

EDINBURGH FRIENDS OF ISRAEL CONFERENCE – SUNDAY 29 MARCH 2015

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It is a long time since there was an active Friends of Israel Group in Edinburgh and it was a pleasant surprise to find that a new group has now been started. The inaugural conference was held in March.

The venue, which was not announced until the last minute, was the lecture theatre of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Inverleith Row. There were 175 bookings and almost everyone who had booked attended. The guests were about 95% non-Jewish, mostly Christians motivated by their faith to support Israel.

Only a minority of the guests were from Edinburgh. The majority had come from other parts of Scotland. There were also guests from Ireland, England (as far as London) and Holland.

The standard of the speakers and presentations was generally excellent. The facilitator was Nigel Goodrich. The MC for the day was Simon Barrett, who presents The Middle East Report on Revelation TV. Revelation TV's strapline is 'Church without Walls'. Simon said he had been inspired by Olympic runner Eric Liddell and the film Chariots of Fire. He read out a message from Lady Cosgrove, the patron, who could not attend because she was on her way to Israel.

Simon introduced Dorothe Kauffman, the chair of the Edinburgh FOI, who has contributed a separate article. Dorothe later signed the Shalom Declaration which had been brought along by BoD consultant Steven Jaffe. This was the central act of the conference.

The first main speaker was Avner Lustig, who described life on the kibbutzim Keren Shalom, Nir Am and Nachal Oz, which are close to the Gaza border and which suffer regular bombardment. This was a chilling and emotional presentation about what it is like to live in land which is legally Israel but so threatened. The numbers in these kibbutzim are shrinking. The children are all traumatised and some casualties have occurred. Analysing the reasons behind Gaza hostilities, Avner reminded us that there have been no Jews in Gaza since 2005, but since Hamas took over they have been living up to their charter of which Article 13 rejects peace initiatives in favour of Jihad - and this was referred to again and again by other speakers.

The next speaker was Jan Slater who spoke about the work of the International Christian Embassy in setting up a residential home for Holocaust Survivors in Haifa. There are 200,000 survivors in Israel of whom one third live below the poverty line. The environment for the residents is completely Jewish with Shabbat and all festivals being observed and there is no evangelism. The purpose of the presentation was to gently encourage the audience to donate or fund-raise, because, as the speaker said, there is burden of guilt on Britain for not delivering on the Balfour Declaration, pressurising European Governments not to let Jews leave before WW2 and barring immigration to Palestine. There is an estimate that two million

Jews could have been saved but for these actions.

Following on was Dr Denis McEoin, a charming Irishman who spoke about whether Israel was guilty of war crimes in Operation Protective Edge. The answer was not guilty. According to the rules of war, it is permitted to fire on military targets that are embedded in civilian populations provided the casualties are not excessive. In Gaza, of the 2100 casualties, it appears that over half were Jihad fighters so only about 1000 were 'real' civilians and this is not excessive casualties. The analysis is based on Hamas's own analysis of age and sex of the victims, which shows, pro rata, disproportionate numbers of young men being killed compared with the general population, and also on their published lists of martyrs. By contrast, Dr McEoin argued that Hamas is guilty of war crimes by using civilians as human shields and has been denounced as such in a recent Amnesty International report. He also referred to Article 13, and said that it is based on a tenet of Islam that Jews may be permitted to live in Islamic lands provided they are kept in a state of humiliation. He said that journalists who comment on the Israel - Palestine situation have no sense of history and no understanding of the historical context of anti-Semitism.

There followed a panel discussion with the three speakers. Main new points that emerged were:

- Dangers of the new Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Palestine, which will legitimise the BDS movement.
- The need to lobby Parliamentary candidates on their attitude to Israel, since there are many marginal seats. Candidates go by the postbag and the Palestinian lobby have been very good at mass emails, which give the impression there is much more popular support for the Palestinian case.
- The weakness of US foreign policy, which has somewhat lost interest in the Middle East after developing fracking to meet domestic energy needs - but possibly hope for improvement after next US election.
- The dangers of the myth that movements like Hamas and ISIS are supported by poor people who would not join if their economic problems were solved - this disavows the fact that they are motivated by deep conviction; that they believe in a principle that Islamic lands must never be given up, or if given up, must be reconquered. And it also fails to recognise that many of the leaders have a good education and professional qualifications.

There followed the signing of the Shalom Declaration, and to my amazement, the Christians broke into singing the first two lines of the Shema in Hebrew and to the correct tune (the one we use in the Kedusha).

The next 2 speakers were:

Ruth Kennedy, the Director of the new Centre for Scotland Israel Relations in Glasgow and Dan Golan of the Israeli Embassy.

Ruth Kennedy is known for her sterling work for the Church of Stirling and was at that stage still starting out on her new role. Dan Golan talked mainly about the awful events of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2014 and said that another Israeli show, Five Kilos of Sugar, is booked to come to the Fringe in 2015. He also referred to all Israel's achievements, including economic success, exports and knowledge transfer. He got a standing ovation.

For me, although all the speakers so far had been amazing and impressive, the next speaker stood out because he was very practical. Luke Akehurst spent most of his career as a Labour Party activist but 4 years ago he became Director of We Believe in Israel and he is brilliant at putting the positive case for Israel. Included in our packs was a 'toolkit' that would enable anyone to do this, including hints on lobbying and debating, and key refutations for the key arguments that Israel's denigrators use.

In Dundee, Luke had spoken about Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). At the Edinburgh conference he spoke about the Apartheid smear. He started with a clear definition of South African Apartheid so everyone understood what it actually meant and then contrasted it with the legal situation in Israel. Regarding the economic and social position of Israel's Arab citizens, he commented on all the measures that have been taken since the 2000 Oz Commission to rectify this and how far they are succeeding. Having armed us with various facts, he then discussed the importance of lobbying in the lead up to the Election.

Luke explicitly mentioned the Scottish Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (SPSC) and said that this conference, and the others that are being held in Scotland, recognise that the time has now come to redress the dominance of the SPSC in Scottish public debate.

The next presentations were about Magen David Adom, and again stressed the inclusive and non-discriminatory nature of MDA's work, including abroad, and in transfers of Palestinian patients urgently needing life-saving treatment at the Erez crossing.

The final speaker was Raymond Mann, from Glasgow, who spoke about BDS and did so at length and very cogently.

Finally there was another panel discussion. During this some people again raised the issue of the Fringe last year, and the harassment of Israeli businesses and the panel commented on the work that is being done by the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council and Police Scotland, amongst others, to address these issues.

Finally, there was a closing collection for StandWithUS UK and for the Home for Holocaust Survivors in Haifa. And while that was going on, they played a beautiful rendering of Hatikvah on the screen with transliterated words and everyone sang along, twice!!

I have to say that I was overwhelmed with emotion by the day, and I still am thinking about it. I could not believe there were so many good friends out there, and that non-Jewish people are rallying to the support of Israel with so much expertise and so well informed. The only disappointment was that the event was not better supported by the Jewish Community.