

Opinion **UK foreign policy**

Israel's hapless British defenders

Many Jews still feel kinship to Israel, but refusing to recognise its failings is not an act of support

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When Ed Miliband begins a speech on Israel with the words “as a proud British Jew”, you just know the chief rabbi will soon be firing up his social media machine for an angry denunciation.

In fact, if you believe the foreign secretary’s announcement of sanctions against illegal West Bank settlements was prompted by domestic political considerations — and it would be foolish to think them absent — then Miliband has been blessed in his enemies.

Mike Huckabee, the evangelical American ambassador to Israel, called it “Jew hate”. Israel has responded with rage and retaliatory gestures. The UK’s traditional Jewish leadership has fumed. It is worth stressing that the chief rabbi speaks for mainstream orthodox synagogues. Britain’s senior Masorti rabbi offered a far more thoughtful response, calling settler extremism “a violation of God’s name”, a view echoed by progressive rabbis.

Miliband’s announcement was timed to precede the Israeli election so that it would not seem like a swipe at a new government should Benjamin Netanyahu be ousted. But Andy Burnham also wanted a reset before the party conference on an issue where Labour had become detached from its supporters.

There are questions about the efficacy of the policy, but Miliband was nuanced and measured. There are no new sanctions on Israel; he opposed the wider BDS movement. He spoke against antisemitism and of the UK’s commitment to the Jewish homeland. He drew a line on settlements, not just for the Palestinians but also to safeguard Israel’s future by trying to keep a two-state solution alive. The only truly wince-inducing moment for supporters of Israel was his description of the settler policy as ethnic cleansing. But if it looks, walks and quacks like a duck . . .

Naturally none of this was enough for Israel’s unquestioning defenders around the world. I, too, have a vested interest in the safety of British Jews and the survival of the country that is their only certain lifeboat, but this knee-jerk response captures the witlessness of those who consider themselves Israel and Judaism’s greatest supporters.

Any such taxonomy must begin with Netanyahu and his far-right coalition partners. There is weight to the view that no nation could fail to respond to an attack of the scale and atrocity of October 7, just as there is logic to the determination to avert a nuclear Iran. But these are arguments for smart action, not any action.

The Israeli premier has started wars he cannot finish and gulled America into a conflict that allowed Iran to hold the world economy to ransom and humiliated the US president. The Gaza campaign (and now the West Bank settler extremism) has horrified and alienated genuine allies. Israelis should be alarmed by the deepening faultlines under the US alliance. Even those prepared to disregard the plight of the Palestinians should recognise the last years have been a strategic disaster for Israel.

Like many after October 7, I was revolted by the immediate glee of far too many people and shaken by the increasingly open antisemitism within the UK. It has been a shock to see synagogues and individuals targeted and efforts to cancel Jewish businesses and artists.

This frightening climate has inevitably calcified sentiment among British Jews. In the UK, the traditional community leaders and their media outriders fail to discern between defending the existence of Israel and shielding its atrocious government. Many Jews still feel a strong kinship to Israel, but stolid defence when its government goes wrong is not an act of support. Depicting any pushback against Israel as a threat to Jews here risks conflating antisemitism with anti-Israel sentiment, something we rightly fear and constantly warn against.

Keir Starmer lost his premiership, in part because his backing for Israel eroded Labour support. Yet when he visited the scene of a knife attack on British Jews he was greeted by boneheads waving “Starmer, Jew harmer” signs. Antisemitism is too important to be yelled so blithely and we are already witnessing signs of fatigue among allies at this approach.

The chief rabbi argues this latest move is a “dark day” that will make Jews in Britain less safe. These are the words of people feeling so embattled and deep in their bunker they can no longer distinguish between enemies and critical friends, between the time to whisper and the time to bellow. Do they really believe that those who would attack synagogues or stab Jews in the street need a green light from Miliband?

Their current approach is counter-productive. It neither aids Israel nor protects Jews here.

Contrary to the rhetoric, this places no new target on Jewish backs because that target is already there. Jews must live with unprecedented levels of security at schools and places of worship. The fanaticism and antisemitism were uncorked long ago and bolstered by far-left groups cynically stirring up rage at Starmer's government. You may consider the new sanctions misguided but patently they are not an attack on British Jews. Nor can any serious observer say the government has turned on the community.

There is one possible tactical argument for the overreaction to the sanctions, namely that Jewish leaders hope that by ferociously fighting even small steps they raise the cost of bigger ones. Sadly that would require a subtlety that is little in evidence.

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