



PODCAST | POLITICS

# The UK Elections and Palestine with Sara Hussein

By: Sara Hussein · July, 2024

*The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.*

**Sara Hussein** 0:00

Palestine has actually been a singularly unifying issue. We've seen that in the hundreds and thousands of people taking to the streets every week, week in, week out, over the past nine months. People from all communities, struggles, walks of life, and that's been reflected also then in terms of the election of not only the independents, the Greens, but also the really narrowing Labour margins of victory in many constituencies.

**Yara Hawari** 0:25

From Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari, and this is Rethinking Palestine.

On July 4th, the British public elected a new government. As predicted by many pundits and pollsters, the Labour Party led by Keir Starmer won in a crushing defeat for the Conservative Party, which was ousted after 14 years of parliamentary rule. For many supporters of Palestinian liberation and fundamental rights, this election posed a challenge, with both major parties supporting the genocidal actions of the Israeli regime. Within the Labour Party, which has traditionally been the political home for many Palestine supporters, this led to



some very serious tensions and fractures. Indeed, some candidates were forced to break with the Labour Party and run on independent tickets.

It also gave rise to candidates predominantly running on what was called a pro-Gaza platform. Following the election, the first official trip by the new Foreign Secretary David Lammy was to Israel, where he met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. So what does this British post-election landscape look like now for Palestinians and their allies?

Joining me to discuss all of this and more is Sara Hussein, Director of the British Palestinian Committee and Policy Member of Al-Shabaka. Sara, thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

**Sara Hussein 1:50**

Thank you for having me. I'm really looking forward to it.

**Yara Hawari 1:52**

Sara, perhaps we can begin by having a little overview of the elections. What happened? What were the significant changes?

**Sara Hussein 2:02**

As you mentioned in your introduction, what we saw was a landslide majority for the Labour Party. In this first-past-the-post system that we have in the UK, where people vote for their MPs within constituencies and the person with the most votes goes to parliament, we saw Labour win 411 seats, which, as you said, is a crushing victory in this system.

But if you scratch the surface a little bit, what we see is quite a shallow victory. First of all, we're looking at one of the lowest voter turnouts we've had, at 60 percent. And if we bear in mind that the Conservatives pretty much self-imploded and were incredibly unpopular — in fact, one in five voters actually voted



tactically purely to oust the Conservatives — when you see then that Labour won with 34 percent of the vote share, which is the lowest of a governing party in modern history, it really gives a clearer picture of how there's very little love for either of the two major parties right now.

What was also really interesting is, as you've referred to, the rise of five independent MPs — or the election of five independents — based on a Palestine platform. Four of those were completely new members of parliament, and one of them, Jeremy Corbyn, was elected again — unprecedented in terms of the British voting system.

We saw the Green Party, which made Palestine an intentional part of its platform, have its best election ever, going from having one seat previously to four seats. We also saw a rise in the popularity of the far right, with Nigel Farage's Reform Party also gaining five seats. So there's that as well.

But I think in relation to Palestine, what's happened in Gaza played an important role in this election and more broadly put a real dent in the machine of party politics. And I think it showed the real possibility of breaking beyond the two-party system for the first time.

## **Yara Hawari 3:41**

Now, as I mentioned in the introduction, historically the Labour Party has been a political home for many who support Palestinian liberation and fundamental rights, and that was especially the case under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. But the purge of so-called Corbynistas and leftists more generally from the party has meant that that's no longer the case. Not to mention that since the beginning of the genocide, Starmer and other key figures have been supportive of the Israeli regime's actions in Gaza. So what is the Labour Party like now for people who support Palestinian liberation?



## Sara Hussein 4:22

First of all, I think it's important to build on this a bit — in terms of Starmer and others being supportive of the genocide — because we don't say this lightly. I think it's important to add some examples of what we mean when we say that.

And I think no Palestinian in the UK — and I'm sure many other people — are going to forget that interview he gave in October on LBC, when he said that Israel had a right to cut off power and water to the people of Gaza, which is collective punishment and a war crime under international law. And then we saw four months later, Starmer's Labour leadership effectively upend parliamentary protocol to push for a Labour amendment on a ceasefire vote — there was a motion brought by the SNP — that removed the term "collective punishment" from the motion, among other things, specifically to shield Israel from accountability.

And this support for Israel goes beyond that as well. People will remember the LBC interview very well, but maybe fewer people will know about the speech he gave to Labour Friends of Israel — it's an annual lunch — in 2021, where he invoked the colonialist language of the early Zionists, "making the desert bloom," and associated racist tropes along those lines.

So this is the Labour leadership that we have in power now. To your point about the purge, even before the elections, we've seen a series of deselections of left-leaning candidates. Faiza Shaheen, for example, was one of them that was famously reported. There were reported attempts to bar Diane Abbott from running as a Labour candidate. And at the same time, the party was backing new candidates like Luke Akehurst, for example, who is the former director of an organization called We Believe in Israel, which is a very active supporter of the genocide.

So in short, it's a really difficult environment for those Labour MPs, councillors, and party members who rightly stand against the genocide, who believe in the



universal principles of justice, and who understand that there can be no justification for the massacre of now more than 40,000 people — and, as we've seen recently, a very conservative estimate by the British medical journal *The Lancet*, that could be somewhere around 186,000 people, not to mention the collective punishment and the starvation of 2 million.

So these people at all levels of the party are weighing up resignations. We saw a number of Labour councillors resigning over this issue in the past months. And they're weighing up whether to stay in the party and push back from within — try to bring the party back to its values — or whether to step out.

### **Yara Hawari 6:41**

So despite this hostile environment within the Labour Party, I think what's been really interesting in this election, and also in elections elsewhere across the world, is that Palestine broadly — but also the ongoing genocide in Gaza — has been a key issue. And I think it's something that's almost unprecedented in terms of a foreign policy concern amidst an election.

So what does this tell us about Palestine as a core issue for people?

### **Sara Hussein 7:16**

I think that's exactly right. And what you're pointing to there is something that has happened despite a really difficult environment. There's a dynamic that we've been seeing playing out through the elections and beyond.

Attempts, particularly by the previous government and elements of the mainstream media, to stir up real divisions in the UK — to kind of frame or try and make Palestine a sectarian issue, a Muslim issue, a matter of Muslim-Jewish communal tensions, and stoke these kinds of culture wars. When actually what we've seen, as you've said, is quite the opposite.



Palestine has actually been a singularly unifying issue. We've seen that in the hundreds and thousands of people taking to the streets every week, week in, week out, over the past nine months. People from all communities, struggles, walks of life. And that's been reflected also in the election — not only in the independents, the Greens, but also the narrowing Labour margins of victory in very many constituencies that have gone less reported, but are very important to take note of.

People understand that Palestine is not a singular issue. It's an issue of our collective humanity. It's an issue that unites people and brings people together because they see the injustice and recognize that.

### **Yara Hawari 8:36**

And perhaps also because people are increasingly becoming aware of the complicity of their own governments and what their tax contributions are going toward. The fact that the British government is directly complicit in the ongoing genocide, I think, plays a huge role in the politicization of really hundreds of thousands of people.

### **Sara Hussein 8:59**

Absolutely. And I think also you just see people being much more alive to the issue now. Many more people are questioning what they're seeing on the mainstream media, and they're seeing how it doesn't tally up with the images and the live-streamed genocide they're seeing through social media or on their phones.

It's really making people who potentially — as you say — would have seen this as a foreign policy issue, but they're seeing it now and they're seeing the reality of it, and it becomes their issue as well. And as you said, I think we shouldn't underestimate how foreign policy issues don't normally affect elections — this one clearly has.



## **Yara Hawari 9:35**

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And that kind of explains the rise of these independent candidates who are predominantly running on what people are calling pro-Palestine or pro-Gaza platforms. Can you tell us a bit more about these individuals?

## **Sara Hussein 10:01**

As we mentioned, five independents were elected — unprecedented, the election of independents to parliament in this number. Four of them, as we said, were new candidates who ran on a Palestine platform from all over the country. So we have candidates from the North in Blackburn, from the Midlands in Birmingham and Leicester, in Dewsbury, which is also in the North of England, and then obviously Jeremy Corbyn in Islington North in London.

As well as them running as people of conscience on a Palestine platform and obviously being voted into parliament because people felt they were speaking for them, there are a number of others who were very, very close to unseating the major parties. I think perhaps the most significant being the 23-year-old British Palestinian Leanne Mohamad, who ran in her home constituency of Ilford North — here in London — against Labour's now Health Secretary, Wes Streeting.

And this is the man who had widely been tipped to be the next leader of the Labour Party. She was 528 votes shy of beating him, with both having around 15,000 votes. I think that sends a really strong message about how people feel — not only about what's happening in Gaza and Palestine more broadly, but about how deeply complicit the establishment here in the UK is.

## **Yara Hawari 11:17**



So I think it's not by coincidence that the Labour Party has now placed several vocally pro-Israel MPs in cabinet, including David Lammy, who I mentioned earlier as Minister for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs.

What can we expect moving forward in terms of British foreign policy vis-à-vis Palestine? Because it seems like there won't be much of a difference from the previous government's policy.

## **Sara Hussein** 11:42

The early signs are not looking good. Although I guess we did expect that from those who have been placed in the cabinet.

There are a number of issues that we were looking to straight away to see how the government would respond. One of those is the amicus brief — the objection lodged by the previous government at the International Criminal Court against arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant. Then there's the arms trade, for example. Lammy and the Labour leadership had called on the previous Conservative government to publish legal advice from lawyers around Israel breaking international humanitarian law, which would then result in the need to suspend arms sales to Israel. We haven't seen any movement on that yet — either in terms of calling to publish the legal advice, or in terms of the government actually doing what it should be doing, which is suspending arms sales immediately pending any review.

So it's still a little bit difficult to see how these things are going to go. I think obviously the US election is going to play a role, coming up in November. We have a Labour leadership that is not massively distinguishable from the previous government, honestly. And there's going to be a lot of work to do.

I think the difference is that Labour does hold certain professed principles and has made a number of statements prior to coming into government that I think we



need to really hold them accountable to. And I think that's where the work's going to be — with those MPs in the Labour Party, Labour Party members, unions, those who really do hold to Labour's professed principles and to universal values. And then looking cross-party as well — to Independents, Greens, other parties who may hold different political views but do have moral clarity on the deep injustices that are being faced by Palestinians, and who will hopefully be able to hold a Labour leadership that claims to support international law and the independence of mechanisms of justice to actually account on that.

**Yara Hawari 13:41**

Do you foresee any potential for cross-party coalitions on this particular issue? Particularly as we're seeing, as you mentioned, these fractures and disruptions in the two-party system and the rise of independent candidates and other spaces within parliament to deviate from party lines.

**Sara Hussein 14:00**

I do. I'm hopeful. Because there are a few issues — we just touched on a couple — where I think it's really clear that Labour, at least in word, hold to certain principles and have made comments about things that need to be done. They base a lot of what they talk about on respect for international law, the rule of law, and international mechanisms for justice.

And so I think there'll be a lot of people in not only their party but other parties who believe in these things, who will be — I hope — willing to scrutinize, to be there, putting in questions, putting in early day motions, putting in all kinds of things that will really hold Starmer and his leadership to account.

**Yara Hawari 14:43**

Sara, you mentioned the Labour Party's values that some people still hold dear. We know that Palestine isn't an issue that exists in a vacuum, and Labour's current



position on Palestine really speaks to the transformation of Labour as a whole. It's moved to the center in an effort to challenge the right.

Do you think it's still possible for it to return to those so-called values that you mentioned? Or are we seeing a complete transformation of the Labour Party where return is not possible?

**Sara Hussein** 15:22

I don't know. It's a really hard question.

**Yara Hawari** 15:25

I guess the reason I'm asking that is because it's not just Palestine, is it? The Labour Party has abandoned a lot of its core base. It's abandoned the working classes, it's abandoned its values and the politics it was supposedly established on, and its argument for doing so is sort of to challenge the far right, to be a more inclusive party — which in reality is a shift towards the center.

And we're not just seeing that in the UK. We're seeing that across Europe, where left-wing parties are becoming more centrist to gain more votes. So the issue of Palestine really speaks to a broader political problem, where we're seeing the dissolution of the left and leftist values. So with that in mind, do you still think there is a chance for the Labour Party to recover from this?

**Sara Hussein** 16:30

I think it's a very, very big job if possible. But like you say, if you look to other issues, their policies, and some of the rhetoric around immigration that we saw Starmer using to try and win votes from the center, and questions of privatization — there are a number of things where, as you say, they've moved to the center, ostensibly to counter the right.

But actually all you see is a rightward shift. And one of the big stories around



Reform was that Suella Braverman — the former Home Secretary — was considering potentially defecting. There was all this talk about her potentially defecting to Reform. She was a Tory Home Secretary who was the architect, or at least the big champion, of the scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. She was calling to criminalize the Palestinian flag. And now her moving even further right shows that the Labour Party abandoning its principles and moving further to the center is just actually playing into this rightward shift.

And as I say, some of this stuff, in terms of culture wars, isn't just about Palestine. It's about stoking up division among communities in the UK. One really worrying report we've seen recently is Starmer and the Labour leadership creating something called the Muslim Leadership Council — a new Muslim body that can supposedly give credible policy recommendations to the government. It's effectively bypassing the existing community structures for the Muslim community. It's a very classic divide-and-rule tactic. And it's really worrying that rather than deal with the fact that there are an electorate who was clearly not happy with you across many communities — not just the Muslim community — and rather than amend policy and think about why you've lost that support, you would bypass them to create a whole new structure.

So again, I think that's a slightly different example, but it speaks to what I think you're asking — is the Labour Party salvageable? Not under this leadership, certainly. And it's a huge, huge job. But I think the British electorate is so dissatisfied, so unhappy with these two parties, that for the first time we have seen this glimmer of light, this cracking slightly of the two-party system. And I think that should really give hope for a different way of doing things.

**Yara Hawari 18:48**

Sara, I have a final question. In the immediate term, what should we watch out for in terms of British foreign policy vis-à-vis the ongoing genocide in Gaza?



**Sara Hussein** 18:59

I think the ICC arrest warrants and what happens there. We've mentioned also the arms trade and what they do in terms of making good on their claim to want to publish the legal advice and then act upon it.

I think it's going to be interesting also to see how they respond to rulings at the International Court of Justice — whether it's the case that South Africa brought against Israel for genocide, or the ruling we saw around the occupation and the unlawful nature of the occupation. Because this is the other thing — this goes beyond Palestine in the sense that what happens here, Palestine is really a litmus test for the whole international system.

What the new government here and governments elsewhere do has the potential to collapse that whole international system that we've seen to date. And I think even the foreign policy chief said very clearly after the ICJ gave an interim ruling on the South Africa case that governments are going to have to make a choice. They either choose to support international institutions and the rule of law, or they choose to support Israel. And that was a guy who hasn't been particularly helpful on Palestine. It's a very clear, very honest statement.

**Yara Hawari** 20:05

So given all of this, Sara, how do we not despair?

**Sara Hussein** 20:11

That's a good question. I think while the picture isn't particularly positive in the short term, it does feel like a moment of inflection in the longer run. And that's really difficult to say in the midst of genocide, not to mention all of the settler colonialism, occupation, annexation, apartheid, exile — the things that have been used to subjugate and oppress the Palestinian people as a whole for more than three-quarters of a century.



But I do think there are some glimmers of hope when we look at what's happened here in the UK, and I'm sure in some other places as well. People are definitely more alive to the reality of what's happening and are questioning their own governments and their own leaders on these things. We talked about the translation of this into the streets — week in, week out, people protesting, people getting out on the streets from many different communities.

We see more and more people making ethical choices about where they spend their money. We've seen it translated in the student encampments — this generation of students willing to risk their safety and their futures because they see it as being nothing compared to how their fellow human beings are suffering in Palestine, and they see it as a much bigger issue broadly for our humanity.

And as we've been discussing today, this has been translated at the ballot box. Yes, it's a landslide majority and lots of seats for Labour, but we shouldn't underestimate the significance of what this has done in terms of the two-party system and having some new hope through Independents and Greens.

And it's about the hope it creates for the future — in terms of showing people that it actually is possible to vote a different way. That's really important. I think no one really knows exactly when that tipping point will be when you're in the middle of this. But I think all we have to do is just keep going and do everything in our power to get there — not only for us as Palestinians in Palestine, but really for the sake of our collective humanity.

**Yara Hawari 21:57**

Sara, thank you so much. We'll leave it there. It was great to have you on Rethinking Palestine.

**Sara Hussein 22:03**

Thank you for having me.



## Yara Hawari 22:07

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