

Report on a visit to Israel and the West Bank

Between 24 and 28 February 2019, I was part of a delegation of Assembly Members who visited Israel and the West Bank.

The visit had several aims, including:

- to improve our understanding of the current situation from a political and religious perspective and in terms of the prospects for peace
- to share experiences and learn about economic development, enterprise and innovation
- to develop links and learn about the efforts that are being made in the sphere of linguistics and culture
- to promote links between Wales, Israel and Palestine
- to participate in an event to mark the Christian and military heritage of Wales in Jerusalem

The visit was sponsored by the Evan Roberts Foundation (a charity that promotes the Christian heritage of Wales and educates people about this heritage). The delegation included Alun Davies AM, Mandy Jones AM, Russell George AM, Darren Millar AM and Jenny Rathbone AM.

The first leg of our trip involved a visit to the Academy of Hebrew Language, located on the Giv'at Ram campus in Jerusalem. The Academy was established by law in 1953 to serve as the official institution of the Hebrew Language. Down the years, the Academy has been a national institution for studying the Hebrew language, and it has continued the work launched by the Language Committee (Va'ad Halashon). This includes overseeing the development of the language and providing professional and consistent terminology as the language evolves.

We had a presentation from Professor Aharon Maman, Vice President of the Academy, on the resurgence seen in the language over the years and the central role played in that process by liturgical and religious elements – not unlike the pivotal role played by the William Morgan Bible in the survival of the Welsh language.



It was interesting to learn that intensive Hebrew courses, known as “Ulpan”, had been the inspiration for the Wipan model of learning Welsh in Wales. The role of schools and the education system, together with the use of the language by public bodies, was also key to the growth of the Hebrew language, and clearly showed us in Wales how central those factors have been in the resurgence of the Welsh

language.

Following this visit, we met with Emmanuel Nahshon of the Israeli Ministry of International Affairs. He gave us an overview of the current political situation in Israel, as well as the international context. This was particularly valuable during the lead-up to the general election there, with Benjamin Netanyahu hoping to secure another term as Prime Minister.

Although the Knesset had been dissolved for the election period, we had an opportunity to meet Michal Biran MK, a Labor Party Member of the Knesset, to discuss the election forecasts and to learn about the system used for parliamentary elections there.



It was interesting to learn that the system used is that of proportional representation – but that instead of regional lists, as we have in Wales, there are national lists of candidates. As politicians who are accustomed to having an affinity with a particular constituency or region, we found the notion of a parliament filled with national representatives interesting.

However, the lack of a specific link between Members and constituencies did not seem to be problematic for voters or elected members, based on what we we saw.

At both these meetings, it was claimed that the peace process was not the main focus of campaigning (and that this marked a first in the history of modern elections in Israel). Issues such as health services, the state of the economy and housing were more prominent. After we had returned to Wales, however, it became clear that the relationship between Israel and Palestine had become a more central feature of the campaign, following controversial comments made by Netanyahu in the final days of the campaign.

It is also fair to say that this had been a central part of other discussions that we had conducted with two other representatives during the visit.

We held the first of those discussions with Dr Abdullah Adbullah, Chair of the Political Committee of the Palestinian Legislative Council and a senior Palestinian diplomat, whom we met in Ramallah in the West Bank. He gave us the Palestinian perspective on the current situation, highlighting the need for international authorities and Governments to do much more to encourage peace and a fairer



relationship between Palestine and the Israeli Government.

The lack of trust between the two sides involved in the conflict was evident, and it was difficult to see how they could come together without more robust external intervention. There is little doubt that the two cohorts and their leaders are implacable in their beliefs, and our visit left me with one specific lasting impression, namely that it will be difficult to move the process forward until the older generations (on both sides) step aside.

We also had the opportunity to visit the "Paths to Peace" scheme in Netiv HaSara. This is a small community of Israelis situated close to Gaza. With a huge wall separating the community from Gaza, the community had experienced rocket attacks. In response, one of the residents had started painting a mural on the wall, featuring messages of peace and brotherhood. We had an opportunity to leave our own messages on the mural, signifying our support for all efforts to secure peace there.



We also had more optimistic meetings with some of the region's newer politicians, including the Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, Fleur Hassan-Nahoum. Her passion for bringing together the various communities in Jerusalem was a breath of fresh air. She was very proactive in trying to bring together Arabs and Jews in the city on the basis of common values, and that was to be welcomed.

Our meeting with Bashar Masri, a successful Palestinian businessman and entrepreneur, was a similar experience. He has been described as Palestine's Richard Branson, and although he made his fortune abroad, he has returned to his homeland to help build the nation. We visited Rawabi, a brand new town that he is building on the West Bank. It is an amazing project, with hundreds of flats, a shopping centre, leisure provision and all the resources that can be expected in a modern town – very different to the other communities in the area.

Bashir Masri's mission is his desire to ensure that the West Bank is an attractive place where Palestinians can live and work, and to prove that developments of this kind are possible despite all the problems. He echoed the view that there is a need for a new generation of leaders in Israel and Palestine to build the foundations for peace in the future. He also expressed frustration that the troubles hinder the possibility of having any meaningful political discussions on other important issues such as equality for women and LGBT issues – two topics that are nowhere near the agenda there.

As someone who worked in the area of enterprise development before being elected to the Assembly, I found our visit to the Perez Centre for Peace and Innovation in Tel Aviv to be an inspiring experience. The centre was established in 1996 by the late

also had the opportunity to discuss more broad-ranging concerns about the lack of access to justice for Palestinians.

During visits to the Golan Heights and the border with Gaza we had a presentation from representatives from the IDF, outlining how they dealt with the tensions there. We also saw how, in the case of the Golan Heights, the civil war in Syria is contributing to the threat posed to the security of residents in that area and beyond. This gave us an insight into the wider context underpinning this part of the middle east, and into how complex and multi-layered the problems in the region are.

During this time, we also had an opportunity to visit some sites of historical importance and sites for religious tourism, including Capernaum and Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Western Wall and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. These are sites that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Given that we have so much to offer in terms of religious heritage, it was useful to see the potential for growing that sector in Wales.



One visit that was very relevant to my portfolio as a member of the Assembly's Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee was the visit that we paid to a site that featured innovations in the growth of vegetables and fruit. Given that a lack of water is a growing problem in the region, considerable emphasis has been placed on developing alternative methods of growing food products.

In past decades, there has been an emphasis on irrigation programmes and, more recently, on water desalination. However, we now need to use water more prudently, and so we had the opportunity to learn about innovative hydroponics schemes, as well as new techniques of growing products in greenhouses that are huge but are also energy efficient, and with the use of smart dehumidifiers.

These technologies can be used across the world in countries where water is scarce; in fact, they can be used everywhere amid the need to use water more prudently.



Finally the Assembly delegation had an opportunity to unveil a memorial to mark Wales' military heritage in the Old City of Jerusalem. The memorial was located in a small garden behind Christ Church, an Anglican church located just a few yards away from the city's famous gateway – Jaffa Gate. It was through that gateway that the Welsh soldiers marched with General Allenby when the city was captured from the Ottomans during the First World

War.

A small congregation of local Welsh people and members of the church joined us in marking the occasion. The inscription on the memorial is probably the only piece of Welsh language that can be seen anywhere in the Old City of Jerusalem!

On one of the final legs of our trip, we visited Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Memorial Center, where we had the chance to see the Holocaust History Museum and took part in a ceremony to commemorate the Holocaust victims. The experience was shocking, and it highlighted the horrors of anti-Semitism under the Nazis in Germany and beyond. We had the opportunity to give readings as part of the ceremony, and we prayed and observed a moment of silence in front of the eternal flame in memory of those who had suffered.

The visit was extremely busy and extremely valuable. I learned a lot about the reality of the situation on the ground in Israel and Palestine, and the visit also broadened my understanding of the political situation there. Beyond that, the experiences that I had in relation to economic, educational, agri-environmental, legal and other matters opened my eyes to all manner of lessons and possibilities that are available to us in Wales. The visit was an experience that certainly enriched my ability to contribute to policy development at the National Assembly for Wales.

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