UK’s silence over ICC’s dangerous precedent is problematic

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With the ongoing distraction of a global pandemic, Israel’s enemies have seized the opportunity to ramp up attacks on the Jewish State in the international arena.

UK-Israel ties remain strong, from close collaboration in our world-leading Covid-19 vaccination rollouts to intelligence-sharing, yet the UK’s response to recent threats to our ally has been too muted.

The International Criminal Court’s determination that it has territorial jurisdiction over the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and can therefore open a probe into war crimes is a case in point. Based on an extraordinary misinterpretation of international law, the decision was rightly condemned by some of our closest allies; the United States, Australia, Germany and Canada.

The UK’s silence over this dangerous precedent is problematic and was one of the pressing issues that the Parliamentary Officers of the Conservative Friends of Israel raised in our recent meeting with Middle East Minister James Cleverly. It was an opportunity to not only reflect on the strength of the bilateral relationship but also identify possible bumps in the road in the year ahead.

In our frank conversation, my colleagues and I expressed in clear terms the importance of the UK voting against all anti-Israel resolutions at the current session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNRHC). It is an expectation that unites hundreds of other Conservative parliamentarians from all corners of the UK.

Since its inception in 2006, the UNHRC has adopted resolutions condemning countries on 171 occasions – 90 of which targeted Israel. The terror-supporting, human rights abusing regime in Tehran has received a mere 10, while states including China, Russia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe have received zero. None. Nada.

The bias rife within the halls throughout the United Nations is no secret. The UN’s current Secretary General Antonio Guterres, as well as his two predecessors have all spoken out about the problem. As Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson condemned the UNHRC in February 2018 for its “disproportionate” focus on Israel, which he said was “damaging to the cause of peace”.

Announcing a welcome and principled change in stance towards the UNHRC in March 2019, the UK said it would vote against all anti-Israel resolutions under the controversial permanent Agenda Item 7 – the only permanent agenda item at each session, reserved solely for criticism of Israel.

The UK has since made good on its vow to vote against Agenda Item 7 and we welcome Minister Cleverly’s enduring commitment on this front. However, the Palestinian Authority has since recalibrated its approach and has been working to move anti-Israel resolutions out of this agenda item in a procedural sleight of hand.

In 2019, we saw precisely this, when an anti-Israel resolution was moved to Agenda Item 2 which relates to accountability motions, often involving war crimes. Inexplicably, the UK undermined its principled stand by allowing this student politics-style chicanery to go unchallenged; the UK abstained on the motion.

Back in in December 2020, the UK voted for 11 out of 16 UN General Assembly resolutions singling out Israel, including one which only used the term “Haram al-Sharif” to describe Jerusalem’s Temple Mount – effectively ignoring Judaism’s fundamental connection to the site. Resolutions of this nature don’t just harm our ally Israel, they harm the wider peace process as Palestinian intransigence and terrorism goes unchecked.

The UNHRC’s latest Israel-obsessed votes are expected around the 22nd/23rd March.

In the same way that we would vote against motions at UN bodies detrimental to our other allies, we must demonstrate our principled words through firm action and vote against all anti-Israel resolutions – including those outside Item 7.