

Introduction

1. Gaza Families Reunited Campaign (GFRC) is a grassroots collective made up of Gazans in the United Kingdom (UK), migrant justice activists, academics and humanitarian sector workers.
2. GFRC is submitting views to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee inquiry into the Israel-Palestine conflict, as families impacted by the genocide in Gaza call for the UK Government to establish a family reunification scheme for Gazans seeking to join their families in the UK.
3. The campaign also exists against the backdrop of escalating atrocities, urging an immediate end to the genocide in Gaza and calling the UK Government to take concrete action to protect Palestinians, including the creation of a Gaza Family Scheme to enable Palestinians in the UK to bring their loved ones to safety until it is safe to return.
4. Nearly three years ago, we saw the then UK Government swiftly introduced the Ukraine Family Scheme to protect Ukrainian families, with the devolved nations following with their sponsorship schemes for displaced Ukrainians.
5. Palestinians in the UK are simply asking for the UK Government to replicate the same protection for their families, whose lives are at risk amid ongoing aggression and systemic violations of their fundamental rights.
6. With each passing hour, the situation in Gaza continues to spiral deeper into unprecedented catastrophe, with the Israeli military aggression and siege stripping Palestinians of their most basic rights to life, food, and healthcare.
7. The atrocities over the past 14 months is yet another horror that Palestinians have lived over the last 75 years. We must have an immediate end to this genocide to preserve the lives of those still surviving through these horrors and seeking safety in their homeland.
8. The International Court of Justice has ruled there is a 'plausible risk of a genocide' in Gaza, and war crimes and crimes against humanity are also being committed.
9. Therefore, we believe the UK Government must accept the responsibility and role it has had in allowing and enabling these atrocities to continue.

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

10. The UK Government's response to the conflict in Ukraine demonstrated its capacity for decisive action when the political will exists. The swift establishment of the Ukraine Family Scheme is a clear example of this.
11. However, the absence of a similar scheme for Palestinians highlights inconsistency and a failure to uphold equal moral standards. The scale of a proposed Gaza Family Scheme is significantly smaller than that of the Ukraine Family Scheme, yet the government continues to hesitate in taking action.
12. This disparity underscores an inconsistency in the UK Government's response to humanitarian crises, raising serious questions about its commitment to upholding universal principles of justice and equal treatment.
13. Despite the manageable scope of such a scheme for Gaza, the UK Government's inaction reflects a troubling lack of urgency and moral responsibility in addressing the

ongoing genocide.

14. The introduction of a Gaza Family Scheme continues to be an urgent moral imperative to our campaign. Family unity is an undeniable human right, especially in light of the severe and escalating threats to Palestinian lives.
15. Yet as Israel continues to intensify its aggression on Gaza - including using starvation as a weapon of war¹ - in direct violation of multiple orders of the International Court of Justice, many Palestinians in Gaza continue to find themselves trapped without any safe or viable path to reunite with their loved ones in the UK.
16. Our proposed Gaza Family Scheme is modelled after the Ukraine Family Scheme, enabling applicants to apply to join their family member (the sponsor) in the UK.
17. The sponsor may be a British national (or dual national), someone with refugee status or humanitarian protection, pre-settled or settled status, Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), or with leave to remain, for example through a student and/or work visa.
18. As with the Ukraine Family Scheme, our proposed scheme would include provision for applicants' identities and security checks through deferred biometric enrolment.
19. It would also require the Home Office (HO) and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to work together, with the latter needing to provide consular assistance to people seeking to access the Scheme to exit Gaza.
20. We know from the experience of Afghan nationals that UK Government offices can interact with each other to ensure that family members can be given safe passage. FCDO and the HO have done the same to a very limited extent so far, and this can be extended to families from Gaza too.
21. In the absence of a specific family route for Palestinians from Gaza seeking to join family members in the UK, Palestinians from Gaza can only seek to rely on existing routes.
22. These include those under existing immigration laws and policies which predominantly cover immediate family members such as one's spouse/partner and minor children; those subject to the sponsor's status in the UK, or outside the Immigration Rules on the basis of family life rights protected under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).
23. In and of themselves, these pathways involve **restrictive criteria, prolonged waits** (for example, up to 6 months for a family visa) and **hefty fees** (for example, £1846 per person if applying from outside the UK to join one's partner or child, in addition to an immigration health surcharge of at least £2587.50 per adult if applying for a 30-month period).
24. We strongly believe the UK Government has a moral and political responsibility to provide protection to Gazans fleeing genocide, as it has done in the past with Ukrainians and Afghans fleeing persecution.
25. **Therefore, the UK Government must urgently introduce a family reunification scheme, to give family members of those in the UK temporary sanctuary and reunite them with their loved ones.**

How can the 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?

¹ Gaza starvation could amount to war crime, UN human rights chief tells BBC, BBC News, 28 March 2024: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68679482>

26. To ensure lasting peace, the UK Government must address the root causes of violence by holding Israel accountable for ongoing violations through international mechanisms, while imposing an arms embargo and severing economic and diplomatic ties that enable its aggression.
27. Between October 2023 and May 2024, the previous UK Government was responsible for issued over 100 new licences allowing UK companies to sell arms to Israel. The current government has suspended 30 out of 350 licenses to Israel. Meanwhile, Israel has continued to kill innocent civilians in Gaza while depriving them of the essentials they need to survive. The UK Government must take responsibility for enabling this to continue.
28. The UK Government must also advocate through the United Nations (UN) and other bodies for an immediate end to the genocide in Gaza, ensuring justice, reparations, and accountability for the victims. It should provide comprehensive support for Palestinians from Gaza, and establish a Gaza Family Scheme to reunite families.
29. Palestinians from Gaza face **additional barriers** to exercising their rights to family reunion due to the near impossibility of exiting Gaza and their lack of status and access to support from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Egypt if they have managed to evacuate.
30. The UK Government's immigration rules on family reunion are, at best, unfit to meet the factual reality of the moment, and at worst, deadly.
31. The UK Government places a requirement that families register biometric data – fingerprints and photographs – before an application is even looked at by a caseworker in the HO. In Gaza, this is **impossible** because the UK visa centre is **closed**.
32. The HO recently in an answer to a written question said Palestinians in Gaza can enrol biometrics in Ramallah or Jerusalem² - but it is unclear whether this would have been possible pre-7 October, with one of our members saying he had applied 12 years ago and has never heard - let alone now.
33. Attempts to request that the HO “pre-determine” applications submitted online with evidence, before facilitating evacuation from Gaza, are routinely refused.
34. This is despite there being in place an ‘Unsafe Journeys’ guidance document setting out when this can happen. The misapplication of that guidance has been challenged in the UK courts and found to be in violation of the ECHR.
35. Nonetheless, refusal remains the position of the UK government. The UK Government – through the FCDO and the HO – have refused to assist with the evacuation of family members of UK visa holders.
36. These facts render the existence of the family reunion process a legal illusion for the majority of Palestinians in Gaza with close family in the UK.
37. Even if families have exited Gaza and reside in Egypt, and have registered fingerprints, the UK Government practice is to refuse the majority of these applications (family members who are not spouses or children).
38. Decisions take months, and reams of robust evidence documenting trauma, suffering, dependency and urgent need, are ignored. Many of these applications will be successful in the courts – but the psychological and financial cost of this failure to meet human rights obligations is great.

² Home Office Questions. Immigration – Palestinians, 22 November 2024: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-11-22/15674/>

39. While Palestinians are in Egypt, there are in limbo, with no access to state support nor access to UNHCR as they fall within the remit of UNRWA which does not have a presence in Egypt.
40. During the Petitions Debate in May 2024 on the need for a Gaza Family Scheme, the then Shadow Minister for Immigration Stephen Kinnock noted the “desperate and deeply distressing” situation and “indescribable anguish” faced by Palestinians in the UK seeing to reunite with their loved ones in Gaza.³ He made the following recommendations:
41. (i) Defer the biometrics requirements for those who are eligible for family reunion but cannot physically get out of Gaza
42. (ii) Operate a scheme whereby individuals in Gaza can have their family reunion visas assessed either online or by telephone and approved in principle before being assisted to leave Gaza
43. (iii) The FCDO to work urgently to ensure that all those who hold UK visas or are eligible for family reunion, but must leave Gaza in order to submit biometrics, are assisted to leave
44. (iv) The HO and FCDO to look urgently at wider obstacles to family reunion for the family members of British citizens and residents who are trapped in Gaza.
45. The current Government rightly identified the issues faced by Palestinians while in Opposition. **It must now act to implement the above changes.**
46. More widely, it must introduce a Gaza Family Scheme (modelled after the Ukraine Family Scheme) to enable Palestinians in Gaza to reunite with their loved ones in the UK on a temporary basis, until it is safe to return.

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

47. We believe that an immediate end to the genocide in Gaza is the only way to protect the lives of the hundreds of thousands of people remaining in Gaza. The UK Government must take immediate action to address the genocide in Gaza by publicly recognising it as such and leading international efforts for accountability, including its own role in enabling Israel to continuously commit atrocities in Gaza.
48. This includes imposing targeted sanctions on Israel, such as arms embargoes and trade restrictions with companies profiting from illegal settlements, and pressuring for an end to the blockade on Gaza to allow humanitarian aid.
49. The UK Government should also advocate for an international tribunal to hold perpetrators accountable, establish civilian protection mechanisms, and end its complicity by halting arms exports and trade that enable violence. These steps are essential to uphold international law and protect Palestinian lives.
50. **In addition, the UK Government must urgently introduce a family reunification scheme, to give family members of those in the UK temporary sanctuary and reunite them with their loved ones.**
51. **The UK has a moral and political responsibility to provide protection to Gazans fleeing genocide, as it has done in the past with Ukrainians and Afghans fleeing persecution.**
52. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the UK Government moved quickly to

³ House of Commons. Palestinians - Visa Scheme Debate, 13 May 2024: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-05-13/debates/C04330B1-6243-4B7B-9AFA-66AFCE259FC5/PalestiniansVisaScheme>

establish specific routes for Ukrainians to come to the UK, including the Ukraine Family Scheme.⁴

53. In response to the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and the fall of Kabul, the UK Government set up two Afghan resettlement schemes, citing the UK's longstanding commitment to providing to those fleeing persecution.⁵
54. The only way Gazans can return home safely is if an immediate end to the genocide is achieved and Israel is held responsible for committing genocide.
55. Therefore, **we believe the UK Government must now act urgently to prevent people in the UK from losing their loved ones in Gaza, by creating a route for them to reunite with their families until it is safe for them to return home.**

31st December 2024

⁴ Home Secretary statement on humanitarian support for Ukrainians, 1 March 2022:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-statement-on-humanitarian-support-for-ukrainians>

⁵ Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme HC Deb 6 Jan 2022 vol.706