**Palestine is still occupied, lest we forget it**

While we condemn the forced annexation of Crimea by Putin, we should not forget the crippling chronic annexation of Palestine by Israel illustrated by the settlements in the West Bank and their menacing presence in the daily lives of Palestinians.

Several stark reminders of this reality were apparent to my colleagues and me during our recent visit to Palestine. During a tour of Greater Jerusalem, we saw first-hand the impact on Palestinians of the illegal settlements and house demolitions. Taking just one example of basic utilities services; water consumption is some 200 litres plus for residents of the settlements but only 90 odd litres for Palestinians. Most Palestinians would be lucky to get a rubbish collection but they are regular in the settlements; even though the Palestinians are still paying the same. The house demolition programme is at the sharp end of a targeted campaign to eliminate properties of families being dispossessed, often on dubious legal grounds and sometimes very cruelly in the middle of the night. Refugee camps surrounded by the separation wall in Jerusalem like the one in Shafut, have 70,000 residents and receive limited emergency services from the occupying Israeli administration and yet construction of the wall of separation is relentless as highlighted during the recent Papal visit. The aim is clear, and that is to isolate Palestinian villages like Abu Dis from the rest of Jerusalem.

I was also struck by the ghost town in the middle of the City of Hebron immediately surrounding the Abrahamic mosque which has become a military zone. Palestinians are banned from walking down the road in Hebron. If ever there was a potential flash point, this was it, because of the religious significance afforded by all sides to this site. It felt like a ticking time-bomb.

In Hebron, we witnessed Palestinian children detained by Israel security for nothing more than throwing stones, with two shot dead in the last week alone. We discovered children from the settlements were dealt with by Israeli civil law whilst Palestinian children have military law applied. There are currently over 200 Palestinian children being detained in prison by the Israeli government, often arrested from their beds.

There are also another 200 Palestinians in “administrative detention”, held without charge. When we met some of their relatives, we discovered many were on hunger strike demanding an end to the use of administrative detention. This is a procedure that allows the Israeli occupation to arrest any Palestinian, any time without charge or trial based on “secret information” that neither the lawyer nor the prisoner can see. Interestingly it’s a practice which was introduced by the British, so we have a responsibility to try and end this. Our delegation also experienced some of this aggressive treatment when we joined the wall protest in Bil’in. The Israeli military responded in their usual way by dispersing tear gas aimed at the protesters.

But the first sign of Israeli policy is demonstrated by the reception which the Israeli border control at Tel Aviv airport affords their visitors. Quite apart from the fact that in order to get to the West Bank you need to pass through the occupiers points of access (even though Gaza has its own airport strips left behind by the British). they then embark upon a torrent of aggressive questioning and intimidation. They seemed obsessed with my family lineage, asking me repeatedly for the names of my father and grandfather. Several hours of repeated questioning and interrogation, waiting around and an approach designed to make it clear to me in no uncertain terms that I was not welcome made a very bad start for my trip after which, l can only imagine what the Palestinians must go through on a daily basis each time they have to pass through check points like Qalandia where you see 18 year old soldiers with sub-machine guns treating them appallingly.

If there is hope, then we saw it in two guises. In Nablus we saw an amazing lively Palestinian city giving us a glimpse of what an unoccupied Palestine could be like. And also the emergence of some very impressive Palestinian female politicians as their unity government is put in place and is increasing recognised by the world. Both Hannen Zoabi MP in the Knesset and the Mayor of Bethlehem, Dr Vera Babon caught my eye in particular. Strong women, with a clear and positive outlook bode well for both the future administration of Palestine and its political culture.

My trip was an eye opener. It is one thing to see these images of segregation, mistreatment and suffering on a television screen but quite another to experience them. The international kowtowing to Israel needs to end now as it only understands the language of power and punishment. In fact the entire approach to Israel needs to change, to one of boycotts and sanctions which are always preferable to bloodshed.