

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

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*Déardaoin, 10 Nollaig 2020*

*Thursday, 10 December 2020*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

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The Joint Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Sorca Clarke,	Joe O'Reilly,
Barry Cowen,	Niall Ó Donnghaile,
Gary Gannon,	Diarmuid Wilson.
David Stanton.	

Teachta / Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Developments in Georgia: Engagement with Ambassador of Georgia**

**Chairman:** The meeting will be divided into two parts. In the first part, we are very pleased to meet H.E. George Zurabashvili, ambassador of the Republic of Georgia, to discuss the occupation of regions of Georgia and the EU accession process. He is very welcome. This is the first time Mr. Zurabashvili has attended in his capacity as ambassador. On previous occasions on which we met and on which he was present, it was in his capacity as senior official or chargé d'affaires. Today, he comes fully fledged as ambassador of the Republic of Georgia. In that regard, he is most welcome.

The format of the meeting is that we will hear an opening statement from the ambassador before proceeding to questions and answers with members of the committee, some of whom are present with us in the committee room and some of whom we expect to join us on Zoom or Teams. I am in the hands of members as to how we proceed. I am very keen that everybody will have the opportunity to ask questions. What we could do is allocate five minutes to each member or just proceed as we have in the past, but asking members to address questions. We will see how we get along.

Before proceeding to the business of the meeting, I remind members that mobile phones should be switched off completely or put on aeroplane mode for the duration of the meeting because they are likely to cause interference with the recording equipment in our rooms, even when in silent mode. I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person or body outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action taken based on what they say at the meeting. However, it is expected that nobody will abuse this privilege. It is my duty as Chair to ensure it is in no way abused. Therefore, if statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, witnesses will be directed by me to discontinue such discourse. It is imperative that these directions be complied with, which I know they will be.

The ambassador and his official are very welcome. I call on him to make his opening statement.

**H.E. Mr. George Zurabashvili:** Dear Chairman and members of the Joint Committee on Foreign Relations and Defence, I thank you for your incredible words and generous introduction. It is a great honour and privilege to be invited to this historic building, Leinster House, by the respected committee to represent my country and to brief members on the challenges Georgia has and the ongoing Russian occupation, and also to share the progress Georgia has been successfully achieving towards further European Union integration, as well as to mark out the excellent bilateral relations between our countries. I am conscious that this is the first opportunity I have had to address members since the respected committee was selected. Moreover, since Ireland has been elected as a non-permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, I would sincerely like to congratulate it.

Georgia's stated aspirations to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as its rigid democratic and economic growth, have further solidified Russia's aggression against a sovereign neighbour, with the main intention being to keep Georgia under its direct political influence and domination. It is important to emphasise that the conflict in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia is not an internal rebellion or a civil war, but a co-ordinated attack fomented, planned and carried out by the Russian Federation. Russia's military forces and units and Russian citizens directly participate in the military operations, using Russian military equipment. The plans to storm and occupy Georgian regions were drawn up and approved in Moscow. Faced with well-trained and well-equipped military units of Russia, Georgia lost *de facto* control over the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. As a result of Russian military aggression, illegal proxy regimes were created by Russia in both the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia.

Throughout almost 30 years of the Russia–Georgia conflict from 1991 to the current day, the ethnic Georgian population has been subjected to atrocities, including mass murder, torture, rape and pillage. The Georgian nation has suffered through three massive waves of ethnic cleansing in both the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia, which has resulted in 500,000 internally displaced persons, IDPs, and refugees, for which the Russian Federation is responsible. During the August 2008 war, Russia conducted a large-scale military attack against sovereign Georgia on land, at sea, by air and via cyberspace. As a result, Russia has additionally occupied 125 villages and has burnt out, destroyed and flattened the houses of 35,000 Georgians in order to preclude any return of the expelled population, trying to change the traces of history and pretending Georgians never lived here. Those few who have escaped atrocities and have remained in the Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions are constantly subject to massive human rights violations.

In April 2011, the Russian occupation forces started the installation of barbed wire fences and other artificial obstacles along the occupation line in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia. This process of borderisation has further intensified and actively continues now. The length of barbed wire fences and barriers along the occupation line in the occupied Abkhazia region exceeds 49 km, and in the Tskhinvali region it exceeds 52 km. As a result, the local population is cut off from agricultural and grazing lands, potable and irrigation water systems, and churches and cemeteries. Residing on different sides of the occupation line, more than 800 families are denied contact with each other. Those few ethnic Georgians who are left beyond the occupation line are deprived of fundamental human rights, including free movement, civil rights, property rights, education rights in the native Georgian language, health services and so on. The native Georgians are forced to take Russian passports or register as foreigners. They are forced to change Georgian names and surnames. Almost all original Georgian toponymic names of cities, villages and streets are also changed. We witness frequent cases of illegal kidnapping, detention, torture and murder of those who live along the occupation line. The brutality of such actions is beyond human nature.

Russian occupation forces continuously move the occupation line deeper into the country, seizing thousands of acres of Georgian lands, advancing closer to the vitally important east-west highway, grabbing territories where crucial pipelines carry oil and gas to the EU markets. The creeping occupation brings fear to the local population, destruction to the economy and undermines security. Currently, 20% of Georgian territory is occupied by the Russians.

The Russian Federation refuses to fulfil its obligations under the 2008 ceasefire agreement that was mediated by the European Union under the French Presidency. The six-point agree-

ment envisages the non-use of force, which Georgia has signed unilaterally as Russia declines to meet this obligation. Georgia calls for withdrawal of the Russian troops from our territories as stated in the same agreement. Instead, Russia has built two illegal military bases in both occupied regions where more than 10,000 Russian military and security personnel are stationed. In addition, Russia maintains 2,600 KGB or FSB agents and border guards to control the occupation line and adjacent territories. The Russian illegal military bases are well equipped with modern military hardware, including tanks, artillery, military drones and ballistic missiles with the capability of wearing conventional and nuclear warheads. Russia's Black Sea naval fleet is in constant movement in the Abkhaz section of Georgia's territorial waters, while military planes of Russia's air force constantly violate the airspace of both regions. The permanent military drills conducted by Russia on the occupied territories constitutes further threat to local and regional security.

We remember well the visit to Georgia in November 2008 by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs and now Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin. We remain immensely grateful to the Irish Government and the European Union for launching the European Union monitoring mission, the non-military observers' mission, with eight Irish serving on the ground in Georgia, observing the occupation line. However, again, the Russian Federation breached the ceasefire agreement mediated by the EU and does not allow the EU monitoring mission to cross the occupation line to carry out its mandate fully. Even worse, a few months ago the occupation regime kidnapped and detained one of the international observers.

Russia is continuing to violate the basic principles of international law through the legitimisation of forced territorial and demographic changes through occupation and ethnic cleansing and recognising the so-called independence of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia. Furthermore, through political and financial pressure, Russia forces others to do so, as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and, most recently, the Assad regime in Syria did.

The Russian Federation continues the illegal process of de facto annexation of these regions through signing so-called treaties on alliance and integration with the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali occupation regimes, thus fully incorporating Georgia's occupied regions into Russia's military, political, economic, social and legal systems. A few weeks ago, the Russian President announced the creation of a common socioeconomic and defence space with the occupied Abkhazia region of Georgia.

Through these destabilizing steps, in an attempt to change sovereign borders in Europe, the Russian Federation poses a serious threat to peace and security on the European Continent. It is of crucial necessity that the international community does not turn a blind eye to the alarming processes the Russian Federation is carrying out through de facto annexation of Georgia's occupied territories and projecting power in the wider Black Sea region and the southern Caucasus.

Georgia remains firmly committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflict and de-escalation of tensions with Russia based on respect of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and it has undertaken concrete steps by adopting A Step to a Better Future, the peaceful integration programme for both regions.

The response of the European Union as a guarantor of the ceasefire agreement needs to be stronger, more decisive and resolute in defending the principles of respecting the agreement, and it needs to call on Russia to implement its obligations under the EU-mediated 2008 ceasefire agreement, cease its illegal steps towards de facto annexation of Georgia's occupied territories and withdraw its military forces from Georgian soil.

We appeal to our international partners and allies to demonstrate a firm stance, make strong public statements and take actions in the respective capitals to give due assessment to the illegal developments I have mentioned. The European Union and the international community should make Russia accountable to international law, because in the modern world the rule of law must govern and justice must prevail.

We are grateful to the Irish Government and to the Oireachtas for supporting Georgia's territorial integrity, for co-sponsoring multiple UN resolutions on the safe and dignified return of internally displaced persons to their true homes, and for the motions passed in Oireachtas, as I anticipate seeing other resolutions on Georgia's territorial integrity and EU membership as a reiteration of Ireland's continued support.

Today, in speaking to the committee and in speaking to Ireland as a friendly nation, a fully fledged EU member state and a newly elected non-permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, I remain confident that the occupation Georgia faces and the crimes against humanity that Georgians suffer because of the devastating policy of the Russian Federation will be strongly condemned, efficiently tackled and the actions towards de-occupation will be executed. We are not living in a perfect world but definitely we together can make it more human, more secure and better protected.

In parallel, the country is progressing well towards European Union integration. Strong leadership of the Government based on the nation's destiny towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which is firmly reflected in our constitution, will achieve our success. The Georgian Government has declared it will submit an EU membership application by 2024.

European values are exactly what determine Georgia's European path. We Georgians share exactly the same values as the EU does and our shared past is an integral part of our shared future. Therefore, we are confident that only by embracing political and economic interdependence can we both progress and develop further.

Dreams do not work unless we do. In terms of the eastern partnership, we have signed an association agreement with the European Union that opens a new chapter in Georgia's relations with the EU. In this direction, our next goal is to join the Single Market, the single euro payment area and the single telecommunications space, and incorporate into educational domains, the transportation network and many more.

Since the deep and comprehensive free trade agreement signed with the European Union, the EU has become the major trade partner for Georgia, with a 12% increase in our trade balance sheet. Georgia invites Irish businesses to enjoy our favourable location, which is a gateway from Europe to Asia, as we provide free market access to a population market of more than 2 billion through free trade with China, including Hong Kong, central Asia and all neighbouring countries.

Avoidance of double taxation is another strong incentive for Irish companies. The competitive advantage of Georgia is based on the rule of law, with a liberal market economy and well-regulated property rights, an easy, friendly and corruption-free business environment and a skilled and cheap labour force. The phenomenal progress Georgia has achieved in the past decade comes through the elementary tax code system designed by the Government to ease business conditions. Georgia is ranked seventh in the world in the World Bank ease of doing business index and it is ranked fifth on economic freedom by the Fraser Institute.

Georgia possesses huge potential in green hydropower generation. We are studying closely the project to construct a novel Black Sea underwater electricity transmission line to supply the EU with much-needed green energy. In a world of digitisation, Internet cables stretching along the seabed are among the top priorities, as the Black Sea has turned out to be a sea of connectivity.

Georgia contributes to global security and participates in all counterterrorism operations led by the United States and in various EU peacekeeping missions. Although EU membership is not currently on the table, it is our goal that Georgia will become a member of the European Union. We call on the EU to further shape co-operation with Georgia as a potential candidate country. Being defined as a potential candidate country will be a sign of great support to Georgia's democracy and will certainly further consolidate Georgia's democratic and economic reforms.

Nowadays, the increasing bilateral relations require reciprocation by the Irish Government to open an Irish embassy in Tbilisi, which will definitely contribute to the Irish global footprint policy. It will also benefit Ireland as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, open new horizons for Irish businesses and contribute to our bilateral relations.

Our friendship is strong and firm, while the relations are sincere, reliable and trusting. We commit insofar as we can to support Ireland in whatever it needs and whenever it asks, on the international arena and in all multilateral formats of our competence. We remain more connected, more interactive and more relevant than ever before.

I thank members of the committee and invite them to ask any questions they may have.

**Chairman:** I thank the Mr. Zurabashvili for that comprehensive address.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank Mr. Zurabashvili for his time this morning and during the more severe lockdown restrictions in Ireland, when he gave so freely of his time on Zoom. It was much appreciated then and remains so now. I thank him also for outlining so comprehensively and eloquently the challenges that his country faces.

In respect of the creeping border with Russia and the impact that has had, the ambassador referred to the kidnapping, detaining, torture and murder of those who live along the occupation line. What would he like Ireland to do in that regard in light of our new position on the UN Security Council? Given that Georgia is actively seeking membership of NATO, how does he foresee that fitting into that area of the country?

**Deputy John Brady:** I welcome Mr. Zurabashvili. Like Deputy Clarke, I had the honour of meeting him earlier in the year at the Georgian embassy at a time when restrictions were not as severe as they are now. It was my first meeting in my new position with any ambassador to Ireland, so it was an honour for me. I thank him for his courtesy and welcome him to our meeting.

I note the ambassador's concerns about the 2008 ceasefire agreement and the detail he outlined in regard to breaches to it. He is critical of the international and European communities and acknowledged the role Ireland has played with personnel on the ground. He outlined some of the measures that could be taken, but what additional ones does he suggest? Should a resolution be passed? We know from conflicts in other regions of the world that resolutions do not always have the desired impact and many countries completely ignore them. What are his views on that? What additional measures can be taken?

I note Mr. Zurabashvili's comments on bilateral relations. We have examined various agreements and I think bilateral relations can be developed. Are there any specific areas that he thinks can be strengthened and worked on?

The UN Security Council seat that Ireland will take in January is a position that we should use to the full. One of the pillars on which Ireland obtained the seat was human rights grounds. If Mr. Zurabashvili were to give the Government a message about how to use its seat on the council, what would it be?

Turning to sport, our countries have met on the playing fields of both soccer and, more recently, rugby. There have been mixed fortunes on the soccer pitch, in respect of qualifiers for both the World Cup and the European Football Championship. In the recent rugby game, Ireland convincingly beat Georgia, although Ireland did not play its best. On the field, relationships are developing well between the countries, and long may they last.

**H.E. Mr. George Zurabashvili:** I thank the Deputies for their interest. It is pleasant to be here among friends. To respond to Deputy Clarke, I, too, recall our Zoom call, in which we had a substantial discussion. Regarding the creeping border and the creeping annexation and occupation that Russia is conducting as we speak, it is grabbing more and more land. The problem is that Russia is not only not withdrawing troops from Georgian soil but adding more and more. With the creeping annexation, Russia is instilling more fear in the local population and, of course, it results in more torture and murder. We have a strong aspiration to become a NATO member, with the support of 76% of the Georgian population. According to surveys, Georgians very much support European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

We see NATO not only as a good defender for ourselves but also as a way to approximate our standards to NATO standards. Our military already co-operates well with NATO headquarters. As I noted, we participated in almost all US-led and NATO-led counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are some examples of countries that have become NATO members later having problems, such as Germany, but that should not be a problem for us. We strongly believe this is the right direction for the further progress of the country. NATO concerns not only military; it is a strong democracy with many other requirements to secure membership, which we are fulfilling quite well and on which we are making progress.

Deputy Brady is absolutely correct to say resolutions sometimes do not work, but what else do we have? They are a tool to be vocal and to make Russia accountable to international law. We are talking about being accountable to international law and to fulfilling obligations once a country has signed a resolution. We very much look forward to hearing the voice of Ireland, as a future non-permanent member, on the UN Security Council. We very much look forward to and hope there will be many initiations coming out from Ireland on Georgia's behalf to support us in the United Nations.

Our bilateral relations are quite strong. I would like to see business and economy develop further. This is the most important element that can cement any strong political relations we already have. We would love to see more Irish businesses and more investments from Ireland go to Georgia. Again, we are offering our soil, our land and our markets for Irish businesses. We hope they will take up this idea and enjoy doing business in or with Georgia.

It is always nice to have sports events like rugby and soccer. We will have many other enjoyable matches and games ahead. We are doing quite well but we are still not members of the Six Nations. We are struggling to become the seventh member. We were here several times at

the Aviva Stadium and we were too polite to win. I hope our skills will get better. Rugby and soccer are very popular in Georgia. All my friends are great fans. It is similar to here.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** This is the first time I have had the opportunity to welcome the ambassador to the committee. I congratulate him on his elevation and I wish him the very best.

I visited Batumi two years ago and was extremely impressed by, first and foremost, the work that is going on in the harbour there. It looks like it could be a major gateway between Asia and Europe. I wish Georgia well as it develops that area.

When I was there, I was also extremely impressed by the young people's level of education and their knowledge of the English language. It is almost second nature to them. That opens up the question of educational co-operation between the two countries, particularly visa-free transfers to open up opportunities for Irish students to study in Georgia and Georgian students to study here. What are the ambassador's views on that?

With the port in Batumi, there are opportunities for import and export right across the globe.

When I was in Batumi, there were several questions about Georgia meeting the rule of law for accession to the European Union, particularly to stamp out corruption of any sort. Where does that stand now?

The number of people serving in the Georgian military is staggering for a country of its size. It is almost 37,000. How many of them could be redeployed to other work if we solved the problem Georgia has on its borders with the Russian Federation?

In his presentation, the ambassador said the European Union needs to be stronger in its approach to Georgia and also referred to United Nations resolutions. In both cases, Mr. Zurabashvili is not the first ambassador to tell this committee about resolutions from the United Nations. Nobody seems to take any notice whatsoever of resolutions that are passed. What is his view on this? What exactly would he like the European Union to do in a way that would show a stronger response to the Russian Federation?

**Deputy David Stanton:** I welcome the ambassador and thank him for his interesting presentation.

I join with colleagues in saying that we are quite concerned and alarmed at the military aggression in that area. That is to be denounced in every possible way.

I note the ambassador referred to the economy in Georgia. At one stage, it was referred to as a star reformer. Can he let us know how the economy is performing now? How is the Covid-19 pandemic impacting on the Georgian economy and population?

Will he comment on the Georgian birth rate? There are concerns about the birth rate dropping dramatically there over the last period of time. What is being done about that?

I was interested in his comments on the potential of hydroelectricity production in Georgia to provide green energy to Europe. Will he comment further on its potential?

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the ambassador and his team for an informative brief. Its graphics were excellent.

He mentioned that Georgia hopes to submit an application to join the European Union in 2024. Realistically, when does Georgia hope to gain entry as a result of that application?

Are the EU military monitors still on the ground or have they left?

The ambassador said that in 2008 Georgia came under attack by land, sea and cyberspace. Are the cyber attacks still happening or have they ceased?

**H. E. Mr. George Zurabashvili:** I thank Senator Craughwell for telling us of his good memories about visiting Batumi two years ago. Education is one of the main aspects about which any nation has to care. We are part of the Erasmus+ programme and one of the most active countries in it. If one goes to the statistics, more than 5,000 Georgians students enjoy the Erasmus+ programme. Some Georgians also travel to Ireland for the good education provided here. We are also part of other educational programmes of the European Union. As part of our next goal as an associate country of the European Union, we very much look forward to becoming part of the educational domains of the European Union.

The Georgian language is a source of great pride for us. At the same time, it is a bit local. We have to study other languages. The other language is English. It is obligatory from the first grade in school. That is why the young generation is fluent in the English language. They realise that if one wants to achieve something globally, one has to speak and know English well.

The reforms that the Georgian Government is fulfilling will take time and are painful for the population. We understand that to have a bright future, one, sometimes, must struggle today. We are proud of the anti-corruption measures that we are doing quite well. For instance, according to the corruption percentage index of 2019, Transparency International ranked Georgia 44 among 180 countries. It should not be forgotten that 30 years ago Georgia was part of the Soviet Union which was totally based on corruption. It is a huge progress for us. At the same time, we are listed as No. 1 in the absence of corruption category in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the Rule of Law Index 2020 surveyed by the World Justice Project. We are doing well. There are many other things that need to be tackled but we are on the right path.

Regarding UN resolutions, the Senator is correct that they do not bring results. We do not know any other terms beside the resolutions, however. At the same time, those resolutions are very helpful. They bring results. Whenever the resolutions are straightforward, vocal and firm, they will definitely bring results. I am grateful to the Oireachtas for the several resolutions that have been passed in Leinster House. I anticipate more and more because this is the only job we can do together here.

Deputy Brady asked a question on the economy. The Georgian economy was not doing badly before the pandemic. The country's GDP growth before the pandemic was 5%, which is a good figure for us or for any country. Our economy is not as big or wealthy as Ireland's but it is very diversified, which keeps us resilient to the turmoil that happens in the world economy. Everybody suffers in a pandemic and the Georgian economy has suffered a lot. We will probably have negative growth by the end of this year. I cannot yet give any figure but we do not anticipate anything good. However, I saw yesterday in the Georgian press that the National Bank of Georgia is predicting growth of approximately 4.5% in 2021. If that happens, it will be a very successful year for us, after the pandemic. Of course, it depends on the epidemiological situation and the vaccination process and not only in Georgia because we are interconnected with our immediate neighbourhood and with the whole world. We hope the vaccination process will progress well so as to allow the interlinked economies to take another breath and jump forward.

Deputy Stanton mentioned hydropower and hydroelectricity. Georgia is a mountainous country and our permanent glaciers mean we have streams and rivers full of water. We use hydropower plants for 85% of our power generation so we can say that almost all electricity generation is green in Georgia. We import whatever we need but our own generation is hydro-power. In the summer, we export electricity to neighbouring countries. We have constructed a high-voltage grid to connect us with Turkey for the importation and exportation of electricity. We have others with Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. We are thinking about constructing an underwater electricity cable link to the European Union to enable us to export green energy to the EU. The Black Sea has become the sea of connectivity. The Black Sea is not as big as it used to be in old times. Its length is about 1,100 km. It is not that long and can be crossed in a two-hour flight. It is very much possible and we are considering this opportunity.

I think I missed one of the topics that were raised.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I was interested in the reports of population decline in Georgia. Many Georgians have come here in the past seeking asylum and refugee status. The population decline seems to be a matter of concern.

**H.E. Mr. George Zurabashvili:** The population of the country has reduced slightly. According to the most recent census, there are 3.8 million Georgians living in Georgia. Emigration is a global process that occurs everywhere. Georgians have been travelling since the borders opened after the collapse of the USSR. That is when Georgian emigration started. There was some previously when the Bolsheviks captured and occupied Georgia. When the Iron Curtain was in place, we were not allowed to travel abroad. The most recent wave of Georgian emigration started 30 years ago. People are travelling for a better life and better salaries. The economy leads their decision. At the same time, Georgians are family-based people. We always anticipate that one day we will return. I think the Irish will not be surprised to hear this given that 70 million people of Irish extraction live abroad and 5.5 million people live in the country.

We realise that sometimes undocumented immigration brings problems to the host countries. We implement many activities and have invented new mechanisms to prevent illegal or undocumented travel. We have had some success. European Union statistics show a huge decline in the number of people who have travelled undocumented. That is part of life but, at the same time, we are doing the best we can and we co-operate closely with Europol, Eurojust and Frontex to prevent and avoid illegal travel.

Deputy Berry asked a question on Georgia's application to join the EU in 2024. That is what we have declared. How long it will take to become a member, God knows. It is a long process. At the same time, we are not chasing the process. We are saying EU membership would be good for Georgia. Whenever it happens, it happens. It will be whenever the EU is ready to open its borders to new members and enlargement. Ireland supports the enlargement process but there are different ideas. We are not pushing anybody. We are doing our homework and when the time comes, we will be ready.

On cyberattacks, we suffer from such attacks. It was not only in 2008 because since that time there have been several attacks coming from Russia. We had close co-operation with the law enforcement bodies of our ally countries, such as the UK and the US. This helps us to identify the source of these attacks. We know what happened and when it happened. We are not the only country to have suffered cyberattacks from Russia. It is our common problem.

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** I welcome the ambassador and first secretary. Some of the

questions I wanted to ask the ambassador have already been asked so I will be brief. The ambassador is probably as well known around these Houses as most members are and better known than some. The ambassador does an excellent job representing his country and I thank him for his presentation.

I wear two hats as I am the convenor of the Oireachtas Georgian Friendship Group and a member of this committee. Therefore, I believe we should wholeheartedly support the ambassador's call for the Irish Government to open an embassy in Tbilisi in Georgia. I agree an embassy would be an important step in the expansion of the Irish global footprint. Indeed, perhaps we could use the experience of the Chairman and his good offices to assist us in expediting that objective, as soon as possible.

On annexation by Russia, the ambassador mentioned that 20% of the Georgian territory is occupied and in the region of 125 villages are occupied. Can he elaborate on what he meant by the term "continuous annexation"? He mentioned it in reply to a question by Deputy Brady but I am interested to hear more about the issue.

I am very impressed by the figures on the Georgian economy over the last number of years. Like Senator Craughwell, I was fortunate to visit Georgia so I can attest to the fact that it is a very progressive country and I take this opportunity to wish Georgia well in its application to join the European Union.

In terms of something that Deputy Berry mentioned, as part of the visit to Georgia the delegation visited the EU monitoring group. I am glad to say that the Irish are very well represented in that group by members of the Defence Forces and it is something that we can be proud of. Does the mission still exist and continue the good work that it did a number of years ago?

The ambassador mentioned the avoidance of double taxation in Georgia and the huge opportunities that presents for companies. We are primarily interested in Irish companies establishing there as they would have access to a market worth over €2 billion. Ireland, as a country, should seriously consider that market and maybe another committee might also pursue this issue. There is a huge opportunity for Irish dairy and meat products, in particular, but there are opportunities in other areas as well.

I thank the ambassador for attending and giving an excellent presentation. We look forward to working with him in the future.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I thank the ambassador for joining us today. I want to refer to the recent enforced truce that took place in the Nagorny Karabakh region in November. It is fair for me to say that the EU institutions were found wanting so, as a consequence, Russia now has a stronger military presence in the area. Are there lessons to be learned from the failure of EU institutions to intervene in the conflict as we take our seat at the European Council? Can the ambassador speak to how geopolitics has changed as a consequence of the military presence of Russia in the region? Has the position of the European Union been undermined because of its ineffectiveness during the conflict and inability to be stronger in bringing some form of cessation there?

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I welcome the ambassador. I have had the privilege of meeting him on at least one occasion, casually on another occasion and we have had very good conversations here in LH 2000. Unlike Deputy Brady, I have not yet managed to get to the embassy but it is something that I would like to do. In my case, I tend to commute a lot so it is not easy for me

to visit embassies in the evenings. I agree with Senator Wilson that the ambassador is very well known in here.

Ireland, with the EU, supports Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Senator Wilson may have been the catalyst but there was a motion passed in the Seanad in 2018 giving further expression to that and we have been against the aggression. Earlier I perused the briefing notes, the ambassador's presentation and the chronicle of displaced persons, of torture and of arrests, which made very grim reading. That can never be taken off the table and we must never lose sight of the human rights issues in the region.

In July 2016, agreement was reached on a deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU, which is good. I would personally be a great supporter of Georgia's movement towards accession to the EU. I say to the Chairman of this committee and colleagues here that we have a duty within the EU to support and give voice to accession. Indeed, as other colleagues have said earlier, we must support Georgia in its new capacity in the UN. I note that the EU has contributed €410 million to Georgia between 2014 and 2016, which I support. I wish Georgia well with accession.

I join with colleagues in expressing support for the position of Georgia because we are greatly distressed by the civil rights abuses and horrible effects of aggression in the region. Thankfully, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, and the Overseas Development Institute, ODI, have reported that the recent elections in Georgia were a great success in terms of process, on which I congratulate the ambassador.

I ask the ambassador to please enlighten us about the continuing boycott of parliament by the opposition in Georgia. Naturally, the boycott is a concern for the ambassador but it is a concern for us too. What steps are being taken to resolve the matter? I have a lot of personal involvement in Albania, on behalf of the Council of Europe, so I know that there is always an onus on the majority or governing party to make an effort to accommodate the opposition and bring them onboard.

I am aware of the six-point peace plan. Senator Wilson asked questions along these lines but I want to hear about the continuing day-to-day breaches of the peace plan. I was shocked when I heard the ambassador say that the conflict has displaced 150,000 people.

The points that the ambassador made about foreign direct investment were well made. While Ireland does not have a lot of input in that area it is important that such investment happens and that good signals are sent out. The ambassador also made an interesting point about getting green energy to Europe, which is an issue that could become relevant.

I come from an area that also informed the questions asked by Senator Wilson because he said that it is important that agriculture and dairy products go to Georgia. Certainly the region where I live and where I come from have a very developed food processing sector. Has much been done to link up with the very large food processing firms in counties Cavan and Monaghan like Lakeland Dairies and Glanbia? Perhaps the ambassador might speak specifically about the issue.

I strongly support Georgia's accession to the EU because therein lies the solution to a lot of its problems. I thank the Chairman for this opportunity to raise those issues. Again, I welcome the ambassador. This is a very important dialogue.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I join with others in thanking the ambassador for an informative

and detailed briefing across a wide range of areas. Notwithstanding Georgia's fraught relationship with the Russian Federation, will the ambassador elaborate on relations with adjoining countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan?

**Chairman:** I remind members and witnesses of our time restrictions owing to the Covid regulatory framework. I will not ask the ambassador to elaborate on all of the questions from Deputies Gannon and Cowen and Senators Wilson and O'Reilly, many of which were very interesting. Rather, I ask him to briefly comment on them and, if it is not too much of a burden, to send a note to the committee over the Christmas period on the important issues raised by members, in particular Senator O'Reilly. We are not in a position to allow this discussion to continue for longer than two more minutes. My apologies to members and the ambassador but we are under some Covid-induced pressure.

I invite the ambassador to make some final comments to the generality of the questions, particularly the political overview of the neighbourhood in response to Deputy Cowen. We will accept the remaining answers in writing over the Christmas period, if that is acceptable.

**H.E. Mr. George Zurabashvili:** I extend a warm welcome to the convenor of the Irish-Georgian-Friendship Group, Senator Wilson, and I thank him for being with us. Along with occupation, the Russian Federation continues the illegal process of *de facto* annexation of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. There are many signed treaties on alliance and integration of the Russia Federation with the illegal regimes in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. A few weeks ago, another extremely dangerous step was taken with the recent programme on the creation of common, social and economic space between the Russian Federation and the occupied Abkhazia region of Georgia, which will serve as a drastic turning point in the *de facto* annexation. On the one hand we are talking about occupation and on the other annexation of those regions. This is happening gradually through different treaties, all of them illegal. At the same time, this is how Russia is acting towards the annexation of both these regions.

I will be brief regarding Georgia's relations with our neighbours. I have already spoken about Russia. We have an excellent relationship with all neighbours, including Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey. These relations are not just established they are century-old relations. We do have minorities living in Georgia. Georgia is a multiethnic country. There are Azerbaijanis and Armenians and so on living there and we have very good relations with all of them.

With regard to the EMM mission on the ground in Georgia, this is the only international mission that exists in Georgia, with the help of the European Union. We are grateful to the Irish Government for its eight observers. It is a non-military mission. Its purpose is observation but it could not fulfil its obligations because Russia has breached the agreement. On the ceasefire agreement, it is a six-point agreement. As we speak, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia is meeting his Russian counterpart in Geneva. The Geneva talks are the only format where we meet the Russian officials in the presence of the United Nations, the European Union and the OSCE and US. This is the 51st round of negotiations. In terms of success, there has been none yet but we are hopeful. We are keeping this pipeline alive because it is important to have dialogue with the Russians. It is not easy to talk with somebody who considers what is his and what is yours is his as well. It is difficult.

**Chairman:** I am reluctant to intervene but I have to bring matters to a conclusion. My apologies to members as wells. As I said, there is a strict time limit on our use of this room and some members are due to attend in the Convention Centre as well. I have asked the ambassador to address the outstanding issues from Senators Wilson and O'Reilly and Deputy Cowen

by way of note to the committee and we will come back to them at some future date, perhaps in the confines of the embassy as mentioned by Senator O'Reilly.

I thank the ambassador for his attendance. On behalf of the committee, I wish him well in his role. I thank him for engaging with us and for dealing in a comprehensive way with the questions raised. We look forward to hearing from him in writing on the questions which we did not have time to address today.

**H.E. Mr. George Zurabashvili:** I would be delighted to receive any further questions. As advised by the Chairman, I will communicate my answers to the committee in writing. I thank the committee for its time. I wish everybody a merry Christmas and safe and happy New Year.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador and his officials. If members are happy, we will move to the next engagement which I know is of interest to all of them. I remind them that we will have to bring matters to a conclusion at 1.30 p.m.. If it is acceptable to members we will hear the opening statement and then move straight to questions. Is that agreed? Agreed.

*Sitting suspended at 12.37 p.m. and resumed at 12.39 p.m.*

### **Developments in Israel: Engagement with the Ambassador of Israel**

**Chairman:** I welcome the ambassador of Israel, Mr. Ophir Kariv, to brief the committee on the current situation in Israel and the wider region. I welcome the ambassador and his official. I would remark to colleagues that the ambassador is attending with us on the important feast and holiday of Hanukkah. In that regard, we wish members of the Jewish community in Ireland a happy holiday and, indeed, Jewish people worldwide an enjoyable and peaceful Hanukkah.

The format of the meeting is that we will hear the ambassador's opening statement before proceeding to a question-and-answer session with members of the committee. In this regard, due to Covid-19 restrictions, we must bring our meeting to a conclusion by 1.30 p.m.

Witnesses should note that they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action taken based on what they say at the meeting. However, it is expected that nobody will abuse this privilege. It is my duty as Chair to ensure that the privilege is not abused. Therefore, if witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, witnesses will be directed by me to discontinue.

I remind the ambassador that we are joined on Microsoft Teams by a number of our members who will make a contribution. In respect of privilege, I remind members that the privilege only extends to the confines of Leinster House, this committee room or offices in Leinster House. It does not extend to anybody speaking from outside of the precinct, be that a constituency office or residence.

I am please to call on the ambassador, H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv, to make his opening statement.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** I thank the Chairman and committee members for inviting me here and giving me the opportunity to discuss with the committee the Israeli perspective on some of the core issues facing the Middle East today, both the threats and the opportunities. I also thank the Chairman for his warm words for Hanukkah, which connects exactly to my first point.

Before we turn to contemporary geopolitics, I would like to refer to today's date, which happens to mark the commencement of the Jewish festival of Chanukah. This evening, Jews all around the world are celebrating the lighting of the first candle, of eight, of Hanukkah. This holiday commemorates the successful rebellion of the Jews in the land of Israel against the Seleucid Empire. That Jewish struggle, from 167 B.C. to 160 B.C., resulted in the re-dedication of the Temple on Temple Mount, marking the opening of yet another chapter of Jewish sovereignty in what is now Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital.

On a personal level, as ambassador of the modern State of Israel, this holiday bears special significance as it highlights the historical continuity of the Jewish people in our land, the age-old bond with Jerusalem and, indeed, the direct line that connects today's Jewish state, which I represent, to that Jewish state of more than 2,000 years ago. This history is well documented in biblical, archeological and historical sources. Moreover, on a more personal level, my family home is in the city of Modiin, which is built near and named after ancient Modiin, the very place where that rebellion started.

Throughout history, the Middle East has witnessed the rise and fall of local powers, as well as of foreign occupiers. Jewish sovereignty flourished, and then declined. Our independence was followed by occupation, destruction and exile, foreign rule, and again, by a national revival with the rise of Zionism and the establishment of the modern state of Israel.

If we move from the wider historical perspective to the concrete issues facing us currently, in order to give a concise overview of the various subjects that are currently on the agenda of Israeli decision makers, I chose to focus today on the following: the Abraham accords, the Iranian threat, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian issue, and Covid-19, which affects us all, and its impact on Israel's international development co-operation.

The Abraham accords, which refer to the historic peace agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, represent a strategic paradigm shift in the Middle East. A growing number of Arab states recognise that Israel is not an enemy, but rather a valuable partner for prosperity and a strategic ally in dealing with common challenges. The agreements signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and, hopefully, soon with other countries, are aimed at tackling the real core issues in the Middle East; both the threats and the opportunities. The agreements consolidate the co-operation of moderate countries confronting the extremists' axis of Iran and its proxies. The alignment of goodwill, knowledge and resources in areas such as trade, food security, renewable energy, high-tech, innovation, research and development, transportation, water treatment, public health and fighting Covid-19, carry huge long-term benefits to our peoples and to the entire region. I believe one issue of tremendous importance to all states in the Middle East is climate change, which also has a direct geopolitical impact on the Middle East which is not often discussed. If we can find ways to co-operate together to combat the effects of climate change, it could mitigate some of the negative impacts on our region.

It is important to note that these agreements do not come at the expense of the Palestinian issue. Rather, they provide an opportunity for a renewal of the peace process in a more supportive environment. We call upon all countries to support those agreements and the new atmosphere they have created, and to encourage other parties, including the Palestinians, to join and take an active part in this new momentum for peace and co-operation.

The Iranian regime continues to constitute the biggest threat to the region and through its nuclear programme, combined with the ongoing development of ballistic capabilities, as well

as the arming of its terrorist proxies, also far beyond the Middle East. The Ayatollah's regime continues to pursue its goal of becoming a nuclear military power while at the same time it continues its efforts to destabilise the region, both directly and through its proxies.

Recently, the secretary general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, confirmed, once again, that Iran continues to enrich and store uranium in enrichment levels and quantities far exceeding its international obligations. The secretary general also confirmed that Iran has failed to provide reliable answers to the IAEA concerns relating to its nuclear activities. The Iranian regime continues with its policy of deceit while pushing forward its efforts to become a nuclear threat. In the past, firm sanctions proved the only efficient means to force a change in Iranian policy - including bringing it to the negotiation table. A strong sanctions regime, led by the United States, is required in order to thwart that nuclear threat.

At the same time, Iran continues its efforts to destabilise the region in order to establish its influence through a northern "Shi'ite arch", which members can see on their screens, from Iran through Iraq to Syria and to Lebanon and the eastern Mediterranean, and through a southern arm in Yemen and to the Gaza Strip.

At all times, even during its economic crisis, Iran has continued to spend huge sums of money to arm and support militias and terrorist groups in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen and elsewhere. An effective ban on selling arms to Iran should be applied to limit its destructive policy.

The Iranian regime is using Syria as another front against Israel. Israel will not accept this and will continue to do whatever is necessary to thwart this strategic threat. A total roll-back of Iranian forces and militias, including Hezbollah, from Syria is essential.

In Lebanon, the Hezbollah terror organisation, financed and backed by Iran, continues its project of upgrading its arsenal of rockets, making them much more accurate. This precision project is considered a major threat by Israel. Hezbollah continues to place its military facilities in the heart of civilian areas in Beirut and store rockets and weapons in villages and private houses in south Lebanon. Hezbollah continues to place its military facilities in the heart of civilian areas in Beirut and store rockets and weapons in villages and private houses in south Lebanon. These are lethal ticking bombs in the midst of the Lebanese civilian population, who are being cynically exploited as human shields by Hezbollah. In addition, Hezbollah attack tunnels, crossing into Israel, have been discovered by the Israeli Defence Forces in recent months. This act of aggression was initiated from within south Lebanon, sometimes close to United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, positions. Israel sees the Lebanese Government as responsible for any hostilities initiated from within its territory. Israel's position is also that UNIFIL must boost its operations to fulfil its mandate in full.

The whole of Hezbollah should be declared a terrorist organisation without erroneously differentiating a political wing from a military one. The list of countries that have declared all of Hezbollah a terrorist organisation now includes 19 countries including Israel, the US, the UK, Germany and also the Arab League.

On a more positive note, recently, Israel and Lebanon started negotiations, with American involvement, with the aim to reach an agreement on their maritime border. Such agreement will contribute to stability in the region and will support an economic recovery of Lebanon.

I will now move on to the Palestinian issue. I will start with our view of the reality, and we will discuss the current implications later. The strong Jewish connection to the land of Israel,

with Jerusalem at its heart, is deeply rooted in over 3,000 years of well documented history. Members can see images on their screens of different historical periods, archaeological findings relevant to those periods and images of the festival of Chanukah, which begins today. These 3,000 years of the history of Israel include periods of independence, occupation by foreign powers, exiles and national revivals. At all times, Jerusalem has been the national, spiritual, cultural and religious centre of the Jewish people and always served as its capital during periods of full or partial sovereignty.

This brings us to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is no denying that the Palestinians are there, and that they have their claims and their ideology. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more than 100 years old. Historically, Palestinian leaders have followed a policy of repeatedly rejecting opportunities to achieve peace, some of which are shown in the maps on the screens. These missed opportunities brought tragedy and suffering upon both the Palestinian people and others, including the Israelis. If members so wish, I will relate this point to the map that is now appearing on their screens. Israelis and Palestinians are destined to live side by side. We hope the Palestinian leadership learns from its historic mistakes first, but not only, for the sake of its own people. We call on the Palestinians to join the new positive momentum of peace and co-operation created by the Abraham accords. We call on them to come to the negotiation table and start a direct, bilateral serious negotiation without any preconditions. We call upon the friends of the Palestinians to encourage them to do so.

Like the vast majority of countries around the world, Covid-19 has posed many challenges in Israel. The very best of Israel's start-up nation has come to the forefront with medics, scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs dedicating their efforts towards developing vaccines, tests and treatments for Covid-19, as well as other measures to deal with the societal impact of the virus.

This pandemic knows no borders. It has also emphasised the importance of Israeli-Palestinian co-operation. The UN Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace, Nikolay Mladenov, has hailed this co-operation as "exemplary". Since March, Israel has done its utmost to assist the Palestinians in measures to deal with Covid-19 by facilitating the supply of thousands of donated test kits and large volumes of PPE, guiding Palestinian healthcare staff in coping with Covid-19 and facilitating other aid activities. Israel also carried out a public health campaign in Arabic to advise Palestinians in coping with the pandemic. Israeli hospitals have been and continue to be a model for coexistence as Jewish, Muslim and Christian healthcare staff work together to achieve the best outcomes for their patients.

On a broader level, MASHAV, Israel's agency for international development co-operation, has continued to share its expertise in development technologies and techniques with partners around the world, but with a specific emphasis on Covid-19. The agency was founded in 1958 when the state of Israel had just marked its tenth anniversary of independence. It was one of the first government aid agencies in the world. Since the beginning, its focus has been on the sharing of expertise, which has helped Israel to develop rapidly since 1948. This is achieved through training people from the developing world in areas such as agriculture, healthcare, food security and women's empowerment. This training is done in person in Israel and abroad, and MASHAV also works on international partnerships and consultancies. In recent years, MASHAV has flown approximately 2,500 trainees from developing countries to Israel for training on an annual basis, as well as conducting some 300 short-term consultancies and on-the-spot courses in developing host countries each year.

Since the onset of the pandemic, MASHAV has adapted its activities to providing training

for thousands of participants from developing countries through webinars. Among other activities, MASHAV hosted an online conference for women leaders, in which Amina Mohamed, the Deputy Secretary General of the UN, participated, alongside senior participants from the WHO and Israel. Practical on-the-ground humanitarian assistance has been provided in more than 120 cases, mainly in the least developed countries as well as in low-middle and upper-middle income countries. Israel has been assisting with public health, supplying PPE, providing computers for the elderly and young people to access remote learning and assisting microenterprises, as well as providing assistance through food programmes. MASHAV is evidence of one of the founding principles of the Israeli state, which is our duty to empower individuals and communities in need by sharing our knowledge and expertise.

The Middle East is a complex region, as is each and every issue I have given an overview of in this presentation. In order to understand it, and certainly in order to have a constructive contribution, one must be aware of the complexities, the challenges and the opportunities that our changing reality holds. Israel sees peace with its neighbours, including the Palestinians, as a vital interest. We hope the new momentum for peace will soon include the Palestinians as well as the rest of the moderate Arab world.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador for his opening statement.

**Deputy John Brady:** I welcome the ambassador to the committee. It is the first time I have met him and have had the opportunity to put important questions to him. The issue in Palestine and the conflict with Israel is one of ongoing concern for everyone. Most people would like to see a peaceful outcome to the conflict based on a two-state solution. As I see it, one of the biggest impediments to that is the ongoing expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank. We know that over the summer, in the run-up to the Israeli elections, plans to further annex the West Bank by another 30% were announced. While all that is happening, it makes a peaceful outcome very difficult to achieve. I have some questions on that.

Some of the facts are interesting, and these are from the director of the Map Association and Jewish Settlement Specialist, which was closed down by Israel. There are 252 Jewish settlements in the West Bank and ten Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem. There are 640,000 Jewish settlers in the region and 220,000 of them are in East Jerusalem. In 1988, when Palestine's independence document was proclaimed, the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank was 66,500. There was then a major ramping up of illegal settlers in the West Bank. In 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed, there were 116,000 settlers. When the Camp David summit took place in the US in 2000, the number of illegal settlers had increased to 184,000. By 2014, when talks were held to resolve the conflict, the number of West Bank settlers had surged to 371,000. As I said, there are now over 640,000 illegal settlers in the West Bank.

My first question relates to the recognised borders set by the UN in 1967. What is the position of Israel on those borders? It is a massive reduction of the traditional land of the Palestinians at only 22% of what was their traditional land. I seek the ambassador's perspective on that. Since 1947, there was a cleansing of Palestinian land with over 700,000 native Palestinian people forced from their land and into exile in refugee camps across the region. The Nakba, as it is called, and the right to return for those Palestinians is another issue of contention. First, it is an issue of contention as to whether the Nakba happened at all. Some Israelis refuse even to use the word. What is the position regarding the right to return for those who were forced from their lands?

I also have a question about the ongoing land, sea and air blockade of Gaza and what is seen

as the collective punishment of the people of Gaza, which is illegal under international law. I wish to get the ambassador's perspective. Does he consider it just to collectively punish the people of Gaza? Does he think, like the international community, of the human impact it is having on the people in Gaza in trying to survive? Does he see it as illegal, like the vast majority of the international community?

I will turn to the section about the Iranian regime and the paragraph in which the ambassador stated that "Recently, the secretary general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, confirmed, once again, that Iran continues to enrich and store uranium ....". He went on to say that the secretary general also confirmed that Iran has failed to provide reliable answers to the IAEA concerns relating to its nuclear activities. I note that, but there is a great deal of ambiguity about Israel's nuclear activities.

**Chairman:** I am reluctant to intervene but I must ask the Deputy to pose questions.

**Deputy John Brady:** I am going to ask questions.

**Chairman:** We are running out of time and every member wants to contribute.

**Deputy John Brady:** It is widely reported that Israel is the only country in the Middle East to have nuclear warheads, estimated at between 80 and 100. I ask the ambassador to comment on that. Will Israel put its nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards and join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons?

My final point relates to the human rights abuses of minors or children in Palestine. Last week, a 13-year-old named Ali Abu Alia was shot and killed in the West Bank. In the previous two weeks, four other Palestinian children were shot and severely injured. They were aged between 15 and 16 years and were shot in the chest, eye and head. They are undergoing treatment. Unfortunately, such incidents are not isolated. I am not trying to create a hierarchy of victims or victimhood in all this, but I wish to ask specifically about the abuses of children. Children enjoy special protection under international law, but consider the number of Palestinian minors in detention in Israel using the Israeli military detention system. In any year there are 500 to 700 children who are arrested and go through the military detention system. Since 2000, over 10,000 Palestinians have gone through that system and were incarcerated. There is much international criticism, and rightly so. What is the thinking there and can the ambassador justify the abuse of minors in this situation?

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I welcome the ambassador and thank him for his comprehensive presentation. He stated that the Middle East is an extremely complex area. I sometimes wonder, and I am not sure the ambassador will respond to this, if it would be a better and more peaceful world if the powerful countries in the west took their noses out of the Middle East and allowed the Middle East to find its own equilibrium.

The ambassador rightly pointed out that Covid-19 respects no borders. Will he outline how Israel proposes to support the Palestinian people as we go through a vaccination programme? Will it take a proactive role in that and in providing the vaccines and the facilities? We know that very specialised facilities are required for the vaccine.

I welcome the recent accord with Bahrain. It is the beginning of the peace we would all like to see in the Middle East.

I note the ambassador's comments on Iran. I am concerned that the involvement of the

United States in the Middle East serves to aggravate the Iranian people. My view of people, whether they are in Israel or Iran-----

**Chairman:** The Senator should ask a question rather than offering his view.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I will come to the question. I believe that people just want to live. The ambassador referred to the terrorists operating in the region. Last week, we heard from the Palestinians about people being afraid to go to bed at night. I wonder about rockets being fired into Israel. We have not heard that story and I would be interested to hear something about that.

On the issue of terrorists and their political wing, if we have learned nothing else in Ireland, we have learned that at some stage one has to speak to the political wing of terrorist groups in order to find peace. I am also interested in hearing how Israel is managing climate and how it would contribute to that on a global basis.

I have a final question. This country has some people who are very skilled in the development of peace. What role might Ireland play and, in particular, people, although I do not like to name individuals, such as Mr. Bertie Ahern? He is recognised as a man who played an extremely active role in bringing peace to this island. Would his expertise and the expertise of others like him be welcome in the Middle East and, in particular, in Israel?

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I join in the welcome to the ambassador. I thank him for facilitating a meeting with me recently in which we had a very genuine and straight discussion. I found the meeting very worthwhile and I will raise some of the issues I raised then again today. By way of very quick background, we in this country are acutely aware of the sufferings of the Jewish people historically, and we are also completely in favour of a two-state peace solution. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Chairman, who is a distinguished former Minister for Foreign Affairs, have both sought a two-state solution in the region. That is what we want.

I welcome the recent curbs. I also welcome the postponement of the annexation. However, I must ask about plans in October for 5,000 new settlement homes on the West Bank. Does Israel propose to go ahead with those? If so, does the ambassador not agree with the contention that those homes would be in areas that would go to Palestine in the event of a two-state solution and that that presents a threat to the peace process?

I also wish to ask about the 1,257 housing units in the east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Givat Hamatos, and the proposed construction of the houses on 15 November and tenders being sought for them. The same question arises in regard to them. Does that present the threat of closure of access to Jerusalem from Bethlehem? The ambassador will appreciate that our culture is among the reasons we have always had a great interest in Israel. I welcome our trading balances. In this country we are concerned about the religious sites in the context of those settlements. I also wish to ask about the demolitions and confiscations in those regions and about the situation in Gaza.

We ask these questions as friends. There is no point in having an inane, silly discussion here where we welcome the ambassador and make facile comments. As a friendly nation we need to put these points to the ambassador and to ask him again for a further commitment to the peace process and how he sees it evolving. Does he accept the contention that the continuation of the settlements ultimately threatens the peace process? I see this as an exercise in goodwill. I welcome the talks between Israel and Lebanon and the efforts to reach agreement. Any attempt

to achieve peace and any incremental peace is welcome. We just want peace in the Middle East. We are friends of Israel but we also want to know that we will get two states and that we do not discriminate or dehumanise anyone in the process.

**Chairman:** I thank Senator O'Reilly. I will invite the ambassador to respond to the questions asked by Deputy Brady and Senators Craughwell and O'Reilly and then we will resume with Deputy Gannon and Senator Wilson.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** I thank all the members for their comments. I have an important point as far as the timeframe is concerned. I have almost 20 points to reply to.

**Chairman:** We have to conclude by 1.30 p.m., which gives us about 16 minutes. I am very keen to give the ambassador time for a closing comment, but I do want to bring in both Deputy Gannon and Senator Wilson, and they could well be joined by way of questions from our colleagues who are joining us remotely. I ask the ambassador to deal with the questions, in particular Deputy Brady's questions, as succinctly as he possibly can to allow for a further round. I apologise, Deputy Clarke is next on my list.

**H.E. Ophir Kariv:** I will try to do that. I apologise in advance if I skip anything. Members should please feel free to bring that to my attention. I have a question first for Deputy Brady. His opening words were that this is the first time we are meeting. I have been here for more than two years.

**Deputy John Brady:** I did not mean-----

**H.E. Ophir Kariv:** Deputy Brady also said that is true of his party. During the two years I would have loved to have meetings with his party and I asked to have them. I will invite the Deputy again. I am addressing Deputy Brady and Sinn Féin here again today, and I ask him to try to talk also to us and not only about us. It is regrettable that this is our first interaction after my being here for more than two years. I thank him for his comments. I will make some general statements that I hope will begin to answer the questions about Jerusalem, the status of the 1967 lines and the issue of settlements. I will touch upon it on the basis of the main ideas.

As members saw in my presentation, the connection of the Jewish people is to the whole of what we call Israel today. This is where the Jewish people were born, thrived and have their historical, cultural and religious roots. This part of the land members can see on the 1949 to 1967 map, which we now call the West Bank, was formed as a consequence of the war of extermination that was forced on us by the Arab world and the Palestinians, a war that was waged against UN General Assembly Resolution 181 on the partition, the borders, which can be seen on the second map on the left. The Arab world and the Palestinians went to war to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state at the time because it also involved the creation of the Jewish state. That was one of the most important historical sins of Palestinian leadership. It was one of the major ones. The lines delineating the West Bank were forged in the Armistice Agreements between Israel and Jordan in 1949. I will read from the agreement how they were drawn and the logic behind them.

No provision of this Agreement shall in any way prejudice the rights, claims and positions of either Party hereto in the ultimate peaceful settlement of the Palestine question, the provisions of this Agreement being dictated exclusively by military considerations.

and

The Armistice Demarcation Lines defined in articles V and VI of this Agreement are agreed upon by the Parties without prejudice to future territorial settlements or boundary lines or to claims of either Party relating thereto.

This is the agreement that drew what we call today the 1967 lines. This is the agreement that defines, for the first time in history, this piece of land that is now called the West Bank. It was never a border. It was an armistice line and I just outlined the logic behind it and its aim. The United Nations called for the partition of the land between Israelis and Palestinians. There is no question but the Israelis and Palestinians have to find a way to live side by side, be it this way or another. Nobody is going anywhere. Final borders were never drawn in history. This is in contrast to borders in other cultures that are recognised as international borders. The green line between the West Bank and Israel was never meant to be a border.

In this light, one can also see the settlements of Jews going back and continuing with renewed efforts what we started in the 19th century of Jews re-establishing themselves in their historical land. This is not to exclude them again. Some political compromise will have to be found between Israelis and Palestinians. There is, however, no historic division of the land. There never was and was never meant to be in the lines of 1949. That applies even more to Jerusalem.

As I mentioned in my opening words, we are celebrating Hanukkah today. Hanukkah celebrates the dedication of the Jewish temple on Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem more than 2,000 years ago. Nobody is in a position to tell Jews this is not their place, with all due respect. Again, this does not exclude or prevent Palestinians to put forward their claims when they come to the negotiating table. It does not prevent them from doing so. This is not a precondition to anything. We call on Palestinians to come to the table without any preconditions. We have strong positions, some of which I just mentioned. They have equally strong positions on their side. I showed the committee where our positions are coming from. The only way to go forward with that is to sit together at the table and try to find a solution to one of the most complicated conflicts in the world today. It is one with historical, religious, national and deep layers.

**Chairman:** I will intervene here. Notwithstanding the fact many of the specific questions were not addressed, I want to give Deputies Clarke and Gannon and Senator Wilson an opportunity to speak. Perhaps then the ambassador can resume. Of course, any issues that have not been addressed, and I am thinking, in particular, of Senators Craughwell and O'Reilly-----

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** Could I say one word about refugees?

**Chairman:** The ambassador will have an opportunity to address these issues and I invite him to do so in writing over the holiday period. I really want to give to Deputies Clarke and Gannon an opportunity to speak.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I am sorry to interrupt. It would be great if we could get the written responses.

**Deputy John Brady:** Some important questions might be lost in translation by way of written correspondence. Many Deputies and Senators here rightfully want to put questions to the ambassador. I know we are constrained due to Covid-19 restrictions. It would, however, be a useful engagement if the ambassador was open to coming in a second time and giving more time to this issue of huge concern. I put forward many questions that will be brushed over and lost so it would be a useful engagement.

**Chairman:** I am sure we can arrange this for the spring, subject to our work schedule. I want to bring in Deputy Clarke.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank the ambassador for his time this afternoon. As a newly elected Sinn Féin Deputy in the last election, I have had no correspondence from the Israeli Embassy. Perhaps, if the ambassador is open to it, I will give him my email address at the end of this session. I will certainly take him up on an invitation to meet outside of this setting.

It will probably come as no surprise to the ambassador that before any ambassador comes in, the members of the committee are provided with a comprehensive country note. This is simply because ambassadors are not afforded the time to speak about every aspect of what goes on in the country they are here to represent.

I want to raise with the ambassador one issue, specifically, that caught my eye. The note says that Israel is a highly developed and technologically advanced economy in terms of software, medical technologies and pharmaceuticals. The next point, however, goes on to say that wages are low. The next goes on to say that the education system has not been well invested in over the past number of years. Is this accurate? If so, why is that the case? I have no issue with providing the ambassador with this but it states major investment and policy changes will be needed to even maintain current levels of achievement with regard to the education sector in Israel. I find that perplexing, to be honest. I would not have presumed this was an issue for the country the ambassador represents.

Finally, as others have referred to, while here previously, the Palestinian ambassador made a statement about Israel using occupied lands in a method to bypass its environmental laws, causing untold hardship for farmers due to the diversion of water. Is this statement also something the ambassador would agree with? If this is happening and Palestinians are buying back water at a premium, I believe we will all agree that access to water is a fundamental human right.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Clarke for being so succinct.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I wish the ambassador and the Jewish community in Ireland and throughout the world a happy Hanukkah. The date of 10 December also coincides with international Human Rights Day. I am sure we will all join people throughout the world in advancing more access to greater human rights.

I want to take up the point raised previously by my colleague. One fundamental human right is the access to water. Throughout the Middle East and, particularly, in Palestine at the minute, there is a water crisis and water shortages. I note that Palestinians get less than 15% of the total yield of aquifers, leaving 85% of water controlled by Israel.

Does the ambassador believe Israel has more of a responsibility to help develop water access and more water equality in the Middle East, particularly as it pertains to the Palestinian community? Some 60% of Palestinians are insecure in their water availability. That has the potential for and will lead to further conflict in the future. Will the ambassador speak to that?

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** I welcome the ambassador and, of course, the deputy ambassador from the Israeli Embassy here today. I am delighted that we have the ambassador with us. I have met him on many occasions and I am also a member of the friendship group, which currently has more than 20 Members from the Oireachtas.

I have a number of questions but I want to ask the ambassador about one thing, in particular.

We have noticed the growth of anti-Semitism throughout the world and, specifically, in Europe in recent years. Regarding some of the comments that are made about Israeli policy, either implicitly or explicitly, does the ambassador regard criticism of Israel's policies as anti-Semitic or otherwise?

**Deputy John Brady:** In fairness, that is an unbelievable question, Chairman. Any criticism of Israel now is anti-Semitic. Is that what the Senator is suggesting?

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** Thankfully, we live in a democracy. I have asked a question.

**Deputy John Brady:** That is an unbelievable question

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** I have asked a question of the ambassador. I would be grateful for an answer.

**Deputy John Brady:** If that is what the Senator is suggesting then that is a shocking question.

**Chairman:** I am keen to keep order. Members have the opportunity to ask and pose their questions to the ambassador. We are grateful for his attendance at our committee. Indeed, I will speak on behalf of the members and say that we will have a further opportunity next year to engage with the ambassador on the basis of his assertion that while the peace process is currently stalled, there is a keenness on everyone's part to find resolutions to difficult and complex issues. I will ask the ambassador to come back and address the issues raised by Deputy Clarke and referenced by Deputy Gannon and Senator Wilson. Deputy Stanton is waiting patiently. I am not sure if he has a brief question but we are challenged by time.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I will be brief. I welcome the ambassador. I did not have an opportunity to meet with him yet. I am curious about the current relationship with Russia. I know Russia has a huge influence in the region and note some recent comments by the Russian ambassador, which caused some concern. What is the current situation there?

**Chairman:** Some of the questions that have been posed by members, not only now, but during our earlier session, might warrant a written note over the holiday period. I invite the ambassador to come back to us on that. I now ask him to address the second round of questions and, perhaps, leave us with some concluding remarks.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** With the Chairman's permission, I will make one remark about refugees.

Deputy Brady mentioned the Palestinian refugees of 1947. I remind all members here and those watching that while around 700,000 Palestinians lost their homes in the war the Palestinians initiated in 1948, 850,000 Jews became refugees. These were not Jews from Europe but Jews who were deported and forced to leave their homes in the Arab world in the months leading up to the establishment of the state of Israel and its aftermath. There were 850,000 Jewish refugees from Arab states. Nobody speaks about them. Most of them found their home in Israel. They were not confined to refugee camps because we do not see our brothers as refugees. Unfortunately, on the Palestinian side, Palestinians who moved to other parts near Palestinian population centres were put in refugee camps by their own brothers and with assistance from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA.

**Deputy John Brady:** His Excellency has not answered the question as to whether they

have a right to return to their homes.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** This is a different story. Maybe-----

**Deputy John Brady:** He should answer the question. Do they have a right to return to their homes in Palestine?

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** The final agreement between Israel and Palestinians involves many complicated issues, including the Palestinians stance on refugees and the meaning of 5 million refugees. That is another Palestinian or UNRWA invention, namely, 700,000 refugees becoming 5 million today. Those 5 million people going to the state of Israel, although this is the end of the state of Israel, is not on the table. I am sorry.

**Deputy John Brady:** It would make the illegal settlers on the West Bank unviable.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** They are not illegal settlers. Everything on the table will be discussed.

**Chairman:** His Excellency should continue uninterrupted.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** Deputy Clarke referred to the Israeli education system. I must admit I was more prepared for foreign affairs issues and not domestic Israeli issues, which I did not know were on the agenda of this committee.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** That is why I am asking that a briefing be provided to members of the committee. Ambassadors do not have enough time to touch on every single aspect of things. It is something that stuck out to me as not being very reflective of Israel as a whole. It is not something we would hear spoken about very often.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** Israeli students have just been ranked in ninth place in mathematics. That information was published only a few days ago. This is really a domestic issue. Like many other countries, we deal with many dilemmas domestically in how to disburse and how manage the budget. I do not think this is-----

**Chairman:** If his Excellency could just give us a note on education investment and the education system-----

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** Yes, we will provide a note.

**Chairman:** -----that would be of benefit to our members.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** As far as water is concerned, Israel and the Palestinian Authority co-operate very closely. I heard it said that a huge number of Palestinians do not have water. That is just not true. Some 97% of the Palestinian population, at least in the West Bank, have daily and regular running water supplies.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** According to the WHO, Palestinians only have access to 55% of the water they should have.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** That is also not true. The WHO marks a line of 100 l per day as the amount of water that is needed. Today, Palestinians enjoy something like 133 l and that will grow in the future because there is an infrastructure master plan for supplying water in Palestinian areas. We have to differentiate between the West Bank and Gaza because their situations are different and their infrastructure is different. The master plan Israel prepared and showed the

Palestinians would provide almost 50% more water to the Palestinians daily than the Palestinians are planning for themselves.

There is something important that we have to understand here. Israel has enough water. Most of the water Israelis drink today is desalinated. We invested a lot in that. There is enough water and what we are going to do with the water we can put aside is help our neighbours. I mentioned global warming and the environmental effects. One of the major threats to our region is drought and the lack of water. This is a major cause of instability and destabilisation. We are aware of that and we know about it because it is our interest and we do not think people have to lack water. The Israeli policy and main view is to use our resources and the technology we developed and invested in to desalinate water in order to provide water to our neighbours who need it. That includes the Palestinians and Jordanians. These are the immediate ones so that-----

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** When does Israel intend for that to happen?

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** Water has already been transferred to Jordan and is being transferred to the Palestinians.

**Deputy John Brady:** Will Israel end the blockade of Gaza and allow the people of Gaza some water as well?

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** Of course we will supply water once the main problem in Gaza is resolved. We already supply more water to Gaza today but the problem is with the Gaza infrastructure.

**Deputy John Brady:** Because Israel bombed it.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** This is one of the areas where we invite the international community to help and restore it because it is vital. We are doing the work on our side and preparing and it is now ready, with-----

**Deputy John Brady:** The infrastructure Israel destroyed.

**H.E. Mr. Ophir Kariv:** -----infrastructure on the Israeli side of the border with Gaza to be able to start transferring water into Gaza. This is mainly an issue of the Gaza infrastructure and I believe the international community, or those who want to help, also has a role to play here.

**Chairman:** I very much regret that I need to bring matters to a conclusion because we have been in this room for more than two hours. I ask His Excellency to drop the committee a note on the educational system in Israel, on the matter of the environment and water and on the current very sensitive political situation, dealing with the issues raised by Senator Craughwell. As His Excellency and members will be aware, this issue is of great importance to our committee as regards the middle east peace process and we are very keen to help and assist. I suggest that we resume this discussion in the spring and have a further engagement that will not be constrained by Covid. I thank His Excellency for the published note on what Israel is doing in respect of Covid, technology, vaccination and its leadership in the region. That feeds into Senator Craughwell's question as well. Hopefully on the next occasion we meet, the Covid issue will have been satisfactorily resolved, though I dare say the complexities and sensitivities of the wider political issues in the region will not be. I look forward to further engagement with His Excellency and I thank him for coming in.

10 DECEMBER 2020

The joint committee adjourned at 1.39 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 17 December 2020.