

## The Question of Palestine in Harold Wilson's Labour Party, 1970-1976

Tim Bishop

### Introduction

In the early 1970s, the issue of Palestine first rose to international prominence. From Britain's perspective, the Palestinian question became significant following the 1973 October War and the oil shortage by Arab nations against states regarded as unsympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Indeed, during the mid-1970s three-quarters of Britain's supplies of this crucial resource came from the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Not unrelated to these developments, the early 1970s witnessed a pro-Palestinian lobby emerge within the British Labour Party. This centred around the Labour Middle East Council (LMEC) which formed in 1969 and had 189 members by July 1975 including around fifty MPs.<sup>2</sup> The most vocal members were the MPs Christopher Mayhew (LMEC Chair until defecting to the Liberals in July 1974), David Watkins (LMEC Chair, 1974-1983) and Andrew Faulds. These individuals sought, in Watkins' words, to "confront" what he regarded as "the great Zionist influence in the Labour Party" and shift Labour's policy to being more supportive of the Palestinian cause.<sup>3</sup> Hence, they lobbied the Party leadership and cultivated support among Labour MPs and Party activists (i.e. less influential non-MP Party members).<sup>4</sup> Their pursuits were also supported by a wider network of cross-party groups (e.g. the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) and Palestine Action) which Labour MPs and activists were also active in.

The pro-Palestinian lobbyists were right in believing Labour had strong ties to Israel, the Labour Zionist organisation, Poale Zion, having been affiliated to the Party since 1920. In 1957, Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) formed and by July 1967 over three-hundred Labour MPs were members.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these ties were particularly noteworthy whilst Harold Wilson was Labour leader (1963-1976). Wilson had close friendships with Israeli Labour politicians such as Prime Minister (1969-1974) Golda Meir and a strong attachment to Israel.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, he dedicated his time to writing a book on Israel after leaving politics which Roy Jenkins, who served in Wilson's Cabinet, described as "one of the most strongly Zionist tracts ever written

---

<sup>1</sup> Urwick to Rycroft, "Possible White Paper on British Foreign Policy," 19 September 1975, FCO93/789, Archives Direct, Sources from the National Archives, UK [henceforth, ADSNA].

<sup>2</sup> LMEC Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee, 9 July 1975, FAULDS/3/2/11, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics [henceforth BLPES].

<sup>3</sup> A Dialogue with David Watkins, 20 January 1975, FCO93/584, ADSNA.

<sup>4</sup> For a history of LMEC, see James R. Vaughan, "Mayhew's Outcasts": Anti-Zionism and the Arab Lobby in Harold Wilson's Labour Party," *Israel Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 27-47.

<sup>5</sup> J. Edmunds, "The Evolution of British Labour Party Policy on Israel from 1967 to the Intifada," *Twentieth Century British History* 11, no. 1 (January 2000): 26.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, *The Jewish Community in British Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 160.

by a non-Jew.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the links between Israel and Labour were not coincidental. Many regarded there to be ideological affinity between the two, Israel often being considered a socialist democracy surrounded by dictatorships. Indeed, Wilson described Israel as the “only democracy” in the Middle East while a 1972 LFI advert suggested Israel had “captured the imagination of Socialists everywhere.”<sup>8</sup>

These dynamics – the Palestinian cause’s increased international recognition and linkage between this and access to oil, a Labour pro-Palestinian lobby emerging, Wilson’s personal sympathies and the strong ties between Labour and Israel – make the question of Palestine within Labour between 1970-1976 particularly intriguing. This is the focus of this article. It seeks to understand what Labour’s policy and its evolution, the relative influence of different factors on Party policy and why Labour’s factions expressed contrasting views. These questions also have contemporary relevance. In 2018, then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was dogged by alleged sympathy for terrorism having been pictured holding a wreath close to a plaque commemorating three Palestinians linked to causing the 1972 Munich massacre.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, during the 2019 general election, forty-seven percent of voters believed Labour had a “problem” with antisemitism.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, this cannot be disassociated from Corbyn’s support for the Palestinian cause and, specifically, his links to Hamas given the group’s overt antisemitism.<sup>11</sup> Thus, through understanding the earlier history of Labour’s debate over Palestine, this article also seeks to shed light on the recent troubles the Palestinian question has created for Labour.

Overall, this article shows that the Palestinian question created considerable difficulties for Labour between 1970-1976. These were not as great compared with current times in the sense of seriously undermining Labour’s electoral prospects. However, between 1970-1976 the Palestinian question created awkwardness for the Party leadership. This was due to it being subjected to conflicting pressures over the issue and, whilst in government, its desire to gain Middle East insights through contacts with the PLO coupled with this organisation’s association with terrorism. More broadly and primarily sustained by ideological convictions, the Palestinian question led to divisions among Party activists and MPs. Regarding Labour’s Palestinian policy, it is argued that this tended to reflect a pragmatic strategy aimed at balancing the conflicting pressures on the Party leadership. However, the Party’s pro-Palestinian lobby generally constituted more of an irritant for Labour’s leadership than a significant policy influence. Nonetheless, indicating the Party leadership’s pragmatism, the second chapter demonstrates that whilst in government, contacts Labour’s pro-Palestinian lobbyists cultivated

---

<sup>7</sup> See Harold Wilson, *The Chariot of Israel: Britain, America and the State of Israel* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982); Roy Jenkins, “Wilson, (James) Harold” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edition.

<sup>8</sup> Middle East, *Hansard*, 440, 18 October 1973; LFI Advert, *Labour Weekly*, 2, 14 July 1972, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester [henceforth LHASC].

<sup>9</sup> “Jeremy Corbyn wreath row explained”, *BBC News*, 15 August 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Corbyn and Antisemitism Poll, December 2019, Deltapoll.

<sup>11</sup> Dave Rich, *The Left’s Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016), 174.

with the PLO were, to some extent, privately appreciated by the Labour leadership for their diplomatic utility.

In advancing these arguments and following a historiographical and methodological review, this article is divided into two chapters. The first focusses on Labour's period in opposition from October 1970 until the February 1974 general election. It starts in October 1970 because this is when the first "official" recognition by a British government of needing to incorporate a distinct Palestinian people into a Middle East peace settlement occurred. This enables Labour's policy to be understood through comparison to the Conservative government's position at the time. The chapter shows that between 1970-74 Labour's policy shifted from viewing the Palestinian problem as a humanitarian issue to, while highly ambiguous, considering the Palestinian question in political terms. The second chapter focusses on Labour's period in government following the February 1974 general election until the end of Wilson's tenure as Party leader and Prime Minister in April 1976. To understand Labour and the Palestinian question, particular attention is given to the Labour government's voting record regarding three pro-Palestinian resolutions passed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in October and November 1974.

There is limited literature on Labour and the Palestinian question between 1970-1976. Moreover, extant literature generally focusses on Labour's relationship with Israel rather than the Palestinians. Specifically, studies by Shindler and Wistrich analyse the European left's relationship with Israel but neither address Labour Party developments between 1970-1976 in any detail.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Edmund's study of Labour policy towards Israel is more detailed but, again, the focus is Israel and her limited attention to the Palestinian cause is with regards to the 1980s.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the Israel focus, Miller's study of Europe, Israel and the Palestinians makes passing reference to the position of the Labour government regarding one pro-Palestinian Resolution passed by the UNGA in 1974. He explains this solely as the government seeking to maintain unity with European Economic Community (EEC) members. This article shows this to be an oversimplification. Moreover, Miller does not focus on the Labour Party and thus does not address Labour's developments between 1970-1976, this partly explaining his oversimplified claim.<sup>14</sup> The second exception to the Israel focus is Vaughan's valuable study of Mayhew and LMEC. While this furthers understandings of the emergence of Labour's pro-Palestinian lobby, Vaughan's work is also limited. Namely, its focus on LMEC means it fails to address the Labour leadership's Palestinian policy. This is particularly problematic because Vaughan suggests the pro-Palestinian lobby was "influential" during the 1970s but merely

---

<sup>12</sup> See Colin Shindler, *Israel and the European Left: Between Solidarity and Delegitimization* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 247; Robert Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> June Edmunds, *The Left and Israel: Party-Policy Change and Internal Democracy* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 86-110.

<sup>14</sup> Rory Miller, *Inglorious Disarray: Europe, Israel and the Palestinians since 1967* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 54.

points to the writings of Labour's pro-Palestinian lobbyists who unsurprisingly argued their activities led to shifts in Labour's policy towards supporting the Palestinian cause.<sup>15</sup> While building on Vaughan's work, in attending to the policy of the Party leadership, this article goes beyond Vaughan and the other extant literature. By addressing the leadership's policy, this article also shows that while Labour's policy shifted to a position viewed more favourably by pro-Palestinian lobbyists, their influence on this was limited. In doing so, this article uses a diversity of sources. These include internal Foreign Office files, Hansard's parliamentary transcripts, newspaper articles, MPs' private papers and memoirs and documents from the Labour Party Archive in Manchester.

### 1. Opposition: Labour and the Palestinian Question, 1970-74

In November 1967 following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the UN Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 242. This proclaimed the need for a "lasting" Middle East peace settlement but made no reference to the "Palestinians." Instead, it merely referred to the need for a "just settlement of the refugee problem."<sup>16</sup> It thereby treated the Palestinian question as a humanitarian rather than a political issue. To supporters of the Palestinian cause such as Watkins, this was Resolution 242's "defect."<sup>17</sup> Britain under Wilson's Labour government, however, played a significant role in Resolution 242's passage.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, British policy subsequently became wedded to Resolution 242, Wilson proclaiming the following year that regarding a Middle East settlement, the government was "fully committed" to the resolution.<sup>19</sup> Thus, at this point, neither Labour nor government policy recognised a need to incorporate a distinct Palestinian people with political rights into a Middle East settlement.

After the Conservatives gained power in June 1970, British policy shifted following a speech by Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1970 to a Conservative Party meeting in Harrogate, subsequently dubbed the "Harrogate speech". The speech did not mark a rejection of Resolution 242; Douglas-Home pledged the government's commitment to it.<sup>20</sup> However, in practice it reflected a revision of British policy as applied through Resolution 242. This was demonstrated by Douglas-Home's proclamation that any peace settlement had to account for the "legitimate aspirations" of the "Palestinians" and thus his treatment of the issue as a political one.<sup>21</sup> The government's policy shift partly mirrored international developments following the 1967 War which resulted in one million West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians

---

<sup>15</sup> Vaughan, "Mayhews Outcasts," 27.

<sup>16</sup> UNSC Resolution 242, 22 November 1967, UN Archives: S/RES/242.

<sup>17</sup> David Watkins, *Seventeen Years in Obscurity: Memoirs from the Back Benches* (Lewes: The Book Guild, 1996), 120.

<sup>18</sup> See Nigel Ashton, 'searching for a Just and Lasting Peace? Anglo-American Relations and the Road to UNSC Resolution 242,' *The International History Review* 38, no. 1 (2015): 24-44.

<sup>19</sup> Middle East, *Hansard*, 180W, 7 February 1968.

<sup>20</sup> Alec Douglas-Home, "Two Principles for a Settlement: Speech to a Conservative Party Meeting at Harrogate, 31 October 1970," *Survival* 24, no. 6 (1982): 18.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas-Home, "Two Principles for a Settlement," 19.

coming under Israeli military occupation and reawakened Palestinian nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Prior to this, the international community had overwhelmingly viewed the Palestinian problem in humanitarian terms. In contrast, by 1969 France's Foreign Minister, for example, proclaimed that the Palestinian problem was "political."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, as indicated by not all Western states (e.g. the US) viewing the Palestinian problem politically, the Harrogate speech stemmed from Douglas-Home's personal inclinations and an awareness of the benefits of placating the Arab states by acknowledging the Palestinians for access to oil. Indeed, Douglas-Home recalls that in making the speech he sought a "more definite" policy compared with Labour and argues it "helped" Britain "greatly" during the 1973 oil crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the government's policy shift and increased international recognition of the Palestinians, Labour continued viewing the Palestinian problem in humanitarian terms until late 1973. A month before the Harrogate speech, Labour passed its own Middle East resolution at its Annual Conference. This reaffirmed Labour's commitment to Resolution 242 and, reflecting this, made no reference to the "Palestinians." Instead, it merely proclaimed the "need for a humane solution to the refugee problem."<sup>25</sup> Labour's continued adherence to this position was evident in its stance on UNGA Resolution 2949 of December 1972 which recognised the "indispensable" rights of the "Palestinians."<sup>26</sup> While the Conservative government, standing by the Harrogate speech, voted for it, Labour's front bench expressed opposition.<sup>27</sup> The words of James Callaghan, Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, in January 1973 echoed this. Identifying prerequisites for a Middle East settlement, Callaghan declined to acknowledge the "Palestinians." Instead, he simply referred to "the need for a solution to the desperate plight of the refugees."<sup>28</sup>

Beside Labour's commitment to Resolution 242, the Palestinian absence in Labour's policy statements is explained by two factors. First, Labour's position in opposition was significant. In 1972 alone, officials from Arab oil producing states (sympathetic to the Palestinian cause) made fifteen separate threats that the oil weapon would be used against their "enemies."<sup>29</sup> Being in opposition, however, meant there was less pressure to respond to these threats such as by indicating support for the Palestinians. The salience of this factor will become evident with Labour's policy shift leading up to gaining office.

---

<sup>22</sup> Wendy Pearlman, "The Palestinian National Movement" in Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim (eds.), *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 138

<sup>23</sup> Miller, *Inglorious Disarray*, 16-23.

<sup>24</sup> Alec Douglas-Home, *The Way the Wind Blows: An Autobiography by Lord Home* (London: William Collins Sons, 1976), 258-261.

<sup>25</sup> Labour Party Annual Report 1970, 205, 327, LHASC.

<sup>26</sup> UNGA Resolution 2949, 8 December 1972.

<sup>27</sup> Foreign Affairs, Hansard, 1776, 28 June 1973; Voting Record, UNGA Resolution 2949, 8 December 1972.

<sup>28</sup> Callaghan, *Labour Weekly*, 12, 26 January 1973, LHASC.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *Inglorious Disarray*, 31.

Second, the Labour leadership sought to maintain strong ties with Israel and its supporters. After becoming Foreign Secretary following the February 1974 election, Callaghan told diplomats that Labour “would not survive” if it broke its ties with Israel.<sup>30</sup> While likely a slight exaggeration to get his point across, this is, nonetheless, an indication of the influence Labour’s ties with Israel are likely to have played regarding its policy in the preceding years. The PLO, the organisation that claimed to represent the Palestinians, was viewed by Israel’s government as a terrorist organisation.<sup>31</sup> Golda Meir, to whom Wilson was close, had even said there were “no such thing as Palestinians.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the PLO’s refusal to recognise Israel’s legitimacy and its charter’s call for Palestine’s “liberation through armed struggle” (meaning Israel’s liquidation) did little to endear British supporters of Israel to the Palestinian cause.<sup>33</sup> To these individuals the PLO was, in the words of prominent LFI MP Clinton Davis, a “terrorist organisation.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, adopting a pro-Palestinian policy was not a recipe for Labour maintaining its relationship with Israel or its supporters. Indicating this, the Harrogate speech was criticised by pro-Israel Labour MPs and Israeli officials.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the Labour leadership is likely to have been very wary of adopting a similar Palestinian policy to that of the Harrogate speech.

While suggestive of their limited influence, the consistent Palestinian absence in Labour policy did not, however, go unnoticed by Labour’s pro-Palestinian lobbyists. A small (compared with Labour’s pro-Israel lobby) but vocal group of MPs and members – united in being driven by ideological convictions – argued Labour’s policy needed revision. During the second half of the twentieth century, Labour’s commitment to international socialist solidarity in foreign policy led to “concern with imperialism” and support for national liberation movements.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in 1970 alone, Labour “held discussions with representatives of Liberation movements in South Africa, Portuguese Guinea, Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia.”<sup>37</sup> As noted, following the 1967 War, one million Palestinians came under Israeli occupation and, moreover, Jewish settlements started being established in the occupied territories. This led some within Labour to view the Palestinians as victims of Israeli colonialism. One Labour member, for example, described Israel as “neo-colonist” arguing the Palestinians had consequently ‘suffered many injustices.’<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, as Shindler notes, “kibbutzim had not spread all over Israel”, public ownership was being privatised and Israel started resembling “any other West European society.”<sup>39</sup> The socialist utopia had not materialised. Thus, with the rise of Arab socialism some came to believe there was greater

---

<sup>30</sup> Middle East Heads of Mission Conference, 65, 13-16 May 1974, FCO8/2177, ADSNA.

<sup>31</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 336.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Giles, “Golda Meir: “Who can blame Israel?”, *Sunday Times*, 12, 15 June 1969.

<sup>33</sup> The Palestinian National Charter, 1-17 July 1968.

<sup>34</sup> Arab Organisations (London Office), *Hansard*, 1301, 24 July 1972.

<sup>35</sup> Debate on the Address, *Hansard*, 150, 2 November 1971; Robert Mauthner, “British Mid-East peace plan angers Israel”, *The Financial Times*, 5, 2 November 1970.

<sup>36</sup> Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World: Volume 2, Labour’s Foreign Policy since 1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>37</sup> Labour Party Annual Report 1970, 33, LHASC.

<sup>38</sup> “Labour and the Middle East”, *Labour Weekly*, 12, 19 January 1973, LHASC.

<sup>39</sup> Shindler, *Israel and the European Left*, 247.

ideological affinity between Labour and the Palestinians than with Israel. Indicative of this, Faulds urged Wilson to “to get to know some Arab Socialist leaders” and described Arafat as a ‘social democrat.’<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the Palestinian cause was viewed, in LMEC MP Frank Hooley’s words, as a “national liberation movement” alongside other such movements, as, of course, the Palestine *Liberation* Organisation sought to be.<sup>41</sup>

These convictions led to a belief that there were contradictions or “double standards” in Labour’s policy. For example, one member complained that while the “Black African movement for equality” was viewed as a “liberation movement”, the “Palestinians” were side-lined.<sup>42</sup> The centrality of this ideological belief in “double standards” for uniting Labour’s pro-Palestinian lobbyists – from Party activists to MPs – is indicated by its inclusion in an April 1973 LMEC memorandum submitted to Labour’s National Executive Committee (NEC). Labour’s “pro-Israel views inevitably leads it to apply “double standards” on questions such as colonialism” and results in Labour failing to acknowledge “the Palestinian struggle for a national identity”, it argued.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, besides the belief that side-lining the Palestinians contradicted Labour’s foreign policy ideology, there were other factors leading to support for the Palestinian cause. Some MPs were influenced by Middle East visits. For example, Watkins describes a 1968 visit funded by the Emir of Abu Dhabi to Palestinian refugee camps as the “first time” he “witnessed the horror inflicted on the Palestinians.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, there was recognition that supporting the Palestinian cause could enhance Labour’s position in government regarding oil access. This is evident in the private memorandum LMEC submitted to Labour’s NEC in April 1973 calling for a revision of Labour’s ‘support for Israel.’ Hinting at the oil weapon, it argued Labour was “distrusted in the Arab world and should take decisive steps to improve its standing.” This, it claimed, would open “economic opportunities for Britain under a future Labour government.”<sup>45</sup> Reference to oil was uncommon in public pronouncements by pro-Palestinian lobbyists. Yet, especially for those (e.g. Mayhew) on the Party’s right and not hugely involved in the environmental movement, this does not necessarily undermine oil’s significance. Referring to ideological factors appeared more altruistic and it is likely there was concern about accusations of playing to the tune of the Arab oil lobby. Indicating this, in his memoirs Mayhew suggests supporters of Israel assumed Israel’s critics were “in the pay of the oil companies.”<sup>46</sup> Hence, referring to oil was unlikely to constitute an effective means of attracting Israel’s supporters to the Palestinian cause.

---

<sup>40</sup> Middle East, *Hansard*, 266, 11 March 1975.

<sup>41</sup> Report on LMEC delegation to Lebanon and Syria, January 1975, FCO93/584, ADSNA.

<sup>42</sup> Mick Ashley, *Labour Weekly*, 15, 29 September 1972, LHASC.

<sup>43</sup> LMEC Memorandum submitted to Labour Party NEC International Department, 18 April 1973, FAULDS/3/2/15, BLPES.

<sup>44</sup> Watkins, *Seventeen Years in Obscurity*, 115.

<sup>45</sup> LMEC Memorandum submitted to Labour Party NEC International Department, 18 April 1973, FAULDS/3/2/15, BLPES.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Mayhew, *Time to Explain: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 161.

However, it is the ideological argument regarding “double standards” in Labour’s policy that united pro-Palestinian lobbyists and that was fundamental to generating divisions and embarrassment for Labour’s leadership. This was coupled with much of the Party continuing to view Israel, in Wilson’s words, as a “democratic socialist country.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, unlike pro-Palestinian lobbyists which viewed Israel imperialistically following the 1967 War, some such as Wilson paternalistically argued Israel was “producing better facilities for educating Arabs than they ever had before 1967.”<sup>48</sup> Although the weight was with the pro-Israel lobby, the subsequent Party divisions were very evident. This was manifested in *Labour Weekly* where Party members frequently argued. For example, following the 1972 Black September Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli athletes one member, G.J. Roper, expressed regret at what he described as Labour’s “one-sided approach” in denouncing the attacks. As “[s]ocialists”, he argued, they should recognise that the attacks were “inevitable” given ‘social and political injustice’ in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> This prompted another member to express “astonish[ment]” at Roper’s remarks, asserting that there was “nothing one-sided” in condemning the attacks.<sup>50</sup> That Party members engaged in such debate so publicly is suggestive of the strength of their respective convictions and hence the rigidity of divisions.

Labour MPs also openly argued, their infighting leading to considerable embarrassment for the Party leadership. In December 1972, Faulds engaged in an angry exchange with Jewish Labour MP Clinton Davis over the Palestinians whom Faulds argued had suffered ‘systematic oppression.’ The disagreements between the two led Faulds to declare that it was “time some of our colleagues [. . .] forget their dual loyalty to another country” – they were not representatives “in the Knesset.”<sup>51</sup> Similar comments by Faulds regarding “dual loyalties” would ultimately lead Wilson to dismiss Faulds as Shadow Arts Minister in November 1973.<sup>52</sup> More immediately, however, his words caused embarrassment for Wilson whilst visiting Israel over the 1972 Christmas break, Wilson apologising for “a couple of mavericks in our ranks who made extraordinary speeches in the last debate.”<sup>53</sup> However, Wilson’s support for Israel during the trip led to further infighting, Mayhew dedicating an article in *Labour Weekly* to condemning this. Wilson “betrays Labour traditions and principles” and ignores Israel’s “indifference to the sufferings” it has “imposed on the Palestinian[s]”, Mayhew asserted.<sup>54</sup> The infighting evidenced here also undermines the suggestion of Edmunds – stemming from her focus on Israel and insufficient attention to Labour’s pro-Palestinian lobbyists – that “dissent” within Labour regarding support for Israel did not emerge until the 1973 October War.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Middle East, *Hansard*, 440-441, 18 October 1973.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> G. J. Roper, “One-sided attitude to Munich deaths”, *Labour Weekly*, 9, 15 September 1972, LHASC.

<sup>50</sup> Percy Gourgey, “Munich condemnation “not one-sided””, *Labour Weekly*, 9, 22 September 1972, LHASC.

<sup>51</sup> Foreign Affairs, *Hansard*, 725-727, 14 December 1972.

<sup>52</sup> Philip Ziegler, *Harold Wilson* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), 389.

<sup>53</sup> “Wilson pledges support for Israel”, *Labour Weekly*, 5, 5 January 1973, LHASC.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Mayhew, “What prompted Harold Wilson to make those extraordinary speeches in Israel?”, *Labour Weekly*, 6, 5 January 1973, LHASC,

<sup>55</sup> J. Edmunds, “The Evolution of British Labour Party Policy on Israel from 1967 to the Intifada,” 29.



To Labour's pro-Palestinian lobby, it probably appeared their activities were effective. Days before the October 1973 War, the Labour Party Conference adopted a new Middle East statement.<sup>56</sup> This went further than all previous statements in recognising the Palestinians as a separate people. Pointing to the Palestinian absence in the 1970 Party Conference Middle East resolution, the "other important factor", it argued, was "the necessity of involving the Palestinian community in any settlement." The "root cause" of the Middle East conflict, it asserted, was "the failure to find a fair and humane solution to the problems of the Palestinian community."<sup>57</sup> This brought Labour's policy closer to the pro-Palestinian lobby. Although refraining from buoyant support and indicating continuing Party divisions, Mayhew made clear to LMEC's Committee that it marked "a slight improvement on previous statements by the Labour Party."<sup>58</sup>

In his memoirs, Watkins claims Labour's policy shift was "directly consequent" upon LMEC submitting the April 1973 memorandum to the NEC.<sup>59</sup> However, given Watkins's incentives to vindicate LMEC as a former chair, this cannot be treated as an objective assessment. Moreover, Watkins's claim is undermined by two factors which suggest it is unlikely LMEC was the primary influence on Labour's policy shift. First, evidence suggests Labour's NEC, who were responsible for drafting the statement, sought to limit LMEC's influence. Whereas pro-Israel groups (e.g. Poale Zion) were granted official affiliation status to Labour, the NEC repeatedly rejected LMEC's applications.<sup>60</sup> Hence, the NEC is more likely to have treated LMEC's memorandum with suspicion than seriously considering it. This is supported by the considerable period – five months – after the memorandum's submission that Labour's policy underwent any change.

Second, the policy statement's language suggests it was primarily influenced by the conviction that Palestinian terrorist activities needed ending. Between July 1968-December 1972, Palestinian groups were behind terrorist attacks on Israeli, American and European aviation facilities in twelve European cities alongside the 1972 Munich attacks.<sup>61</sup> The policy statement's assertion that the failure to find a solution to the Palestinian problem was the Middle East conflict's "root cause" stemmed from an argument about needing to combat "international terrorism." If no solution was found, the Palestinians would "continue to act as a destabilising factor," it argued.<sup>62</sup> The contrast between this construction of the Palestinians as protagonists of violence and pro-Palestinian lobbyists' depiction of them as victims suggests

---

<sup>56</sup> Watkins, *Seventeen Years in Obscurity*, 118.

<sup>57</sup> Labour's Programme for Britain: 1973 Annual Conference, 119, LHASC.

<sup>58</sup> LMEC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 3 October 1973, FAULDS/3/2/11, BLPES.

<sup>59</sup> Watkins, *Seventeen Years in Obscurity*, 118.

<sup>60</sup> LMEC Annual Meeting Minutes, 6 December 1972, FAULDS/3/2/11, BLPES; LMEC Memorandum submitted to Labour Party NEC International Department, 18 April 1973, FAULDS/3/2/15, BLPES.

<sup>61</sup> Rory Miller, *Inglorious Disarray*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Labour's Programme for Britain: 1973 Annual Conference, 120, LHASC

Labour's policy shift was not primarily influenced by LMEC and rather was driven by international developments, particularly terrorism.

However, a more accurate indication of the equivocal policy the leadership would follow in government did not emerge until 13 February 1974 in an article by Callaghan in *The Times*. Unlike his words the previous year and closer to the 1973 Party conference statement, Callaghan argued the "Palestinians" were at "the core of the [Middle East] dispute." Most significantly though, he argued that a "personality" needed to be established for the "Palestinians", a phrase which would guide Labour's policy in government. Callaghan was not explicit in what this meant but suggested it could involve the Palestinians living "on the West Bank under Israel's rule or in Jordan" thereby precluding an independent Palestinian state.<sup>63</sup> Yet, exactly how the Palestinians should be incorporated into a Middle East settlement was relatively insignificant from Callaghan's perspective; Britain was not a superpower capable of imposing Middle East peace. Indeed, upon becoming Foreign Secretary, Callaghan admitted to diplomats that regardless of what he said regarding the Middle East conflict, "it would have no influence in terms of a settlement."<sup>64</sup> Thus, when later questioned on what the Palestinian "personality" meant, Wilson said that it was "for those directly concerned to determine."<sup>65</sup> The significance of the policy shift rather lay in viewing the Palestinian question politically by reference to the "Palestinians" in contrast to Labour's earlier view of the problem as a "refugee" issue.

The introduction of the Palestinian "personality" phrase came a couple of weeks before the February 1974 general election with Britain experiencing severe economic difficulties, miners' strikes and the oil crisis following the October 1973 War. During the October War, Arab oil ministers had declared an oil embargo on "petroleum shipments to the US and Holland" and issued an ultimatum that it would be rescinded only after "the rights of the Palestinians were guaranteed."<sup>66</sup> Additionally, as Sandbrook notes, the Arab-dominated OPEC cartel imposed a seventy-percent increase in oil's cost leading the Western economy into "a nightmarish combination of recession and inflation" almost overnight.<sup>67</sup>

This led to the Labour leadership's desire to avoid offending the Arab oil producing states rising and increasingly conflicting with its aim of maintaining its relationship with Israel. Callaghan's *Times* article was published under a week after visiting Egypt and Israel.<sup>68</sup> On one hand, Callaghan recalls that during the trip he wanted "to reassure Israel" that Labour "would not" end its "historic friendship" for Israel. Equally, he sought "to mend fences with the Arab leaders to avoid any remote possibility that the Labour Party's close links with Israel might

---

<sup>63</sup> James Callaghan, "Callaghan on the prospects for a lasting peace in the Middle East," *The Times*, 13 February 1974.

<sup>64</sup> Middle East Heads of Mission Conference, 64, 13-16 May 1974, FCO8/2177, ADSNA.

<sup>65</sup> Wilson talks to MEED, 4 October 1974, FCO 93/770, ADSNA.

<sup>66</sup> Avraham Sela, "The 1973 Arab War Coalition: Aims, Coherence, and Gain-Distribution," *Israel Affairs* 6, no. 1 (1999): 60.

<sup>67</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Penguin, 2011), 28.

<sup>68</sup> Labour Party Annual Report 1974, 55, LHASC.

lead to an oil embargo against Britain if we won the election.”<sup>69</sup> Callaghan’s writings closer to the time demonstrate the latter concern was not a mere afterthought. In a December 1973 pamphlet, for example, he argued Britain needed “Middle East” oil for “transport” and “factories” but that fighting could “put up oil prices to unprecedented levels.”<sup>70</sup> Additionally, there was concern that appearing overtly pro-Israel would harm Labour electorally. Labour’s Chief Whip, for instance, told a January 1974 Shadow Cabinet meeting that he thought “much would be made of the argument that a Labour Government would be so pro-Israeli as to bring about a loss of Middle East oil.”<sup>71</sup>

The Palestinian “personality” policy reflected a pragmatic strategy to address these conflicting pressures. Callaghan told British diplomats when Labour returned to power following the February 1974 election that the Palestinian “personality” phrase was introduced to him by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.<sup>72</sup> Sadat was key to instigating the oil weapon during the October War.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in repeating Sadat’s phraseology, to a significant extent, Callaghan was playing to Arab ears. Equally, however, the term was highly ambiguous, one official describing it as “delphic.”<sup>74</sup> Unlike a statement providing a clear solution to the Palestinian problem, it failed to give much tangible to the Palestinians. Consequently, it reduced friction likely to be caused regarding Labour’s relationship with Israel. Indicating the deliberateness of this, Callaghan acknowledged the following year that he “had not spelled out precisely what Palestinian aspirations [he] regarded as legitimate.”<sup>75</sup> Finally, Callaghan introducing the phrase in a national newspaper during the election campaign is significant; it reflected an effort to reassure voters that Labour’s relationship with Israel would not undermine a Labour government’s access to oil. Notably, pro-Palestinian lobbyists do not seem to be a significant factor behind this policy shift. This is indicated by their presence in the Party for several years prior to this development without significant policy shifts occurring coupled with Callaghan’s statement coinciding with the election, the possibility of gaining office and the oil crisis.

## 2. Governing: Labour and the Palestinian Question, 1974-1976

On returning to power in March 1974 following the February general election, the Palestinian question became increasingly difficult for Labour’s leadership. On one hand, it remained firmly committed to Israel. Indeed, on Callaghan becoming Foreign Secretary, Wilson told him that he wanted a “meticulous account” of Callaghan’s foreign policy in only two areas. One was

---

<sup>69</sup> James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London: Collins, 1987), 290.

<sup>70</sup> James Callaghan, “*Challenges and Opportunities for British Foreign Policy*”, Fabian Tract 439, 4-5, December 1975.

<sup>71</sup> Labour Party Shadow Cabinet Meeting Minutes, 16 January 1974, Labour Parliamentary Committee Meeting Minutes, British Labour Party Papers, 1968-1994, British Online Archives.

<sup>72</sup> Middle East Heads of Mission Conference, 3, 13-16 May 1974, FCO8/2177, ADSNA.

<sup>73</sup> See Sela, “The 1973 Arab War Coalition.”

<sup>74</sup> Samuel to Craig, 6 November 1974, FCO93/507, ADSNA.

<sup>75</sup> Callaghan Telegram no.112 to Tel Aviv, 6 June 1975, FCO93/545, ADSNA.

South Africa due to Wilson's detestation of apartheid; the other was Israel.<sup>76</sup> Simultaneously, the Party remained factionalised over the Palestinian question and, more significantly, Labour was now in government. Thus, the Party was no longer as free as previously to formulate policy without considering repercussions for Arab-British relations. The significance of this was furthered by Britain's domestic political climate. The February 1974 election was dominated by the oil crisis, miners' strikes and a sense that Britain faced economic catastrophe. Labour's election manifesto noted a "huge addition" to the price Britain paid "for [Middle East] oil" while forty-nine percent of voters nominated price inflation as Britain's most urgent problem.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Labour's accession to power seventeen seats short of a majority meant "it was inevitable a new election would be called sooner rather than later."<sup>78</sup> Hence, Labour could not ignore the electorate. Thus, avoiding further economic crisis – something the Arab states could trigger – was a priority.

Given this situation, Labour continued pursuing the ambiguous Palestinian policy that Callaghan had laid the foundations for. This was evident in both the government's private correspondence and its public pronouncements. Writing to Sadat shortly after gaining office, Wilson refrained from a detailed solution to the Palestinian question. Instead, he ambiguously asserted that a Middle East settlement had "to offer the Palestinians a stake in the future."<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, the public formulation followed that indicated by Callaghan in *The Times*. This was introduced on 19 March when Callaghan outlined the government's Middle East policy. A peace settlement must provide "a 'personality' for the Palestinian people", Callaghan told the Commons.<sup>80</sup> Significantly, this constituted a codification of Labour's policy into "official" British policy. As a senior official observed, the government's Palestinian policy had "moved from the Harrogate formulation, through UNGA Resolution 2949 [. . .] to Mr Callaghan's formulation of 19 March."<sup>81</sup> That Callaghan's statement constituted a shift in "official" British policy rather than a mere one-off remark strongly suggests it was well-thought out and aimed at balancing the conflicting pressures on Labour's leadership.

However, that Labour's policy now represented British policy did not mean Labour's pro-Palestinian lobby became less vocal in criticising the Party leadership. Manifesting Labour's continuing divisions, responding to Callaghan's 19 March statement, Faulds welcomed it but urged the government to recognise the PLO as the "legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." Indicating his belief that side-lining the Palestinian cause contradicted Labour foreign policy principles, failing to do so, he asserted, would result in "a black day" in "the British Labour movement."<sup>82</sup> As demonstrated later in this chapter,

---

<sup>76</sup> James Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 290.

<sup>77</sup> FWS Craig, *British General Election Manifestos, 1900-1974* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1975), 399; David Denver and Mark Garnett, *British General Elections since 1964* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 50.

<sup>78</sup> Denver and Garnett, *British General Elections since 1964*, 53.

<sup>79</sup> Ziegler, *Harold Wilson*, 389.

<sup>80</sup> Foreign Affairs, *Hansard*, 872, 19 March 1974.

<sup>81</sup> Gore-Booth to Williams, 9 August 1974, FCO93/487, ADSNA.

<sup>82</sup> Foreign Affairs, *Hansard*, 939-941, 19 March 1974.

government-PLO contacts existed under Wilson. However, the government was assiduous in denying recognition to the PLO as the Palestinians’ representative given its association with terrorism.<sup>83</sup> Thus, while Labour’s policy had shifted, it remained at odds with the Party’s pro-Palestinian faction.

Yet, May 1974 ministerial statements provide further indicators that pro-Palestinian lobbyists had limited influence compared with other factors on Labour’s policy. These came from Callaghan and David Ennals, Labour’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, during a Middle East Heads of Mission Conference. In his opening speech, Ennals outlined Party divisions over the Middle East. Although noting a “pro-Arab lobby led by Mayhew”, Ennals described it as ‘small but vocal’ thereby suggesting he viewed it as an irritant at Labour’s peripheries. By contrast, Ennals described Labour’s “pro-Israel lobby” as ‘strong’ and stressed a “wide recognition” within Labour of needing “a healthy relationship with the oil producers.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, while Callaghan said that Labour “would not survive” if it broke ties with Israel and expressed concern that government policy could impact “oil supplies”, he made no reference to Labour’s pro-Palestinian lobby.<sup>85</sup> This does not necessarily mean scrutiny from pro-Palestinian lobbyists did not play on Callaghan’s mind; individuals rarely list every thought. Nevertheless, these statements strongly suggest concern regarding oil and scrutiny from the pro-Israel lobby were comparatively greater for the government.

However, it was following Labour’s re-election in the 10 October 1974 general election that the conflicting pressures on Labour’s leadership generated the most difficulty. This was largely because the Arab League had proposed “the question of Palestine” as a new item on the UNGA’s agenda which led to three pro-Palestinian Resolutions being voted on, Britain having to take a stance.<sup>86</sup> Analysing how Britain voted and proceedings surrounding the UN votes furthers understandings of Labour and the Palestinian question.

Britain abstained on the first Resolution – 3210 – passed by the UNGA on 14 October inviting the PLO “to participate in the deliberations of the UNGA on the question of Palestine in plenary meetings.”<sup>87</sup> In his UNGA speech following Britain’s abstention, Ivor Richard, Britain’s Permanent Representative to the UN (and as a former Labour MP, a political appointee), sought to justify Britain’s position. Given Callaghan’s proclamations on providing a Palestinian “personality”, Richard said that Britain considered “it right the views of the Palestinians should be heard.” Thus, he suggested abstention was “a matter of procedure” – only representatives of states should address UN plenary sessions – and tried to disassociate Britain’s vote from its Palestinian policy. Britain’s vote should not be “taken as indicating an attitude on any substantive implications in the resolution,” Richard stressed.<sup>88</sup> However, this was not very credible; Britain’s abstention was intimately related to its Palestinian policy.

---

<sup>83</sup> PLO, Hansard, 430W, 3 December 1974.

<sup>84</sup> Middle East Heads of Mission Conference, 11, 13-16 May 1974, FCO8/2177, ADSNA.

<sup>85</sup> Middle East Heads of Mission Conference, 64-65, 13-16 May 1974, FCO8/2177, ADSNA.

<sup>86</sup> Craig to Weir, 4 October 1974, FCO93/506, ADSNA.

<sup>87</sup> UNGA Resolution 3210, 14 October 1974; Voting Record, UNGA 3210, 14 October 1974.

<sup>88</sup> Provisional Verbatim Record of 2,268 UNGA Meeting, 14 October 1974, FCO93/507, ADSNA.

Labour's desire to maintain ties with Israel and its supporters ruled out voting positively on Resolution 3210. Despite the move to a more, if ambiguous, pro-Palestinian policy, Labour's relationship with Israel remained strong. Demonstrating this, the Israeli Labour Party – which, with its predecessors (e.g. Mapai), had dominated Israeli politics since Israel's creation – had expressed hope that Labour would win a 'substantial majority' in the October general election.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, before voting on Resolution 3210, Yigal Allon, Israel's Foreign Minister, sent a message to Callaghan. "Nothing would further the cause of terrorism more, than the appearance of [PLO] representatives" at the UNGA, urged Allon. He even claimed the UN debate on Palestine aimed at "undoing" Israel.<sup>90</sup> Thus, if Callaghan sought to maintain Labour's ties with Israel, the existence of which he had said Labour depended on, voting positively on Resolution 3210 was not an option.

Indicating the primacy of Labour's allegiance to Israel and that its Palestinian "personality" policy was more *rhetoric* than a strong commitment for a settlement incorporating the Palestinians, Britain had originally planned voting against Resolution 3210.<sup>91</sup> Miller suggests Britain's ultimate abstention stemmed solely from efforts at EEC unity but fails to develop his argument.<sup>92</sup> Seeking EEC unity certainly played a role; EEC members sought unity to further their influence. Thus, as Richard remarked, Britain's position if it voted against the Resolution would be "weakened" by a "lack of EEC support."<sup>93</sup>

Yet, it is plausible to suggest Britain would have abstained even in the absence of seeking EEC unity given Britain's desire to avoid offending the Arab states. Justifying Britain's abstention to pro-Israel Labour MPs frustrated Britain had abstained rather than voted against Resolution 3210, Callaghan affirmed that "Britain simply could not ignore the oil weapon." The significance of this was particularly great, Callaghan argued, given Britain's "frightening" economic situation and the need to avoid increases in Britons "unemployed."<sup>94</sup> Callaghan's consistently in expressing concern regarding oil – in public *and* private – suggests his remarks were genuine instead of merely an excuse in the face of criticism. Moreover, the October general election which preceded Britain's vote by only four days was dominated by the issues of high inflation and the oil crisis, Labour's manifesto suggesting the latter would cost Britain "an extra £2,500 million."<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, Labour's meagre three seat majority following the election meant the government could not afford to ignore Britain's domestic woes thereby furthering the importance of not jeopardising access to oil. This demonstrates the deceptiveness of Richard's declaration that Britain's abstention was unrelated to its Palestinian policy. By

---

<sup>89</sup> Israeli Labour Party Advert, *Labour Weekly*, 12, 4 October 1974, LHASC.

<sup>90</sup> Rafael to Callaghan, 3 October 1974, FCO93/506, ADSNA.

<sup>91</sup> Weston to Craig, 9 October 1974, FCO93/506, ADSNA.

<sup>92</sup> Miller, *Inglorious Disarray*, 54.

<sup>93</sup> Richard, Tel. no. 1260, 3 October 1974, FCO93/505, ADSNA.

<sup>94</sup> "Note of Meeting between Foreign Secretary and parliamentary delegation led by Leslie Huckfield", 5 November 1974, FCO93/548, ADSNA.

<sup>95</sup> Craig, *British General Election Manifestos*, 456.

seeking to dodge the issue, Richard's statement itself reflected an effort to limit the damage caused by Britain's voting regarding Labour's relationship with the conflicting pressures on it.

The shift in Labour's Palestinian *rhetoric* since 1970 in response to these conflicting pressures was explicit in Richard's 20 November 1974 speech to the UNGA two days before passage of the other two pro-Palestinian Resolutions. Resolution 242 "took no account" of the Palestinians being "a separate people" with "political rights", remarked Richard. A settlement must "enable the Palestinian people to express their personality and exercise their legitimate political rights", he argued.<sup>96</sup> However, this was merely a shift in *rhetoric* aimed at balancing the conflicting pressures on the government; a strong commitment to pursuing the declared policy was absent. Two days after Richard's speech, Britain abstained on UNGA Resolution 3236 reaffirming the Palestinians' rights to self-determination and voted against UNGA Resolution 3237 granting the PLO observer status and full membership in UN sub-organisations.<sup>97</sup>

Again, voting positively on either Resolutions was ruled out by the Labour leadership's desire to maintain ties with Israel and its supporters. On 14 November, almost twenty Labour MPs had tabled a Commons motion calling on Britain to vote against any UN resolution recognising the PLO "terrorist organisation."<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the reaction of Gideon Rafael, Israel's Ambassador to Britain, to Richard's 20 November speech again illustrated the importance of not voting positively on a pro-Palestinian Resolution for maintaining Labour's relations with Israel. Richard's speech makes "the Harrogate speech seem pro-Zionist." There is nothing 'so pro-Palestinian as Richard's remarks in the entire history of UK policy statements," an enraged Rafael told Ennals.<sup>99</sup>

However, as with Resolution 3210, conflicting pressures meant that Britain abstained on Resolution 3236 as a pragmatic strategy seeking to balance these. Following Britain's abstention on Resolution 3210, Arab states made clear the importance of not disregarding the Palestinian cause for Arab-British relations. Britain's Ambassador to Egypt, for example, was 'summoned' by Egypt's Under-Secretary who expressed Egypt's "disappointment" at Britain's abstention and urged that Britain take a more "positive line" in November.<sup>100</sup> Thus, when a delegation of pro-Israel Labour MPs met Ennals urging the government to vote against the upcoming Resolutions, Ennals countered that Britain "had to take account" of its "oil requirements." Voting against both Resolutions would be counterproductive; it had the potential "to cause [British] unemployment," he asserted.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, the government

---

<sup>96</sup> Plenary Statement by Ivor Richard, 20 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>97</sup> UNGA Resolution 3236, 22 November 1974; Voting Record, UNGA Resolution 3236, 22 November 1974; UN Resolution 3237, 22 November 1974; Voting Record, UNGA Resolution 3237, 22 November 1974.

<sup>98</sup> Vincent Ryder, "War fears grow after Palestine speech", *The Daily Telegraph*, 4, 15 November 1974.

<sup>99</sup> Callaghan to Tel Aviv Tel. no 275, 23 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>100</sup> Adams to FCO telegram no. 933, 28 October 1974, FCO93/507, ADSNA.

<sup>101</sup> Acland to Craig, 21 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

sought EEC unity, Richard asserting two days before the vote that Britain would try to “ensure the common position” was “not eroded.”<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, as with Resolution 3210, the government’s desire to avoid rupturing Arab-British relations makes it plausible to suggest Britain would have abstained regardless of this.

The explanation for Britain’s vote against Resolution 3237 is slightly different to the previous Resolutions. In his speech to the UNGA justifying the vote, Richard said it had “nothing at all to do with our views on the substance of the question of Palestine.”<sup>103</sup> This attempt to disassociate Labour’s voting stance from its Palestinian policy is more plausible than regarding Resolution 3210. Unquestionably, the statement was partly aimed at reducing Arab criticism and voting against Resolution 3237 demonstrated the strength of Labour’s allegiance to Israel against the Palestinians. However, there was concern that granting the PLO permanent UN observer status would set a precedent for potentially more dangerous groups attaining the same status. It would have “damaging consequences not only for the UK in relation to Zanu and Zapu [(Rhodesian liberation groups)] but for the future of the UN system,” asserted Callaghan.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, he had been warned by Foreign Office officials that PLO permanent observer status had the potential to undermine Britain’s position in Rhodesia.<sup>105</sup> Thus, it could be argued that on Resolution 3237 this concern overrode efforts at placating the Arab states. Equally, however, it is quite possible the government believed Richard’s speech two days previous coupled with abstention on Resolution 3236 the same day would ensure Arab-British relations were not jeopardised.

Notably, whilst researching this article and besides a Foreign Office official noting their lack of activity, no reference to pro-Palestinian lobbyists during UN proceedings was found in Foreign Office records.<sup>106</sup> This suggests pro-Palestinian lobbyists were far less influential on government policy compared with the government’s desire to maintain ties with Israel and avoid rupturing Arab-British relations. Given the numerical inferiority of Labour’s pro-Palestinian lobby and the context of the oil crisis, it also further illustrates the Labour leadership’s pragmatism in seeking to address the most significant pressures on it.

Despite the government’s efforts, there were difficulties following the votes. Ironically given Labour’s allegiance to Israel, it was pro-Israel groups that were most critical. Callaghan received several delegations from disgruntled pro-Israeli Labour MPs and there was criticism more widely from Israel’s supporters in Britain and Israel itself.<sup>107</sup> The British Zionist Federation, for example, wrote to Callaghan expressing “great disapproval” at Britain’s abstention on Resolution 3210 and, more significantly, at a December 1974 LFI dinner with

---

<sup>102</sup> Richard to FCO telegram no. 1665, 20 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>103</sup> Richard to FCO telegram no. 1704, 22 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>104</sup> Callaghan to UKMIS New York, Telegram no. 1023, 22 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>105</sup> Williams to Weir, 21 November 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>106</sup> Craig to Adams, 6 December 1974, FCO93/525, ADSNA.

<sup>107</sup> “Note of Meeting between Foreign Secretary and parliamentary delegation led by Leslie Huckfield”, 5 November 1974, FCO93/548, ADSNA,



Golda Meir attended by Wilson, Meir said that Britain's abstentions had "pained" Israel.<sup>108</sup> Thus, while Labour's relationship with Israel may not have been seriously undermined, the UN votes certainly added friction to it.

By contrast, there was limited response from the Arab states or Labour's pro-Palestinian lobby. Indeed, indicating the importance the government attached to maintaining oil supplies, Richard later observed that there had been "little criticism from the Arabs" and thereby concluded that the UN debate on Palestine had "not [been] the immediate disaster it might have been."<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, a British official suggested that whereas there were "dozens of letters [. . .], parliamentary questions, telegrams and deputations" from an angry pro-Israel lobby, there was not a "peep" from "the Arab lobby."<sup>110</sup> The latter suggestion was not wholly accurate. In the Commons, Faulds and Watkins argued abstention on Resolution 3210 constituted a failure to stand by the "Palestinian personality" policy.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, there was far less outcry from pro-Palestinian lobbyists. This is partly explained by them appreciating that Britain had not voted against all the Resolutions. Although they wanted Britain to vote positively (hence the criticism by Faulds and Watkins), they considered Britain not voting against all Resolutions as manifesting a more pro-Palestinian policy from Labour. This was illustrated at a CAABU meeting chaired by Labour MP Colin Jackson with Faulds and Watkins present. Regarding Britain's abstention, members "agreed" that Callaghan had "now adopted a more positive position" despite a strong "Zionist lobby."<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, overall, the UN votes created considerable difficulty for the Labour leadership given the conflicting pressures on it throughout the period.

While the UN votes marked the most intense episode for Wilson's government and the Palestinian question, the issue refused to disappear thereafter. The government faced persistent questions in Parliament and negative press suggesting it was in contact with the PLO.<sup>113</sup> The government denied this. For example, asked in December 1974 whether there had been "discussions" between ministers and PLO representatives, Ennals said there had been "none."<sup>114</sup> Such denial reflected the PLO's association with terrorism and the government's desire to avoid being linked with this. Manifesting this, asked whether a change in Britain's position on the Palestinians (e.g. recognising the PLO) would lead public opinion to "react violently", a senior British official responded:

The answer is that British Jewry and many important Labour leaders would and I am absolutely certain that Ministers would not be prepared to take them on. The public

---

<sup>108</sup> Shipton to Callaghan, 30 October 1974, FCO93/548, ADSNA; "Golda warns on Arafat", *Labour Weekly*, 2, 6 December 1974, LHASC.

<sup>109</sup> Richard to Callaghan, 20 December 1974, FCO93/508, ADSNA.

<sup>110</sup> Craig to Adams, 6 December 1974, FCO93/525, ADSNA.

<sup>111</sup> Debate on the Address, *Hansard*, 237-335, 30 October 1974.

<sup>112</sup> CAABU General Committee Meeting Minutes, 14 November 1974, FAULDS/3/2/2, BLPES.

<sup>113</sup> PLO, *Hansard*, 430W, 3 December 1974; Craig to Wright, 17 October 1974, FCO 93/488, ADSNA.

<sup>114</sup> PLO, *Hansard*, 430W, 3 December 1974.

image of the PLO in Britain is of a single terrorist organisation associated with hijackings and massacres.<sup>115</sup>

Hence, the government sought to minimise potential embarrassment, Wilson instructing Ministers attending a reception at Qatar's London embassy in August 1975 that they were "not, under any circumstances, to be friendly towards PLO representatives" attending.<sup>116</sup>

However, contrary to public statements, the government was in contact with the PLO. The Foreign Office had had "numerous contacts with the PLO."<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Said Hammami, the PLO's London representative, had met Callaghan and Wilson, Wilson later admitting that he knew Hammami "well."<sup>118</sup> Despite Wilson having pointed to the PLO's association with terrorism whilst in opposition to suggest Hammami's London office be closed, when in government the Labour leadership found PLO contact useful.<sup>119</sup> Callaghan's words to diplomats are illustrative. Posts such as Cairo and Damascus, he asserted, should maintain "discreet" contact with the PLO to gain "information on PLO activities which could be important for our knowledge of Middle East affairs."<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the government made use of such information. For example, when meeting Sadat in November 1975, Wilson said that following meetings with Hammami he had "been able to feed some of the PLO's ideas to the Israelis."<sup>121</sup> It is thus with a view to gaining Middle East insights and despite the potential awkwardness of its discovery that Wilson told Hammami on one occasion that he wanted to "encourage his contacts with Transport House", Labour's headquarters.<sup>122</sup> It is also a further indication of the Labour leadership's pragmatism towards the Palestinian question despite Wilson's sympathies towards Israel.

Furthermore, despite so often constituting an irritant, the government's desire to gain insider PLO information meant pro-Palestinian lobbyists were of some use to the government given their PLO contacts. Indeed, six LMEC MPs met Arafat in January 1975 during a twelve day visit of Syria and Lebanon under PLO auspices.<sup>123</sup> This certainly generated negative press for Labour, the *Daily Mirror* publishing an article headlined "Tea with the terrorists."<sup>124</sup> It also generated complaints from pro-Israel Labour politicians, Wilson defensively telling them that MPs who met Arafat had done so without the government's "goodwill."<sup>125</sup> However, while

---

<sup>115</sup> Craig to Wright, 17 October 1974, FCO93/488, ADSNA.

<sup>116</sup> Tony Benn, *Against the Tide, Diaries 1973-76* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 430-31.

<sup>117</sup> Craig to Weir, 22 November 1974, FCO93/517, ADSNA.

<sup>118</sup> Craig to Weir, 22 November 1974, FCO93/517, ADSNA; Harold Wilson, *Final Term: The Labour Government, 1974-1976* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1979), 159.

<sup>119</sup> David Harris, "Wilson's Call to Quit Olympics Baffles Ministers", *The Daily Telegraph*, 32, 8 September 1972.

<sup>120</sup> Callaghan, Telegram no. 69, 23 April 1975, FCO93/746, ADSNA.

<sup>121</sup> Note of Meeting between Prime Minister and Egyptian President, 7 November 1975, FCO93/645, ADSNA.

<sup>122</sup> Craig to Campbell, 29 January 1975, FCO93/746, ADSNA.

<sup>123</sup> Report on LMEC delegation to Lebanon and Syria, January 1975, FCO93/584, ADSNA.

<sup>124</sup> Terence Lancaster, "Tea with the terrorists", *Daily Mirror*, 3 January 1975.

<sup>125</sup> Meeting of Prime Minister with Board of Deputies of British Jews, 9 April 1975, FCO93/789, ADSNA.

Wilson would not have wanted negative press, the extent to which they lacked the government's "goodwill" is questionable. Rather than condemning LMEC's visit, the trip's participants were invited to the Foreign Office to report on it. Moreover, when LMEC visited the Foreign Office Watkins expressed "gratitude" for government support during LMEC's trip and Ennals subsequently told Britain's Ambassador to Lebanon that contacts made by LMEC with Arafat had been "useful" diplomatically.<sup>126</sup> Thus, while often constituting an irritant, the contacts Labour's pro-Palestinian lobbyists cultivated with the PLO were, to some extent, useful for the Labour government.

Nevertheless, infighting over the Palestinian question continued into Wilson's final months as Labour leader. In January 1976, Roy Hughes, LMEC's Vice-Chair, wrote a provocative article contending that terrorism was "not all one-sided." Palestinian terrorist activities were the product of Israel denying the Palestinians their "human rights," he argued.<sup>127</sup> This provoked considerable criticism including from Labour MP and Poale Zion president Eric Moonman who accused Hughes of sympathy for terrorism.<sup>128</sup> The role of Labour's traditional ties to Israel coupled with the belief of Labour's pro-Palestinian lobbyists that side-lining the Palestinians led to double standards in Labour's policy was very clear in generating this infighting. In criticising Hughes, one Labour member, for example, argued that "all Socialists should back Israel."<sup>129</sup> By contrast, in rallying to Hughes's defence, Watkins argued that Hughes's critics were acting upon "the basic assumption of the Zionists that they have a divine right to build up an ever-expanding settler state on the soil of Palestine."<sup>130</sup> Thus, while the weight was with the pro-Israel lobby, upon resigning as Prime Minister and Labour leader in April 1976, Wilson was leaving a Party internally divided over the Palestinian question.

## Conclusion

Between 1970-1976, Labour's policy on the Palestinian question underwent significant shifts. Whilst in opposition, its policy evolved from viewing the Palestinian problem as a humanitarian issue to, while highly ambiguous, considering it in political terms. This overall policy shift was primarily driven by a pragmatic strategy which sought to address the conflicting pressures on the Party leadership as their relative importance changed. This was most noticeable regarding the increased desire to avoid offending the Arab oil producing states as the possibility of assuming office arose in the context of the oil crisis. This laid the foundations for the policy pursued by Labour in government. That this foundation had been laid was most important as it voted on the three pro-Palestinian Resolutions at the UN, the government's actions during these votes further manifesting the Labour leadership's

---

<sup>126</sup> Record of Conversation between Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Group of Labour MPs, 28 January 1975, FCO 93/584, ADSNA; Record of Conversation between David Ennals MP and HM Ambassador, Beirut, 4 February 1975, FCO 93/740, ADSNA.

<sup>127</sup> Roy Hughes, "Terrorism is not all one-sided", *Labour Weekly*, 10, 9 January 1976, LHASC.

<sup>128</sup> Eric Moonman, "Why the thugs escape", *Labour Weekly*, 12, 16 January 1976, LHASC.

<sup>129</sup> D. Austin, "Why all Socialists should back Israel", *Labour Weekly*, 12, 16 January 1976, LHASC.

<sup>130</sup> David Watkins, "Israelis are on a disaster course", *Labour Weekly*, 10, 30 January 1976, LHASC.

pragmatism in seeking to balance the conflicting pressures on it. Most importantly, these were its desire to maintain its relationship with Israel whilst ensuring access to Middle East oil, the significance of the latter being accentuated by Britain's domestic political and economic climate.

While issues surrounding the Palestinian question may not have seriously undermined Labour's electoral prospects, it did, nonetheless, create considerable difficulties for the Party throughout the concerned period. In addition to the Party leadership being subjected to conflicting pressures and, given this, the policy it pursued inevitably leading to criticism, there are two reasons for this. First, Labour's strong ties to Israel coupled with the emergence of a pro-Palestinian lobby led to infighting among Party activists and MPs and embarrassment for the Party leadership. The pro-Palestinian lobbyists were united by the ideological argument that side-lining the Palestinian cause led to double standards in Labour's foreign policy while Israel's supporters – viewing the state as a socialist democracy – continued to believe there was ideological affinity between Labour and Israel. Second, whilst in government, the Labour leadership found contacts with the PLO beneficial for their diplomatic utility, the government's pursuit of such contacts leading to critical press coverage. While LMEC's contacts with the PLO led to difficulties for the government, this did, however, mean that, to some extent, pro-Palestinian lobbyists were useful to the Labour leadership.

By investigating the Palestinian question in Wilson's Labour Party, this article also furthers understandings of Labour's policy trajectory on the Palestinian question since Wilson's leadership. In May 1977, the right-wing Likud gained power ending the Labour Party's dominance of Israeli politics. Additionally, international criticism of Israel rose dramatically following accusations of Israel's complicity in massacring Palestinians in Beirut's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982.<sup>131</sup> These developments further undermined beliefs regarding ideological affinity between Israel and the British Labour Party. Moreover, they precipitated a rise in support for the Palestinian cause in Labour circles, Labour's 1983 election manifesto pledging Labour's support for an independent "Palestinian state" alongside Israel.<sup>132</sup> The later developments in Israel were undoubtedly crucial for shifting Labour's support to being firm advocates of the Palestinian cause. However, this article also suggests that Labour's ultimate move to a two-state solution policy was facilitated by its earlier policy shifts under Wilson. Specifically, the shift from viewing the Palestinian problem in humanitarian terms to a political issue was essential for advocating an independent Palestinian state given the inherently political character of a state. Given that the two-state solution remains the policy under Labour, this also indicates that Labour's current policy is incomprehensible without attention to the policy shifts which occurred under Wilson.<sup>133</sup>

Furthermore, by attending to the Labour leadership's policy, this article undermines Vaughan's claim regarding pro-Palestinian lobbyists being particularly "influential" on

---

<sup>131</sup> Edmunds, *The Left and Israel*, 86-110.

<sup>132</sup> Edmunds, *The Left and Israel*, 86-110; 1983 Labour Party Manifesto.

<sup>133</sup> 2019 Labour Party Manifesto, 99.

Labour's policy during the 1970s.<sup>134</sup> This, of course, is not to suggest that pro-Palestinian lobbyists were not more influential on Labour's policy in later years including the later 1970s. This was not addressed here and, indeed, attending to the leadership's Palestinian policy to assess the exact causality behind Labour's policy trajectory since Wilson's leadership of the Party provides an avenue for future research.

Finally, this article also sheds light on present difficulties the Palestinian question has created for Labour. In October 2019, Louise Ellman resigned from the Party after twenty-two years as a Labour MP accusing the Party of antisemitism and pointing to allegations levelled against her of "dual loyalties" to Israel.<sup>135</sup> Obviously, these comments closely resemble those of Faulds. Thus, with the emergence of support for the Palestinian cause within the Labour Party during the 1970s and the potential for this support to morph into hostility towards Jews – as in the case of Faulds – the foundations for Labour's present difficulties, arguably, were being laid over forty years ago.

---

<sup>134</sup> Vaughan, "Mayhew's outcasts", 27.

<sup>135</sup> "Former UK Labour MP says activists accused her of dual loyalty to Israel", *The Times of Israel*, 23 October 2019.