



Broken barriers
How Israel's war in Gaza divides British
domestic politics

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Introduction

The politics and developments in the Middle East rarely leave other countries unaffected. The unfolding situation in Gaza, however, seems to be in a class of its own. Domestic political divisions have spread across Europe and the world. Countries such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom have large both Jewish and Palestinian diasporas,¹ and tensions are running high. Even where these specific diaspora groups are not particularly large, the Middle Eastern conflict has been used as a bat to score political points domestically, not least in relation to migration and freedom of expression. This brief focuses on how the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 and Israel's ensuing war in Gaza have affected British domestic politics. In addition to substantial Jewish and Muslim diaspora groups, the UK is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The UK is also particularly interesting as a general election called for 4 July 2024 is likely to lead to a change in government.²

The Labour Party, which is the most popular party among Muslims in the UK, has struggled to navigate the war in Gaza. Labour's response has been strongly influenced by an attempt to rebrand the party following accusations of antisemitism under its former leader, Jeremy Corbyn.³ This is not the first time a Middle Eastern conflict has unsettled British domestic politics, and the Labour Party in particular. The Labour

governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown decided to join the US as it invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003. This fateful decision has left a black mark on their legacy.⁴ Unlike the case of Iraq, however, the Israel-Palestine conflict does not directly connect with UK foreign policy. It has become increasingly clear that many constituents and political representatives view Gaza – and Palestine as a whole – as an important, even essential, political issue without necessarily having any personal connection to it. The issue is in fact seen as so important that constituents are prepared to change their voting allegiances and politicians are prepared to resign their positions. This in spite of the fact that there is little or no chance that such political positioning will affect the situation on the ground for the people in Gaza. It transcends the barriers of ordinary politics – it's a matter of principle.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a protracted conflict with a history of occupation, illegal settlement and recurring cycles of violence that spans more than 75 years. The timeline in focus for this brief, however, covers the two months immediately following the Hamas attacks on the 7th of October 2023. The brief examines how politicians and political parties positioned themselves against the unfolding situation in Gaza. This is done through a study of parliamentary debates in the British lower chamber, the House of Commons, statements by

¹ For Jewish diaspora see DellaPergola – Staetsky (2020), 20; for Palestinian diaspora see Courbage – Naufal (2020), 195-240

² UK Parliament (N.D.), *General elections*; Statista (2023), *Voting intentions in a general*

election in the United Kingdom from July 2017 to December 2023

³ BBC (2020), *A guide to Labour Party anti-Semitism claims*; EHRC (2020), *Investigation into antisemitism in the Labour Party*

⁴ Heffernan (2011), 168-171; Morris, YouGov (2023)



politicians and news articles from some of the largest British media platforms.

Background

Recent developments in the Israel-Palestine conflict

On the 7th of October 2023, Hamas launched an attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel is vastly militarily superior, has an advanced defence force and military intelligence, and is a nuclear weapon state. Nonetheless, Hamas managed to cross the border and carry out an attack in which approximately 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 200 taken hostage. Israel responded with an intense and extensive bombing of the Gaza Strip, which claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians. While still ongoing at the time of writing, around 11,000 deaths were reported in just the first month, around 4,500 of whom were children. Although there was a week-long humanitarian pause at the end of November, in the second month the casualties were estimated at well over 17,000.⁵ As this brief goes to print the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports 37 000 dead in Gaza.⁶

Israel has asserted its right to self-defence, a claim that has been accepted and repeated

by many states in the international community, especially in the European Union and the United States. As the death toll of Palestinian civilians continued to rise, however, Israel received increasingly sharp criticism for its response. Accusations range from disproportionate violence to breaching international law, ethnic cleansing and genocide.⁷ This is only the latest conflagration in a very long conflict, with a history of occupation, illegal settlement and recurring cycles of violence that spans more than 75 years.⁸ Several attempts have been made to mediate and resolve the conflict, most prominently through the Oslo Accords in 1993.⁹ The solution that has been most widely acknowledged and invested in is the so-called *two-state solution*, which suggests splitting the land into an Israeli and a Palestinian state.¹⁰

The British current political landscape and divisions

The Conservative party – also known as the Tories – has suffered a major loss of support since the 2019 election, when it achieved a substantial majority of seats with 43.6 percent of the vote under Boris Johnson.¹¹ Johnson was replaced as party leader and prime minister in 2022 and succeeded by Liz Truss. Her time in office was widely

⁵ UI (2023), *Konflikten Israel–Palestina – fördjupning*; UN News (2023), ‘*This must stop, UN chief says as deaths, displacement ripple across Gaza*’; for second months casualties see Sawafta – Fick, Reuters (2023)

⁶ OCHA:s continuously updated statistics can be found here <https://www.ochaopt.org>

⁷ OHCHR (2023), *UN expert warns of new instance of mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, calls for immediate ceasefire*; OHCHR (2023), *Gaza: UN experts call on international*

community to prevent genocide against the Palestinian people; UI (2023), *Konflikten Israel–Palestina – fördjupning*

⁸ Gordon (2008); Waxman (2019); Khalidi (2020); Pratiwi et al. (2022)

⁹ Roy (2002); Bauck – Omer (2016)

¹⁰ Hilal (2007); Shemer-Kunz (2023); Strömbom – Persson (2023)

¹¹ UK Parliament (2020), *General Election 2019: full results and analysis*



considered a disaster and lasted only a few weeks. She was then succeeded by the current prime minister and Conservative Party leader, Rishi Sunak. When measuring voting intentions in a UK general election, recent polls show a significant gap in party support. While support for the Labour Party since October 2022 has fluctuated between 42 and 52 percent, support for the Conservative party has peaked at 27 percent.¹²

The Labour Party has also had a change of leadership since the 2019 election. In contrast to most previous Labour leaders, Jeremy Corbyn had campaigned for Palestinian statehood and a tougher stance against Israel for many decades. An investigation into antisemitism in the Labour Party by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was published in 2020. Corbyn was suspended from the party over his response to the allegations, which he was accused of not taking sufficiently seriously. He was replaced as Labour leader with current party leader, Keir Starmer, who made tackling antisemitism within the party a top priority. The EHRC has stated that improvements have been made under Starmer's leadership and has confirmed that it is "content with the actions taken and has concluded its work with the Party".¹³

British Jews have long had a tendency to lean more to the conservative side politically. In the 2019 election, 63 percent expressed support for the Conservative Party and 26 percent for Labour. These estimates are said to be similar to those in the general elections of 2005–2015.¹⁴ Labour, however, has two clearly distinguishable and sizable groups on whose support they can almost always rely: young people (aged 18–29) and Muslims. In the 2017 general election, 85 percent of Muslims expressed support for Labour and 11 percent for the Tories. According to the Muslim Council of Britain, Muslim voters could have a decisive influence in around 30 marginal constituencies.¹⁵ Additionally, the voting group of British Muslims is substantially larger than that of British Jews. In 2021, almost 4 million, or 6.5 percent of the population of England and Wales were Muslim compared to approximately 270 000 British Jews, just 0.5 percent of the population.¹⁶

Supporting Palestine: To call, or not to call, for a ceasefire?

In the initial two-month period, the main political division in relation to Israel's war in Gaza was whether to support calls for a ceasefire. This division had the strongest effect on the Labour Party. The position not to support a call for a ceasefire was held both by the Conservative Party and the Labour

¹² Statista (2023), *Voting intentions in a general election in the United Kingdom from July 2017 to December 2023*

¹³ BBC (2020), *A guide to Labour Party anti-Semitism claims*; EHRC (2020), *Investigation into antisemitism in the Labour Party*; EHRC (2023), *Equality watchdog concludes monitoring of Labour Party action plan*

¹⁴ RMC (2019), *How faith communities vote in UK elections*; for an overview of political

conservatism among British Jews since 1945 see Alderman (1996)

¹⁵ For voter demographic by age see Curtis – McDonnell, YouGov (2019); for religion see MCB (2019), *MCB finds Muslim voters could swing 31 marginal seats*; and RMC (2019), *How faith communities vote in UK elections*

¹⁶ ONS (2023), *Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021*; UI (2023), *Storbritannien – Religion*



leadership. They instead supported what they referred to as humanitarian pauses, i.e. not a cessation of the war, but shorter pauses of a few days to allow in humanitarian aid. The counter position to this, to support and call for an immediate ceasefire became the position of an increasing number of Labour representatives and the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP).

Labour shares government line on Israel-Palestine

The first statement in the House of Commons on the Israel-Palestine conflict was made by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on 16 October. The statement made it clear that the UK stood with Israel. He stated that the UK must support Israel's right to defend itself, but that this must be done in line with international humanitarian law. He urged Israel to take every precaution to spare civilian life, while also recognizing that Israel "faces a vicious enemy who embed themselves behind civilians". Sunak also addressed the impact on the security situation in British communities, citing a rise in antisemitism, and said that British Jews must be supported. He added that this also applied to British Muslim communities, which were "appalled" by Hamas' actions and fearful of the response. Before finishing his statement by vocalising support for a two-state solution, Sunak stated that "we believe that Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people".¹⁷

This was followed by a statement by Starmer that chimed well with that of the prime minister. He was united with the prime

minister on Israel's right to defend itself, proclaiming that "Labour stands with Israel". He too voiced support for a two-state solution. An overwhelming majority of the subsequent questions critical of Israel's response, particularly with regard to issues of international law, came from Labour Party and SNP MPs. Several MPs raised the issue of "collective punishment" of Palestinians, but this was rejected by the Sunak who repeated his statement that "we should support absolutely Israel's right to defend itself and to go after Hamas", and that "of course, Israel will act within international humanitarian law". One Labour MP referred to Gaza as an "open-air prison" and asked what was to be done about the inhuman treatment of Palestinians. In response, Sunak claimed that "Hamas are the entity responsible for the suffering we are seeing, and Hamas alone". Conservative MPs to a greater extent focused their questions on concerns over domestic antisemitism and regional escalation.¹⁸

Growing concerns over the soaring number of civilian casualties

Four days after the Hamas attack, Keir Starmer was interviewed by the British radio station LBC in relation to the annual Labour Party Conference. The Labour leader was asked for his opinion on what he considered to be a proportionate response by Israel. When asked whether he thought a siege and the cutting off of power and water were an appropriate response, Starmer stated that: "I think that Israel does have that right. It is an ongoing situation. Obviously, everything should be done within international law".¹⁹

¹⁷ HC Deb, 16 October (2023)

¹⁸ HC Deb, 16 October (2023)

¹⁹ For full interview see LBC (2023)



The comment led to widespread criticism and outrage within the Labour Party and several Labour councillors resigned in protest. Many mentioned the Labour leadership's refusal to condemn collective punishment of Palestinians in their resignation letters.²⁰ One of the councillors who resigned, Amna Abdullatif, said that Starmer had made "horrifying comments about Israel having the right to withhold fuel, water, food and electricity from the 2.2 million Palestinians trapped in Gaza, effectively endorsing a war crime".²¹ Another statement signed by several councillors said that Starmer and the shadow foreign secretary "endorsed collective punishment, blockade, siege and mass civilian casualties", arguing that this constituted complicity in war crimes. The collective statement ended: "In a choice between serving our parties or justice, we have chosen justice".²² These resignations had consequences for the Labour Party, which lost its majority on Oxford City Council when a ninth councillor quit the party. The councillors now sit as Independents.²³

Resigning Labour councillor Shaista Aziz wrote an opinion piece for *The Guardian* explaining why she could no longer continue to represent the Labour Party, saying it had betrayed British Muslims over Gaza. She also referred to the comments made by Starmer on LBC radio, calling his response "disturbing because Israel's actions are a form of collective punishment, which is illegal under

international law. Starmer is a former human rights barrister and must have known this". Aziz continued that while the Israel-Palestine conflict is not "fundamentally a Muslim or Jewish issue", but a human rights issue, it has disproportionately affected Muslims and Jews both internationally and within the UK. She also discussed how the situation in Gaza, and in Palestine in general, constitutes a unifying issue for Muslims across different national backgrounds, making the party's stance on the issue of great importance. Aziz ended her article: "while it remains to be seen if the much discussed 'Muslim vote' holds for Labour, what is very clear from the events of the past two weeks is that we are seen as politically disposable".²⁴ This letter pinpoints the key arguments against the Labour leadership's position and the dissatisfaction felt by many both within the party and among voters. Critiques of the Labour Party line have for example been accompanied by an open letter signed by thousands of British Muslim councillors, doctors and imams, which expressed how members of the Muslim community felt unheard and unrepresented.²⁵

Ceasefire Now: Labour MPs rebel in vote

By the end of October, over 250 Labour Party councillors and approximately a quarter of its MPs had explicitly backed calls for a ceasefire, in spite of clear instructions not to do so from the party leadership.²⁶ In mid-November, another debate was held on the

²⁰ Badshah, *The Guardian* (2023); for examples of resignation letters see Abdullatif, X (2023); Aziz, X (2023); Thomas, X (2023)

²¹ Abdullatif, X (2023)

²² Thomas, X (2023)

²³ Lancaster, BBC (2023); Henley et al., *The Guardian* (2023)

²⁴ Aziz (2023)

²⁵ Badshah, *The Guardian* (2023)

²⁶ Henley et al., *The Guardian* (2023); Whannel, BBC (2023)



situation in Gaza. Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell, faced the task of answering the questions, several of which related to a ceasefire. Labour MP Tahir Ali referenced an opinion poll by YouGov which measured the British public's support for a ceasefire, asking whether the minister would finally "stand with 76% of the British public and call for an immediate ceasefire". Mitchell declined a change in position and maintained the government's commitment to humanitarian pauses. He also highlighted that this position was shared by the opposition front bench.²⁷

Six weeks into the escalating situation in Gaza, an SNP amendment to the King's Speech, calling for an immediate ceasefire, was expected to come to a vote in the House of Commons. Starmer maintained that while he understood the calls for a ceasefire, he did not believe it to be the right position at that time. He argued it would only serve to "embolden" Hamas. Starmer signalled that MPs with shadow ministerial positions would be sacked for backing the SNP ceasefire motion. MPs were put on a "three-line whip", which is a strict instruction to attend and vote according to the party's position. Shadow frontbenchers – the Official Opposition's ministers and other spokespersons – would be able to stay in their positions if they abstained in the vote. Pressure from constituents was in many cases extremely strong and this was

described as putting MPs between "a rock and a hard place". Intense lobbying from civil society organisations such as Amnesty International also urged MPs to back the SNP's motion.²⁸

Despite the pressure from the party leadership, 56 of the 198 Labour MPs abandoned the party line and voted in favour of a ceasefire. Ten of them were frontbenchers who either resigned or were fired following the vote. Eight of these had served as shadow ministers. The vote was defeated by 125 votes to 294, with 222 abstentions. The 294 comprised 288 Conservative, four Democratic Unionist Party and two "Independent" MPs.²⁹ The failure to back a ceasefire sparked protest around several local Labour offices across the UK, among them in Starmer's own constituency. The Palestine Solidarity Campaign said MPs who failed to support a ceasefire should expect to be held accountable when it concerns matters that are of such obvious deep concern to their constituents.³⁰ Although the ceasefire rebellion went beyond the party's left wing, the Labour leadership did not believe the scale of disunity to be representative of the party and expressed confidence it would not affect other policy areas. The passions of both constituents and MPs, inflamed by the situation in Gaza was believed to be unique and to have resulted in an unusual divide.³¹

²⁷ HC Deb, 14 November (2023); for poll referenced in debate see YouGov (2023-10-19)

²⁸ Amnesty International UK (2023), *Ceasefire vote in Commons is 'vital moment' to protect civilians in Gaza and Israel*; BBC (2023), *Keir Starmer set for showdown with Labour MPs over Gaza stance*; Paton, *The Times* (2023); Scott, *The Times* (2023); Seddon, *BBC* (2023); Whannel, *BBC* (2023)

²⁹ UK Parliament (2023), *King's Speech Motion for an Address: Amendment (h)*; Seddon, *BBC* (2023)

³⁰ *BBC* (2023), *Israel-Gaza: Hundreds protest outside Labour leader's office*; Cummins – Olah, *BBC*(2023); Gecsoyler, *The Guardian* (2023); Quinn, *The Guardian* (2023)

³¹ Scott, *The Times* (2023); Seddon, *BBC* (2023)



However, regardless of whether the divide was only applicable to the specific situation in Gaza, voters and representatives might abandon the party at the next election, in which case a Labour government would not get the chance to show how well it agrees on other issues.

Calls for a ceasefire did not end with the vote on 15 November. In the following week, the Scottish Parliament held a vote calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, which was passed by 90 votes to 28. The motion gained the support of Members of the Scottish Parliament of all parties except the Conservative Party.³² Scottish Labour formally backed a call for a ceasefire, widening the division even further.

On Monday 4 December, the humanitarian situation in Gaza was again the subject for debate. Many of the questions focused on the prospects of supporting a ceasefire. Then Parliamentary Under-Secretary Leo Docherty answered all such queries with the same government line. He also repeatedly stated that a ceasefire was not possible because Hamas did not want a ceasefire and has expressed its determination to “wipe Israel off the map”.³³

Supporting Israel: At what cost to British freedom of expression?

The second significant political division relates to the lengths the UK should go to ensure support for Israel – and by extension to stifle pro-Palestinian support. This division seems to be strongest in the Conservative

Party. Some Conservatives – including the prime minister and his government – held the position that British support for Israel should be ensured through legislation. The counter position, held by many others in the Conservative Party, is that such legislation would infringe on free speech and constitute a threat to freedom of expression in the UK.

Anti-BDS bill

In June 2023, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill was introduced to the House of Commons. The bill, put forward by the then Conservative MP Michael Gove, was intended to ban British public bodies from boycotting Israel. More commonly known as the anti-BDS bill, it aimed to specifically limit the reach of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.³⁴ The BDS movement, which calls for any and all kinds of boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel, has broad support from Palestinians and anti-occupation groups in the UK. Two Labour-led councils have been among those enacting such a local-level boycott of Israel.³⁵ The bill and the position it constitutes vis-à-vis the broader Israel-Palestine conflict are not uncontroversial. Several MPs point to problems with specifically naming Israel in the bill. Some argue that the bill violates freedom of expression. Conservative MP Kit Malthouse has highlighted and criticised a section of the bill that would forbid public authorities from expressing their support for a boycott. He argued that “not even to be able to express opposition to the law while still complying with it seems very un-British,

³² Scottish Parliament (2023), *S6M-11342*

³³ HC Deb, 4 December (2023)

³⁴ UK Parliament (2023), *Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill 2022-23*

³⁵ BDS Movement (N.D.), *What is BDS?*; Stacey, The Guardian (2023)



extremely illiberal and unnecessarily draconian”.³⁶

A second reading of the bill was to be held in the House of Commons on 25 October 2023, something which was criticised by several MPs, including Tories, with regard to the timing. The bill was thought to exacerbate existing tensions within the British community. Then Conservative MP Crispin Blunt argued: “This bill, as an example of exceptionalism for the state of Israel, is hard to beat. [...] It is all too obvious. The effect of this bill on community relations will in reality be utterly toxic. It is completely irrational to continue with this bill now”.³⁷ Another Tory MP reportedly went so far as to call the decision to proceed with the bill “fucking madness”.³⁸ Dame Margaret Hodge, a senior Jewish Labour MP, highlighted the risk of the bill further strengthening polarisation: “To bring this wrong-headed, poorly drafted and politically motivated Bill back to the House in the midst of these horrors [...] is an act of complete irresponsibility and unbelievable foolishness”. A second reading in the House of Commons allows MPs to amend the bill before the government tries to push it through the upper house. In spite of strong criticism and lengthy debate all the proposed amendments were defeated.³⁹

Armistice Day and controversy around pro-Palestinian protests

Since Israel’s bombing of Gaza began, there have been weekly protests against the war all

over the UK. Criticism of these marches came immediately. Several Conservative Party MPs raised the issue in the debates on 16 October and 23 October, claiming that the protests were making Jews feel unsafe. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak answered these claims with comments that hateful extremism were not allowed and that the police could be trusted to deal with the matter.⁴⁰ However on Saturday 11 November protests coincided with Armistice Day. This struck a nerve for many across the UK. Sunak claimed that planning and holding protests on Armistice Day would be “provocative and disrespectful”. He also appealed to Home Secretary Suella Braverman to support the police in “doing everything necessary to protect the sanctity of Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday”.⁴¹ Braverman took a strong stance, publishing an opinion piece in *The Times* calling protesters “hate marchers”. She also accused the police of bias, naivety and double standards for not banning the protests. She claimed “these events have been problematic, not just because of violence around the fringes but because of the highly offensive content of chants, posters and stickers”.⁴²

The organisers of the protest said that they were aware of the importance of the date but that their previous demonstrations had been both peaceful and orderly. The director of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign said that the protests would take place nowhere near remembrance activities, either

³⁶ Quote from HC Deb, 25 October (2023); other critique also mentioned by Stacey, *The Guardian* (2023)

³⁷ Stacey, *The Guardian* (2023)

³⁸ BBC (2023), *Conservative MPs express concern over Israel boycott bill*

³⁹ HC Deb, 25 October (2023)

⁴⁰ HC Deb, 16 October (2023); HC Deb, 23 October (2023)

⁴¹ Sunak, X (2023)

⁴² Braverman (2023)



geographically or in terms of time of day. Save for a few arrests, the protests had been overwhelmingly peaceful. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Mark Rowley, said there was nothing to indicate that there would be serious public disorder during the protest that would merit a ban of the march.⁴³

At present, the police can only impose conditions on the route and timing of a march, or if there is a risk of serious disorder or violence, and standstill protests are unregulated. The Conservative government, however, had recently put plans in motion to amend the legislation. One suggestion was that extremism should be defined as a new standalone offence. Another suggestion was for specific slogans to be prohibited and, if chanted at a march, for this to form the basis for a ban on similar marches in the future. Such legislation has been stalled in the Home Office over concerns about freedom of expression and free speech. The independent reviewer of terrorism legislation has argued that glorification of terrorism is already a criminal offence and that a broadening of the legislation would entail both difficulties and risks. His recommendation was that there was “no need” for further legislation and “good reason for caution”.⁴⁴

Tory disputes and sacking of government positions

Divisions within the Conservative party became particularly clear following

Braverman’s article in *The Times*. It emerged that Downing Street had not signed off on the contents of the article, and had in fact requested several specific changes and that the article be toned down more generally, all of which was ignored. Braverman was blamed for inciting violence through the article. Some Tory MPs went so far as to call for Braverman’s removal from office. Starmer also joined the criticism, accusing Braverman of undermining the police before directing his critique towards the prime minister, claiming he was “too weak to do anything about it”.⁴⁵ Braverman was sacked as Home Secretary immediately following the Remembrance weekend.⁴⁶ While not the first controversy surrounding Braverman, this seemed to be the last straw. The day after her removal from office, Braverman published a letter to the prime minister that addressed her previous article, doubling down on her stance: “I have become hoarse urging you to consider legislation to ban the hate marches and help stem the rising tide of racism, intimidation and terrorist glorification threatening community cohesion”. Braverman also mounted several attacks on the prime minister’s leadership, arguing that his “response has been uncertain, weak and lacking in the qualities of leadership that this country needs” and claiming he had failed both the Conservative Party and the British public.⁴⁷

Although for very different reasons, Braverman was not the first in the Conservative government to be sacked over

⁴³ Easton – Seddon, BBC (2023); Elgueta – Slow, BBC (2023); Mason, BBC (2023)

⁴⁴ Quotes from Hall KC (2023); also discussed by Smyth – Hamilton, *The Times* (2023)

⁴⁵ Quote from Nevett – Francis, BBC (2023); also mentioned by Smyth – Hamilton, *The Times* (2023)

⁴⁶ Francis, BBC (2023)

⁴⁷ Braverman, X (2023)



a stance related to Israel's war in Gaza. While a large number of MPs from the opposition have publicly backed a ceasefire, very few Conservative MPs have. One who did was Paul Bristow, who called for a permanent ceasefire in a letter to the prime minister at the end of October. He stated that "It is difficult to understand how this makes Israel more secure or indeed makes anything better" and that ordinary Palestinians "should not suffer collective punishment for the crimes of Hamas".⁴⁸ Downing Street claimed Bristow's comments were not consistent with the principles of collective responsibility – the convention that all members of the government must publicly support government policy, even if they personally disagree with it. He therefore had to leave his position. The Conservative Party has also suspended councillors for attending pro-Palestinian marches.⁴⁹

A shift of focus: What can the UK do?

In addition to continuing discussions around the issues discussed above, by the end of the examined period the general focus had shifted to more concrete issues in connection with the broader Israel-Palestine conflict. Two issues receiving significant attention were whether the UK should export weapons to Israel and recognize Palestine as a state.

The argument that British weapon exports to Israel constitute enabling and complicity in

war crimes was put forward by several MPs. On 14 November, Mitchell was asked whether weapon exports should continue. His response was met with upset exclamations when he claimed that "the President of Israel, President Herzog, has made it clear that his country will abide by international humanitarian law". He then stated that the UK already had the "toughest arms regulations anywhere in the world".⁵⁰ This came amid increasing protests and civilian blockades targeting British companies with connections to arms sales to Israel.⁵¹

The issue of a two-state solution, which is the official UK line, has also come into increasing focus, mainly in relation to the possible recognition of an independent Palestinian state. At the end of November, Scotland's then first minister, Humza Yousaf, wrote to both the prime minister and the Labour Party leader to call for the recognition of Palestine within its 1967 borders.⁵² These arguments have also come from Tory MPs such as Peter Bottomley, who in a debate on 4 December implored Israel to withdraw back into its own internationally recognised boundaries, and to cease settler activities in the West Bank.⁵³

Conclusions

It is clear that the 2023 conflict escalation and Israel's war in Gaza constitute a monumental collapse of the line between what is considered international and national

⁴⁸ Bristow (2023)

⁴⁹ Morton, BBC (2023); Fitzpatrick, BBC (2023)

⁵⁰ Quote from HC Deb, 14 November (2023); for video see ParliamentaryTV (2023), 13:30; also discussed HC Deb, 20 November (2023)

⁵¹ BBC (2023), *Gaza protesters blockade aerospace firm in Dorset*; Cox, BBC (2023); Mureddu-Reid, BBC (2023)

⁵² Scottish Government (2023), *First Minister calls for recognition of state of Palestine*

⁵³ HC Deb, 4 December (2023)



– or foreign and domestic – politics. Mass protests and extraordinary amounts of constituency pressure on politicians have shown this to be an issue that matters to voters. Politicians have been forced to navigate a domestic political landscape where their political position on support for a ceasefire – or unequivocal support for Israel – has become an electoral issue. Three main themes can be distinguished: 1) an erosion of political trust as a result of the various parties’ political positioning; 2) the exposure of internal cracks and dynamics within the political parties; and 3) the effect on the electorate and repercussions in the future with connections to the Middle East.

The show of support for and solidarity with Gaza has become a matter of principle for many British voters. To reinforce this effect, the stark contrast between leading politicians’ responses to this conflict and to Russia’s recent and ongoing invasion of Ukraine, particularly in connection with regard to international law, has exposed political double standards. This erodes trust in and support for the political parties, as well as the political establishment more generally. While the two cases are far from identical, people have no difficulty distinguishing the similarities and the vast differences in how the various political parties position themselves in relation to the parties of the two conflicts. Both the Conservative and the Labour Party have reacted to the Middle Eastern conflict in a way that has exposed a lack of universality and varying degrees of cognitive dissonance. In addition to taking sides in the conflict itself, the situation in Gaza has turned up the heat on other domestic political issues, primarily the issues of freedom of expression and political

protest. Already sensitive topics, not least in relation to the right wing populist upsurge in several European countries and the balance between freedom of expression and hate crimes, the war in Gaza has brought the discussion to a head. Politicians have been forced to take positions on whether to support political protest – both the extent to which they should be allowed (when, how and by whom) and to what extent controversial matters should be discussed domestically in general (when, how and by whom). This has not only exposed duplicity among those who previously advocated freedom of speech at all costs, but also set new legislation in motion that directly affected the domestic political climate and could have had real and lasting domestic consequences.

Israel’s war in Gaza exposes internal fissures in both the Labour and the Conservative parties. For the Labour Party, however, the political positioning has higher stakes. Starmer has spent massive amounts of time and effort attempting to leave behind claims of antisemitism within Labour under the Corbyn leadership. He would not want to throw away all that hard work by taking a stance that could be interpreted as anti-Israel. At the same time, there is significant anger – both from constituents and within the party – at the Labour leadership not only for its failure to call for a ceasefire, but also for its refusal to strongly condemn and criticise many of Israel’s actions in its war in Gaza. For many voters, as well as representatives, this seems to take the form of an identity crisis as Labour is a party founded on the basis of general support for human rights and justice.



In addition to having the most Muslim voters, the Labour Party also generally has the youngest voters – a group that has turned out to be among the most strongly pro-Palestinian.⁵⁴ The possible loss of votes is not just theoretical. It could easily have real consequences, given how these two groups constitute such a large proportion of Labour’s voters in key constituencies. This becomes especially apparent given their, and their elected representatives’, seeming willingness to abandon the party. While it is extremely unlikely that these voters would change their vote to the main opponent, the Conservative Party, there is a very real possibility that they will choose to support smaller parties or simply not vote at all. While unlikely at this stage, it is not impossible and should not be too easily discounted, that this could result in another election loss for the Labour Party – and therefore have long-lasting effects on British domestic politics.

The situation in both the UK and in Gaza has of course continued to develop and change since the end of the two-month period examined in this brief. For example, in the period since 8 December 2023, the Labour Party withdrew support for its own candidate, Azhar Ali, on the eve of a by-election in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, for comments he made in relation to Israel’s war in Gaza. The by-election then resulted in a landslide victory for the longstanding critic of Israel, George Galloway.⁵⁵

Additionally, a February 2024 opposition debate on a ceasefire derailed into “chaos”

after House of Commons Speaker Lindsay Hoyle broke with parliamentary protocol. Hoyle faced sharp criticism and over 50 signatures to a motion of no-confidence for allowing a vote on a Labour Party amendment, effectively overriding the vote on the original SNP motion calling for an immediate ceasefire.⁵⁶ Finally, it is also important to note that Israel’s war in Gaza is still ongoing, and further developments and changes should be expected throughout its duration, and likely for a considerable period after it ends.

⁵⁴ YouGov (2023-10-16); YouGov (2023-10-24); YouGov (2023), *Sky Survey Results*

⁵⁵ McKiernan, BBC (2024); Adu et al., *The Guardian* (2024)

⁵⁶ Quinn, *The Guardian* (2024)



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