

UK: Contenders for Boris Johnson's Crown Stress Fealty to Israel. Jonathan Cook

Following Israel's recent savage attack on Gaza, the last two Tory candidates for PM are outcompeting each other in supporting it

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As [Israel](#) unleashed a surprise wave of air strikes on [Gaza](#) last Friday, the two remaining Conservative politicians vying to replace disgraced Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) publicised [letters](#) vowing fealty to Israel.

Their timing underscored the degree to which British politicians on both sides of the aisle have now joined their American counterparts in making commitment to Israel a defining issue in their campaigns for highest office.

Liz Truss, the foreign secretary, and Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, trumpeted their pro-Israel credentials over the weekend, as Israel killed 45 Palestinians, including 16 children, and injured hundreds more. Israel said several Islamic Jihad leaders – the intended targets – were among the dead. A ceasefire [went](#) into effect late on Sunday night.

As expected, western leaders [came out](#) solidly in support of Israel, even though on this occasion there was not even the pretence that Israel was "retaliating" for rockets fired out of Gaza. Israel initiated the hostilities, [claiming](#) its strikes were meant to prevent an alleged attack by the Palestinian resistance group Islamic Jihad with an anti-tank missile.

One can imagine how politicians in [the United States](#) and Europe would have reacted had a Palestinian faction justified firing rockets into Israel unprovoked on the basis that it wished to deter future Israeli air strikes. But in any case, if deterrence really was Israel's aim, its attack had precisely the opposite effect. Entirely predictably, Islamic Jihad [responded](#) by firing hundreds of rockets into Israel.

In fact, though it is never mentioned by western politicians or media, Palestinians, unlike Israel, actually have a right in international law to resist Israel militarily – and not only because Israel has been belligerently [occupying](#) their lands for decades.

Israel has additionally subjected Gaza to [a 15-year blockade](#) that has tightly controlled who and what is allowed in and out of the tiny, heavily overcrowded coastal enclave. Gaza has been left in ruins by a series of Israeli attacks over more than a decade – what the Israeli army calls “[mowing the lawn](#)”. Gaza's trapped 2.1 million inhabitants [suffer serious shortages](#) of food, clean water, medicines and electricity. Malnutrition and poverty are endemic.

Last year, the head of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, [observed](#):

“If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza.”

That hell is entirely manmade – by Israel.

Double standard

Perhaps the most flagrantly [hypocritical comment](#) on the weekend's events came from Yevgen Korniychuk, the Ukrainian ambassador to Israel. He [tweeted](#) out a message of support for Israel that turned reality on its head.

He expressed “deep sympathy” for the Israeli public, suggesting that Israel, like Ukraine, was suffering “a very brutal attack by its neighbour”. He added: “Attacks on women and children are reprehensible.”

But it was Israel that initiated the attack, not the Palestinians. And it was women and children in Gaza, not in Israel, who died under Israeli bombs.

Korniychuk's comments served to underscore the wider hypocrisy of western politicians who have expressed outrage at Russian aggression against Ukraine since its invasion in late February, but for years have either minimised or supported Israel's regular aggression against Gaza.

The double standard was starkly evident in the case of the two contenders for Johnson's crown. At the weekend, Truss and Sunak laid out their unwavering support for Israel at the very moment it was killing Palestinian civilians in Gaza. They did so to their party's main pro-Israel lobby group, [the Conservative Friends of Israel](#) (CFI).

Truss [averred](#): “The UK should stand side by side with Israel, now and well into the future. As Prime Minister, I would be at the forefront of this mission.” Comments from Truss, the bookmakers' favourite, particularly stick in the craw.

As foreign secretary, she has been [outspoken](#) in condemning [Russia's](#) invasion, calling it an

“illegal occupation”. She has [backed](#) Britons going to fight against Russia. She has loudly [supported](#) sending weapons to help [Ukraine](#) defend itself. And she has [suggested](#) that the assets of Russian nationals frozen by the UK should be transferred to Ukraine.

Of course, Truss wishes to extend none of those supposedly principled positions supporting Ukrainians against Russian aggression to Palestinians facing Israeli aggression.

It is inconceivable that she would ever approve of sending arms to Palestinians so they could defend themselves from Israeli attack. Quite the contrary. Truss’s government has [increased arms sales to Israel](#) to record levels even as Israel chokes Gaza and Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem steal ever more Palestinian land.

It is also unthinkable that Truss would agree to freeze Israeli assets in the UK and use them to help reconstruct long-suffering Gaza. Or that she would back Britons going to fight with the Palestinian resistance against Israel’s suffocating blockade of Gaza.

Financial gain

Once again, what is treated as sacrosanct for Ukraine is denied absolutely to Palestinians, even though Israel’s crimes against the Palestinian people have been going on for decades, not months. But it is not just that Truss and Sunak are failing to uphold the same ethical and legal principles they espouse so vehemently in the case of Ukraine.

Their letters to CFI deny Palestinians any right – not just a military one – to resist their oppression from Israel, while the pair also promise to reward Israel regardless of how much it oppresses the Palestinians and breaks international law.

Remember, a spate of human rights groups recently [concluded](#) that Israel is an apartheid state, in its treatment of both Palestinians under occupation and those living as a minority inside a professedly “democratic” Israel.

That is all swept under the carpet, with neither Tory minister daring to alienate CFI. The organisation’s website revealed in 2014 that [four-fifths](#) of all Conservative MPs were CFI members. Its current website [reports](#) that since the 2015 general election it has taken more than 180 of them on trips to Israel, where they have been wined and dined by Israeli leaders.

More than a decade ago, [an investigation](#) by Channel 4 described CFI as “by far Britain’s most powerful pro-Israel lobbying group”. Its members were [reported](#) to have donated more than £10m (\$12m) to the party between 2001 and 2009. Which may explain why Truss wrote in her letter: “CFI members are some of our most valued, passionate and committed supporters. I have no doubt that the strength of the Conservative party’s support for the State of Israel stems in large part from the important role that you all play.”

That sounds a little too much like an admission that the Tory party’s – and her own – unconditional backing for Israel derives, at least in part, from the financial leverage exerted by wealthy pro-Israel donors. It was almost as an afterthought that Truss noted her commitment to Israel was also “because it is the right thing to do”.

'Incentivising' apartheid

As Truss and Sunak face separate hustings organised by CFI over the next few days, the pair will be encouraged to outcompete each other in demonstrating their loyalty to Israel.

That said, it is hard to imagine what more they can offer. Truss strongly hints that she wants to follow the example set by former US president Donald Trump and move the British embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in defiance of international law.

Peace talks that Israel has long stymied are [premised](#) on Palestinians receiving occupied East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Israel has been actively preempting that possibility by helping Jewish settlers [take over](#) Palestinian lands in the city and making life ever harder for the Palestinian population there to drive them out.

Truss said she had been holding conversations about where the embassy is sited with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid. Lapid, who approved the latest attacks on Gaza, [backed](#) Trump's relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018.

For Trump, the move was [intended](#) to pander to his electoral base of US evangelicals. They [wish](#) to shore up Jewish control of the region to bring about an end times in which Christians alone rise to be with God.

Now Truss appears ready to emulate Trump.

In her letter, the foreign minister also [promises](#) to "cement" Britain's ties with Israel by expediting [a Free Trade Agreement](#) being drafted by the government. Truss has said "closer trade" is a priority.

Human rights groups like Amnesty International have [warned](#) against Britain hastily negotiating such an agreement, warning that it may "incentivise Israel's system of apartheid", help Israel expand its illegal settlements and give a stamp of approval to Israeli efforts to annex Palestinian land under occupation.

Truss vows too a further crackdown on the international boycott movement, backing [a US-style bill](#) to prevent public bodies, including local councils, from [joining the BDS campaign](#) to divest funds from Israel for its illegal activities in the occupied territories.

She says BDS causes "needless division". Presumably the division that concerns her is antagonising Israel's aggressive lobbyists in the UK, not fuelling tensions with Palestinians, their supporters and human rights groups.

Given inaction by western governments, solidarity expressed through boycotts is effectively the only non-violent way for individuals and organisations to punish Israel – whether for its continuing crimes against ordinary Palestinians, or its efforts to steal and colonise their land, or its moves to frustrate the emergence of a Palestinian state.

By outlawing peaceful resistance to Israel's belligerent occupation, Truss would leave Palestinians and their supporters with a stark choice: either promote violent forms of resistance, or sit quietly while Israel inflicts death by a thousand cuts on Palestinian statehood and any hopes of peace.

Global power dynamics

Truss makes clear that she will characterise any effort to hold Israel to account as [“antisemitism”](#). She intends to silence criticism of Israel for its human rights abuses at the United Nations, one of the very few international forums where Israel faces scrutiny.

And she promises to toughen the UK’s stance towards Iran, the only counterweight to Israel’s military dominance in the Middle East.

Sunak is barely less extravagant in his advocacy for Israel. He too extols the Free Trade Agreement, calls for intensified intelligence cooperation with Israel against Iran, promises to outlaw boycotts, and grossly mischaracterises the Abraham Accords – signed by some Gulf states to further isolate the Palestinians- as a [“new era of peace”](#).

Whether it is Truss or Sunak who replaces Johnson, each is already committed to championing Israel against the Palestinians and crushing dissent at home.

The opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer is [not offering](#) any kind of corrective to the Conservatives’ lockstep support for Israel.

His predecessor, [Jeremy Corbyn](#), a strong supporter of justice for the Palestinians, [faced](#) a relentless, years’-long, evidence-free campaign tarring him as presiding over an institutionally antisemitic party. Starmer has learnt that lesson. During his campaign for the Labour leadership, he [declared](#) himself a Zionist, subscribing to an ideology that in practice insists Israel has a right to usurp Palestinian land and colonise it.

Since then, he has [ignored](#) a vote by his own party conference to declare Israel an apartheid state and deny it arms to oppress Palestinians. He has also [blurred](#) a long-accepted distinction between anti-Zionism, opposition to Israel’s oppression of Palestinians, and antisemitism, bigotry towards Jews.

Like Truss and Sunak, Starmer has unequivocally [supported](#) helping Ukrainians resist Russian aggression while denying that right to Palestinians under Israeli military occupation.

The truth, as illustrated by these bipartisan double standards, is that no UK party leader is prepared to found their foreign policy on genuine ethical principles or humanitarianism, whatever they claim.

Their kneejerk support for Israel follows from a recognition of global power dynamics. Western neocolonial interests are what sets the agenda in the oil-rich, conflict-prone Middle East, a region where the super-powerful lobbies of the fossil fuel industry and the arms manufacturers have so much at stake financially.

It is those narrow, cynical, elite interests that British governments serve, not some notion of the greater public good. Which is why Israel knows it is free to pound Gaza whenever it chooses – with no consequences, except for the Palestinians facing its bombs.

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