

U.K. Prime Minister Sunak's Message to Israel: Carry On with the Slaughter

Sunak's visit to Israel is a shaming day for Britain. It marks the moment that all those claims to represent fairness, decency and the rule of law have been abandoned

By [Peter Osborne](#)

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Margaret Thatcher, [Britain's](#) most feted post-war prime minister, was fiercely pro-Jewish and a powerful enemy of antisemitism.

But she was never afraid to call out [Israeli](#) war crimes, and did so repeatedly.

When the [Israeli army](#) stood by in September 1982 as Christian Phalangists slaughtered [Palestinian](#) refugees and [Lebanese](#) citizens in the Shatila and Sabra refugee camps, she [described the massacres](#) as "an act of pure barbarism".

And, as historian David Cronin has exposed in an [illuminating article](#) for Declassified, she wrote to then US President Ronald Reagan of "an urgent need for a balanced policy", adding that "unlimited support for Israel can only lead to growing polarisation and despair in the Arab world".

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who [flew into Tel Aviv](#) to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 19 October, loves to [present himself](#) as the heir to Margaret Thatcher.

This is nonsense.

The historical record shows that Thatcher would have arrived in Tel Aviv swinging her handbag. Of course, she would have extended her deepest sympathy to Israel for the attack on 7 October. But she would also – as a strong supporter of Israel – have given Netanyahu a stern lecture on morality, international law – and global statesmanship.

What a contrast with pitiful Sunak, who has come to Israel as Netanyahu's poodle.

Reckless Language

Sunak made a mistake when he expressed [Britain's "unequivocal" support](#) for Israel, thus giving Netanyahu, leader of the most far-right government in the country's history, carte blanche to order war crimes.

Sunak's reckless language means that Britain is already [complicit in the carnage](#) committed [across Gaza](#) by Israeli bombing over the last 12 days, the destruction of hospitals and civilian infrastructure, the targeting of schools, the wiping out of [entire families](#), and the slaughter of [approaching 4,000](#) Palestinians.

To be fair, this policy of giving Israel impunity to commit war crimes did not start with Sunak.

It was reaffirmed recently by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson who, in a letter to the Conservative Friends of Israel in April 2021, announced that he would [block an International Criminal Court](#) investigation into war crimes committed by Israel.

In a further show of support for Israel, on 18 October, Sunak ordered Britain to abstain on the United Nations resolution calling for "humanitarian pauses" in order to deliver essential aid to save lives in Gaza.

Britain was the only country [to abstain](#) apart from [Russia](#), with the [US vetoing the resolution](#).

Netanyahu would have got the message: carry on bombing.

I have studied Sunak's comments to the media and speeches in parliament. There has not been one mention, let alone condemnation, of Israel's declared policy of collective punishment, as formally set out by Israeli defence minister, Yoav Gallant, with his [announcement](#) of a "complete siege of the Gaza Strip" with "no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed". Even though such action is illegal under international law.

Sunak's government is seemingly untroubled by Gallant's claim that Israel was fighting "[human animals](#)".

Gallant has since made the [terrible](#) statement that Israel "will eliminate everything" in Gaza. No condemnation from Sunak or his government. Many Palestinians understandably see this as genocidal language.

Murderous message

Gallant, remember, is the minister in charge of Israeli troops.

He is sending a murderous message to the soldiers under his authority who, if Israeli plans go ahead, will soon be entering the densely populated Gazan enclave, home to 2.3 million people.

Meanwhile, Sunak has already deployed [a naval task force](#) – including a company of Royal Marines, two ships and three helicopters – to the Eastern Mediterranean in support of Israel.

According to a British government statement, this military package will “reinforce regional stability”. Yet Sunak imposed no conditions in return for this support. No demands for restraint. No reminders of Israel’s solemn duty to protect civilian life.

When asked by Matt Frei of Channel 4 News whether he would be urging restraint on Israel, Sunak wouldn’t even answer.

This is especially remarkable given the outbreak of dehumanising language among Israel’s political and media elite over the past few days.

The activist Yehuda Shaul has compiled a collection of such quotes. They are beyond chilling. Likud MP Revital Gottlieb [calls on Israel](#) to “bring down buildings! Bomb without distinction! Flatten Gaza. Without mercy!”

Another Likud MP, Ariel Kallner, calls for “[Nakba to the enemy](#) now”.

This deranged discourse has raised no concern from Sunak’s Downing Street. Not even an eyebrow. There’s been no rebuke, and it’s easy to see why. The most senior politicians in Israel are at it. Up to and including President Isaac Herzog himself. “Nobody is innocent in Gaza,” [according to him](#).

Fair Game for Slaughter

Think of the licence to kill this grim statement from Israel’s head of state sends out to Israeli troops ahead of the looming invasion.

According to Herzog, Gaza’s civilians are fair game for the slaughter.

There’s no evidence this troubles Sunak, who met Herzog on his visit to Tel Aviv. Sunak’s message: carry on with the slaughter.

Israel has killed more than [1,500 children](#) in Gaza since the latest bombing began. Not even a passing mention.

In the West Bank, Palestinians are under [systematic settler attack](#) amid fears of a wave of ethnic cleansing. No mention.

At one point, Sunak even extended his sycophancy towards Netanyahu into servility, telling the Israeli prime minister at their joint press conference that “I know that you are taking every precaution to avoid harming civilians” – a lie which insults the memory of the thousands of Palestinians killed or injured in Israeli bombing raids over the last 12 days.’

All this means that Sunak’s visit to Israel is a shaming day for Britain. It marks the moment that all my country’s claims to represent fairness, decency and the rule of law – admittedly always hypocritical and self-interested – have been abandoned.

Prime Minister [@netanyahu](#), I stand with you in Israel’s darkest hour.

I welcome your commitment to ensure routes into Gaza are opened for humanitarian aid.

I support your work to secure the release of hostages, to strengthen your security and to end the threat from Hamas. pic.twitter.com/ZrLJALTzBN

Sunak's moral vacuum alarms even the dictators and despots whom Britain counts as allies across the wider Middle East. The British prime minister apparently plans to make a series of visits across the region in the days ahead.

Exactly where is being kept secret, officially for security reasons. The real reason, it is not difficult to guess, is that Sunak is no longer welcome and fears being snubbed.

Ever since the Second World War, Britain has claimed to stand up for what we fondly call liberal values. He's made these values worthless. It is hard to exaggerate the scale of this betrayal.

I also think that Sunak's moral negligence is a tragedy for Israel itself. The last thing Israel needs at this dark moment is a blank cheque to commit further war crimes.

Sunak had an opportunity, as a true friend of Israel, to urge restraint. He has not taken it.

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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.

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