

“Political Assassination”: Jeremy Corbyn on the Establishment’s Campaign to Stop Him Becoming British Prime Minister

The former Labour Party leader sits down with Declassified for his most candid interview yet – on the British media, UK military and intelligence services, Israel, Keir Starmer, Julian Assange and Saudi Arabia.

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“I had my first speech outside Number 10 as prime minister all planned out,” Jeremy Corbyn tells me. “I was going to announce homelessness in Britain ends now, next week no-one will be sleeping rough.”

He is sitting on a sofa at the offices of his Peace & Justice Project in Finsbury Park, deep in his north London constituency. “Not bad for a first policy, huh?” he asks, flashing his trademark wry grin.

As it happened, the 2019 general election led to a landslide victory for Boris Johnson’s Conservatives. More than 2,000 people still [sleep rough](#) across the UK every night.

When we last met, things looked rather different.

It was October 2018 and I was [interviewing](#) him for *La Jornada*, an independent newspaper

in Mexico, at his offices in Westminster. This was the year after the shock election result of 2017, when his Labour Party had [achieved](#) the biggest electoral swing in its favour since 1945.

“The media assault on Corbyn during his tenure as Labour leader from 2015-20 will be recorded as perhaps the most intense political assassination in modern British history.”

It looked, then, like he had a good chance of becoming the next British prime minister.

Corbyn says he remembers the interview. “It’s one of the only positive write-ups you got as leader,” I venture. “The only one!” he shoots back, laughing, before adding, “Actually, truth be told, I got another okay one from the [Morning Star](#).”

It’s funny, but it’s not a joke. The media assault on Corbyn during his tenure as Labour leader from 2015-20 will be recorded as perhaps the most intense political assassination in modern British history.

The campaign to make sure he never made it into No 10 came from the usual suspects on the right such as the *Sun* and the *Telegraph*, but self-styled left publications like the *Guardian* and *New Statesman* were key to it as well.

The campaign also included, crucially, large parts of his own party. The reality is that barely a single element of the British establishment didn’t mobilise to see off the threat he posed.

Corbyn [launched](#) the Peace & Justice Project in early 2021 to maintain the significant momentum garnered by the British left during his time as Labour leader. Within a year of his premiership, Labour’s membership had risen to [600,000](#), making it the largest party in Western Europe.

His new project’s office is set in a space for people from across the local community. Football coaches, entrepreneurs, politicians, all rub alongside each other at the communal desks. It’s very Corbyn. “Bringing people together, that’s what we do,” he says as he walks through.

Corbyn, now 73, was often portrayed as a [scruffy](#) and [irascible](#) dinosaur by the press, but today he has on a crisp white shirt and a tidy olive green suit. From the moment we meet, he barely stops cracking jokes. The last two years out of the Westminster fire pit have done him good. He is ready to tell his side of the story.

‘A warning to me’

The month before the 2019 election, I decided to go through the newspaper clippings from Corbyn’s four years as Labour leader to try to locate all the hit pieces on him that emanated from the British military and intelligence establishment. What I [found](#) shocked me.

Some 34 major national stories attacking Corbyn as a “threat” to British security had come from elements within the national security state. Laid out in chronological order it looked like a campaign – and this was only what they were doing in public. It was likely the tip of the iceberg.

One example came a week after Corbyn was elected Labour leader in 2015. The *Sunday Times* carried a [story](#) quoting a “senior serving general” who warned that the armed forces would take “direct action” to stop a Corbyn government. The anonymous general added: “There would be mass resignations at all levels and you would face the very real prospect of an event which would effectively be a mutiny.”

“I thought it was a sort of shot across the bows, a warning to me.”

Corbyn tells me: “When that story came out shortly after I was elected leader in 2015 from apparently a serving military officer, we obviously challenged it straight away and they said it was a rogue element and they didn’t speak for anybody else. But I thought it was a sort of shot across the bows, a warning to me.”

The warning, Corbyn says, was directed at his international policies “based on peace, based on human rights, based on democracy, based on fair trade, rather than the very pro-American defence and foreign policy” of the British establishment.

He adds: “I knew this was going to lead to attacks, and it certainly did. It also served as a warning to a lot of our supporters just what we were up against in challenging the foreign policy establishment and the up-until-then cosy agreement between those front-benchers in parliament to support the same foreign policy. So...was I shocked? Yes. Was I surprised? No.”

‘Deliberately undermining me’

MI5 and MI6 were also involved in this apparent campaign. In September 2018, two anonymous senior government sources [told](#) the *Sunday Times* that Corbyn had been “summoned” for a “‘facts of life’ talk on terror” by then MI5 chief Andrew Parker. MI5 was likely involved in the leak as the article noted what the agency’s boss wanted to brief Corbyn on.

The reporters also based the story on a “security source” who “acknowledged that some of the Labour leader’s public statements on terrorism have been ‘troubling’ to the security services”.

Then, two months later, the *Daily Telegraph* [“learnt”](#) from an unspecified source that Corbyn had “recently met” with Alex Younger, then head of MI6, during which “the importance of the agency’s work and the severity of the threats facing Britain were made clear to him.” The imputation was again that Corbyn was naive to the threats facing the UK.

It was likely MI6 was involved in the leak as a “Whitehall official” divulged “the feeling” within the agency “that the time had come for Mr Corbyn to become acquainted with the workings of the intelligence establishment.”

“It was all then leaked out as a way to be deliberately undermining of me.”

“They were obviously private meetings,” Corbyn tells me. “We obviously prepared for them and went there. We absolutely did not inform or leak about the meeting at all to anybody. I instructed my office that this meeting had to be treated as completely confidential. And it

was. It was leaked by them and it was leaked in a way to undermine: that somehow or other I'd been summoned and given a dressing down. That was not the nature of the meeting at all."

He adds:

"The meeting was a discussion in which they discussed various parts of the world and various issues, none of which was new to me, none of which was a surprise to me. It was about the role of ISIS [Islamic State], it was about the war in Syria, it was about post-Iraq war, Afghanistan...They were well aware of my views on those conflicts and very well aware of what I'd said."

He continues:

"They acknowledged I had a different view from themselves and the government, and the meetings were...pretty frank. Were they aggressive? No. It was an intelligent discussion. Obviously it was all recorded. Obviously it was all then leaked out as a way to be deliberately undermining of me."



Andrew Parker, head of MI5 from 2013-20, speaks in London in October 2017. (Photo: Stefan Rousseau/Getty Images)

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'A deliberate message'

It wasn't just the British state that was bearing down on Corbyn. In June 2019, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited the UK and was [recorded](#) saying privately: "It could be that Mr Corbyn manages to run the gauntlet and get elected. It's possible. You should know, we won't wait for him to do those things to begin to push back. We will do our level best. It's too risky and too important and too hard once it's already happened."

Compared to the extensive coverage of alleged Russian interference in the Brexit referendum, Pompeo's remarks barely registered in the British media. I ask Corbyn why he thinks that is.

"We have a supine media in this country," he tells me. "The British self-confidence of saying we've got the best media in the world, the best broadcasting in the world, the best democracy in the world. It's nonsense, utter, complete nonsense. We have a media that's supine, that self-censors, that accepts D-Notices, doesn't challenge them, and the vast majority of the mainstream media haven't lifted so much as a little finger in support or defence of Julian Assange."

"Many of the so-called investigative reporters in the British media are just pathetic."

He adds: "And so the idea that we've got this brave British media that is always exposing the truth is utter nonsense. Even the liberal supposedly left-leaning papers like the *Guardian*, where are they on all of this? Nowhere. Where were they kicking off about Pompeo's remarks? Nowhere. We obviously kicked off about it, protested...We were just told it was a private briefing...It wasn't. It was a quite deliberate message."

Pompeo was Trump's CIA director from 2017-18 and this is not lost on Corbyn who brings up the [CIA-backed](#) coup which overthrew president Salvador Allende and Chilean democracy in 1973. "I've lived to see Allende elected, I've lived to see Allende killed, I've lived to see the coup in Chile," he says. These were formative events in Corbyn's political development.

"He wasn't alone, though, Pompeo, in these remarks," Corbyn continues.

"Benjamin Netanyahu also weighed in on this and said that I must not become prime minister. Sorry, who is Benjamin Netanyahu to decide who the British prime minister should be? It's not for me to decide who the Israeli prime minister should be...so who is he to make that kind of comment? Again, the British media just lapped it up...Frankly, many of the so-called investigative reporters in the British media are just pathetic."

In November 2019, the month before the election, the *Daily Telegraph* had published an "[exclusive](#)" interview with Netanyahu in which he told them "Israel may halt its intelligence co-operation with the UK if Jeremy Corbyn becomes prime minister".



Then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo addresses reporters in New York City in May 2018. (Photo: US State Department)

‘A tool of the British Establishment’

The *Guardian* has long been viewed as the voice of the liberal-left in Britain, so it surprised many during the Corbyn leadership to see it act as one of the main media vehicles through which the campaign to bring him down was fought.

The paper was a key part of the “anti-semitism crisis” that engulfed Corbyn’s leadership. From 2016-19, the *Guardian* [published](#) 1,215 stories mentioning Labour and anti-semitism, an average of around one per day, according to a search on Factiva, the database of newspaper articles.

In the same period, the *Guardian* published just 194 articles mentioning the Conservative Party’s much more serious problem with Islamophobia. A YouGov poll in 2019, for example, [found](#) that nearly half of the Tory party membership would prefer not to have a Muslim prime minister.

The *Guardian*’s coverage of anti-semitism in Labour was suspiciously extensive, compared to the known extent of the problem in the party, and its focus on Corbyn personally suggested that the issue was being used politically.

The late Jewish anthropologist David Graeber [commented](#) after the 2019 election: “As for the *Guardian*, we will never forget that during the ‘Labour antisemitism controversy’, they beat even the *Daily Mail* to include the largest percentage of false statements, pretty much every one, mysteriously, an accidental error to Labour’s disadvantage”.

“I have absolutely no illusions in the *Guardian*, none whatsoever,” Corbyn tells me. “My mum brought me up to read the *Guardian*. She said, ‘It’s a good paper you can trust’. You

can't. After their treatment of me, I do not trust the *Guardian*."

"I have absolutely no illusions in the *Guardian*, none whatsoever."

He continues: "There are good people who work in the *Guardian*, there are some brilliant writers in the *Guardian*, but as a paper, it's a tool of the British establishment. It's a mainstream establishment paper. So, as long as everybody on the left gets it clear: when you buy the *Guardian*, you're buying an establishment paper".

Corbyn says he had visited the *Guardian* offices during the 2015 leadership campaign to meet with its journalists. One was a meeting of all staff, another was with the core editorial team.

"The meeting with the entirety of the staff was fine," he says. "A lot of young people were there, it was interesting, it was funny, it was zany, very pleasant, I was very well-received. And they said, 'OK, what's your pitch to the leader of the Labour Party?' And I set out anti-austerity and social justice...Some of the questions were quite tough. Fine, it's okay. It was very respectful, it was a very nice meeting. We then had a meeting with the editorial team."

He pauses. "Bit different," he adds, raising his eyebrows. "It was like I was being warned; like I was being warned by this team of actually incredibly self-important people".

He continues: "So was I surprised? No. And I've had to live with the behaviour of the *Guardian* ever since. But the *Guardian* is in a unique position because it is the paper most read by Labour Party members, is the most important in forming opinion on the centre and left in British politics. And they are very well aware of that, which is why I think an analysis of the *Guardian*'s treatment of the time that I was leader of the party needs to be made because they and the BBC had more unsourced reporting of anti-semitic criticisms surrounding me than any other paper, including the *Mail*, *The Telegraph* and the *Sun*."

'What is his crime?'

Another ignominious part of the *Guardian*'s recent history has been its treatment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, a one-time collaborator with the paper. As Assange was [arbitrarily detained](#) by the UK in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, the *Guardian* became a major media vehicle through which the information war against him was fought by his various enemies.

One apparent [mini-campaign](#) trying to link Assange to Russia ran for six months until November 2018 and culminated in a front-page splash, based on anonymous sources, [claiming](#) that Assange had three secret meetings in the embassy with Trump's former campaign manager Paul Manafort.

It is now [widely-accepted](#) the Manafort story was false and the *Guardian* no longer refers to it in articles on the subject, although the paper has never retracted it.

"Nelson Mandela was put into maximum security, life imprisonment after the Rivonia treason trial of 1964," Corbyn tells me when I ask about Assange. "All through the sixties and the seventies into much later on, eighties even, Nelson Mandela was a lonely figure supported by a few people around Africa and around the world. He was not a popular, iconic

figure at all. He became so later on, he became the iconic figure in the fight against apartheid.

“And when he was released and came to the British parliament, there were some amazing speeches from people who had apparently been incredibly active in the apartheid movement. But somehow or other I’d missed their participation in all the anti-apartheid activities I’d been to.” He smiles then adds with his characteristic irony, “You know how it goes, that’s alright.”

“Julian Assange, what’s his crime?” Corbyn asks, then adds again with emphasis, “What *is* his crime?”

“One day I did interviews for about 15 broadcast media all over the world. Where were the British? None.”

Answering his own question, he continues: “Assange managed to collect information on what the US was doing, US foreign policy was doing, its illegal activities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, and much else. In the great traditions of a journalist who never reveals their sources, very important, and he was pursued because of this and as we know, eventually sought asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy, but was unable to get out of it.”

He adds: “We then discover that all that time in the Ecuadorian embassy...there was the surveillance of him by apparently an independent security company, but in reality it was working for the Americans.”

In early 2021, *El Pais* [revealed](#) that the Spanish company running security for the Ecuadorian embassy in London had been sharing audio and video recordings of Assange’s private meetings with the CIA. These included privileged conversations with his lawyers.

Later in the year, new [revelations](#) showed a *Guardian* reporter had known the company meant to be protecting Assange was actually spying on him. Instead of alerting Assange, the *Guardian* journalist requested transcripts of his illicitly-recorded private conversations.

Assange “was initially welcomed by the *Guardian*,” Corbyn says, adding the paper “published all of his stuff and then dropped him and have continued to drop him.”

Corbyn said he’s been on many demonstrations outside the courts in Britain in recent months to raise awareness of Assange’s extradition case. “There’s huge numbers of media there from all over the world,” he says.

“One day I did interviews for about 15 broadcast media all over the world. Where were the British? None. Not one, apart from social media. So what is it about the British media that they cannot bring themselves to the biggest story about freedom-to-know in the world today on their very doorstep, they could walk from their offices to the High Court and get the story.” He adds: “It says everything about the supine nature of the mainstream media in Britain.”

Julian Assange has now been in Belmarsh maximum security prison in London for nearly 1,200 days. “He’s not convicted of anything,” Corbyn says. “There is no unspent conviction that he’s got to serve time in prison for. And Belmarsh – I’ve been to see prisoners in the past – is a horrible, horrible place and he’s there with all the dangers to his health that goes

with that.”

On Friday, Home Secretary Priti Patel [approved](#) Assange’s extradition to the US to face life in prison there on espionage charges.



Jeremy Corbyn speaks to supporters of Julian Assange outside court before an extradition hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court in London in April 2022. (Photo: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images)

‘I’d never met him before’

One figure who had a role in the long and winding Assange case is Corbyn’s successor as Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer.

Starmer was head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) from 2008-13, when it handled Assange’s proposed extradition to Sweden to face questioning about sexual assault allegations.

The CPS has [admitted](#) destroying key emails relating to the Assange case, mostly covering the period when Starmer was director. A CPS lawyer working under Starmer also [advised](#) the Swedish authorities not to visit London in 2010 or 2011 to interview Assange. An interview in the UK at that time could have prevented the long-running embassy standoff.

Starmer quit as Corbyn’s shadow immigration minister in the ‘chicken coup’ of 2016 against Corbyn’s leadership. In his resignation letter Starmer [cited](#) the “need for a much louder voice on the critical issues” and aired “reservations” about Corbyn’s leadership.

After the coup was defeated and Corbyn was reelected in a landslide, Starmer was not only appointed to the shadow cabinet, but bagged one of its most senior positions.

Corbyn tells me: "I appointed Keir Starmer to the shadow Brexit position...because of his legal knowledge and skills and the importance of saying to the Parliamentary Labour Party, 'Look, I understand the makeup of the PLP. This is why I've appointed this broad and diverse shadow cabinet.' Did it make it easy to manage? No. Were there lots of debates in the shadow cabinet? You bet there were. I didn't stop those debates, I encouraged those debates".

He adds, "But I have to say, as we developed this very difficult position over Brexit, where we had a 60-40 split of party supporters voting remain to leave, we had the view that we had to somehow or other bring people together. I tried to unite people around the social and economic message saying, 'If you're poor and up against it, however you voted, you need a Labour government that's going to redistribute wealth and power.'"

Corbyn admits he didn't know much about his newly-appointed shadow Brexit minister at that point.

"Was I close to Keir Starmer? No, I'd never met him before he became a member of parliament. Obviously knew who he was, he was a neighbouring MP. Had we had much contact? No, not really. And our conversations when he was in the shadow cabinet were largely about the minutiae of Brexit, the various agreements and the many meetings that we had in Brussels with officials there...So beyond that, apart from occasional chats about Arsenal football club, that was about it."

Corbyn continues: "Was I aware of everything about his past? No, not really. Should I have been? Yeah. But then there are so many things one could and should be aware of that one isn't."

Corbyn adds: "I noticed it when he stood for election for leader of the party he was very clear that he accepted the 2019 manifesto and its contents and put forward his ten points there. Those seem to have been parked now, shall we say."



Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer speaks in the House of Commons in April 2020. (Photo: Jessica Taylor/UK Parliament)

Targeting the Left

Starmer's now-infamous [10 pledges](#) promised his leadership of Labour would effectively be a continuation of Corbynism without Corbyn. He promised he would support a tax increase for the top 5% of earners; nationalise rail, mail, energy and water; and unite the party.

But the hallmark of Starmer's leadership so far has actually been its effort to [attack the left](#). Corbyn, as the symbol of the left's resurgence, was directly targeted. In October 2020, he was [suspended](#) by the Labour Party ostensibly because of his response to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report on anti-semitism in the party.

Corbyn's [statement](#) said anti-semitism was "absolutely abhorrent" and "one anti-semite is one too many" in the party. He added: "The scale of the problem was also dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party, as well as by much of the media."

For anyone following the events of the five previous years, this was a statement of obvious fact. The point was also important to assuage the [real fears](#) in the Jewish community about the scale of anti-semitism in the Labour Party. But Starmer did not see it the same way.

"The response to the EHRC report which I gave, which I thought was reasonable and balanced, was met with the immediate suspension of my membership, which the media were told about before I was," Corbyn tells me.

"First I heard about it was when a journalist stopped me in the street as I was leaving the Brickworks Community Centre just near here, which I'm a trustee of, and I was told my

membership had been suspended and I thought the journalist who said it was joking, was winding me up. I said, 'what?' He said, 'No, you've been suspended.' And I said, 'Nah, nah, what you talking about?'"

"The scale of the problem was dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents."

Corbyn pauses. "It was true. Anyway, I obviously appealed against that and won that appeal, unanimously, reinstated, unanimously, endorsed by [Labour's National Executive Committee], unanimously, and then my membership of the parliamentary party was suspended. And there's been no process taken against me by the parliamentary party."

The lack of due process clearly upsets Corbyn, who takes parliamentary and party political procedure very seriously. "It makes my constituents very angry. They say, 'Look, Jeremy, we voted for you as our Labour MP, so why? We've got confidence in you, we have no problem with you. We don't think you've done anything wrong and we welcome your work as our local MP.' And I'm very proud to represent the people of this community."

Corbyn now sits as an independent MP for his constituency of Islington North, which he has represented for 39 years.

He has not publicly spoken out against his treatment before. "Was I angry about it? Yeah, of course. But I have always, in politics, tried to keep off the personal attack," he says. "It's very tempting but...politicians having a go at each other, calling each other names doesn't get anybody anywhere. It don't put bread on the table. And so it's important that we campaign on political points and political principles."

Corbyn is unusually candid in our conversation and only clams up and reverts to a stock answer when I ask if he will stand as an independent if Labour don't restore the whip back to him. "I am focused on getting the whip back at the present time," he says simply.

'The biggest rebellion ever': Saudi Arabia

While the British media has been fixated on Russia's invasion of Ukraine this year, it has largely ignored the war being waged on Yemen by Saudi Arabia, which began in 2015, and has created the world's [worst humanitarian disaster](#). Millions of children are on the [brink](#) of starvation.

The Saudi war machine receives [critical support](#) from the British, in the form of billions of pounds of arms, but also wide-ranging logistical support. The UK has since 1964 had [10 senior soldiers](#) embedded in the Saudi armed forces, while [three UK personnel](#) sit permanently inside the Saudi Air Operations Centre.

Support for the Wahhabi dictatorship in Riyadh has long been a bipartisan staple of British foreign policy. I ask Corbyn why there is this cross-party consensus on such a clearly indefensible policy?

"Saudi Arabia and Britain have a very close economic, political and military relationship," Corbyn tells me. "It's not new. It goes right back to the establishment of Saudi Arabia, which was a British invention in the beginning."

He adds: "You need to read the history of the whole of the Middle East to realise the malevolent influence of British colonial policies within the whole region. That is well documented, but needs to be better understood...one of my passions is to improve history teaching in the totality of our education system, to understand the brutality of colonialism and imperialism."

Saudi Arabia is the recipient of around [40%](#) of all Britain's arms exports. The major contractor is UK firm BAE Systems, which has sold weaponry worth at least [£17.6bn](#) to the Saudis since it began its war on Yemen. The UK-supported Saudi air campaign in Yemen has routinely involved war crimes, including the [bombing](#) of schools and hospitals.

But Corbyn's Labour threatened to upset this cosy UK-Saudi '[special relationship](#)' for the first time.

"I met with the most extraordinary levels of lobbying and opposition from Labour MPs."

"I pushed that we as a party make a declaration that we would cease all arms trade to Saudi Arabia," Corbyn tells me, adding that he also "intervened to make sure that the Saudi delegation would not be welcomed as observers to the Labour Party conference. There was a big pushback against that by a lot of people, and I said, 'No, whilst they are bombing Yemen and we are opposed to arms sales to Saudi Arabia, that stands.'"

Corbyn says he then put forward a parliamentary motion to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia. "I met with the most extraordinary levels of lobbying and opposition from Labour MPs who said 'it's damaging jobs, it's damaging major British companies, British Aerospace and others, and you cannot go ahead with this, this will cause consternation and damage within our communities and constituencies'.

"I said, 'Look, I fully understand the employment implications over a long period on this, but if we're serious about human rights, and we are – and you all are, apparently – then this has to be the policy: we suspend arms sales and we protect those jobs in order to convert those industries into something else'".

In October 2016, Corbyn brought this [vote](#) to the House of Commons calling for the cessation of UK support for the Saudi war machine. One hundred Labour MPs either voted against or abstained.

"It was the biggest rebellion ever against my time as leader of the party," Corbyn says. "I was appalled, saddened, disappointed by that. And it just shows how deep the pressure of the arms trade is...the motor force of foreign policy is often driven by the interests of those that export arms."

He adds:

"Look at who funds the think tanks. Look at who sets up the seminars. Look at who places the articles in papers saying, 'There's a big tension building up here'...We all understand that. How do you resolve these tensions, do you throw arms at it? Do you start another war somewhere...knowing full well all that money spent on those arms by any one country is money not spent on schools, not spent on hospitals, not spent on housing, not spent on feeding people."

The three most influential foreign policy think-tanks in Britain – [RUSI](#), [Chatham House](#), and [IISS](#) – are all funded by an array of the world’s largest arms companies.

“The power of the arms lobby is absolutely massive in this country,” Corbyn says, before asking, “why don’t we wind down the rhetoric, wind up the peace, and start supporting peace initiatives and peace processes? All wars end in a conference. All wars end in some kind of agreement. Why don’t we cut out the middle phase, and go to the end?”



Medical teams carry body bags containing corpses of the 70 people killed in a Saudi air strike on a prison in Saada, northwest Yemen, on January 25, 2022. (Photo: AFP via Getty Images)

Labour Friends of Israel

Another break with the bipartisan consensus in UK foreign policy under Corbyn was his position on Israel.

Israel is a [serial violator](#) of international human rights law, and is judged to be practising apartheid against the Palestinians by both the US and UK’s top human rights groups, [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#). Leading Israeli group B’Tselem has also reached the same [conclusion](#).

As with Saudi Arabia, British support for Israel is extensive and multi-faceted, and includes aiding its [combat operations](#) against Palestinians. But both Corbyn’s election manifestos [called](#) for stopping British arms going to Israel that are used to violate the human rights of Palestinian civilians.

“You were the first pro-Palestinian leader of a major party for a long time, which was controversial,” I tell him.

“I think probably the first one,” Corbyn shoots back.

I had thought maybe Michael Foot, the last leftwing leader of Labour from 1980-83, had

been in favour of Palestinian human rights.

“I don’t recall Michael Foot ever saying very much about it,” Corbyn clarifies, continuing: “My view is that I support the Palestinian people — and to end the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. And what we had in our manifestos was full recognition of an independent state of Palestine.”

But Corbyn’s position – which is the same as the British government’s [declared stance](#) – caused a huge backlash from groups in Britain lobbying on Israel’s behalf. One of them was Labour Friends of Israel (LFI), a parliamentary group which [says](#) it “campaigns for a negotiated two-state solution for two peoples”.

I ask Corbyn if it’s becoming of a nominally progressive political party to have a lobby group within it representing an apartheid state?

“Should the party have taken more robust action against the Labour Friends of Israel for its behaviour? Yes.”

“I’m not opposed to there being friends of particular countries or places all around the world within the party, I think that’s a fair part of the mosaic of democratic politics,” he says. “What I am concerned about is the funding that goes with it — and the apparently very generous funding that Labour Friends of Israel gets from, I presume, the Israeli government.”

LFI does not disclose its [funders](#), but a 2017 undercover [documentary](#) by Al-Jazeera showed it is very close to the Israeli embassy in London.

In one piece of undercover [footage](#) taken at the Labour conference in 2016, then LFI chairperson and Labour MP Joan Ryan is seen talking to Shai Masot, an Israeli diplomat from the embassy. She asks him, “What happened with the names we put into the [Israeli] embassy, Shai?”

Masot replies: “Just now we’ve got the money, it’s more than one million pounds, it’s a lot of money.”

In another conversation, this time filmed outside a London pub, Michael Rubin, then parliamentary officer for LFI, [admits](#) that LFI and the Israeli embassy “work really closely together, but a lot of it is behind the scenes”. He adds that “the [Israeli] embassy helps us quite a lot. When bad stories come out about Israel, the embassy sends us information so that we can counter it.”

Currently, 75 Labour MPs – well [over a third](#) of the total – are “supporters” or “officers” of LFI, including Keir Starmer and nearly all his senior shadow ministers. Another 38 Labour Lords are also [signed up](#). Last month, shadow health secretary Wes Streeting was [in Israel](#) with LFI.

I ask Corbyn why Labour took no action when the Al-Jazeera revelations were broadcast.

“We did actually protest about the contents of the revelations by the Al Jazeera documentary,” Corbyn tells me. “Should the party have taken more robust action against the Labour Friends of Israel for its behaviour? Yes. Remember, this was a time

when many of the senior bureaucracy of the Labour Party were actively undermining me”.

He continues: “Did we underestimate this before I became leader? Yes, we did.”



Israel's ambassador to Britain, Tzipi Hotovely, speaks at Labour Friends of Israel's annual lunch in November 2021. (Photo: LFI)

Anti-semitism crisis

How much does Corbyn think the anti-semitism crisis which engulfed him was a result of his pro-Palestinian political position?

“Very largely that is the case,” he tells me. “I have spent my life fighting racism in any form, in any place whatsoever. My parents spent their formative years fighting the rise of Nazism in Britain, and that is what I’ve been brought up doing. And when in the 1970s the National Front were on the march in Britain, I was one of the organisers of the big Wood Green demonstration to try to stop the National Front marching through.”

“And somehow or other I was accused of being anti-semitic,” Corbyn continues. “The allegations against me were foul, dishonest and utterly disgusting and appalling from people who should know better and do know better. People that have known me for 40 years, never once complained about anything I’d ever said or done in terms of anti-racism, until I became leader of the Labour Party. Interesting coincidence of timing. Disgusting allegations which obviously we sought to rebut at all times.

“And I’ll be forever grateful for the support given by Jewish socialists, the many Jewish members of the Labour Party all over the country, and of course the local Jewish community in my constituency.”

On the accusations against him, he adds: “It was personal, it was vile, it was disgusting, and it remains so.”

What happened to Corbyn was an extreme example of a tried-and-tested tactic used by pro-Israel groups across the world: the attempt to [smear critics](#) of Israeli policy as anti-semitic. US Senator [Bernie Sanders](#), novelist [Sally Rooney](#), and [Ben & Jerry's](#) ice cream company are all recent cases.

“The tactic is to say that somebody is intrinsically anti-semitic and it sticks and then the media parrot it and repeat it the whole time,” Corbyn says.

“Then the abuse appears on social media, the abusive letters appear, the abusive phone calls appear, and all of that. And it’s very horrible and very nasty and is designed to be very isolating and designed to also take up all of your energies in rebutting these vile allegations, which obviously we did. But it tends to distract away from the fundamental message about peace, about justice, about social justice, about economy and all of that.”

The Conservative strategy for the 2019 election seemed to be to stop Labour gaining any momentum with their policies by bogging them down in anti-semitism [accusations](#), while [obsessively](#) pushing the “Get Brexit Done” message. It worked.

Corbyn was always presented by the media as a radical outlier in the British parliament, at odds with its traditions and history. In a sense that is true – his policies as leader put peace and justice above establishment interests – but Corbyn is also a very traditional English radical.

He believes passionately in the parliamentary system and is a stickler for its various mechanisms – committees, early day motions, parliamentary questions. He is prone to go off on long tangents about the minutiae of parliamentary procedure, and his surprise when it doesn’t always work the way it should even smacks of a certain naivety. In this regard, he is similar to his hero Salvador Allende.

But Corbyn is above all a deeply-committed constituency MP. On the way out I ask him if he’s going to the final Arsenal game of the season on the weekend. “I am,” he says, suddenly looking very serious. “I’m going early to meet the stadium manager because some of the people who live in flats next to where the away fan buses park are complaining that the exhaust is upsetting them. We’re going to try to see if we can sort it out.”

Surrounded by the political circus, he is getting on with what he does best: representing his community. But with the left gaining from [France](#) to [Colombia](#), it may be that the final act of Corbyn’s unlikely climb to the summit of British politics is yet to be written.

At one point, I make the mistake of saying he was a historic problem for the British establishment. “Why are you speaking in the past tense?”, he cut in quickly. I think it was a joke, but maybe not.

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