

Written evidence from Friends of Al-Aqsa to the Foreign Affairs Committee's Inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (IPC0035)

Friends of Al-Aqsa (FOA) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this enquiry and would be happy to provide follow-up written and oral evidence. FOA has been registered as an NGO since 1997 and is a leading voice for Palestinian rights in the United Kingdom. FOA works with politicians, academics, journalists and legal experts. The evidence will be submitted by the Chairperson of FOA, Dr Ismail Patel.

Summary of Recommendations

A. The UK government must align its policies with its stated position on occupation, settlements, and human rights. Inconsistency between rhetoric and action undermines the UK's credibility on the global stage.

B. The UK government must pursue a fair and just foreign policy that upholds a rules-based international order in its approach to Israel and Palestine. The UK cannot privilege Israel as this sends a harmful message that international law only applies to certain 'nations'.

C. The UK must take concrete steps to ensure all its citizens, whether supporters of Israel or Palestine, are granted equal rights. Discriminating against Palestinian supporters and curbing their rights while allowing supporters of Israel to advocate for their cause freely creates a dangerous divide.

Introduction

1. Since October 2023, over 40,000 Palestinians and more than 1,000 Israelis have been killed. Palestinians are holding around 100 Israelis, while Israel is detaining over 8,000 Palestinians. Israel has targeted and destroyed hospitals, refugee camps, universities, and schools. It is estimated that at least 90% of the victims are civilians, with a disproportionately high number being women and children. Nearly 60% of Gaza has reportedly been damaged or destroyed.
2. The escalation of violence over the past fourteen months has deep historical roots. These include the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians in 1947–48, the ethnic cleansing of 531 Palestinian towns during the same period, Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza since 1967, the blockade of Gaza since 2017, the denial of Palestinian refugees' right to return, the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, and the systematic denial of basic human rights to Palestinians.
3. The UK government bears a historical responsibility to help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In November 1917, the then Foreign Secretary issued the Balfour Declaration, promising a "national home for the Jewish people." During the Mandate period following World War I, Britain facilitated large-scale Jewish migration to Mandate Palestine while suppressing indigenous Palestinian resistance, most notably during the 1936–39 Revolt. This ultimately led to the UN Partition Plan of 1947, which failed to consult Palestinians and did not provide a fair resolution. These actions laid the groundwork for decades of displacement, ethnic cleansing, and occupation.

West Bank

4. 2023 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since OCHA began recording casualties in 2005. There were over 12,000 Palestinians injured and 476 killed.
5. The situation worsened further between 7 October 2023 and 21 October 2024. According to the UN, 732 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, during this period.
6. Since 1967, Israel has pursued a policy of settlement expansion aimed at creating “facts on the ground.” Today, there are over 250 settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, housing more than 700,000 Israelis. Additionally, approximately 25,000 settlers reside in the Occupied Golan Heights, with the Israeli government recently announcing plans to double this number by 2027.
7. Mandate Palestine has been reduced to approximately 12 percent of its original size due to occupation, settlements, the Wall, and the confiscation of resource-rich land. Furthermore, the West Bank is cut off from Gaza and East Jerusalem. Within the West Bank itself, fragmentation has made the establishment of a contiguous Palestinian state virtually impossible.

East Jerusalem and Masjid Al-Aqsa

8. Between 1 June 2023 and 31 May 2024, Israel approved some 8,200 housing units in East Jerusalem, an 86 percent increase from the previous year. In 2023, 81 Palestinians had their residency revoked, and there are at least 20,000 outstanding demolition orders in East Jerusalem—orders with no expiry limit.
9. There are around 10 Temple Mount groups campaigning for the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary and the building of a Jewish synagogue on the site. In the month of Ramadan (2021, 2022 and 2023), Israeli soldiers stormed the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary and attacked the worshippers, including using smoke bombs and stun grenades. Every year, thousands of Israelis supported by the Police or Army storm and trespass on Al-Aqsa sanctuary. In August 2024 - Over 2,200 Israelis forced their way into Al-Aqsa Sanctuary, supported by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Negev and other political figures. Ben-Gvir has claimed a synagogue must be built on the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary.

Gaza

10. Before 1948, the district of Gaza was three times bigger than now and had a 60,000 population. Israel, after 1947-8, reduced Gaza by a third to around 40km by 10km, and the population increased to 200,000 due to Israel expelling Palestinians from their homes. Today, the population of Gaza is around 2.3 million, with 1.8 million being refugees.
11. In 2006, the USA, Europe and Israel demanded the Palestinians should hold an election. Despite Palestinians being under Israeli occupation, they still went to the polls and elected Hamas.

12. From 2007, the people in Gaza were subjected to control and management through a draconian siege. A wall was built around Gaza. Nothing could be driven, flown or sailed into Gaza. Israel even controlled the type and quantity of medicine, fuel and how many calories of food per person could enter Gaza. This meant that Gaza became dependent on humanitarian aid to survive.
13. The UN in 2018 said that Israel's siege had made Gaza unfit for human habitation.
14. Between 2006 and October 2023, Israel carried out nine major attacks, including 2006 Operation Summer Rain - over 240 Palestinians were killed; 2008-2009 - Operation Cast Lead - Israel killed more than 1000 Palestinians; 2014 – Operation Protective Edge - Israel killed more than 2147 Palestinians and May 2023 - Israel launched a 5-day attack on Gaza, killing 33 Palestinians.

United Kingdom

15. The continued crisis between Palestinians and Israelis has an impact on community relationships, politics and security in the UK.
16. The Community Security Trust (CST) reported 5,583 anti-Semitic incidents between October 7, 2023 and September 30, 2024. In almost the same period, Tell MAMA recorded 4,971 Islamophobia attacks.
17. Pro-Palestinian groups are treated with suspicion and contempt. Police used powers under the Terrorism Act to arrest members of the PalAction group.
18. UK citizens have total immunity to support Israel, finance it and go and serve in the Israeli army.
19. There is a disparity in the governance and management of civil societies, including charities, against those serving Palestinians over Israel.

What can be learned from the record of UK Government policies to date?

20. The UK foreign policy over the past century has not only failed to resolve the Palestine-Israel crisis that the UK government was instrumental in creating but also made the establishment of a State of Palestine next to impossible.
21. It is important to note that during the 1940s, the Zionist group members of Irgun and Stern were proscribed as terrorists by the British government.
22. The British governments of Edward Heath (1973), David Cameron (2014), Gordon Brown (2009), Tony Blair (2002), and Margaret Thatcher (1982) all suspended arms sales to Israel on different occasions.
23. The UK government listed Hamas as a terrorist organisation in August 2021, and earlier in 2001, its military wing Izz al-din al-Qassam.
24. In 2023, a Roadmap for UK-Israel Bilateral Relations was signed. Although specific details are classified, the document references cooperation on trade worth £7 billion, defence, security, and cyber technology with more than 400 Israeli tech firms operating in the UK.

25. Until this 2024 Labour government, the policy was to unilaterally recognise the State of Palestine based on 1967 borders (UN Res 242). Labour has now changed that policy and recognition will happen as part of a peace process.
26. In October 2024, the UK sanctioned three settlement outposts and four settler organisations. Foreign Secretary David Lammy called on the Israeli government to “crackdown on settler violence and stop settler expansion”.
27. The UK suspended 30 of its 350 arms export licences to Israel.
28. The Labour government resumed UNRWA funding after being suspended by the last Conservative government.
29. The UK government in September 2024 abstained at the UN General Assembly vote demanding Israel end its unlawful occupation of the Palestinian territories.
30. In the last year, the UK has also on occasions abstained from voting for a ceasefire in Gaza.
31. According to David Lammy, the approach to foreign policy should be “progressive realism.” That is, it should be pragmatic and values-driven, not nostalgic.

What can – and should – the UK do in Regards to Israel?

32. The UK government already espouses values that, if implemented, could positively engage international partners and help facilitate a negotiated settlement. These values include upholding international law by supporting the ICC and ICJ, respecting the Genocide Convention and Arms Trade Treaty, being an honest broker by equitably applying international rule-based order, engaging in the UN by supporting resolutions that promote peace and justice rather than blocking them, and finally, upholding human rights values.
33. The UK government has declared Israeli settlements illegal under international law. However, settlement expansion is not driven solely by a handful of extremist organisations—it is a systematic policy supported by successive Israeli governments. In 2017, the Israeli Knesset passed the Settlement Regularization Law, effectively “legalizing” illegal settlements in the West Bank. In 2018, it enacted the Nation-State Law, which enshrines “Jewish settlement as a national value.” Current Israeli leaders continue to advance this agenda. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich openly advocates for settlement expansion as a means to tighten Israeli control over the territory. Over the past year, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Smotrich, and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir have emboldened settlers and prioritised expanding settlements in the West Bank.
34. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion declaring Israel’s ongoing presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories unlawful. The ICJ called on Israel to end its occupation without delay, immediately halt all new settlement activities, and evacuate all settlers.
35. Despite this clear ruling and UK government’s own policy on settlements, the UK government has failed to recognise that settlement expansion is not an isolated effort by extremist groups but a central policy of all Israeli governments. To uphold

international law, avoid hypocrisy, and prevent enabling Israeli violations, the UK must go beyond sanctioning four extremist organisations. It must extend sanctions to include all entities and individuals involved in advancing settlement expansion. Anything less risks legitimising ongoing violations, undermining the rule of law, and compromising the UK's credibility on the international stage.

36. Five successive UK governments have suspended arms sales to Israel, citing obligations under international conventions, particularly the Genocide Convention and the Arms Trade Treaty.
37. In this context, David Lammy, as Shadow Foreign Secretary, previously called for the government to publish its legal advice on whether Israel's actions in Gaza violated international law, potentially impacting arms export licenses. However, once in office, Lammy failed to release the original legal advice and instead announced the government was seeking new legal counsel—raising serious concerns about transparency and accountability.
38. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has stated there is a 'plausible' case of genocide in Gaza, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.
39. The UK must respect international legal bodies and immediately suspend all arms sales and military cooperation with Israel. Several countries—including Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovenia, Italy, and Canada—have already taken such action. Finally, it is critical to emphasise that Israel, or any occupying power, does not have a legal right to self-defence against the people it occupies. Upholding this principle is essential for protecting international law and human rights.
40. Despite the UK government's stated commitment to upholding human rights and combating discrimination, Israel's ongoing human rights violations have faced no meaningful accountability. Today, under an increasingly violent Israeli government, the very existence of the Palestinian people is under threat.
41. In August 2023, a legal study commissioned by the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) concluded that Israel's administration of occupied Palestine violates the prohibition of racial discrimination and apartheid. This assessment was reaffirmed in July 2024, when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Israel's policies and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory amount to segregation and apartheid, breaching Article 3 of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). The case against Israel's apartheid system is supported by leading international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW), as well as over 100 Palestinian organisations and 17 Israeli NGOs.
42. The evidence is overwhelming. The UK must recognise Israel's apartheid policies for what they are and take concrete steps to hold Israel accountable under international law. Anything less risks enabling further violations and eroding the principles of justice and equality.

What can – and should – the UK do in cooperation with regional and international partners, to help bring about a ceasefire?

43. The UK government appears hesitant to diverge from U.S. policy on Israel, fearing diplomatic isolation. While maintaining a strong partnership with the U.S. is important, the UK must also consider its relationships with the EU and the broader international community. True allies provide principled advice and advocate policies promoting long-term stability and prosperity, and championing the rule of law.
44. Concerns about alienating the U.S. are misplaced. Already, 144 out of 193 UN member states have recognised the State of Palestine, and the Majority of countries supported resolutions to end Israel's occupation and demanded an end to attacks on Gaza. Similarly, six countries have suspended arms sales to Israel without harming their relations with Washington.
45. Moreover, the UK has publicly affirmed its respect for the independence of the ICC in light of the ICC arrest warrants issued against Netanyahu and Gallant, and the U.S. has not retaliated.
46. The case of South Africa, which brought a genocide case against Israel to the ICJ with the support of 14 other countries, further disproves fears of U.S. reprisal. In fact, in December 2024, the U.S. dropped plans to review its relationship with South Africa, highlighting the resilience of partnerships even in the face of disagreements.
47. While the UK's direct influence on the ground may be limited, it holds significant indirect leverage through its special relationship with the U.S. and its strong ties with key regional actors, including Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and the UAE. These nations play a critical role in shaping outcomes in the conflict, and coordinated diplomacy could help lay the groundwork for peaceful solutions.
48. Promoting peace and stability is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for the UK. Inaction risks wider regional escalation with profound consequences for British interests, including energy insecurity, migration and terrorism.
49. The UK government has an opportunity to depart from the failures of the past. This requires moral leadership with strategic pragmatism. By strengthening alliances in Europe and the Global South, promoting human rights, and supporting a global rule-based order, the UK can restore its influence as a credible force for peace and justice on the world stage.

What can – and should – the UK do in Regards to Domestic Policy

50. The UK government's policies are increasingly at odds with the views of the British public. A YouGov poll conducted in May 2024 revealed that 55 percent of the population supports ending arms sales to Israel, while only 13 percent support their continuation. Additionally, 73 percent of respondents back an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Despite this, the UK government continues to undermine Palestinian advocacy, restricting their freedom of speech and right to assemble.
51. In the UK, Palestinian organisations face significant challenges in conducting basic activities. It has become increasingly difficult for them to open bank accounts, call for protests, engage with political decision-makers, or even for students to hold sit-ins or discussions. Registered charities wishing to send funds to Palestinians are facing

- barriers as well. Meanwhile, anti-Palestinian sentiments are stifling open debate, with many Palestinians and their supporters being unjustly accused of supporting terrorism.
52. In stark contrast, supporters of Israel have the freedom to voice their opinions, raise funds, travel to Israel, and even serve in its army without facing the same level of scrutiny. Groups like Temple Mount, which advocate for the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary, are allowed to collect funds within the UK, highlighting the double standard in the government's approach.
 53. This situation has led to a divided society, with the UK government's policies privileging Israeli supporters and undermining democratic principles. The government is effectively creating a two-tier civil society where one group's rights and freedoms are respected, while the other's are suppressed.
 54. To restore fairness and uphold democratic values, the UK government must take immediate action. This includes arresting UK citizens who travel to serve in the Israeli army and revoking the charitable status of organisations that support settlement building, the destruction of Al-Aqsa, or the occupation and apartheid policies. Only then can the UK begin to rectify the imbalance it has created and align its policies with the values of its citizens.

30th December 2024