

Blurring boundaries

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Tommy Robinson, the British far-right agitator whose proper name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, visited Israel at the invitation of [Amichai Chikli](#), the Israeli Minister for Diaspora Affairs. Chikli and Yaxley-Lennon presented the latter's trip as representing solidarity with Israel against Islamist extremism. British Jewish organisations condemned it outright.

Anyone who saw the Channel 4 News report by Lindsey Hilsum on this visit, which included many profoundly contemptuous comments by Yaxley-Lennon, will know that Robinson himself is unimportant, being little more than a thug possessed of the deliberate intent to wind up crowds to a fervour of hatred, but that what happened is also important because of what it reveals, which is a growing alignment between parts of the far-right, elements of Zionism, and sections of the Israeli government, all united by the language of fear.

Across Europe, far-right movements have discovered a surprising and politically convenient enthusiasm for Israel. They imagine it as a model ethno-national state defending its borders against a Muslim “other”. Supporting Israel does, in that case, allow them to deny racism while promoting anti-Islamic sentiment. For Robinson, it offers legitimacy: if an Israeli minister welcomes him, how can he be called an extremist?

For those in Israel’s government promoting this link, cultivating people like Yaxley-Lennon is tactical. As criticism of Israel grows among progressives, they are seeking new allies who are nationalist, populist, and uncritical. Such alliances do, however, come at a moral cost. They associate Israel with intolerance, and in doing so, they alienate the diaspora communities whose safety depends on pluralism, not populism. That cannot help the Jewish cause.

The evidence that it does not already exist. British Jewish leaders have been clear that Robinson's approach endangers Jewish security and does not defend it. He was contemptuous of them in the Channel 4 report, asking who elected them when no one did, of course, elect him. He instead rated popularity on the number of YouTube views

his videos could secure.

That, of course, deliberately misses all issues around legitimacy when his movement thrives on division, and not solidarity. It is part of a wider Western grouping of populists trading in fear for whom decency is sacrificed for short-term gain. Trump fits firmly into the pattern, his contemptuous responses to those marching against his attempt to seize absolute power in the USA this weekend being exactly of this type.

Real safety, whether that be for Israel, the USA, Britain or anyone, lies not in exclusion but in justice and cooperation. When democracies appear to endorse those who stand up for violence and exclusion, they blur the boundary between defenders and destroyers of freedom. That, in the end, is the true danger. And what is worrying is that some in government in the USA, Israel and even here in the UK may already be blurring that boundary.