

It was an honour and a pleasure to be part of a National Assembly parliamentary delegation to Israel and the West Bank in February. During our four and a half days, we met a wide spectrum of knowledgeable people concerned about the future for peace in the region.

Fleur Hassan-Nahoum is the newly appointed deputy mayor of Jerusalem. Born in London, and brought up in Gibraltar, she relocated to Israel in 2001. Since her appointment in November 2018, Fleur told us she has made improving schools and other services in East Jerusalem a priority.

Nearly 40% of Jerusalem residents are Arabs. Most of them did not vote in last year's local elections as to do so is to recognize Israel's right to annex East Jerusalem and separate it from the rest of the West Bank and Gaza. No surprises then that services in East Jerusalem for the mainly Arab population are historically poorer than other parts of Jerusalem.

As an orthodox Jew, Fleur's enthusiasm for righting those wrongs felt unusual. She sees a more cohesive Jerusalem as a trailblazer to a more cohesive Israel. Fleur told us that she works closely with Palestinians like Ali Abu Awad who has made peaceful resistance an art form.

Israel was preparing for the general election on April 9th. All 120 new members of the Knesset were up for election on a PR list system. Any grouping with more than 3.25% of the electorate is guaranteed a few seats. This system rarely delivers majority governments and provokes constant factional deal making within and between different party groupings.

None of the MKs have a single constituency link. Former Labour MK Michal Biran explained that all Knesset members and therefore none are held to account for the widening inequalities in areas that require most attention.

The independence of the judiciary seems to be a positive legacy of the British rule between the world wars. On the day we left Israel, Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit indicted the current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on 3 counts of corruption.

In many ways the Israeli Supreme Court feels a lot more modern than ours. The building oozes transparency. Anyone can walk in to listen to proceedings. Both court hearings we observed had female judges in charge.

It was not always thus. The former Chief Justice for Israel Asher Grunis explained that there was only one female member of the Israeli Supreme Court when he first became a member. Now women make up seven of the 15 Supreme Court members thanks to the efforts made to promote women in the lower courts. Judge Grunis pointed out that there was only one Arab member and that efforts need to be made to change that.

Last year's controversial Nationality Act which potentially gives the 20% of the population who identify as Arabs less rights than Jewish Israeli citizens and removed Arabic as an official Israeli language alongside Hebrew will give the Supreme Court new headaches to adjudicate on.

Many of the intelligent, well-informed Israelis we met expressed concern about the unhelpful Nationality Act as well the widening inequalities between different communities. The European standards of living of the majority is in marked contrast with the lower standards of living and educational attainment of most Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

That divergence becomes a chasm when comparing the living standards of Israelis with that of the people of Gaza and parts of the Palestinian controlled areas of the West Bank.

We did not have time to go to Gaza but reports in the Israeli press are not encouraging. Inspired by Donald Trump's withdrawal of U.S. funds from all Palestinian projects, the Israeli Government was in the run-up to the general election withholding the taxes it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. This means the Palestinian administration is unable to pay its civil servants, never mind deliver the public services we all take for granted: rubbish collection, clean water, education, health.

At a secondary and tertiary care level, Palestinians rely on health services in Israel. We visited the Wolfson Hospital in Tel Aviv, where Save a Child's Heart charity funds heart surgery for children from poor parts of the world that lack this specialist paediatric care. On the day we visited, three of the five intensive care beds were occupied by babies from Gaza. One in 1,000 of the world's babies are born with a heart defect and Save A Child's Heart both brings children from less developed areas of the world for life saving heart surgery and trains up

paediatric cardiologists to enable them to establish paediatric heart surgery in countries like Ethiopia, Tanzania as well as Palestine.

We met Abdullah Abdullah in Ramallah on the West Bank. Dr Abdullah is a long standing Fatah and PLO spokesperson with nearly 50 years of experience of the ups and down of international attempts to broker peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

We asked Dr Abdullah why there had been no elections in Gaza and the West Bank in 10 years. He said that Israel will not allow it, by which he meant Israel will not allow the residents of East Jerusalem to take part in those elections. So the Palestinian Legislative Council is disbanded and the political impasse does not look like it will be recalled any time soon.

Dr Abdullah pointed out that the West Bank and Gaza can only trade with the rest of the world through Israeli-controlled ports and airports. The delays involved hamper the development of Palestinian export businesses.

There is a stark difference in the landscape between the West Bank and Israel, rocky and arid on the West Bank, green and lush in the Israeli area. We were not there long enough to pursue how much this is down to topography and soil quality or other issues.

Back in Israel we visited Green 2000 north of Tel Aviv, a global innovator in irrigation systems, sustainable horticulture and animal husbandry who cut their teeth in the arid Negev, Jordan River and Arava regions and now advise farmers from all over the world on cutting their carbon emissions. Technical solutions being applied in Africa appear to be unavailable to entrepreneurs on the West Bank and in Gaza – politics get in the way.

Back in Tel Aviv, our last visit was to the Peres Centre for Peace and Innovation which showcases a huge array of Israeli inventiveness, everything from fast charging vehicle batteries to global solutions to feeding the world sustainably. What role can the Peres Centre play in spearheading the development needed to promote peace and cohesion in the region? With the UK paralysed by Brexit and the US in the grip of Donald Trump's trade wars, the path to peace is unlikely to be delineated by outside forces. Despite hugely impressive achievements, Israel's longer term prosperity is linked to the pursuit of peace and reconciliation across the Middle East.

Jenny Rathbone May 2019.