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## PERSPECTIVES

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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [cst@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:cst@tauex.tau.ac.il). We are glad to share with you the thirty-fifth issue of Perspectives.

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### The Labour and the Jews

*Antisemitism is no longer tolerated. But ahead of Starmer's landslide, can Jews feel safe?*

*Noah Abrahams*

On July 4, the United Kingdom will head to the polls after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called an early election.

Sunak is the fifth Conservative prime minister since 2010. The Labour, led by Sir Keir Starmer, a former Director of Public Prosecutions, is projected to win 42% of the votes. Through the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post system, this achievement will provide a landslide, possibly the biggest in British history.

In recent years, Starmer, whose wife is Jewish, worked hard to perish antisemitism and antisemites from his party. He had the Labour adopt the IHRA definition, made clear that antisemites would be thrown out, and often acted accordingly.

His predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, a staunch critic of Israel fond of anti-Western, anti-liberal terror groups, associated with pro-Palestinian social media pages that contained antisemitic rhetoric.

Corbyn was suspended from the Labour in 2020 following his dismissive response to the findings of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) that the party discriminated against Jews and did not counter antisemitism as effectively as it could have.

Starmer was brutal in his reaction to Corbyn's denialism. He said those who believed the issue of antisemitism in the party had been "exaggerated" were also "part of the problem and should be nowhere near the Labour Party."

Hundreds of other members were banned from the party for alleged antisemitism.

In 2023, Starmer described antisemitism as "an evil" and stated that "no political party that cultivates it deserves to hold power." He added, "I said from the start that we would be judged not on our own terms but by the return of those who felt they could no longer support us."

Jewish Labour Movement national chair Mike Katz told *The Jerusalem Post* that under Starmer's leadership, UK Jews are willing to give the Labour party another chance.

Indeed, Starmer is expected to win the majority of Jewish votes.

It is difficult to assess how much Jew-hatred contributed to Corbyn's defeat in 2019. After all, Corbyn did win 32% of the votes to the Tories' 43%, which, in a different electoral system, the Labour would not have crashed so badly. At the time, Brits wanted to get the matter of Brexit over and done with.

Nevertheless, the bottom line is that Labour was defeated under Corbyn, the hater, and under Starmer, who fights antisemitism, they are headed to their biggest victory ever.

This is a lesson also seen in other European countries.

Antisemitism, and other forms of racism, can make you popular on certain campuses. But it won't deliver power.

Still, the prime minister-to-be's commitment to the fight against Jew-haters has not been unblemished.

In 2019, Starmer threw his unwavering support behind then-party leader Corbyn, the same Corbyn who was eventually banished on the grounds of antisemitism.

During the recent campaign, Starmer was reluctant to discuss that decision. He exclaimed that his predecessor would have been a "better prime minister" than Boris Johnson.

"Everybody knew there was always going to be a day after when we would have the opportunity for a new party and to make sure our party was there to face the future," he said.

Contemporary antisemitism among Labour ranks raged already before Corbyn ascended.

In 2003, Labour MP Tam Dalyell said there was “far too much Jewish influence in the US” and that “a cabal of Jewish advisers” were directing American and British policy on Iraq.

Two years later, Labour politician Ken Livingstone (who went on to become the Mayor of London) asked Jewish journalist Oliver Finegold if he had been “a German war criminal.”

When the reporter said he was Jewish, Livingstone said he was “just like a concentration camp guard.”

“You are just doing it because you are paid to,” he sniggered.

If some among Britain’s Jews are still suspicious of Starmer and the Labour, it is because, just like the football team the Labour leader roots for, Arsenal, he at times flakes when under pressure.

Starmer has not been consistently determined in purging the party from Corbyn-echoes. Diane Abbott, the first black woman and longest-serving black MP, who still remains close to Corbyn and who was once his shadow home secretary, was suspended by the party for her questioning of whether Jews, as well as other minority groups, face racism in Britain.

However, ultimately, in May, responding to the row in the party over the move, Starmer had a change of heart and allowed Abbott to stand as a candidate.

Flip-flopping has been particularly evident when it comes to Israel, whose existence is delegitimized by not a few Labour activists and MPs.

In the aftermath of the October 7 atrocity, Starmer rigorously supported Israel. Speaking at an event in November, he said he did not back a ceasefire because Hamas did not want one, and it would only embolden the terrorist group.

Starmer boldly explained that a ceasefire “would leave Hamas with the infrastructure and the capabilities to carry out the sort of attack we saw on October 7.”

In treacherous and testing times, Starmer put his neck on the line for Israel.

Fifty-six Labour MPS wasted no time voting for a ceasefire in Gaza in the immediate aftermath of October 7. Starmer did not.

But fast-forward to February, when as many as 100 of his Labour MPs, including at least two members of his shadow cabinet, were willing to rebel and vote again for an immediate ceasefire.

Facing pressure, Starmer changed his stance to calling for “a ceasefire that lasts.”

“This is what must happen now. The fighting must stop now,” he told delegates.

Conservative MP Steve Double, a member of the Friends of Israel parliamentary group, argues that “despite whatever Keir Starmer may claim, it would appear many in the Labour party still have a blind spot when it comes to Israel’s legitimate right to defend itself and its existence as a sovereign state.”

“I was appalled at the rhetoric from many members of the opposite benches,” Double said.

Last November, Labour MP Andy McDonald chanted the phrase “from the River to the Sea” in central London.

In February, it was revealed that a Labour candidate in a by-election, Azhar Ali, told a meeting of activists that Israel deliberately allowed the October 7 attacks to take place in order to give itself the “green light” to invade Gaza.

That same month, Graham Jones, a former Labour MP for Hyndburn in Lancashire, was suspended after he argued that British subjects who fight in the IDF “should be locked up.” The suspension was lifted in May.

Harsh criticism of Israel is not necessarily antisemitism. Yet when the right of the one Jewish state to exist or defend itself is questioned, Jews in Britain fear their existence is questioned, too.

According to a Savanta survey from February, 41% of the British public believe that Labour still has an antisemitism problem.

These are the highest figures for any of the major parties in the UK.

Among Labour voters, one-third shared that view.

Soon in Number 10 Downing Street, it will be for Starmer to prove them wrong, and he will have the confident majority to do so without fearing political backlash.

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