

# UK ARMS IN ISRAEL'S ATTACKS ON GAZA

Briefing | December 2023

## SUMMARY

- The UK government regularly approves the export of weapons and military technology to Israel, despite its repeated flagrant violations of international law.
- Arms exports include components for F-35 aircraft used in Israel's bombing of the Gaza Strip.
- UK banks, including Barclays, are profiting from the deadly arms trade with Israel.



Gaza under attack: east of Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, 24 November 2023. Photo: Mohammed Zaanoun/ActiveStills

Israel's aerial bombardment and ground invasion of the besieged Gaza Strip has killed many thousands of Palestinians. Israeli forces are carrying out a colossal assault marked by indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian infrastructure causing tens of thousands of casualties, including through attacks on medical facilities, bakeries, schools, shelters, and evacuating civilian convoys. Israel has tightened its already unlawful blockade of the Gaza Strip, a form of collective punishment, cutting off water, food and fuel to the population.

This assault occurs in the context of Israeli leaders' stated intent to harm civilians in Gaza. For example, Israel's President Herzog said, "it is an entire nation out there that is responsible"<sup>1</sup> while its Heritage Minister called for a nuclear bomb to be dropped on Gaza.<sup>2</sup> UN experts denounced this "increasing genocidal incitement" from Israeli leaders which, combined with the use of "powerful weaponry with inherently indiscriminate impacts" and the "destruction of life-supporting infrastructure", point to a "genocide in the making."<sup>3</sup>

**“We are profoundly concerned about the support of certain governments for Israel's strategy of warfare against the besieged population of Gaza, and the failure of the international system to mobilise to prevent genocide.**

**UN human right experts<sup>3</sup>**

Across the occupied West Bank, Palestinians have endured a surge in attacks by Israeli armed forces and settlers, forcing out communities and making 2023 one of the deadliest years on record.<sup>4</sup> Palestinian citizens of Israel are subject to a campaign of discriminatory arrests, harassment and intimidation.<sup>5</sup>

The intensity of Israel's assault is unprecedented, and the scale of suffering horrendous, but Israel's attacks on Palestinians did not start in October 2023. Palestinians have faced over 75 years of Israel's violence. The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967, and under an illegal blockade since 2007, severely restricting essential supplies. During

this time, Palestinians in Gaza have suffered from regular Israeli military assaults including in 2008/9, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021 and 2022.

Palestinians have long identified that the militarised attacks they face are part of Israel's system of rule amounting to apartheid, which is a crime against humanity. Forensic reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as leading Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, concur. Under this system, Palestinians are subjected to systematic dispossession, physical separation and racist discrimination by the state of Israel.

Despite Israel's armed violence against Palestinians, the UK government regularly approves military technology and arms exports to Israel, including for weapons of the type used to carry out violations of international law. This makes the UK government complicit in Israel's abuses of Palestinian rights.

## UK arms trade with Israel

Since 2015, the UK has approved the export of over £474 million worth of arms to Israeli forces.<sup>6</sup> This includes licences covering components for military aircraft, helicopters, drones, bombs, missiles, military technology, armoured vehicles, tanks, ammunition and small arms. However, the true figure is much higher as the figure published by the government doesn't include open licences, whereby the transfer of unlimited quantities of listed military items are authorised, with no requirement to report what is transferred.

One example is the UK's contribution to the US F-35 combat aircraft which are being used by Israel to bombard Gaza.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 15% of the value of each F-35 is produced in the UK. This includes the rear fuselage, which is produced by BAE Systems in Lancashire, and the targeting system, which is produced by Leonardo in Edinburgh. Durability testing for the F-35 is undertaken at a BAE Systems facility in East Yorkshire.<sup>8</sup>

Almost all exports related to the F-35 programme are covered by an open licence, meaning it is not included in the government's licencing figures mentioned above. F-35s were used in Israel's May 2021 assault on Gaza when 260 Palestinians were killed.<sup>9</sup>

During the latest assault, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak expressed "unequivocal" support for Israel and deployed UK military assets to support its war on Gaza.<sup>10</sup>

## The bombing of Jabalia Refugee Camp

Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip has been characterised by widespread and large-scale attacks on civilian infrastructure. One example is its bombing of Jabalia refugee camp, the largest refugee camp in the Gaza Strip and one of the world's most densely populated areas. The camp is 1.4 square kilometres and was home to 116,000 refugees.

On 31 October 2023 Israeli fighter jets bombed Jabalia, reportedly with 2,000lb bombs and to "apocalyptic" effect.<sup>11</sup>

**“ Young children arrived at the hospital with deep wounds and severe burns...many were screaming and asking for their parents.**

**Mohammed Hawajreh**  
MSF nurse<sup>12</sup>

A nurse with Doctors Without Borders (MSF) at Al Shifa hospital explained how after the strikes "young children arrived at the hospital with deep wounds and severe burns. They came without their families. Many were screaming and asking for their parents. I stayed with them until we could find a place, as the hospital was full with patients."<sup>12</sup>

This attack and a further bombardment there the following day killed at least 195 Palestinians and wounded more than 700.<sup>13</sup>

## Documented failings of the UK arms exports system

The Strategic Export Licensing Criteria, under which all arms exports are assessed, states that export licences should not be issued if the government "determines" that there is a "clear risk" arms exports might be used in a "serious violation of international humanitarian law".<sup>14</sup> If the policy was applied, it would result in an arms embargo on Israel given its persistent unlawful attacks on Palestinians.

There have been longstanding concerns that UK-supplied arms and components have been used in Israel's violations of international law:

- In 2009, the UK's then foreign secretary, David Miliband, admitted that Israeli equipment used in Gaza in the 2008-9 conflict "almost certainly" contained UK-supplied components.
- In 2014, the government found that several export licences previously approved covered items that could be part of equipment used in the Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip, and announced that they would be suspended as a precaution in the event of a resumption of hostilities.

However, arms exports have continued, and no full assessment is known to have been conducted by the government in response to subsequent

Israeli attacks on Palestinians. This is despite consistent cross-party calls for an investigation, including by a group of 78 MPs in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

By licensing the export of weapons to Israel, likely to be used in its violations of international law, the government is breaking its international obligations, including those in the Arms Trade Treaty (Article 6)<sup>16</sup> and the Geneva Conventions.

## Taking aim at the UK-Israel arms trade

Through its arms trade with Israel, the UK is fuelling Israel's militarised violence against Palestinians.

Palestinian civil society has long demanded that governments impose a two-way arms embargo on Israel, meaning a complete end to both exports to and imports from Israel. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also urged the UK government to impose an arms embargo in response to Israel's most recent assault.

**The government must impose a two-way arms embargo on Israel without delay to end its complicity in Israel's crimes against the Palestinian people.**

Financial institutions are also funding the deadly arms trade. Our research has found that Barclays is prominent among UK-based financial institutions investing in companies producing weapons and military technology sold to Israel and used in violence against Palestinians.<sup>17</sup> Barclays, one of the UK's largest high street banks, has over £1 billion in shareholdings, and provides substantial loans and financial services, to at least nine arms companies producing weapons used in attacks on Palestinians.

**In line with its responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, all financial institutions must end their financial ties with companies supplying weapons and military technology to Israel.**

The UK government must also put in place binding regulations to stop UK businesses and banks from trading and profiting from Israel's military occupation, illegal settlements and violations of Palestinian rights.

## TAKE ACTION

- Find actions to oppose the UK-Israel arms trade on PSC, CAAT's and War on Want's social media and websites.
- Join the **Barclays: Don't Bank on Apartheid** campaign: [palestinecampaign.org/campaigns/stop-arming-israel-3](https://palestinecampaign.org/campaigns/stop-arming-israel-3)



## References

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