

My Lords. I welcome this debate, and wish to use the short time available to argue for a better understanding of Israel.

This task is urgent, because we see now a disturbing resurgence of anti-Zionism, bordering on the anti-Semitic, particularly – I regret to say – in sections of the Left in British politics today.

Israel is not, of course, above criticism. It is right that, when necessary, we should be critical of Israeli policy, conduct, and behaviour.

But too often this legitimate criticism of specific actions of Israel obscures the reality of Israel.

And when this reality is not heard, it creates space for those with uglier motivations to build support for false, grotesque analogies between Israel and apartheid South Africa or even Nazi Germany.

I fear that on the Left today what is in jeopardy is not just support for the conduct of Israel but for the concept of Israel. We even see senior figures praising as “friends” those who are committed to the violent destruction of the Jewish homeland.

Indeed, we now have the perverse situation where people who consider themselves to be progressive oppose Israel, in the belief they are standing up for liberal values and human rights. But in doing so side with totalitarian Islamist regimes that abuse human rights and prohibit basic liberties.

I believe it is the duty of progressives to stop this slide from opposition to specific policies of Israel to opposition to the very existence of Israel.

I want us to make the progressive case for a country where women have the right to vote, dress as they wish, and say what they wish, in a region where too often women are segregated and subjugated.

To make the case for a country committed to the free practice of religion for all, in a region where religious minorities are frequently suppressed and persecuted.

A country where gay people are not discriminated against, tortured, detained, or executed, as they are almost everywhere else in the region.

A country with a free press, freedom of expression, an independent judiciary, and strong trade unions – all lacking in almost all neighbouring countries.

My Lords, there is nothing progressive about siding with those that oppose the very values that we as a society strive to represent.

And there is nothing progressive about seeking to extinguish a beacon of democracy, modernity and pluralism in the Middle East.