

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW - Blind peer takes a message of solidarity and support to the disabled in Gaza.



By Dr Hanan Chehata

Exclusive MEMO interview with Lord Low of Dalston.

Hanan Chehata: You have just come back from the largest delegation of European parliamentarians ever to have visited Gaza. You are well known for your admirable work on the rights of the disabled and issues surrounding blindness but what sparked your interest in Palestine enough for you to take the huge step of going to visit Gaza yourself? What motivated you to make that visit?

Lord Low: Well two-fold really. I'm interested in politics. The politics of the Middle East is a very vexed question and I wanted to just observe some of it at first hand. Probably about five years ago now, I went as part of a European-funded Partners for Peace project to Israel where there were some cooperative projects between Israeli and Palestinian blind children. We visited a blind school in the West Bank and that was an adventure all of its own because it was the day that Sheikh Yassin was murdered... the air was crackling with electricity. I've never experienced anything quite like it... We still went to the West Bank to visit the school and that gave me an interest, so I was keen to study the situation more at first hand.

The second reason was that obviously one hears about what happened a year ago in Gaza but it can be a little bit abstract if you don't see the pictures on the television and I was keen to find out a bit more about the reality of that on the ground. So those were my reasons for going.

HC: What was the aim of the delegation?

LL: There wasn't a party line that was agreed in advance, but I think the subtext of the delegation was really... partly fact-finding but also to express solidarity with and support for the residents in Gaza. The delegation overall had a pretty pronounced pro-Palestinian agenda and I was comfortable with that on the humanitarian level. I think maybe I had politically a bit more of an open mind on the issues than some of the members of the delegation but certainly at the humanitarian level everybody there was very much in sympathy with the Palestinians and the residents of Gaza.

HC: Do you think that the delegation managed to achieve its fact-finding goal? Did you learn a lot about the situation on the ground?

LL: Yes, certainly. We were able to observe at first hand the deprivation and the misery and the wretchedness in which the inhabitants were living. We were able to observe the scale of the destruction.



HC: Can you tell us a little about the scale of the destruction in Gaza?

LL: Let me give you one or two examples. The Legislative Council, which was a modern four-storey building, had been pretty well destroyed. Part of one room, a big room, was left and we had our lunch there, but it was only part of a room open to the elements down at the far end; you just looked out over the devastation.



We saw factories and farmland that had been destroyed. A community of about three or four hundred houses we went to see had just been razed to the ground. It was just a bomb site and we saw inhabitants, residents, living in conditions of the most abject squalor. Three or four generations in just a tent with no washing facilities, just a rudimentary fire in a tray on the ground for cooking, I mean, unimaginable conditions.

Schools were destroyed or damaged. There was a UN building that had been damaged and we heard a lot about the destruction from the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) in Gaza, John Ging. He's very good.

With regards to fact-finding, some people went to see the Egyptian Foreign Minister. He didn't want 60 people in his office so it was cut down to 15. I didn't go but I think they learned a bit more about the motives, the thinking of the Egyptians, the tightening of the blockade and so forth. They didn't necessarily agree with the Egyptian perspective but anyway we did learn more about that.

And I made a very careful note of what Ismail Haniyah, the Prime Minister of Gaza and the leader of Hamas, said in a measured speech. It was very interesting to hear his very measured and conciliatory statements because it is not how Hamas is normally represented.

HC: What did he say?

LL: He said that they had won an election, they were puzzled that the Quartet had completely failed to engage with them, they were anxious to engage, they were anxious to meet the conditions that the Quartet had imposed and he told us, listing the conditions, that they had a formula for addressing these conditions. The formulas he expounded were not in exactly the same words as the conditions but you could see how it wouldn't take the negotiating power of Tony Blair to bridge the gap between the two formulas. I'm sure that they could be brought together if they wanted to.

HC: Do you think that is something that will happen at some point in the future?



LL: We are putting pressure on. We have asked to see the Foreign Secretary and he has offered some dates. [Sir] Gerald Kaufman, who led the delegation, is trying to get agreement on the date when we can get to see the Foreign Secretary and we also want to see [Baroness] Cathy Ashton, the High Representative of the European Commission, who has responsibility for foreign affairs.

I'm a little bit less engaged politically than some of the other members of the delegation but what I'm perfectly clear about is that the blockade currently being imposed is a breach of the human rights of the people of Gaza and we think the European Union and the British Government need to do more than just utter warm words, fine words, on the subject. They need to use, at a minimum, the leverage of trade sanctions because Israel

relies on trade from the UK and Europe. It's very important. So they need to use what bargaining power they have and that certainly is something we will be impressing on both the Foreign Secretary and Cathy Ashton.

HC: Do you feel that you were you able to get a satisfactory appraisal of the conditions facing disabled people in particular during your visit?

LL: I'm glad you touched on that because this became an important dimension of the visit from my point of view. It was very clear to me that the fact that I, as a totally blind person, had made the journey to Gaza struck a chord with our hosts and they accorded me great courtesy and showed me a great deal of consideration during the visit and, as I say, it was an object of interest.

I made a statement at an early stage after we entered Gaza. The two leaders, the Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Council and Gerald Kaufman, said something and then there were four speakers from each side. I said that I would like to bring a message from the disabled people of Europe and the world and I expressed a message of solidarity and support; I wanted to say to the people who had been injured in the hostilities that there was life after disability and the people of the world were with them and this, I think, caught their imaginations. So from that point on I said I would like to meet people who had been injured and they made that possible.

I met two boys who had been blinded, one 11 and one 18. I was pleased to see that they were being educated in a blind school and they were beginning to learn Braille. I was very struck by the spirit of these boys. Al-Jazeera took an interest in that and they filmed our meeting. I said to 11 year old Louai Subh that he would find he could do things with his hands that other people do with their eyes and I was very impressed with the spirit they were showing. They seemed undaunted.

Then I met the member of the Legislative Council who has the disability portfolio and we were able to talk about what the needs of disabled people were. She is anxious to set up an organisation of blind people and I'm taking steps to put them in touch with the World Blind Union and also the International Council for the Education of People with Visual Impairment to see if we can get an educational programme going in Gaza. This should possibly be done on a Palestinian-wide basis, thinking back to my experience of visiting the school at



Beit Jarrah, near Bethlehem; but I'm sure things could be done in Gaza as well. What I want to do is to try and mobilise some resources that would actually help the disabled people of Gaza who have great needs.

HC: In a rally in Damascus a couple of weeks ago Khalid Meshal said something to the effect that many people have eyes and do not see and yet Colin Low, despite his blindness, is able to perceive the truth about the injustice in Palestine. What do you make of that statement?

LL: I'm very grateful, honoured that somebody should think that and also it makes me feel that I was able to do something useful by making the journey and being part of the delegation.

HC: You said that you had a message of solidarity and support for the people of Gaza but did the people of Gaza have a message that they wanted you to take home and deliver?

LL: I don't think there was a single message but they obviously valued the presence of the delegation as a means of letting the people of the world know about the conditions in which the residents of Gaza are languishing. They wanted this to be brought to the wider world, to the international community, and they obviously wanted us to use our best endeavours to ensure the Palestinians were given justice; in particular that the hardships of the blockade are lifted.

HC: The people of Gaza wanted you to tell the world about their horrific situation and the Arab media certainly covered your visit and were very impressed with the whole mission, and particularly your part in it, but the British media showed a distinct lack of interest in your journey there. How do you feel about the British media's lack of interest in the delegations' visit and in the issue of Palestine more generally?

LL: Well, disappointed, but realistic. I mean what can you expect of the British media? One doesn't necessarily expect a great deal. Even something like the terrible destruction on the scale of a year ago in Gaza, for the British media it was a nine-day wonder and then they moved on to something else.

I hope that I can assist in getting the message out as a reasonably open-minded and unbiased member of the delegation.

HC: In addition to the meetings you have planned since you have returned from your visit, what other steps have you taken to take this matter to Parliament and to highlight the siege of Gaza more widely?

LL: There was a question Lord Wright of Richmond asked in Parliament (you can see that in [Hansard](#)) and I joined in on that and we got a statement from the minister that was more positive than it might have been.

For the rest I've been making contact with colleagues at The World Blind Union and also with the International Council for the Education of People with Visual Impairment. The President is coming over here next week and I'm going to introduce him to Majed Azeer, a leader of the Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza, and he is also going to bring along somebody who has a lot of contacts in Palestine so that is part of my effort to try and gain some resources.



HC: Would you regard your visit as a one-off event highlighting your concern for the people of Gaza or will you remain committed to the Palestinian cause?

LL: No, I'm not just going for Palestinian tourism. I'm heavily involved in other things so there is a limit to what I can do but I certainly intend to do what I can and to mobilise resources. It may be that what I will do is gear up people on the ground to do things but don't expect it to be my last visit. I'm sure I'll have occasion to go back again.

HC: What is your most lasting memory from Gaza?

LL: The visit to the community that had been bombed out and meeting the blind young boys.

HC: What impact has this visit had on your life, personally?

LL: I think what it has done is that it made me aware that my disability was actually a powerful instrument for establishing human contact with people in other cultures, perhaps with those who have similar problems or perhaps those who have different problems, but it became clear to me that it actually was a bridge and it was a way of reaching out to people.

HC: Lord Low, many thanks for your time.

