

Written evidence submitted by Mr James Lynch (MENA0075)

1. This submission is made by James Lynch, co-director of the FairSquare human rights organisation and sometime visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). From 2004 until 2011 I worked at the Foreign Office, where I was posted to the British embassy in Doha. My last position was as Head of the Gulf team. From 2011 until 2017 I worked on the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International's International Secretariat. I have written about the place of human rights in the UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, for [ECFR](#) and in *What Next for Britain in the Middle East? Security, trade and foreign policy after Brexit*, published in 2021.
2. My submission primarily offers perspectives on the following two questions on which views have been sought by the Committee:

 - How can and should the UK engage with countries whose regimes do not respect human rights but who may be important for our resilience strategy, counter-terrorism efforts, economic growth and green-energy transition, or who may need humanitarian assistance?
 - To what extent should the UK prioritise political stability over the advancement of democracy in its relations with countries in the region?
3. This submission argues that while UK espoused commitments to the values of human rights, democracy and international humanitarian law have always been applied with deep inconsistency in the Middle East and North Africa, the contradictions between the positions it adopts in relation to allies and partners and those it adopts in relation to strategic rivals or adversaries have in recent years been drastically exposed. The profound human impact of this falls not only on victims of violations carried out by the UK's allies, but also where abuses have been perpetrated by the UK's strategic adversaries. At the global level, this inconsistency - widely castigated as an example of "western hypocrisy" - has severely undermined confidence in the relevance and applicability of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Britain's standing and its soft power have been badly damaged, reducing its ability to influence global challenges and achieve its own goals.
4. While then Foreign Secretary James Cleverley [wrote](#) this year that "our resolve to ensure that everyone can enjoy their rights is unwavering", the reality is that British resolve on human rights differs dramatically depending on the country in question. In Syria and Iran, the UK has used a wide range of human rights tools at its disposal, for example pushing for [war crimes investigations by the ICC in Syria](#) and imposing human rights sanctions against [Iran's morality police](#) over the Mahsa Amini Protests. An [arms embargo](#) is in place against both countries. However, in the case of the [devastating Yemen conflict](#), where UN investigators repeatedly found evidence of [war crimes](#) they said could lead to "criminal responsibility" by the Saudi-led coalition, the UK resisted serious moves to restrain its allies or hold them accountable, [rejecting cross-bench appeals](#) to suspend the issuing of arms export licences for Saudi Arabia. Instead the UK [fast-tracked the delivery of missiles](#) to Saudi Arabia, issued [licences](#) for the sale of £8.3bn worth of arms to Saudi Arabia between 2015 and 2020, and provided training, advice and liaison officers to the Saudi-led coalition. This support was ultimately found to have gone beyond what the government was permitted to do - in 2019, the [Court of Appeal](#) ruled that the government had not followed its own rules when assessing the risk that British arms going to Saudi Arabia could be used in the commission of war crimes in Yemen.

5. The UK's response to violations of international humanitarian law and human rights by its [close ally](#) Israel is similarly weak, notwithstanding the UK's [oft-stated](#) position against settlements in the West Bank and Occupied Palestinian Territories. When the [ICC announced](#) in 2021 that it would open an investigation into alleged crimes committed in Palestine since 2014 (which would include actions by Israel in its scope), the then Prime Minister called the move a "[partial and prejudiced attack](#) on a friend and ally of the UK's." This response apparently ignored the findings of a [2015 UN investigation](#), which the UK had voted to [endorse](#), that found that "impunity prevails across the board for violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law allegedly committed by Israeli forces, whether it be in the context of active hostilities in Gaza or killings, torture and ill-treatment in the West Bank", and raised the possibility that Israel's political and military leadership might be held accountable for war crimes.
6. This is not an attempt to make crude comparisons between the nature of the governments in Saudi Arabia or Israel with Iran or Syria; rather it is to highlight that the UK treats credible allegations of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by these states, and efforts to hold them accountable, in radically different ways. This difference is primarily explained by the relative strength of its political, security and trade ties to these governments. A senior British diplomat I interviewed in 2021 told me that, "we constantly live with endless contradictions between positions we take [on human rights]... It would be naive to think there are not political drivers."
7. Such contradictions - often characterised by outside observers as "hypocrisy" or "double standards" - have become more acutely obvious in recent years, with the conflict in Ukraine providing an emblematic example of what the UK's support for international legal norms looks like when a geopolitical competitor is accused of violating them. As the then Foreign Secretary told the [Human Rights Council](#) in 2022, "nothing – and no one – is off the table" in responding to Russia's aggression. The UK's political leaders have rhetorically placed support for Ukraine within a wider push to bolster global norms and values, with the Prime Minister saying [in June](#) this year that, "the U.S. and the UK have stood together to support Ukraine and stand up for the values of democracy and freedom and make sure that they prevail, as I know we will." The UK has firmly supported Russia's ejection from the [Human Rights Council](#) and the issuing of an [ICC arrest warrant](#) against Vladimir Putin, and dispatched its own [human rights investigators](#) to collect evidence on Russian violations of IHL in Ukraine. The UK has made great efforts to convince states in the Global South to support Ukraine and efforts to hold Russia accountable for its actions, emphasising the principles and norms at stake.
8. Allegations of double standards and hypocrisy, which are particularly potent in the Global South, have been supercharged by the way in which the UK has engaged with Israel over its response to the indefensible Hamas massacres and hostage taking of 7 October 2023. Israel has launched a military assault on Gaza unprecedented in its scale and ferocity, killing more than [10,000 people](#) including more than 4000 children. The UN Secretary General has termed Gaza a "[graveyard for children](#)", the UN [Commission of Inquiry](#) has stated that "all parties to the conflict in Israel and Gaza have shown reckless disregard for civilian life", while the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) has said that the unjustifiable Hamas attacks "cannot in turn justify the limitless destruction of Gaza", and accused Israel of violating international humanitarian law.
9. In this context, the UK has refused - alongside the US and the EU - to call for a ceasefire, despite the fact that the [UN Secretary-General](#) is doing so, with the Prime Minister saying that "this is not a time for

hyperbole and simplistic solutions.” On 25 October, the UK Immigration Minister went as far as to say that, “[we don’t believe Israel has broken international law](#).” The UK’s largely unqualified support for one of the most devastating military operations in living memory, which has left around [1.5 million Gazans displaced](#) and which has seen UN experts warning of the [risk of genocide](#) if there is no ceasefire, has been met with a degree of disbelief even among observers in the Middle East who were already sceptical of British “double standards” on human rights and international law. The UK has affirmed the importance of Israel adhering to international law while ignoring their violations of international law, which have included [collective punishment](#) of the civilian population of Gaza and [indiscriminate attacks](#) on civilian areas in Gaza. In this regard the UK has deployed international law as a political and rhetorical tool to enable the illegal conduct of one of its allies. This is antithetical to the object and purpose of international humanitarian law.

10. There are immediate, grave consequences for Palestinian civilians as a result of the failure of the UK, US and EU to rein in Israel’s military and demand a ceasefire. Additionally, looking further forward in time, decisions being taken now will have serious consequences for other conflicts or contexts where there is an urgent need to apply international law and standards. Such clear and obvious disregard for well-established norms in this conflict will serve as a clear disincentive for warring parties in future conflict to abide by international law. This places not only civilians, including children, at risk, but also combatants. It should not be controversial to say that the UK government’s apparent lack of respect for the application of the Geneva Conventions in Gaza places members of the UK armed forces at unnecessary risk in any future conflict zones where they are deployed. The conflict has done immense damage to global confidence in international frameworks and may have been fatal for the concept of the “rules-based international order”.

11. Outside the realms of conflict, statements of support from the UK, US and EU for human rights defenders in the region - which in some previous cases have led to prisoner releases or provided other forms of protection to political dissidents - are likely to have diminished impact. Authoritarian governments, whether in Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Iran, will seek to dismiss such expressions of concern as performative and political, comparing them directly to western actions in relation to Gaza.

12. The UK’s international standing and influence will inevitably be reduced as a result of its stark policy inconsistencies, or double standards. There can be little doubt that in the Security Council and General Assembly, UK arguments on human rights and international humanitarian law will be severely undermined by its actions on Gaza. Immense, long-term damage is being done to UK credibility. This effect should not be underestimated.

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