



By: *Harvey Morris*

British PM to spell out his 'path to peace' as Gaza crisis grows



Mounting outrage at the plight of starving civilians in Gaza is forcing the UK, along with its European partners, to seize a more active role in pursuing a definitive solution to the Middle East's longest-running conflict.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer **summoned** an emergency cabinet meeting during the parliamentary recess this week to discuss the crisis, a day after he stood alongside Donald Trump and **described** the humanitarian situation inside the Palestinian enclave as an "absolute catastrophe".

In a subsequent one-hour joint press conference at the US president's Turnberry golf course in Scotland, Trump himself contradicted the assertion of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu that there was no starvation in Gaza. He **urged** Israel to allow "every ounce of food" into the territory.

Starmer's pathway to peace

Starmer's increasingly vociferous condemnation of Israel's tactics in its almost two-year-long Gaza war coincides with growing political pressure, including from fellow ministers and MPs, for the UK to recognise a Palestinian state.

The prime minister went some of the way this week, announcing after the cabinet meeting that UK recognition would come later this year unless the Israeli government took substantive steps to end the "appalling" situation in Gaza, including a ceasefire and a commitment to a long-term peace process.

The move, which the prime minister had resisted until now, looked ever more likely after a third of MPs from across the House of Commons, including 131 from his own party, **argued** that recognition was a vital step towards an eventual two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

President Emmanuel Macron has already **indicated** that France will announce its recognition of a Palestinian state at the United Nations General Assembly in September,

putting further pressure on Starmer to follow suit.

The immediate priorities are the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, breaking the stalemate that is preventing a full ceasefire and the release of the remaining Israeli hostages

Starmer's strategy is to link recognition to what he regards as a 'pathway to peace' in which the UK would cooperate with its European allies and regional states in taking tangible measures leading to the eventual creation of a Palestinian state.

The immediate priorities are to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and to break the stalemate that is preventing a full ceasefire and the release of the remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

Beyond that, the Europeans and regional partners have a potential role to play in rebuilding the shattered enclave and bolstering the status of the Palestinian Authority, presently confined to the West Bank.

But there are other roadblocks along Starmer's pathway to peace, not least an Israeli government that adamantly rejects the concept of an independent Palestinian state.

Prospect of a two-state solution further away than ever

The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, citing Israel's actions in Gaza, **warned** this week that the prospect of a two-state solution was further away than ever. He was addressing a conference in New York, postponed from last month, to address the issue of a peaceful settlement of the Palestine question.

His intervention came as Israeli media

reported that Netanyahu was expected to propose annexing parts of Gaza if Israel failed to secure a ceasefire agreement with Hamas. Haaretz newspaper **reported** that the move was an attempt to appease the Religious Zionism party of his far-right finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, which had opposed even Netanyahu's limited moves to increase aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip.

A Gaza annexation would be certain to prompt further sanctions by London

The daily said Netanyahu had told his ministers the annexation plan had been approved by the Trump administration.

If the threat were carried out, however, it would provoke a further rift with other governments, Britain's included. Coupled with unrestrained settler incursions in the West Bank, a Gaza annexation would be certain to prompt further sanctions by London.

The domestic pressure in the UK

Already last month, the UK government **sanctioned** Smotrich and Israel's national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, in response to what were described as their repeated incitements of violence against Palestinian communities.

In the latest incident this week, an Israeli settler was **reported** to have shot and killed Palestinian teacher Awdah Hathaleen near the West Bank town of Hebron. Hathaleen had cooperated in the making of the Oscar-winning film *No Other Land*, screened earlier this year by the UK's Channel 4.

Almost half of Britons view Israel's actions in Gaza as genocidal

That and other productions, together with daily media coverage evidencing the plight of

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, have increased the domestic pressure in the UK for British politicians to step in.

A YouGov poll last month **indicated** almost half of Britons viewed Israel's actions in Gaza as genocidal, while 65 per cent believed the UK should enforce an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for Netanyahu if he were to visit Britain.

Matching the aspirations of both sides

Earlier in the crisis, Starmer was seen by many as too uncritical of Israel's actions as he focused on its right to self-defence in responding to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack in which some 1,200 Israelis and foreigners were killed and more than 240 taken hostage.



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Driven by domestic pressure and his own commitment to international law, the prime minister seems prepared to back concrete steps that could advance the eventual goal of a Palestinian state, even at the cost of a diplomatic break with the present Israeli government.

He may be hoping that his current friendly relationship with Donald Trump might even play a role in bringing an impatient US administration onside.

He, like many in the UK and Europe, will remain firmly committed to Israel's right to exist and to defend itself within the limits of international law. Any initiative promoted by Starmer would therefore be expected to match the aspirations of both sides.

The challenge is that, as in the aftermath of previous wars and rebellions in the region over almost 80 years, pressure to secure a definitive solution based on a two-state solution can rapidly fade once the shooting stops and the world's attention drifts elsewhere.