

British Arms Sales to Israel in Support of Attacks on Gaza

Some of the weaponry used to commit such massacres is manufactured in the UK

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Until the UK government applies its own criteria to the arms trade, we need to keep up our own public review process to hold our government to its word

Last week, the UK government announced the [outcome of a review](#) of military export licences whose legality had been called into question during Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip last summer. The outcome, which came 11 months after the review began, concluded that there is no risk that weapons being shipped from the UK to Israel could be used in violations of international law.

This outcome shows that the UK government consistently fails to implement its own criteria for arms export licensing, criteria supposedly in place to ensure that arms exported from the UK are not used for violations of international law.



Rami Joundiye, 22, lost his leg after Israel's attacks on Gaza a year ago, poses at his house in Gaza City 10 July (AFP)

The core function of the Israeli military is to enforce its illegal occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip through a system of control that includes: an Apartheid Wall snaking through the West Bank; a network of checkpoints manned by the Israeli military, preventing Palestinians from moving freely; systematic arrest and incarceration, with [5,750 Palestinians](#) held as political prisoners, kidnapped from their homes with military force. All of this on top of Israel's periodic bombing campaigns on the already occupied and besieged Gaza Strip, the most recent of which in 2014 resulted in [2,205 Palestinians dead](#), 521 of whom were children.

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It doesn't take a military expert to know what kinds of weapons are used by the Israeli military to carry out this brutal occupation: combat aircraft units, drones for surveillance and bombing, and weapons night sight technology. All of these items, along with many others, were approved by the [UK government](#) to be shipped to Israel in the six months prior to last summer's attack on Gaza. Does the UK government think that Israel was just saving them up for the next war? And even if that were the case, does that justify their export?

Decisions to grant arms export licences are made on a case-by-case basis according to the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export [Licensing Criteria](#). These criteria dictate that the government should take into account the buyer country's "respect for international law". Other criteria [were highlighted](#) by the government as specifically relevant to Israel: for example, when there is a clear risk of the equipment being used for internal repression, and where there is a "clear risk that the intended recipient would use the items aggressively...to assert by force a territorial claim".

The licensing criteria outlining what exports should be prohibited cover what is essentially a laundry list of the Israeli military's main activities. If the UK export licensing criteria were applied, there would be a de facto arms embargo on Israel. Despite this, in the four months immediately following Israel's 2014 bombing of Gaza, [over £4 million worth](#) of licences for military equipment were approved for export to Israel.

So why won't the UK apply its own criteria to restrict licences on military equipment bound for Israel?

There is certainly no lack of evidence showing that the Israeli military uses weapons for violations of international law. In fact, only weeks before the review outcome, an independent UN inquiry into the Gaza war [found evidence suggesting](#) that Israel committed multiple violations of international law, including war crimes. The UK government [voted to accept the report](#) in the UN Human Rights Council. Surely that is enough evidence to say that there is at least a "clear risk".

The review that just finished is a good example of how the arms export control process works – or doesn't – and also holds the key of how we can challenge this system of complicity.

Only days before the export licence review was announced last summer, 150,000 people marched in the streets of London to protest Israel's war on Gaza, demanding an end to the UK-Israel arms trade. [In 2009](#) there was a similar story, when public pressure compelled the government to respond, and at that time, actually revoke some export licences. But it was too little and too late for the victims of Israel's massacre to be saved.

There is an absolute correlation between public awareness and pressure and the government taking action on the issues. But it is not only through voting or writing to MPs that we create pressure. It is by taking to the streets and showing that we are not willing to smile and nod at the sham review process or other symbolic gestures.

In August 2014, nine people occupied the roof of the UAV Engines factory in Shenstone, where drone engines bound for Israel are made. The factory is one of several in the UK owned by Israel's largest weapons manufacturer, Elbit Systems. These protestors shut down operations at the factory for two days before they were arrested. Months later, [the charges against](#) them were dropped after the company would not provide details of the arms export licences it had been granted. If the trial had gone ahead, the UK government and/or the company would have had to provide evidence countering the protestors' claim that these weapons are used in violation of international law.

Later in the year, a small group of protestors gathered at another [Elbit-owned factory in the UK](#), shutting it down for a day, and successfully preventing shipments from arriving to the factory.

These smaller actions reached a crescendo on [6 July 2015](#) when over a hundred people protested outside the Elbit-owned factory in Shenstone again, as well as two other Elbit-owned factories in the UK. In all, three Elbit-owned factories in the UK were shut down by protests.

These protests went ahead despite attempts by the Shenstone factory to sabotage these efforts. The factory asked the High Court to impose an injunction with a “forbidden area” 250-meters around the factory, an area including public land which would ban anyone associated with protests from entering, including the peace vigil that local Staffordshire campaigners have been holding at the factory since 2009. On the day of the protest, police came out in massively disproportionate force, and 19 people were arrested.

The company manufacturing weapons for export to Israel used draconian measures to silence any dissent over their actions. Luckily, campaigners made sure that the injunction would not go unchallenged, and on 22 July, the [High Court lifted the ban](#) from the “forbidden area” around the factory.

The response to the protests show that the UK government, in collusion with Israeli arms companies, is willing to go to great lengths to suppress democratic public debate over the illegality of the UK-Israel arms trade. But the protests themselves show that the Stop Arming Israel campaign continues to grow, regardless of attempts to repress it.

Until the UK government applies its own criteria to the arms trade, and imposes an immediate two-way arms embargo on Israel, we need to keep up our own public review process to hold our government to its word, and push it to put an end to these dirty deals.

– Ryvka Barnard is the Senior Campaigner on Militarism and Security at War on Want.

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