

**BRITAIN AND THE  
MIDDLE EAST:  
PRIORITIES FOR  
THE NEXT LABOUR  
GOVERNMENT  
LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

# **LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL**

**WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION**

## **BRITAIN AND THE MIDDLE EAST: PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT LABOUR GOVERNMENT**

**LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

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# FOREWORD

## MICHAEL RUBIN

### Keir Starmer's Labour offers a progressive foreign policy

The contributions to this LFI publication show the wealth of opportunities for a Labour government to contribute positively to progressive goals in the Middle East.

Despite the huge challenges, action to advance the prospects of a two-state solution; deepen the bilateral relationship between Britain and Israel and oppose the effort to demonise and delegitimise the Jewish state; promote regional peace, security and prosperity; and support human rights, democracy and stronger civil societies is possible.

Nonetheless, as supporters of Israel, we have to acknowledge and recognise that the ideological character of the current Israeli government represents a particular hinderance to our progressive aspirations.

Labour's support for the State of Israel and its people has never been contingent upon the political complexion of the government in Jerusalem and has rightly always gone beyond politics. Past Labour governments have worked with administrations in Israel – such as those led by Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak – with which it has had great political affinity, and also others with which it has had far less in common – indeed, Netanyahu was prime minister when Labour went from opposition to government in 1997.

Sadly, Israel is hardly unique is experiencing the rise of a hard-right populist politics. It's a phenomenon which has swept European and US politics over the past decade.

Many of us have often disagreed with, and opposed, individual Israeli governments on all manner of issues. But Benjamin Netanyahu's self-serving efforts to emasculate the independence of the judiciary, and the repellent actions and rhetoric of his far-right allies, go beyond routine policy disagreements. They imperil both democratic norms and the rule of law. And they threaten what, for many of us, is so special about Israel's character: not simply that it is the homeland of the Jewish people but that it is a beacon of democracy, the rule of law and minority rights in the Middle East.

The Netanyahu government's actions and character have, however, produced a broad-based opposition movement which should give us cause for hope.

This is truly a movement of the Israeli people. Firmly rooted in the mainstream, patriotic centre of Israeli politics and not confined to the urban bastions of Israeli liberalism, it is a testament to the country's commitment to its founding democratic values. It is also a reminder that nowhere else in the Middle East would it be possible to see such a movement. At this difficult time, our job is to stand with the Israeli people as they defend their democracy, deepen our links to Israel's progressive centre-left, and remember that, even where it appears to be firmly entrenched, liberal democracy must be constantly nurtured and bolstered against the reactionary forces of the populist extreme right and left.

Here at home, the past decade has been a depressing one for supporters of a progressive foreign policy. The capture of the Labour leadership by the hard left led to the abandonment of the internationalist values which have underpinned the party's approach to the world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Labour's support for the western alliance; its solidarity with those fighting for democracy,

freedom, the rights of women, the LGBT+ community and other minorities; and its unequivocal rejection of extremists were compromised and sullied by a leadership which saw politics through the warped prism of the “anti-imperialist” New Left.

In the Middle East, that worldview shamefully produced inaction in the face of Assad and Putin’s war in Syria, equivocation when Iranians took to the streets against their brutal masters in 2019, and an utterly unhealthy obsession with the region’s only democracy alongside sympathy for its enemies. It also produced a shocking indifference to, and indulgence of, antisemitism within Labour’s own ranks. All of this flew in the face of Labour’s time-honoured values and traditions and its close ties to Britain’s Jewish community.

At the same time, the Conservatives have shredded Britain’s international reputation: undermining confidence in its word, weakening its status as a “development superpower” through “fierce and draconian” cuts, as Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office minister Andrew Mitchell put it, and vandalising much-valued institutions, such as the British Council and the BBC’s World Service.

Other than its attempts to strike threadbare trade deals to patch up the damage wrought by Brexit, the government shows a stunning disinterest in the Middle East. Through a combination of ideological navel-gazing and isolationist instincts, the Tory right has weakened Britain and failed to confront our enemies. No amount of empty tough talk can, for instance, disguise the fact that the government still refuses to proscribe Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – despite the multiple plots Ayatollah Khamenei’s ideological warriors are hatching on British soil. As Tehran’s ballistic missile and nuclear programmes threaten to menace the region, ministers have offered prevarication and procrastination in place of strategy. And, until last September’s protests hit the headlines, the government provided not a scintilla of solidarity to the Iranian people: failing consistently and repeatedly to use its new, much-vaunted post-Brexit sanctions regime to punish the regime’s human rights abusers and oligarchs.

Foreign policy moves few voters at general elections, as the Conservatives’ lack of interest and dismal record graphically shows. Ministers don’t want to govern, to engage in the hard graft of policymaking and decision-taking; preferring instead to position themselves for a potential post-election leadership contest.

Thankfully, and thanks to Keir Starmer’s leadership, voters at the next election will be offered a progressive alternative. It is one free of the stain of antisemitism and anti-Zionism and cognisant to the threat posed by the Iranian regime to Britain and its allies, most especially Israel. It is an agenda of global engagement, true to Labour’s heritage and values – and one in which LFI’s friends and supporters can have confidence, faith and optimism.

This is the fifth policy pamphlet LFI has released since Keir Starmer’s election as leader. We are hugely grateful to everyone who has contributed to its creation, particularly the authors for their fascinating chapters. We’ve collated and endorse their recommendations. We would also like to thank all our supporters, parliamentarians and allies for their continued support and endless encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues – particularly Robert Philpot and Sam Rubens – for all their work in making this publication a reality.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO BUILD STEPS TOWARDS A TWO-STATE SOLUTION

A Labour government should:

- 1** Support Joe Biden's agenda in coordination with European allies, to stabilise the Palestinian Authority (PA); promote Palestinian economic and infrastructure development; and dissuade the Israeli government from steps that would further undermine a two-state outcome or its own democratic credentials.
- 2** Re-establish UK investment in peacebuilding projects and host a meeting with international partners to agree the establishment of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.
- 3** Support steps towards the establishment of a viable, democratic and independent Palestinian state through renewed investment in the PA. This state-building investment should be linked to measures to end incitement and improve Palestinian governance and human rights.
- 4** Support a settlement freeze as part of a series of steps designed to narrow the parameters of the conflict and foster confidence. This step must be accompanied by, and be part of a process involving, reciprocal confidence-building measures on the part of the PA and Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia.
- 5** Encourage Israel and Egypt in efforts to secure a permanent ceasefire with Hamas as a first step towards the reunification of Gaza with the West Bank under the authority of the PA.
- 6** Work with international partners to convene a donors' conference focused upon an emergency infrastructure plan for Gaza. A Labour government must recognise that, given the level of indiscriminate attacks launched from Gaza by terror groups since 2005, Israel retains important and legitimate security concerns. Assistance to Gaza must thus be accompanied by the establishment of a robust, round-the-clock and credible monitoring system to ensure that reconstruction materials are not diverted by Hamas into illicit military purposes.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO MAKE BRITAIN A KEY GLOBAL PARTNER FOR PROGRESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A Labour government should:

- 1** Restore the minister for the Middle East portfolio on its first day in office to ensure the region is, once again, represented at the policy-making top table.
- 2** Position the UK as the key global partner for progress in this changing region and a key partner for the region's economic diversification agenda.
- 3** Ensure the UK should continue to push back against regressive forces in the region, such as the increasingly hardline and repressive regime in Iran and Islamist terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran's expansionist Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).
- 4** Work to build support for liberal democratic values in the Middle East by ensuring development aid supports measures which strengthen civil society, promotes the rights of women, LGBT+ people and other minorities, and builds a free and independent media.
- 5** Conduct a review with the Trade Union Congress to establish a fund to support the growth and strengthening of independent trade unions in the region, recognising that, as well as being a crucial force in enhancing the rights, living standards and conditions of working people, trade unions are crucial civic society institutions which cross sectarian and religious divides.
- 6** Work constructively and creatively to deepen growing ties in the region, playing to the UK's strengths in innovation, education and diplomacy.
- 7** Begin reversing cuts to the international aid budget, the diplomatic service and British Council and restoring the UK's global influence as the fiscal situation allows.
- 8** Launch an urgent review with the BBC of the World Service's output to Arabic and Persian audiences and the impact of the closure of the BBC Arabic and BBC Persian radio services.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRITAIN AND ISRAEL

A Labour government should:

- 1 Vigorously pursue the adoption and promotion of a UK-Israel free trade agreement.
- 2 Enhance bilateral military ties, for instance in the form of further cyber cooperation or joint training exercises between the IAF and RAF.
- 3 Examine how Israeli innovation could assist the UK in dealing with the most pressing challenges of healthcare and the environment.
- 4 Work to ensure the UK is part of the solution to help Europe diversify its energy sources away from Russia by supporting its allies in the East Med gas forum and backing the growing alliance between Israel, Greece and Cyprus.
- 5 Encourage the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to consider the increased impact which would result from greater collaboration with the Mashav, the Agency for International Development Cooperation in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## TO CHALLENGE THE ANTI-ISRAEL BIAS IN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

A Labour government should:

- 1 Commission a statistical analysis of institutional anti-Israel bias at the UN and other multilateral organisations, including UNESCO, the WHO and the Commission of Women, to inform a review of Britain's future voting behaviour in these bodies.
- 2 Work with allies to reform the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Britain should work with the US, Canada and Australia to limit the election of human rights abusers to the UNHRC.
- 3 Decide that, until the UNHRC has removed its institutional anti-Israel bias, which is exemplified by agenda Item 7, Britain will vote against all resolutions condemning Israel at the council.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO COUNTER THE IRANIAN THREAT

A Labour government should:

- 1 Proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, as pledged.
- 2 Establish a more clear and transparent Magnitsky sanctions system, with publicly available and consistently applied criteria underpinning the reasons why individuals are sanctioned, and a regular review process.
- 3 Shut down Khamenei's ideological centres in the UK that have been consistently propagating Islamist extremism and expel Seyed Hashem Moosavi, the supreme leader's official representative in the UK.
- 4 Immediately establish a taskforce for identifying and sanctioning Iranian regime oligarchs, elites, and proxies in the UK, just as it has in relation to Putin's regime.

# INTRODUCTION

## STEVE MCCABE MP

### A new Middle East would await a new Labour government

Just over two years ago, Labour Friends of Israel published a [paper](#), The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach which explored the dramatic changes which had swept the region over the past decade.

It also asked the question of how Labour's foreign policy should respond to these shifts.

At the time, barely a year into Keir Starmer's leadership and with the defeat of 2019 still fresh, talk of a Labour government still looked a somewhat remote possibility.

Now, thanks to the process of radical renewal which Keir has brought to the leadership, Labour is, once again, a credible party of government.

That credibility is evident in Labour's approach to the world. Under David Lammy, Labour has returned to the internationalist tradition which has been the hallmark of our party's periods in government from Clement Attlee to Gordon Brown.

Britain and the Middle East: Priorities for the next Labour Government reflects Labour's shift over the past three years: a party no longer animated by the mindset of opposition, but one engaged in thinking through the tough choices and responsibilities of government.

This publication thus attempts to sketch the challenges and opportunities which a new Labour government will face in the Middle East and offers proposals for responding to them.

### A MIXED INHERITANCE

Much has changed since Labour left office in 2010. The Conservatives' low aspirations for our country have left Britain weaker on the world stage and less confident in its ability to help effect progressive change.

But we must not forget the fundamental strengths which Britain maintains.

In terms of military, economic and diplomatic power, the UK remains an important global player. Our military is [ranked](#) fifth in the world; our economy is the [sixth](#) largest; and we remain one of only five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Despite the cuts imposed by the Conservatives, the UK's soft power – exemplified by the BBC, British Council and the international aid budget – is substantial. While the government has shamefully abandoned the 0.7 percent GNI target, our overall [spend](#) is akin to that of France and behind only the US, Germany and Japan.

With regard to the Middle East, these assets are supplemented by particular strengths. The UK has good relations, based on strong historic ties, with both Israel and much of the Arab world. These ties are reinforced by shared security concerns and strong economic bonds. Additionally, the Northern Ireland peace process over the past 30 years provides Britain with conflict-resolution experience, skills and insights which, while recognising the very real differences between the Troubles and the situation in the Middle East, have considerable potential value.

Nonetheless, as a number of the authors in this publication outline, the situation faced by an incoming Labour government in the next 18 months will be very different from that which Tony Blair encountered on coming into office in 1997. As Dr Toby Greene notes, while the Oslo peace process was already foundering by this point, “the last time Labour came to power the focus was on maintaining momentum towards a conflict-ending agreement. Now the focus must be preventing further deterioration and seizing opportunities for incremental improvement.”

At the same time, as Kasra Aarabi outlines, the threat posed by the Iranian regime is much greater than it was in 1997. The Islamic Republic’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes continue to grow in strength, while its neo-imperialist influence – exercised through proxy armies such as Hezbollah – has vastly expanded throughout the region. Labour came to office three weeks before the surprise election of Mohammad Khatami, who attempted, ultimately unsuccessfully, a programme of limited political reform and détente with the west. Today, the nefarious Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its allies appear to have consolidated their stranglehold on power, exemplified by the rigged contest which brought Ebrahim Raisi to the presidency in 2021.

The threat posed by Tehran is not simply regional. In recent years, there have been a series of [revelations](#) about IRGC-related extremist activity in the UK, with experts suggesting that the two primary targets are the Jewish community and the Iranian diaspora. In February, the police and the security services [revealed](#) they had foiled 15 plots by Iran to either kidnap or kill British or UK-based individuals it considers “enemies of the regime”. Inexplicably, however, the UK government refuses to proscribe the IRGC.

On other fronts, the picture is more hopeful.

Bilateral ties between Britain and Israel, as Richard Pater and Dr Jack Omer-Jackaman write, have entered a “golden age” with the UK now the Jewish state’s largest European trading partner, plans for a free trade agreement advancing, and the two countries mutually benefitting from shared research among their respective world-class universities and research institutes.

Within the region, Israel’s position has improved since Labour was last in office. Three years before Blair became prime minister, Jordan normalised relations with Israel (only the second country in the region to do so). While it would be 26 years before another country did so, agreements were reached in quick succession with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. Moreover, as Matthew Godwin and Jemima Shelley outline, unlike the “cold peace” which exists between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, the Abraham Accords have “brought Israel together with many of its neighbours like never before”. The prospects of an agreement with Saudi Arabia also appear greater than at any time since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Indeed, Godwin and Shelley suggest, the pessimistic lens with which many in the west view the region – as a source of problems rather than solutions – is belied by its ambitious reaction to the challenge of climate change; economic diversification and accelerating entrepreneurship; and an emerging youth demographic which reject religious fundamentalism and women’s exclusion in favour of jobs, growth and peace.

And, yet, as John Spellar discusses, the human rights situation in the Middle East remains parlous, while the death of Tunisia’s democratic experiment earlier this year left Israel, once again, as the only country in the region where the people get to freely choose their government. As Freedom House reported: “popular demand for greater freedom in the Middle East continues to run up against some of the most entrenched systems of repression in the world”.

In Israel itself, the Netanyahu government’s judicial reforms have raised deep concern for the future of Israel’s democratic institutions and the system of checks and balances. Moreover, the presence, for the

first time, of far-right ministers within the government, and their hardline agenda, represents a further barrier to easing the conflict with the Palestinians and is clearly slowing the momentum of the Abraham Accords process. This is both tragic and stands in contrast to the approach adopted by the short-lived “unity government” in 2021-22.

The warming relations between Israel and many of its regional neighbours should also not blind us, as Meta Ramsay shows, to the continuous efforts to demonise and delegitimise the Jewish state in international institutions, most notably the United Nations General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

## A FUTURE AGENDA

As the contributions in this publication shows, none of these challenges mean that a Labour government should regard its role as nothing more than a passive observer of developments in the Middle East.

As Diana Johnson argues, Labour should adopt an approach which is “pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, and pro-peace”.

This would involve supporting a settlement freeze as part of a process involving reciprocal confidence-building measures on the part of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia.

It would also see Britain back steps towards the establishment of a viable, democratic and independent Palestinian state through renewed investment in the PA linked to measures to end incitement and improve Palestinian governance and human rights.

It would seek to address the situation in Gaza on both a political and humanitarian level: encouraging Israel and Egypt in efforts to secure a permanent ceasefire with Hamas as a first step towards the reunification of Gaza with the West Bank under the authority of the PA, while working with international partners to convene a donors’ conference focused upon an emergency infrastructure plan for Gaza.

Finally, the experience of the International Fund for Ireland should lead Britain to become the world’s leading advocate of civic society peacebuilding in Israel-Palestine. UK international aid would prioritise investment in people-to-people projects as part of a drive to establish an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

Like the Blair-Brown government, Labour should also seek to deepen the bilateral relationship between Britain and Israel. As Richard Pater and Dr Jack Omer-Jackaman outline, this would involve pursuing the adoption and implementation of the free trade agreement between Britain and Israel and enhancing bilateral military, tech and international aid ties. As Meta Ramsay argues, a Labour government should also oppose the effort to demonise and delegitimise Israel in international institutions by reviewing Britain’s voting record and pushing for reforms of the UNHRC.

This publication also outlines a rich agenda for a Labour government to promote peace, progress and human rights and democracy in the wider region. At the outset, a Labour government should re-establish the minister for the Middle East portfolio to ensure the region is, once again, represented at the policy-making top table.

As Matthew Godwin and Jemima Shelley suggest, Britain should work constructively and creatively to deepen growing ties in the region, especially the Abraham Accords process, playing to its strengths in innovation, education and diplomacy. This would also see Britain established as a key partner for the region’s economic diversification agenda.

A Labour government should also, as John Spellar outlines, work to ensure development aid supports measures which strengthen civil society, promotes the rights of women, LGBT+ people and other minorities, and builds a free and independent media. It should also recognise the unique role of the trade union movement in crossing sectarian divides and work with the TUC to establish a fund to support the growth and strengthening of independent trade unions in the region. The Magnitsky sanctions regime is a welcome additional tool to punish those who abuse human rights. However, the current government's failure, [highlighted](#) in LFI's paper on Iran last year, to utilise it against the Iranian regime (only now belatedly corrected), shows the need for a clearer and more transparent system.

As the fiscal situation allows, it is also vital that a Labour government restores Britain's soft power – so methodically and painstakingly accrued by the Blair-Brown governments – by reversing cuts to the international development aid budget and institutions such as the British Council. It should also launch an urgent review with the BBC of the World Service's output to Arabic and Persian audiences and the impact of the closure of the BBC Arabic and BBC Persian radio services.

At present, the UK government's policy on Iran has been weak. Kasra Aarabi suggests the next Labour government must pursue three concrete policy actions. The first would be to shut down Khamenei's ideological centres in the UK, which are spreading hatred and encouraging violence. Second, the UK should target and sanction those profiting from the Iranian regime. Finally, the UK must proscribe the IRGC with immediate effect.

The challenges faced by an incoming Labour government in the Middle East are different, and, in some regards, greater, than those faced by the party when it came into office in 1997. But beyond preparing for power with an imaginative, evidence-based policy agenda, it must also draw confidence from Britain's ability to work with its allies to advance its goals, as well inspiration from the internationalist values which have guided its predecessors' actions in government.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN ARENA: LESSONS FROM THE LAST LABOUR GOVERNMENT

DR TOBY GREENE

**An incoming Labour government will face a range of challenges very different from those which confronted the party in 1997**

The 1997-2010 Labour government coincided with a pivotal period for the Israeli-Palestinian arena, which included the collapse of the Oslo process, the outbreak of the Second Intifada, and Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

A future Labour government will face a situation that is markedly different. While basic truths about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain constant, the politics within Israel, the Palestinian territories, and the region, as well as the global political context and Britain's place in it, are radically different.

The last time Labour came to power the focus was on maintaining momentum towards a conflict-ending agreement. Now the focus must be on preventing further deterioration and seizing opportunities for incremental improvement.

## THE LAST LABOUR GOVERNMENT

The Blair government entered office with the Oslo process foundering. Benjamin Netanyahu was serving his first term in office, which lasted from 1996 to 1999, following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Labour's broad position was consistent with the Major government it replaced: to back US-led diplomacy in support of a conflict-ending agreement and, against that backdrop, to promote warm bilateral UK-Israel relations, in the context of deepening relations between Israel and the EU.

The overarching approach was underpinned by assumptions that remain true today: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is defined by the legitimate claims to self-determination of two peoples, Jews and Palestinians, within the same territory. A negotiated two-state solution is the only model through which these claims can be reconciled. Any alternative inevitably curtails the rights of one party or the other, and is a recipe for continued conflict and instability. Palestinian sovereignty is urgent and just, but should be realised alongside a secure Israel.

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were both personally warm towards Israel, viewing it as a legitimate expression of Jewish self-determination and a democracy – attitudes bolstered by the strong relations each had with the British Jewish community. Their views contrasted with the Labour left perspective of Israel as an illegitimate colonial implant. For New Labour, displaying a positive attitude towards Israel also aligned with a wider agenda to distance the party from the legacy of the Labour left.

In office, Blair was gripped by a personal passion for the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and consistently sought a role reflecting his ambition for Britain as a global actor and himself as a global statesman. He believed that influence with the parties was derived from personal trust and private persuasion, and therefore Blair measured his public criticisms of Israel over settlement construction and the use of military force.

The collapse of the Oslo process and the eruption of the Second Intifada, which raged from 2000 to 2004, came after PLO leader Yasser Arafat rejected proposals for a two-state solution tabled by the-then Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, and Bill Clinton at Camp David in summer 2000. The Second Intifada overlapped with the period of the “war on terror” triggered by the 9/11 attacks.

Blair rejected the idea – prevalent on the left – that western support for Israel was one of the root causes of Islamist extremism, which he saw as a malign anti-western ideology that needed to be confronted and defeated. But he did believe that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would take away a tool exploited by extremists to mobilise support.

Under considerable pressure from within Labour over the Palestinian issue, therefore, he pushed the Bush administration hard to reinvigorate the peace process in parallel to the Iraq invasion. While this may have contributed to the development of the [2003 roadmap](#), Blair’s difficulties in securing a more consistent focus from the Bush administration, and his attempts to influence Israelis and Palestinians directly, generally exposed the limitations of UK leverage.

In the absence of any prospect for a conflict-ending agreement, Blair was always pragmatic, embracing opportunities for incremental progress. Although many were sceptical of the-then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon’s unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements in 2005, Blair embraced it as an opportunity to move in the direction of a two-state outcome.

Blair’s commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian arena served to blur the differences between himself and much of the Labour party on the issues. However, during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, his unwillingness to condemn Israel’s actions as disproportionate, or call for an immediate ceasefire, proved too much for his parliamentary party, setting the context for a backbench revolt that accelerated his departure from office.

As prime minister, Brown shared Blair’s commitment to Israel’s welfare. He strongly opposed the burgeoning BDS movement and marked Israel’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary by becoming the first Israeli prime minister to address the Knesset, where he declared that Britain “will always stand at Israel’s side”. However, in 2009, with David Miliband as foreign secretary, the government branded Israeli military actions in the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead as “disproportionate”.

Pragmatism and incrementalism characterised Blair’s ongoing involvement as the Quartet envoy (representing the ‘Middle East Quartet’ of the UN, EU, US and Russia) after leaving No 10. He aligned with an international agenda to strengthen the moderate Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, including promoting its institutional and economic development, and working with Israel to reduce checkpoints. In parallel, he worked on the challenge of easing the humanitarian situation in Gaza without empowering Hamas, which had taken control there in 2007.

## **CONSERVATIVES IN POWER, LABOUR IN OPPOSITION**

The Conservatives’ years in power have seen major changes in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

David Cameron’s entry into office was followed quickly by the “Arab Spring”. As hopes for democratisation gave way to the reality of state failure, Islamic State, and the growing influence of Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian issue fell down the agenda.

The issue has demanded government attention most urgently during escalations of violence, especially between Israel and armed groups in the Gaza Strip who have used the territory as a base to fire rockets at Israeli towns and cities. The conflict in the summer of 2014 especially focussed public attention on



destruction and death in Gaza, stretching Conservative support for Israel to its limits and causing a coalition rift with the Liberal Democrats.

This conflict followed the last meaningful [effort](#) to broker a comprehensive two-state agreement, led by the-then US secretary of state, John Kerry, in 2013-14. Under intense US pressure, Netanyahu engaged seriously and was drawn, according to those involved, into “the zone of a possible agreement.” However, when a distrustful Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, was presented with the framework in the White House in March 2014, he dismissed it.

While Donald Trump showed a surprising level of interest in brokering his “deal of the century”, his proposals, when they emerged in 2020, were hopelessly one-sided in favour of Netanyahu’s preferences.

Against this backdrop the Conservatives – whose membership do not share the Labour party’s deep-rooted concern for the Palestinian question, and whose international diplomatic capacity was constrained by the Brexit process – focused primarily on bilateral relations with Israel. The flourishing of economic and strategic ties – signified by the signing of the [2030 roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations](#)’ in March 2023 – has been encouraged by several factors. The spread of instability in the Middle East heightened Israel’s significance in countering regional threats and supporting pro-western Arab governments. Meanwhile, Israel’s economy has shown resilience through global economic turmoil and Covid-19, incentivising trade ties for post-Brexit Britain, especially with Israel’s hi-tech sector.

Finally, the Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain (and subsequently Morocco) signalled a major shift in the region. The normalisation agreements underlined the overlap of regional agendas between Israel and Gulf states who are key economic and strategic partners for Britain, including countering threats from Iran, with its network of regional proxies and its advancing nuclear programme. They also exposed the declining significance of the Palestinian issue for Arab leaders.

In parallel, attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became heavily politicised within the UK. The explosion of anti-Zionism and antisemitism under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership made the Israeli-Palestinian arena a source of painful division for Labour, which the Conservatives were ready to exploit.

## A FUTURE LABOUR GOVERNMENT

The issues for a potential future Labour government will be very different from those faced by Blair and Brown.

The game today is not about getting Israelis and Palestinians back into direct negotiations. Neither society has the internal coherence to engage in that kind of process.

The current Israeli government’s attempts to neuter the Supreme Court and grant itself unlimited powers has triggered unprecedented civil strife. So long as this government remains in office, we can expect prolonged instability with potentially catastrophic consequences for Israel’s economy, security and international relations. This government’s sharply illiberal turn will present dilemmas for all western capitals committed to Israel’s welfare but also to Palestinian rights and democratic values.

Meanwhile the Palestinians face internal crises shaped by the divide between the PA in the West Bank and the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, and the weakness of the 87-year-old Abbas, who is physically ailing and has no clear successor. With a new generation of Palestinians taking up arms, violence in the West Bank, and public [support](#) for it, is at levels unseen since the Second Intifada.



The leverage and bandwidth of the US is also diminishing in an era of renewed great power competition, a war in Ukraine with global ramifications, the rise of China, and the escalating dangers of climate change and nuclear proliferation.

The one game-changing opportunity is that pressuring Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians might form part of a package of incentives for Saudi Arabia to normalise relations with Israel – a huge prize for any Israeli government, and Washington. But this would be a highly complex deal with many moving parts, and would depend substantially on internal political developments within Israel. Due to his corruption trial, Netanyahu depends not only on the ultra-Orthodox but on far-right extremists unlike any seen before in an Israeli cabinet, for whom any concession to the Palestinians appears unthinkable, regardless of wider strategic incentives.

Setting aside the hope of a Saudi package deal, much will depend on the 2024 US election. If Joe Biden retains power then a UK Labour government's role would likely focus on supporting his agenda, in coordination with European allies, to stabilise the PA; promote Palestinian economic and infrastructure development; and dissuade the Israeli government from steps that would further undermine a two-state outcome or its own democratic credentials.

If Trump or another like-minded Republican returns, their administration, like the Bush administration that the last Labour government dealt with, will need to be persuaded that curtailing the excesses of the Israeli right is in its interests. Given the significance of Evangelicals in the Republican base, this may not be easy. However, the possibility of drawing Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords – the former president's signature diplomatic achievement – would no doubt appeal to Trump.

Were the current Israeli government to collapse and be replaced – polls show it would be heavily defeated were it to face an election – the scope for progress would increase substantially.

The short-lived, ideologically heterogeneous 'government of change' led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid in 2021-22 was pragmatic in working both with the Arab minority inside Israel and the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. In his brief tenure as prime minister, Lapid declared before the UN that a two-state solution was "the right thing for Israel". Benny Gantz, currently the most popular opposition party leader in Israel, avoids such declarations but as defence minister during this period met regularly with Abbas. With the Israeli Labour party at risk of losing its Knesset representation, UK Labour representatives should supplement their traditional relationships with Israeli Labour by investing in relations with these pro-liberal democracy parties in the centre.

The government of change also oversaw an expansion of [pragmatic policies](#) to stabilise the Gaza Strip, including allowing up to 20,000 Gazans to enter Israel to work. These policies – which have been maintained by the Netanyahu government – have led Hamas to stay out of recent rounds of fighting with Israel, and with a more pragmatic Israeli government could provide the basis for significant further progress.

## A BALANCING ACT FOR LABOUR

Despair at the bleak prospects for realising Palestinian political rights in the current circumstances has led to calls, including from some US academics, to declare the end of the "two-state paradigm" and to realise Palestinian rights in the context of a "one-state reality". This is a road to nowhere. "One-state reality" neither adequately characterises the complexities on the ground, nor offers a roadmap to a stable political order, nor reflects the wishes of most Israelis or Palestinians.

Keeping open the window for a two-state solution should therefore remain the goal. In this, any British government must recognise its own limitations, and remain cognisant that to influence at all it must do so in coordination with the US and with European partners.

This includes the question of when to recognise a Palestinian state. Were a Labour government to make this move unilaterally, and outside the context of a wider diplomatic agenda, it would have little meaning or impact, save to trigger a row with Israel that would [reduce](#) Britain's already limited influence. It is welcome that Labour's National Policy Forum has dropped the Corbyn-era phrasing around "immediate" from the text calling for unilateral recognition in the party platform, indicating a more pragmatic approach.

Nonetheless a future Labour leadership in government will have to manage, just as the last one did, the expectations and concerns of the party membership. The extremism of the current Israeli government, the diplomatic vacuum, and the propensity for violent escalations, are likely to fuel the BDS movement, with all its divisive implications for Labour.

The deep internal division within Israel also represents an unprecedented crisis for British Jews. While most still see Israel as central to their identity and security, a majority are dismayed by the existential crisis facing Israeli democracy, which is a source of acute anxiety and painful dilemmas. In rebuilding trust with British Jews in the wake of the Corbyn era, this is another area that a future Labour government must handle with care.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# THE NEW MIDDLE EAST: HOW THE REGION WILL CHANGE OVER THE NEXT DECADE

MATTHEW GODWIN AND JEMIMA SHELLEY

## The UK should be the key global partner for progress in a changing Middle East

All too frequently, the picture of the Middle East we see in the west is pessimistic and outdated. As polling across the US, UK, France and Germany carried out for the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in 2022 [showed](#), respondents largely felt the region is backward and often a source of problems for the world rather than solutions.

However, last year, Egypt hosted a landmark COP summit, which led to a breakthrough agreement on a new “loss and damage” fund for countries worst hit by climate change, while this year the UAE’s COP will feature a major stocktake on global targets, with an emphasis on the opportunities a sustainable economy presents. Meanwhile, the 2020 Abraham Accords, and successive agreements between Israel and its neighbours, continue to transform the region, demonstrating that what was once impossible is now the new norm.

It’s clear the west doesn’t understand today’s Middle East, whose people want jobs, growth and peace, and are rejecting religious fundamentalism and women’s exclusion. Young people and women, who are overcoming hurdles to participation, will be the bulwark against the region’s challenges, especially climate change.

As the region works toward economic diversification and accelerating entrepreneurship, what does the Middle East look like today and how can the UK respond to the New Middle East?

Young people under the age of 30 [constitute](#) more than half of the Middle East’s population. This expanding youth demographic faces [daunting](#) unemployment rates: joblessness among young people is almost twice as high in the region as the world average. According to the 2023 Arab Youth Survey, unemployment and the cost of living are the biggest issues facing the region’s youth. More than half of young Arabs outside the wealthy Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries [believe](#) it would be difficult to find a new job.

Despite this backdrop, polling surveys [reveal](#) that this generation retains hopes for a brighter future. Youth exclusion from society is being countered by young men and women who are increasingly shaping social and economic innovations. Our institute’s polling shows that 69 percent of people in all age groups see science, technology and innovation as sectors in which young people should aspire to work and more than three-quarters support young people learning technological skills. Where governments are driving change toward sustainable economies, the people are behind them.

The UK should work with regional governments to unlock youth entrepreneurship, supporting Middle East leadership to [increase](#) access to finance; reduce the regulatory burden, such as easing business registration; and continue to expand the private sector. As governments increase cooperation between economic sectors, such as health and financial technology, governments should work to enhance regional mobility for entrepreneurs. This future-oriented mindset is not just limited to those under 30.

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Women in the Middle East are leading progress and innovation across the region. While women were historically excluded from much of public life, they have been demanding a more prominent place including through gender parity in education, politics and the workforce. In fact, Arab states are leading the way when it comes to the number of women taking up science and technology subjects in school. UNESCO research has [found](#) that between 34 and 57 percent of STEM graduates in Arab countries are women, much higher than in universities in the US or Europe.

Beyond education, women's participation in the workforce is gradually increasing across the region and across sectors. For example, 34 percent of the Middle East's tech startups have [female founders](#). In recent years, women have been assuming leading cabinet portfolios in countries such as Lebanon and Egypt. And, in the UAE, nine [women](#) are cabinet ministers. Earlier this year, the first Saudi female astronaut [broke](#) the celestial ceiling by visiting space.

The region as a whole is supportive of women's leadership: our institute's [polling](#) last year shows that, on average, 70 percent of those polled believe women should have the same rights as men to work in business and government.

Despite this progress, much more needs to be done to support women's agency and advancement in the Middle East. With female workforce participation at 19 percent – the lowest of any region – and representation in political institutions at 17.8 percent – well below the global average of 26.5 percent – the Middle East remains a challenging environment for women. Gender inequalities and discrimination play a role in many aspects of women's life in the region. In many countries, travel for women is still not safe and governments must ensure a gender-lens is applied to transport and urban planning policies. To help counter inequality, the UK should support female entrepreneurship through more targeted investment in businesses led by women, which is critical to progressing both female empowerment and the region's diversification agenda.

## THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY: CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

As the UAE-hosted COP 28 approaches, climate change is the central challenge of our time. The Middle East, where, between 1980 and 2022, temperatures have [increased](#) four times as much as the rest of the world, is especially vulnerable. Soaring temperatures have irreversibly altered the demographic landscape of the Middle East. Climate change has had a devastating impact on the region's water supplies and food production systems. As agricultural land becomes unfarmable and employment opportunities diminish, many rural dwellers have migrated to towns and cities. Mass urbanisation in recent decades has, in turn, accelerated greenhouse gas emissions, demonstrating the demographic implications of the climate emergency.

The Middle East's acute vulnerability to the global climate crisis, and the pressing need to move away from extraction-intensive industries, has resulted in some of the world's most ambitious climate targets, as well as investment in clean technology. In addition to back-to-back COP summits in Egypt and the UAE, the region's leadership have been more ambitious than much of the rest of the world. Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative aims to generate 50 percent of the kingdom's electricity from clean sources by 2030 and to reach net zero by 2060, while the UAE similarly plans to [generate](#) 50 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2050, with a 70 percent reduction in emissions from energy production overall. These impressive targets are in line with those set out by the Biden administration. Government-led diversification programmes are matched by the belief [held](#) by 62 percent of the region's population that "green skills" will play a crucial role in shaping their careers - approximately two-thirds more than the global figure.

## ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

The Middle East is not only setting its sights on green energy, but also on economic diversification and innovation. Multiple national development plans have been launched by the region's leadership. They aim to address the twin challenges of climate change and mass unemployment by diversifying the economy and creating dynamic employment opportunities.

While extraction-intensive sectors continue to dominate, burgeoning entrepreneurship and greater economic integration are transforming the Middle East into a critical growth region for international trade partnerships, with the Middle East's economies growing by 5.8 percent in 2022. However, this growth rate [masks](#) the disparity between countries in the Middle East. Outside of the GCC, economic growth projections are not necessarily as positive, where the GDP of the developing oil importers of the region has been shrinking in recent years.

One of the main barriers blocking progress in the region is corruption, with our polling showing that 82 percent of people in the Middle East believe the biggest motivating factor for protestors across the region is the demand for an end to corruption and nepotism.

Finally, the Middle East is also liberalising, with some governments pursuing programmes to reduce the role of religious authorities and increase the participation of women, allowing for greater social freedoms. Seventy-three percent of the people we polled across the region [support](#) these transformative steps. People in the region are also being more moderately religious and more pluralistic, with 78 percent across the region supporting the protection of religious minorities. Relatedly, they are rejecting the influence of politicised religious political movements, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, with 75 percent agreeing that politicised religious movements are damaging for the region. While there is much more room for progress, western governments, including the UK, should recognise and support liberalising initiatives.

## PRIORITIES FOR AN INCOMING LABOUR GOVERNMENT

An incoming Labour government should adopt a number of priorities in its approach to the region.

First, the UK should position itself as a key partner for the region's economic diversification agenda. Cross-border trade between the Middle East and the UK [increased](#) in 2022, with the largest UK-listed PLC revenue contribution coming from the region, up 15 percent, and revenues increasingly coming from non-oil sectors. Last year, Britain began [negotiations](#) for a free trade deal with the GCC. Its members together constitute the UK's seventh largest export market and demand for British goods and services is expected to soar to almost £1tn by 2035. UK-Turkey trade hit nearly £24bn last year as the two countries undertake negotiations for a new free trade deal. An incoming Labour government must continue to prioritise this growing economic relationship and ensure the UK is advancing the region's agenda for more diverse, sustainable development.

Second, the UK should continue to push back against regressive forces in the region, such as the increasingly hardline and repressive regime in Iran and Islamist terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran's expansionist Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. By proscribing these groups, the UK is supporting modernising governments to isolate and weaken groups whose views are totally out of step with the large majority of the region and represent the primary threat to progress. As part of constructive dialogue, a Labour government should also continue to raise concerns about human rights and support efforts to curb corruption.

Finally, Israel and the Arab world face many similar challenges, including climate change and combatting Islamist extremism. They also share the same goal of a peaceful and prosperous Middle East, where

progressive growth triumphs over destructive ideologies. The Abraham Accords have brought Israel together with many of its neighbours like never before and what was a top-down process is now being better reflected in public opinion: in 2023, the Arab Youth Survey [revealed](#) that the majority of Emirati, Egyptian and Moroccan youth support the normalisation of ties with Israel. The UK government should work constructively and creatively to deepen growing ties in the region, playing to its strengths in innovation, education and diplomacy. The UK should be the key global partner for progress in this changing region.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# PRO-ISRAEL, PRO-PALESTINE, PRO-PEACE: HOW BRITAIN CAN HELP PROMOTE PEACE AND A TWO-STATE SOLUTION

RT HON DAME DIANA JOHNSON MP

## Labour needs a practical, balanced and positive agenda to support peacemakers in Israel and Palestine

Thirty years ago last month, Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords, marking a rare – and all-too-brief – moment of hope in the tragic conflict between the Jewish state and the Palestinians.

Three decades on, the search for peace remains elusive. Despite this, however, the ultimate solution remains the same as it did in September 1993: two states for two peoples, the legitimate rights to self-determination of both the Israeli and Palestinian people realised, and Israel's most precious characteristic – that it is both a Jewish and a democratic state – preserved.

The principal obstacles to a two-state solution are well-known: disputes about the eventual borders of a Palestinian state and the related legitimate Israeli security concerns; the Palestinian demand for a “right to return” (uniquely, for the descendants of those Palestinians forced to leave their homes in 1948 and not simply to a future Palestinian state, but to pre-1967 Israel); the presence of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the disgraceful growth of violence perpetrated by extreme settlers; the status of Jerusalem; and, perhaps most importantly, a violent rejectionist wing of the Palestinian movement, represented by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which opposes any agreement with Israel and wishes to establish an Islamist state on the entire territory between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean.

While there has been some progress since 1993 – not least the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) which governs some 96 percent of the West Bank Palestinian population and Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 – in other respects the challenges appear greater.

The number of Israelis living in West Bank settlements has grown significantly over the past 30 years. The Palestinian Authority has proven to be increasingly corrupt, authoritarian, and distrusted by the Palestinian people, and – as the situation in Jenin and Nablus underlines – incapable of maintaining security in key West Bank cities. Perhaps most importantly, the Palestinian territories are now divided – and have been for the past 16 years – between the PA-led West Bank and Hamas-run Gaza. Hamas' rule has been disastrous both for the people of Gaza and for the legitimate Palestinian aspirations to statehood. The terror group has provoked a series of bloody conflicts with Israel, leaving a trail of destruction and impoverishment in Gaza and deep-seated insecurity and fear in Israel.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that these problems are not insurmountable. Take, for instance, the vexed question of settlements. Most major Israeli settlements are built close to the 1967 lines within the security barrier that was constructed to stop suicide bombers and terrorists entering Israel during the Second Intifada. Including Israeli Jews residing in East Jerusalem, some 85 percent of Israelis who live beyond the 1967 lines reside within the security barrier. Moreover, 90 percent of Palestinians live outside the security barrier. With “land swaps” – [estimated](#) at around six percent of territory – these “settlement blocs” are likely to remain part of Israel after any agreement. The concept of “land swaps” has been accepted by Palestinian leaders in past rounds of negotiations. Indeed, detailed [proposals](#) have been drawn up by the Geneva Initiative, a joint Israeli-Palestinian project, to address the issue of settlements as part of ending the conflict.



## WEAK LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC DISTRUST

These obstacles have, however, been exacerbated by a combination of weak leadership and mounting public distrust on both sides.

Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been prime minister for over half of the 30 years since Oslo, has, for instance, opted to “manage” the conflict, preserving an ultimately unsustainable status quo because it serves his political interests and those of parties representing the most hardline element of the settler movement with whom he has chosen to ally.

At the same time, Mahmoud Abbas, who like Netanyahu has ruled for much of the post-Oslo period, has failed to seize opportunities presented to him by more moderate Israeli governments. In 2008, at Annapolis, for instance, the president failed to respond to an offer by the-then Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, which would have seen a Palestinian state established in 93.7 percent of the West Bank (with compensating land swaps worth 5.8 percent of the West Bank) and the whole of Gaza. Six years later, he similarly failed to respond to the Obama administration’s framework agreement, despite Israel indicating its assent. Similarly, in 2000, Abbas’ predecessor, Yasser Arafat, turned down Bill Clinton’s proposals – which were broadly accepted by Israel’s then prime minister, Ehud Barak – which would have seen a Palestinian state on 94 percent of the West Bank, compensating land swaps and a sovereign capital in East Jerusalem.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cycle of violence, resentment and distrust on both sides has seen [falling](#) public support for a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine and growing pessimism. As Dr Dahlia Scheindlin, who has conducted joint polling with Palestinian researchers on attitudes towards two states, has suggested, only new leadership can reverse these trends. In Israel, elected leaders need to be “firmly making the case”, she argues, while, on the Palestinian side, a leader who “enjoys public legitimacy” needs to advocate for two states.

Despite the challenges, a new Labour government should work with our European and US allies to help prepare the ground for, and bolster the prospects of, a two-state solution. Its approach should be even-handed, comprehensive and constructive, and patiently focused on the goal of two states for two peoples.

As part of a series of steps designed to narrow the parameters and foster confidence, a new Labour government should support a settlement freeze. This step must be accompanied by, and be part of a process involving, reciprocal confidence-building measures on the part of the PA and Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia.

## A VIABLE, DEMOCRATIC AND INDEPENDENT PALESTINIAN STATE

Second, a new Labour government should support steps towards the establishment of a viable, democratic and independent Palestinian state through renewed investment in the PA.

If it is to fulfil its purpose of advancing a two-state solution, this state-building investment should be linked to measures to end incitement and improve Palestinian governance and human rights.

The PA’s policy of paying “salaries” to those [convicted](#) of terrorist offences and to the families of deceased terrorist “martyrs” incentives terror, breaches the terms of the Oslo Accords and weakens support in Israel for a two-state solution. It also deprives Palestinian public services of vital investment, and compromises international donors who, while not directly funding the payments, effectively subsidise them by freeing up cash for the PA to spend on them.



Such payments – which are [estimated](#) to cost \$300m annually and take up roughly eight percent of the PA's budget – are significant in scale. The policy also acts to incentivise the worst acts of violence by making greater payments for longer sentences.

In some regards, the problem of officially sanctioned incitement has worsened in recent years. In 2017, for instance, the PA introduced a new school curriculum which teaches the virtues of martyrdom, describes terrorists as “heroes” and repeats antisemitic tropes. Extensive research by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) [argues](#) that the curriculum “exerts pressure over young Palestinians to acts of violence in a more extensive and sophisticated manner” and is “more radical than ever, purposefully and strategically encouraging Palestinian children to sacrifice themselves to martyrdom”. IMPACT-se's latest [analysis](#) also indicates that assurances by the PA to international partners that improvements would be made to the curriculum have not been realised.

Thus, as part of a new memorandum of understanding governing British aid, state-building support should include measures to replace the PA's policy of paying salaries to those convicted of terrorism offences with a needs-based system, and end antisemitic incitement to violence and the glorification of terrorism, especially in the PA school curriculum and on state TV.

British aid investment should also seek to bolster the confidence of the Palestinian people in the PA through anti-corruption measures and institutional reform to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and protect a free press and human rights.

As John Spellar rightly notes, the absence of presidential and legislative elections over the past 16 years has undermined the democratic legitimacy of the PA. It also appears to have gone hand in hand with a more authoritarian attitude, less tolerance of dissent and a worsening human rights record.

The lack of proper democratic accountability has also weakened the PA's commitment to good governance.

Tackling corruption, for instance, is consistently [rated](#) as a top priority by the Palestinian people. Palestinian anti-corruption experts cite the [absence](#) of effective legislative oversight as a key factor in the problem of corruption. This problem is compounded by the fact that public confidence in the judicial system remains weak; this is a critical factor both for tackling crime but also for improving security and the prospects of economic investment and reform.

With international commitment and support, the PA is capable of developing measures to address these concerns. After taking office in 2007, former prime minister and finance minister Salam Fayyad oversaw the introduction of extensive plans for state-building through institutional reform and the modernisation of the public and security services. While progress in tackling corruption and economic reform stalled after Fayyad left office in 2013, a series of reform plans [published](#) by his government aimed at building public confidence in transparent, competent and corruption-free governance institutions offer a solid foundation for future progress. In particular, steps to introduce and safeguard the political neutrality of the judiciary and anti-corruption bodies are a key foundation upon which further future reforms can be built.

Measures which strengthen and reform the PA are essential to two-state solution. “As the PA becomes increasingly tarnished in the eyes of the Palestinian public,” the Palestinian human rights activist Bassam Eid has warned, “so too will the peace process with which the PA has been engaging come to be seen in an ever worse light.” The PA's oppressive policies, he adds, not only alienate the Palestinian people, they have also pushed some towards groups like Hamas, despite its own woeful human rights record.

A new aid package should also be accompanied by measures to ensure greater accountability and transparency for British taxpayers. Thus, the government should publish its annual review of the PA's compliance with the aid agreement – something the Conservatives have consistently refused to do. It should also introduce obligations such as those laid out in former LFI chair Dame Louise Ellman's 2019 private members' bill which [required](#) aid to PA schools to comply with values for peace and tolerance in education endorsed by UNESCO.

## ACTION ON GAZA

Third, a new Labour government should encourage Israel and Egypt in efforts to secure a permanent ceasefire with Hamas as a first step towards the reunification of Gaza with the West Bank under the authority of the PA. As noted previously, presidential and legislative elections have been repeatedly promised and postponed over the past decade. The reunification of the Palestinian territories should be accompanied by new elections; together, these two measures constitute an essential prerequisite towards the realisation of a democratic, viable Palestinian state.

Fourth, a new Labour government should work with international partners to convene a donors' conference focused upon an emergency infrastructure plan for Gaza. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is an urgent humanitarian and political priority. Unemployment stands at 44 percent, a figure that rises to nearly 70 percent among young people; more than 65 percent of the Gazan people live below the poverty line – a figure five times higher than in the West Bank; there are water and power shortages, overloaded sewage plants, and creaking health services.

A Labour government should recognise that the Abraham Accords provides an opportunity for Britain, the US and our European allies to work with Israel and the Palestinians to assemble a consortium of Arab states willing to provide funding for infrastructure and development projects in Gaza. As part of its Green Blue Deal for the Middle East, for instance, Ecopeace, which brings together Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian environmentalists, [proposed](#) an ambitious plan under which Israel and Palestine would produce desalinated water and sell it to Jordan, while Jordan sells Palestine and Israel renewable energy. The [agreement](#) between Israel, Jordan and the UAE signed in November 2021 lacked the Palestinian component, underlining both the potential for progress and the current limitations.

A further element of Ecopeace's Green Blue Deal would see solar fields in Area C of the West Bank provide renewable energy to power a new desalination plant, water transmission and sanitation facilities in Gaza.

At the heart of initial reconstruction efforts should be an emergency infrastructure plan that would see major investment by international donors in desalination and energy [initiatives](#), such as "Gas to Gaza", an EU and Qatari-funded project to deliver gas from Israel's network direct to the Gaza power plant instead of diesel, and the "Gaza Central Desalination Plant (GCDP) Associated Works (AW)" [project](#), backed by the European Investment Bank.

Israeli governments of various political complexions have previously [indicated](#) a willingness to facilitate major infrastructure projects and have offered to provide technical support and know-how. Most recently, in September 2021, then-foreign minister Yair Lapid [proposed](#) a two-stage process: in the first, in return for an end to rocket attacks from Gaza, and with international oversight to prevent Hamas' military build-up, Israel would support the reconstruction of water and electricity systems and housing and infrastructure. A second stage, linked to Hamas' acceptance of Quartet conditions and the restoration of PA authority, would see more long-term projects, including an artificial island project to give Gaza a port, a transport link to the West Bank, and more ambitious economic projects with Israel and Egypt.

In the interim, if the security situation allows, increasing work permits for Gazans who wish to seek employment in Israel would provide an immediate step to reduce unemployment in Gaza and stimulate the economy. Prior to the Hamas coup in 2007, 120,000 Gazans worked in Israel. By 2019, that figure was 7,000 (albeit the highest level since Hamas seized power). In 2021, it grew to 15,000, and [exceeded](#) 22,000 in June 2023.

A new Labour government must recognise that, given the level of indiscriminate attacks launched from Gaza by terror groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad since 2005, Israel retains important and legitimate security concerns. Assistance to Gaza must thus be accompanied by the establishment of a robust, round-the-clock and credible monitoring system to ensure that reconstruction materials are not diverted by Hamas into illicit military purposes. Moreover, the trust and confidence of the Israeli public is negatively impacted by Hamas' decision to hold a number of Israeli hostages, including the bodies of two Israeli soldiers – Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul – killed during the 2014 war, as well as Avraham Abera Mengistu, and Arab-Israeli Hisham al-Sayed. Both men, who crossed into Gaza for unknown reasons and are said to suffer from serious mental health issues, are still being detained more than seven years later, despite pleas from their families and groups such as Amnesty International to release them.

## AN AGENDA FOR PEACEBUILDING

Finally, a new Labour government should re-establish UK investment in peacebuilding projects and host a meeting with international partners to agree the establishment of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace

Established during the darkest days of the Troubles, the International Fund for Ireland invested in cross-community work, laid the civic society foundations for peace and helped sustain public support for the Good Friday Agreement. It was, suggested the UK's chief negotiator, Jonathan Powell, "the great unsung hero" of the agreement.

An International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, which has been designed by the Alliance for Middle East Peace and endorsed by Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves, would leverage and invest up to £200m in similar peacebuilding work. Academic evaluations have [found](#) that such projects – which range from sports clubs for children and young people to environmental, cultural, economic and interfaith groups – foster the values of peace, reconciliation and coexistence. Traditionally, these projects have been woefully underfunded. Thus while the International Fund for Ireland invested sums which [translated](#) into \$44 per person per year, the equivalent amount in Israel and Palestine was a mere \$2.

Thanks to the US Congress [allocating](#) \$250m in funds for peacebuilding work in 2021, this picture has begun to shift. It is now crucial that Britain and our European allies joins the effort to establish an international fund. Regrettably, however, while offering occasional warm words, the UK has remained steadfastly detached from international discussions and engagement. It has also shown no inclination to offer any form of financial support. This reflects the government's lack of interest in peacebuilding work more broadly, with a small-scale programme which ran from 2017-20 axed and all UK funding for cross-border people-to-people projects eliminated.

Given the experience it gained – and benefits it accrued – from the International Fund for Ireland, the UK should be at the forefront of supporting peacebuilding efforts in Israel and Palestine. A Labour government should thus re-establish investment in people-to-people work and work with the US and EU to convene a meeting to agree the establishment of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

An International Fund encapsulates the practical, balanced and positive agenda that should mark a Labour government's pursuit of two states. As Keir Starmer [said](#) in his speech to LFI's annual lunch in 2021: "Our approach to this complex conflict will be guided by a simple principle: It is not about

whether you are pro one side or another; this is about whether you are on the side of peace. We are pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, and pro-peace. Our allies will be all those – Israeli or Palestinian – who seek to further the cause of reconciliation, peace, and progress. And our goal will be to support the efforts of peacebuilders to overcome the challenges which face them and seize the opportunities they see before them.”

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# A GOLDEN AGE: STRENGTHENING THE UK-ISRAEL BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

**RICHARD PATER AND DR JACK OMER-JACKAMAN**

**Economic, tech and security ties between Israel and Britain are stronger than ever. A Labour government can strengthen them further**

At a recent panel event at the Israeli Embassy in London, Ambassador Tzipi Hotovely told a prestigious gathering that the contemporary era represents a “golden age” of Anglo-Israeli relations. A senior UK official concurred, commenting in June 2023 that the bilateral relationship is “the best it’s ever been”. Although differences of opinion naturally remain – and will require tactful diplomatic handling under the current Israeli government – on matters of trade and security the relationship has never been closer.

## THE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF INCREASED TRADE

According to the World Bank, the UK is Israel’s largest European trade partner, worth £7.2bn in 2022 – up from £5bn in 2019, the last year before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The past decade has also seen a significant increase in direct Israeli investment into the UK, supporting over 15,000 British jobs. Capital investment, too, has risen. It is financing projects like infrastructure firm Helios Energy Investments’ £205m commitment, focused initially on solar renewable energy projects, and latterly on waste-to-energy facilities. REE Automotive, meanwhile, has committed £68.9m to establishing an “Engineering Centre of Excellence” in the UK, including an engineering centre in Nuneaton and an integration centre in Coventry.

The bilateral venture capital market has also continued to grow, with 2021 its strongest year in the past decade. As a result, there has been substantial investment in sectors such as IT, financial services, consumer products, services and health. The UK also continues to be a hugely profitable import market for Israeli goods, with medicinal and pharmaceutical products comfortably the country’s leading export into the UK. Teva Pharmaceuticals remains the NHS’s biggest supplier of medicines – with one in five prescriptions estimated to be provided by the Israeli company. As BICOM [reported](#) in 2020, based on the NHS’s total drugs bill and the amount of generics Teva provides, Teva estimates that it contributes more than £2.9bn of savings per year to the British public. The UK benefits significantly from exports to Israel, too, with mechanical power generators its most successful export.

## TOWARDS A NEW FTA: POST-BREXIT OPPORTUNITIES

The agreement reached in April 2023 between the UK Civil Aviation Authority and its Israeli counterpart is expected to further reduce administrative barriers to trade. It is also to be hoped that negotiations over the much-mooted free trade agreement between the two countries will soon be finalised, the second round of negotiations having concluded in May 2023.

In a post-Brexit context, a free trade deal stands to be hugely beneficial to the UK. Despite the market uncertainty caused by the current coalition’s judicial reform programme, Israel continues to have a growing economy, with its service sector alone growing by 45 percent over the last 10 years. This sector must be a target for bilateral development. Both the Israeli and British economies are dominated by services: in 2020, services accounted for 80 percent of the UK’s economic activity and 78 percent of

Israel's, while 81 percent of UK workers, and 82 percent of Israel's, are employed in the services sector. Despite this, only 36 percent of UK-Israel trade is services-based.

## TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

There is a healthy precedent for Britain to lead the way in international engagement with Israel's tech scene. Since its establishment in 2011, the [UK Israel Tech Hub](#) which operates under the auspices of the British Embassy in Tel Aviv, has played a key role in facilitating and expanding joint tech projects, with a particular focus in three areas: healthcare; clean growth, including energy, smart mobility, agritech, advanced analytics, automation, and advanced-manufacturing technology; and fintech and cyber.

At almost five percent of GDP, Israel is the global leader in R&D expenditure as a proportion of national income. The UK is looking to extend its collaboration with, and emulate, this vibrant culture. The UK-Israel Eureka bilateral collaborative R&D initiative, for example, offers UK companies a share of £2m in grants for projects focused on industrial research and development with Israel. The 2030 roadmap for Israel-UK bilateral relations [signed](#) in March 2023 by both governments, meanwhile, provides for £20m for joint technology and innovation projects. In her speech to last year's LFI annual lunch, the shadow chancellor of the exchequer, Rachel Reeves, [praised](#) Israel's success in producing AI start-ups – second only in the world to the US and China – and pledged that, through the Industrial Strategy Council, a Labour government will “work with Israeli partners to review best practice in policy-making to support the development of data and AI-driven health solutions, and explore the lessons the UK can learn from Israel's success”.

The UK and Israel also continue to mutually benefit from shared research amongst their respective world-class universities and research institutes. In the medical sphere, recent innovative collaboration includes a partnership between Queen's University Belfast and Tel Aviv University researching algorithms for diagnosis and management of age-related macular degeneration, and a partnership between the University of Cambridge and Technion Israel Institute of Technology researching using a breath test to diagnose Parkinson's disease.

## LEARNING FROM ISRAEL

Israeli innovation could also assist the UK in dealing with two of the most pressing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: healthcare and the environment.

Israel's universal insurance system provides full healthcare coverage, while it is ranked sixth in the world for healthcare innovation, to the UK's 10th, and at a smaller outlay in GDP – 8.3 percent to 10.3 percent. It also achieves this performance with a comparatively small number of doctors: 3.19 per 1,000 people – similar to the UK but low compared with the 3.5 per 1,000 OECD average.

As the shadow secretary of state for health, Wes Streeting, [recognised](#) on a visit to Israel last year, Israeli innovation is also particularly targeted at those areas of healthcare – increased treatment in the home, preventative medicine, digital healthcare – which are especially relevant to the challenges faced by the UK. Some 1,200 Israeli companies operate in the medical innovation field, aided by supportive systems like the [Haifa Digital](#) health startup ecosystem, the [Mosaic Project](#) and the ARC [Centre for Digital Innovation](#) at Sheba Medical Centre.

On the environment, with the UK lagging well behind its own water desalination ambitions, it could benefit from the experience of Israel, a world leader in the field. Israel produces 85 percent of its drinkable water from the Mediterranean Sea, and Israeli-owned IDE Americas [provides](#) the technology for the desalination plant in Carlsbad, close to San Diego, which produces nearly 54m gallons of water a day. Mashav, the Agency for International Development Cooperation in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, has also worked with fellow water-scarce nations, especially in Africa, to share best Israeli practice in maximising agricultural production and minimising the associated effects of poverty amid such water scarcity.

## SHARED SECURITY CONCERNS AND COLLABORATION

The UK and Israel share a number of security concerns, most notably the Iranian regime and its proxies. The regime's threat to Israel is well known, while in November 2022, Ken McCallum, the director of MI5, revealed that, over the course of the year, the security services had foiled 10 direct Iranian plots to kidnap or kill British citizens or others – including [Iranian dissidents](#) – based in the UK.

In this context, in July 2023, Israel and the UK held their inaugural bilateral strategic dialogue in Jerusalem, led by both the Israeli and British national security advisers, Tzachi Hanegbi and Sir Tim Barrow. The dialogue is a reflection of the deepening security ties between London and Jerusalem, a partnership also reflected in the 2030 roadmap. The roadmap, which declares that “for both the UK and Israel, this is one of the most important defence and security relationships”, provides for enhanced cooperation in bilateral defence, counter-terrorism, and the combatting of Iran's nuclear ambitions and its destabilising regional and international activity. Both nations will also look to expand collaboration in the increasingly crucial cyber sphere, including with an annual high-level dialogue on cyber security and resilience.

## TOWARDS AN EVEN STRONGER BOND

Recent trends in the bilateral relationship are hugely positive, to the significant economic, cultural and scientific benefit of both nations. It is in both countries' interest to develop the friendship and dialogue, deepening and securing what is already being achieved and exploring further areas for mutually advantageous collaboration. With this in mind, there are a number of steps a new Labour government could take during its first term in office to further strengthen Britain's bilateral relations with Israel.

First, presuming the free trade agreement is signed, a Labour government should vigorously pursue its adoption and implementation. With its undoubted benefits to the UK, this should be a bipartisan issue.

Second, a Labour government should also look to build on Hanegbi and Barrow's dialogue with a commitment to enhancing bilateral military ties, perhaps in the form of further cyber cooperation or joint training exercises between the IAF and RAF.

Third, the relationship could also be strengthened were the UK to consider increasing its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf. This adds to the UK's force projection by working even closer with allies like Israel and Cyprus. We also encourage the UK to be part of the solution to help Europe diversify its energy sources away from Russia and to support their allies in the East Med gas forum and back the growing alliance between Israel, Greece and Cyprus.

Fourth, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office could consider the increased impact which would result from greater collaboration with the Mashav. The FCDO could, for example, utilise its existing relationship to bring the benefits of Israeli tech and help expand both countries' humanitarian footprint in the developing world.

Finally, the FCDO could also deepen its understanding of current Israeli realities and concerns by hosting more visiting Israelis and facilitating custom-built trips for Brits – an exercise in which BICOM is well versed and experienced – to visit Israel.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# SUPPORTING DOMESTIC FREEDOM, PURSUING REGIONAL PEACE: HOW BRITAIN AND ITS ALLIES SHOULD APPROACH THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

**KASRA AARABI**

**The west has allowed Tehran to “have its cake and eat it”. It’s time for a new approach**

Just over a year has passed since the murder of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old Iranian-Kurdish girl who was murdered by the regime’s “morality police” for the “improper” wearing of her hijab. Her murder on 16 September 2022 triggered mass nationwide anti-regime protests across Iran that challenged the very core of the Islamic Republic. Today, that protest movement remains very much alive. From Iranian women burning their compulsory hijabs with the support of their male compatriots to [popular slogans](#) such as “mullah’s must get lost” and “our goal is the entire regime”, the people of Iran have made their demands absolutely clear.

For its part, the Islamic Republic responded with unbridled violence on the streets of Iran. It launched a brutal wave of suppression that combined mass imprisonments, torture and killings with internet blackouts, disinformation and psychological warfare operations. With Iran’s Generation Z leading the charge against the clerical regime, in October 2022, the 84-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, [delivered](#) a speech demanding “punishments” for the youth population – a green light for increased violence across the country.

But the regime’s suppression was not contained to Iran.

As the international community and the Iranian diaspora – which numbers some 8 million people – mobilised in solidarity with the people of Iran, the regime’s intelligence and security apparatus began a new campaign of terror to target Iranians abroad, not least in the UK. This campaign abroad was spearheaded by the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) – the regime’s notorious, violent Islamist extremist entity which is also responsible for the crackdown on protestors in Iran.

Unlike the Artesh, the Islamic Republic’s regular army whose primary objective is to defend Iran’s territorial borders, the IRGC is constitutionally [mandated](#) as an “ideologically army” with an “ideological mission of jihad in God’s path to spread sharia law globally”. In practice, the IRGC is responsible for enforcing the clerical regime’s hardline Islamist ideology at home and violently exporting it abroad. It has [advanced](#) the latter not only by founding and supporting some of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world – such as its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon – but directly conducting terrorism globally: from the bombing of a Jewish cultural centre in Argentina in 1994 to suicide attacks in Bulgaria in 2012. This time around, however, the UK has become the primary target of the IRGC’s terror. In November 2022, during the peak of the protests in Iran, [two IRGC terror plots](#) against British-Iranian journalists were foiled by the UK’s counter-terrorism police. The guard also specifically targeted Iran International, the London-based Persian-language news network, due to its extensive coverage of the protests inside Iran. The UK’s security minister, Tom Tugendhat, later revealed that [15 Iran-linked terror plots](#) were foiled by the UK’s counter-terrorism police in 2022.

Alongside such plots, the regime sought to further radicalise its hardline Islamist support base in the UK as a means to mobilise homegrown Shia extremism. Its tactics – using its network of mosques, charities and community centres to nurture and propagate its violent and extremist ideology – mimics those used by Sunni terrorist groups like Islamic State and al-Qaida.

There is a network of Khamenei-run centres in the UK, all of which have either hosted IRGC-related extremist propaganda activity or have direct ties to the IRGC. Chief among them is the Islamic Centre of England (ICE), a UK-registered charity that serves as [Khamenei's official office](#) in the UK and has hosted multiple IRGC-affiliated activities. In October 2022, Seyed Hashem Moosavi, the official representative of the supreme leader in the UK and director of ICE, [referred](#) to anti-regime protestors in Iran as “soldiers of Satan” and branded Iranian women taking off their hijabs as “poison” in society.

But ICE is only the tip of the iceberg.

Just a short-walk from Khamenei's London office lies the UK affiliate branch of the IRGC-linked Al Mustafa University, the Islamic College. Al Mustafa University is directly tied to Khamenei, with its head being appointed by, and directly accountable to, the supreme leader. The university is affiliated with the IRGC and has [open links](#) to the Iran-backed Shia terrorist organisation, Hezbollah. Al Mustafa has played a direct role in recruiting and radicalising its students for the IRGC's terrorist proxies and cells. It was sanctioned by the US in December 2020 for precisely this reason. In April 2022, then Middle East minister James Cleverly acknowledged Al Mustafa's ties to terrorism, stating that he was “aware that the Al Mustafa University had been sanctioned by the US as a terrorist entity due to its recruitment of students for the IRGC's Quds Force”. Despite this [acknowledgment](#), the UK-affiliate branch of Al Mustafa University, the Islamic College, still remains open.

Moreover, this year, the Jewish Chronicle and I [revealed](#) that eight senior IRGC members had been hosted online by a London-based students group, the Islamic Students Association of Britain (ISA). These commanders promoted IRGC terrorism, extreme antisemitism and sought to recruit British Muslim students for an apocalyptic army that, in their own words, will “bring an end to the life of ... Jews across the world”. Three of the eight officials hosted by the ISA, which operates from the Kanoon Towhid centre in Hammersmith London, are among the IRGC's most violent and extremist commanders and belong to the highest security-intelligence circles of the regime, the so-called “[Habib Circle](#)”. In other words, we can be sure that the London-based students group is not only glorying IRGC terrorism, but it is, at the very least, in communication with the highest security-intelligence circle of the IRGC.

While the regime sought to use terrorism and violence as a means to silence the Iranian diaspora and western governments, this approach initially proved counterproductive. In December 2022, the foiled terror plots in the UK led the government to announce that it would soon be proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation (it is already designated as such in the US). A month later, parliament [unanimously voted](#) in favour of a non-binding resolution calling on the government to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organisation with immediate effect. In the same month, [the European parliament](#) also passed a non-binding resolution calling on the European Union to proscribe the guard.

But the west's support for the Iranian people and desire to impose consequences on the regime for its actions soon waned. While the UK imposed a limited number of targeted sanctions on individuals within the regime's security apparatus, it stalled on its intent to proscribe the IRGC. Similarly, the EU's foreign policy body made it absolutely clear that, despite the European parliament's vote, the EU would not be proscribing the IRGC.

The west's reduced appetite for taking action against Tehran, coupled with fissures among the Iranian opposition abroad (themselves in part caused by the IRGC's cyber apparatus), started to shift the focus from developments inside Iran. Simultaneously, the regime launched a mass disinformation operation as

a means to distort and control the narrative about events inside the country. This disinformation campaign eventually trickled down into western media. For example, it was widely reported in the [mainstream media](#) that the Islamic Republic had eased hijab restrictions and disbanded the “morality police”, despite the fact that this news was entirely based upon misreporting and was instantly refuted by the regime’s state TV. Such misreporting resulted in the media gradually moving away from covering the Iran protests on the basis that things had stabilised in the country. However, the reality on the ground in Iran could not be further from this. From summer 2023 onwards, the regime has launched a new and brutal wave of suppression against the Iranian people.

## INCREASING CONFLICT: THE PATH OF ESCALATION ABROAD

The regime’s escalation of violence inside the country has been simultaneously coupled with escalation abroad. This may sound contrary to this spring’s [China-brokered Iran-Saudi deal](#), which was portrayed as “rapprochement” between the two enemies. At first sight, the China-brokered Iran-Saudi agreement – which saw the restoration of diplomatic relations that were severed in January 2016 after the IRGC’s Basij civil militia torched the Saudi Embassy in Tehran – appears a positive step for regional peace and international security.

However, an [analysis of the motivations](#) driving Khamenei and the IRGC reveals a rather different picture. The deal itself lacks any real substance. The IRGC has not committed to any changes in its strategy or doctrine, nor has it agreed to curbing or reducing its support for the regime’s proxy militias – the most destabilising forces in the region. The agreement thus merely represents a return to the pre-2016 status quo. As far as Tehran is concerned, that status quo, with its footprint across the Middle East expanded to unprecedented levels, signifies a victory for the Islamic Republic. Rather than producing any substantive rapprochement with Riyadh, the deal constitutes a tactical and temporary delay in the IRGC’s hostility with its lesser enemy – Saudi Arabia – to double-down on its confrontation with its greater enemies: Israel and the United States.

At the international level, the regime believes the agreement with Riyadh will exclude the US from a new emerging regional arrangement and marks yet another step towards the collapse of the US-led liberal order. As IRGC commander and senior military advisor to the supreme leader, Yahya Rahim Safavi, [declared](#) after the deal was signed: “The post-US era in the region has begun.” The deal, he added, was “China’s second biggest blow to the US”. Linked to the US exclusion from the Middle East, at the regional level, Khamenei and the IRGC are seeking to use the agreement with Saudi Arabia to isolate Israel and disrupt the Abraham Accords. For Tehran, the deal is thus being driven by an appetite for increased conflict with Israel, rather than achieving peace with Saudi Arabia. Indeed, part of the [calculus](#) to normalise relations with the Arab world is driven by the desire to dedicate more resource and attention towards targeting Israel and avoid being overstretched in the event of a full-scale conflict.

All the visible signs indicate that the IRGC is preparing for a major confrontation with Israel – which it terms a “cancerous tumour” that must be “eradicated”. The ouster of Ali Shamkhani, who negotiated the deal with Saudi Arabia, as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council – the highest foreign and security policy body – is indicative of this. Unlike Shamkhani, the new secretary, IRGC commander [Ali Akbar Ahmadian](#), is a pure military strategist with no political or diplomatic background.

These internal changes to “purify” the regime by installing some of the [most zealous IRGC members](#) in senior positions have been simultaneously coupled with the significant expansion of the regime’s [militia](#), nuclear and ballistic missile programmes – all geared towards escalation with Israel. In June, the IRGC’s aerospace commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, announced what he claimed to be the development of the IRGC’s [“hypersonic”](#) missile that could penetrate Israel’s Iron Dome defence system. The regime’s path towards escalation with Tel Aviv was further evidenced in September when Israel’s defence minister, Yoav

Gallant, [revealed](#) that the Islamic Republic is constructing an airport in southern Lebanon, only 20 kms from the Israeli border, for “terror purposes”.

But the regime’s escalation is not simply limited to the Middle East and is now fully operational in Europe. Tehran has expanded its support for Putin’s war in Ukraine. The Islamic Republic is now the biggest military supporter of Russia’s invasion, with military cooperation between the two rogue regimes reaching unprecedented levels. Not only has the IRGC provided a consistent supply of deadly drones to the Russian military, but Moscow has been sharing satellite and missile technology with Tehran that could result in the further expansion of IRGC’s deadly missile programme. Crucially, the Islamic Republic’s escalatory path towards confrontation is taking place against the backdrop of an [expiring UN ban](#) on Iranian ballistic missile testing and transfers in October 2023 as part of the [sunset clauses](#) of the 2015 nuclear deal.

## THE WEST’S FAILED IRAN POLICY

All the signs indicate that we are headed towards a major escalation both inside Iran and abroad. In spite of all this, the west – not least, the UK – has failed to effectively respond to the Islamic Republic’s actions. The reluctance to impose consequences on the regime has, in part, been underpinned by the Biden administration’s insistence on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal – known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – and avoiding any confrontation with Tehran. In reality, however, this one-dimensional approach towards the Islamic Republic, which has refrained from imposing any consequences on the Khamenei’s regime, has had the opposite effect.

Since coming into office in January 2021, the US administration has prioritised the nuclear deal above all other outstanding issues with the clerical regime in Iran, including Iranian-backed terrorism on US soil. This stance towards Tehran has been replicated by the UK and the EU. However, despite almost three years of negotiations with Tehran, not only has the Biden administration failed to strike a deal, but the Islamic Republic has, since January 2021, significantly expanded its nuclear programme. This includes installing advanced centrifuges and increasing its stockpile of enriched uranium, which was below five percent prior to January 2021, to 60 percent – a figure close to weapons-grade levels (the JCPOA set a limit of 3.67 percent). The [UN atomic watchdog](#) has also found uranium particles enriched up to 83.7 percent in Iran’s underground nuclear site, just short of the level required for a nuclear weapon.

The Islamic Republic has adopted this approach despite receiving significant concessions from the US: [lax enforcement of oil sanctions](#), for instance, has enabled it to export as much as [2 million barrels per day](#) – a figure that is almost at pre-sanction levels – while billions of dollars is being transferred to Tehran in exchange for the release of US and European hostages. The current status quo has, in many ways, enabled Tehran to “have its cake and eat it”, advancing its pariah activities inside and outside of Iran – including doubling-down on its terrorist operations and hostage-taking policies against US and European nationals – while simultaneously doing enough to keep the west at the negotiating table as a means to avoid consequences for its hostile actions.

## THREE STEPS TO RECALIBRATE POLICY TOWARDS IRAN

More so than ever before, a serious recalibration in policy towards Iran is needed in the UK. To counter the IRGC national security threat, impose consequences on the regime in Iran and simultaneously support the Iranian people, a Labour government can – and should – implement three immediate policy steps.

First, Britain should shut down Khamenei’s ideological centres in the UK that have been consistently propagating Islamist extremism and expel Moosavi, the supreme leader’s official representative. Two of

these entities – ICE and Kanoon Towhid– are currently being investigated by the Charity Commission for potentially violating the commission’s rules. However, such measures are simply not enough. Together with Al Mustafa University, which has an affiliate branch in the UK, these institutions are directly controlled by, and are accountable to, Khamenei, with their heads being appointed by the supreme leader’s office, rather than the Iranian foreign ministry. Given that Khamenei is directly responsible for all the regime’s gross human rights violations inside and outside of Iran, the UK can – and should – operationalise Magnitsky sanctions – which targets human rights violators – against these entities to formally shut down their offices with immediate effect.

Second, Britain should target the regime’s oligarchs living in the UK. Like Putin’s regime in Russia, the Islamic Republic is a kleptocratic, oligarch system that is corrupt to its core. While Tehran violently enforces a hardline Islamist order on the Iranian people, the sons, daughters and families of regime and IRGC officials – the aghazadehs (or noble born) as they are known in Persian – live lavish lifestyles on corrupt money in western cities, not least in the UK. The UK must immediately establish a taskforce for identifying and sanctioning Iranian regime oligarchs, elites and proxies in the UK, just as it has in relation to Putin’s regime.

Finally, the UK must [proscribe](#) the IRGC as a terrorist organisation with immediate effect. The IRGC is not a conventional nation-state army. Rather, it is an ideological organisation that operates no differently to proscribed UK terrorist groups – including al-Qaida, IS and Hezbollah – with terrorism, hostage-taking and militancy being used as its primary modus operandi. Like these groups, the IRGC has a [formal programme of indoctrination](#) to radicalise all of its members and their families in a violent, Islamist extremist ideology that calls on them to [wage jihad](#) against Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians for having “unacceptable faith” and torture and execute Iranians who are opposed to the regime. Indoctrination now accounts for [more than 50 percent](#) of training in the IRGC.

Not only is the IRGC conducting direct terror operations in the UK but it is seeking to nurture homegrown Islamist radicalisation and terrorism on British soil. However, unlike IS and al-Qaida, [existing sanctions on the IRGC](#) do not prohibit the IRGC’s propaganda activities or ability to disseminate its jihadi propaganda. This is why terror legislation is so key and must be enforced against the IRGC. Proscription would give the UK government, Charity Commission and tech companies a clear mandate to prohibit any propaganda activity related to the IRGC – a mandate it currently lacks.

It would also provide our local communities – including schools and police – with the necessary safeguarding tools to take action against IRGC or Shia radicalisation. At present, the UK’s Prevent programme, which is designed to identify and prevent individuals from becoming involved with terrorism through radicalisation, is almost exclusively focused on Sunni Islamist extremism, meaning that the IRGC and Shia Islamist extremist activities are blind-spots.

The proscription of the IRGC would fundamentally change this. The existing sanctions regime on the IRGC is not sufficient – and the UK government knows this. The failure to proscribe the IRGC, which the UK home secretary has [declared](#) the “greatest national security threat against the UK”, is putting the lives of British citizens at risk, not least the Iranian diaspora and Jewish community, the primary targets of IRGC terrorism.

At present, the UK has failed to impose meaningful consequences on the regime in Iran, in spite of its terrorism on UK soil, military support for Putin’s war in Ukraine and violent crackdown on protestors in Iran. The UK’s reluctance to act may be borne out of the view that adopting a softer posture will eventually lead to Khamenei’s regime de-escalating. But inaction is having precisely the opposite effect. It has resulted in an overinflated sense of confidence in Tehran, which will increase the regime’s recklessness and strategic errors. As a result, the path towards escalation in many ways feels inevitable. However, it’s not too late to reverse this. A new Labour government would be able to reverse this

trajectory by adopting a proactive, robust policy against the Islamic Republic and imposes real consequences that would be felt by Khamenei's regime. The three recommendations provided in this paper provide a starting point to achieve a comprehensive Iran policy that simultaneously protects the UK's national security, supports peace and security in the Middle East, and advances the aspirations of the Iranian people.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# FAIRNESS TO ALL: HOW BRITAIN CAN SUPPORT EVEN-HANDED AND BALANCED INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

## BARONESS RAMSAY OF CARTVALE

**Israel is subject to disproportionate criticism at the United Nations. This is unfair, a breach of the UN Charter and harmful to the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace**

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism explicitly and rightly states that, like any other country, Israel should be subject to scrutiny and legitimate criticism.

However, since 1967, the weight and authority of the United Nations has repeatedly and disproportionately been deployed against the Jewish state.

No other country on earth receives the kind of sustained effort to delegitimise and demonise its existence to which Israel is subjected.

There are both principled and practical reasons why the next Labour government should use Britain's power and authority within international institutions to address this issue and redress the balance.

That Israel faces a barrage of condemnatory resolutions in international institutions is not an opinion. It is a fact.

Since 2015, for instance, the UN General Assembly has passed 140 resolutions condemning Israel. No other country comes close to this number: the next highest is Russia – which, in this period, has annexed Crimea, committed multiple war crimes on behalf of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and mounted a brutal invasion of its neighbour, Ukraine – with 23 condemnatory resolutions. Similarly, Syria has been condemned only 10 times by the General Assembly since 2015; North Korea eight; Myanmar seven; and Iran seven. Amazingly, despite its genocidal campaign against the Uyghurs, China has not been condemned once by the General Assembly.

Nor is the General Assembly exceptional among UN international institutions. Since 2006, the UN Human Rights Council has passed 103 resolutions condemning Israel. Syria has faced less than half that number – 42 – with North Korea subject to 16; Iran to 14; and Eritrea to 12. Russia has been condemned by the UNHRC only six times.

Israel is also the only country in the world for which the UNHRC maintains a permanent agenda item, Item 7: “Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories.” As the Jewish Leadership Council argued in evidence to a parliamentary select committee inquiry in 2020: “We believe that the UN Human Rights Council’s disproportionate focus against Israel is part of an inherent institutional bias.”

The World Health Organisation has passed eight resolutions condemning Israel since 2015 – but not a single resolution against any other member state. Likewise, between 2009 and 2021, UNESCO adopted 82 resolutions against Israel; nine on Crimea; four on Iraq; and two on Syria. No resolutions were passed on Iran, Sudan, North Korea, or any other country in the world.

This assault on Israel at the UN has been recognised and repeatedly condemned by successive secretary-generals. In 2006, Kofi Annan told the UNGA: “Supporters of Israel feel that it is harshly judged, by standards that are not applied to its enemies – and too often this is true, particularly in some UN bodies.” Likewise, in 2016, Ban Ki-Moon told the Security Council: “Decades of political manoeuvrings have created a disproportionate volume of resolutions, reports and conferences criticising Israel. In many cases, rather than helping the Palestinian cause, this reality has hampered the ability of the UN to fulfil its role effectively.” The current secretary-general, António Guterres, has similarly made clear that Israel “needs to be treated as any other state”.

The fact that Israel is so self-evidently not “treated as any other state” is a clear breach of the principle of equality enshrined in the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UN Charter, for instance, specifically endorses “the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small”.

It’s also clear that the disproportionate focus on Israel is cynically used and exploited by some of the world’s worst human rights abusers to distract international attention from their own bleak records, allowing them to escape the condemnation they deserve. At the UNHRC, Israel is judged by a membership which includes China, Qatar and Cuba. Indeed, 70 percent of the council’s members are not democracies.

Similarly, the Commission on the Status of Women – whose members include Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia – has repeatedly targeted Israel while granting a free pass to the Saudis, Yemen and Iran, despite their abysmal records on women’s rights.

And, of course, Iran has been regularly appointed to leading positions in the UN. Most recently, in June 2023, the Islamic Republic was elected as a vice-president of the General Assembly, despite its regular threats to “annihilate” Israel. In a particular grotesque display of UN double-standards, despite its months-long crackdown on protesters and wave of executions, in May 2023 Iran was asked to chair the social forum of the UNHRC. This year, the forum’s focus will be on the “contribution of science, technology, and innovation to promoting human rights, including in the context of post-pandemic recovery”. Tehran, which is currently under investigation by the UNHRC, has been boasting of how it is using technology, including facial recognition tools, as part of its effort to stamp out the protest movement and force women to wear the hijab.

As Ki-Moon indicated, the manner in which Israel is singled out for opprobrium by international institutions does nothing to promote the cause of peace and reconciliation between the Jewish state and the Palestinians; in fact, quite the opposite. The unjustifiable, relentless and one-sided criticism which their country routinely faces in the international arena does not go unnoticed by the Israeli public. Together with the regional isolation and hostility which Israel has traditionally faced, it understandably reinforces a bunker mentality among some sections of the population. That mentality has, in turn, been ruthlessly reinforced and tapped into by the Israeli right for its own political and ideological purposes. Moreover, the sheer level of criticism the country faces makes it difficult for genuine and legitimate messages of concern about the actions of Israeli governments to be heard and debated domestically. In short, this toxic mix of double-standards and demonisation undermines Israeli progressives and peace campaigners and strengthens their opponents. Crucially, it also flies in the face of the longstanding position that the best way to make progress towards peace – as set out in the Oslo Accords and subsequent agreements – is through direct negotiations between the two sides; that principle is undermined by attempts to internationalise the conflict and to delegitimise one of the two parties to those negotiations.



## AGENDA FOR CHANGE

If it wishes to play a constructive and substantive role, a Labour government under Keir Starmer should aspire to the kind of even-handed and balanced approach towards the Israel-Palestinian conflict adopted by the administrations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Such an approach requires Britain to take a lead in addressing the manner in which international institutions treat Israel.

Under successive Conservative governments, the UK has contributed to the bias against Israel at the UN. Between 2015 and 2023, it voted [against](#) Israel at the General Assembly on 71 percent of resolutions, backing Israel on seven percent and abstaining in a further 22 percent. By comparison, Canada, which has had a centre-left government throughout this period, supported Israel on 84 percent of votes, opposing it on three percent and abstaining on 13 percent. Australia supported Israel on 41 percent of votes, voted against it in 20 percent and abstained on 40 percent.

An incoming Labour government should commission a statistical analysis of institutional anti-Israel bias at the UN and other multilateral organisations, including UNESCO, the WHO and the Commission of Women, to inform a review of Britain's future voting behaviour in these bodies.

Since 2019, the UK has adopted a policy of voting against all UNHRC agenda Item 7 resolutions, a longstanding demand from the Jewish community. While this is welcome, the egregious nature of the council's bias against Israel requires we go further. Until the UNHRC has removed its institutional anti-Israel bias, Britain should vote against all resolutions condemning Israel at the council.

This temporary measure should be accompanied by a sustained reform effort. Agenda Item should be removed. It simply cannot be right that only one country is targeted in this manner.

At present, the UNHRC's founding resolution – which obliges member states to consider “candidates' contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights” in electing members – is disregarded entirely. Working with liberal democratic allies such as the US, Canada and Australia, Britain should seek to limit the election of human rights abusers to the UNHRC. This would involve a greater push to encourage countries with positive human rights records to run for election to the UNHRC. At the same time, a system of obstacles should be placed in the path to election of human rights abusers, including initiating measures that meaningfully name rights-abusing countries, unequivocally condemn their abuses, and directly attribute responsibility to perpetrators.

No country – including Israel – should escape legitimate censure or criticism in international forums. Equally, no country should be allowed to opportunistically use the Jewish state as a decoy and shield to protect itself from scrutiny and, where warranted, condemnation. Israel has been forced to play this role for far too long – to the detriment of the Middle East's only democracy, the cause of human rights globally, and the credibility of international institutions. It's time for a change of course.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# A FORCE FOR GOOD: HOW BRITAIN CAN SUPPORT PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REGION

RT HON JOHN SPELLAR MP

## Britain needs to revive its soft power and invest in stronger regional civic societies

In April, Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, extinguished the last embers of hope engendered by the Arab Spring 12 years ago.

Over the past year, the president has set [about](#) systematically dismantling democracy in the North African state.

Tunisia was not simply the birthplace of the Arab Spring; it was also the only country to oust an authoritarian ruler and go on to build a democracy.

The failure of Tunisia's lonely Arab experiment leaves Israel, once again, as the region's only democracy. Over recent months, the Netanyahu government, at the behest of its far-right coalition allies, has pushed through reforms which threaten the independency of the judiciary and thus key elements of Israel's democratic character. While the massive pro-democracy protests throughout the country since January underline the strength of Israeli civic society and the values of the Israeli people, these events are a reminder that democracy can never be taken for granted and must be protected and strengthened at all times.

There are also, of course, legitimate questions about the impact of Israel's occupation of the West Bank on the rights of the Palestinian people. The next Labour government must work to further a two-state solution and the realisation of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

## THE MIDDLE EAST: "THE MOST ENTRENCHED SYSTEMS OF REPRESSION IN THE WORLD"

But we should not forget that a resolution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians will not alone address the democratic deficit endured by the Palestinian people. And it certainly won't address the lack of democracy and human rights more widely across the Middle East.

Despite pledges to hold new elections, President Mahmoud Abbas is currently in the 18th year of the four-year term he won in 2005. There have been no parliamentary elections since 2006, although local and municipal elections have taken place over the past two years. As Freedom House, which ranks the West Bank as "not free", has [noted](#): "The PA governs in an authoritarian manner, engaging in repression against journalists and activists who present critical views on its rule." Similarly, Freedom House says that, since seizing power in 2007, Hamas has governed Gaza "in an authoritarian manner, actively suppressing criticism of its rule".

Looking at the broader picture across the region, Freedom House [suggests](#) that “popular demand for greater freedom in the Middle East continues to run up against some of the most entrenched systems of repression in the world”.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Syria, where the Assad regime – with the active assistance of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – answered its people’s peaceful demand for change and reform by waging a war over the past 12 years in which over 230,000 civilians, including 30,000 children are [estimated](#) by the Syrian Network for Human Rights to have been killed. Among the victims are 15,000 Syrians who died due to torture, with another 150,000 arbitrarily arrested.

Unsurprisingly, the Iranian regime, which has brought so much suffering to the region, has shown scant regard for human life within its own borders. Over the past year, it has [cracked down](#) harshly on the protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini last September. Nearly 550 people have been killed, over 19,000 arrested, and, [according](#) to Amnesty International, while seven men have been executed so far “dozens of others” are at risk of being sentenced to death. These events are, of course, simply the latest in a regular cycle of protest and repression stretching back over the past 14 years. Each time, however, the protests have become larger, more political in their demands, and the response of the regime more brutal.

As LFI argued in its 2021 [publication](#), *The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach*, in government, Labour should support democratic forces and values in the region and the development of the civic society institutions – including a vibrant media, independent judiciary and free trade unions – which underpin, and are a vital prerequisite to, successfully functioning democracies.

As we also suggested, a Labour government should also adopt a policy of consistency: supporting the rights of oppressed groups throughout the region, whether women in Saudi Arabia, journalists in Egypt, Palestinian political activists or the LGBT community in Iran, with equal passion and commitment.

## INDIFFERENCE VERSUS ACTION

What might that mean in concrete terms?

First, under the Conservatives, Britain’s soft power has been dramatically curtailed. Our international aid budget has been slashed, with one-third of spending now [redirected](#) towards asylum-seekers and refugees at home. Our diplomatic service has been reduced and £90m [cut](#) last year from specialist work on conflict resolution in the Middle East and North Africa. And vital institutions, such as the British Council, have suffered tightened budgets: programmes have been eliminated, offices [closed](#) and up to 20 percent of staff made redundant. As the fiscal situation allows, a Labour government should begin reversing these cuts and restoring the UK’s global influence.

Second, successive Conservative governments have shown a shocking indifference to the Middle East. The 2021 Integrated Review and its 2023 “refresh”, for instance, failed to even reference the Abraham Accords, one of the most potentially significant developments in the region’s future diplomatic, economic and strategic landscape. As Moran Zaga, a policy fellow at Mitvim, the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, [argued](#) in *The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach*, the accords also offer the long-term opportunity to spread liberal values more widely in the region. “For the UAE and Bahrain, the interaction with Israelis on the people-to-people level could cultivate a layer of civil society which is only yet in its early stages,” she wrote. “This trend could result in greater liberalisation in the Arab Gulf states – serving as an example for other Arab societies to follow.”

This indifference is reflected in the decision to abolish the dedicated post of minister for the Middle East in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office team. The decision ignores the strategic [importance](#) to the UK of the Middle East. It is a region with which Britain has deep, historic and continuing security, commercial and economic ties and interests. These range from the importance of capital investment from the region, particularly the Gulf, in the UK economy to the impact of the threat posed by terrorist groups and hostile states on Britain's domestic security. There may be logic to the government's much vaunted "Indo-Pacific tilt", with that region certain to play a central geopolitical role in the next century, but geography can't be ignored – the Middle East is on Europe's doorstep. To recognise this importance, Labour should restore the minister for the Middle East portfolio on its first day in office to ensure the region is, once again, represented at the policy-making top table.

Third, the government's failure to grasp and engage with developments in the region is apparent in the workings of the new post-Brexit Magnitsky-style sanctions regime established in 2020 to promote human rights and punish corruption. As LFI research last summer [uncovered](#), in its first two years of operation, the government failed to impose any sanctions against Iranian individuals or entities under the new act. Indeed, while various European sanctions – including for those who have violated human rights in Iran – were carried into British law when we left the European Union, this list (of some 82 individuals and one entity) had not been added to in nearly a decade, effectively leaving unpunished those responsible for the violent suppression of the 2019 protests. Since the outbreak of the September 2022 protests, the government has begun to use Magnitsky sanctions against the regime, but its previous inaction is curious and startling. It is compounded by the government's continuing failure to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which stands at the heart of Tehran's machinery of domestic repression.

A Labour government should fulfil its pledge to proscribe the IRGC. As my colleague, LFI chair Steve McCabe [argued](#) in our 2022 publication *Iran: A Darkening Picture at Home and Abroad*, Labour should also establish a more "clear and transparent" Magnitsky sanctions system, with publicly available and consistently applied criteria underpinning the reasons why individuals are sanctioned, and a regular review process.

Fourth, as a crucial step in building support for liberal democratic values in the Middle East, a Labour government should work to ensure development aid supports measures which strengthen civil society, promotes the rights of women, LGBT+ people and other minorities, and builds a free and independent media. As well as being a crucial force in enhancing the rights, living standards and conditions of working people, trade unions are crucial civic society institutions which cross sectarian and religious divides. A Labour government should conduct a review with the Trade Union Congress to establish a fund to support the growth and strengthening of independent trade unions in the region.

Finally, the freezing of the licence fee, increasing costs and inflationary pressures, and the BBC's decision to move to a digital-first service has led to [cuts](#) in the World Service, including several foreign-language radio services. In January, the BBC's oldest foreign-language radio service, BBC Arabic, went off-air, with its Persian radio service closing after 82 years in March. The World Service provides vital, impartial and independent news to those subjected to authoritarian rule.

While BBC Arabic and Persian online content remains, this is, of course, at the mercy of government-imposed firewalls and internet shutdowns, such as those regularly imposed by the Iranian regime during the current protests. A Labour government should launch an urgent review with the BBC of the World Service's output to Arabic and Persian audiences and the impact of the closure of the BBC Arabic and BBC Persian radio services.

Democracy cannot be imposed on the Middle East by external players. But neither can the aspirations of the people of the region for freedom and self-government be ignored. A Labour government should work to support and nurture those aspirations: punishing those who abuse human rights and assisting those who seek a better future.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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