S.: "For the sake of your grandchildren, Mr. Obama don't blink. If you blink on Jerusalem, if you blink on settlement freezes, Jerusalem will seek you down and unravel what you are trying to accomplish in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. If settlement expansion continues, Mr. Obama, then the two-state solution will be lost. Our Israeli state's future existence depends on a two-state solution... If you're a friend Mr. Obama engage us – because friends do not allow friends to drive drunk."

In our meetings with civil society leaders, business leaders and others – both Israelis and Palestinians – there were regular mentions of the influence of the conservative Jewish lobby in U.S. politics. Many welcomed the emergence of more moderate Jewish voices, such as the organisation 'J Street'.

While we were still in the region, the Elders wrote to President Obama, recognising his efforts in relation to the peace process. We asked him to remain steadfast in his demands for an end to settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. We also called on the President to use his influence to try to end the blockade of Gaza and enable its people to rebuild their homes and lives.

4. Dehumanisation of the 'other'

Recognising our common humanity, encouraging contact and ending the dehumanisation of the 'other' is imperative in preparing the public to accept a lasting political agreement.

Our visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum – created to give those who were murdered by the Nazis a lasting memorial – touched us all. In a moving tour of the museum, we saw potent reminders of man's capacity for inhumanity to man, the assembled human stories of women, men and children extinguished because of hate. It is one of history's most horrendous representations of the dehumanisation of the 'other'. We asked a young Israeli woman about her feelings on the Shoah: "Never again for anyone. Not just never again for Jews." she said. "Having the Holocaust in my family's history informed my identity from a very young age, and it has made me acutely aware of suffering and oppression of others. I believe those who know persecution should be especially wary of persecuting others. It heightened my awareness when it happened to others."

The Elders believe that the tragedy of the Holocaust should continue to warn and remind us all of the need to build societies based on human rights and respect for every individual, and the rights of all peoples to live in freedom and dignity. In the Palestinian Territories and in the wider Arab world it is not uncommon to read or hear anti-Semitic comments, nor is Holocaust denial rare. This kind of dehumanisation of Jews is intolerable and any who condone or ignore it cannot claim to be defenders of human rights. We also heard from Palestinians, both those living in the West Bank and in Gaza, about the tremendous sense of dehumanisation and subjugation they feel as a result of Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territories, a feeling borne out in the reality of their daily lives.

The importance of recognising and respecting our common humanity was brought home to us by an Israeli humanitarian group called ZAKA (the disaster victim identification organization). ZAKA coordinates nearly 1,000 volunteers to respond to tragic incidents in Israel, working to save lives – both Israeli and Palestinian.

When this is not possible, ZAKA volunteers retrieve and identify body parts to ensure a proper burial, based on their belief that we are all made in the image of God. A member of ZAKA spoke poignantly against dehumanisation when he said: “No tear is different to another tear, no suffering different to another suffering, it is the same. It is against nature for a mother to bury her child. It’s not natural.” Unfortunately, such admirable work remains the exception rather than the rule; public opinion in Israel and among Palestinians is hardening, and perceptions are only intensified by enforced separation.

5. ‘Economic peace’ is no substitute for a comprehensive agreement

Israel’s policy of promoting economic activity in the West Bank has brought some benefits, but these are limited and no substitute for a comprehensive peace agreement.

4: World Bank, “A Palestinian State in Two Years: Institutions for Economic Revival”, Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, September 2009.

During our visit we heard much about the Israeli government’s ‘economic peace’ initiative which aims to encourage economic activity and improve the quality of life for Palestinians in the West Bank. Since the beginning of 2009, the government of Israel has taken some steps to ease restrictions in the West Bank and allow greater access to West Bank markets for Arab citizens of Israel. At the same time, the security environment in the West Bank has improved dramatically. Together, these developments have led to increased investor confidence and more economic activity. We were encouraged to hear of business collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank – although these joint efforts are on a relatively small scale and limited in number, hindered from expansion by legal and physical barriers. In addition, donor aid of more than US\$950 million in the first eight months of this year played a large role in the improvement of the West Bank economy⁴. As a result, the IMF projects 7 percent growth in 2009, up from 5 percent in 2008.

Most of the Palestinians we met argued that improvements in the economy were the result of Palestinian reforms and in spite of the impediments Israel continues to keep in place. Most Israeli business people we met had never visited Ramallah or any other major

Palestinian town. Indeed, as the World Bank has reported, “... while the easing of movement restrictions within the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, has helped Palestinian producers regain their markets, the measures remain palliative, in particular in the face of continued settlement growth and Israeli control of nearly 60 percent of the West Bank land.”

While any policy designed to ameliorate the lives and well-being of the Palestinian people is to be welcomed, from our discussions with Palestinians, including business leaders and civil society, it was clear that the government of Israel should ensure that these measures support comprehensive negotiations aimed at resolving the conflict, not seek to replace them. Concerns were also expressed that such “West Bank First” policies are a deliberate strategy to further isolate Gaza and entrench Palestinian divisions.

Impressions and findings from Israel

6. Educating for peace

Incitement, hatred of Israel and anti-Semitism in Palestinian textbooks remains an issue of concern. Educating Israeli children for peace is also vital.

Our encounter with Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the influential spiritual leader and figurehead of the religious Shas political party, was one of our most fascinating meetings. It was important to us to meet the Rabbi who is a revered figure in the traditional Jewish religious community, a group that has in the past been marginalised or self-marginalised from previous efforts to promote peace. We found that, although we come from very different backgrounds, there was common ground between us both in terms of seeking peace and in accepting the other. For example, on the very important issue of incitement, we found that Rabbi Ovadia Yosef shares our belief in the importance of education in overcoming the climate of fear and hatred that is such a hindrance to peace – among both Israelis and Palestinians. In Israeli society there is widespread concern about the content of Palestinian Authority school textbooks in terms of hatred of Israel, anti-Semitism and incitement to violent struggle. The Palestinians we spoke to, particularly young people, also held concerns about what is taught in Israeli schools vis-à-vis the portrayal of Palestinians and Arabs, how the Middle East conflict is

described and whether Israeli children are being educated for peace and mutual respect. We all agree that children raised on hatred are destined for hate and intolerance in the future as well, and that this cycle must be stopped.

7. Israel's security concerns

The risk of renewed terrorist attacks and Israel's vulnerabilities in the wider region remains central to Israeli concerns. Addressing these fears is essential in moving towards a common future.

During the second *Intifada*, the UN estimates that 5,848 Palestinians and Israelis were killed either directly or as an indirect consequence of the conflict. The majority of those who died were Palestinians; Israeli civilians who died were primarily victims of suicide bombings perpetrated by Palestinian militant groups in Israel. At least 402 Israeli civilians (and 58 security forces personnel) were killed as a result of suicide bombs during this period. Between 2004 and 2007, 11 Israeli civilians, including four children, died from the 2,696 Qassam rockets fired by Palestinian armed groups from the Gaza Strip into nearby Israeli towns, particularly Sderot⁵. As reported by Israeli authorities, 1,750 rockets and 1,528 mortar bombs fired from the Gaza Strip hit southern Israel in 2008⁶.

Among those hit by rockets in Sderot was a young man who told us: "Even though I lived in a terrible state of emergency in the shadow of Qassam rockets for nine years, I want to hope that change is possible and I am ready to talk to the other side at any stage and at any cost."

Another Israeli man who had spent his military service as a paratrooper in the Israeli army and had since worked with former combat soldiers on addressing trauma issues, framed the issue well when he said: "Both sides must know the suffering of the other – Israelis' fear of terror attacks and Palestinians' fear of soldiers and their yearning for independence."

5: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Special Focus: "Israeli-Palestinian Fatalities since 2000 – Key Trends", August 2007.

6: Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 September 2009.

8. Amplifying the voices of those working for peace

Within Israel we met a large and active community that supports peace efforts, yet they often struggle to be heard.

In Israel, we met individuals and groups working on human rights, social and economic justice, women's rights and peace, not only for Israelis, but also for Palestinians. We, as Elders, felt it was important to amplify the stories of these diverse, courageous and generous Israeli citizens who long for peace and are full of a sense of urgency to achieve it.

Young people are often the wisest people we meet. In Israel, we heard from a 16 year old girl with cerebral palsy who provided astute insights both about her experiences as a person with disabilities in her society and about the conflict. "I am blessed with a problem that I try to make a benefit," she said when talking about her activism in support of the rights of disabled people and her desire to see Israeli society respect people who are different. "If society doesn't know how to respect anything different, black people, old people or the disabled, how can it respect different people like the Palestinians?" In a moving exchange, Archbishop Tutu responded, "It is difference that enriches. If we were all the same we would have a most boring world ... Waking up to a world with all this diversity is wonderful. This is the essence of Ubuntu: I can be me only because you are you."

The Elders raised the issue of societal divisions and diversity in our discussions with Israeli civil society. We found a strong desire among a wide cross-section of civic leaders to see Israel as a more diverse and tolerant society. We saw how addressing divisions within societies, as much as between them, will be critical to building peace in this region.



Delegation leader Fernando Henrique Cardoso speaks to the media in Israel.



Young Israelis told the Elders that they feel distanced from the peace process and disempowered: "I can't see a situation where my will to make a difference can actually make one."

Ela Bhatt with young
Palestinians who told
her: "We Palestinians
are always hopeful - it's
the only thing we have
that keeps us going."



The Elders hope to see
the end of a system that
separates Palestinians
from Israel with walls
and watchtowers.



The Elders at Yad
Vashe. The Holocaust
reminds us all of the
need to build societies
based on human rights
and respect for every
individual.





In Bil'in, the ground is littered with expired tear gas canisters used by the Israeli military to disperse protests against the wall.

Impressions and findings from the West Bank

9. Palestinians are both hopeful and sceptical

Those striving for an end to occupation and the creation of an independent, sovereign and viable Palestinian state are hopeful, but warn that delays fuel extremism and they urge the U.S. to do more. 'Normalisation' of the status quo is deeply resented.

Our visit took place at the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and we took the opportunity to share Iftar, the breaking of the fast, with over forty Palestinian civic leaders to hear from them directly about their lives and their hopes for the future. We heard many express the view that efforts to restart the peace process are being prolonged unnecessarily and unfairly and that this could be addressed through more active intervention by the international community, particularly the United States. We also heard a lot of pessimism and scepticism about the process itself – understandable when previous efforts have failed and conditions on the ground have worsened since the 1993 Oslo Accords. Nevertheless, civil society leaders say they are trying to be hopeful, not least because they fear that further failure will fuel extremism. A young woman in Ramallah said to us: “We Palestinians are always hopeful – it’s the only thing we have that keeps us going.”

Recognising the asymmetry inherent in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, especially in the unequal distribution of land, military power, wealth and political control is vital to achieving a just and sustainable settlement. There is strong opposition among Palestinians to any move that ‘normalises’ relations with Israel without a comprehensive agreement as this is seen as reinforcing the status quo. The young Palestinians we met were particularly sensitive to moves that they see as ‘normalisation’ of the current situation. One young man told us: “A major problem we face is that politicians forget about the youth in Palestine. They start to think that day-to-day life is normal. It’s abnormal. Israelis want us to get used to it, to live with it.”

10. Settlement activity in the West Bank

Ending illegal Israeli settlement construction and withdrawing from the West Bank, in accordance with numerous international agreements, is vital to achieving a two-state solution.

Israel’s continued construction of settlements in the West Bank is illegal under international law. UN Security Council resolutions 242, 446, 452 and 465, as well as the International Quartet’s “Road Map”, and the Arab Peace Initiative, require Israel to withdraw from territories occupied since 1967. It is difficult to see how any agreement can be reached while the settlements continue to grow.

UN experts estimate that by the end of 2008 there were approximately 485,000 Israelis living in West Bank settlements, including some 195,000 in East Jerusalem, the proposed future capital of a Palestinian state⁷. Palestinians are vehemently opposed to settlement activity; they regard it as action by Israel to establish “facts on the ground” – fragmenting Palestinian territory and society through the expropriation of land, restrictions on freedom of movement, settlement construction, the building of the separation barrier, as well as control over natural and economic resources. These actions work against Palestinians’ aspirations for a viable and contiguous state. We frequently heard from both sides that while politicians might be working towards a solution, the reality on the ground might be making it impossible to actually achieve it.

⁷: OCHA, occupied Palestinian territory: “West Bank Movement and Access Update”, May 2009.

In a meeting with some of Israel's most successful business people we were told that the building of settlements in the West Bank was "one of the worst mistakes that Israel has made since 1967". While some Israelis believe that the 2005 disengagement from Gaza demonstrates that it is possible to disband settlements, others, for ideological or economic reasons, believe any evacuation of Israeli settlers from the West Bank is highly contentious and the issue remains a sensitive and very divisive issue within Israeli society.

11. Evictions in East Jerusalem

Palestinians in East Jerusalem are being forced from homes they have lived in for decades by Israeli authorities and settler organisations, heightening tensions and undermining international peace efforts.

In addition to settlement activity, we were concerned to see forced evictions and house demolitions imposed upon Palestinians. One of the most poignant encounters we had during our visit was with Maher Hanoun and his family in East Jerusalem. We visited three generations of the family as they were preparing Iftar on the street. For several nights they had been sleeping outside – the women and children in cars and the men camped on the pavement. They had been evicted from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah district on 2 August 2009 by court order — along with eight other Palestinian families, 53 people in total, including 20 children. Their properties had been handed over to a settler organization. The evictions followed an Israeli court decision that enables Jewish individuals or associations to lay claim to land and property allegedly owned in East Jerusalem prior to 1948. At the same time, Palestinians are denied any rights to reclaim pre-1948 property from what is now Israel.

Day after day, fundamental human rights are being denied to Palestinians by Israeli authorities. From January to July 2009 at least 194 people, including 95 children, were forcibly displaced, and another 107 otherwise affected, as a result of house demolitions ordered or carried out by Israeli authorities in East Jerusalem⁸. Such actions are indicative of efforts to create "facts on the ground" and to form contiguous links between Jewish communities in West Jerusalem, East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

⁸: OCHA, occupied Palestinian territories: "Sheikh Jarrah," August 2009.

12. Increasing restrictions on freedom of movement

Palestinians are subjected to increasing restrictions on freedom of movement, fuelling anger and frustration.

There was a real sense of frustration among Palestinians on the issue of restrictions on movement, as well as the lack of engagement by the international community on this issue. After driving through the Qalandia checkpoint outside Jerusalem – one of the largest of some 600 checkpoints that hinder Palestinian movement – we stopped to survey the concrete walls, barbed wire, barred walkways known as ‘terminals’ and snarled traffic that blocks the main route between East Jerusalem and the West Bank. We heard about the long delays and regular humiliations experienced by Palestinians who have to use this and similar checkpoints to reach East Jerusalem and even other Palestinian towns.

One person we met was a young woman who lives in Ramallah but recently graduated from a school in East Jerusalem. She told us that it could take her anywhere from 30 minutes to 3 hours to pass through the checkpoint to reach her school. She told us of the treatment she received from Israeli soldiers: “I would wake up every day thinking of what they might have prepared for us this day, and if it would end peacefully. How much of my dignity will be wasted just by being at that terminal? And I thought to myself, if I was denied my most basic rights and was treated with no respect as a little girl, then how will it be when I grow up?”

13. Divisions between West Bank and Gaza leaderships

The Fatah-Hamas split is damaging for all Palestinians and an impediment to lasting peace.

We were concerned to see how the political and geographic division between the two Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, is doing real harm both to the Palestinian people and to the peace process.

Human rights groups report that both Fatah and Hamas are carrying out arbitrary arrests, unlawful imprisonments and torture of their rivals and opponents in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Civil society leaders made it clear to us that their patience with the ongoing rivalry is wearing thin, especially with presidential and legislative elections due in January 2010. It will be difficult to have an election that is respected and accepted by both sides unless there is reconciliation between the two political factions. However, ordinary Palestinians also don't want this to become an impediment to proceeding with elections in January 2010.

Effective, accountable leadership must reflect the will of the people. There certainly needs to be much more effort on the part of the leaders for the factions to come together in a responsible way. We stressed this point in our meetings with both Fatah and Hamas officials.

14. Palestinian planning for a future state

The Palestinian Authority has set out a two year economic and political plan. This is a welcome development that should be encouraged.

While we were in the region, Palestinian Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad released a two-year plan for economic and political development for the Palestinian people. This is a significant initiative as, for the first time the Palestinian Authority has set out national goals and priorities, as well as operational directives for ministries and public bodies to build the institutions of a Palestinian state. Mr. Fayyad spoke to us in some detail about his programme that is intended to accelerate the end of the Israeli occupation and pave the way to independent statehood, which he said "can and must happen within the next two years." Crucially, the Prime Minister made clear that the plan was not in lieu of the political process, but should reinforce it, representing a proactive effort by the Palestinian Authority to form the foundations of a future state.

15. Non-violent protests in Bil'in

Non-violent protest against the occupation and the separation barrier as seen in Bil'in is a positive example of progressive political action.

Bil'in is a Palestinian village that has become a focus for progressive political action by Palestinians and Israelis. As we heard from the villagers we met there, they are engaged in a struggle to retain their land, olive trees and freedom. In early 2005 Israel began constructing the separation wall on Bil'in's land – in contravention of an International Court of Justice advisory opinion in 2004 that the separation barrier is “contrary to international law”. The wall cut the land surrounding the village in half in order to place the Israeli settlement of Modi'in Illit and its future expansion on the ‘Israeli side’.

Inspired by creative protest tactics by other villages against the separation barrier, Bil'in residents began organising their own non-violent direct action and demonstrations. Joined by Israeli and international activists, Bil'in residents demonstrate every Friday. Almost every week, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) responds with force. According to the authorities the protests are deemed illegal gatherings. Over the years the IDF has responded to the demonstrators with tear gas, sound and stun grenades, rubber bullets, water cannons and recently “stink water”. Several protestors, including Israelis, have suffered serious injuries. On 17 April 2009, Bassem Abu Rahma, a Bil'in resident, was killed when he was hit by a tear gas canister. In late June of this year, the IDF began conducting regular night-time incursions into the village, evacuating homes and searching for participants in the Friday demonstrations, particularly the leaders of the ‘Popular Committee against the Wall and Settlements’, as well as teenage boys accused of throwing stones. Since our visit we have learned that a village leader, Mohamed Khatib was severely beaten while under arrest.

In addition to its grassroots resistance movement, Bil'in has also turned to the Israeli High Court of Justice. Following a two year hearing, in September 2007, the court held that the route of the wall

is illegal because it cannot be justified by security considerations and ordered the barrier to be moved several hundred metres west, returning approximately 25 percent of Bil'in's land to the village. While the residents of Bil'in celebrated the ruling, two years later the wall has yet to be moved. The villagers are now back in court trying to get the order put into effect.

Bil'in has become an important symbol for non-violent Palestinian resistance. Archbishop Tutu said of Bil'in during our visit: "Just as a simple man named Gandhi led the successful nonviolent struggle in India and simple people such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King led the struggle for civil rights in the United States, simple people here in Bil'in are leading a non-violent struggle that will bring them their freedom."

“I believe that you are showing the right path to this war-torn world. Non-violence is not a passive idea, as you have shown. It is ethical activism at its political best. It demands invention, a collective, creative, constructive heart, which your village has shown. And, it is the only way of cleansing the society of the tiredness, brutalisation, despondency it has been forced into.”

– Ela Bhatt

Impressions and findings on Gaza

16. Israel's blockade of Gaza

The Gaza blockade is collective punishment of 1.6 million people.

We had planned to visit the Gaza strip and were very disappointed that we could not do so due to the dynamic security situation at the time. We did, however, speak to experts, civil society leaders and young people in Gaza via video link.

We continue to be deeply disturbed about the plight of the people in Gaza who have been subjected to a blockade since June 2007, imposed by Israel following the Hamas takeover of Gaza from the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority. The closure of seven crossing points, strictly controlled access to Israel, and limitations on all goods being shipped into Gaza makes it extremely difficult and expensive for people to get food, fuel, and basic services. The only thriving sector of the economy is the black market – fed by the tunnels dug into Egypt – a dangerous and criminalised sector that is of dubious benefit to Israel, Egypt or Gaza.

Israel's aims in sealing off Gaza are to weaken Hamas, to prevent further rocket attacks against Israeli towns and to demand the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit who was captured by militants during the Gaza military offensive. Securing the release of Corporal Shalit is a major issue of concern to Israelis, one described to us as the 'linchpin' to ending the blockade. Rather than targeting those responsible for firing rockets and mortars into Gaza, we are deeply concerned that the blockade collectively punishes the entire Gazan population.

The dire situation was further compounded by the Gaza conflict of December 2008 and January 2009. Eight months after the Israeli offensive, thousands of Palestinians continue to live in tents or the rubble of their former homes while the wider population faces chronic and rising unemployment, infrequent access to power and water, deteriorating sewage systems and sub-standard housing.

Yet those we spoke to via video link cling to the belief that a “normal life” is possible and do not want to be seen as victims. One of the young women we spoke to told us: “Don’t look at us with the eye of sympathy. We can do things like anyone else. Don’t look at us like poor Palestinians. We have dreams, goals, we are not crippled. We have brains on our shoulders, personalities. It is not Gaza that is killing our dreams, it is leaders.”

Following our visit, the UN’s Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, led by Justice Richard Goldstone, published its report. It calls on the Israeli and Gazan authorities to conduct open and transparent investigations into alleged rights violations that took place both in Gaza and in Israel and report their findings and any prosecution plans to the UN Security Council within six months. Failure to do so, in the view of Goldstone’s commission, should result in the Security Council referring the matter to the Prosecutor for the International Criminal Court in The Hague. There is no doubt that accountability for the most serious crimes is vital to ending the culture of impunity in the region.

17. The blockade is leading to ‘de-development’

Gazan life is going backwards. The blockade is eroding previous gains in human development and threatens long-term prospects for progress.

While there has been some easing on the types of goods allowed into the Gaza Strip during June and July 2009 (e.g. small quantities of agricultural fertilizer, glass, aluminium, house repair tools and cattle) this has not had a significant impact when compared to the extensive reconstruction needs on the ground. As the UN detailed

9: OCHA, occupied Palestinian territory: “Locked in: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of the Blockade on the Gaza Strip,” August 2009

10: OCHA: “Access for the Provision of Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza: An Overview of Obstacles to Delivering Principled Humanitarian Assistance,” September 2009.

in its report on the humanitarian impact of the blockade on Gaza, “at the heart of this crisis is the degradation in the living conditions of the population, caused by the erosion of livelihoods and the gradual decline in the state of infrastructure, and the quality of vital services in the areas of health, water and sanitation, and education ⁹. The blockade is driving a whole generation backwards into what is being described as ‘de-development.’ Currently, around 70 percent of the population lives on less than one dollar a day. 75 percent of the population is food insecure and receiving food aid, compared to 56 percent in 2008 ¹⁰. It is clear that the situation in Gaza is deteriorating. This is legally and morally unacceptable and is fuelling anger and resentment.

During our meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres we raised the situation in Gaza. We were concerned that the President and the Israeli government do not fully acknowledge the human suffering caused by the blockade. Within this context, we raised the United Nations’ frustration in trying to bring in approximately \$80 million worth of building materials for the reconstruction of schools, homes and health clinics in Gaza following the conflict of December 2008-January 2009. The UN had given detailed undertakings that the funds and materials would be properly accounted for. We understand that the UN is still awaiting permission from the Israeli authorities to be able to bring the materials into Gaza. President Peres indicated to us that he will look into the matter.

18. Women’s rights in Gaza

Women are facing increasing social restrictions – a serious cause for concern.

The young women from Gaza with whom we spoke via video link conveyed to us that they are determined to live as full lives as possible. However, they object to the growing push for a more socially conservative society as seen in the influence of “guardians of religious morality” – some of whom are self-appointed, others from within Hamas-controlled Gaza – who have sought to impose their directives in recent months. They told us about the increasing

pressure on women and girls to wear the hijab and the diminishing space for women to take the lead in any area of public life. One woman told of her efforts to go out in public without her head covered and being spat at by a driver. She said that most of her liberal friends have to wear the hijab even though it goes against their wishes.

During our meeting with three Hamas members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, including former speaker of the PLC Abdel Aziz Dweik, we raised our concerns about the situation facing women in Gaza and asked that they convey them to the Hamas leadership in Gaza.

“The people touched me the most. They are fantastic. I came here with a very heavy heart. I told my colleagues that I didn’t think I even wanted to comment. But the people have been amazing on both sides.”

– Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The future

A breath of fresh air: Israelis and Palestinians working together to stop the building of the wall and share water resources.

The last day of our visit provided an inspiring example of cooperation. South of Jerusalem, the Palestinian residents of Wadi Fukin and the nearby Israeli villagers of Tzur Hadassah are working closely together as part of the 'Good Water Neighbours Project'. This project of EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East encourages communities to use their mutual dependence on shared water resources as a basis for developing dialogue and cooperation on sustainable water management. The initiative has created real improvement within the water sector by building trust and understanding that has led to common problem solving and peace-building – even in the midst of conflict. In a town hall meeting in Tzur Hadassah where both communities came together, we heard about the concrete successes their cooperation has brought over the years. They have successfully stopped the separation wall from being built, and together market agricultural produce (so-called “peace vegetables”). They have also improved sanitation services to Wadi Fukin. It was truly a breath of fresh air to see this partnership between Israelis and Palestinians and to learn that there are 25 similar initiatives underway.

Ending our trip, we committed ourselves to continuing to follow the situation in the Middle East closely and to do all that we can to ensure that the interests of ordinary people are at the heart of peace efforts, as well as supporting those working for a peaceful and prosperous future for all Palestinians and Israelis.

Annex

Summary of Programme

The Elders' itinerary included the following meetings and site visits:

Monday 24 August

Private meeting with representatives of the United Nations, the World Bank and the Middle East Quartet

Tuesday 25 August

Dialogue with Israeli youth

Meeting with Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, former Chief Rabbi and spiritual leader of the Shas political party

Dialogue with civil society representatives from human rights, peace, women's and employment organizations

Meeting with Israelis directly affected by conflict

Visit to Yad Vashem, Memorial Ceremony and tour of the Children's Memorial

Reception with Ambassadors to Israel and Representatives to the Palestinian Authority

Meeting with Israeli business leaders

Wednesday 26 August

Meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres

Driving tour of East Jerusalem and stop at the Qalandia checkpoint

Meeting with residents from three West Bank-based refugee camps

Meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad

Meeting with independent Palestinian policy experts

Dialogue with Palestinian youth

Meeting with Mrs. Fadwa Barghouti, wife of imprisoned Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti and member of Ramallah City Council and Fatah Revolutionary Council

Iftar (breaking of the Ramadan fast) and dialogue with Palestinian civil society representatives from human rights, peace, women's and employment organizations

Thursday 27 August

Video conference with civil society representatives in Gaza

Video conference with young people in Gaza

Visit to the Palestinian village of Bil'in including the protest site; meeting with village leadership and residents

Meeting with Dr. Abdul Aziz Dweik, Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council

Phone conversation with Ismail Haniyeh, leader of Hamas-controlled Gaza

Visit to the evicted Hanoun family in East Jerusalem

Meeting with representatives of UN agencies: OCHA, UNRWA, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process in East Jerusalem

Meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas

Friday 28 August

Site visit to the EcoPeace – Friends of the Earth Middle East “Good Water Neighbours Project” at Wadi Fukin and Tzur Hadassah

Live webcast dialogue in Jerusalem with Israelis and Palestinians with video links to Ramallah and Tel Aviv and phone link to Gaza

More information

Photos, videos and media reports about the trip:

www.theElders.org/middle-east

Read the Elders' blogs:

www.theElders.org/middle-east/blogs/elders

View the Elders' live webcast with Israelis and Palestinians:

www.theElders.org/middle-east/blogs/elders/elders-live-jerusalem