

Devastation in Gaza poses an increasingly serious problem for Starmer

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Starmer's stance on Gaza has already reduced support for Labour - and that will only worsen in the coming months

The [Labour Party](#)'s landslide general election victory on 4 July has been compared to the party's previous wins under Tony Blair in 1997 and Clement Attlee in 1945. But [Keir Starmer](#) won a far smaller vote share than either Blair or Attlee and, unlike in 1997 and 1945, the mood of the victors was hardly euphoric - more damp squib than firework display.

The party's win was not down to any widespread love of Starmer's policies, but a deeply embedded antagonism to the 14 years of the Tory rule, aided by Nigel Farage's Reform Party taking votes from the Conservatives, the collapse of the SNP vote in Scotland and an unusually low national turnout.

Labour was further held back by an [unexpectedly large number of voters who abandoned the party](#) - many of whom were motivated by its stance on [Israel's assault on Gaza](#). The mainstream media has wrongly attributed this to the UK's substantial Muslim minority, portraying it as just a sectarian issue - ignoring the anger and hurt felt by many on the left.

[Independent candidates](#) stood primarily on a pro-Gaza ticket across many parts of the north of England, the Midlands and London. Five were elected - a record for a general election - and many more came close, most notably Leanne Mohamad in Ilford North, who managed to reduce new health secretary Wes Streeting's majority from 5,218 to just 528.

Overall, in [57 constituencies](#), Labour's biggest challenger was an independent or a candidate from the Green Party or the Workers Party. The Greens' leap forward was particularly notable - they came in second place in 40 seats, all currently held by Labour, up from three in 2019.

As the new independent candidates said repeatedly throughout the election campaign, [Gaza](#) is just one reason for [dissent from the new Starmer norm](#). Many traditional Labour supporters are also unhappy that the party is moving decidedly rightwards and [embracing Big Business](#), as revealed last week by openDemocracy. Labour now seems likely to end up as a centre-right party - effectively disenfranchising several million people.

Even so, [Labour's position on Gaza](#) was undeniably a big factor in its [fall in majorities in many seats](#). It presents a problem for Labour in general and Starmer in particular that is simply not going to go away - and has several components.

The first is that Israeli prime minister [Binyamin Netanyahu](#) and his far-right Knesset supporters have long espoused the view that defeating Hamas requires inflicting punishment on the whole civilian population. It is this so-called [Dahiya doctrine](#) that is largely responsible for the

appalling loss of life among Palestinians.

The death toll in Gaza is at least 37,000, with as many as 10,000 missing, mostly buried under the rubble, and well over 70,000 wounded. The Lancet, the world's leading medical journal, recently [published a letter](#) that suggested that if indirect deaths - including those due to disease, malnutrition and increased infant mortality - are included then the total number of human lives lost could reach 186,000.

The second is that there is no end in sight for the current war. There are occasions when talks seem to be getting underway but they [repeatedly come to nothing](#), as they have done for the past six months at least. The Palestinian suffering is huge but the Hamas military leadership believes it can persevere, especially as claims by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) that most of Gaza has been cleared of Hamas turn out to be false.

Israel's current leadership has little interest in a long-term ceasefire. Netanyahu will certainly persist with his attack on Gaza until at least the [US presidential election](#) in November, now hoping that [Donald Trump](#) surviving the recent shooting will help to secure his win. Meanwhile, Israel's [steady encroachment on Palestinian land](#) and people in the West Bank is a further sign of a long-term insistence on permanent control "from the river to the sea".

Finally, there is one more factor that is rarely understood. The sheer scale of the loss of life and wider Palestinian suffering due to the Israeli assault on Gaza has already caused a long-term - perhaps permanent - shift in attitudes towards Israel and support for Gaza in the UK, which reaches far beyond Muslim communities.

This shift will likely only increase as more and more evidence emerges about the Israeli conduct of the war. Last week the highly experienced foreign correspondent, Chris McGreal, published a [report](#) on the IDF's repeated use of fragmentation artillery shells in densely populated urban areas. Perhaps the most devastating of all such ordnance being used is the Israeli M339 tank shell, whose manufacturer, [Elbit Systems](#), describes it as "highly lethal against dismounted infantry". No doubt even more so against children.

The deliberate human impact, especially on children, is appalling and causes injuries that would be difficult to treat even in well-equipped and fully functioning hospitals - of which there are none left in Gaza due to Israel's bombing campaign.

Other similar reports will surely follow McGreal's and the combined impact will last years, substantially adding to calls for international legal action against Netanyahu and his government.

This is where Starmer is so vulnerable. Thanks largely to the work of a handful of investigative journalists, especially Declassified UK, we know more than the British government would like about the [UK's close links with Israel](#) - including the multiple roles of RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus in aiding Israel and the [hundreds of thousands of pounds flowing from the Israeli lobby to Cabinet ministers](#).

Unless there is a radical change in policy towards Israel now that Starmer is in Downing Street, the assault in Gaza will remain a problem for Labour well into the future. Add to this the wider view that Labour is moving markedly to the right and the huge parliamentary majority may not be as stabilising as it first seemed.

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P.S.

• Open Democracy. 15 July 2024, 11.43am:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/starmer-labour-position-gaza-problem-deaths-israel-netanyahu-labbby/>