

## **PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

### **Palestinian-Israeli Conflict**

**Mr ROBERT** (Fadden) (7.21 p.m.)—I rise to address the motion and I seek to present the case for, and indeed a defence of, Israel. Although it is important to try to solve the issue in its own right, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not actually at the heart of every conflict in the Middle East—the concept of linkage is often overstated. Conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, Hezbollah's miniwar against the government of Lebanon and even the internecine fighting between Palestinian groups have roots that go much deeper than and are often highly unrelated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and will not go away even after a two-state solution is realised.

With respect to the motion and the Saudi-Arab League peace plan, there is no question that the plan is a good start, but that is what it must be—a start. Israel has said numerous times that it would be happy to sit down with the Arab League states and use their plan as the starting point for negotiations. The Arab League, however, has presented the plan as a 'take it or leave it' proposition and refuses to negotiate any of its points. This is unrealistic, since the peace plan contains several positions that Israel cannot accept without negotiation. It uses language which suggests—and which the Arab world understands to mean—that the so-called right of return of all Palestinian refugees to Israel would negate Israel's existence as a Jewish state. It does not deviate at all from the 4 June 1967 borders, meaning Israel cannot absorb some of its bigger settlements in exchange for swaps of other land to make up the difference. It is generally accepted that such a land swap would be part of any peace settlement.

The plan has been presented as a prerequisite for Israel's negotiations—that is, Israel has been told that, once it carries out all of the Arab League demands, then and only then will the Arab League negotiate the terms of peace. By that stage, of course, Israel would have no more leverage. There is no guarantee that all of the Arab League states would feel themselves bound by a final settlement reached under the plan and thus bound to make peace. Each of the states has reserved for itself the right to determine whether Israel has complied with the requirements of the plan. It would be very easy for a country such as Syria to find a pretext for claiming noncompliance and maintaining its state of war.

With respect to the right of return, it may be true to say that that is a final status issue that needs to be resolved, but it must be resolved by the Palestinians accepting that the exercise of this right is incompatible with any two-state solution and therefore incompatible with peace. Whether a so-called right of return exists under international law is debatable, and I am sure the issue will continue to be contested. Importantly, though, it is not claimed by, or for, any other refugee population in the world. It is also notable that, for every other refugee population in the world, only those people who actually left their homes are regarded as refugees.

For the Palestinians, however, all descendants of the original refugees are regarded as refugees. So an original exodus of 600,000 to 800,000 people, of which an estimated 200,000 are still alive, may balloon into a population of more than four million. By referring to a right of return for Palestinian refugees, the motion could be said to prejudice an issue that must be negotiated, thereby undermining the core premise of the rest of the motion. It would be preferable, I believe, to refer to this issue as being about the status of the Palestinian refugees and their descendants. The issue should be resolved by a full right for all the refugees and their descendants to return to a new Palestinian state and some kind of compensation package for actual refugees, with international money to assist in the resettlement. The issue is complex. It is steeped and

rooted in history, and only with continued dialogue and good faith on both sides can a suitable settlement and answer come forward.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)**—Order! The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.