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Tareq Shrourou

Thank you for your letter of 3 April about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs).

I am deeply concerned by the situation in Gaza and the tragic loss of life that we have witnessed in recent weeks. The UK has been clear that Israel has the right to protect its borders against Hamas and other terrorist groups. It is clear that Hamas has been exploiting these protests for its own benefit. Hamas has declared that a number of those killed during the protests were its operatives. I have encouraged the Palestinians to do all they can to ensure that future protests are peaceful, and have pushed for Israel to show restraint. The most important thing is to prevent further violence.

There is an urgent need to establish the facts of what happened, including why such a volume of live fire was used and what role Hamas played in events. Given the importance of accountability, we are supportive of an independent and transparent investigation. We therefore welcome Israel's commitment to investigate the conduct of operations. We would urge that its findings be made public and, if wrongdoing is found, that those responsible be held to account.

Ultimately, Hamas's ongoing decision to embrace violence and reject the Quartet Principles lies at the heart of the Gazan tragedy. The UK's position on Hamas is clear: Hamas must renounce violence, recognise Israel, and accept previously signed agreements. Hamas faces a fundamental decision about whether it is prepared to accept the Quartet Principles and join efforts for peace, or whether it will continue to

use terror and anti-Semitic incitement, with all the terrible consequences for the people of Gaza and Israel.

Hamas's military wing has been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK since 2001, and the UK retains a policy of no contact with Hamas in its entirety. Any peace agreement should ensure that Hamas permanently ends rocket fire and attacks against Israel, the Palestinian Authority resumes control of Gaza and restores effective and accountable governance, and Israel lifts its restrictions in order to ease the suffering of ordinary Gazans.

The recent violence makes clear the urgent need for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We need a political process to move us closer to our goal of a two-state solution with a safe and secure Israel living alongside an independent and viable Palestinian State, which improves the economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza.

This conflict will only be resolved when violence is rejected and negotiations take place. The UK is doing all it can to support this goal.

Your sincerely

Alistair Burt

THE RT HON. ALISTAIR BURT MP
Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa