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PERSPECTIVE

Israel's genocide in Gaza recently exceeded 200 days, more than half a year characterized by remorseless consistency as Israeli forces indiscriminately pound the enclave. Several hospitals have been flattened and put out of service, half of Gaza's buildings have been destroyed, and there are barely any educational facilities left standing. The man-made starvation in Gaza has caused the death of at least 27 children due to dehydration and malnutrition. Meanwhile, over 19,000 children have been left orphaned. The death toll is close to 40,000.

To date, Israel's crimes have been met with unflinching support from the political class in Britain. To understand the dynamics of how a country on trial for genocide by the World Court has received unqualified support in these quarters is to understand the scale of the meticulous, multipronged operation to insulate Israel undertaken by the pro-Israel lobby.



A Labour Friends of Israel delegation poses for a photo with Israeli President Isaac Herzog (sitting-R) during a "solidarity mission" after October 7, 2023.

Conservative Friends of Israel

In April, the former Conservative minister Sir Alan Duncan provoked outrage when he suggested the lobby group Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI) does the bidding of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet. The statement represented a rare moment of honesty from Westminster.

Formed in 1974, CFI exists to ensure "that Israel's case is fairly represented in Parliament". One prime method in this modus operandi is free trips to Israel, and research shows the group has taken British MPs on 155 free trips over the last decade, more than any other group or government.

Sir Richard Dalton, former British ambassador in Tehran and consul in Jerusalem, has previously highlighted the relationship between the lobby and politicians. He suggests ventures like free trips — "financial pressures" — are a way of censoring politicians on Israel.

During Israel's onslaught on Gaza, when the death toll had already surpassed 20,000, CFI paid for MPs to travel to Israel. Theresa Villiers and Greg Smith were among them. Upon their return, both used avenues in the media — Jewish News and GB News, respectively — to heap praise on Israel and attempt to legitimize its campaign of ethnic cleansing in Gaza.

This is a metaphor for the wider pattern — when Conservative ministers have been taken on trips to Israel by CFI, a predictable record of pro-Israel sentiment ensues. When he embarked on his political journey as an MP in 2015, one of the first trips registered for James Cleverly was a fact-finding "political delegation" in Israel and the West Bank. A friend of Israel is an apt description for the home secretary's subsequent positions: in the last few six months alone, he has dismissed the categorization of Israel as an apartheid state, expressed Britain's unwavering support for Israel, and called for pro-Palestine marches to cease.

And whilst proponents of Israel or CFI continue to deny that donations and free trips come at the cost of compliance, when that compliance is imperiled, the reality is laid bare. As far back as 2006, then shadow foreign secretary William Hague offered the mildest of criticism of Israel when it attacked Hezbollah in Lebanon, suggesting the response was "disproportionate". William Hague had previously accepted personal donations from CFI members, allegedly tens of thousands of pounds.

But when he made the remark on Israel's aggression, there were immediate threats to withdraw funding. One of those was from Lord Kalms, a major donor to the Conservative Party and a CFI member. In a few words, he appeared to sum up the nature of the unwritten contract in an article in the Spectator: "Think again, William, for who you speak."

Meanwhile, then-director of CFI Stuart Polak

We need to talk about pro-Israel lobby in UK



UK Labour leader Keir Starmer addresses the Annual Lunch of Labour Friends of Israel in 2021.

met with then-party leader David Cameron. A crucial concession was made — the word "disproportionate" was not to be used when mentioning the Israeli military's action.

Four decades ago, the Conservative historian and politician Robert Rhodes James defined the CFI as "the largest organisation in Western Europe dedicated to the cause of the people of Israel". Today, at least 80% of Conservative Party MPs are involved with CFI. A cursory glance at the enthusiasm with which Conservative Party leaders — usually at CFI events — from Liz Truss to Boris Johnson to Rishi Sunak line up to make crystal clear their commitment to Israel, supplements the burgeoning mountain of evidence that makes that diagnosis difficult to refute.

The net success is discernible too. In the last 15 years of Conservative rule, legislation to outlaw and muzzle BDS has been introduced, an International Criminal Court investigation into Israel's atrocities was opposed, and the government is currently ignoring legal advice that would compel them to suspend arms sales to Israel.

Labour Friends of Israel

But despite being ardent Conservative Friends of Israel in name and nature, it's not a unique level of support that is exclusively confined to one corner of Westminster. Labour Friends of Israel operate on a similar wavelength and the rules of engagement appear to be identical. When Tony Blair was Labour party leader, the tacit agreement among the party hierarchy was that the party was "never again to be anti-Israel". The culture this entailed was one defined by constant injections of capital, many by figures associated with LFI. The result was, as detailed by former Labour Friends of Israel chair Jon Mendelsohn, anti-Israelism dissipated from the party.

After a brief spell with Jeremy Corbyn at the helm and an unmistakable pro-Palestine policy agenda in which LFI was frozen out, normal service has resumed under leader Keir Starmer. Today, sitting Labour MPs have accepted over £280,000 in donations from pro-Israel groups or individuals, and Labour Friends of Israel fund a significant number of the Labour shadow cab-

inet.

The director of Labour Friends of Israel, Michael Rubin, celebrated the return of a "balanced, mature, and constructive" approach to Israel-Palestine in 2021, claiming that it now resembles the Blair-Brown years.

However, what this translates into is a culture of the unwavering championship of Israel. Keir Starmer himself dismissed Amnesty International's conclusive findings that Israel practices the crime of apartheid, and as Israel unlawfully cut off food, water, and electricity from all of Gaza after October 7, the former human rights lawyer publicly encouraged the collective punishment it necessitated.

Trevor Chinn, an early backer of CFI and donor to Tony Blair's Labour, was a key supporter of Keir Starmer's leadership campaign — in which he boasted about supporting Zionism without qualification — with a contribution of £50,000. Chinn also generously gave to shadow cabinet members David Lammy and Lisa Nandy. Both appeared on the airwaves obfuscating when asked about Israel's breach of international law, in a perfect embodiment of the transactional correlation that exists.

Board of Deputies

Yet, whilst this consolidation of an elite pro-Israel consensus in Westminster illuminates comprehensive patterns of influence, they scratch the surface when it comes to the network that shields Israel from accountability.

The Board of Deputies is a veteran repeat offender in this regard. The organization is supposed to officially represent Britain's Jewish community, but it is a notoriously diligent supporter of Israel.

Author Hil Aked in a recent book on the Israel Lobby notes that in 2007, as Britain's University and College Union called for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions in line with BDS, the Board of Deputies announced almost £1 million would be spent fighting boycotts and similar "delegitimization" campaigns.

Where there is a drive to nullify any disparaging of Israel, the presence of the Board of Deputies is never distant. When the United Nations established a fact-finding mission to investigate Israel's 2008 Gaza assault, the Board demanded Britain reject it. True to form, during Israel's International Court of Justice trial, the Board was