

Report on Delegation to Israel and the West Bank

Introduction

This is a short report on a cross-party delegation of Assembly Members to Israel and the West Bank between 24th February and 28th February 2019.

The delegation was sponsored by the Evan Roberts Institute, a Welsh charity which seeks to promote, protect, and educate people about, Welsh Christian heritage. The author of this report is a trustee of the Institute as is Russell George AM, who also participated in the delegation.

The purpose of the delegation was to provide an opportunity for Assembly Members to participate in a ceremony to mark Welsh Christian and military heritage in the Holy Land and to engage in a fact finding programme to learn more about Israel and the West Bank, including prospects for peace, the development of the economy, and the language, culture and history of the Holy Land and its peoples.

The programme included many visits and meetings, an overview of which is below.

Welsh Heritage

The delegation unveiled a plaque in the Old City of Jerusalem to commemorate Welsh Christian and military heritage in the Holy Land.

The ceremony took place in a small garden at the rear of Christ Church, an Anglican Church just inside Jerusalem's famous Jaffa Gate, through which Welsh troops marched with General Allenby following the surrender of the city by the Ottomans during the Egypt and Palestine campaign of the First World War.

All members of the delegation took part in the ceremony as did the Rector of Christ Church, the Reverend David Pileggi.

The ceremony included readings by AMs from the life of St David, extracts from the memoirs of Royal Welsh Fusiliers Captain John More, and the History of the 53rd (Welsh) Division.

St David is said to have visited Jerusalem in the 6th century where he was appointed as an Archbishop by the local Patriarch and given gifts which he brought back to Wales. These gifts included a portable altar in which was inlaid a stone known as the Jerusalem tablet. The tablet now sits in St David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire, from where the plaque which was unveiled started its journey from Wales to the Jerusalem.

Contributions to the costs of the plaque were received from 160th Infantry Brigade, the Royal Welsh, and the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association for Wales.

A special message from Brigadier Alan Richmond, the Head of the Army in Wales, was conveyed to those who attended the event, in it he said:

"I am delighted that the military heritage of the Welsh people in the Holy Land is being recognised today. My brigade was part of the 53rd (Welsh) Division and after 2 ½ years of fighting in the Dardanelles, Egypt and Palestine, entered Jerusalem on 9th December 1917. Two days later, on 11th December General Allenby arrived on foot to formally declare the

liberation of the Old City of Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire. His success would not have been possible without the selfless sacrifice of so many Welsh soldiers of the 53rd (Welsh) Division and also the 74th (Yeomanry) Division. We remember them all with great pride and humility. Cymru am Byth."

The exchange of stones and pieces of our land is a symbol of friendship and commemoration between the peoples of Wales and the Holy Land and it is hoped that the plaque will inspire visitors to Jerusalem to learn more about Wales and our Christian and military heritage.

The plaque is made of Welsh slate and is the only Welsh language text on public display situated in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was particularly poignant that it was unveiled in the week of St David's Day.

There is scope for further commemoration of Christian and military heritage links in other parts of the Middle East which ought to be explored and a programme developed.

Sacred Sites

The delegation visited the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and Tiberius and Capernaum on the shores of Galilee. Tens of thousands of visitors and pilgrims from around the globe are attracted to these sights each year. Many come to learn about history, some come because of curiosity, and others come as part of their journey of faith. Other than a small charge to access Capernaum, there were no charges for entry to these sacred sites.

Given the world wide interest in Celtic Christianity and Non-Conformist Revival history, Wales would do well to learn from the way in which sacred sites in Israel are promoted, accessible, and maintained.

Yad Vashem

The delegation visited Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, to undertake a tour of the Holocaust History Museum and to take part in an Act of Remembrance for victims of the Holocaust.

The museum presents life for Europe's Jews before and after the Holocaust and plots the history and rise of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. It was an emotional and timely reminder to all in the delegation of the risks we face in Wales should the rise of prejudice, racism and anti-Semitism in our own nation, political systems and parties go unchecked.

Following the tour the delegation took part in a moving Act of Remembrance in the Hall of Remembrance, the principal Holocaust remembrance site in Israel. The Hall is a severe concrete-walled structure with a low tent-like roof. It stands empty, save for an eternal flame and engraved in the black basalt floor are the names of 21 Nazi extermination camps, concentration camps and killing sites in central and eastern Europe. A crypt in front of the memorial flame contains ashes of victims.

The Act of Remembrance included short readings followed by an opportunity for prayer and reflection before the eternal flame.

Academy of the Hebrew Language

At the Academy of the Hebrew Language the delegation received a presentation from Professor Aharon Maman, Vice President of the Academy, on the revival of Hebrew as an everyday language.

It was interesting to note that the revival of the language had only been made possible due to the preservation and use of the language in written and spoken form for liturgical and religious reasons. There are clearly parallels to the value ascribed to the William Morgan translation of the bible in protecting the use of the Welsh language.

It was also clear that the adoption of the language as the medium of education in Israeli schools, its use by public bodies, and a clear expectation that those coming to live in Israel should learn the language, were key factors in ensuring the rapid growth in its use.

Security Challenges

Visits to the Israel/Gaza border and to the Golan Heights provided an opportunity to receive briefings from the IDF and to meet residents about life in areas where the tensions of the ongoing conflict are a daily reality. The recent escalation of protests and violence on the Gaza border, and the civil war in Syria, have clearly contributed to a heightened sense of danger and insecurity for Israeli citizens.

The briefings were invaluable in providing some historical context to the issue of borders and wider regional challenges but there was also a sense of sadness at the intractable nature and complexities of the conflict, and its impact on ordinary citizens on all sides.

Political Perspectives

Emmanuel Nahshon of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided a briefing on the current political context in Israel and its international relationships.

As the delegation to Israel fell within the period leading up to the recent Israeli general election the Knesset was not sitting. The delegation did, however, meet Michal Biran, a Labor MK, to discuss the current political landscape. It was clear that domestic issues such as challenges faced by the health service, housing and other issues were the at the core of the political campaign which was underway. It was claimed that pursuing the peace process was not the primary concern for most Israelis in the election, but this was contrary to the desire for security which was reported to the delegation elsewhere.

In the West Bank the delegation was kindly received in Ramallah by Dr Abdullah Adbullah, the Chair of the Political Committee of the Palestinian Legislative Council and senior Palestinian diplomat. Dr Abdullah provided a comprehensive narrative and an authentic Palestinian perspective on the conflict. He expressed concern at the lack of international impetus to bring both sides of the conflict together for talks and the need for an honest broker to do so, especially given the lack of trust that the Palestinians have in the Trump administration.

In addition to voices from national politics, the delegation also met Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, the Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem. Mrs Hassan-Nahoum expressed a desire to promote engagement with residents in East Jerusalem as a means of building trust and encouraging participation in local

elections. She had a refreshing perspective and focus on wanting to bridge the divide between Arabs and Jews in the wider Jerusalem area in order that common values and aims can be promoted and achieved.

Prospects for Peace

The itinerary of the delegation included a visit to the Paths to Peace project in Netiv HaAsara where we heard about life for residents in a small community which had experienced rocket attacks and infiltration via tunnels from Gaza. A local ceramic artist decided to start a mural for peace on part of the security barrier near the community. The mural faces Gaza and has messages and symbols of peace in Arabic, Hebrew and English. The project seeks to engage people from all walks of life in developing the mural as a sign of the desire for peace between Israel and Palestine.

The delegation also visited Rawabi, a new Palestinian town in the West Bank. Rawabi was the brainchild of Bashar Masri, a visionary Palestinian entrepreneur and businessman, and was constructed with the support of Qatar. It includes modern housing, a retail centre, offices, play and entertainment facilities, and places of worship. The town is well planned and like nothing else in the Palestinian Territories. Mr Masri explained that he wanted to make it attractive to live in the West Bank in spite of the current conflict and to demonstrate that it is possible to develop significant projects in spite of the challenges posed by the ongoing stalemate. He expressed a hope that a new generation of leaders were emerging in both Israel and Palestine that had the ability to negotiate peace.

In Tel Aviv, the delegation toured the Wolfson Medical Centre and met representatives of Save a Child's Heart, a charity providing lifesaving and lifechanging heart surgery for underprivileged children from around the world and supporting the development of improvements in paediatric and cardiac care through the training of health professionals internationally. Their activities extend to providing treatment for children from Gaza and the West Bank and developing the capacity of medical facilities and centres in the Palestinian Territories. This approach to training and capacity building is something that Wales may seek to emulate through its international engagement.

The Peres Centre for Peace and Innovation, also in Tel Aviv, provided an opportunity to meet Nadav Tamir, the Director, and to reflect on the ingenuity of the peoples of Israel and the hope that this can lead to prosperity which can close the economic gap between Israel and its neighbours in order to promote peace. There was a clear sense of national pride at the technological achievements and inventiveness on display and there can be no doubt that this leads to business opportunities and collaborations which inspire other new and novel ideas. There may be valuable lessons for Wales to learn from showcasing innovation in this way.

Economic Development

In addition to seeing the innovation on display at the Peres Centre for Peace and Innovation, the delegation also had the opportunity to meet Nili Shalev, the Director General of the Israel-EU R&D Directorate at the Israel Innovation Authority. There was an invaluable discussion on the methods used by the Israeli government in order to stimulate investment and innovation in new and emerging global markets to enable Israel to become a global leader in those markets. The use of product development grants in exchange for royalties on sales and shares in companies was

particularly interesting to the delegation and there was much discussion on whether such an approach could be deployed in Wales.

Justice

The delegation met former Chief Justice, Asher Grunis, at the High Court of Israel in Jerusalem. The meeting enabled delegates to discuss concerns regarding access to justice for Palestinians and the development of Israeli law post the British Mandate.

With the ongoing debate in Wales over the development of a distinct and separate legal jurisdiction it was fascinating to learn about the development of the Israeli justice system from its roots in the British legal system which it inherited post the British Mandate.

Conclusion

It was a busy but rewarding visit to Israel and the West Bank which enabled the commemoration of Welsh Christian and military heritage, provided the delegation to explore and better understand the complexities of the ongoing conflict, and affording opportunities to explore opportunities for international engagement and ideas which could be applied by policy makers here in Wales.

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