UK Labour overwhelmingly backs anti-Israel agenda should Corbyn take power

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Britain’s Labour party today called for a future government led by Jeremy Corbyn to adopt a raft of anti-Israel policies.

With a general election expected before the end of the year, at the party’s annual conference in Brighton, Labour delegates overwhelmingly backed a boycott of Israeli settlement goods for the first time and vowed to reject trade agreements with the Jewish state which “fail to recognize the rights of the Palestinians.”

The party also appeared to endorse a Palestinian “right to return” and reaffirmed Labour’s opposition to British arms sales to Israel.

The debate was part of a wider session on foreign policy, which was dominated by discussion on Labour’s stance on Brexit.

The anti-Israel motion was passed nearly unanimously in Brighton after a debate in which Palestinian flags were unfurled and chants of “Free Palestine” were shouted.

The move followed the release of polling on Sunday which showed that two-thirds of Labour members do not believe the party has a “serious” problem with anti-Semitism, and more than half oppose the UK signing a trade agreement with Israel after Britain leaves the European Union.

Pro-Israel groups reacted angrily to news of the vote.

James Sorene, chief executive of the British Israel Communications and Research Center, an independent UK-based think tank, said the party had opted for “shallow and malicious rabble rousing because that plays well with the crowd.”

“If the Labour party wants to try and help bring about a two-state solution, it should develop some coherent policies, build strong relationships on both sides, deal with its anti-Semitism crisis and do the hard work on the ground to make a difference,” Sorene told the Times of Israel.

Labour Friends of Israel called the result “another dark day in the history of the Labour party.”

“Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party is the home for anti-Jewish racists and Israel haters,” its director, Jennifer Gerber, said in a Tweeted statement.

“It’s depressing, but thoroughly unsurprising that Labour has today ended its decades-old opposition to the extremist Israel boycott movement. Boycotts do nothing to bring about peace and are designed entirely to demonize Israel,” she argued.

“With Corbyn now uniquely singling out the world’s only Jewish state for boycotts, it’s no wonder the Jewish community fears the prospect of him becoming prime minister,” said Gerber.

Luke Akehurst, the director of the We Believe In Israel campaign group and a former member of Labour’s National Executive Committee (NEC), said the motion was “another salami slice radicalization of Labour’s position on Israel and provides policy cover for a settlement boycott.”

“It also [gave] another excuse for the conference floor to become a hostile environment for delegates who take a balanced view on Israel,” said Akehurst.

Noting that it is the second consecutive year in which Labour’s conference has debated Israel, Akehurst added: “It is very strange that, with so many pressing issues facing the UK and the range of global crisis that Labour could take a position on, two years running it has chosen this debate. This cannot be unlinked to the pathological obsession with Israel and Jews which has driven the party’s anti-Semitism crisis.”

Opening the debate, Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry accused United States President Donald Trump of “actively supporting the suppression and annexation of Palestine” and said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was “trying to turn Israel into an apartheid state.”

A member of the hard left Jewish Voice for Labour group received a standing ovation when she told the debate she was “one of thousands of Jews in this party who have never experienced any anti-Semitism.” She went on to praise Corbyn as “the most anti-racist leader this party has ever had.”

Green-lighting boycotts?

The motion passed by delegates accused the US and Israeli governments of “destroying prospects for peace in Palestine.” It labeled Trump’s much-delayed peace plan a “one-sided attempt to impose an unjust outcome destroying Palestinian rights” and said any future deal should be “based on international law and UN resolutions” that recognize the Palestinians’ “collective rights to self-determination and to return to their homes.”

“Labour’s ethical foreign policy must prioritize Palestinians’ rights to freedom, justice and equality, including by applying these principles based on international law to all UK trade with Israel,” the resolution read.

It called for the party to “adhere to an ethical policy on all UK’s trade with Israel, in particular by applying international law on settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.”

This wording is seen by pro-Israel groups as giving the green light for a Labour government to introduce a boycott of settlement goods.

The new party policy also commits Labour to “work globally for an alliance with progressive sister parties rejecting trade agreements with Israel that fail to recognize the rights of the Palestinians.”

“This attempt to introduce a boycott of Israeli goods and halt a post-Brexit trade agreement will result in thousands of lost jobs and livelihoods in Britain and Israel,” argued Sorene.

“British people do not support a boycott of Israel and find it hard to understand why other people do. Any policy that seeks to erode Britain-Israel relations will have a chilling effect, not just on trade, but also on vital defense and intelligence partnerships that protect our country,” he suggested.

Labour rejected arms sales to Israel at its conference last year, a stance it reiterated today. The motion backed the “stopping [of] any arms trade with Israel that is used in violation of the human rights of Palestinians.”

The motion singled out for criticism the “continuing siege of Gaza,” the expansion of “illegal settlements” and Netanyahu’s pre-election pledge to annex the Jordan Valley. It made no mention of Israel’s security or terror attacks.

The party also took aim at the UK’s record during the British Mandate.

“An internationalist Labour Party has a special responsibility to redress the ongoing injustices against the Palestinian people, denied their right to self-determination during the British Mandate, because of the role Britain played as a colonial power during the 1948 Nakba when Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their homes,” it argued.

Labour’s stance echoed a similarly worded resolution passed by Britain’s trade unions at their annual conference earlier this month.

Under former prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Labour governments frequently ignored motions passed by left-leaning conference delegates. However, Corbyn is both a long-standing critic of Israel and ran for the party leadership on a commitment to “democratize” the party by giving members a greater say in policy-making.

The pro-Corbyn Momentum pressure group called on conference attendees to back the Palestine motion, which was discussed during a wider debate on foreign policy.

Denial of Jew-hatred within the party

Despite the continuing row over Jew-hate in the party, only 23 percent of Labour members believe that Labour has a serious problem with anti-Semitism, the survey published on Sunday revealed.

More than half of members blamed political opponents who want to “undermine” Corbyn or the “mainstream media” for the anti-Semitism crisis. Twenty-nine percent said a “small minority of Labour members with anti-Semitic views” were responsible. Only 13% said the problem was the fault of the Labour leadership.

Sixty-six percent of members denied the existence of any problem.

The polling also found that Labour members were strongly opposed to Britain doing a trade deal with Israel when it leaves the European Union. Only 31% backed such an agreement, with 56% against. By contrast, 42% supported a trade deal with Russia, 54% with the US, and 62% with China. The Jewish state was the only country of those polled that a majority of Labour members didn’t want to see the UK strike a post-Brexit trade deal with.

The YouGov poll of 1,100 Labour party members was commissioned by Mainstream, a new group committed to opposing extremism established by former Labour MP Ian Austin. Austin, the adopted son of a Holocaust survivor, quit the party over anti-Semitism earlier this year and is a fierce critic of Corbyn.

Labour “has been poisoned by a culture of extremism and intolerance” under Corbyn, Austin wrote in The Sun newspaper. “It is the responsibility of everyone who opposes extremism in all its forms to stand up against this destructive force.”

A report by the researcher and blogger David Collier published last month accused Labour of being “an incubator for anti-Semitism” and suggested that, since Corbyn’s election as leader in September 2015, members have become “radicalized” about both Israel and Jewish people

Polling released earlier this year suggested that allegations of anti-Semitism in the party are hurting its general election chances. More than half of Britons said Corbyn’s handling of Jew-hatred made him unfit to be prime minister.

A further YouGov poll published today suggested that nearly 60% of voters – and more than half of those who backed the party at the 2017 general election – want Corbyn to stand down as Labour leader. Fifty-four percent of those currently intending to vote for the party want Corbyn to continue in his post.

The calls for Corbyn to resign were backed by a senior Jewish Labour MP on Sunday evening. Dame Margaret Hodge, a former minister under Blair and Brown, told a Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) rally that she was “not going to give up until Jeremy Corbyn ceases to be leader of the Labour party,” the Jewish Chronicle reported.

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, also attacked Labour’s handling of anti-Semitism at the rally. “Anti-Semitism is racism, and my concern about our party is that there appears to a hierarchy when it comes to racism,” he reportedly suggested.

A coup against a moderate, pro-Israel deputy

The Labour conference, which began on Saturday, has been dogged by feuding over Brexit and a failed bid to oust the party’s moderate deputy leader, Tom Watson.

Watson, a strong supporter of Israel who has close links to the Jewish community, narrowly survived the attempt by Jon Lansman, a member of Labour’s governing NEC, to abolish the post of deputy leader. Lansman, who is Jewish, is the founder of Momentum and played a pivotal role in Corbyn’s election as Labour leader.

Last week, Lansman successfully pushed through the NEC the abolition of the party’s student wing. Labour Students, one of the few party institutions not controlled by the hard left, has long been run by moderates and has been seen as a friend of Jews in the party.

The JLM said the move would “disband one of our most committed allies in the fight against anti-Jewish racism.” Labour Students had “gone above and beyond to call out anti-Semitism and support Jewish students,” the party’s Jewish affiliate said in a Tweet.

The JLM also strongly criticized changes to the party’s disciplinary rules which were passed on Saturday.

It accused Labour of ignoring calls from the Jewish community to make the disciplinary process independent from the party and said handing more powers to the NEC was “giving control to those who have engaged in or are complicit in anti-Semitism.”

The JLM also claimed the rule changes were not discussed with it or Jewish communal organizations and attacked the party for scheduling the debate on them on Shabbat.

Labour says the changes are designed to “fast track” the expulsion of anti-Semites.