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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Middle East: Conflict

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Albanese, Anthony, MP

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Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (4.39 pm)—On Sunday, 1 October a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Mohammed Al-Durrah, wanted to accompany his father to a used car auction in Gaza city. He never made it home to his family. To get from their home in the Bourij refugee camp to Gaza city, Mohammed and his father had to pass through Netzarim junction. The junction is home to an Israeli army post put there to defend the Jewish settlement of Netzarim—a contentious settlement, home to some 60 Jewish families. There is no way for Palestinians who live in the Bourij refugee camp to reach Gaza city other than via this junction. It was there that Mohammed and his father became trapped in fighting between Palestinian youths and the Israeli defence force. The world has graphically witnessed what happened next. His father and young Mohammed attempted to hide behind a concrete water butt about 15 metres east of the Palestinian post. His father shouted to the Israelis to alert them 'the child, the child'. They were no threat to anyone. They were unarmed. They were defenceless. They were terrified. They were shot at. Fifteen bullets hit the wall around them. The cameraman who filmed the horrific incident told the *Guardian*, 'They were aiming at the boy and that is what surprised me, yes, because they were shooting at him, not only one time but many times.' The evidence of where the bullets hit authenticate this chilling eyewitness account. The *Guardian* reported:

Aside from the circle of bullet holes—most of them below waist level—the expanse of wall is largely unscarred. This appeared to suggest that the Israeli fire was targeted at the father and son.

The young boy was hit and died in his father's arms. After this, the shooting continued. The father was shot and is in hospital. The shooting still continued. The ambulance driver was also shot dead trying to reach them. Bassam Al-Bilbays, who was riding with the ambulance, described, 'There was some breath left in him when we reached the ambulance, but when we opened the doors they started shooting again.' This is the human dimension of the Middle East conflict. There can be no defence for the killing of unarmed civilians and children.

Mohammad Al-Durrah's death is not isolated. More than 80 are dead, the youngest being just two years of age. This tragedy has followed the provocative action of the leader of the Israeli opposition, Mr Ariel Sharon, in visiting Al Haram Al Sharaf accompanied by a massive military contingent. Al Haram Al Sharaf contains Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, which are holy places of worship for Moslems. Such a provocative visit is consistent with Mr Sharon's views as an opponent of peace. He is the man who led the invasion of Lebanon. He stood by while Israel's right-wing allies committed massacres of thousands of women and children in Sabra and Chatilla. After an inquiry, this resulted in his resignation as defence minister. He has continued to support an expansion of settlements in the occupied territories. Fortunately, at present, he is not part of the government. Indeed, Prime Minister Ehud Barak deserves commendation for implementing UN resolution 425 and withdrawing from southern Lebanon. However, recent events have sparked a change in Israeli foreign policy. The world has watched in horror as the violence has escalated, with both sides taking increasingly hardline negotiating positions, seriously threatening the ability for the Middle East peace talks to continue.

Wars are most often started and prolonged by extremists such as Mr Sharon, by those who cannot see the world for what it is—a place where every issue is not black and white, where land is a scarce commodity and where many versions of history dictate many differing claims of ownership. Disputes over land ownership and the wars that ensue are an awful part of human history. Yet, in the 21st century, it cannot be idealistic to assume that such conflicts can now be worked out through peaceful means—via negotiation, through the moderation of both sides' claims and through an understanding of the complexities and varying versions of human history.

What is most terrifying to me about what is happening in the Middle East at the moment is that the situation is fast escalating out of rational control. In a fight for political survival in a climate ruled by fanaticism, leaders who previously spoke the language of peace find themselves in a bidding war with other influential politicians, trying to prove to extremists that they are tougher, that they are more warlike. I read with great concern reports that Mr Barak has raised the option of a national unity government similar to that which was formed during the 1967 conflict. This government could well be formed once Barak's 48-hour deadline for the release of three Israeli soldiers captured by the Hezbollah—and the Palestinians' authority to control their people—runs out. At

that point, according to the internal security and acting foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yassar Arafat will no longer be considered a peace partner by Israel.

Any national unity government would spell the end for the peace process in the Middle East. It would include the leader of the Likud, Ariel Sharon. It would be very unlikely that Sharon and the Likud would agree to be a part of any national unity government that did not scrap all concessions made by the Israelis during the most recent round of peace talks at Camp David. That would spell the end for the peace process and would be a tragedy. What makes current events all the more tragic is that much progress had been made towards peace during the Camp David discussions convened by President Clinton.

It is understandable that Israelis desire security; the question is how this security can be achieved. Given the geography of the Middle East it is absurd to believe that security can be imposed upon the region—it can only be agreed. The provocation and excessive use of force by the Israelis has been condemned by the United Nations by a vote of the Security Council of 14 to zero with one abstention, that being the United States. Palestinian teenagers should not be throwing rocks, but the fact that they are does not justify an army shooting at unarmed civilians, using snipers, bazookas, grenades, tanks and attack helicopters. Dialogue must replace provocation and response. The Palestinians must be given their homeland. The occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem by the Israelis has created generations of oppressed people.

The Palestinians' acceptance of the 4 June 1967 borders, which constitute only 22 per cent of that which existed prior to 1948, is an extraordinary compromise in the name of peace. I have visited the beach camp in Gaza and was distressed at the conditions in which families were living. These conditions have led many young Palestinians to believe that they have nothing to lose. Today's *Sydney Morning Herald* quotes a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Muhammad Rayyan:

"I wait for God to choose me," said the boy, who has been nicknamed the Lion because of his fearlessness. When I see another fall, I am jealous. I long to be like him. This is my only goal in life."

The ultimatum made by Prime Minister Barak, giving the Palestinians 48 hours to discipline their civilians or face war, is undermined by the failure to acknowledge the excessive force used by Israel. A helicopter gun ship is not more moral than a boy with a stone. The above quote shows that it is impossible to threaten those who believe they have nothing to lose. Peace can only occur if there is respect for human life and human rights—by all sides. I watched the *Sunday* program yesterday, in which Ariel Sharon defended his visit to Al Haram Al Sharaf by saying:

It's a free country, with free access.

Anyone who has been to the region would be horrified by the inequity in that statement. This is a noble principle, but it is one which certainly does not apply to Palestine. Palestinians live with restrictions every day. Gaza and the West Bank are regularly closed, preventing Palestinians from going to work, and creating a subsequent resentment. Roadblocks occur at regular intervals. The hotel in Ramallah—the City Inn where I stayed with Peter Nugent, who is presently here in the House, and also Joe Hockey, Peter McGauran and Leo McLeay—has been occupied by the Israeli defence force and used by snipers on the West Bank. Palestinians do not have equal rights in the Middle East.

On Wednesday of last week the Australian Parliamentary Friends of Palestine, of which I am secretary, held an urgent meeting to consider our response to the conflict. The Parliamentary Friends of Palestine group comprises 27 federal members of parliament, from all political parties. It is chaired by the member for Parramatta, Mr Ross Cameron, with the member for Watson, Leo McLeay, as deputy. A statement was endorsed unanimously by those at the meeting condemning the killing of unarmed civilians and children and calling for a just settlement which satisfied the legitimate aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis to live in peace. The alternative is a disaster for all in the Middle East.