

TWIN GAZA WITH EDINBURGH SPEECH TO POLICY COMMITTEE OF 30th AUGUST 2022 FROM PETE GREGSON, PETITIONER

Hello Councillors,

The idea of twinning with Gaza came about after I had visited a conference at Edinburgh Uni in late 2018 organised by the Balfour Project. I learned a lot- that Balfour came from Lothian and that he gave the land away to the Zionist Federation in 1917, even before we had taken it from the Turks. We did this because it bolstered support from Zionists for WW1; at the same time we were promising independence to the Arabs who lived there, as we wanted their help in defeating the Turks (think Lawrence of Arabia). I learned that we ran Palestine until 1946 and that when the Palestinians rose up from 1936 to 1939 we ruthlessly suppressed them.

The British response to the revolt was harsh; we deployed over 100,000 troops to quell the rebellion. Imprisonment without charges or trial, curfews, whip lashings, house demolitions, and collective punishment against villages and families were some of the practices we employed to quell the revolt. An estimated 10 percent of the adult Palestinian male population were killed, wounded, deported, or imprisoned. More than 120 Palestinians were sentenced to death of whom 40 were hanged. There is an exhibition at the Botanic right now which shows that during our Mandate we even declared Palestinian plants to be illegal.

At the end of WW2, some 200,000 Jews were rescued from Hitler's death camps. There weren't welcome in the countries that they were born in, so these homeless people were optimistic about going to the USA- for President Truman had 400,000 visas waiting for them. But we British sent these Jews to Palestine instead- we gave 100,000 visas and when the other 100,000 arrived on Zionist-funded ships, we did not know what to do with them; for a while we tried to put them into camps, but of course that was unthinkable, so we let them in.

And when the Zionists booted us out of Palestine, we fled, leaving them with all our weapons. In the ensuing Nakba, 750,000 Palestinians fled from their homes- many to Gaza.. 70% of the people there are refugees from the Nakba and still dream of returning to their homes.

After 15 years of an illegal siege, life today in Gaza is miserable- 95% of the water is undrinkable, they get just 4 to 10 hours electricity a day, there is over 50% unemployment, with average wages of just £1/hr. 46% of kids suffer from acute anaemia; 50% express no will to live. Since Islam forbids suicide, to die of an Israeli bullet is seen as the best solution- as we witnessed just a few years ago, in the Great March of Return - over 230 died; according to the UN, more than 33,000 wounded. The Israelis used illegal exploding bullets, keen to make cripples, knowing it drains a family's resources more than a death would. There is an exhibition at Out of the Blue right now called Toxic Occupation which shows how the occupation is poisoning the Palestinian water table.

So we return to the subject of the twinning with Gaza.

"Not now", said one of you to me on Sunday. Now is not the time for extending civic warmth to Palestine.

Not now? Say some of you Councillors? How bad does it need to get, before we may support the Palestinians? Glasgow and Dundee have twinned with Palestine cities, but it seems to have passed by us in Edinburgh. I can give you an anecdote about how bad it is. My friend Mohammed, whom you met earlier, had a baby a couple of months ago, a little boy. He named it Peter, after me. A couple of weeks into his life they found he was not thriving and they found his lungs were malformed (Palestinians this this condition may be caused by gas from the bombs that fall on them.

The Gaza hospital said the baby must go to Hebron, some 40 miles distant. But this is 40 miles through Israeli controlled land. I lent Mohammed's wife about \$300 to support herself in Hebron, for the Israeli refused permission for Mohammed to accompany her. No sooner had she left Gaza and entered Israel but the bus was stopped, she was ordered off and the Israelis took all her money and her phone. She sat in the baking sun with a weak baby for 3 hours. Luckily an EAPPI witness from Europe saw the Israelis rob her and forced then to give Peter's mother a receipt. She is still trying to get a refund. When she got to Hebron, the baby died. This is the life that we have helped create for Palestinians.

Every day at least one Palestinian dies from bullets or bombs, but you would never know of this from our media. Three weeks ago Gaza was bombed in an unprovoked attack, killing 44 people, including 14 kids, with 360 wounded. Our response? Liz Truss issued a statement supporting Israel.

We can do something that helps to heal this damage. We can reach out the hand of friendship to a suffering and isolated people.

I asked one of you three years ago about twinning with Gaza and was told that it would be more appropriate for Edinburgh to twin with Tel Aviv- because they looked like us, had the same culture, etc. So it seems we only seem to care about people like us. It feels like Arabs are a no-go area for our city- Anas Sarwar complained of Islamophobia in the UK and I think he was right.

And what is twinning about? Is it about reaching out to those who are the same as us, or those who are different? Dundee with Nablus, Glasgow with Bethlehem. Edinburgh stands out as the major Scottish city with no Palestine partners.

A few years ago, there was an attempt to get Edinburgh twinned with Ramallah, an initiative that the Scottish Zionists easily disposed of. What will you do today? Do you believe the hate mail you have received about me from Zionists, calling me an antisemite and a Holocaust denier? Because neither of those claims are true. Some of you believe I am unsuitable, so I have stood down as chair of EGTA.

I beg you to judge this petition in its merits; your decision is not a statement of support for me.

You have received thousands of letters in support of twinning. Each of you has received at least 20 from your constituents- I delivered them to the chambers myself; I can get you hundreds more. In 3 years of delivering 25,000 flyers around Edinburgh, I have never met one citizen who declares twinning with Gaza to be a bad idea. Everybody recognises it as a profound humanitarian act.

I know Edinburgh doesn't do "twinning" so you may view this as adopting "sister-city" status, as our website here at www.twingaza.com explains.

All I seek today is the agreement of the following treaty, which is based on the one Dundee has with Nablus and would commit us:

"To actively co-operate to ensure the continuing development of close relationships between the citizens.

To facilitate the creation of direct links between institutions and organisations wishing to partake in twinning activity.

To encourage exchanges between young people to ensure succeeding generations learn the history of the relationship between the cities and the role that each has played in its own national history.

To take every opportunity to share skills and knowledge to the benefit of their respective citizens.

To undertake to convene regular meetings between representatives in order to evaluate co-operation programmes.”

At present the Edina-Gaza Twinning Association is doing some of this work- all on the net, as this space Israel cannot police; we hold 5 classes a week on Zoom running conversational English classes with Gazans young and old and thanks to Gaza Sky Geeks we are getting websites built in Gaza- these websites are much cheaper and as good as ones made here. We have 10,000 flyers like these which we shall use to get our Scottish traders on board.

Indeed, if we twin today I could approach our big financial institutions to outsource some of their IT work to Gazan rather than India.

COVID has opened up new ways of doing things- today you heard from our Friends in Gaza, using technology that would have been unthinkable three years ago. There is Google translate, so we can read Arabic websites instantly. Everyone in Gaza uses Messenger and What's Ap- I have over 1,000 Facebook friends there. I speak every day to new friends in Gaza.

One of our doctor members here in Edinburgh recently hosted a Gazan consultant who was awarded a senior Fellowship by Edinburgh University Global Health faculty ... collaborating with academics here, he has developed a Palliative Care diploma course for medical students which rivals the programmes of our home grown courses.

Edinburgh also has the Royal College of Physicians and Royal College of Surgeons ... both keen to help Gaza with its particular health problems. Edinburgh University might offer the kind of support to Palestinian students that St Andrew's does through their STEPS programme.

We should see twinning as non-political and of benefit to both Edinburgh and Gaza City.

This is what we do now; if we twin today we can go so much further.

Thank you for your time