

Written Evidence submitted by Human Rights Watch to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (IPC0105)

Human Rights Watch (HRW) welcomes the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the UK's role in finding a resolution to the long-standing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

HRW is an independent non-governmental organisation that monitors and reports on human rights in more than 100 countries worldwide. HRW has been documenting human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by all parties in Israel and Palestine for more than three decades and has researched every round of hostilities between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups since 2008.

In this submission, we seek to provide evidence on the following questions:

- *What can – and should – the UK do, in cooperation with regional and international partners, to help bring about a ceasefire?*
- *What can be learned from the record of UK Government policies to date?*
- *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?*

Context and Current Situation

1. For the past 15 months, Israeli authorities killed, wounded, starved, and forcibly displaced thousands of Palestinian civilians in **Gaza**, and destroyed their homes, schools, hospitals, and infrastructure at a scale unprecedented in the recent history of Israel and Palestine.
2. Nearly 47,000 Palestinians in Gaza were killed between October 7, 2023, and January 19, 2025, as a direct result of the hostilities, according to Gaza's Ministry of Health. The death toll, though, is likely far higher. Multiple models by doctors and epidemiologists estimate deaths caused by traumatic injury to be between 47,000 and 88,000. 70 percent of the 8,200 fatalities the UN Human Rights office (OHCHR) had verified by September were women and children. However, these estimates don't take into account deaths from illness, malnutrition, and dehydration.
3. Israeli forces forcibly displaced nearly all of Gaza's population, often multiple times. By May 2024, more than half of Gaza's population was crammed into the southern city of Rafah, which the Israeli military then attacked, forcing more than 1.4 million people to flee again. Beginning in October 2024, Israel cut all aid to northern Gaza and again forcibly displaced people there. Most of Gaza's territory was under military evacuation orders, part of a system of forcible transfer of Palestinian civilians that amounts to a crime against humanity.
4. Israeli attacks and demolitions destroyed or damaged 63 percent of all Gaza's buildings, rendering much of the Strip uninhabitable, clearly constituting ethnic cleansing in some areas and violating Palestinians' right to return. More than 87 percent of all schools, all universities, and 84 percent of health facilities in Gaza were damaged or destroyed, including as a result of apparently unlawful attacks.
5. Israeli authorities deliberately deprived people in Gaza of adequate water needed for survival for months, restricting piped water, cutting electricity and restricting fuel needed to run critical water and sanitation infrastructure, destroying warehouses and attacking sanitation workers, and blocking the entry of critical water supplies. Israel's denial of water to the Palestinian population

of Gaza amounts to the crime against humanity of extermination and the genocidal act of inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the group in whole or part.

6. Nearly all of Gaza's population has faced severe food insecurity or [famine](#). Israel's blockade denied [83 percent](#) of food aid entry to Gaza as of September, and on average people were eating one meal every other day. Israeli forces repeatedly [attacked known aid-worker locations](#), including a UK charity, after aid workers had shared with the Israeli military their precise coordinates in advance.
7. During the October 7 attacks on southern Israel, which resulted in the killing of 815 civilians, Palestinian armed groups committed [numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) against civilians. They also took as hostages 251 people, acts which amount to war crimes, and in August intentionally and unlawfully killed six Israeli hostages.
8. In the **West Bank**, Israeli authorities have [escalated their repression](#) of Palestinians, setting years-long highs in [numbers of Palestinians killed](#) and those held in [administrative detention](#) without trial or charge. There have also been upticks in [building of illegal settlements](#), [demolitions of Palestinian homes](#), and [movement restrictions](#) in the occupied West Bank, as well as in [settler violence](#) and reports of [ill-treatment and torture](#) of Palestinian detainees.
9. In **Lebanon**, HRW has documented violations of the laws of war and war crimes by the Israeli military, including apparently deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on [journalists](#), [civilians](#), [medics](#), [financial institutions](#), and [peacekeepers](#), in addition to the widespread and unlawful use of [white phosphorus](#) in populated areas, among other violations. Between October 2023 and December 2024, Israeli strikes across Lebanon killed more than [4,000 people](#), including more than 240 children, 220 health and rescue workers, and 700 women. More than 1,000 Israeli strikes across Lebanon on September 23, 2024, killed [558 people](#), according to Lebanon's Public Health Ministry. In subsequent weeks, more than [one million people](#) were displaced, hundreds of [thousands](#) of buildings and houses were destroyed, and entire border villages reduced to rubble.
10. Hezbollah attacks using explosive weapons in populated areas of **northern Israel** put civilians at grave risk of harm. Between late September and November 2024, salvos of Hezbollah munitions fired from Lebanon into northern Israel killed at least fifteen civilians and injured scores, and several strikes announced by Hezbollah claimed to attack civilian areas without specifying the military objective.

UK Policies and Response

11. Across political parties, the UK has for too long failed to call out, much less press the Israeli Government to end its serious abuses against Palestinians or call for accountability, and has at times even signalled support for these abusive policies. Accordingly, the UK has failed to uphold international law and use leverage, as one of Israel's allies, to bring an end to Israel's serious abuses, both before and after October 2023.
12. The former Conservative Government routinely undermined the Independent International [Commission of Inquiry](#) on the OPT including East Jerusalem and Israel and voted against other Human Rights Council [resolutions](#) on human rights in Israel and Palestine. In March 2023, the former Government signed a [2030 Roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations](#) which, under the guise of combatting antisemitism, provides that the UK will continue to discourage the focus on Israel at the Human Rights Council and other international bodies, disagrees with the use of the term 'apartheid' with regard to Israel, [opposes](#) the ICJ advisory opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's occupation in the OPT, and re-commits itself to introducing anti-boycott laws. The roadmap simultaneously fails to condemn settlements and the systemic discrimination and plethora of other serious rights abuses against Palestinians.

13. In June 2023, the former Government sought to push through an [anti-boycott bill](#), the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill, that would have restricted public bodies from making investment decisions that align with their human rights responsibilities and obligations. The Government claimed the bill would address antisemitism by prohibiting boycotts of companies doing business with Israel. The bill never made it through all parliamentary stages and was dropped ahead of the election.
14. Following the Hamas-led attacks on October 7, 2023, the UK rightly condemned these [serious crimes](#) in unequivocal terms. However, the UK failed to condemn or take action against the Israeli authorities' grave abuses. To the contrary, the UK [continued licensing arms transfers](#) to Israel despite the clear risk that UK-made components might be used to carry out or facilitate serious violations of IHL in Gaza. This put the UK at risk of complicity in grave abuses, in violation of its international obligations and domestic laws.
15. In October 2023, the UK, along with Russia, abstained on a UN Security Council resolution calling for full humanitarian aid access to Gaza and the release of hostages held by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups. That resolution, which the US vetoed, came after Israel imposed a total blockade on the Gaza Strip, blocking food, water, fuel, and electricity from reaching Gaza's civilian population. The UK has had a [mixed record](#) at the Security Council but has voted in favour of four resolutions since late 2023—three that were adopted in December 2023, March 2024 and June 2024, and another in November 2024 that the US [vetoed](#) (the latest one under the new Government).
16. In July 2024, the former UK Government [exhibited clear double standards on accountability and justice](#) with respect to situations across the International Criminal Court's (ICC) docket. In stark contrast to its referral of the situation in Ukraine to the ICC in 2022 and welcoming the issuance of an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, the UK sought to submit written observations to the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber I challenging the court's jurisdiction over Israeli nationals in respect of the prosecutor's request for arrest warrants against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then Defense Minister Yoav Gallant (but not challenging the arrest warrants for Hamas leaders). This position would have created an accountability vacuum for serious crimes committed by Israeli nationals in the OPT, fundamentally undermining international justice efforts (but see paragraph 18).
17. In a positive step, in [December 2023](#) and again in [February 2024](#), the UK issued travel bans against settlers who carried out violence against Palestinian communities in the West Bank. The new UK Government [further](#) imposed sanctions on three illegal settler outposts and four organisations that have supported and sponsored settler violence. However, the UK has still not imposed sanctions on Israeli officials responsible for serious abuses in the OPT, nor taken steps to ban trade with illegal settlements in the OPT.
18. The new Labour Government also took some welcome steps to reverse course, notably restoring funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and [abandoning](#) the former Government's initiative to contest the ICC's jurisdiction over Israeli nationals.
19. In September, the Government [announced a partial arms suspension](#), suspending approximately 30 licences for use in the current conflict in Gaza—out of 90 licences for goods which go directly to Israeli forces—from a total of approximately 350 military and dual-use licences to Israel. However, the Government failed to suspend UK-made components for the F-35 fighter jet programme going indirectly to Israel via the United States and other third countries. The Government has also failed to explain how it determined that other military items going to Israeli forces will not be used to facilitate or commit serious violations across the OPT or Lebanon. HRW [intervened before](#) the UK High Court in the ongoing legal challenge by Al-Haq and the Global Legal Action Network to the UK's transfer of arms to Israel.

20. While the new Government has made several relatively strong statements expressing concerns about Israel's conduct in Gaza such as [stating](#) that "there must be no forcible transfer of civilians within or out of Gaza" and [that](#) "there is no excuse for Israeli restrictions on humanitarian aid", it has failed to follow up with real consequences on Israeli authorities when they ignore its concerns, as they have done, to demand and pressure Israel to end its atrocities.
21. After the ICJ issued its historic advisory opinion of 19 July 2024 declaring Israel's occupation of the OPT illegal, the UK [said](#) that it abstained on the UN General Assembly resolution that followed *not* because it does not "support the central findings of the ICJ's Advisory Opinion" and indicated its "clear view that Israel should bring an end to its presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as rapidly as possible." The ICJ's advisory opinion [sets out clear obligations for third states](#), including the UK, notably to distinguish between Israel and the OPT in their dealings with Israel; to not support Israel's unlawful acts and the unlawful situation it has created in the OPT; and to ensure Israel's compliance with IHL. The UK has yet to take steps to comply with its obligations.
22. Following the decision of the [ICC's judges to issue arrest warrants](#) against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant of Israel, as well Mohammed Deif commander-in-chief of Hamas' military wing, UK Ministers and spokespeople appeared to be [equivocating](#) on whether the UK would execute the arrest warrants should the ICC suspects travel to the UK. The Government [has since stated](#) that it respects the independence of the ICC and would follow the domestic legal process in UK courts for the enforcement of ICC warrants. However, it has still not clearly stated that it would cooperate with the ICC to execute the arrest warrants nor that heads of state and government do not enjoy immunity vis-à-vis international courts (as would align with the [UK's position](#) if Putin were to travel to the UK).

Lessons Learned: The Need for Accountability and Ending Impunity

23. The [unprecedented atrocities](#) over the last 15 months are the result of past and ongoing crimes and other unlawful actions for which virtually no one has yet been held to account. Since 2007, Israel has imposed an [unlawful closure](#) on the people in Gaza, including a generalised travel ban on all of Gaza's population, with few exceptions, and sweeping restrictions on the movement of goods. About seventy percent of Gaza's population are either refugees who were expelled from or fled their homes in what is now Israel in 1948 or their descendants. For decades, they have been denied their [right to return](#) to those areas. Before the current hostilities, 80 percent of Gaza residents [relied](#) on humanitarian aid.
24. For over half a century, Israeli authorities have maintained an [abusive military occupation](#) over Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza. And there is an emerging [consensus](#) within the human rights community—including some of the [most prominent](#) Israeli [human rights groups](#)—that Israeli officials are committing the [crime against humanity of apartheid and crime against humanity of persecution](#) against Palestinians. The ICJ's July advisory opinion found Israel to be in breach of article 3 of the UN treaty prohibiting racial discrimination, which prohibits [racial segregation and apartheid](#).
25. While the current hostilities are unprecedented in scale, many of the abuses we are witnessing have been committed with impunity for years, including during prior rounds of fighting. During the last major escalation, in May 2021, HRW [concluded](#) that Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups had committed war crimes, and some of these patterns are repeating with greater intensity in the current hostilities.
26. Impunity fuels abuses and hollows out the ability of the law to deter atrocities. There is now more than ever a need for strong support for impartial and independent justice processes to bring accountability for serious crimes by all sides. This means support for international justice institutions like the ICC, the ICJ, the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on

the OPT, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, and prosecutions through national courts under the principle of universal jurisdiction. These pathways hold out promise to break cycles of impunity that are a root cause of the suffering in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel.

27. But international law depends on political will for its enforcement. This is particularly true for the ICC, which sits outside the UN system and does not have its own police force. Across all ICC situations, a lack of cooperation can stymie progress, from unexecuted arrest warrants to obstruction of Court investigations. It is crucial for governments to press Israeli and Palestinian authorities to cooperate with the UN inquiry and ICC as they carry out their investigations.
28. However, many states, including the UK, have remained silent on the importance of accountability and impartial justice, and at times undermined international justice mechanisms working on Israel and Palestine, which stands in stark contrast to the responses of those same governments towards proceedings in other situations such as Ukraine and Myanmar. This has led to a perception of double standards and put the legitimacy of these critical international justice mechanisms at risk.
29. Supporting legal processes before the ICC and the ICJ does not require taking a position on the underlying allegations. It entails entrusting impartial and independent processes with assessing the facts and determining responsibility and giving victims—all victims—their day in court. The UK made a positive decision to [vote in favour](#) of the UN General Assembly resolution in December 2024 requesting a new advisory opinion from the ICJ concerning Israel's obligations in relation to the presence and activities of the UN and its agencies, other international organisations and third states.
30. The UK should further reflect on how its decades-long reluctance to call out and meaningfully address the very serious abuses by Israeli authorities has helped sustain those abuses and failed to fulfil the obligations to ensure Israel's compliance with international law as outlined in the ICJ advisory opinion.

Recommendations to the UK Government

1. In all UK communications, **publicly condemn and recognise**, in clear terms, the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious violations of IHRL, IHL, ICL and the Genocide Convention being committed by the Israeli authorities, including acts of genocide, forced displacement, starvation as a method of warfare, and apartheid and persecution, and highlight the need to address root causes of the current escalation.
2. Press the Israeli authorities to **comply with all provisional measures ordered by the ICJ** in the case brought by South Africa alleging that Israel is violating the 1948 Genocide Convention, including ordering Israel to prevent genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, enable the provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance at scale necessary to meet urgent needs, lift its blockade, and prevent and punish incitement to commit genocide—measures which Israel continues to violate.
3. Take **all measures within the UK's power** to prevent genocide and press Israel to end its crimes and violations, cooperate with international judicial bodies and investigative mechanisms, ensure humanitarian access and adequate aid and basic services, and fully comply with the ICJ's binding orders and advisory opinion. Crucially, the following actions should be taken by the **UK to discharge its third state obligations** flowing from the advisory opinion.
 1. Undertake a **comprehensive and thorough review** of the UK's trade, military, security, and diplomatic relations with Israel, ensuring that its actions are fully aligned with its international obligations, effectively address Israel's breaches of

international law, and comply with the findings of the advisory opinion and third state obligations outlined.

2. Suspend **all military assistance and arms sales or transfers to Israel immediately**, including F-35 parts sent indirectly to Israel, given the clear risk they might be used to commit serious violations of international law and risk of UK **complicity** in atrocities. Review the UK's conclusion that it could not reach a "determinative judgment on allegations regarding Israel's conduct of hostilities" in light of HRW's findings, including on forced displacement as a crime against humanity in the context of Israel's conduct of hostilities.
3. Impose **targeted sanctions**, including travel bans and asset freezes, against Israeli officials responsible for or credibly implicated in ongoing crimes and serious violations in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.
4. **Ban trade with illegal settlements** in the OPT, including East Jerusalem, given it is impossible to do business there without contributing to or benefiting from human rights abuses and serious violations. The UK should also support the [UN database of businesses](#) involved in Israel's unlawful policy of establishing Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.
5. **Review the current UK-Israel Trade and Partnership Agreement and consider suspending** it in whole or in part, given the proof that successive Israeli Governments have seriously breached their human rights obligations under the agreement. Any Free Trade Agreement must incorporate a territorial clause that unequivocally excludes the agreement's applicability to the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967.
6. **Revoke the 2030 roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations**, entered into under the previous Government.
7. Publicly support the **work of the ICC** across all situations under its jurisdiction, including the ongoing Palestine investigation, uphold the court's independence, and publicly condemn efforts to intimidate or interfere with its work, officials, and those cooperating with the institution.
8. Publicly and clearly state that the UK would cooperate with the ICC to **execute arrest warrants**, as the UK is obliged to do as a party to the Rome Statute, should the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant or Hamas official Mohammed Deif travel to the UK, and that heads of state and government do not enjoy immunity vis-à-vis international courts. The UK is also obliged to **avoid "non-essential contacts"** with individuals who are fugitives from the ICC.
9. Support **domestic investigations and prosecutions** under the principle of universal jurisdiction, as relevant and appropriate, of those credibly implicated in serious crimes and violations in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.
10. Press the Israeli authorities to **halt their campaign to bar UNRWA** from areas under Israeli control, including the OPT which includes East Jerusalem. Continue to support UNRWA's efforts in the OPT and more broadly by providing adequate funding for the humanitarian response in Gaza, including resources for sexual and reproductive health services, the urgent restock of essential medications, and mental health and psychosocial support services. Make a **submission** in the new ICJ advisory opinion reaffirming the UK's views of Israel's obligations to the UN and its agencies, including UNRWA, as it stated in the General Assembly on 19 December 2024.

11. Address long-standing impunity by Israeli authorities and Palestinian armed groups for serious crimes under international law, and **support [reparations](#)** for victims of gross human rights abuses, including as set out in the July 2024 ICJ advisory opinion and subsequent General Assembly [Resolution](#) on 18 September 2024.

24th January 2025