

Sunak and Starmer back Israel war in British parliament

Thomas Scripps, Chris Marsden
16 October 2023

Britain's parliament reopened on Monday to declare support for Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza.

Conservative government Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Labour Leader of the Opposition Sir Keir Starmer delivered near identical opening statements, laying down the trio of lying assertions that became the template for speakers from all parties during the debate:

- Israel is exercising its "right to defend itself".
- It will "of course" observe international humanitarian law in doing so under terrible difficulties.
- Responsibility for any deaths of Palestinian civilians "lies with Hamas" and "Hamas alone" who are using them as "human shields".

Hamas had carried out an "existential strike at the very idea of Israel as a safe homeland for Jewish people," intoned Sunak. Adherence to international law must be balanced against the understanding that Israel faces "a vicious enemy that embeds itself behind civilians."

"As in any time of great crisis," Starmer proclaimed. "It is crucial that this House speaks with one voice in condemnation of terror, in support of Israel in its time of agony and for the dignity of all human life."

Amid his professions of support for Israel, Sunak, like Starmer, did not shy away from speaking of his government's recognition of the "concerns" and trauma suffered by Britain's Muslim community regarding the plight of the Palestinians.

In a transparent attempt to shield themselves from the legal implications of their support for war crimes, Sunak made repeated reference to Israel's taking "every possible precaution to avoid harming civilians" and to their encouragement of operations "in line with international humanitarian law". Starmer added, "Israel's defence must be conducted within international law. Civilians must not be targeted. Innocent lives must be protected." As if any of this is on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's agenda.

They cited in turn the equally hypocritical statements of US President Joe Biden, that "democracies we are stronger and more secure when we act according to the rule of law", and his Secretary of State Anthony of Blinken, that "We democracies distinguish ourselves from terrorists by striving for a different standard."

In this way Israel was provided with a license to commit mass murder.

Sunak and Starmer know what they are endorsing with their lies. Israeli bombing raids have already killed more than 2,800 people in Gaza, at least 720 of them children, wounded 10,800, including well over 2,400 children, and displaced close to a million people. Thousands are trapped under rubble. Cut-off electricity, water and food supplies threaten millions with a humanitarian catastrophe.

A day earlier, armed forces minister James Heappey told Sky News of the planned ground invasion of Gaza, "Nobody should pretend that this is going to be anything other than horrific, I'm afraid we're going to see some awful things over the next few days."

Former British Army Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, "There is no way to describe the potential carnage that will likely unfold. Street by street fighting in Gaza is the very worst form of warfare – just look at Stalingrad, and more recently in Bakhmut in Ukraine."

British imperialism is sending military support, not only to facilitate Israel's operations against Gaza but as part of a US-led plan to prepare conflict with Iran, either directly or by engineering a military engagement with its allies Syria or Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Sunak's statement referred to announced plans to deploy Royal Air Force surveillance aircraft, two Royal Navy ships, three Merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines to the region "to deliver practical support to Israel and partners in the region, and offer deterrence and assurance." They join the United States's enormous

deployment of two aircraft carrier strike groups involving over 15,000 personnel.

Sunak and Starmer's more carefully calibrated statements were a launching pad for a bloodthirsty, dictatorial deluge from the Tory benches, as MPs reinforced demands for aggressive action against Hamas, more aggression towards Iran and the suppression of popular protest at home.

Former senior cabinet minister Nadhim Zahawi declared, "Israel has to take the necessary steps to root out this evil virus ... and of course destroy it."

Bob Blackman claimed, "There can be no greater contrast than between the actions of the IDF [Israel Defense Force], who attempt to prevent the loss of civilian life, compared to the sheer brutality of the terrorists."

He urged an expansion of the conflict across the region, noting that Hamas's attack had been "well planned, well resourced," and stating, "It is beyond belief that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, who fund and support Hamas, were not beyond this whole operation."

This was a common refrain, with Stephen Hammond also requesting, "Hamas, Hezbollah and a multitude of terrorist organisations get their logistic, financial and military support from Iran. Can [Sunak] assure the House that he will work with our international partners to do everything possible to isolate Iran and increase economic sanctions."

Sir Julian Lewis made clear the broader predatory aims of British and American imperialism in pursuing war in the region: "Hamas is a creature of a client state of Russia, and we must remember that Russia is still at war with Ukraine." Sunak responded, "We remain committed to our support for Ukraine... he can be reassured that we are able to do both."

Former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith followed Home Secretary Suella Braverman in declaring the chant "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" antisemitic—"all about getting rid of Jews"—and tarring every one of the more than 150,000 people who demonstrated in solidarity with Gaza in London just two days prior. Sunak replied that police were still "reviewing footage" to pursue arrests.

On the opposite benches, the few Labour MPs, largely of Muslim and Asian backgrounds, who made criticisms of the Israeli government were sure to preface them with a ritual denunciation of Hamas and invocation of Israel's "right to defend itself". The rest of their contributions consisted of requests for Sunak to urge caution in his

conversations with the Israelis and statements of support for a peaceful two-state solution.

Each such contribution gave Sunak an opportunity to ram home the same message, to cheers from the Tory benches: "We should support absolutely Israel's right to defend itself and to go after Hamas... a vicious enemy that embeds itself behind civilians... We must acknowledge, always, that responsibility for what is happening here is with Hamas and Hamas alone."

Not one member of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs denounced either the government's or Starmer and his shadow cabinet's open endorsement of war crimes or acts to suppress popular protest.

Richard Burgon was the group's lead speaker, with John McDonnell making only half-hearted attempts at getting called to speak and Jeremy Corbyn apparently absent from the chamber. Burgon remarked that Palestinians were being made to suffer collective punishment, "a war crime under the Geneva Conventions", but concluded in the same desultory style as his colleagues, "Will the prime minister take this opportunity to make clear to the Israeli government that this collective punishment of Palestinian civilians must end immediately?"

The debate finished after just two hours, hurried off the agenda for a discussion on overcrowding in British prisons. Its significance was in revealing the chasm between Parliament and the overwhelming opposition to Israel's bloody war in the population—on show in the mass demonstrations held across the UK on Saturday and scheduled to repeat this weekend.

The last three days have cast shadows of a looming political conflict between the parties of big business which occupy the House of Commons and the working class—young workers and students above all.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact