

## **Written evidence submitted by Conservative Friends of Israel (MENA0042)**

### **Conservative Friends of Israel**

CFI works to promote its twin aims of supporting Israel and promoting Conservatism in the UK.

This evidence is submitted by James Gurd, CFI's Executive Director, and CFI's Parliamentary Chairmen Rt. Hon. Stephen Crabb MP (Commons) and Rt. Hon. The Lord Pickles (Lords).

### **Executive Summary**

Israel is the UK's key strategic ally in the tumultuous and rapidly changing Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Hopes for securing a lasting peace agreement between Israel and a State of Palestine have been dramatically harmed by Hamas and its October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 attack on Israel. This unprecedented attack must serve as the watershed moment in the fight against Iran-backed terrorism.

UK policy towards Israel and the Palestinians has for too long been influenced by a misguided policy of equivocation. This approach has given succour to Palestinian Authority (PA) hardliners, as well as extremists. UK policy has failed to curtail Palestinian terrorism and needs a fundamental rethink.

Israeli-Palestinian peace is frustrated by a range of systemic problems caused by the PA which must now be addressed in the long-term interests of peace, including its promotion of violence and antisemitism. The UK should provide unwavering support for Israel in its necessary fight against Hamas and other terror groups, while concurrently strengthening Israeli-Palestinian civil society through peaceful coexistence initiatives.

The UK – along with international partners – has failed to curtail Iran's hegemonic ambitions and destabilising activities. The UK-Iran relationship cannot be business as usual while Iran remains the principal disruptor in MENA and beyond.

The UK must proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to ensure it has the strongest possible set of tools to pursue it at home and lead essential international efforts to strangle its financing of terror proxies.

The transformative Abraham Accords, which Iran seeks to prevent, have shown that regional peace is possible. The UK should fully embrace the Accords as an unprecedented opportunity to extend the emerging network of peace and counter-Iranian influence. The UK is uniquely placed to expand them given its deep and historic ties across the region.

### **What are the main countries in which the UK should focus its efforts within the region?**

- 1) Israel is the UK's natural partner and key strategic ally in MENA. As MENA's only true democracy, the Jewish State aligns with British values, which is invaluable in a region long-dominated by turmoil and repression. The UK's strategic relationship with Israel makes our citizens healthier, safer and more prosperous.<sup>1</sup>

- 2) MENA is experiencing dramatic upheaval as a result of Iran's escalating destabilisation efforts. This has been exacerbated by a failure of Western policy to contain and deter Iran, and the U.S.' gradual pivot away from the region which opened the door to disruptive state actors such as China and Russia, to the benefit of the Iranian regime.
- 3) Despite these many challenges, MENA states share crucial strategic objectives with the UK, such as opposing Iranian belligerence, environmental technologies, and advancing the progress of developing nations. This underlines the importance of the UK retaining an active role region-wide. The UK will be best served by utilising its considerable soft power in a sustained effort to secure a stable environment through investment, security cooperation, bilateral and multilateral dialogue.
- 4) The transformative Abraham Accords offer a historic opportunity to secure regional peace and cooperation. The Abraham Accords disproved the outdated misconception that Arab-Israeli peace could only follow resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- 5) Arab recognition of shared Jewish-Muslim history through the Accords paves the way for a future based on mutual understanding, tolerance and coexistence, and has already delivered significant trade, investment and people-to-people exchanges. The UK is uniquely placed to play an active, supportive role owing to its historic ties in the Gulf and its deep alliance with Israel. The UK should prioritise engagement with MENA and Islamic states in a concerted effort to expand the Accords, deliver regional stability and prosperity, and counter Iran. The UK should appoint a Special Envoy for the Abraham Accords.
- 6) In a region beset by economic instability and socioeconomic challenges, the Accords offer a precious route to shared economic growth. The Accords are set to create as many as four million new jobs and \$1 trillion in new economic activity for the region in its first decade.<sup>2</sup> MENA economic prosperity should be a UK priority. The UK should work to create a multilateral free trade area for Accords signatories. This will act as an additional incentive for more MENA/Islamic nations to normalise relations with Israel, while also countering disruptive economic trade practices by Russia and China.
- 7) The benefits of a strong, integrated MENA economic area will extend worldwide. The Abraham Accords nations are in an ideal geographic position to serve as a gateway for goods moving across Asia and Africa and into Europe and North America.<sup>3</sup> This offers an unprecedented opportunity for the reorientation of global commercial transportation hubs, market access and lower costs, and will reduce dependency on China's manufacturing base.<sup>4 5</sup>

**What are the possibilities for a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine and how can the UK engage with all the parties involved to help bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict?**

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1185657/israel-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-09-21.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1185657/israel-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-09-21.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1149-1.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hoover.org/research/greater-sum-its-parts-abraham-accords-free-trade-area>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/09/g20-eu-and-us-back-trade-corridor-linking-europe-middle-east-and-india>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r1pmwvhtn>

- 8) Hamas's unprecedented October 2023 attack on Israel is a landmark moment in the region's history and a major setback to hopes for a lasting peace agreement between Israel and a State of Palestine. Iran's concerted effort to arm and support terror groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad poses an existential threat to peace. Peace will never be possible so long as genocidal terror groups such as Hamas are able to wield so much influence in the region. Decades-long Western efforts to get Hamas to adhere to the Quartet Principles have failed entirely and led to Gaza's emergence as a terror statelet. The UK must provide Israel with unwavering support in its efforts to uproot Hamas and its terror infrastructure in Gaza. Long-term, this is the best chance for an environment more conducive to peace.
- 9) The UK Government's firm commitment to a two-state solution is welcome. A peaceful resolution can only be achieved through direct peace talks between the two parties, without preconditions. It is regrettable that the peace process has been in stasis for such a protracted period and recent events mean it will not advance in the near future, but the UK is well placed to play an important role in tackling a number of the systemic problems within the Palestinian arena.
- 10) The PA has failed to develop the infrastructure of a functioning state. Corruption and mismanagement have undermined efforts to develop the pillars of statehood and have harmed Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> The international donor community has reduced or ended (including the UK) direct financial support to the PA, owing to concerns over aid misuse. Over \$40 billion of foreign aid has been directed to Palestinians in three decades, making Palestinians one of the highest per capita recipients of aid in the world.<sup>7</sup> The PA's failure to invest in creating a better future for Palestinians has had far-reaching, harmful consequences for the peace process.
- 11) The PA has been justifiably criticised by Palestinians and the international community for its democratic deficit. President Mahmoud Abbas has been in power for 18 years since being elected for a five-year term in 2005, causing a succession vacuum in which Hamas is vying for power. Support for President Abbas stands at 23% and many have lost confidence in democracy and support for extremist ideologies has grown, undermining chances for statehood and peace: 68% of Palestinians across the Palestinian Territories show broad support for forming terrorist organisations.<sup>8</sup>
- 12) Palestinian rejectionism has led to missed opportunities for lasting peace. Unilateral actions to recognise a State of Palestine outside of accepted frameworks of direct negotiation harms goodwill and impedes the peace process. CFI agrees with the UK Government's opposition to Palestinian unilateral actions and its position that a Palestinian state should only be recognised after a final settlement has been agreed in direct talks.<sup>9</sup>
- 13) Violence from Gaza will remain a major security challenge for Israel for the foreseeable future but the UK must be live to Iran's concerted efforts to expand Palestinian violence into the West Bank.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/ghost-hospitals-reveal-corruption-in-palestinian-authority-health-sector-2SAYUsuTUV4hTYSJ9EdhvY>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/foreign-aid-has-been-tool-suppression-palestine>

<sup>8</sup> <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/938>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-opposes-all-unilateral-actions-that-will-make-israeli-palestinian-peace-harder-to-achieve-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>

- 14) The PA must be held accountable for its role in promoting violence against Israel and antisemitism. The UK has failed to adequately challenge this harmful behaviour and Hamas's October 2023 attack must serve as a catalyst for UK policy change. The PA's payment of salaries to terrorists through the Fund for Families of Martyrs and the Injured financially must be stopped. The UK's current approach of calling for "reform" of the Martyr's Fund and for it to be "needs based, transparent and affordable" is ineffective. The UK should also pressure the PA to reform its school curriculum (which is used in UK-funded UNRWA schools) - major international studies have documented inflammatory material used widely in schools.<sup>10</sup> UK aid provision should be made conditional upon these harmful practices ending.
- 15) Israel's settlement expansion is counterproductive to the peace process, but it is misguided to view settlements as an obstacle to peace. Violence long predates the existence of settlements and the parties have agreed that Israel will retain settlement blocs as part of a negotiated, equivalent, land-swap deal. Israel has been driven by the 'land for peace' policy, evacuating settlements in land-swaps with Egypt and Jordan. Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza could have been a defining moment for peace but the region has instead contended with the violent consequences of Hamas rule and its ideological rejection of peace.
- 16) Looking ahead, the UK can best support Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts by proactively utilising its historic and deep relationships with MENA countries to encourage and support the PA to embrace the Abraham Accords. The UK should also support Israel's normalisation talks with Saudi Arabia which, as a figurehead within the Islamic world, would enable the Kingdom to jointly support the PA and Israel to reach a future agreement – hitherto unseen dynamics in the peace process. The UK should also scope - and partner with - Israeli-Palestinian projects to tackle shared ecological challenges and support Palestinian economic resilience.
- 17) In the absence of an agreement between Israel and PA, efforts must focus on strengthening Israeli-Palestinian civil society. The UK's long-standing resistance to directly funding peaceful coexistence projects has enabled the PA's regressive dismissal of them as 'normalisation'. A world leader in international development and soft power, the UK can and must now directly fund legitimate peaceful coexistence projects bringing Israelis/Palestinians together. The International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace offers an invaluable opportunity. CFI welcomes the Prime Minister's commitment to "explore" joining the landmark U.S.-led initiative and we call on the FCDO to now make this a priority.<sup>11</sup>

### **How can the UK work with its allies to curb Iran's nuclear programme and deter Iran from supporting terrorist groups and other hostile actions in the region?**

- 18) Iran's nuclear programme and support for terrorism represent the greatest security challenge for the UK, the West, MENA and our strategic ally, Israel, as well as the emerging region-wide hopes for peace and stability via the Abraham Accords. The UK-Iran relationship cannot be business as usual while Iran remains a major disruptor.
- 19) Iran must now be considered a nuclear weapons threshold state. The main components for a nuclear weapon are in place. Its routine enrichment of 60% uranium constitutes about 98% of the required path for full military enrichment level and the IAEA reports that

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<sup>10</sup> <https://owncloud.gei.de/index.php/s/FwkMw8NZgCAJgPW>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.allmep.org/news/continued-milestones-in-u-k-parliamentary-support-for-an-international-fund/>

Iran is in possession of enough enriched uranium for “several” nuclear bombs.<sup>12</sup> The UK must be clear-eyed about the nuclear activities of Tehran and needs to utilise the full range of remaining diplomatic tools following the failure of the JCPOA.

- 20) The UK is to be applauded for its decision to extend and introduce into UK law the existing sanctions on Iran’s ballistic missile programme beyond their October 2023 JCPOA deadline.<sup>13</sup> However, Iran’s systematic JCPOA non-compliance leaves the UK with little alternative but to formally trigger the ‘snapback’ of pre-JCPOA sanctions as required by Iran’s “significant non-performance” in accordance with UNSCR 2231; this is the most effective coercive tool left at its disposal.<sup>14</sup> It needs to be recognised that Iran’s nuclear transgressions have dramatically accelerated following the easing of sanctions enforcement under the Biden Administration.
- 21) It is essential the UK upholds its commitment to preventing Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. This is the only way to prevent nuclear proliferation across the unstable MENA region. Iran’s regional neighbours have expressed concern about its nuclear progress and some have called for their own nuclear programmes.<sup>15</sup> Proliferation presents a major challenge to UK interests and international peace and security.
- 22) The UK would instead benefit from fostering enhanced regional deterrents by joining the burgeoning Negev Summit group; a valuable bulwark of regional partners committed to countering Iran.<sup>16</sup>
- 23) Iran has practiced state hostage-taking as a means of financial and diplomatic extortion. The UK should appeal to the U.S. to end its practice of hostage release payments, which will only incentivise further hostage-taking and fund Iran’s illicit activities.<sup>17</sup>
- 24) The UK can play a role in tackling the permissive international environment for Iran, including by ending the ability of Iran Air and Mahan Air to operate in the UK. These airlines have been linked to the IRGC and transport of lethal drones for use by Russia against Ukraine. Companies should be prohibited from insuring or reinsuring the National Iranian Oil Company, the National Iranian Tanker Company and its associated vessels. The Government should also terminate banking licenses for Iranian banks operating in the UK that fund repressive institutions and weapons munitions in Iran, including Bank Sepah, which provides financial services to Iran’s Aerospace Industries Organisation (AIO), responsible for managing Iran’s missile programme.<sup>18</sup>
- 25) The Financial Action Taskforce’s decision to blacklist Iran in February 2020 provides a route to effectively counter terror financing.<sup>19</sup> The UK, with its world-renowned anti-terrorism financing regime, is well-placed to share best practice with international partners and engage constructively with Iran to bring it back in line with international

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/26/iran-has-enough-uranium-to-build-several-atom-bombs-un-warns>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-steps-up-action-to-tackle-rising-threat-posed-by-iran>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/2231/background>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabias-nuclear-asks-what-do-they-want-what-might-they-get>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/regional-geopolitics-and-second-negev-summit>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.fdd.org/in\\_the\\_news/2023/09/18/will-iran-continue-to-take-hostages/](https://www.fdd.org/in_the_news/2023/09/18/will-iran-continue-to-take-hostages/)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/what-eu-and-uk-should-do-now-to-hold-iran-accountable>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/High-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/Call-for-action-February-](https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/High-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/Call-for-action-February-2023.html#:~:text=This%20list%20is%20often%20externally,the%20FATF's%20call%20for%20countermeasure)

[2023.html#:~:text=This%20list%20is%20often%20externally,the%20FATF's%20call%20for%20countermeasure](https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/High-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/Call-for-action-February-2023.html#:~:text=This%20list%20is%20often%20externally,the%20FATF's%20call%20for%20countermeasure)

norms. This stands to bear greater fruit for the UK than efforts to revive the lifeless JCPOA.

### **To what extent are terrorism and malign Private Military Companies affecting stability in the region?**

- 26) Iran is the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism and while its malign use of proxies is mostly targeted at Israel, it is now undermining the stability of the whole region.<sup>20</sup>
- 27) Through the IRGC, Iran has accelerated regional interference. The Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces endanger Iraq's progress.<sup>21</sup> Saudi oil facilities have been targeted by drones and cruise missiles.<sup>22</sup> A UAE oil refinery and Abu Dhabi International Airport have also been targeted.<sup>23</sup> Shipping in strategically important international waterways has been attacked, with a British national killed aboard MV Mercer Street.<sup>24</sup>
- 28) The UK must continue to work closely with relevant partners to tackle Iran's destabilising use of terrorism as its primary means of statecraft. These acts are illegal under international law and in breach of multiple UNSC Resolutions. The UK must uphold these and continue to patrol crucial naval routes, such as the Persian Gulf, as an act of deterrence.
- 29) The UK must proscribe the IRGC to ensure it has the strongest possible tools to pursue it at home and lead international efforts to strangle its financing of terror surrogates. The UK's proscription of Russia's Wagner Group was welcomed unanimously following the violence unleashed in MENA conflict zones but the IRGC poses an immediate threat within the UK. Proscription will receive strong parliamentary support - 125 cross-party British parliamentarians recently wrote to the Prime Minister calling for proscription and a motion has been passed in the House of Commons with support from all major political parties.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

- 30) The MENA region is experiencing a period of sustained tumult exacerbated by regional and international power struggles. The problems facing the region and our strategic ally Israel are extensive but the UK finds itself uniquely positioned to play a positive role in fostering stability by levying its unparalleled regional ties and deploying its significant soft power capabilities.
- 31) Iran represents the greatest security challenge for the UK, Israel and MENA, and its malign activities necessitate a significant new policy response. The UK must support regional partners in their respective fights against Iranian-backed terror groups. The IRGC's export of violence around MENA and the threat posed to the UK requires its proscription. The

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<sup>20</sup> <https://usun.usmission.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-introduces-commonsense-resolution-to-extend-arms-embargo-on-worlds-leading-state-sponsor-of-terrorism/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.lse.ac.uk/middle-east-centre/research/Iraq-Research/iraq-shia-militias>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-49746645>

<sup>23</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/business-dubai-united-arab-emirates-abu-dhabi-yemen-8bdefdf900ce46a6fd6c7bc685bf838a>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-58124489>

<sup>25</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-05-02/debates/6B06D080-5111-441B-83F5-3772CC805C69/IranHumanRightsAbuses>

UK must formally trigger the 'snapback' of pre-JCPOA sanctions to reduce the likelihood of region-wide nuclear proliferation.

- 32) Israeli-Palestinian peace has been dramatically harmed by Hamas's major attack on Israel in October 2023. While the UK must continue to provide unwavering support to Israel in the shared fight against terrorism, the UK cannot afford to leave systemic issues within the PA unchallenged. Foremost, the UK must move decisively to end the PA's payment of salaries to terrorists. The UK should also explore areas of mutual interest to both parties; counter-terrorism efforts, economic growth, green-energy transition. The UK should also become a major partner to the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.
- 33) The transformative Abraham Accords represent an invaluable opportunity to expand peace not just between Israel and its Arab/Muslim neighbours, but also with the Palestinians. The UK needs to be full-throated in its support of this process and make it a policy priority in its ongoing diplomatic engagement with all MENA states. The UK should explore the establishment of a free trade area for Abraham Accords signatories, and anchor MENA in a new transregional trade route encapsulating Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. These long-term initiatives will provide an invaluable alternative to the region Iran is currently trying to shape.

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