

Israel-Palestine War: UK Leaders Are Paving the Way for Ethnic Cleansing in Gaza

Responses from Starmer, Sunak, Braverman and others are especially reckless because of the horrifying language already being used by senior Israelis

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In moments of crisis, it's the job of a statesman to resolve problems, not inflame them. It's their job to show wisdom, to ignore popular clamour, to remind all parties of their obligations under international law, to emphasise our common humanity, and to look for long-term solutions that avoid a return to past horrors.

Statesmanship has been utterly lacking in [Britain](#) ever since Hamas [broke out](#) of Gaza last week.

Let's look at the shocking display from Labour leader [Keir Starmer](#) on LBC radio on Wednesday. He said that Israel had the "right to defend itself" against the Hamas attack. Then Starmer went a step further when asked about [Israeli](#) Defence Minister Yoav Gallant's grim [announcement](#) of a "complete siege" of Gaza, in which Gallant said: "There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed" - adding for good measure that Israel was fighting "human animals".

Asked whether cutting off water and electricity supplies was a proportionate response to the Hamas attacks, Starmer said: "I think that Israel does have that right. It is an ongoing situation, obviously everything should be done within international law."

But Starmer of all people, with his distinguished legal background, must know that depriving a population of food, power and electricity amounts to collective punishment, which is illegal under international law.

There's a terrible risk here. These remarks from a man seen as the British prime minister-in-waiting have given a green light for future war crimes.

‘Unequivocal’ Support

To be fair to Starmer, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has been no better. After the Palestinian fighters attack, he went on television to express support for Israel. Then he went on to [note that](#) this support was “unequivocal”, which amounts to a blank cheque from Britain to Israel to conduct itself in any way it chooses over the terrifying weeks ahead.

We have seen humane and responsible talk from leaders of international organisations. In a [statement](#) on Tuesday, Martin Griffiths, under-secretary general at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said:

“My message to all sides is unequivocal: The laws of war must be upheld. Those held captive must be treated humanely. Hostages must be released without delay.

“Throughout hostilities, civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected. Civilians must be allowed to leave for safer areas. And humanitarian relief and vital services and supplies to Gaza must not be blocked. The whole region is at a tipping point. The violence must stop.”

But from Sunak, we had no mention of human rights, let alone the type of call for proportionality that we [heard](#) from Irish leader Leo Varadkar, who warned that current solidarity could “fall apart” if Israel goes “too far in terms of its actions in Gaza”.

Meanwhile, British Home Secretary Suella Braverman is doing her best to inflame domestic tensions by [suggesting](#) that waving a Palestinian flag could become a criminal offence.

Apocalyptic Talk

The responses from Starmer, Sunak, Braverman, and others are especially reckless because of the horrifying language already being used by senior Israelis.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that Israel’s response will [“change the Middle East”](#). Gallant [said](#) that Gaza “will never go back to what it was”. A former Israeli general [said](#) that Israel “must create an unprecedented humanitarian disaster in Gaza”, adding that the “ultimate tool” was damage to the water system.

This is apocalyptic talk. Israel’s right to self-defence does not extend to the wiping out of entire neighbourhoods, medieval siege, random slaughter of children, or damaging water supplies. Yet western leaders are going along with all of this.

Some commentators have compared the Hamas assault to 9/11. To my mind, this makes little sense. But I am troubled by the memory of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s promise to former US President George W Bush to [“be with you, whatever”](#) in the wake of the destruction of the Twin Towers. In the end, that vow of loyalty led to the bloodshed and horror of the [Iraq War](#) and its awful aftermath.

Meanwhile, the bombing in Gaza continues. Some [300,000 people](#) are already in the streets after the destruction of their homes, and the Israeli military has only just begun. The ground invasion could start at any moment. Who knows how many will die.

Some now speak of a second [Nakba](#) – only this time, even worse than the tragedy of 1948,

with millions of Palestinians potentially being driven from their homes.

In a heartrending tweet on Wednesday, Palestinian playwright Samah Sabawi [noted](#):

“I told my family in #Gaza to get out when I heard reports the US is coordinating a plan to offer safe passage for civilians out of Gaza into Egypt. My aunty said ‘Do you guarantee we would be allowed to return?’ I couldn’t. I know ethnic cleansing when I see it. She refuses to leave. Death or eternal refugeehood. What would you choose?”

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— Samah Sabawi (@gazaheart) [October 11, 2023](#)

I pray that I am wrong, but I fear western leaders are now establishing the political foundation that would leave us complicit in massacres, indiscriminate bombing, and ethnic cleansing. Meanwhile, inflammatory and [reckless](#) media reporting is establishing the emotional foundation. Never has the time for statesmanship been more needed.

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Peter Osborne won best commentary/blogging in both 2022 and 2017, and was also named freelancer of the year in 2016 at the Drum Online Media Awards for articles he wrote for Middle East Eye. He was also named as British Press Awards Columnist of the Year in 2013. He resigned as chief political columnist of the Daily Telegraph in 2015. His latest book is The Fate of Abraham: Why the West is Wrong about Islam, published in May by Simon & Schuster. His previous books include The Triumph of the Political Class, The Rise of Political Lying, Why the West is Wrong about Nuclear Iran and The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism.

Featured image: Israel counterattack on Gaza (By Trong Khiem Nguyen / Flickr)

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