



**LABOUR, ISRAEL  
AND PALESTINE:  
LESSONS FROM THE  
BLAIR-BROWN YEARS**

**LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

**LABOUR  
FRIENDS  
OF ISRAEL** **LFI**

# **LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL**

**WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION**

## **LABOUR, ISRAEL AND PALESTINE: LESSONS FROM THE BLAIR-BROWN YEARS LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

**BY**  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Israeli-Palestinian arena presents a humanitarian, political and security crisis more acute than any time since 1948. Yet the situation echoes the crises seen by the last Labour government.
- The 1997-2010 period encompassed the second intifada and attempts to recover from it, including Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Though 7 October and the subsequent war have been far more intense and destructive even than the second intifada, there are lessons to be learned from the Blair and Brown years.
- As in the wake of the second intifada, an important focus must be on rebuilding the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a plausible basis for Palestinian statehood, and on making credible to Israelis that a path to a two-state solution is the best way to build a regional alliance to marginalise Hamas and its Iranian-led allies.
- Labour's approach then was underpinned by assumptions that remain true: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is defined by the legitimate claims to self-determination of two peoples, Jews and Palestinians, within the same territory. Partitioning this territory into two states is the only model through which these claims can ultimately be reconciled.
- Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were both personally warm towards Israel, viewing it as a legitimate expression of Jewish self-determination and a democracy – attitudes bolstered by their strong relations with the British Jewish community.
- The Israeli-Palestinian issue has become an even more prominent feature of a wider cultural conflict which is part of the context with which the new Labour government must grapple. This is particularly alarming for British Jews, whose sense of security was badly shaken by the Corbyn period. Many feel distressed by surges in antisemitism and deeply alienated by hostility towards Israel, in the face of what they consider a legitimate war of self-defence against an enemy bent on Israel's destruction.
- Like the last Labour government after the second intifada, Keir Starmer's government finds itself part of an international effort to stabilise the Israeli-Palestinian arena. It will be engaged in post-conflict recovery and trying to build up the PA so that it can be both the basis of a future Palestinian state and a credible security partner for Israel. A more pragmatic Israeli government is a necessary condition for this. But if that change comes about, third parties can do much to coordinate between the parties.
- For the first time since 2007, a Gaza ceasefire may pave the way for replacing Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Arab states, including oil-rich Gulf states, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, appear willing to play a much more active role, and have considerable economic resources to deploy.
- In seeking to influence developments in the months and years to come, the government must remain cognisant that Britain's limited influence derives from relationships of trust and access to key players: the US, European allies, moderate Arab states, the PA, and Israel. To make the two-state vision relevant for Israelis, it should be built into a regional plan for a deeper and broader alliance between Israel and Arab states designed to counter the threat of Iran and its allies, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The immediate game today is not about getting Israelis and Palestinians back into direct negotiations. Neither society currently has the internal coherence or will to make historic compromises. Changing this will require courageous and far-sighted leadership, but can be helped over time by a regional diplomatic process, coupled with a step change in international support for grassroots peacebuilding.

## **INTRODUCTION: LESSONS FROM THE BLAIR-BROWN YEARS**

The Israeli-Palestinian arena presents a humanitarian, political and security crisis more acute than any time since 1948. Yet the situation echoes the crises seen by the last Labour government.

The 1997-2010 period encompassed the second intifada and attempts to recover from it, including Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Though 7 October and the subsequent war have been far more intense and destructive even than the second intifada, there are lessons to be learned from the Blair and Brown years.

Like then, the current war has deepened immeasurably the mutual antipathy between Israelis and Palestinians, yet also shattered the idea of maintaining the "status quo" and forced decision-makers to re-evaluate the costs of their various alternatives.

As in the wake of the second intifada, an important focus must be on rebuilding the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a plausible basis for Palestinian statehood, and on making credible to Israelis that a path to a two-state solution is the best way to build a regional alliance to marginalise Hamas and its Iranian-led allies.

## **THE LAST LABOUR GOVERNMENT**

The Blair government entered office with the Oslo process foundering. Benjamin Netanyahu was serving his first term, which lasted from 1996 to 1999, following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Labour's broad position was consistent with the Major government it replaced: to back US-led diplomacy in support of a conflict-ending agreement and, against that backdrop, to promote bilateral UK-Israel relations, in the context of deepening relations between Israel and the EU.

The approach was underpinned by assumptions that remain true: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is defined by the legitimate claims to self-determination of two peoples, Jews and Palestinians, within the same territory. Partitioning this territory into two states is the only model through which these claims can ultimately be reconciled.

Palestinian sovereignty is urgent and just. Yet while Israeli occupation is inherently unstable, ceding control to a weakly constituted PA, at risk of losing power to Iranian-backed Hamas, is also fraught with security risks for Israel – as well as Egypt and Jordan – that need to be addressed.

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were both personally warm towards Israel, viewing it as a legitimate expression of Jewish self-determination and a democracy – attitudes bolstered by their strong relations with the British Jewish community. Their views contrasted with the Labour left perspective of Israel as an illegitimate colonial implant. For New Labour, a positive attitude towards Israel also aligned with a wider agenda to distance the party from the legacy of the Labour left.

In office, Blair showed a personal passion for the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and consistently sought a role reflecting his ambition for Britain as a global actor and himself as a statesman. Believing that influence with the parties derived from personal trust and private persuasion, he measured public criticisms over settlements and the use of military force, and tended towards a flexible position over the sale of military equipment to Israel. The unusual step of appointing Lord Levy as his personal envoy reflected a desire for close personal involvement that bypassed traditional Foreign Office machinery.

The eruption of the second intifada, which raged from 2000 to 2004, came after Yasser Arafat rejected two-state proposals tabled by the-then Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, and Bill Clinton at Camp David in summer 2000. The second intifada overlapped with the period of the “war on terror” triggered by the 9/11 attacks. In a manner that prefigured 7 October, Palestinian armed groups inflicted mass casualties on civilians within Israeli population centres, triggering large-scale and deadly Israeli military operations to reoccupy Palestinian population centres that it had previously left.

After 9/11, Blair rejected the idea – prevalent on the left – that western support for Israel was a cause of Islamist extremism, which he saw as a malign anti-western ideology that needed to be confronted. But he did believe resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would remove a tool exploited by extremists to mobilise support.

Under pressure within Labour over the Palestinian issue, he pushed the Bush administration hard to reinvigorate the peace process in parallel with the 2003 Iraq invasion. As in the post-7 October context, a key issue was how to reform the PA and make it a capable partner for Israel in excluding Hamas and stopping terrorism. This involved drawing power away from a leader (at that time, Arafat) who had lost credibility with Israel and the US.

Blair struggled to secure a consistent focus from the Bush White House, in contrast to the attention given by Clinton. His pressure may have played a role in getting the Bush administration to issue the 2003 roadmap peace plan. To the extent that Blair had that influence, it derived from the exceptionally close relationship he had developed with Bush.

In the absence of any prospect for a conflict-ending agreement, Blair was always pragmatic, embracing opportunities for incremental progress. Although many were sceptical of the-then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon’s unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements in 2005, Blair embraced it as an opportunity to move in the direction of a two-state outcome. He hosted international conferences to mobilise support for the PA post-disengagement, and used a 2005 G8 summit to advance the same agenda.

Blair’s commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian arena served to blur the significant differences between himself and others in the party on the subject, but the potential for the issue to divide Labour was always apparent. During the 2006 second Lebanon war, Blair refused to condemn Israel’s actions as disproportionate or call for an immediate ceasefire. He saw it a strategic imperative that Hezbollah and Iran not be seen as victors. This proved too much for the parliamentary Labour party at that moment, triggering a backbench revolt that accelerated his departure from office.

Brown shared Blair’s commitment both to Israel’s welfare and the Palestinians. As chancellor and prime minister he called for an “economic roadmap” to advance Palestinian economic independence and governance. At the same time, he opposed the burgeoning BDS movement and marked Israel’s 60th anniversary by becoming the first UK prime minister to address the Knesset. His speech [described](#) Israel’s foundation as “an ancient promise redeemed” and labelled the relationship with Britain an “unbreakable partnership”. Brown condemned as “totally abhorrent” calls from the president of Iran “for Israel to be wiped off the map of the world”, whilst also calling for a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. He [gave support](#) in public and in private to Israeli and Palestinian negotiators working on a final status accord during the 2007-2008 Annapolis Process.

Pragmatism and incrementalism characterised Blair's ongoing involvement as the Quartet envoy (representing the "Middle East Quartet" of the UN, EU, US and Russia) after leaving No 10. He operated within an international agenda to strengthen the PA in the West Bank while isolating Hamas, which took control of Gaza in 2007. This included promoting the PA's institutional and economic development, and working with Israel to reduce checkpoints. In parallel, Blair worked on easing the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, which was suffering under tight restrictions on movement and access imposed by Israel and Egypt in response to Hamas' takeover of the territory.

## CONSERVATIVES IN POWER, LABOUR IN OPPOSITION

The Conservative years saw major changes in the Middle East, which can be seen in retrospect to have set the context for 7 October.

The last meaningful effort to broker a comprehensive two-state agreement was led by the-then US secretary of state, John Kerry, in 2013-14. Under US pressure, Netanyahu engaged seriously and was drawn, [according to those involved](#), into "the zone of a possible agreement". However, when a distrustful Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, was presented with the framework in the White House in March 2014, he dismissed it.

While Donald Trump showed a surprising interest in brokering the "deal of the century", his proposals, issued in 2020, were hopelessly one-sided in favour of Netanyahu's preferences. Thoroughly absorbed with the Brexit process, the Conservative government had little bandwidth to try and influence this outcome.

Against this backdrop, the Conservatives focused primarily on bilateral relations with Israel. The flourishing of economic and strategic ties – signified by the signing of the 2030 roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations in March 2023 – drew extra motivation from several factors. The spread of instability in the Middle East heightened Israel's significance in countering regional threats and supporting pro-western Arab governments. Meanwhile, Israel's economy showed resilience through global economic turmoil and covid-19, incentivising trade ties for post-Brexit Britain, especially with Israel's hi-tech sector.

Finally, the Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain (and subsequently Morocco) signalled a major regional shift. The agreements reflected the overlap of regional agendas between Israel and the Gulf states, which are key economic and strategic partners for Britain. These included countering threats from Iran – with its network of regional proxies and its advancing nuclear and ballistic missile programmes – in the face of waning US commitment to the region. The agreements also exposed the declining significance of the Palestinian issue for Arab leaders.

The Arab-Israeli normalisation breakthrough heralded game-changing opportunities for regional cooperation in security, economic development, and energy and transportation connectivity. This was illustrated through the unveiling of the multilateral Negev Forum in mid-2022 (with the initial participation of Israel, Egypt, UAE, Morocco, Bahrain and the US), and the announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) initiative in September 2023. Yet despite Britain's historically close relations with many of these states and deep interests in the region, the Conservative government arguably did not give these developments the focus they deserved. There was no mention of the normalisation process in the [2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), and the UK was not party to the [memorandum of understanding](#) that launched IMEC, unlike France and Germany.

On the domestic front, attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became heavily politicised during the Corbyn period. The explosion of anti-Zionism and antisemitism within Labour made the issue a source of painful division for the party, which the Conservatives were ready to exploit.

## THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT FOR KEIR STARMER'S LABOUR GOVERNMENT

The events of 7 October and their aftermath exposed how short-sighted it was to think the Palestinian issue could be neglected. In response to the war, both the Conservatives and Labour have aligned closely with the Biden administration, trying to balance support for the war against Hamas and to bring home the hostages, with pressure on Israel to reduce harm and increase aid to Palestinian civilians. There has been a consensus in support of UK participation in defending Israel from attacks from the Houthis or Iran.

Meanwhile the war has had significant domestic ramifications. There were disturbing expressions of support in the UK for Hamas' actions on and immediately after 7 October. Broader sympathy for Israel after the Hamas assault waned in the face of the scale of death and destruction resulting from Israel's response. Parts of Labour's base, particularly within British Muslim communities, were angered by what they saw as unjustified support for an Israeli military operation that constituted for them nothing less than genocide.

Divergent perspectives on these events across society reflect a broader growing trend towards fragmented identities, values and world views, augmented by the generational shift towards reliance on social media for news.

Those in Britain who express sympathy not only for Palestinian rights and welfare, but for Hamas, demand particular attention. Aside from a minority of Muslims who subscribe to Hamas' Islamist ideology, a new wave of radical identity politics coming from the US left – which creates simplistic binaries between oppressor and oppressed and seeks to view the conflict through the prism of America's past and present racial divisions – has given fresh impetus to an old canard that Israel is a white, settler-colonial state. This perspective, evident in street protests, social media and campus demonstrations, erases the Jewish historical experience, and regards Hamas' actions as in some measure legitimate "resistance".

The Israeli-Palestinian issue has therefore become an even more prominent feature of a wider cultural conflict which is part of the context with which the new Labour government must grapple. This is particularly alarming for British Jews, whose sense of security was badly shaken by the Corbyn period. Many feel distressed by surges in antisemitism and deeply alienated by hostility towards Israel, in the face of what they consider a legitimate war of self-defence against an enemy bent on Israel's destruction and the mass murder of Jews.

## THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Like the last Labour government, the Starmer government finds itself part of an international effort to stabilise the Israeli-Palestinian arena. It will be engaged in post-conflict recovery and trying to chart a new path forward towards Palestinian statehood. The challenge in humanitarian, political and security terms is far greater than that faced even after the second intifada, or the 2014 Gaza war.

However, there are opportunities today that have matured in the last 20 years. Back in 2002, Saudi Arabia tabled the Arab Peace Initiative, offering normalised relations between Israel and all Arab states in return for a Palestinian state on all the occupied territories. It was a significant gesture, but a rigid formula that failed to land. Today, the Saudis are more flexible and proactive. They are keen to secure upgraded defence ties with Washington, and follow the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco in normalising relations with Israel - a huge prize for any Israeli government, and Washington.

Realising these opportunities depends on developments within Israel. Netanyahu's political survival rests on the ultra-Orthodox, and on far-right extremists unlike any seen before in an Israeli cabinet, for whom any concession to the Palestinians is unthinkable, regardless of wider strategic incentives.

Here, too, though there is the potential for change. The failures surrounding the war have further eroded support for Netanyahu's coalition, already losing ground due to the "judicial overhaul". An election will offer a good chance of producing a more centrist government, though Israeli society will remain deeply fractured, with a high risk of civil strife. Violence committed by extremist settlers will be an ongoing problem.

Meanwhile the Palestinians face formidable internal challenges. Regardless of how the war concludes, restoring credibility to the PA, re-establishing it in Gaza, and keeping Hamas down will be a long-term issue. It is exacerbated by the deep unpopularity of 88-year-old Abbas, who is physically ailing and has no clear successor. The equation echoes that experienced by the Blair-Brown government, which played an active role in supporting Palestinian reform in the post-second intifada and post-Arafat period. The PA must be built up so that it can be both the basis of a future Palestinian state and a credible security partner for Israel. A more pragmatic Israeli government is a necessary condition for this. But if that change comes about, third parties can do much to coordinate between the parties.

There are few more experienced in this than Blair himself. Aside from mobilising international support for PA reform as prime minister, he continued to focus on this issue as Quartet envoy from 2007-2015. Significant progress was made in bottom-up Palestinian state building in the West Bank, helped by the pragmatic leadership of Salam Fayyad, who served as Palestinian prime minister from 2007-2013, and Israeli leaders including Ehud Olmert, the prime minister from 2006-2009, and Barak in his later stint as defence minister from 2007-2013.

Today the scale of need in the Gaza Strip is unprecedented, as is the deep unpopularity of the PA among Palestinians (in contrast to strong support for Hamas), and distrust for it among Israelis. But, for the first time since 2007, a Gaza ceasefire may pave the way for replacing Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Arab states, including oil-rich Gulf states, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, appear willing to play a much more active role, and have considerable economic resources to deploy.

## **THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT'S ROLE: A BALANCING ACT**

The catastrophic war that erupted with the Hamas assault of 7 October may lead many to lose hope in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. But the current period is also a moment of dynamic and irreversible change. Since there can be no return to the status quo ante, all sides must confront the alternatives.

The "progressive realism" articulated by the foreign secretary, David Lammy, means seeing the world as it is. It is through this pragmatic lens that the UK's broad approach, and particular policy dilemmas, should be evaluated. In seeking to influence developments in the months and years to come, the British government must remain cognisant that Britain's limited influence derives from relationships of trust and access to key players: the US, European allies, moderate Arab states, the PA, and Israel.

As in the period of the last Labour government, the UK's role will also depend on who is in power in Washington. The Biden administration is focused on securing a ceasefire and incorporating an irreversible path to Palestinian statehood as part of a regional infrastructure to counter Iran and its allies, including Israeli-Saudi normalisation. This includes seeking a diplomatic solution to stop a war between Israel and Hezbollah. If the Democrats retain power, the UK's role will be to support this agenda, much as it was for Blair during the Clinton years.



If Trump returns to the White House, he will likely ease pressure on Israel. The UK will need to work, as Blair had to do with Bush, on persuading the White House that curtailing the excesses of the Israeli right is in its interests. Given the instincts of the Republican base and the party's general disinterest in the Palestinians, and given Netanyahu's dependence on the far right in Israel, this may not be easy. However, the possibility of drawing Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords – the former president's signature diplomatic achievement – would no doubt appeal to Trump.

A more centrist Israeli government would increase the scope for progress substantially. But it will still have huge difficulty balancing international demands for an irreversible path to Palestinian statehood with Israeli opinion that considers that proposal absurd in the light of 7 October.

To make the two-state vision relevant for Israelis, it should be built into a regional plan for a deeper and broader alliance between Israel and Arab states designed to counter the threat of Iran and its allies, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The immediate game today is not about getting Israelis and Palestinians back into direct negotiations. Neither society currently has the internal coherence or will to make historic compromises. Changing this will require courageous and far-sighted leadership, but can be helped over time by a step change in international support for grassroots peacebuilding (as articulated by John Lyndon in a recent paper for LFI on the case for an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.)

Recognising Palestine as a state is one of the few diplomatic levers the UK as a third party has. It could be useful as part of a set of trade-offs and incentives coordinated with other like-minded states and the parties themselves. But done out of context, it will harm the UK's ability to influence Israel while making little tangible difference for Palestinians.

Other thorny questions, including arms exports, and the proceedings at the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice, must also be addressed in a clear-eyed way. The rights and responsibilities of Israelis and Palestinians, and the UK's broader standing with allies and the international community, must be considered alongside a measure of what will best promote the context for diplomatic progress and preserve the UK's influence with the parties.

It is also important for Labour to recognise the changes in Israeli politics since 2007. "The Democrats", a new merger of Labour and Meretz under the leadership of Yair Golan (a retired general and hero who tackled terrorists on 7 October), stands to grow their support in the next election. But the left is now a niche in Israel and will remain so. UK Labour should continue to treasure the relationship with Israeli Labor and its new successor, but should supplement that by investing in relations with pro-liberal democracy parties in the centre, in particular Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party.

Domestically, the Starmer government will have to manage, just as Blair and Brown did, the expectations and concerns of the PLP and party membership. How to respond to the level of death and destruction in Gaza, particularly given the extremism of the current Israeli government, and electoral pressures in certain UK constituencies, will continue to be divisive issues.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the events of 7 October and since, coming on top of the deep internal division within Israel, represent an unprecedented crisis for British Jews. Israel's stability as a Jewish and democratic state is central to British Jews' sense of identity and security. The events of 7 October shook the confidence of the entire Jewish world in Israel's safety and future. At the same time, the hostility Jews have experienced in the UK has caused many to question their place in contemporary British society. This is another area that Labour must handle with care as it seeks to maintain trust with British Jews in the wake of the Corbyn era.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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