

*Balfour  
Project*

# **Britain's Arms Trade with Israel:** Briefing by The Balfour Project

MAY 2024

## **Authors:**

Lily Wood  
Valentin Herdeg  
Lara Arekat  
Abigail Towle

The 'Balfour Project' calls for the immediate suspension of Britain's arms trade with Israel while there is significant risk that British manufactured military equipment and technology is being used in serious violations of international law in Gaza. This is not solely a question of Britain's legal responsibilities, but also its historic responsibilities towards the Palestinian people. Our work at the 'Balfour Project' addresses Britain's complicity in denying Palestinians their inalienable right to self-determination. Today we are witnessing Britain's potential complicity in denying Palestinians the right to live. If Britain is serious about wanting a future for Palestinians and Israelis that is anchored in justice and will therefore bring peace, it must act accordingly – and suspend arms sales to Israel now.

**Our Demands** rest on Britain's binding legal obligations, both under domestic and international law. The UK's Strategic Export Licencing Criteria clearly state that licences must not be granted by the UK "if it determines that there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international law"<sup>1</sup>. Reports indicate that lawyers within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) reached the conclusion that they cannot be sure that Israel has not breached international humanitarian law during its offensive in Gaza. The UK Government's own policy states that there need not be the legal confirmation that breaches of international law have been committed, only that they may have been. It is our position that the ongoing investigation of both war crimes and crimes against humanity by the ICC; orders by the ICJ for Israel to act to prevent and punish genocide and incitement to genocide; as well as the ongoing domestic case being brought against the UK Government regarding their arms sales to Israel, constitute sufficient evidence under the Criteria that arms sales to Israel should be suspended.

The majority of British voters – according to a new YouGov poll – support an arms ban on Israel<sup>2</sup>. This was true even before the Israeli army

killed three British nationals in their capacity as aid workers in Gaza – possibly by weapons with British manufactured parts. The UK government might hide its legal advice, but the British public is aware that providing weapons to an army that appears to deliberately target civilians, humanitarians, doctors and journalists can never be right.

It is important to note that it is not just British citizens who oppose an arms ban. Over 130 cross-party Parliamentarians have recently signed an open letter calling on the government to immediately suspend export licences for arms transfers to Israel<sup>3</sup>. The letter notes that other countries have committed to ceasing arm deals with Israel, following violations of international law. The most recent example is, in fact, one of the UKs strongest allies - Canada.

The Canadian government took a firm stance, and halted arms trade with Israel<sup>4</sup>. This is the kind of meaningful action the UK Government must take, in order to abide by international law and to put an end to the UK Government's complicity.

<sup>1</sup> UK Government, "First Joint Report of the Committees on Arms Export Controls Session 2022-23 Developments in UK Strategic Export Controls Response of the Secretaries of State for International Trade, Defence, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs January 2023 CP 775," January 2023, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63bbe3f5d3bf7f2638463250/first-joint-report-of-the-committees-on-arms-export-controls-session-2022-to-2023-developments-in-uk-strategic-export-controls-response-of-the-secretaries-of-state-for-dit-mod-fcdo.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> YouGov, "Would You Support or Oppose the UK Ending the Sale of Arms to Israel for the Duration of the Conflict in Gaza? | Daily Question," yougov.co.uk, April 4, 2024, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2024/04/04/8aa72/1>

<sup>3</sup> "Halt Arms Sales to Israel – Zarah Sultana & 130+ Parliamentarians Make Humanitarian Call - Labour Outlook," labouroutlook.org, March 28, 2024, <https://labouroutlook.org/2024/03/28/halt-arms-sales-to-israel-zarah-sultana-130-parliamentarians-make-humanitarian-call>

<sup>4</sup> Leyland Cecco, "Canada to Halt Arms Sales to Israel after Non-Binding Vote in House of Commons," The Guardian, March 19, 2024, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/19/canada-halt-arms-sales-to-israel>

# The Balfour Project

was founded by British citizens to acknowledge Britain's historical role in shaping 20th and 21st century Palestine and Israel. The ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza is not just a response to the Hamas atrocities of 7 October. It is part and parcel of a history of negating Palestinians the right to have rights.

Britain also bears a historic responsibility for the fact that Palestinians remain stateless, exiled, refugees and treated as second-class citizens within Israel. We make this claim particularly in light of the Balfour Declaration and the policies of the British Mandate, but it remains true for Britain's military support of a war that, in the words of Deputy Knesset speaker Nissim Vaturi from the ruling Likud party, has one goal: "erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth"<sup>5</sup>.

This goal implies ethnic cleansing and, according to arguments being advanced at the ICJ, genocide.

On 20 May the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court submitted a request for warrants to be issued against Hamas Leaders, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Gallant for suspected war crimes.



**The Balfour Project therefore calls for the immediate suspension of the British arms trade with Israel.**

<sup>5</sup> Raz Segal, "Israel Must Stop Weaponising the Holocaust," The Guardian, October 24, 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/24/israel-gaza-palestinians-holocaust>.