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The Corbyn wreath ‘scandal’ is just an exercise in hypocrisy

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Showing solidarity with Palestinians courts condemnation, while complicity in the Israeli occupation is seen as acceptable

In November 2004, Britain’s foreign secretary Jack Straw laid a wreath at the grave of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. How might this have been framed with the current Labour leader? Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon saw Arafat as a “Jew murderer”. According to the Israeli minister of parliamentary affairs at the time, Danny Naveh, Arafat was “personally involved in the planning and execution of terror attacks”. Given that the [Munich massacre](#) at the 1972 Olympic Games was carried out by an offshoot of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which Arafat led, the Israelis would have seen him as complicit in the murder of 11 Israeli athletes.

But there was no outrage, no scandal at Straw paying his respects at Arafat’s grave, and it would have been strange if there had been. The PLO had, after all, been recognised as the “representative of the Palestinian people” by the UN general assembly in 1974, and by [Israel](#) itself two decades later.

Which brings me to the [current furore](#) over Jeremy Corbyn’s trip to Tunis in 2014. Let’s stick to the facts. Corbyn was attending a conference as a backbencher at the invitation of Tunisian president Moncef Marzouki, a respected human rights campaigner who had been a prominent dissident under the western-backed dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The aim of the conference was to build unity between the divided Palestinian factions, and it culminated in the laying of a wreath at a memorial for the dozens of people killed, civilians among them, when the Israelis bombed the PLO’s headquarters in 1985. Back then, Margaret Thatcher herself contested Israeli claims that the attack “was justified in international law”, and [reportedly said](#) she had “recoiled from Israel’s attack on Tunis with the killing of many civilians”.

An Israeli commission found Ariel Sharon personally responsible for the [Sabra and Shatila camps] massacre

This week’s controversy has focused on the graves of two other senior PLO figures, Salah Khalaf and Atef Bseiso: Corbyn was pictured a few metres away from both, and a photograph shows a wreath laid by Khalaf’s tomb. Khalaf was assassinated in 1991, [allegedly by an extreme terrorist group after passing information about them to Western intelligence services](#) and was accused of founding Black September; while Bseiso, who was killed a year later, was accused of involvement in the Munich atrocity, which he denied. Khalaf was Arafat’s second in command and was influential in the PLO’s eventual decision to abandon armed struggle in the 1990s in favour of negotiation.

Corbyn denies commemorating Khalaf. But is the idea of doing so any different to Straw laying a

wreath on the grave of Arafat, for whom Khalaf and Bseiso served as junior officials? Are the PLO and Fatah now once again to be understood as simply terrorist organisations?

Sometimes there is a need for plain speaking, and this is one such moment. Labour has bungled its response to the antisemitic fringe on the left of the party, needlessly haemorrhaging goodwill with Britain's Jewish communities. But that is a separate issue from the stigmatising of legitimate expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people. For those of us who believe that challenging antisemitism and supporting Palestinian solidarity are not mutually exclusive, they spring from the same desire for justice and equality.

To take a side in the Israel-Palestinian conflict is to inescapably associate with those who have committed acts of violence. The conflict is an unequal one, between occupied people and an occupier; between refugees and a military regional superpower armed and backed by the west. According to Israeli human rights organisation [B'Tselem](#), Israeli security forces have killed 9,456 Palestinians since 2000, compared to the 1,237 Israeli security personnel and civilians killed by Palestinians. Any civilian death is inexcusable: the Munich atrocity was an atrocity.

But let's take the case of Ariel Sharon. In 1982, up to 3,500 Palestinian and Lebanese refugees [were massacred](#) by Israel's Phalangist allies in the Sabra and Shatila camps. An Israeli commission later found Sharon to have been personally responsible" for the massacre. Among those attending his funeral in 2014 was Tony Blair: and yes, he laid a wreath. Who cried scandal then?

Coming to the present, what is so infuriating about this latest saga is that the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, had the audacity to condemn Corbyn in a tweet this week. Meanwhile, the building of [illegal settlements](#) on Palestinian land continues; last week, a pregnant woman and her 18-month-old child [were killed](#) by Israeli soldiers; and last month the introduction of a nation-state law [downgraded the rights of Israeli Arab citizens](#). Netanyahu has also been [cosying up](#) to Hungary's far-right president, Viktor Orbán, who has [been accused](#) of running antisemitic election campaigns that targeted George Soros. None of these issues have received even a fraction of the outrage reserved for Corbyn's visit to Tunis four years ago.

The Corbyn incident suggests that to be complicit in the violence of the Israeli occupation - as western governments are - is acceptable, but to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause is to court condemnation.

And here's where moral clarity is needed. [Antisemitism](#) exists, it is a menace, and frightens Jews traumatised by the all too recent Holocaust. Labour must show far greater leadership in tackling antisemitism in the party and rooting out every and any antisemite. But that should not detract from the just cause of showing solidarity with the Palestinian people. There is nothing immoral about laying a wreath to remember the victims of an attack that even Margaret Thatcher condemned.

Owen Jones

P.S.

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