

Starmer has a choice. He can pretend to be a world lead...

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The [Guardian](#) has an article this morning that is headlined as follows:



Toynbee's view is that Starmer has to play the grown-up and grown-ups can't call for ceasefires in the Middle East for three reasons (as far as I can work out from what she is saying: I wish people would write more clearly).

The first is that the UK can't step out of line with its allies, and they have not called for a ceasefire.

The second is that calling for a ceasefire would permit Hamas to keep arms, which is unacceptable as Israel must have the right to defend itself.

The third is that Starmer must see off the naive left-wingers in his party, like Sadiq Khan, Andy Burnham and Anas Sarwar, all of whom I would put well to the right politically.

Polly (who I have spoken to many times, so please forgive the familiar tone), is wrong on all three counts.

First, the UK has put itself outside all alliances except, perhaps, NATO. The pretence that there is a special relationship with the USA is now a joke. And we have alienated

the EU. We have chosen to be an outlier, and Starmer is dedicated to maintaining that status. If so, there is little to be gained from always seeking alignment. The role of the outsider is to take a different stance - and usually one that indicates that there is both a higher moral ground and so a different strategic opposition to be taken. When we no longer have the capacity to do war (and let's not pretend that we have), playing the role of peacemaker is what the UK has left available to it. That is precisely where we should now be - building a new alliance when doing so with the likes of Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and other traditionally non-aligned states who have real influence precisely because they can do what war-mongering states cannot - which is to argue for the peaceful solution that must, inevitably be found.

Second, no one doubts the atrocities of which Hamas is capable. But if Hamas was destroyed, then Hamas would be replaced. The young people of Gaza who might survive the unbelievable trauma of what is currently happening to them are not - however much we might wish for it - going to quietly accept that they have a future in a broken and near-destroyed territory that they are wholly unable to defend from a neighbour who appears intent on their destruction. Whether they are right or wrong to feel like that will not matter: if we are talking about politics in the real world, that is what will happen if Hamas is destroyed. Destroying Hamas will not, in other words, deliver the security Israel wants and to which it is entitled. Demilitarisation of Gaza (which is what the de facto demilitarisation of Hamas currently means, whether we like it or not) would create a dangerous vacuum and is a policy that cannot be sustained. It is folly to propose it as a one-sided solution as a result.

Third, there is good reason why people in Labour want to see moral and not pragmatic leadership from their party. They have had enough of pragmatism. They saw, only yesterday, references at the Covid inquiry to Boris Johnson's total indifference to the deaths of people during that crisis, preferring to focus on the economy instead. They rightly find that disgusting. They might expect no better from Tories, but the fact that they think politics can be done better is one reason why they are in Labour in the first place. What they do not want is for Labour to sink to Tory depths. That, they believe, is where Starmer is taking them, and for better or worse, his reaction to the conflict in Gaza has turned out to be the issue over which this difference will be contested. He is playing politics if he denies that, as he seems to be doing.

It's Toynbee's claim that nothing that Labour can say on this issue now makes any difference. That is an extraordinary thing to say. What is implicit within it is a claim that doing the right thing has no impact on the world. It suggests that setting an example does not matter. It implies that conscience in a time of war is of no concern. The message is that conformity matters more. She is wrong on all these counts.

At a time of war in which the UK is not, and will not be, a combatant, what it says and does matters more than ever. If Starmer is to lead a country that he wants to exist outside the usual alliances of power then he has to demonstrate why. Taking a lead in calling for peace - which has to require a ceasefire at some time - is the right thing to

do in that case. It gives Starmer, Labour and the UK a lead where at present it has no influence at all. And when we know that peace only comes by talking - as South Africa, Northern Ireland and other conflicts have proven - right is on the side of making that demand from the position that the UK is in.

Starmer has a choice. He can pretend to be a world leader and align with those refusing to call for a ceasefire or he can be a world leader and call for a ceasefire. It's his call - but at the same time, the future direction of UK foreign policy is also his to grab. Wouldn't he want to do that?

Declaration of interests: I am a Quaker, albeit not a very regular attender right now.