



Bellicose British Foreign Policy in Ukraine and Gaza – Tom Stevenson part 2/2

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Talia Baroncelli (TB): Hi, you're watching theAnalysis.news, and I'm Talia Baroncelli. You're watching part two of my discussion with Tom Stevenson. I hope you watched part one as well and that you enjoyed the content. If you'd like to help us out, we really can't do this work without you, so please feel free to go to our website, theAnalysis.news, hit the donate button at the top right corner of the screen, and most importantly, get onto our mailing list; that way, you never miss new content. See you in a bit with Tom Stevenson.

Joining me now is journalist Tom Stevenson. He is a foreign correspondent and contributor to the London Review of Books. He has reported from the Middle East and North Africa and is the author of a collection of essays called *Someone Else's Empire: British Illusions and American Hegemony*. Thanks so much for joining me today, Tom.

Tom Stevenson (TS): Thank you.

TB: Well, this copying and pasting of goals is also obvious in another document that you brought up from March 2021, where the British government published its results of the Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development, and Foreign Policy. In this document, they state that they have certain goals of an Indopacific tilt, and so that's also directly aligning with the U.S.'s interests in the South China Sea and trying to be able to deal with the so-called threat of China and also mentioning South Korea as a very highly significant area of focus.

One other thing that's really interesting in that document is how one of the U.K.'s goals is to commit to America's stockpile of nuclear weapons. There's a segment in your book where you speak about nuclear war, and it's quite fascinating because you mentioned how, in 1957, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said, "Oh, perhaps we should start using tactical nuclear

weapons.” William Kaufmann from the RAND organization picked this apart and said that it would not be a good idea if you were to use tactical nuclear weapons, smaller so-called nuclear weapons, that it would actually lead to a situation in which there would be an escalation and just full-blown nuclear war.

It was Daniel Ellsberg; many people are familiar with Daniel Ellsberg’s work. He was saying, and he revealed that the United States policy was one of a first-strike policy and that the U.S. had war games played out where they would essentially be willing to strike thousands of positions, particularly in China, in Asia, and in the Soviet Union. It would amount to the killing of over 600 million people, and 100 million of them would be in Europe. There was no hesitance whatsoever on the part of the U.S. defense establishment at the time; this would have been in the late ’50s and the ’60s, and going into the war in Vietnam, the U.S. was really ready to use this first strike and the absolute chaos and destruction that it would lead to. You characterized this as being worse than anything Hitler even planned.

The reason I bring this up is, how do you view the nuclear threat today? Because there are a lot of more belligerent think tanks or defense officials who would say that if you bring up the threat of nuclear war in Ukraine, for example, that’s somehow undermining support for Ukraine, and it’s appeasing Russia. Any negotiated settlement is, in fact, playing into the hands of Russian propaganda. Bringing up this issue of nuclear war and the threat of nuclear war is simply a tactic that’s used to support the Russian side essentially.

TS: That’s certainly been the prevailing attitude, I think. I would say this: when Russia first invaded Ukraine and launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the second week of the war, I traveled to Ukraine, traveling in the opposite direction of refugee convoys. While I was doing that, at the same time, American strategic bombers, B-52s, were taking off from British air bases in the British Isles and making overflights over Poland.

At the same time, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly conducted exercises involving Russia’s strategic nuclear forces. Just this morning, Russia announced that it will be carrying out exercises with Russia’s tactical nuclear forces in the near future over the coming days. There is simply no question that the war in Ukraine, whatever one thinks of it, increases the risk of thermonuclear war. I think it’s extremely difficult, really, for anyone, for the most hawkish commentators who argue that there should be direct NATO intervention in the war to those who insist on an immediate ceasefire, or negotiations, or whatever else to go against that.

What we could say, I think, is this. Ukraine’s political independence was gravely threatened by Russia’s invasion, there’s no question. At this point, it has more or less secured it with the help of Western arms and support from the United States and from Europe as well. Russia’s expectations of a mad dash to Kyiv caused a quick capitulation. The Ukrainian government fleeing to villas in Tuscany, or whatever, was completely thwarted.

Since then, the war has descended into a bloody stalemate, which has been obviously recognized by Ukrainian generals, most notably General Zaluzhnyi, until he was relieved of

his duties. In the background of this, you have the war creating a standoff between the world's two preeminent thermonuclear powers, which have almost all the nuclear weapons. The chance of a full-scale nuclear war between the United States and Russia actually breaking out remains relatively low. But given that the stakes are essentially global-scale extirpation, any movement in that dynamic is one that one has to pay an enormous amount of attention to. The idea that it should be just brushed off as a cover for sympathy with Putin is, frankly, absurd. Pure propaganda, in my view.

TB: Well, I do want to bring up this perceived tension between the diplomats of Germany and that of Britain, of the U.K., because if you look at the rhetoric, for example, there's been lots of criticism of German Chancellor Scholz, saying that he hasn't done enough for Ukraine. Germany has actually been the second-largest provider of aid to Ukraine, so that's not quite correct. If you look at British rhetoric, on the other hand, it seems to be far more bellicose and belligerent, and you would think that they'd be providing all sorts of weapons and aid to Ukraine. Can you give a sense of what that support from the side of the U.K. has actually been for Ukraine?

TS: Sure. Britain has supplied munitions. In the earliest period of the war, advanced anti-tank munitions were the most important part. Those weapons were, along with NLAWS and javelins from the American side, along with other European equivalents; those weapons were extremely useful in allowing Ukraine to humiliate Russian forces in the initial advance. That played an important symbolic role.

At the same time, Britain has also played an important political role in terms of support for Ukraine, in that it has been the Western European power that is tacked closest to the position taken by the United States and by other Eastern European states like Poland and the Baltic states in terms of support for backing Ukraine to the hilt with the general aim of driving Russian forces from the field. Politically, that is certainly appreciated in Kyiv and, in my experience has been received as a positive, probably by a very strong majority of Ukrainians, certainly those who are more or less supportive of the government's handling of the war.

On the other hand, it also has had the effect of creating a general environment in which the whole concept of Ukrainian forces driving Russia from the field, is simply defeating them forcibly, is still taken seriously at a time when that has become militarily quite fanciful. I think there's been two prongs of that.

With regard to Germany, you're certainly right. German political culture since the German Green Party took control of the Foreign Office has, in fact, been much more sticking to the same British line that everyone was demanding, which is that under Foreign Minister [Annalena] Baerbock, the general outlook is fundamentally pro-American hegemony in an unquestioning way, and also certainly backing Ukraine. Germany gets the stick it does, I think, primarily because of the policies towards Russia in terms of gas exports and the gas pipeline connection, which had been in place for many years, where the U.S. kept demanding that Germany find ways to cut off the Cold War era gas pipelines between the two, which

were so critical to the German economy, and it refused to do so. In terms of today, I think Germany's position is at least arguably reasonable.

TB: I do want to pivot to a very different conflict that you've written about, and that's what you call the forgotten war in Ethiopia. I remember in 2021, Abiy Ahmed, who is the leader of Ethiopia, basically characterized the, I guess you could call it, uprising on the Tigrayan side as leading to the current conflict and saying that they were trying to sabotage the state. So that was the Tigray and Defense Forces. He accused them of trying to sabotage the state by... I think he was trying to postpone a regional election, and they didn't want to do that.

Ever since November of 2021, there's been very little aid going to Tigray, and there's been pretty much a media blackout. Could you perhaps give some context to that particular war and where things stand right now? I know the Eritreans have also been involved. You do mention in the article that you wrote that Abiy Ahmed signed an agreement with Eritrea and with Somalia. I think it was in 2020 or 2021, and that perhaps set the stage for this particular conflict, but perhaps give us an overview of what's going on there and why you think it's been largely forgotten.

TS: Sure. The Civil War in Ethiopia is, I think, remarkable in two ways. First, while it was raging, while it was at its height between 2020 and 2022, it was almost certainly the most bloody and destructive conflict in the world. That's saying something, given what else was happening during those years. At the same time, it is also one that was almost entirely ignored, except for a few specialists in foreign ministries here or there. The level of attention, not to say, concern that it received was completely really incommensurate with what was actually happening.

The story itself is incredibly dramatic, which is that Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 and was treated as an enlightened performer. He was fated at the IMF, at the World Economic Forum. He was given in 2019 the Nobel Peace Prize for signing what was in fact a much more complex cessation of hostilities with Ethiopia's northern neighbor, Eritrea. Within a year, he would launch what would become, at its height, really the worst war in the world.

In 2020-2022, there is nowhere in the world you would have wanted to be less than in Tigray. It is that stark. It was horrific. Head of the World Health Organization, who was himself, Tigrayan Tedros Ghebreyesus, would say that there's no way in the world we're witnessing hell like Tigray. This is while the war in Ukraine is ongoing. There was this incredible mismatch between huge battles in which hundreds of thousands of people were being killed and civilians slaughtered. We still don't know the numbers. The estimates are at least 600,000 and quite possibly a good number more than that, with front lines moving up and down, the involvement of regional states, as you said, where it was certain that Eritrea played an important part in the war in the north, and a small number of Somali troops were also involved, too, as a result of the agreements that Abiy Ahmed had made. Yet the war pretty much passed us by. You could find information about it from a couple of correspondence or from a few specialist sources, but it was never a priority.

I think that what that points to is something much more important in international affairs in general, which is this sense that the hierarchy that we tend to impose upon the world in terms of what is actually considered important, what conflicts really merit attention and should be treated as something serious or something that one should even make any real serious attempt to try to blockade or prevent.

To be charitable, I think you would say that interest or the importance of international conflicts follows a geographic gradient, where you would say, look, the world economy has a certain shape. The distribution of global GDP follows some gradient, whereas war in Europe or East Asia is the most important, followed by the Middle East because of the energy resources, followed by Latin America, South-East Asia, and so on. Last, of course, the Sub-Saharan Africa. Obviously, I think that is insufficient. There's no question that race is a huge part of that story and also political concerns.

The war in Ukraine, for example, what one can see is the core conflict of our times, I think for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is that it allows us to set up a good versus evil story. Whereas the war in Yemen, for example, might have fundamentally some symbol or characteristics, the good versus evil story is inconvenient because it ends up casting the wrong guys as good and evil. Whereas the war in Ethiopia, I think, provides a critical final piece of that puzzle in that it shows that when you have a conflict where there isn't a straightforward ability to present it, it's either nefarious or constructive. You have something that is just benign, which is that you can have hundreds of thousands of people being killed in a massive land war, and it's just treated as an irrelevance.

TB: Well, we should also address the elephant in the room, which is Gaza. We have spoken about Gaza in terms of British foreign policy, but we haven't fully addressed Israel's horrific onslaught on the Gaza Strip, on the Palestinians, ethnically cleansing the Palestinians, perhaps committing genocide, I would argue that they are. That's a legal definition.

In any case, the Israeli Defense Forces, the way that they're exacting this war is to create such a huge death toll, which inevitably won't actually lead to the elimination of Hamas or anything. It could potentially even strengthen Hamas's cause by creating so much death and destruction and targeting innocent children and innocent civilians.

How would you assess Israel's war? Do you think that the way that they've been prosecuting or carrying out this war, do you see any consequences at all in the long run for how Israel... I shouldn't just broadly say Israel. I'm speaking specifically of Netanyahu's government here. Do you see any consequences for him in the long run? Will Britain just stand there and let him get away with it in a way, just like the U.S. has been aiding and embedding this onslaught on Gaza?

TS: Well, I think, in my view, it's critical to try to start with a characterization of what the war really is. I think to that extent, this war, which I think is principally an attack by Israel on

Gaza, not on Hamas, but on Gaza, began with strategic bombing. It began with a mass campaign from the air where the targets were not named individuals or political control centers or really anything to do with Hamas, as much as Israel may have occasionally tried to claim that. They were really simply areas of Gaza City and then of Gaza as a whole. The general aim, and I think there's more than enough evidence of this, some of it from the excellent reporting of the Israeli investigative journalist Yuval Abraham, with the aim of simply flattening Gaza. Gaza itself was the target, and I think it's important to stress that. It is not that Hamas or the tunnel network were, unfortunately, between the Israeli armed forces. Gaza was between the Israeli armed forces and Hamas or the tunnel network or whatever else. Gaza itself has always been the target and remains the target. I think as we appear to be on the edge of another leg of this assault on Rafah it's important to keep that in mind.

I think we have to insist on that, and we also have to insist on something else, which is that this war has never really been a calibrated, carefully planned operation with clearly achievable goals that one can hold on one side or the other. It has had what I would describe as an orgiastic quality. It has combined malice and mirth. It is retributive in a very important sense. The October 7 attacks were treated as something deeply shocking to the psyche, not just of the ruling Israeli Party, but Israeli society as a whole. Unfortunately, I think that there is still, to this day, probably broad acceptance and support for the way the war is being prosecuted. Nonetheless, that is the form that it has taken.

Now, what is that required internationally? Because to bring that to the international dimension, I think, given that I myself am a British citizen, if we're looking at it from the perspective of Britain or from the United States, we have to keep that in mind. Well, one thing that is required is an enormous number of munitions. In fact, Israeli armed forces were very quickly finding themselves running out of them because of the sheer number of bombs, missiles, artillery shells, and so on that they had to use in the attack. When the stock started running low, the United States and its allies stepped up to help replenish them either by actually supplying munitions, selling them, or helping along the logistics supply lines through Cyprus and so on, which brings Britain very much into the picture. Bombs manufactured in Texas or with their precision-guided munitions systems attached in Missouri or wherever else in General Dynamics factories across the United States would end up having either been prepositioned in Israel or in Europe or shipped to Europe and then flown, perhaps via Cyprus, perhaps via a British base, is almost certainly in some cases, to Israel before they are dropped on Gaza.

Again, I think it's important to keep in mind that this is not just a case of Israel acting alone. Can the United States, Britain, the international community, or whoever else be persuaded to a different outcome? We, in the case of Britain, and I believe you, in the case of the United States, are participants in this war in a limited but important sense. I think that's also critical to keep in mind.

Now, another thing is that Israel has been able to prosecute the war in Gaza in the way that it has in this fundamental, orgiastic, retributive way, I think because it has been relieved of the

responsibility of having to think about the response function of the regional states. In a world where Israel was not protected diplomatically by Britain or principally by the United States, but also protected militarily by the United States, with the immediate movement of military assets towards Israel as soon as the war began and so forth. As a result, Israel doesn't have to think about, doesn't have to take into account what other regional states would do were it to behave differently and then, therefore, conduct the operation in a different way, approach the war in a different manner, or whatever else. Therefore, the weight of the war is currently being prosecuted in an international effort. I think we should keep that in mind, too.

I think my general argument there is that Israel's actions really can't be seen in isolation, either from the U.S. or from the international, powerful states internationally as a whole, because the environment in which the war is taking place is truly shaped internationally. As to whether or not there are going to be ramifications for the way the war has panned out, I think absolutely. The Palestinians in Gaza are trapped in a way that civilian populations very rarely are in wars. It's actually quite hard to think of other examples where it's this stark.

Usually, however bad the situation is, wherever there's a siege applied, there's usually somewhere else to which civilians or, indeed just populations as a whole are able to flee. Gazans are not able to flee in that way because of the small geographic size of Gaza, because of the way that it's enclosed, principally by Israel, although partly by Egypt as well, they are trapped. I think the enormous psychological effect of that and the images that a huge number of people are now able to see as a result of the war are causing some changes in the way that things are being handled. We see, of course, good evidence of that in American universities, but in European universities, it's often said that's not happening. In fact, it is. It just receives less attention. I think there is something of a watershed happening here simply due to the sheer extent of the violence. We'll have to see how that plays out, especially with the next stage of the war in Rafah.

TB: I wanted to touch upon that last point about this being a potentially watershed moment for U.K. politics. I would largely agree. You've seen large protests throughout the United States on university campuses. There have been protests, as you mentioned, throughout Europe and in the U.K., in Germany, where I currently am in Berlin. The police crackdown on largely peaceful pro-Palestinian protests has been astounding, and that's a topic for another time.

Going back to the U.K., there's a huge discrepancy, I would say, between some of the conservative Tory MPs and what the average person in the U.K. is thinking about this conflict. You see former Home Secretary Tory MP Suella Braverman go on numerous news outlets saying that she questions the death toll in Gaza, saying that the death toll, which is now over 35,000 Palestinians, is to be questioned, given that she says you can't trust the " Hamas-led Gaza Ministry of Health," which is pretty insane, considering that even in the U.S., even the Biden administration acknowledges the high death toll. Even if you take the most conservative estimate of it, they acknowledge that the death toll has been immense. We've been taking statements from Admiral John Kirby, from the National Security Council,

and people from the State Department such as Matthew Miller. Her rhetoric is really extreme, even compared to theirs.

You see a backlash in the U.K. The Rochdale by-elections are an example of this. George Galloway was elected there, and some people would point out that there are some issues with him that he largely doesn't accept for students to be taught about LGBTQ issues or, again, lesbian issues at schools, that, of course, LGBTQ people should have rights, but his rhetoric is quite conservative on those social issues, so there are some issues with him. In general, I think there is support for ending this war in Gaza, for having a ceasefire, for returning the hostages, and for also having some off-ramp out of this cycle of violence and the Israeli occupation, and to have sovereignty or at least some independence for the Palestinian people. How would you say the onslaught in Gaza potentially shapes politics in the U.K.?

TS: Yeah, I think your characterization is correct overall there. As it stands, the British government's position remains in line with the themes of what we've been talking about, basically to take the lead from Jake Sullivan. That's true also of other parties as well. It's certainly true of the Tory right in the form of someone like Suella Braverman or whoever. That is currently the position, and yet it has opened up this enormous gulf between public opinion and the political system as a whole. I think that is where the potentiality lies if some shift can happen.

On the specific issue of Israel, I think this war has really revealed to an enormous number of people who perhaps were not as familiar with the situation before last year the sheer nature of the violence necessary to maintain the status quo. That, I think, is a watershed moment in attitudes, particularly among the young. I think we're seeing that in the United States and also in the U.K. Then the question becomes whether or not it's possible to maintain that distended status quo within Britain. Maybe that's also true in the United States, I think, probably to some extent as well, which is that the general population's view on the conflict is overwhelmingly in favor of the British government working as far as possible towards a ceasefire immediately and refusing to continue to cooperate with Israel the way the war has been handled. That is just black and white, the position.

Sometimes, there are attempts to argue with the Muslim population or something like that. That's just not the case. The general population does not believe whatsoever in the current British government's position, which is basically supportive of Israel. I think the question becomes, how long can that situation on such an important and emotive topic go on? Does that contain within it the possibility of trying to actually democratize foreign policy in Britain? That's an interesting question because right now, there's very little of it. Still, the general idea is very much that it's not a question that's really open to national politics, not in a serious way. I think that this issue possibly contains not certainty, but some idea that it might be possible to try and move foreign policy questions towards an idea of a democratic national political life rather than a technocratic idiosyncrasy to be decided, and it doesn't matter what anyone who actually lives or votes in the country thinks about it. I guess that's the question, and it will be interesting to see how that plays out.

TB: It was really great speaking to you, Tom Stevenson. Thank you so much for your time. Tom Stevenson, contributing editor to the London Review of Books, thanks so much for joining us.

TS: Thank you very much. Pleasure.

TB: Thank you for watching. If you'd like to check out the rest of our content, you can go to our website, theAnalysis.news. See you next time.

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