

Thanks for listening to The Rest is Politics. Sign up to The Rest is Politics Plus to enjoy ad-free listening and receive a weekly newsletter. Join our members' chatroom and gain early access to live show tickets. Just go to therestispolitics.com. That's therestispolitics.com.

Welcome to The Rest is Politics with me, Alastair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

Now, we're going to do lots on the Middle East, obviously. Not just what's happening there, but also what's happening in the UK politics around it. We're speaking shortly before Keir Starmer is going to make a big speech on the whole issue.

And then Rory, I know you want to talk about AI ahead of Rishi Sunak's Bletchley Summit, at which I hear Elon Musk, amongst others, will be appearing. But I think it's sticking on the kind of domestic policy front as well. I know that's global, but it's about Rishi Sunak. I'd also like to talk about the environment. But shall we start with the Middle East? Absolutely.

Just as a very, very brief reminder of where we are now, Israel has begun its ground operations, not at huge scale. So it's more tentative than people were expecting, but tanks have crossed the border. Ground forces are beginning to engage. And so we're getting now into the phase in Gaza, which many people have been warning about and worrying about, which is the beginning of a ground war, with all that that means, which is street fighting, people being able to use rubble as cover. This amazing tunnel network, which is sometimes described as being larger than the London Underground, which allows Hamas fighters both to hide from attacks, but also to be able to come up behind Israeli troops as they advance. And you'll see any number of statements by different types of military analysts talking about Mosul or Fallujah, or even Stalingrad about the problems of these kinds of urban warfare.

Look, I think we're into that phase. I mean, it's only three weeks really. But we're already into that phase that we saw in the war in Ukraine, where suddenly what appeared to be utterly abnormal, literally just a few weeks ago, becomes kind of part of everyday life for all of us. You wake up, you turn on the radio, you turn the TV, you go online, and you hear and see stuff that a few weeks ago would have been virtually unthinkable. And look, I wonder if we're going to talk about the domestic situation, but I wonder just for the listeners, we should have a little reflection on what's happening inside Israeli politics at the moment. You had an extraordinary situation at the weekend where Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, seemed to be distancing himself from those who had been in charge of the intelligence. He was essentially saying that he'd been assured that things were quiet, et cetera. And then almost instantly, Benny Gantz, who is a different politics to Netanyahu, but he's one of the three key members of the war cabinet. There are six members of the war cabinet, three are kind of the leaders of it. That's Netanyahu, Gallant, the defense minister, and Benny Gantz, who's a pretty decorated soldier, but also a senior politician as well, and clearly brought in to sort of give this sense of unity. And then the three observers, so the six strong cabinet, but three really powerful figures within it. And Gantz essentially attacked Netanyahu for what he said. And I think this reveals something of the weakness of Netanyahu's position, although he's kind of the strongman leader and he's projecting himself as the war leader right now. Gantz essentially made him withdraw what he'd said. And Netanyahu, something pretty rare for BB, he apologized for what he'd said. And so there's a vulnerability going on around Netanyahu at the moment. And I keep seeing more and more voices who are actually calling for him to go. Now, there was even one, I heard one of the former

military guy, this is in France, I heard this on the radio in France, who's basically saying that Netanyahu should do what Chamberlain did, make way for somebody more appropriate. So there's something very, very fragile going on at a time when it looks like because of the scale of the bombardment. And as you say, the beginnings of these ground operations, that the military side of things is really, really, really being stepped up. And of course, I guess because people know Netanyahu for so long, they see somebody who's a survivor who won't waste this crisis in terms of his own political survival. I think there's a worry about Netanyahu that maybe isn't reflected in what we see when he comes on with the black shirt and the big flags behind him.

And he makes these sort of big strident speeches to camera.

So just a couple of things there. So Benny Gantz was the Army Chief of Staff and along with Gaddy Eisencott is part of this very, very strong tradition of heads of the Israeli army entering politics, these sort of decorated war heroes, which goes back to Yitzhak Rabin and well before that too. And again, as with some of these figures, he represents more moderate forces.

His blue and white coalition was a centrist party that was calling for limits on corrupt politicians entering the Knesset, protection for minorities, etc. The challenge though, in all of this, is of course, as we talked about a lot, that Netanyahu is running a fragile coalition, which at the moment is dependent, of course, on these extremists, such as Smotrich and Ben Gavir to hold him together. If he were to step down and Israel has had many, many elections in the last seven years, it's had a very, very febrile politics because of the inability to form these strong stable coalitions.

Haritz at the moment is predicting, and this is a Jerusalem post poll, is that Ben Gavir's party would win 10 Knesset seats and probably end up as the next leader. So the decision to bring in Benny Gantz into the coalition was Benny Gantz, who previously refused to serve with Netanyahu, came in because of the national emergency. But there will be strong pressure to try to keep this fragile coalition together rather than allow Netanyahu to go and potentially create much more dangerous fractures. Yeah, by the way, I'm not saying that Gantz was suggesting that he should go, but I think it's been interesting that there's been this kind of growing sense around the place that Netanyahu is not the right guy. And it's been interesting as well to watch Joe Biden, who is coming from a position of absolute support, but at the same time is starting to up the dial in terms of protection of civilian life and humanitarian access and so forth. And this may seem inappropriate to some people, but I do think it's interesting that we start, perhaps start to have a discussion about the nature of this conduct. There's a very interesting piece that I read that we should put in the newsletter from a guy called Clive Baldwin, who's the legal advisor to Human Rights Watch. I think some of the legalities around what's called international humanitarian law, which is what governs the conduct of hostilities, the actual fighting, as opposed to the law that governs the decisions that have been made to use force. And I just wonder whether we're now in that phase of this war. And again, this is something that we saw at the outset in Russia and Ukraine, and is what you see at the start of most military conflicts, where the attempt to have the kind of shock and awe impact, to quote Donald Rumsfeld back in the time of the Iraq war, is such that you lose sight sometimes, I think, of the humanity of what's happening. When you look at some of the aerial footage of the state of those parts of Gaza that have been bombarded, it's hard to see, even whilst the Israelis keep saying that Hamas used these buildings, they hide themselves amongst the civilian population, it is part of the conduct of the laws of war, that you must not target civilians. It's accepted in war that there will

be civilian casualties. And just because there are civilian casualties, doesn't necessarily mean that you're in breach of international humanitarian law. But there does seem now to be a scale of bombardment that doesn't seem to me to be linked in any clear way. It's certainly not the way that I've understood or seen properly explained as to what the specific objectives of the current military combat are. Really good. Let's just stick on this for a second. So before we get into the law bit of it, I think listeners will now be very, very familiar with some of the facts and figures, but there were now 1,400 Israelis killed in this Hamas terrorist attack, 200 hostages taken. And in the response since, Israel has so far dropped at least 8,000 munitions. So that's a huge number. Let me put it in context. In the height of the fighting in Mosul in March of 2017, about 5,000 munitions were used. And I was in Mosul last February, and it is astonishing looking at a city that's been hit like that. I mean, you see hospitals jay down to the ground, craters everywhere. I mean, as people will have seen from some of the images from North Gaza, that number

of munitions hitting is absolutely unbelievable. And if you go back to the controversy over the hospital, much of the reporting that said the hospital was almost certainly hit by a rocket fired from within Palestine rather than by an Israeli bomb, a lot of that reporting was just saying the damage wasn't enough, that the damage done by Israelis are much, much larger, the craters

they leave are much, much larger. So again, facts and figures on this stuff difficult, but I think the Israelis claim to have hit 450 military targets in 24 hours on Sunday, that already 200 schools and universities have been destroyed, of which 29 are run by the UN. And just on that right, when they say military targets, have they been explaining what they mean by military target? They're just saying that somewhere that they imagine that somebody within the command structure of Hamas happens to be. Yeah. So that the definition normally is that it's either a place where a Hamas fighter is launching attacks from, so it could be somewhere where a rocket is being fired from, or from a Hamas soldier is firing at you, or it could be a communications center, command control center. And again, I mean, this is the problem. I think we talked about this a week or so ago that within the way in which the US, the UK and Israel conducts war, if there is any form of communication center, which could be a few Hamas people using a radio in a building, if you hit that building, that's considered under these rules legitimate and the civilians that are killed are not even counted. Which is why, as I say, the RAF claim that I think there were only one or two civilian casualties during some of these Iraq bombing campaigns. Of course, many thousands of civilians were killed, but they weren't counted as civilian casualties because they were considered to be close to the site of military operations.

So I remember during the Kosovo war, when I was seconded to work at NATO, and I found myself in this very bizarre position where I was at certain meetings, sitting at the right hand of General Wes Clark, who was the Supreme Allied Commander in charge of Europe. And at one point, he called me in after the Bina meeting, and he showed me this building that they were about to hit, or they were planning to hit. And he explained that it was where Milozovic was running part of his communications machine, i.e. television, propaganda, etc. And then he explained that there was a possibility that this would at the same time be being used by British, American, French, German journalists who were covering it. And I suddenly realized he seemed to be asking me

whether I thought that would be justifiable given the target that he was about to hit.

And I can't pretend that I was terribly comfortable being in that position. And I said, look, ultimately, that's a military decision. But the reason I say that is that it showed me that in that context, he and the military in that war were going to pretty considerable lengths, at least to try to minimize the loss of life of civilians. And this is something we discussed with the Palestinian ambassador when he got angry that some British politicians were saying, Hamas is so evil that they hide people in hospitals, because the Palestinian ambassador was saying that gives Netanyahu and his war cabinet the green light to say that is a legitimate target. Remember that the US, the UK, and the coalition that supported the Iraqi attack on Mosul, Jaydamed the main general hospital in Mosul on the grounds that it was an ISIS bomb factory. So it's by no means unheard of for terrorist groups to use these places, understandably, from their point of view. But should they not be, do you not think that there needs to be some explanation? I can remember back in, you know, sorry to keep going on about personal experience, but I remember in Kosovo, part of what we did was trying to explain why certain facilities were being targeted, why we saw them as legitimate. Whereas what seems to be happening at the moment is that we're just very quickly getting normalized to the idea that we see what look like residences, people's homes being demolished. You mentioned Mosul. I sent you, I don't know if you had time to read an article that I saw in the conversation from a guy called Amar Azuz, who's at Oxford University School of Geography and the Environment. And he, I don't know, I wasn't aware of this word. He wrote a piece about this thing called domicile. Have you heard of domicile? No, I hadn't heard of domicile before your piece, no. Well, but it is so, domus, which means home side, which means deliberate killing. And essentially, destroying people's homes, destroying where people live, destroying where people have a sense of identity, where they come from. And he was writing about his own experience, because he was a resident of Homs. And that, of course, was wiped out. And you can rebuild these places, but they're never going to be the same. So in a sense, you're removing people's sense of belonging to a home, to a place. And I look, I don't want to overstate it, but I just wonder if you're on the receiving end of this at the moment, it's hard to think that this is not what's happening to you. Yeah. And the costs of rebuilding are going to be unbelievable. And the question is, who's going to pay for it? You know, hundreds of billions of dollars of damage will have been done already. And the cost of rebuilding an entire city that's been, or half a city that's been flattened by aerial bombardment is unbelievable. And it's absolutely vital. I mean, any hope for any long-term piece would require the people of Gaza to have decent housing, water, electricity, schools, clinics, public infrastructure, roads. And that will have to be reconstructed at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars. If it doesn't happen, Israel will face itself with an even more radicalized population living in the midst of a humanitarian crisis in rubble and ruin. Who then is picking up the bill for that rebuilding, which is ultimately in the interest of Israel, because it's vital for Israel that there is decent humane conditions in Gaza. Otherwise, really, the next 5, 10 years is going to be more and more horrifying. We talked about damaged buildings. I mean, it's also worth thinking about the fact that something like 8,000 people appear to have been killed, at least according to the Hamas Health Ministry. And we add that coder because it's very difficult to get information on the ground. And you remember, one of the disputes we're going to get onto is about the fact that telecoms were shut down, so it was difficult to get reports out of Gaza. But in proportional terms in a population of 2.2 million, that is like 244,000 people being killed in the UK. And to put that in context,

the total UK deaths in World War II were 450,000. So these numbers, in other words, will touch so many individual lives. So many people will know people now who've been killed or wounded. And then we've got the point about the humanitarian relief. So Israel is denying there's a food shortage, but the number of trucks getting into Gaza, and remember Gaza is this strange place with basically no access, that the borders have largely been closed. There used to be 500 trucks a day before the war. Currently, there's about nine trucks a day getting in. And so we've had essentially a situation where the UN has been looted as people have tried to get hold of food and basic supplies. Law and order is breaking down. People are living in makeshift shelters with a little food or water. And this is the background against which this ground assault is now being launched. And I think the final thing to talk about, and we haven't seen it yet, but it's the one thing that from a geo-strategic point of view keeps people awake at night. And maybe they're exaggerating, because as I say, we haven't seen it yet, and it may turn out not to be the case. But the real fear is what happens if Lebanon gets going, if Iran gets going, if the West Bank gets going, or other Iranian proxies such as the Houthi and Yemen get going. So what happens if this campaign becomes much more internationalized? Well, look, we talked last week about the skirmishes going on in and around Lebanese border. There has been an uptick in the killing of Palestinians and of the skirmishes with settlers. And when we get on to talk about Kiostama's speech, I noticed that he was saying there's got to be an end to the extension of settlements. But just to stick on this piece from this guy who was from Homs, I'll just read you a section of his article, Amar Azuz. Domicidal campaigns like this, he's talking about Homs in Syria in 2014, work to erase evidence that a community actually existed in a particular place, and that it had a history and culture there. This is an attempt to write people out of history through destroying their homes and heritage in a way that's systematic and deliberate. Now, I'm not saying that's what the Israelis are doing. I am saying that is what the people on the receiving end feel that is happening to them. And of course, as the guy explains, you can't, there's no direct comparison between them. But I think that when you've had this situation, for example, where we talked about this, was it last week or the week before where the Israelis told people in North Gaza, move south. And lots did, lots didn't, but lots did. And we've heard stories of people, including from Homs-E-Yusuf's family, people now in homes built for five, six, seven, putting up 100, 150 people. Heaven knows what it's like living in those circumstances when you're running out of food and water because of the other problem that you've talked about. And yet now, we seem to be seeing a situation where there was this, you know, and again, we've got to be careful because these are just snapshots that you see because this is the stuff that gets filmed. So I don't know if you saw yesterday, the footage of a tank literally taking out a car. Now that was happening around a place where they think, or there is a fear now, that Gaza is essentially being split into two. So if you haven't by now left the North, you're now considered, if you are still in the North, that you're kind of fair game, but equally the people who've gone South are reporting increased bombardment as well. So this is, I think, at a stage where, and I think it's reflected in some of the responses that we're beginning to see from Biden, from others, essentially, there's got to be an understanding that Hamas terrorist organization, there's no doubt, and this is something that appears in this piece from the human rights watch guy, Clyde Baldwin, what Hamas did was a war crime. For example, taking hostages, that is a war crime. For example, attacking civilian population, that is a war crime.

But now there has to be an understanding that Israel is operating according to international humanitarian law as well. And I think there's a risk if they don't, and if they're not seen to be doing that, that they will lose international support more quickly than they realize. And of course, also very important to see the way in which this is viewed in the Middle East. I mean, already, this is becoming the most incredibly divisive issue. And the family of a very prominent out-of-zero correspondent in Gaza was killed. And many, many tens of millions of people in the Middle East have seen pictures of Wailal Abdul standing there looking at the bodies of babies on the ground as he mourns his family that's been killed.

And then reporting, then he went out to work the next day. That was pretty extraordinary. But I think every day that this continues, this issue becomes more and more radicalized, and the alienation becomes more and more profound.

Can I just give you a line from this article by the lawyer at Human Rights Watch.

Giving warning does not absolve parties from the requirement to protect civilians.

Civilians who do not evacuate following a warning continue to be protected.

They still must not be targeted, and attackers must take all feasible measures to protect them.

So he's quoting there from, you know, sort of accepted international law.

Now, the point is, I heard an absolutely heartbreaking interview yesterday with somebody who is working inside one of the hospitals where they have been told by the Israelis they need to evacuate. And essentially he was saying, how do you evacuate somebody who's in the middle of having a baby? How do you evacuate somebody who's, who cannot live without the dialysis that they're getting at that time?

And so look, the Israeli government are very, very good at communication.

They've got some amazing communicators who go out on the radio, they go out on the television.

I'm not criticizing him for this because it's part of the job that you have to do in these combat situations. But I think sometimes there has to be proper explanation of the military objective that is being pursued and why a particular bombardment or a particular attack lends itself to the pursuit of that military objective.

That's the bit at the moment that I'm not seeing.

Now, moving on to the the UK dimension, I mean, you raised Kirstama and one of the things that, of course, is very striking is the way in which this conflict much more than many other conflicts.

I mean, this has been true for 50 years, much more in the conflict in Sudan, for example, becomes domestic as well as international. And that's partly some of the stories that we've been talking about. So that was the very large Palestinian demonstrations and elements in those Palestinian demonstrations, waving flags, calling for deaths to Jews, even if it was a small element, was widely publicized and horrified, very understandably terrified many members of the Jewish community in Britain. And now we find ourselves with the labor party very much caught up in this. As part of this, we want to bring in different voices. And so on our recent leading podcast, which I hope many of you have listened to, I thought it was a really excellent conversation with Saeed Awasi, who's a current conservative but former cabinet minister who takes a very, very strong line on what she sees as the spread of Islamophobia. And of course, this is spreading across. I mean, there's been something like the police in Britain are suggesting a 14-fold increase in antisemitic hate crimes and a three-fold increase in Islamophobia in Britain. So big increase of this abuse. Anyway, in it, she criticized a tweet written by Jake Wallace Simons, editor of the Jewish Chronicle. And Mr. Wallace Simons has been

in touch with us, asking us to clarify that he was condemning jihadism, not Islam. So it's sort of trying to create a platform where all views can be reasonably expressed. We've asked Mr. Wallace Simons to make a short on-the-record statement. And he said, I'm now quoting him, I made the argument on Twitter that parts of Muslim society were, quote, in the grip of a death cult that sacralizes bloodshed. I continued, not all, but many Muslims are brainwashed by it. That is a big part of the problem. He then goes on to say, clearly, I was not talking about Islam. I was talking about the death cult of jihadism in response to scenes of jubilant crowds celebrating the savagery on the streets. Many people took my comments in bad faith and suggested that I was calling Islam itself rather than jihadism a death cult. This is categorically untrue. Islam is a wonderful, rich world religion that holds many treasures and I wish only to be friends and allies. It is jihadism that is the death cult, and it needs to be destroyed. So that is from Jake Wallace Simons, editor of the Jewish Chronicle. I think it's right that we should give him the opportunity to say that because Sayyida was pretty strong about it. We got amazing feedback from Sayyida's interview. I think partly because she was on question time, BBC question time at the same time, so people were aware of her as a strong voice on this. What I think is really difficult at the moment is having this debate in a non-confrontational, non-polarising way. If we maybe go on to talk about the domestic political scene, and it is fascinating in a way that... So Rishi Sunak is the prime minister, and the British government clearly were not as powerful as we were maybe, but the British government has done an important voice in this. Yet in terms of the sort of political and media oxygen as it were, it seems to all be about labour. And I don't think that's just because people think, well, maybe labour are going to be in power. I think it's also because there's an overhang there from Corbyn's era. There is a very interesting story about the relationship between the left, not just in Britain, but throughout Europe and Palestine. Partly because going right the way back, left-wing socialist movements were associated with anti-colonialism, international solidarity, fighting Western imperialism. And that meant that particularly from the early 70s onwards, so I think after the 67 war and the moment at which the occupation of these territories took place, most of the dominant left-wing movements became very, very pro-Palestinian, particularly the communist movements in France, Italy, etc. Slightly less in Germany. Yeah, but Rory, if you go back a bit further, who do you think in 1946 wrote a pamphlet entitled A Palestine Munich, which accused the Atlee government, the government led by Clement Atlee, of betraying Jewish statehood, and Sir Michael Foote. There we are. So left-wing for younger listeners, the Jeremy Corbyn of his period, much more left-wing labour politician, at that stage in the 40s, labour very much supportive of Israel, weren't they? I think things shifted though after the 67 war, didn't they, in the early 70s. Hold on, let me give you another one. 1980, Tony Ben writing in his diary, I'm against PLO recognition, not because I'm anti-Palestinian, but because the annihilation of Israel is the PLO's objective and they are associated with terrorism. Yeah, no, it's not as simple. By the early 80s, though, the French recognized the PLO, didn't they? The French left recognized the PLO. So, Alison, let me talk to you a little bit about Tony Blair because this is a very interesting thing. So, my sense is that what we're looking at now in the Israel attack on Gaza is very similar in its international consequences to the Israel attack on Lebanon in 1982, which was a big, big defining feature that really shook even some of the traditional more right-wing support for Israel. And actually, famously, Ronald Reagan was so horrified by some of the images he was seeing, he pushed very hard

for

Israel to cease the Lebanon attacks in 1982. So, labor went through this long evolution, and one of the things that changed, I think, just before we come to Tony Blair, that made the situation more complicated for the left was the emergence of Islamist groups, of which Hamas is the most prominent, because traditionally, Palestine and that movement in the 70s and early 80s was secular. It wasn't associated with radical Islam. In fact, it was very much something supported by the non-aligned movement by communist countries. It was seen as

part of a general sort of socialist movement, anti-colonial. And then, of course, it became confused with the question of Islam and the war on terror at the point at which Tony Blair took over. And so, tell us a little bit about Tony Blair's evolving views on Israel. And I wondered also whether we should get him back on the podcast because he was the Middle East envoy, wasn't he? He was deeply embedded in this for many, many years.

He was. And I think that that was a period of his life that I think he was incredibly motivated and unbelievably frustrated. I remember he's constantly complaining as the wrong word, but sort of lamenting the nature of the negotiations, the nature of the discussions that he was involved in. If you look at his own account of this in his own autobiography journey, he does describe the Israel-Lebanon War in 2006. He says this, that event and my reaction to it probably did me more damage than anything since Iraq. What was his reaction? Well, his reaction was basically, it was very, very on the side of the Israelis. He was very pro-Israel. And that is something that I think was pretty hardwired into him. I think a little bit like David Cameron, he had a real sense that he understood the Israeli perspective and he gave it far more sympathy than a lot of people on the left perhaps do. But he then did say this, this was perhaps one of the more self-reflective pieces of the book in a way. He said, it showed how hard I had swung from the mainstream of conventional Western media wisdom and from my own people. But also, he said, how set open brackets

stuck question marks, closed brackets in my own mode of thinking I had become.

Unpack that a bit. So it talks about his own people and his own mode of thinking. I mean, there's a lot going on there. Well, I can remember talking to Sally Morgan, who was obviously one of the kind of central team around Tony, you know, as it were before, during and after. I remember she and I having conversations about how worried we were about how Tony was so far out on the issue, where the Labour Party was not in the same place and he just had to adapt a bit. And he wasn't really

up for that because he felt so strongly that there had to be voices standing up for Israel.

And we're seeing something similar now where at the start, and you know, this is something you and I talked about from day one. And this was my worry from the Labour Party's perspective from day

one, is that of course, you've got to go absolutely out and be very, very firmly on the side of Israel when they're being attacked in this vicious manner as they were in October the 7th. But how quickly things can move in terms of, if you like, the body politic, where opinion is. So I think what Tony was saying there was that everything in him felt that the position he held was the right position to hold. And he's not an opinion form. He's a leader in this context. And yet he could sense the body politic had moved away from him. So I think within the Labour Party, there are clearly different traditions. And Keir Starmer, I think in his leadership run, had a video with Palestinian

flags being waved and was very much drawing on some of that part of the traditions of the Labour Party. And then since he's come in, he's very much defined himself by challenging Jeremy Corbyn's anti-Semitism. And that's a complicated issue, as we've discussed in the past, because there's a fine line between the question of genuine anti-Semites and people like Jeremy Corbyn who would argue, and I'm quite sympathetic to him on this, that fundamentally what drives him is sympathy for the Palestinian cause. I think what's driven a lot of the tensions within Labour in recent days has been the sense that in this Twitter world where everything is black and white and you just have one strong view, that the view that has emanated from the Labour leadership has been, as with the government, so strongly supportive of Israel's right to defend itself that the other side of the argument, the justness of the Palestinian causes it were, is not being heard.

And I think that's what, in part, what Keir Starmer's, we're recording this Tuesday morning, and Keir Starmer's making a speech later today, setting out the whole picture from the Labour perspective. Just to, I mean, expand on that. So, Andy McDonald, Middlesbrough MP, made a speech referring, using this phrase, from the river to the sea, which is very much associated with Palestinian demands, essentially to take over the whole of Israel. Ian Lavery and John McDonald came out in favour of him. Thirteen junior shadow ministers attacked the Labour leadership for refusing

to endorse the ceasefire. This is one of the big, big debates across the world whether or not you should be endorsing a ceasefire. And then you had Andy Slaughter, Yasmin Kroschi, Jess Phillips, and then later Sadiq Khan, Anna Sawa, your friend who we saw in Scotland, Andy Burnham, our friend who we interviewed on Manchester, all talking about the need for a ceasefire.

And Shabana Mahmood, who's the shadow justice secretary, accusing Israel of imposing collective punishment. So, this is a difficult moment for Keir Starmer, isn't it?

It is. It is because we've come through the party conference season, Rishi Sunak's conference, really not going very well for the Tories. Keir Starmer's conference went very well for Labour. And then along comes this issue. And suddenly it looks like the Labour Party, which was very united, is not quite united after all. And I think that's why people should take a good look at Keir Starmer's speech today. I think it... Now, I had no part in the writing of it, Rory, but because I knew that we'd be recording before the speech, but the episode wouldn't go until afterwards, I did sort of ask a friendly contact there whether I could have a little look at one of the drafts. And the first of all, he makes a very important point, which is very hard for politicians to make. He says that we should not overestimate Britain's capacity to influence what's going on, but we should do what we can. I think that is an important point because there's a danger that once you end up with the debate on, well, should you call for a ceasefire? Shouldn't you call for a ceasefire? As if Benjamin Netanyahu is sitting around there saying, I wonder what Hampstead and Highgate CLP is going to say.

The problem is, in a political speech of this sort, it can sound a little bit like making an excuse. So it can sound like a preface to saying, well, it doesn't really matter what I think, because Britain doesn't have much influence anyway. It's an excuse for not really coming down clearly on one side or the other. No, but interestingly, when I read the speech, I had little echoes in my head of Macron. Remember when Macron was in his em-mem-ton phase, when everything he said was, you know, well, on one hand, but em-mem-ton on the other hand. And it was a little bit like that. So for example, he talks about the events of October 7th being terrorism on a scale and brutality that few countries have ever experienced, certainly not

this one. And then saying, that is an immutable fact that must drive our response to these events, as must the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, which again, is playing out on a previously unimaginable scale. And similarly, at every stage he says, my approach is driven by the need to respond to both these strategies to stand by the right to self-defense of any nation which suffers terrorism like this alongside the basic human rights of innocent Palestinians. So that is very much kind of em-mem-ton. Let's see if he pulls it off because I think Macron's em-mem-ton is very much part of his brand, isn't it? And it's a pretty peculiar thing. And generally speaking in politics, on the one hand on the other, is not usually what we associate with clarity from political leaders. But I think the thing he'll be hit on, I mean, I think he can make a good speech. But if you look at those figures of the rebellions and people who've come out, is he going to join the Labour leader in Scotland, the Labour Mayor of Manchester, in calling for a ceasefire or not? No, he's not. He actually is very, very clear. He says, while I understand calls for a permanent ceasefire at this stage, I do not believe that is the correct position now. And he goes on to explain, a permanent ceasefire would freeze the conflict in the state where it currently lies. He does say in the draft I saw right at the end of the speech that we live in this black and white world where everybody has to have sort of strong views, this way, strong views that way. But actually, the only way we're going to get to a settlement that this is through a political process. Now, I think what's really, what was quite impressive in its own way, and Keir Starmer's getting a lot of flak at the moment, people just want him to stand up and essentially be the commentator, say there should be a ceasefire. Well, there isn't going to be a ceasefire. And you know, that's, I think, why he was admitting. Now, can I come in on this? Because we keep him as, why doesn't he just say it? What's the problem with saying it? The problem with saying it is that it makes him a commentator rather than a political leader. And I think part of his mindset is thinking... So why does Andy Burnham say he's a political leader? Because he's the mayor of Manchester and he's not the guy who most people think is going to be the prime minister quite soon. If he's the prime minister, then one of the most important relationships he's going to have immediately is with the president of the United States. If he suddenly finds that that relationship is defined by him coming out, essentially criticising the approach of the United States on this thus far. Joe Biden, I think, is absolutely adamant, no ceasefire. Israel's right to defend itself. And meanwhile, back behind the scenes, he's saying, heaven's sake, Bibi, just, you know, watch the way you're working on this. And I think, and the other, the other alliance, which is going to be there, whether it's Netanyahu, whether it's another leader, in terms of coming to terms with the consequences of this war that's going on now, the consequences of this are going to be with us for decades. And Keir Starmer's thinking, I'm not just the leader of the opposition on this right now, I'm the guy that these people are expecting to be the prime minister. So I think part of what he's trying to do with his speech today, and it will get a lot of attention, it will probably be live on the news channels unless Dominic Cummings is sort of, you know, blathering away, he'll be wanting people to look at him and think, well, I may wish he says this and wish he said that. But actually, part of the thinking is, can I imagine this guy as the prime minister in a year's time? But France, Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland, Slovenia, Luxembourg, have all gone further than him, haven't they? And is that because they're less worried about their relationship with the US? Has Macron come out and called for a ceasefire? They've all backed the idea of a humanitarian pause, which Starmer still hasn't done. No, he has done. He has done. This is the

thing. He's backed the idea of humanitarian pause as plural. This is the debate. Let's show this. If you look at the Guardian reports on this stuff, clearly the sense is, and he needs to get out and make this very clear if this is true, the sense amongst journalists is that the EU is ahead of Starmer on this stuff and is taking a bolder position. If that's not true, he needs to clarify that he's in line with the EU position. I was in France last week, and I was following the German media quite closely on the European summit. The European Union is in a very, very strange position on this because there's a very big divide going on between Ursula von der Leyen, who's the head of the commission, and Charles Michel, who's essentially the president of the council, as it were. And the reason this thing became so important is, and they appear to be odds. They're usually quite close on things, but they do appear to be odds. And there's no doubt there is a range of opinion across the European Union. But I think Keir Starmer is clearly saying there should be humanitarian pauses. I love your S that keeps coming in.

It is the S because of pause. Which is what the EU wants. They want a pause.

No, they want pauses. They agreed on pauses in the end because they had several countries who wouldn't side up to pause. Let's keep watching this. We've barely talked in our discussions in this about the current Palestinian leadership because Mamoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian authorities, he barely figures in these conversations now. And that's the other problem in this, which of course the Israelis have been exploiting. You have Hamas and Gaza, you have the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Because the other voice is very strong in terms of our prime ministers. David Cameron was very, very pro-Israel. He made very strong statements in favor of Israel whenever they got into these situations.

I think the Conservatives have a very complicated tradition around this. And this is right. People should, if you have the time, listen to Saida Wasi's interview with us on leading.

Because on the one hand, you have Saida Wasi saying that Mohammed was a Conservative. And that she's very proud of some of them to be a Conservative. On the other hand, she's acknowledging that David Cameron very much supported Michael Gove's very passionately pro-Israeli position within his cabinet.

Can I make one final point on the kind of linking the domestic to the international?

The first thing I got when I got back home last night, I turned on the news, and the first thing I saw was Soella Braverman calling these marches and these demonstrations that had been marches of hate. I mean, that woman, honestly, at least what Kirsten was trying to do today, he celebrates the fact that actually, yes, there's been a rise in Islamophobia, yes, there's been a rise in anti-Semitism, but actually it's almost, we are pretty good at living together as the United Kingdom and we shouldn't lose that. And yet she seems to want to turn these things into, to call it marches of hate, as if every single person on those marches wants to sort of eradicate Israel from the face of the map. I'm afraid this horrible exploitation of problems rather than trying to fix them. And I think at least what I saw in Kirsten's speech today was a serious analysis of a British opposition leader rather than a British politician trying to exploit it. Let's see how this plays out. My prediction is that he's in trouble and he's in trouble with the Left of the Labour Party and he'll be in trouble with a lot of the Muslim community in Britain, but we'll see whether the speech marches to address that.

Rory, there's no doubt I've talked to some MPs who are in seats with large Muslim population and they say that they are under real pressure, genuine political pressure. And of course, the Lib Dems are moving in pretty hard to say, well, that's because Labour this and Labour that

and we're the only people you can trust. So for some MPs, this is politically very difficult, but I think Gere Stammer has made the decision. Ultimately, this is about him being tested as a leader and standing up for things that are difficult as well as things that are easy.

Very good. Okay, time for a break.

Welcome back to The Rest is Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And we are talking now at the launch of a very, very interesting initiative, which is Rishi Sunak is hosting a huge international AI summit at Bletchley Park, Bletchley, of course, being the place where all the code breaking took place during the Second World War, so big iconic nod to British security and technology. And it is a big deal. It's a really big deal. And he'll be very pleased with it. It's not perfect. I mean, he's got the Vice President of the United States, not the President. He's got the President of the European Commission, but not Macron. But as I think you mentioned at the beginning, he's got Elon Musk flying over.

Reid Hoffman, who we interviewed a couple of weeks ago, is flying over today and an enormous number of the most significant AI minds in the world are gathering. And that's quite a thing for Britain to pull off. And Reid was joking with me yesterday that Biden is sufficiently competitive about this, to have rushed out an executive order on Monday on AI to try to preempt the British Summit, because they're all deeply, deeply competitive on who makes the first moves on AI.

All the world leaders are desperate to be seen as being ahead of the game. And there are many, many things that we've talked about, which are Rishi Sunak's weaknesses. But this is something which I think, given all the criticisms and all the things that we're acknowledging, and given the fact that I think he's almost certainly not going to be Prime Minister again in a year's time, if he's remembered for things positively, if in 15, 20 years' time he becomes a sort of national treasurer, kind of John Major that we put on leading, it'll be because of this sort of stuff.

Oh, I'm glad to see that you've moved from everybody in number 10 tells me that Rishi Sunak is the grown-up to one day he might be a national treasurer.

Anyway, if he is a national treasurer, I think it'll probably be because of this, because I think this is something where he has a natural interest. He studied at Stanford. He's very interested in technology. He knows how to talk to these people. And I think that genuine intellectual interest comes across. And it's quite an achievement for Britain, given all that we talk about, given how many problems we're in, that they've managed to pull this together since June, and that this may be the beginning of a real proper annual process. He wants it to be like the International Climate Change Committee, but something that really could become not just the US putting out legislation, but international legislation.

Well, I see that one of the things that is going to come out of it, I saw in something I read about it, was that there will be an agreement about where the next international AI gathering should be. So it could well become an annual thing, and that would be a good thing. And look, I agree with you here. You and I have both been saying for months that there seems to be no sense of political momentum behind getting a grip of some of these issues. And when we talk with Reed Hoffman, he was very strongly of the view. He was very critical, for example, of the European Union, trying to sort of regulate this stuff. He says, no great technology has been regulated until it's been fully formed. But the trouble with this stuff is it's so powerful and so complicated and so potentially dangerous. Reed did admit that, and Mustafa Suleiman, his colleague and friend admitted it even more,

that I think politicians are negligent if they don't get on top of this.

And Joe Biden, the executive order that he rushed out on Monday, it's pretty big stuff, because he's basically saying to all developers of AI systems that they have to, before they release anything to the public, there has to be an analysis of risk, the national security, the economy, public health or safety, and that all the results of tests that they do have to be shared with the US government. So that's quite a big thing. And Elon Musk, this is a risk that Sunex is taking, he's doing, I mean, I've kind of lost it with Elon Musk for all sorts of reasons, but Sunex is doing a live chat on Twitter or X, whatever it's called. And I think that they were sort of panting breathlessly about it on the radio this morning, but it's quite a risk because I think Musk is so unpredictable in these circumstances, having those what he's going to say.

Yeah, that's right. Well, just on Biden's executive order, I think one thing that's great about it is that the US are going to be red teaming, which is something the US does very well. And I wish we did more of in Britain, which is that one of the best ways of stress testing something is to set up a team of very bright people and get them as it were to be devil's advocates and really work out how to work through the worst case scenario. I always felt we should have done more of that in Afghanistan, have people red teaming as it were playing the Taliban against us. And the US will really put money behind this, seriously smart people trying to work out how what the very worst case could be on a new AI release. The other thing is watermarking.

Yeah. And this is about deep fakes. One of the things that's changed just in the last few days, I think, on this UK AI summit is initially the threats they were focused on, understandably, were things like biosecurity. So, you know, the fact that AI could pretty quickly allow someone, even like you and me, without an advanced doctrine biochemistry to begin putting together some pretty

nasty biological weapons. I mean, as I think, as you've all said, we need to think in terms of, maybe it's somebody with a bit more scientific training than you and me, but anyway, it enabling somebody as it were to put together COVID and Ebola together. So, bio risks.

Just on the point about the watermarking, the White House were briefing that one of the reasons Biden was getting more exercised about this issue is because he'd been given a presentation about some of the fake stuff that was circulating about himself and about the use of his own voice. Which you've talked about, haven't you? Yeah. You've seen some of that stuff.

I've seen some of that stuff. Yeah. Yeah.

So, this summit has now inserted a session on deep fakes and elections. I mean, next year is, as I think we've talked before, a really big year for international politics because next year is going to be the UK election, the US election, the Indian election, the EU elections, almost only the Pakistani elections. So, I think this question of how deep fakes are going to be used by AI and the way in which you try to... So, watermarking obviously is there to try to allow you to distinguish between something that's genuine and something that isn't. And of course, the only way you can do that is, as it were, by using AI against AI. So, there's a sort of element of arms race and all of this. Yeah. Yeah.

Couple more things quickly. I mean, so, this is obviously something that Rishi Sunak is desperate for the UK to be relevant to AI. It's really difficult to do because the sums of money involved are completely eye-watering. Microsoft, for example, which I think had over \$100 billion

of cash in the bank, is now in a situation where for the first time, certainly in my memory, they're actually moving into a technical deficit this year. And quite a lot of that is their enormous investment in computing capacity to get into the right position on AI. Because the next iteration of chat GPT, these large language models, will be spending 10 times as much on training the model, but then you need these immense banks of computers, electricity, etc., to simply run and power these models. And these titanic fights between these companies like Google and Microsoft that can spend tens of billions of dollars against each other, the UK is deciding to go for a particular niche. So, they've committed \$900 million in AI funding. A lot of that is going to a supercomputer facility in Bristol, where I think they're going to put \$400 million into chips. And they've just got, there's also a big investment in genetics database. And we should talk about this a bit more. I mean, there's both a risk and a potential here for the UK. So, the NHS is obviously the most extraordinary database in the world because we have data going back, universal healthcare going back to the mid 1940s, covering every part of British society with incredibly rich information in a way that countries like the US simply don't have because they've got fragmented private systems. So, in theory, if you could safely get into those databases, you could find the most amazing medical insights through AI. You could find correlations between, I don't know, people's eye colour and their diabetes or correlations between their height at the age of 10 and their development of cancer at the age of 50. Oh, goodness knows what, right? The problem on the other hand, of course, is and Palantir, which is an extraordinary computer company with initially links to the US intelligence services and to Peter Thiel, who's this very right-wing former friend of Reid Hoffman that we were talking about in the leading interview 10 days ago, has now got the contract to do an enormous amount of the data analysis for the NHS. But of course, privacy campaigners are very, very worried because they're saying, this is letting people in on our data. And a lot of the potential around technology, its ability to develop these amazing productivity benefits, people are talking about 55.8% productivity improvements, depends on whether or not we're actually prepared to allow AI to do this stuff and in particular, access private data. Yeah. And I think this goes back to the point about we're talking about such big stuff here that the politicians do have to get on top of this sooner rather than later because there's the technology developing so quickly that there is a risk that these guys just outwit the politicians. I mean, I noticed in some of the business responses to Joe Biden's order, for example, it was very much a sort of, well, we know better how this stuff works than the politicians do and people won't want to share all the data that they have. I agree with you. I think that Sunak is to be commended for trying to make this issue and to try to bring all these people together. One other point, if I can though, Rory, I think that Rishi Sunak getting on top of this, in a sense, projecting himself as a guy who understands the future, I think it does sit rather badly with the continuing attempt to turn the net zero in the future of the planet into what he calls a wedge issue, which I see, according to the papers, he's going to be using the King's Speech to do in terms of actually focusing on this as a political issue rather than as actually something that really matters for the future of humanity. So I'd be more convinced of Sunak, the modern leader, addressing these modern issues if he wasn't backtracking the way that he is on his commitment on the environment. Yeah, there's a huge amount to talk about there. I think one of the things that remains a massive international scandal is the way that international development finance, so the money that we lend to other countries at cheap rates, continues to support coal, oil,

and gas. So \$41 billion a year, five times the support for clean energy going into coal, oil, and gas 2018 to 2020. And this is something that when I was a DFID minister, I tried to stop, I tried to say it's ridiculous that we're using British development money or concessional loans to build heavy oil plants or coal plants in Africa. But it remains a huge issue even within the EU. Fossil fuel subsidies have increased from \$56 billion to \$122 billion during 2022 partly because of the response to the Russia crisis.

Yeah. I mean, I'm actually later today going to be speaking at a net zero conference and part of the speech I've written was driven by the response to something that you said on the podcast a while about when we're talking about the environment. The problem is that we've kind of got the low hanging fruit and now it was focusing much more on cost, the cost of heating your home, the cost of cars, et cetera. And I got a wonderful email. I should forward it to you actually from Corinne Soares, who's a, she co-authored a very good book called Super Charge Me, Net Zero Faster. And she was, she was making the point actually that the low hanging fruit is going to get lower and lower and pointing to the impact of the Inflation Reduction Act in America. And I dug into this a bit and Credit Suisse, for example, described the Inflation Reduction Act as the most ambitious, comprehensive, legislative action ever taken on addressing climate change. And this goes back to a point that Mustafa Suleiman made when we talked to him, that the more that stuff gets used, the cheaper that it becomes. Whereas with fossil fuels, that is not the case. Fossil fuels, when you take inflation into account, coal roughly is getting sold at the same kind of price as it always was. Whereas the new technologies get cheaper and cheaper and cheaper, the more that they get used. So the point she was making about America, for example, is that transport and energy is already getting cheaper. And the more that we can persuade people to go down the clean technology route, ultimately, the more we're going to save for ourselves and the more we're going to save the economy as a whole. Good. Well, lots more to talk about in the environment. But thank you. And I think we're maybe coming to the end of the pot.

We didn't cover the COVID Inquiry, but maybe we can do that in, in question time.

Yeah, let's do, let's do COVID Inquiry in question time tomorrow.

All the best.

Bye-bye.