

THE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF UK ARMS SALES TO ISRAEL

On 7 October 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups from Gaza carried out attacks in Israel during which almost 1,200 people were killed and over 200 people were taken hostage. Since then, Israel's military forces have carried continuous airstrikes and intense ground offensives in the densely populated Gaza strip, which has killed over 32,000 people, damaged over 60% of buildings, and forced over 1.9 million people from their homes. There have been targeted attacks on medical facilities and personnel, bakeries, water pipes, electricity networks, schools and facilities sheltering displaced people. All of Gaza's 2.3 million population need humanitarian assistance, however, a full and effective humanitarian response remains impossible due to the military offensive and because of restrictions imposed by Israel.

This conflict has been characterised by serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), committed by all parties to the armed conflict, at a scale that amounts to Crimes Against Humanity. If carried out intentionally or recklessly, attacks directed against civilian populations and civilian objects are war crimes. The UK continues to sell arms and components to Israel, despite the risk that such military equipment could be used in potential violations of international law. The UK risks being complicit in and facilitating serious violations of IHL if it fails to halt arms exports to Israel immediately.

THE UK GOVERNMENT MUST:

- Immediately suspend both extant licences for military equipment and technology and the issuing of new licences while the Israel continues to carry out widespread serious violations with impunity.
- Adhere to its obligations under international law, respect the International Court of Justice ruling, and advocate for adherence to international law and accountability for all parties.
- Use every diplomatic and economic lever at its disposal to help secure an immediate and permanent ceasefire, to stop the death and destruction, allow enough aid in, and to ensure the safe release of hostages.

THE UK'S ARMS EXPORT REGIME

The UK most commonly issues two categories of arms licences - standard and open licences. The standard licence allows for shipments of specific items in specific quantities to an end-user and are typically valid for two years. Open licences have fewer restrictions and simply cover shipments of specific items to specific destinations, but the quantities or the name of the end-user do not need to be known. Whilst data on exports from open licences is gathered by HMRC for customs purposes, the Department for Business and Trade says they cannot collect this data, or collate it with licence data, as it would be too burdensome. As a result, the Government does not publish data on the value of goods exported under open licences. Such licences typically last for five years and in 2022, the UK issued over 13,000 standard licences and 387 open licences.

The Export Control Joint Unit (ECJU) is responsible for issuing licences and assesses licence applications on case-by-case basis against the [Strategic Export Licencing Criteria](#). The UK also has binding legal obligations under the international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which then-Prime Minister Lord Cameron signed the UK up to in 2014. Under the UK's obligations under domestic and international law, licences should not be issued, and existing licenses should be revoked, if they are found to no longer be consistent with the export licencing criteria. Criterion 2c clearly notes that the UK must not grant a licence "if it determines there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law."

UK ARMS EXPORTS TO ISRAEL

Since 2015, the UK has licensed at least [£489 million](#) worth of military exports to Israel, through 1,250 standard licences. In the same time period, the UK issued 61 unlimited-value licences open licences to Israel. We do not know the entire value of arms exports to Israel as the UK does not publish data on open licences issued. Of what we do know, the UK has approved exports of:

- **Components for the F-35 stealth bomber aircraft** - The UK provides approximately 15% of the components in the F-35 stealth bomber aircraft currently being used in Gaza, including the rear fuselage and active interceptor system, ejector seats, aircraft tyres, refuelling probe, laser targeting system, and the fan propulsion system. Durability testing for the F-35 is also undertaken in the UK. The F-35 needs almost daily servicing during combat missions and could not keep up attacks on civilians in Gaza without UK support.
- **Components for Israeli armed and surveillance drones** - Components for drones are made by UK-linked companies and then assembled in Israeli factories. The same drones were used in Nagorno Karabakh by Azerbaijan and are ever present above Gaza and the West Bank both for spying missions and in attacks on civilians.
- **Military Intelligence and technology** - The UK [provides intelligence](#) from overflights of Gaza to enable military operations, and [allows the US](#) to use UK air bases on Cyprus to do the same which facilitates Israeli attacks in Gaza. Components produced in the UK are built into surveillance and armed drones which are used permanently over Gaza.

It appears the UK has continued to supply arms to Israel despite the current level of risk of violations of international law since October 2023, as noted in a recent correction to [a written parliamentary question](#). Despite repeated claims that the UK continues “a robust and thorough” assessment against the criteria, [Lord Cameron](#) has himself noted concerns about breaches of international law occurring in Gaza. Whilst the UK’s exports represent a small proportion of Israel’s overall military imports, it is still duty bound under its legal obligations, and if there is a clear risk that arms and military equipment transferred to Israel might be used to facilitate or commit serious violations of international law, including attacks that may amount to war crimes, they must be stopped and revoked.

Accordingly, the UK Government should immediately suspend both extant licences for military equipment and technology and the issuing of new licences while the Israel continues to carry out widespread serious violations with impunity. Failure to do so risks the Government breaching its own laws and international obligations and being complicit in grave abuses.

Aside from the UK’s legal obligations, it is incoherent to allow arms sales to Israel, whilst simultaneously asking for more aid to get to people in Gaza. As humanitarian organisations have repeatedly echoed for months, a full-scale humanitarian operation while a military offensive continues is impossible, and the continued supply of weapons to Israel is fuelling the conflict. The UK must use all diplomatic and economic levers, including stopping arms sales, to help secure an immediate and permanent ceasefire. There is little point until waiting until further atrocities are committed before using these levers.

PREVIOUS SUSPENSIONS AND REVOCATIONS

The UK has previously suspended and revoked licences due to end use violations and breaking of IHL. [In 2014](#), when Lord Cameron was Prime Minister, the UK Government reviewed and suspended twelve export licences to Israel following the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza. [In 2009](#), licences for naval guns were revoked due to their use against civilians in Gaza in

contravention of IHL. A significant number of licences were also suspended or revoked in the wake of [the Arab Spring](#) due to concerns of internal repression, and [in 2019](#) the UK Government was forced to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia following a ruling from the Court of Appeal that due to the use of arms by Saudi Arabia in violations of IHL in Yemen.

For over 20 years, successive UK Governments have sought guarantees from the Government of Israel not to use any UK-exported weaponry in the occupied Palestinian territory, known as imposing “end use conditions”, however, Israel has frequently disregarded these conditions, routinely using UK arms in Palestine. As a result, the UK is at risk of no longer imposing end use conditions on arms supplies to Israel to avoid criticism in case Israel refuses to abide by conditions under which arms are sold. Under UK national and international obligations, when an arms purchaser repeatedly refuses to abide by end use conditions, and when UK supplied arms are used in serious violations of IHL as is the case with Israel, the UK must end the supply of arms to that recipient. However, this has not happened in the case of the Government of Israel.

The Government has also resisted suggestions from the Committees on Arms Export Controls to introduce a post-shipment verification system to monitor the end-use of military equipment exported from the UK.

CASE OF THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT

In February 2024 following a lawsuit, the Hague Court of Appeal ordered the Government of Netherlands to stop supplying F-35 fighter jet parts to Israel within seven days, due to the clear risk of serious violations of international humanitarian law. The judge concluded, based on reports from Amnesty and the UN, that many civilians, including children, were being targeted in the conflict. The UK supplies components to the same F-35 fighter jets.

Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights group, and Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) have applied for a [judicial review](#) of the UK Government’s export licences for the sale of British arms capable of being used in Israel’s action in Gaza.

THE NEED FOR PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY

Parliamentary scrutiny of the UK’s arms exports regime is critical. The now-disbanded Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC) previously consisted of four select committee chairs - Trade, Defence, International Development and Foreign Affairs – and was responsible for scrutinising UK arms exports policy related to their respective government departments. However, due to its unique status it was unable to function as an appropriate committee should. Since January 2024, the Business and Trade Committee has taken an overall lead of parliamentary scrutiny for UK arms exports with other committees able to examine strategic exports as part of other work.

In the short term, it is crucial that the Business and Trade Committee scrutinise the role of UK-manufactured weapons used in Gaza as a matter of urgency. In the next parliament, in order to ensure a cross-cutting overview of the UK arms export regime and for arms exports to be given the dedicated scrutiny they require, the CAEC should return as a full standing Select Committee, with the powers that a regular Select Committee has.

OXFAM’S WORK

Oxfam has a long history of working on the impact of arms on civilians in humanitarian crises, most recently having campaigned to stop the export of UK arms to Saudi Arabia for use in the conflict in Yemen. Oxfam has been working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel since the 1950s, and still have staff in Gaza today.