

Three Strikes for Starmer

September 5, 2024

When Sir Keir Starmer ascended to the leadership of the UK Labour Party in 2020, he promised a decisive break from Jeremy Corbyn. Hamas and Hezbollah would no longer be considered ‘friends’, anti-Semitism would no longer be tolerated, and Israel would no longer be demonized.

Over the last four years, Starmer made significant progress on these fronts. He purged Corbyn from the Labor Party, adopted the recommendations of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s investigation into anti-Semitism,¹ and affirmed Israel’s right to self-defence.

The Anglo-Jewish community responded constructively to these changes. Where British Jews voted for the Conservatives over Corbyn by a six-to-one margin in 2017, Starmer attracted support from a plurality of Anglo-Jewish voters.² This reflected voting patterns across the British electorate, enabling Labour to return to power after 14 years in opposition.

Since Labour assumed power in July, however, the Party has taken three troubling decisions on Israel. In isolation, any one of these decisions could be dismissed as a blip on the radar. In their totality, they suggest a failure to root out the ideological undercurrents of Corbynism.

¹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/investigation-into-antisemitism-in-the-labour-party.pdf>

² <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/more-british-jews-voting-labour-rather-than-tory-at-general-election-survey-2-shows/>

UNRWA

The first warning sign appeared on July 19, when Foreign Secretary Danny Lammy agreed to restore £21 million in funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). In announcing this decision, Lammy parroted UNRWA's assertion that they 'meet the highest standards of neutrality.'³

Such a claim is not credible. Israel has produced substantive evidence showing that UNRWA facilities have been systematically used as command centres and storage facilities for Hamas.⁴ It has identified 42 employees of UNRWA who assisted Hamas on October 7, and it has alleged that over 10% of their workers are affiliated with terrorist groups.⁵ Last month, UNRWA fired nine of its employees for their involvement in the October 7 massacre.

Lammy sidestepped this evidence by focusing on the UN-commissioned Colonna report from April 2024. But this report did not support the Foreign Secretary's claim of neutrality. Instead, it found that alleged breaches of neutrality by UNRWA 'escalated significantly' after October 7. Referring to anti-Semitic educational content as a 'grave violation of neutrality', it noted that 3.85% of textbook *pages* in Palestinian schools contain concerning material.⁶

ICC

On July 26, the Labour Government made its second move against Israel. It dropped a pre-trial submission challenging the International Criminal Court's (ICC) jurisdiction over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjm9r0w71g8o>

⁴ <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/the-unrwa-hamas-connection/>
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-reveals-12-unrwa-staffers-it-says-took-part-in-oct-7-says-30-more-5-assisted/>

⁶ https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf

In June, the Sunak Government had responded to ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan's application for arrest warrants against Israel's leaders by requesting permission to comment on 'outstanding jurisdictional issues.' The Government wanted the Court to address the implications of the Oslo Accords, which deny criminal jurisdiction to the Palestinian Authority over Israeli nationals.⁷ The Court agreed to accept submissions from the UK and other interested parties until August 6.

By dropping the UK's request for comment, the Starmer Government weakens pressure on the Court to address an important pre-trial question. It advances Prosecutor Khan's unprecedented attempt to target the elected leaders of a democratic state, and it signals moral cowardice in the face of the ICC's efforts to equate Hamas terrorists with leaders bound by the rule of law.

Export Licenses

On September 2, Labour completed its trifecta of measures against Israel. Secretary Lammy announced that the UK would suspend 30 of its 350 arms export licenses to Israel.⁸ Coming on the same day as the funerals for six murdered hostages, the announcement provoked opposition in Israel and America.

Though the Foreign Secretary emphasized that 'this is not an arms embargo', his decision to block export licenses represents a clear departure from his predecessor. In December 2023, then Foreign Secretary Lord David Cameron concluded that Israel is 'committed to comply

⁷ <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RelatedRecords/0902ebd180892e1f.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd05pk95j2xo>

with International Humanitarian Law.’ Following five legal assessments, Cameron reiterated his stance in April 2024, rejecting calls to suspend export licenses.⁹

Though Britain does not account for a large share of Israel’s arms imports, these restrictions will affect the supply of drones, jets, and other aircraft. Coming just weeks after the UK dropped its challenge to the ICC, the decision reflects a troubling pattern of one-sided measures against Israel’s legitimate right to self-defence.

Conclusion

Starmer deserves credit for confronting rampant anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. He has repudiated the sordid legacy of Corbyn and worked to regain the trust of British Jews.

It seems, however, that his foreign policy has privileged the concerns of a loud left flank over the defence of a democratic ally. In just two months, Labour has departed from the Conservatives on three issues. Each of these actions has hurt Israel’s security while exacerbating the divide between British and American policy. To maintain good will at home and abroad, Starmer is due for a course correction.

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⁹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9964/CBP-9964.pdf>