When British Prime Minister [*Rishi Sunak*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/20/uk/rishi-sunak-conservatives-gbr-intl/index.html) addressed the nation on Monday, he seemed tetchy and tired.

His speech, ostensibly about national security and the threats facing Britain, was a wide-ranging attack on his chief political opponent [*Keir Starmer*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/10/uk/uk-labour-party-conference-keir-starmer-intl-gbr-cmd/index.html), leader of the opposition Labour Party.

Sunak said that "the next few years will be some of the most dangerous yet most transformational our country has ever known," outlining the risks posed by foreign adversaries like Russia, Iran and North Korea, and the rise of new technologies like artificial intelligence.

The key point Sunak wanted to hammer home was that the UK was entering a perilous period and the Labour Party - including Starmer himself - cannot be trusted to keep the nation safe. His evidence ranged from commitments on defense spending to the views of the previous Labour leader.

The PM pointed out that Starmer served in the shadow cabinet of his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn historically had called for the scrapping of Britain's nuclear weapons and been a critic of NATO. He lost two general elections as Labour leader in campaigns that focused heavily on his views regarding national security. Starmer has since expelled Corbyn from the party over an antisemitism scandal. However, his association with the former leader is still damaging.

Sunak has also talked at length about Starmer's previous life as a lawyer.

Starmer, who was director of public prosecutions and a leading human rights lawyer, has defended terror suspects and worked to block the deportation of foreign criminals. It is worth noting that in some cases, lawyers do not get to choose who they represent.

The context for Sunak's attack on Starmer is that the UK will vote in a general election at some point this year. Sunak has yet to announce exactly when that will happen, probably because as things stand he trails Starmer in the polls by double digits.

Nothing Sunak does seems to shift those numbers. He recently suffered humbling losses at local elections and a high-profile defection of an MP to the Labour Party.

Conservative sources say that no one believes Sunak can turn things around, but that attacks on Starmer over national security are the only thing that seems to resonate with voters.

"Of course Rishi doesn't believe that Starmer himself is a threat to national security," a senior Conservative told CNN. "But it is fair to point out that he supported Jeremy Corbyn, who many people do believe would have been dangerous in government. And those elements of the Labour Party do still exist, however ruthless Starmer has been in shutting them down."

David Gauke, a former Conservative Cabinet Minister, says the challenge facing Sunak is that after 14 years in government, it is possible to blame the Conservative Party for everything that is wrong with the country.

"Making the election a binary choice about security - who can you really trust to keep you safe - is much better for Sunak than a referendum on the past 14 years. The best way to do that is sustained attacks on Starmer's vulnerabilities," Gauke said. "He doesn't have many vulnerabilities, but the Corbyn association is real and still resonates with voters somewhat. I suspect the attacks will get more personal the closer we get to the election."

The other issue that does seem to cut through with voters is Starmer's legal work defending terrorists and terror suspects. The most high-profile example of this is when he gave legal advice to the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir in 2008 as they tried to overturn the German government's decision to ban their activities. The group was proscribed as a terrorist organization in the UK in January after members were seen chanting "Jihad" at a pro-Gaza demonstration.

Sunak took the opportunity to attack Starmer, [*saying at the time*](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/keir-starmer-hizb-ut-tahrir-legal-advice-bscplm0tz): "I know that he does not like talking about them because they have been a client, but when I see a group chanting 'jihad' on our streets, I ban them; he invoices them."

Starmer told a [*British newspaper in March*](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/26845622/keir-starmer-labour-boris-johnson-lawyer/): "In the legal world, particularly if you're doing criminal law, you represent people you don't agree with. You know how it works in our legal system - it is very important that everybody is represented." He also said: "I was chief prosecutor for five years. I prosecuted with my team nearly a million cases a year, including terrorists, murderers and drug dealers."

However tame all this might sound written down, it is extraordinary that the prime minister is accusing the person most likely to succeed him of being a terrorist sympathizer who cannot be trusted with national security.

It is remarkable that the legal career of Britain's former chief prosecutor - for which he received a Knighthood - is being used as evidence that he is soft on terrorists.

However, ***politics***, as the saying goes, is a contact sport. Conservative campaigners are quick to say that Starmer made a virtue of his legal career, so it's fair game. They say that he cynically stood by Corbyn, knowing exactly who Corbyn was and what he stood for.

Labour are expecting worse to come but are thinking strategically about fighting fire with fire. "We know they cannot stand on their appalling record in government, so are going to say increasingly ridiculous things to cut through," an adviser to Starmer told CNN.

"We will hit back at Sunak, but will have to be careful at how we do it. The public are sick of ***politics*** as a game we we will avoid being negative," the adviser said. "You might see more directly aimed at the PM, but it won't always have our paw prints on it."

This is where Sunak's all-out attack strategy risks backfiring. People across the political spectrum have noticed he is looking increasingly tetchy when questioned in public. A supporter of Sunak said: "He is working very hard and everything is still going wrong. He is just not used to that."

A Labour source said: "He cannot handle us making fun of him when he says ridiculous things. Like when he says he is the right man for new ideas and change, like he hasn't been a senior politician for years. It's just ridiculous and it clearly winds him up when we point it out."

No one knows for sure when the election campaign proper will start. Until then, Britain is braced for months of mudslinging between Sunak and Starmer. It might all be moderately entertaining for people who like this sort of thing, but it's unclear how a bitter and nasty election campaign helps a country that has felt in limbo and horribly divided for the best part of three years.