

UK suspension of Israeli arms contracts a guilty fraud

Thomas Scripps
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The British Labour government's suspension of 30 arms export licenses to Israel is a filthy manoeuvre. Foreign Secretary David Lammy announced the move on Monday, following the conclusion of a two-month legal review—which has not been made public in full.

The decision drew immediate condemnation from all the usual quarters. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu branded it “shameful”. His Defence Minister Yoav Gallant announced himself “deeply disheartened”.

In the UK, Board of Deputies of British Jews President Phil Rosenberg declared, “Our allies will wonder whether the UK will stand by their sides, and our adversaries will see that when they commit atrocities, it will be our allies that are punished.” Labour Friends of Israel, never missing an opportunity to warmonger, wrote that it was “deeply concerned by the signal this sends to Iran”. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson posted a widely reported tweet asking, “Why are Lammy and [Prime Minister Keir] Starmer abandoning Israel? Do they want Hamas to win?”

Both the *Telegraph* and the *Times* ran editorials denouncing the Labour government for “emboldening Hamas”, “playing to the gallery”, “hamfisted diplomacy” and “cynical and performative” politics that risked “legitimising the murderous activities of those who wish to see Israel extirpated.” Starmer, wrote the *Times*, had previously said that “‘Israel must always have the right to defend her people.’ How hollow those words now sound, the arms decision following in the wake of the killing by Hamas on Saturday of six hostages”.

Such outrage is itself “cynical and performative”. Everyone knows, and the two newspapers acknowledge, that the decision is “designed to change nothing on the ground... but aimed at easing potential

dissent on Labour's backbenches and appeasing further former Labour voters in the Muslim community... a PR exercise designed to insulate Labour from any domestic fallout.” in the *Times'* words.

Britain is responsible for a tiny fraction of the arms received by Israel, overwhelmingly provided by the United States. In any case, the government's decision affects just 30 of 350 arms contracts between the UK and Israel, and critically, excludes parts for F-35 fighter jets killing Palestinian men, women and children day after day. It was one of these aircraft responsible for the al-Mawasi massacre of roughly 90 people in a “safe zone”.

Making clear his opinion that this brutal war should continue, Lammy announced the suspensions with professions of the right of Israel to “defend itself” and assurances, repeated by Defence Secretary John Healey, that the government's decision would not affect Israel's capacity for “defence”. The carefully calibrated character of his decision is best indicated by the measured response of United States officials who—despite reportedly pushing against the move behind the scenes—acknowledged the UK's “own legal judgments based on their system and their laws.”

Amnesty International UK's Chief Executive Sacha Deshmukh described the arms suspensions as “limited and riddled with loopholes.” Chief Executive of Oxfam GB Halima Begum commented, “the suspension is little more than window dressing.”

Although both groups characterised the move as some form of “recognition” of Israeli breaches of international law, or evidence that the government had “accepted the very clear and disturbing evidence of Israeli war crimes in Gaza,” the actual grounds on which these suspensions have been imposed are strictly circumscribed.

The available summary of the government’s legal review claims that it was not possible to reach a “determinative judgment on allegations regarding Israel’s conduct of hostilities... in part due to the opaque and contested information environment in Gaza and the challenges of accessing the specific and sensitive information necessary from Israel”.

This is broadly the approach taken by the government in response to the legal action brought against it by Al-Haq and the Global Legal Action Network. In that case, as summarised by lawyer Sam Fowles, who advised Global Justice Now on the same issue: its “position appears to remain, broadly, that the sales are lawful because Israel is not breaching international law. It relies heavily, however, on assurances provided by Israel itself. It is not clear, from the case papers at least, whether the UK has made any significant effort to verify Israel’s claim.”

Instead, what allegedly motivates the government’s arms contracts decision is Israel’s failure to “reasonably do more to facilitate humanitarian access and distribution” and “credible claims of the mistreatment of detainees”—both raised in the most guarded and minimising terms.

In other words, even as it suspends some arms contracts—in a transparent attempt to appease elements of its core constituency which have wavered in their support for Labour thanks to its support for the genocide in Gaza—the government continues to deny knowledge of any evidence suggesting the killings of tens of thousands of civilians constitute war crimes. Even the *Guardian*’s defence and security editor Dan Sabbagh felt required to acknowledge the “obvious” and “fundamental incoherence” of the “fudged” decision.

It is doubtless for the same reason that Lammy has refused to publish the legal report he was given. Labour’s leaders know they are culpable and are watching their backs carefully.

As the *New Statesman* notes, “Starmer, who took an active role in the decision, is a lawyer... Lammy is a lawyer; Shabana Mahmood, the Justice Secretary, is a lawyer... Attorney General Richard Hermer, a former Doughty Street colleague of Starmer, is a leading authority on international law.

“This, in short, is not a government that is likely to leave itself legally exposed.”

As far as this has provoked any genuine anger in the ruling class, it is out of concern that *any* acknowledgement of the crimes in Gaza lets a chink of light through a door supposed to be kept tightly shut by a blanket insistence on the legality of Israel’s war—at least on the part of its two major partners, the US and the UK.

Labour is essentially accused of having broken ranks for its own petty interests; of having “cut loose a friend in need” to “reduce the domestic political damage to Labour from the war in Gaza,” according to the *Times*, and given moral succour to the mass anti-genocide movement, viewed as an enemy within.

That movement must reject the appeals of misleaders including former Labour head Jeremy Corbyn to see this as “first step” by the Labour government in “ending all arms to Israel”—as in the statement issued jointly with his Independent Alliance of non-party MPs elected on anti-genocide platforms. Starmer has no intention of going any further.

As with previous breaks with US and former Tory government policy—like resuming UNRWA funding and dropping the UK’s opposition to the International Criminal Court arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant—the arms contracts suspensions are the minimum action deemed necessary to continue facilitating Israel’s genocide while providing itself some political cover and preserving something of the fiction of international law made use of by the “liberal” imperialist powers against their opponents.

An end to the horrors in Gaza and oppression of the Palestinians will not come from a gradual process of “admission” on the part of the Labour government that its Israel policy has been wrong, but from an international anti-war movement which brings the Israeli and imperialist states to their knees, topples their governments, and places their leaders in the dock.



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