

## **Written evidence submitted by Conservative Friends of Israel (IPC0044)**

This submission is made on behalf of the Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI). CFI works to promote its twin aims of supporting Israel and promoting Conservatism in the UK.

### **Executive Summary**

1. Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups continue to hold 100 Israelis and foreign nationals captive in Gaza, including 96 who were taken hostage on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023. The current fighting in Gaza persists due to their continued detention.
2. This is recognised by the incoming Trump administration in the United States which, together with the current Biden administration, is seeking to increase pressure on Hamas to reach an agreement with Israel on terms for releasing the hostages.
3. The UK Government's recent actions, including the suspension of arms export licenses, the resumption of aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and the failure to reject the arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Israeli leaders, have done little to strengthen the incentive for Hamas to negotiate a hostage release-ceasefire deal and are not consistent with the UK's previous robust support for Israel following the abhorrent attacks of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023.
4. It is essential for the UK to be clear-sighted about the nature of the conflict in which Israel is engaged, and to reject any moral equivalence between the legitimate actions of the democratic Jewish state in defence of its citizens and the behaviour of the terror groups that have been attacking Israel on multiple fronts.
5. Despite the security threats it faces, Israel has facilitated the transfer of over 1.2 million tonnes of humanitarian aid to Gaza, assisted efforts to vaccinate Gazans, and repaired water pipes, power lines and aid crossings repeatedly attacked by Hamas. Israel has consistently called upon and assisted Gaza's civilian population to relocate away from areas of conflict, operating humanitarian corridors and issuing warnings in Arabic.
6. Conversely, Hamas has embedded itself within the civilian population in Gaza, using schools and hospitals as command centres, launching rocket attacks from densely populated areas and using women and children as human shields, as well as systematically stealing humanitarian aid.
7. It is vital for the UK to remain in step with our closest allies in our posture towards Israel and to be resolute in addressing the threat from Iran.

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

8. Securing the release of the hostages, including 28-year-old British national Emily Damari, must be the focus of UK efforts at this time.
9. 251 Israelis and foreign nationals were taken hostage by the Hamas terror group on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023 and 96 remain in captivity in Gaza, as well as 4 hostages held prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> October attacks. Hostage-taking is a war crime under international law.
10. A British citizen, 28-year-old Emily Damari, is still being held captive and another British citizen, Nadav Popplewell, was murdered in Hamas captivity. There are nine hostages with British connections.

11. Hamas breached the existing ceasefire in place on 7<sup>th</sup> October, when it instigated the latest fighting with an attack of medieval barbarity, butchering over 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals and carrying out unthinkable acts of brutality and sexual violence.
12. It is regrettable that the UK supported a resolution at the UN Security Council on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2024 calling for an “immediate, unconditional and permanent” ceasefire in Gaza, and a UN General Assembly resolution with the same call on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2024, which provided no incentive for Hamas to release the hostages.
13. The U.S. exercised its veto at the Security Council, stating that a resolution for an immediate ceasefire must be explicitly tied to the release of the hostages. The UK should support the approach taken by the U.S. and seek to increase pressure on Hamas to reach agreement on hostage release.
14. In addition to putting pressure on parties who hold sway over Hamas to immediately release the hostages, the UK Government should increase its efforts with international partners to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the hostages who continue to endure inhumane conditions.

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

15. The approach of the UK, and other allies, towards Iran and its terror proxies over the last decade, has reflected an optimism bias which has not been borne out by the course of events in the region.
16. The UK supported the flawed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal which did nothing to curtail either Iran’s support for terror proxies across the Middle East or its ballistics weapons programme. The JCPOA was constructed on a mistaken assumption that Iran could be coaxed into playing the role of a responsible regional actor and that designated terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah were becoming less interested in armed conflict.
17. Iran has not faced any consequences for its flagrant violations of the JCPOA deal, including systematic non-compliance with its nuclear commitments. Iran must now be considered a nuclear weapons threshold state. Tehran has been emboldened by the West’s failure to respond to its belligerent activities, which formed part of the backdrop to the 7<sup>th</sup> October attacks and the subsequent participation of Hezbollah in the war on Israel.
18. The UK’s failure to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has further emboldened Tehran and its proxies.
19. It sends a deeply problematic message to Iran and its proxies that the UK no longer appears to support Israel wholeheartedly in its mission to dismantle Hamas and bring home the hostages.
20. The UK Government should increase its active support for the Abraham Accords peace initiative that has seen Israel agree partnerships with several Arab states. Those Arab states recognise that their previous policies towards Israel achieved little to grow the economy of the MENA region, improve their own security, or bring about the establishment of a Palestinian state. They had the courage and determination to take a different approach.
21. It is disappointing that the UK was slow to recognise the importance of these enormous changes in regional alliances and their positive benefits for Israelis and Arabs alike. The

UK Government should reflect on the lessons of the Abraham Accords and how it can support new approaches when it comes to the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

22. It is questionable whether the aid policies of the UK and other allies have done anything to counter extremism and support for violence in the Palestinian Territories. Reconstruction in Gaza following the current conflict, unless accompanied by demilitarisation and deradicalisation programmes, will not build a strong foundation for long term peace. In the West Bank, a more rigorous approach is required towards Palestinian Authority (PA)-sanctioned incitement and radicalisation, corruption, human rights abuses and freedom of speech.
23. The PA continues to pay salaries to convicted terrorists and their families. The way UK aid is designed ultimately has the effect of freeing up funding to enable these practices to persist.
24. UK has continued to support UNRWA despite extensive evidence of Hamas infiltration and problematic eligibility criteria. Terror infrastructure was found in over 32 UNRWA facilities in Gaza or in close proximity to them, including tunnels and tunnel shafts of arms depots, yet UNRWA at no point alerted Israel about the misuse of its facilities. UNRWA requires deep reform if it is to be considered a trusted aid partner yet the UK's assistance appears to be unconditional.
25. UK taxpayers' money has funded the use of a curriculum in UNRWA schools in the West Bank and Gaza that glorifies martyrdom and incites violence against Israelis and Jews. There is evidence of the involvement of UNRWA teachers in the 7<sup>th</sup> October attacks and hostage-taking, and it is a statistical inevitability that many UNRWA school graduates took part in the atrocities.
26. The previous aid policies of the West allowed Hamas to turn Gaza into a terror statelet with industrial-scale misappropriation of resources. It is vital that UK, and its aid partners, demonstrate that lessons have been learned from this.

**How can UK assure the resilience of efforts to bring about a lasting peace at a time of uncertainty caused by conflicts elsewhere and changes in leadership in the international community?**

27. Given its longstanding deep relationships and alliances with Israel, the Gulf states and other regional actors, there is a potentially significant role for the UK to play in supporting peace-building efforts in the region. Key to this, however, is the perception of trust and reliability as a partner. The recent shift in posture towards Israel has done little to enhance the UK's influence in the region among any of the principal players.
28. A shift in approach is required to ensure that we are at the forefront of efforts to foster peace and stability in the Middle East.
29. The UK Government has rightly stood with Ukraine as it fights Russian aggression. The same conviction has not been shown in the UK Government's recent policies towards Israel as it fights Hamas, Hezbollah and their Iranian backers.
30. The UK should take a principled stand alongside longstanding allies facing threats to their democratic freedoms, regardless of domestic political pressures.

*30<sup>th</sup> December 2024*