

Response from Mayor Marvin Rees on the Councillor Petition on the Israel – Gaza Conflict

Since 7 October's attacks on Israel by the terrorist organisation Hamas, we have continued to work closely with community leaders from across our city, of all faiths and none. In that spirit, I welcomed a joint inter-faith statement from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders in Bristol. We continue to work with representatives from all communities to promote community cohesion and togetherness in our city, and lit up City Hall with the words 'salam' (and the Arabic script), 'shalom' (and the Hebrew script), and 'peace'. Bristol must continue to stand together against the rising antisemitism, Islamophobia, and hate that we have seen in response to events in the Middle East.

We all want a complete and permanent end to violence and the threat of violence in Palestine and Israel, through a sustainable ceasefire built on the safety and security of both Israelis and Palestinians. All civilians must be protected. Innocent people are being killed and injured. This must stop and, while, like any country, Israel has the right to defend itself, international law must be upheld.

The wider debate about one of the world's most complex geopolitical situations, which is changing rapidly, perhaps, including between me writing this response and you reading it, has become increasingly binary. Former President Obama has rightly observed that a number of things are all true at the same time: that what Hamas did on 7 October was horrific, and that there's no justification for it; that the situation facing Palestinians is unbearable; that there is a long history of antisemitism, not least the unique horrors of the Holocaust, which is too readily dismissed or forgotten; and that thousands of Palestinians who have nothing to do with the actions of Hamas are being killed and injured in Gaza.

International efforts for humanitarian pauses bore fruit in November. There was welcome progress, first in the form of local pauses in northern Gaza in exchange for the release of some of the hostages kidnapped from southern Israel. A breakthrough in negotiations then saw a more sustained pause to enable the release of additional hostages and enable a greater flow of much-needed humanitarian aid into Gaza. But the following weeks have seen more innocent people killed and injured. While it is welcome that another crossing into Gaza, at Kerem Shalom, has reopened, more progress and more aid is needed, and all hostages must be released.

To achieve a sustainable ceasefire, there remain significant, continuing challenges in the short term that will need to be overcome. Those involved in these matters, including officials from the United States, have been warning of several such risks at this time, including Israel winning tactical military victories at the expense of strategic defeats. Hamas makes it difficult to distinguish between military targets and civilians, but the lack of discrimination between the two is unacceptable.

There is no pathway to Israeli safety and security that does not ensure the safety and security of Palestinians. Likewise, there is no pathway to Palestinian safety and security that does not ensure the safety and security of Israelis. In the longer term, there will need to be a political process for a just and lasting peace, so it remains essential that the international community supports a path, however complex and challenging, to a two-state solution with a free and secure Palestine and a free and secure Israel.