

The Fiction Behind the British Government's Human Rights Report on Israel

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The UK government is not only guilty of silent complicity, it is actively suppressing BDS – a global grassroots movement calling for justice

Last week's [Human Rights and Democracy Report](#), published by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), exposes the UK government's hypocrisy on human rights, particularly considering its close relationship with Israel and its attacks on UK grassroots justice movements.

As the FCO celebrates the report, boasting of the UK's role in promoting democracy as a "core British value", its close friends in the Israeli government have declared open season on Palestinian human rights defenders, arresting some and threatening others with travel bans, revoking residency rights and [deportation](#). One Israeli government minister has even called for "[targeted civil assassination](#)" of activists at the forefront of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.



Photo: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (R) and his British counterpart David Cameron attend a joint press conference in Jerusalem on 12 March, 2014 (AFP).

The UK government has not uttered a word to suggest that it will protect those human rights defenders. In fact, it has created its own campaign to crack down on the BDS movement here in the UK. This means that the UK government is not only guilty of silent complicity, it is actively suppressing a global grassroots movement calling for justice.

Empty words

The FCO report mentions the "Israeli government's violation of international human rights and humanitarian law in the context of Israel's occupation" and that the UK government pledges to "hold to account those responsible for the worst violations and abuses". The current deepening of the UK-Israel relationship makes these statements nothing but empty words.

Israel currently holds over 7,000 Palestinians as [political prisoners](#), 700 of whom are administrative detainees, held without charge or trial. That's over three and a half times more than in 2014, showing that Israel has been dramatically increasing its use of arbitrary arrest as a form of mass political repression. The number of children arrested and detained has also [skyrocketed](#) in the past six months, up to 438 children in detention this month.

The vast majority of political prisoners are arrested in the West Bank and East Jerusalem where they reside and then held in prisons inside Israel, constituting a [violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention](#). Currently, the British company G4S has contracts with the Israeli prison service (although the company recently announced, following campaign pressure, its intention to exit those contracts in the next two years).

What has the UK done to take action on this situation? The FCO expresses “concern” in the report, but that’s it. In March of this year, a delegation of UK lawyers was commissioned to conduct site visits to investigate the case of Palestinian children in Israeli military detention. The delegation was cancelled because [Israeli authorities refused to meet](#) with the UK lawyers.

Such refusals have become commonplace. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, [Makarim Wibisono](#), resigned this year because Israel denied him entry entirely.

Yet the UK government ignores these actions and commits to increasing UK-Israel trade.

Deadly weapons

While the number of Palestinians in Israeli detention increases, those who are not in prison are hardly safe. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip live in permanent danger, unable to access necessary goods because of the Israeli-imposed siege, resulting in high levels of unemployment, food insecurity and aid dependency. On top of that, Palestinians in Gaza live in the constant shadow of Israeli military violence, struggling to recover from the attacks in 2014, when over 2,200 Palestinians were killed, and thousands more injured.

But the military doesn’t only use its weapons on Gaza. Israeli soldiers and armed police regularly invade Palestinian towns and villages to confiscate land and [destroy Palestinian homes](#). And when Palestinians dare to protest this and the other aspects of military occupation, [Israeli soldiers](#) take aim at unarmed protestors. Israel has been roundly criticised by international human rights bodies, including the United Nations, for its use of [extrajudicial execution](#).

So what has the UK government done about this indiscriminate use of force?

Aside from making a single unfavourable statement on its website (which is listed as an “action” in the FCO report), the UK government continues to buy weapons from and sell weapons to Israel, an arms trade worth millions of pounds. The weapons that the UK sells to Israel, many of which are made in UK factories and have been the [target of protests](#), are used directly in Israel’s military occupation.

The FCO report reiterates that the UK government will not approve weapons exports where there is a “clear risk the items might be used for internal repression or in the commission of a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), or might be used aggressively against another country or to assert by force a territorial claim.” These criteria perfectly describe Israel’s occupation, and yet the deadly arms trade continues.

Crack down

In the absence of any UK government action to hold Israel to account, the BDS movement has stepped up to end UK complicity in these violations. The global BDS movement was

launched by Palestinians in 2005 to call on people internationally to take action where their governments have failed to hold Israel to account. In this country, the BDS movement fills the gap between what the FCO report claims it will do and what it actually does.

And yet, in the past six months the UK government has taken unprecedented steps to crack down on BDS activities in the UK. In November, it announced [a new proposal](#) to ban local authorities from choosing to divest from companies complicit in these human rights abuses.

In February, when arrests of Palestinians reached the highest number in six years, UK Cabinet Minister Matthew Hancock went on a [trade visit to Israel](#) and announced from there his commitment to cracking down on BDS activists calling for human rights and accountability.

If the UK government is serious about democracy and human rights, it needs to take action to end its material support for Israeli violations. It needs to end the two-way arms trade with Israel and it must ensure the rights and protection of human rights defenders, including BDS activists, in the UK and in Palestine. Until then, the FCO report is just adding injury to insult with such empty words.

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