Written evidence submitted by BICOM

Executive Summary

1. The development of a stable, prosperous and well run Palestinian Authority (PA), with robust, functioning institutions, is essential to the establishment of a future Palestinian state. Support for the bottom up development of Palestinian institutions is therefore consistent with Britain’s development goals, and the search for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution.

2. However, certain PA activities which appear to undermine rather than promote a negotiated peace agreement with Israel are a source of concern. For much of the last few years, the PA has shown a preference for unilateral steps in international forums designed to advance support for Palestinian positions, as opposed to bilateral negotiations with Israel.

3. Another deeply concerning aspect of the PA’s behaviour is incitement against Israel in official media, glorification of acts of violence and support for the ambiguous concept of “popular resistance”.

4. The government should expect the PA, which it supports financially, to act in a manner consistent with promoting a negotiated two-state agreement with Israel. The government should ensure UK funds are spent in a manner consistent with that goal, and make clear the unacceptability of PA actions which appear to undermine it.

5. The hostility and misinformation in Palestinian society towards Israel and Jews underlines the urgent need to support programmes and initiatives which bring Israelis and Palestinians together.

About BICOM

6. BICOM is a British organisation dedicated to creating a better understanding of Israel in the UK and to promoting a close relationship between Britain and Israel, based on shared values and interests. We have independent experts on Israeli politics and society in the UK, and are unique in having a permanent research staff based in Jerusalem.

7. Our organisation believes the two-state solution is the best way to reconcile legitimate Israeli and Palestinian national aspirations, and we publish regular analysis, briefings and updates on the peace process.

8. We provide expert day to day analysis and news summary, as well as in-depth research, on events in Israel and the region through our online publications and our quarterly journal Fathom. We take British opinion formers and policy makers to Israel and the Palestinian Territories to learn about the issues first-hand, and bring experts from the region to Britain. We promote a balanced discourse about Israel in the British media by creating opportunities for a wide range of voices to be heard.
The scope of this submission

9. This submission relates primarily to the question of whether DFID’s funding to the Palestinian Authority aids the twin goals of state building and achieving a negotiated peace, and whether DfID should consider funding joint working between Israelis and Palestinians. It examines those activities of the PA which appear at odds with UK policy and development goals. It also highlights the need to counter negative perceptions of the other in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by supporting initiatives which bring Israelis and Palestinians together.

The role of the Palestinian Authority

10. It is the long standing policy of the United Kingdom to support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the creation of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank alongside a secure State of Israel. This is the premise of British support for the Palestinian Authority and the bottom up development of the institutions for a viable Palestinian state.

11. The PA is an essential precursor to the creation of a fully sovereign Palestinian state at peace with Israel. The PA has made some impressive advances in the capacity and performance of its institutions, financial management and security forces in the West Bank, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad from 2007 until his resignation in 2013. The PA engages in security coordination with Israel, acts against Hamas and other armed groups in the West Bank and takes efforts to prevent the use of guns and explosives. The UK has played an extremely valuable role in supporting this development, and should continue to do so.

12. However, certain activities of the Palestinian Authority appear to undermine rather than promote the shared goal of a negotiated two-state solution and UK development goals. Despite some progress, there are considerable ongoing concerns about corruption and mismanagement of international funds by the PA. However, the focus in this submission is on PA activities and policies.

13. It is worth noting in particular that the Department for International Development provides funds directly to the PLO’s Negotiations Affairs Department (NAD), to produce the outcome of, “a Palestinian leadership empowered for effective negotiations with Israel and for engagement with the international community and in diplomatic efforts.” This is despite the fact that the PLO rejected international demands to engage in negotiations with Israel for most of the period 2009 to 2013.

14. NAD includes in its objectives, according to its website, to “explain and increase support for the Palestinian positions on permanent status issues and interim initiatives, to mobilise local and international civil society organisations to undertake advocacy on behalf of those positions.” Given that the PLO did almost no negotiating from 2009 to 2013, it would appear that this public relations campaign has been a central aspect of NAD’s activities.
Indeed, the Negotiations Affairs Department website is a platform for promoting a distorted version of the conflict. The site appears to have little content which promotes the benefits of peace or a negotiated resolution to the conflict, but is rather a source of Palestinian propaganda, including pro-Palestinian position papers, misleading maps, highly partial accounts of the history of the conflict, and expensive looking animated films.¹ Whilst it is to be expected that both sides will promote their narrative and advocate on behalf of their positions, it is not clear how the UK government funding the propaganda efforts by one side in the conflict is consistent with its development goals of conflict resolution.

15. Other deeply concerning aspects of the Palestinian Authority’s behaviour include its incitement against Israel, its glorification of acts of violence and its support for the ambiguous concept of “popular resistance”.

16. PA President Mahmoud Abbas opposes acts of violence. However, he personally participates in honouring individuals convicted of terrorist offences or who died while engaging in violence. Honouring such individuals is commonplace among Palestinian leaders and in Palestinian media. Abbas personally embraced recently released Palestinian prisoners, who had been convicted for the murder of Israelis, in a public ceremony, describing them as “heroes”.

17. The Palestinian Authority Ministry for Prisoner’s Affairs provides salaries to all Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, regardless of their faction. The longer the sentence, the higher the salary on a scale of 1400NIS (£250)/month (sentence up to 3 years) to over 12,000NIS (£2100)/month (sentence of 30 years). For comparison, the average salary for a PA civil servant in 2011 was 2882NIS (£500)/month.

18. The PA also supports “popular resistance” as a political tool against Israel. This can include popular demonstrations which can escalate to the use of ‘cold weapons’ such as stones and Molotov cocktails.²

19. There are many examples of incitement and messages that run contrary to the two-state solution in official Palestinian Authority media. There is little evidence of the Palestinian leadership educating or preparing their public for the difficult compromises that will be entailed in a peace agreement.

20. Typical messages in official Palestinian media and discourse include the notion that the Jews are not a real nation, that they have no real attachment to the area, that all of Israel rightly belongs to the Palestinians, and that Israel’s presence is a temporary phenomenon. An editorial in the official Palestinian Authority newspaper, Al-Hayat al-Jadida, on Nakba

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¹ See for example the Negotiations Affairs Department’s specially produced Christmas animation depicting a visit by Jesus to the Occupied Territories. “Stand Up For Hope, Peace And Justice in Palestine”, PLO-NAD, 2013. (Retrieved from http://www.nad-plo.org/etemplate.php?id=381.)

(Catastrophe) Day, 15 May 2012, the anniversary of Israel’s declaration of independence read: “Until we return to you, oh Haifa, Acre, and Jaffa, all of historical Palestine ... and all the temporary ones will go away ... May their independence collapse, and may Palestine come back to life.”

21. Other troubling themes to be found on PA television and other media include maps depicting all of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Palestine; images and messages demonising Jews or Israelis, sometimes rooted in Islamic texts; and accusations of appalling acts supposedly carried out by Israel. Such messages feature also in children’s television.

22. At times, grossly antisemitic themes can be found in official Palestinian television and print media. On 1 January 2013, PA television aired a “documentary” marking Fatah’s forty-fifth anniversary, which opened with a voiceover saying, “Faced with the Jews’ schemes, Europe could not bear their character traits, monopolies, corruption, and their control and climbing up positions in government ... The European nations felt they had suffered a tragedy by providing refuge for Jews. Later the Jews obtained the Balfour Declaration and Europe saw it as an ideal solution to get rid of them.”

23. The problem also extends to the PA education system. In February 2013, a joint US-Israeli-Palestinian academic study funded by the US State Department assessed that in 84 per cent of cases, PA text books characterise Israelis or Jews in a negative or very negative way. This compared to 49 per cent negative or very negative characterisations of Palestinians in Israeli state text books.

The need for bridge building and reconciliation

24. The UK government should expect the PA, which it supports financially, to use funds in a manner consistent with the UK policy of promoting a negotiated resolution to the conflict. The government should publicly and consistently make clear the unacceptability of PA actions which undermine this goal, including incitement from official sources and media, glorification of terrorism and violence, and the promotion of negative perceptions of the other in the education system. UK development funds should be directed to PA activities which are clearly consistent with the promotion of a two-state solution, including the bottom up development of Palestinian institutions.

25. There is evidence that the PA is responsive to international pressure over issues of incitement. For example, content from the notorious forgery ‘The Protocols of the Elders

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3 Quoted in David Pollock, “Beyond Words: Causes, Consequences, & Cures, For Palestinian Authority Hate Speech”, Policy Focus 124, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2013.

4 Ibid.

of Zion’ was removed from a textbook still in use in 2004–2005. In early 2010 international pressure resulted in a temporary decline in anti-Israel messages in PA media.6

26. The UK government should also continue to make clear its opposition to attempts by the Palestinians to seek endorsement for their positions unilaterally in international forums, as an alternative to negotiations. In addition, the activities of the Negotiations Affairs Department in promoting Palestinian propaganda, as opposed to preparing for and promoting a negotiated agreement, should be subject to close scrutiny.

27. The hostility and misinformation towards Israel and Jews in Palestinian society underlines the urgent need to promote civil society programmes and initiatives which bring Israelis and Palestinians together, overcome gaps in perception, highlight the benefits of peace, and promote peace orientated education. Currently, messages emanating from the Palestinian Authority reinforce negative perceptions rather than combating them, in turn fuelling suspicions on the Israeli side as to whether the Palestinians are deeply committed to peace with Israel.

28. In promoting a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, civil society initiatives are no substitute for decisive action at the political level. Nonetheless, there is much positive and valuable work that can be done to create constituencies that would not only tolerate or support a two-state agreement, but would actively campaign for it.

29. It is important to note that most Israelis and Palestinians still prefer the two-state solution over the alternatives. A recent survey showed that 63 per cent of Israelis and 53 per cent of Palestinians support the two states solution. However, majorities on both sides doubt whether a majority for a peaceful two state solution exists on the other side. This in turn drives down hope that a negotiated agreement is possible.7 There is therefore an urgent need to find ways to bridge this gap of mutual suspicion.

30. There are some well-established civil society organisations already working to address these challenges. For example, the Parents Circle-Families Forum brings together Israeli and Palestinian family members who have lost loved ones in the conflict to promote messages of reconciliation through educational programmes, films and social media projects. This particular organisation has been effective promoting its message in the UK also, through university campus tours and other public events. The Peres Center for Peace brings together Israelis and Palestinians of all ages in a host of activities and projects relating to sport, healthcare, environment, technology and other fields. Joint Israeli-Palestinian organisations such as One Voice and the Geneva Initiative promote a negotiated agreement within Israeli and Palestinian societies. In May 2013, a new organisation, Breaking the Impasse, was founded, bringing together Israeli, Palestinian and

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6 Pollock, “Beyond Words”.
regional business and civil society leaders to promote the peace process within their respective societies.

31. There are many other potential areas to bridge divides and promote cooperation, including in business and economy, culture and partnerships between professional groups. In particular, there is a need to make education systems on both sides promote the principles of peace and reconciliation. Bringing teachers and educational experts from both sides together to explore ways to improve understanding of the other might be a particularly constructive way of addressing this challenge.