

Suspension of Jeremy Corbyn Will Define UK Labour Leader Keith Starmer as Iraq Defined Tony Blair

Keir Starmer's silence on Palestine and his treatment of his predecessor have set the Labour leader on a collision course with many within his own party

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One of the lesser known aspects of Keir Starmer's assault on the left of his party since becoming Labour leader is his growing silence on Palestine.

Silencing the Palestinian lobby in Britain has always been a goal of Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs, which has gone to some lengths to condition debate inside the Labour Party on Israel.

In 2017, an Al Jazeera documentary exposed the efforts of the ministry's man in London, Shai Masot, to start a youth wing in the Labour Party. Masot was also filmed by an undercover reporter saying he wanted to ["take down"](#) government ministers and MPs considered to be causing "problems" for Israel.

When Masot was rumbled and expelled, a continuous feed of Jeremy Corbyn's meetings as a backbench MP with Palestinians, dating back in some cases over a decade, was created to stoke the furore over the then-Labour leader.

This feed was doctored.

When Corbyn met three Hamas politicians whose Jerusalem IDs had been revoked and had staged a sit-in a tent in the grounds of the Red Cross (this was a cause celebre at the time and many Israelis went to show solidarity with the case), the presence of a second Labour MP, Andy Slaughter, who is not a Corbyn ally but is pro-Palestinian, was excised from British reports.

However, a picture of Slaughter appeared in Israeli news channel [i24's exclusive](#) of "Corbyn's secret visit" in its report in 2018, which was eight years after the MPs' visit took place in November 2010.

Role of Shin Bet

The precise details of Corbyn's visit to Israel in 2010, including who was on it, who arranged it and who they met, were monitored and logged by Israel's domestic security service, Shin Bet.

When these visits were over, Shin Bet invited Corbyn's local fixer in for what turned out to be five hours of questioning in a police station in Haifa.

Shin Bet told her they were relaxed about her charity work for the Palestinian cause, but would not tolerate her campaigning inside the Houses of Parliament in the UK.

If she did not heed the warning, she would spend the rest of her days in prison as an enemy of the state. Her lawyer told her that such a charge could indeed be fabricated against her and that an Israeli court would send her to prison if this happened. She is an Israeli citizen.

At the very least, the warnings given to Corbyn's fixer confirm that Israel's security services had set their sights on the MP at least five years before he became Labour leader and long before antisemitism in Labour became a newsworthy issue.

Nobody in the Labour Party was bothered with Corbyn's travels, which certainly were not secret. He was a backbencher on the fringes of the party. Only Shin Bet took note.

The smear campaign has been wonderfully effective. Of course, many groups joined in for different reasons, including people indifferent to the conflict in Palestine who had shown no past interest in it.

The compromising material of Corbyn's past contacts would have had no purchase had there not been a determination within the Parliamentary Labour Party and at Labour headquarters to stop Corbyn at all costs. But taken together, it worked.

A poll conducted by Survation last year asked member of the British public who were aware of antisemitism in Labour what percentage of party members had complaints against them.

Their mean average reply was [34 percent](#). The real figure is a fraction of one percent. The perception of antisemitism was over 300 times the reality in Corbyn's party.

Palestine lost

Since becoming leader, Keir Starmer has avoided contact with Palestinian leaders, either in Israel or in Britain.

Starmer has had two opportunities to engage.

On 26 June this year, 15 members of the Knesset who comprise the Joint List wrote to all party leaders in Britain to urge them to "actively oppose" attempts by Israel to annex territory unilaterally.

The Joint List, the main coalition representing Palestinian citizens of Israel, is the third largest group of MKs in the parliament. The letter was sent by Yousef Jabareen, the head of the Joint List's international committee.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson instructed one of his ministers, James Cleverly, minister of state for the Middle East and North Africa, to reply.

"We continue to urge Israel not to take these steps. The prime minister has conveyed the UK's opposition to unilateral annexation to Prime Minister Netanyahu on multiple occasions," Cleverly wrote.

Starmer did not reply, and still has not replied. Jabareen received an automated reply from

Starmer's office, telling him that he receives hundreds of emails each day.

On 16 September, a group of leading British Palestinians, many of whom were members of Labour, but some not, wrote an [open letter](#) to the Labour Party insisting on "the right of Palestinians to accurately describe our experiences of dispossession and oppression" and rejecting Labour's attempts to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism.

The letter was accompanied by emails to Starmer to set up a meeting. They were told that Starmer was too busy to meet them. They were referred to Lisa Nandy, the shadow foreign secretary, who also declined to meet them.

A 'dressing down'

However when Stephen Kinnock, who comes from the right wing of the party and is a bitter critic of Corbyn, called in a parliamentary debate for the UK to "ban all products that originate from Israeli settlements in the occupied territories", Nandy found the time to intervene.

Nandy told the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council - according to a source quoted by [MailOnline](#) - that Kinnock, a consistent and long-standing critic of Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, had been given a "dressing down" for his remarks made during the Commons debate.

"Lisa made no secret of the fact she and the leader were angry with Kinnock," the source is quoted as saying.

"Especially after all the work that has been done to try and restore Labour's relationship with the Jewish community."

Starmer was said to be ["infuriated"](#).

Nandy herself proposed a ban on the import of goods from illegal settlements in the West Bank, but only if Israel pressed ahead with annexation.

Starmer's sole intervention in this debate occurred when he was asked by [Jewish News](#) about sanctions and he stressed the need instead to maintain a "strong working relationship with Israel".

Image on the right: Starmer speaking at a [leadership hustings](#) in [Bristol](#) in February 2020 (CC BY-SA 4.0)



Starmer said:

“I don’t agree with annexation and I don’t think it’s good for security in the region, and I think it’s very important that we say that.

“Whether sanctions follow is another matter but at the moment let’s resolve this in the proper way. But this is not good for security in the region. That should be a paramount consideration.”

When pressed further, he added:

“There needs to be a strong working relationship where we are able to exchange views frankly, as you would with an ally and on some of these issues, a frank exchange is what we most need, I think.”

Labour’s history

This Monday marks 103 years since the Balfour Declaration committed British governments to support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

The 1917 document predates Labour’s emergence as a political force in the years after World War One, but the party has a history of its own in the Middle East which no leader can ignore.

In 1944, when the territory of Palestine was still under British control, its national executive committee authored a motion, passed by conference, which read: “Palestine surely is a case, on human grounds and to promote a stable settlement, for transfer of population. Let the Arabs be encouraged to move out, as the Jews move in. Let them be compensated handsomely for their land and let their settlement elsewhere be carefully organised and generously financed.”

But it has history more recent than that.

The suspension of Corbyn after the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report into antisemitism last week contrasts with Corbyn’s treatment of Tony Blair, who as a former Labour prime minister was excoriated by the 2016 Chilcot Report over his decision to invade

Iraq in 2003.

John Chilcot, a former senior diplomat, eviscerated Blair, stopping short of accusing him of lying to parliament.

Chilcot said that at the time of the invasion, Saddam Hussein “posed no imminent threat” and revealed a private note that Blair sent to Bush in July 2002 which read: “I will be with you, whatever.”

In a two-hour press conference following the publication of the report, [Blair was unrepentant](#). “I believe we made the right decision and the world is better and safer,” he declared.

He argued that he had acted in good faith, based on intelligence at the time which said that Iraq’s president had weapons of mass destruction. This “turned out to be wrong”.

Corbyn’s suspension

Corbyn offered a total apology on behalf of the party for the decision to invade Iraq.

He said:

“So I now apologise sincerely on behalf of my party for the disastrous decision to go to war in Iraq in March 2003. That apology is owed first of all to the people of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost and the country is still living with the devastating consequences of the war and the forces it unleashed. They have paid the greatest price for the most serious foreign policy calamity of the last 60 years.”

He went on:

“The apology is also owed to the families of those soldiers who died in Iraq or who have returned home injured or incapacitated. They did their duty but it was in a conflict they should never have been sent to.”

Blair at the time was just a member of the party, in the same situation as Corbyn was last week.

Corbyn, however, did not suspend Blair for not apologising and uttering words which went against the party line.

Instead, the opposite was happening. The “party of war” within the Parliamentary Labour Party went on the offensive against the leadership.

MPs who had backed the Iraq war, and consistently voted against inquiries into it, [went after Corbyn](#).

Of the 71 MPs who voted no confidence in Corbyn in 2016 and who had been in parliament in 2003, 92 percent had voted in favour of the Iraq war and seven against.

In justifying his action to suspend Corbyn, Starmer said that the former leader had defied his

response to the EHRC report, which condemned anyone trying to claim that antisemitism had been exaggerated for political reasons.

The night before the report was published, Starmer phoned Corbyn to say he would not be condemning him by name in his statement of reply to the EHRC report. Corbyn and his team repeatedly asked Starmer what he would say in his statement. Starmer said he would send them his lines.

Angela Rayner, the deputy leader, also promised Corbyn's team that she would send them the lines of Starmer's statement. Both failed to do so. The reactions of the two men were thus set on collision course.

Corbyn appeared as if he was defying the leadership, even though at the time he spoke, he had no idea what Starmer would say on a key point that defined their dispute.

Corbyn subsequently failed to back down, but one possibility is that Starmer's team knew what Corbyn would say, while Corbyn himself was kept in the dark until it was too late.

The left bites back

Corbyn did not defend himself against allegations that he tolerated antisemitism or that he himself was an antisemite, claims that are still being made today. To the extent that he let this campaign run unchallenged in the High Court, he himself is responsible.

On the day Corbyn was suspended, the Campaign Against Antisemitism, the original complainant in the EHRC investigation, wrote to Starmer and David Evans, the general secretary, demanding investigations into 32 members of the Labour Party, including [Angela Rayner](#), Starmer's current deputy, and 10 other MPs.

In response, seven trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party and one which backed Starmer as candidate, published a statement expressing "serious concern" about the manner and rationale for Corbyn's suspension, suggesting it had undermined party unity and democratic processes.

Far from being his "Clause 4" moment - the issue that Tony Blair used to define New Labour by dropping the party's historic commitment to state ownership of key industries - the suspension of Corbyn could define Starmer's leadership in the same way that Blair's decision to invade Iraq has cast a shadow over everything a man elected three times as prime minister did. The ghosts of Iraq follow Blair around to this day.

Quite apart from the fate of Corbyn, support for Palestine is much greater in the party than Starmer is comfortable with. Palestine, which he knows about much less than Corbyn, is his blindspot.

Unless Corbyn is reinstated quickly, the decision to suspend him from the party could prove to be a permanent and defining stain on Starmer's leadership.

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