

## **Cross Party Group on Building Bridges with Israel – 18<sup>th</sup> August 2020 (via ZOOM)**

**MSPs in attendance – Jeremy Balfour MSP, Bill Bowman MSP, Jackson Carlaw MSP, Jamie Greene MSP, Richard Lyle MSP, John Mason MSP,**

**Jackson welcomed Lt. Col Sarit Zehavi**

Intro: the speaker served for 15 years predominantly in Northern border. Sarit founded Alma - a think tank based in North of Israel, 11km from Israel/Lebanon border. Alma's mission is to provide information from all sides of the border.

- Sarit mentioned that on Friday - UNSC - council decided not to approve US proposal to continue weapons embargo over Iran. Impact on Israel - as fear that weapons supplied to Iran will be used to attack Israel, as Northern border is Iranin by proxy and Iran is a destabilising force in the region.
- New UAE Deal: Common interest between UAE and Israel - common interest.
- Sarit showed a map demonstrating the “ground corridor from Tehran to Beirut” demonstrating influence of Iran in Syria and “South in command” - unit of Hizbollah helping rebuild Syrian army post civil war, as well as preparing for war with Israel.
- Recently a few weeks of tension in Northern border. Increased IDF forces in North, following death of Hizbollah militant in strike on Syria. Incident at Northern border where militant placed explosives at border. Nasrallah had previously promised to bomb cities in Israel.
- Blast in Beirut
  - huge impact
  - Sea port completely gone
  - Wheat storage gone; = bread shortage announced by UN
  - 300,000 people lost homes
  - Lebanese ground zero

Proud that Israel has offered humanitarian aid to Lebanese people. Foreign collaboration gives an opposing to create change in Lebanon.

Hizbollah's strength comes from civilian wing that controls everyday life of people which allows for rockets to be hidden in schools, places of worship, etc.

—

Questions

**Q)** Jamie Greene

1. President refusing to resign as worried ab countries ability to hold elections. View on outcome and impact on Israel?
2. New Israel gov. How successful may the difficult coalition be?

**A) Sarit -**

1. No one is talking about election in Lebanon. Gov has resigned and a new one had been establish. Previous gov resignation was due to protest. Sarit unsure if elections will happen.
2. RE security - there won't be much difference between Gantz and Netanyahu

**Q) Jackson Carlaw :** Economic situation in Lebanon. Concern that many on verge of leaving due to crisis. To what extent was this a factor to the change in stability?

**A) Sarit -** view that those who can, will leave Lebanon. Younger generation and "elites" leaving Lebanon, blast is encouraging these processes.

**Q) Sammy Stein -** Hizbollah's political influence?

**A) Sarit -** not developing gov policy but dictating it. Hizbollah rooted in army, banks, civil society organisations. I witnessed process of Hizbollah taking over. Founding of Hassan Diyaab's gov. Opposition to Hizbollah are not strong enough. Campaign against COVID19 led by Hizbollah.

**Q) Donald Martin -** surprised that churches were allowing themselves to hide weapons.

**A) Sarit -** if you look at launching sites, one of those identified was a church parking lot. Report with further detail to be distributed.

Christians in Lebanon - about 20% of population. Weaker than they used to be.

Many take Hizbollah's side in order to survive, not due to true support, but as a result of fear.

**Q) Donald Wilson -** Is Israel confident of American military support continuing regardless of election outcome? Particularly buffer force

**A) Sarit -** not sure it will last, regardless of election. Some American troops remain in Syria but not many. American policy can always change. We have to work with the Americans and explain what we're dealing with - but always prepared for change in policy, regardless of election.

**Q) Neil Lal -** Israel and India have a close alliance. Iran and China building bridges. How do we move forward?

**A) Sarit -** in Israel we believe in processes, not solutions.

Grey zone policy - attacking without claiming responsibility or deteriorating into war. Someone has been doing this in Iran the past few months. There have been several explosions in Iran.

The combination of events over the past few months may weaken Iran.

The only thing that will really weaken Iran and Ayotollahs is the people.

Jackson thanked Sarit for fascinating insight into current situation. Jackson asked Sharon Bar Li for update on Israel, as acting ambassador, on ongoing situation as well as impact of COVID.

### **Sharon Bar Li**

Third elections have taken place in Israel. With assistance of COVID we have managed to break deadlock and form a unity government.

“Corona emergency unity government”.

A parity government.

Two main players - Likud and Blue & White have equal weight in making decisions, gov committees, equal number of cabinet ministers etc.

Rotation of PM.

First outbreak of COVID19 - quick to lockdown and control virus. Now - second wave.

Dilemma - how do we learn to live with the virus? Without shutting economy down until vaccine is developed. Two Israeli attempts at developing vaccine (but still at phase 1).

**Q)** John Mason - is this a second wave or an outbreak?

**A)** Sharon - the virus outbreak at first was imported from abroad - arguably wasn't technically a first wave, we contained it very quickly. Mortality rate is still considerably lower than other countries relative to population, but the infection rate is quite worrisome.

Jeremy Balfour gave thanks to speaker and acting ambassador.

Jackson confirmed participants will be contacted regarding format and to open up question on possible topics and discussion.

Full list of attendees can be found below

Niva	Aldema	
Jeremy	Balfour	MSP
Sharon	Bar-Li	
Danielle	Bett	
Ephraim	Borowski	
Bill	Bowman	MSP
Jean	Brannigan	
Jackson	Carlaw	MSP
Jonnathan	Connelly	
Doug	Flett	
David	Goldberg	
Edward	Green	
Jamie	Greene	MSP
Christina	Jones	
Alan	Kay	
Neil	Lal	
Stanley	Lovatt	
Richard	Lyle	MSP

Donald	Martin	
John	Mason	MSP
David	Rose	
Sammy	Stein	
Vicci	Stein	
Debby	Taylor	
Euan	Waddell	
Thomas	Webber	
Colin	Wilson	
Nathan	Wilson	
Evy	Yedd	
Sarit	Zehavi	