



**Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office**

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Rt Hon. Dame Emily Thornberry DBE MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
House of Commons
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8 January 2024

Dear Emily,

Thank you for your letter of 13 December regarding the UK's approach to recovering hostages held by Hamas and the Government's plans to appoint an Envoy for the most complex detention cases.

Since the appalling events of October 7, 2023, this government has prioritised working to end the conflict in the Middle East, secure the safe and immediate release of dual Israeli-British national Emily Damari, the three hostages with strong UK-links, Eli Sharabi, Oded Lifschitz and Avinatan Or, and indeed all hostages, and to provide humanitarian aid for the civilian population in Gaza.

I continue to believe a ceasefire deal is the best way to get the remaining hostages out and put an end to the suffering they and their families have endured since they were so cruelly taken.

Support to the families of UK and UK-linked hostages held in Gaza

I challenge Adam Rose's assertion to the Committee that the Government is unprepared for British nationals being taken hostage. The Government has well-established structures to respond to the kidnap of a British national overseas. In this case, a team of experts from the FCDO has been leading the cross-Government response since 7 October 2023. That multi-disciplinary team comprises hostage and counter-terrorism experts alongside in-depth geographic knowledge and dedicated consular support for family members. The team have been in continuous touch with the families of the initial two British national hostages – Emily Damari and Nadav Popplewell – since October 2023. In December 2023, the then Foreign Secretary agreed that same support should be extended to the families of Oded Lifschitz, Eli and Yossi (who was subsequently tragically killed) Sharabi and, at a later date, Avinatan Or, based on their close family links to the UK. That is a decision I strongly support.

Family members of all four hostages have access to this dedicated team 24/7, 365 days a year. The team initiates regular contact, keeping the families updated, as far as possible, including through weekly written updates, regular phone calls and face to face meetings. We have also connected the families with specialist agencies and organisations that can offer practical and psychological support, including FCDO-funded partner Hostage International who are able to offer independent advice to families on issues such as government liaison, emotional and mental health support, supporting children, health assessments, handling the media, and legal and financial services. Families have also been supported by Consular officials from British Embassy Tel Aviv and in some cases, Counter Terrorism Command (SO15) Police Family Liaison Officers.

The FCDO further expanded support to hostage families in December 2023, appointing an additional senior civil servant as Director Gaza Hostages to lead the response and recovery of British and UK-linked hostages. The Director Gaza Hostages has worked closely with Consular and Counter Terrorism Department officials, British Embassy Tel Aviv, the wider FCDO network, as well as international partners and has liaised with the families of British and British linked hostages who have been kidnapped. The main objective of this senior role and the wider FCDO team is to support the safe and secure release of hostages.

In addition to support received from FCDO Officials, the Prime Minister, Minister Falconer and I have been privileged to meet the hostage families on a number of occasions, including at the 7 October Memorial Event on 30 September and most recently on 2 December. My colleagues and I have heard first-hand from hostage families and have reiterated our commitment to do everything possible to secure the release of their loved ones.

I am glad that the hostage families are also being supported by the Israeli Government who rightly assert their primacy in the investigation, the hostages having been taken from Israel and because the majority of the hostages (including the UK and UK-linked) are Israeli citizens. The Counter Terrorism Department, BE Tel Aviv and SO15 have forged close relations with the Israeli authorities and are aware of the separate support offers that are available to families. This includes wider support from the Hostages and Missing Family Forum that was formed following the 7 October attacks.

UK involvement in hostage negotiations

As you say in your letter, the decision by HMG not to demand a UK seat at the current ceasefire negotiating table was a deliberate one. It was my judgement that demanding a seat for the UK would prompt others to do so, and that in this case more voices in the room would not improve the chances of success. That decision was driven precisely because securing an immediate ceasefire to enable the safe release of hostages is a top priority for this Government. That decision should not be confused with inaction.

We have left no stone unturned in our efforts to get the hostages home. The UK provides support to ongoing hostage rescue activity. The Ministry of Defence conducts surveillance flights over the Eastern Mediterranean, including operating in airspace over Israel and Gaza. These surveillance aircraft are unarmed and do not have a combat role. They are tasked solely to locate hostages. We cannot, for reasons with which you will be familiar, share everything that the Government is doing, but my officials ensure that the hostage families in particular know as much as possible. I, alongside the Prime Minister, Minister

Falconer, the National Security Adviser, our Ambassadors across the region and in the US, and officials at all levels remain in extensive and intense contact with the negotiating parties. We raise our hostages by name in every engagement.

You will be aware that the UK has supported negotiations from the start of this conflict, aligned with our allies, including the US, and partners in the region. It remains our collective assessment that negotiations remain objectively the best and safest means to get the hostages home to their loved ones and those with the greatest influence over the negotiating parties should be, and are, leading the mediation efforts. Qatar has decades of experience as a mediator in conflict and having hosted the Hamas political office in Doha, alongside Egypt hold the key channels of communication to Hamas. The US continues to play a crucial role, building on its relationship with Israel, which holds primacy. That 105 hostages were released in the first pause is demonstration that negotiation can work. The failure of negotiation rounds in the crucial end stages over the past fourteen months has unnecessarily prolonged the suffering of the hostages. We continue to urge all those directly involved in the talks to do everything possible to secure a deal as quickly as possible.

Thirty-five countries had citizens taken hostage on 7 October. All have supported the negotiation track throughout the conflict and the UK has been a leading voice among them. We have used a range of diplomatic channels – both public and private - to lobby for and influence the safe release of all hostages. We have led efforts at the G7 and G20 with statements calling on both parties to end the conflict and resume dialogue, as well as at the UN. The UK voted in favour of a draft resolution tabled on 11 December 2024 calling for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire and immediate, unconditional release of hostages. We used our Presidency of the UN Security Council in November 2024 to maintain international focus on this crisis. I led a meeting of the UN Security Council on 18 November specifically focussed on “ending the war and securing durable peace.”

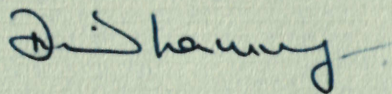
An Envoy for Arbitrary Detention

While there is no single internationally agreed definition we take all allegations of arbitrary detention seriously. And we condemn its use. It is hallmark of authoritarian regimes and a means of political intimidation that spares no thought for its victims. You may be aware that the UK joined Canada's Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations on 15 February 2021. The purpose of this Declaration is to enhance international cooperation and end the practice of arbitrary detention and examine the circumstances of each case individually to determine what action from the FCDO would be appropriate.

As I clearly stated when last before the Committee, I remain committed to strengthening the support offered to British nationals overseas, particularly in cases involving arbitrary detention and kidnaps. I expect to be able to announce our plans to appoint an Envoy shortly, and will be pleased to make the terms of reference for that appointment available to the Committee when I do so.

In the meantime, let me assure you that nothing will interfere or distract from our ongoing efforts to bring Emily, Oded, Eli and Avinatan home. The appointment of an Envoy will strengthen UK support, not replace these efforts. My department will continue to support the hostages' families, and intensive diplomatic efforts will continue until all the hostages are freed.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'D. Lammy', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

THE RT HON. DAVID LAMMY MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs



**Foreign Affairs
Committee**

Friday 13 December 2024

Rt Hon David Lammy MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

[By email]

Dear David

As you know, as part of its work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Foreign Affairs Committee is extremely concerned about the ongoing situation with British citizens, and those with British families and close links to the UK, who were taken as part of the 7 October attacks and are still being held hostage.

I am writing to you today on two main issues relating to the UK Government's approach to hostages: first, the UK's role in recovering hostages held by Hamas, and secondly the need to appoint a Government envoy for those held in arbitrary detention (including hostages).

The UK's approach to recovering hostages held by Hamas

Earlier this week, alongside two lawyers who have been working pro bono to support the British families of hostages held in Gaza (and those closely connected to Britain), the Committee heard from Dr Sharone Lifschitz, whose parents were taken hostage from their home in Nir Oz, Israel, on 7 October 2023. Dr Lifschitz's mother, Yocheved Lifschitz, was returned two weeks later. However, more than 14 months on, Dr Lifschitz's 84-year-old father, Oded Lifschitz, remains in captivity in Gaza.

When you appeared before our Committee on 27 November 2024, you told us that the UK Government is "doing all that we can, frankly, both to find signs of life and to assist with those hostages".¹ This, however, differs from what we heard from witnesses this week.

Adam Rose, Solicitor and Partner at Mischon de Reya, told us that the UK Government has displayed "an apparent lack of creativity in their thinking" and that, "having conducted the same activities for 14 months without success, it is not obvious that there is a group of people

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15045/pdf/> Q112



Foreign Affairs Committee

thinking of different ways of approaching things".² Mr Rose acknowledged that the Gaza Hostage Unit has now been set up and provides the families of the hostages with weekly updates. However, he noted that there is no "blueprint" for what happens when hostages are taken, a "lack of preparedness" within Government, and "no standard operating procedure that kicks in when this happens. The families had to work out for themselves what to do".³

Adam Wagner, Barrister at Doughty Street Chambers, told us that the UK Government has "chosen not to be in the room" during negotiations on hostages, instead choosing to let other countries, including the US, Qatar, Egypt and Israel, lead the direct negotiations. He described the UK as being "on the outer circle, influencing if we can".⁴

In addition to what the UK is doing to negotiate the release of the hostages, it is not clear that the FCDO is doing everything it can to support the families of the hostages. When asked about her experience, Dr Lifschitz told us that there hasn't been support from the Government in her capacity as a victim: "there is a lot of work to be done. I know other Governments have done more [...] My life is forever on the edge [...] It is really hard to carry it. I talk about the failure a lot, but I feel it".⁵ Dr Lifschitz also told us: "Even my workplace never got advice [...] nobody contacted them"; "me, as a [British] citizen, there has been nothing. Nobody asked me if financially if I am okay, if I'm mentally okay, if in any other way I'm okay. Nobody."⁶

Government Envoy for the Arbitrarily Detained

In Opposition, you committed to introducing a new Special Envoy for Arbitrary Detention if elected into Government.⁷ Last month, as Foreign Secretary, you told this Committee "I hope to announce an envoy, an individual who will deal with those more complex detention cases".⁸

In evidence this week, our witnesses impressed upon us the importance of creating and properly resourcing such a role. Adam Wagner told us "that is a good idea, as long as that person is properly resourced and isn't a replacement for the Government doing its own thing". Mr Wagner suggested that the role should be modelled on the Victims' Commissioner role: "someone who will stand up for all the different families who are impacted by hostage-taking and arbitrary detention across the piste, and go to Government and stand up, and be an in-public person who will hold [the Government] to account".⁹

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15120/pdf/> Q75

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15120/pdf/> Q75

⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15120/pdf/> Q75

⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15120/pdf/> Q77

⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15120/pdf/> Q78

⁷ Evening Standard, [Special envoy for hostages planned by Labour to free UK citizens seized abroad like Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), October 2023

⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15045/pdf/> Q129

⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15120/pdf/> Q75



Foreign Affairs Committee

Dr Lifschitz's experience of not receiving any support as a victim in her own right demonstrates the importance of such a role. Her employer was being very supportive to her but has received no guidance and her health, including her mental health, has suffered over the period of her father's detention; an Envoy or Commissioner role would be excellently placed to provide this support and advice. Dr Lifschitz noted that the Red Cross had not had access to any of the hostages in Gaza, and the Committee heard from the British Red Cross that their colleagues had similarly not had access to Palestinians detained by Israel, suggesting breaches of international law on both sides.

I would be grateful for answers on the following questions:

- What is the Government doing to support the families of hostages still being held in Gaza as victims in their own right?
- Why is the UK Government not involved directly with hostage negotiations? Please set out clearly – for the Committee and also the public – the role of the UK Government in the process.
- When will the UK Government publish a definition of "arbitrary detention"? When will you be able to apply that definition to set out the role an Envoy for those Arbitrarily Detained? When will this new Envoy role be announced, and what will their remit include?
- How much autonomy will this envoy have in their work? For example, what latitude will they have for "creative thinking" in negotiations, as requested by the lawyers for the hostage families? To whom will they report in their work?
- How will you ensure that the envoy will be sufficiently funded, in order to carry out their role effectively? Will this envoy work alone, or will they be supported by their own team that they can direct (rather than rely on staff in the FCDO or elsewhere in Whitehall)? Will they have access to funding to support the families in the widest sense, such for counselling or financial assistance?
- Can you provide assurance that the role of the envoy will not replace the Government's ongoing work to try and secure the release of the hostages held in Gaza and will, instead, provide additional resource and support? And could you detail for the Committee how the FCDO team that is supporting the families of the hostages is liaising with other Government departments and agencies to consider them as victims in their own right.

I would be grateful for your response to this letter by Monday 6 January. In line with usual practice, I will be placing a copy of this letter and your response on the Committee's website.

Emily Thornberry MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee