

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

The UK's Arms Export Restrictions on Israel in Perspective

S. Samuel C. Rajiv

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S*ummary*

As long as Israel has the continued backing and support of the US—its most significant arms supplier—steps such as those taken by the UK or other mainly European countries to restrict the export of some components used in Israeli military equipment or resolutions by the UNGA are not expected to negatively impact the IDF's operational plans and objectives.

The United Kingdom Foreign Secretary David Lammy announced on 2 September 2024 that the UK was suspending 30 arms licenses to Israel out of a total of approximately 350 licenses. The UK assessed that these licenses could be used to procure equipment for use in Israel’s ongoing war against the Hamas in Gaza. These licenses relate to equipment such as those used in fighter aircrafts, helicopters and drones as well as for targeting purposes. The UK Foreign Secretary noted that an assessment concluded that there was a ‘clear risk’ that UK arms ‘might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law provisions’.¹ The provisions of the UK’s Strategic Export Licensing Criteria require the government to stop UK arms exports if there is such a risk.

Lammy insisted that this was not an arms embargo or a blanket ban but an evaluation that assessed arms exports licences to Israel, notwithstanding the tactics or ideology of Israel’s opponents. The UK also insists that the action will have no material impact on Israel’s security and only covers items which might be used in the current conflict. More importantly, Lammy noted that arms licences are not being suspended for naval equipment or equipment used in trainee aircraft or for international collaboration programmes such as the F-35 fighter aircraft programme.² The UK government added that it continued to support Israel’s right to self-defence in accordance with international law.

The UK government’s decision brought into focus the arms relationship between the UK and Israel and highlighted the supply chain dynamics that permeate the international arms market. The following sections will place in perspective the UK’s decision in the context of the Israel–Hamas war and briefly highlight arms restriction imposed by other countries on Israel.

The UK–Israel Arms Trade

The UK and Israel are among the biggest arms exporters in the world. During 2019–23, for instance, the UK had the seventh biggest share of global arms exports, at 3.7 per cent, with Qatar, the US and Ukraine being its biggest export markets. Israel was at the 9th position accounting for 2.9 per cent of global share, with India, the Philippines and the US being its top three export destinations during 2019–23.³

The UK–Israel bilateral arms trade, has, however, been rather modest. Arms export licenses worth GBP 18 million were granted to Israel in 2022, as against

¹ [“UK Policy on Arms Export Licences to Israel: Foreign Secretary's Statement”](#), Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), 2 September 2024.

² Ibid.

³ [“Trends in International Arms Transfers 2023”](#), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 2024, p. 2.

GBP 42 million in 2021.⁴ In 2022, the value of total UK defence export orders stood at GBP 11.2 billion.⁵ The UK’s arms exports to Israel, therefore, were less than 0.4 per cent of the country’s total arms exports in 2022. The European Network against Arms Trade (ENAAT) notes that UK arms exports amounted to Euros 653 million during 2000–22. The maximum number of export licenses related to the sale of aircraft, weapons sights and control systems, electronic equipment and explosive devices.⁶

The European Arms Exports Data Browser, which has data for UK arms exports during 2012–19, shows that the maximum value of UK arms exports to Israel related to equipment under Military List (ML) 10 (aircraft, unmanned airborne vehicles, aero engines and aircraft equipment, related goods and components, specially designed or modified for military use).⁷ The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), a UK-based pressure group, notes that the value of arms export licenses by the UK to Israel since 2008 till 2023 amounted to GBP 576 million.⁸

The UK government gave 108 export licenses for military and non-military-controlled goods to Israel from 7 October 2023 (when Israel’s war with Hamas began) and 31 May 2024, out of which 42 licenses related to military goods.⁹ Elbit, for instance, won a January 2024 GBP 25,000 contract to supply training and simulation equipment to a multi-national air exercise featuring NATO countries, US and Lithuanian soldiers.¹⁰

Israel, meanwhile, has supplied the UK with Hermes 450 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Spike multi-purpose missile systems, and Litening aircraft electro-optical targeting pods. The Hermes drones, for instance, were used extensively in UK military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Elbit Systems Limited joint venture with Thales UK for the Hermes UAVs was initially signed in 2007 and the contract was worth US\$ 110 million.¹¹

⁴ Louisa Brooke-Holland, [“UK Arms Exports to Israel”](#), House of Commons Library, 16 September 2024, p. 5.

⁵ [“Value of UK Defence Export Orders 2013-22”](#), UK Defence and Security Exports, Department for Business and Trade (DBT), 17 November 2023.

⁶ [“Exports and Licences of Military Goods by United Kingdom to Israel since 2000”](#), EU Export Data Browser, ENAAT.

⁷ [“EU Arms Export Database”](#), European External Action Service (EEAS).

⁸ [“UK Export Licences Approved for Military Goods to Israel Between 2008 and 2023”](#), Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT).

⁹ Louisa Brooke-Holland, [“UK Arms Exports to Israel”](#), [Research Briefing, The House of Commons Library, 16 September 2024](#); [“Export Control Licensing Data: 31 May 2024”](#), Export Control Joint Unit (ECJU), Department for Business & Trade (DBT), UK, 11 June 2024.

¹⁰ Nandini Naira Archer and Ethan Shone, [“UK Accused of Being ‘Complicit’ in Gaza Deaths After Giving Elbit New Contract”](#), Open Democracy, 14 February 2024.

¹¹ [“Elbit Systems Gets UK UAV Contract with Thales”](#), *Reuters*, 10 August 2007.

Global Supply Chains and International Arms Trade

While anti-arms trade campaigners have welcomed the decision of the new Labour government on suspending certain arms export licenses to Israel, they highlight that the restrictions do not cover British components used in F-35 fighter aircraft, a key part of the inventory of the Israel Defence Force (IDF). The IDF is alleged to have used an F-35 aircraft to take out Mohammed Deif, the head of the Hamas military wing, on 13 July in a densely populated Gaza neighbourhood, which led to the death of over 90 people. They note that such usage is a violation of international humanitarian law, the key basis cited by the UK Foreign Secretary while announcing the arms export restrictions.¹²

Foreign Secretary Lammy stated that the UK will not suspend all export licences for the F-35 programme as that will undermine the global F-35 supply chain which is vital for the security of the UK, its allies and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Foreign Office further clarified that ‘UK components for the multi-national F-35 joint strike fighter programme will be excluded from this decision, except where going directly to Israel’.¹³

The UK companies such as BAE systems supply 13–15 per cent of the content, by value, of each F-35 fighter aircraft in the world, including key systems such as electronic warfare suits and active interceptor systems, apart from airframe parts. The rear fuselage of every F-35 aircraft in the world, for instance, is produced in Lancashire, UK.¹⁴ The export of parts for the global F-35 programme were covered by an open general export license (OGEL), which was revoked on 2 September 2024.¹⁵ The OGEL allows UK companies to export specific parts and/or equipment to specified destinations multiple times. Other OGELs which removed Israel as a ‘permissible destination’ on 2 September 2024 included those relating to small arms and light weapons, printed circuit boards and components for military goods, among others.

Israel received its first F-35 aircraft in June 2016 and the Israeli Air Force’s (IsAF) F-35 fleet was declared operationally active in December 2017. Anti-Israel activists note that given an estimated price of US\$ 80 million per plane, and 15 per cent UK work share, with Israel having received 36 aircraft by end 2022, the value of UK exports specific to the F-35’s in the Israeli inventory will be more than

¹² [“Joint Statement: Suspension of Arms Exports to Israel is Welcome but Inadequate and Shows that Pressure Must be Maintained”](#), CAAT, 3 September 2024.

¹³ [“UK Suspends Around 30 Arms Export Licences to Israel For Use in Gaza Over International Humanitarian Law Concerns”](#), FCDO, 2 September 2024.

¹⁴ [“F-35: A Trusted Partner on the World’s Largest Defence Programme”](#), BAE Systems.

¹⁵ [“Suspension of Licences for Israel”](#), ECJU, DBT, 2 September 2024.

US\$ 430 million.¹⁶ Latest reports note that Israel has so far received 39 of the 50 fighters in its initial contract. Israel in June 2024 signed an additional contract for 25 aircraft to be received by 2028, which will bring its total fleet strength to 75 aircraft.¹⁷

The UK Secretary of State for Business and Trade Jonathan Reynolds noted that the suspended licenses also cover components used in F-16 fighter aircraft.¹⁸ While the UK does not have the F-16 fighter aircraft in its inventory, IsAF operates nearly 150 twin-seater combat and trainer variants of the aircraft, the second largest fleet of the Fighting Falcons. US subsidiaries of UK companies such as BAE Systems provide support to the international F-16 fighter fleet, including power, hydraulics and electrical systems support and mission computers.¹⁹

Arms Restrictions by Other Countries

The UK was not the only nation to have restricted arms supplies to Israel in the context of the country’s current military operations against the Hamas and the Hezbollah. The Spanish Foreign Ministry in February 2024 stated that ‘no arms sales operations’ have been authorised to Israel since 7 October 2023.²⁰ Canada’s Foreign Minister on 10 September 2024 noted that the Canadian government was suspending around 30 arms export licenses to Israel. Earlier, in January 2024, Canada had stopped issuing new licenses even though existing licenses were not revoked.²¹

Italy’s Foreign Minister in January 2024 confirmed that no new decision was taken since October 2023 to supply arms to Israel.²² The Italian Defence Minister told the Parliament in March 2024 that previously contracted sales were continuing after a determination that “they did not concern materials that could be used against civilians in Gaza”.²³ Italian exports to Israel have included

¹⁶ [“Statement on UK Arms Exports to Israel”](#), CAAT, 17 October 2023.

¹⁷ Emanuel Fabian, [“Israel Inks Deal to Buy 25 More F-35 Fighter Jets for \\$3 Billion”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 4 June 2024.

¹⁸ [“Statement from the Secretary of State for Business and Trade”](#), UK Parliament, 2 September 2024.

¹⁹ [“BAE Systems to Support International F-16 Fighter Fleet”](#), BAE Systems, 6 April 2021; [“Global Support Continues for the F-16”](#), BAE Systems, 18 February 2013.

²⁰ [“Statement on Arms Sales to Israel”](#), Ministry for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, 12 February 2024.

²¹ Michael T Klare, [“Canada and UK Restrict Arms Sales to Israel Over Gaza War”](#), *Arms Control Today*, October 2024; see also Niha Masih and Leo Sands, [“Which Countries have Suspended or Restricted Arms Sales to Israel?”](#), *The Washington Post*, 4 September 2024.

²² [“Decision Not to Send Arms to Israel Already Taken: Tajani”](#), ANSA, 20 January 2024.

²³ [“Italy Arms Exports to Israel Continued Despite Block, Minister Says”](#), *Reuters*, 15 March 2024.

helicopters and naval artillery. The IsAF inducted the first of the Italian company Leonardo’s AW119Kx Koala training helicopters, nicknamed ‘Ofer’, in May 2024. The contract for the helicopters was signed in 2019. It is pertinent to note that Leonardo acquired the British-Italian company AgustaWestland in 2016. AgustaWestland was itself formed in 2000 when the Italian major Finmeccanica joined with the British company GKN to merge their helicopter brands (Agusta and Westland respectively). During 2019–23, Italy was the third biggest supplier of arms and equipment to Israel, after the US and Germany, albeit at a measly less than 1 per cent share.²⁴

Israel’s biggest arms supplier is the United States, accounting for 69 per cent of its arms imports during 2019–23. It is pertinent to note that even the US restricted the sale of 2,000 and 500 pound bombs to Israel ahead of the Israel Defence Forces’ (IDF) offensive focused on Rafah. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told a US Congressional Committee in May 2024 that the Biden administration had paused “one shipment of high payload munitions” and stated that Israel “shouldn’t launch a major attack into Rafah without accounting for and protecting the civilians that are in that battlespace”.²⁵ President Biden told CNN in an interview on 9 May 2024 that he has “made it clear’ to the Netanyahu government that if they went into Rafah, the US will not supply “weapons and artillery shells” even as the US would continue to provide defensive weapons to Israel such as the Iron Dome air defence system.²⁶

The US, though, allowed for the shipment of 500 pound bombs subsequently in July 2024.²⁷ US officials were cited as stating that the Biden administration had supplied at least 14,000 2,000 pound bombs to Israel, apart from precision-guided missiles, among other equipment.²⁸ Israel’s Defence ministry in August 2024 stated that the US had supplied ‘armored vehicles, munitions, ammunition, personal protection gear and medical equipment’ worth more than 50,000 tonnes and that these equipment was ‘crucial for sustaining the IDF’s operational capabilities during the ongoing war’.²⁹ The Biden administration also approved of a US\$ 20 billion arms package to Israel in August 2024, including fighter jets among other equipment, to be delivered from 2026 onwards.

²⁴ [“Trends in International Arms Transfers 2023”](#), SIPRI, p. 6.

²⁵ [“Pentagon Chief Confirms US Pause on Weapons Shipment to Israel”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 8 May 2024.

²⁶ Kevin Liptak, [“Biden Says He Will Stop Sending Bombs and Artillery Shells to Israel if it Launches Major Invasion of Rafah”](#), *CNN*, 9 May 2024.

²⁷ Tom Bennet, [“US to Resume Shipments of 500lb Bombs to Israel”](#), *BBC*, 11 July 2024.

²⁸ Humeyra Pamuk and Mike Stone, [“Exclusive: US has Sent Israel Thousands of 2,000-Pound Bombs since Oct. 7”](#), *Reuters*, 29 June 2024.

²⁹ Emanuel Fabian, [“Israel Says US Shipments of Arms and Equipment During War Exceed 50,000 Tons”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 26 August 2024.

Going Forward

The IDF has carried out intense military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah targets and eliminated the key leaderships of both the organisations, post the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks. The IDF operations have resulted in the displacement of 1.9 million people in the Gaza Strip and the death of at least 41,615 Palestinians, as per the Gaza Ministry of Health.³⁰ After the IDF began its ground offensive in southern Lebanon on 1 October, French President Emmanuel Macron has called for an arms sales ban on Israel and asserted that “Lebanon cannot become another Gaza”. Prime Minister Netanyahu has criticised Macron’s statement calling for an arms embargo as a “disgrace”.³¹ The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 13 September 2024 meanwhile overwhelmingly passed a resolution (with 124 in favour, 14 against and 43 abstentions) calling on States to cease providing ‘arms, ammunition and related equipment’ to Israel, among other requirements.³²

The UK government’s decision to restrict certain arms export licenses highlighted Israel’s external sources of defence component/equipment supplies in the context of its current military operations. It reinforces that very few countries, if any, are fully self-sufficient in arms production. Even though Israel is a major arms exporter—overwhelmingly relating to niche equipment such as missiles, sensors and air defence systems—it is still dependent on external sources for key platforms such as fighter jets and related components. Analysts note that this dependence and the massive amounts of military aid that has been provided by the US has, however, not had any significant leverage over Israeli military actions. As long as Israel has the backing and support of its most significant arms supplier—the US, steps such as those taken by the UK or other mainly European countries to restrict the export of components used in Israeli military equipment or resolutions by the UNGA are not expected to negatively impact the IDF’s operational plans and objectives, in the near to medium term.

³⁰ [“UNRWA Situation Report #141 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem”](#), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 4 October 2024.

³¹ [“France’s Macron Calls For Arms Sales Ban on Israel As Gaza War Nears A Year”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 6 October 2024.

³² [“UN General Assembly Demands Israel End ‘Unlawful Presence’ in Occupied Palestinian Territory”](#), *UN News*, 18 September 2024. India was among the 43 countries that abstained on this resolution.

About the Author



Dr. S. Samuel C. Rajiv is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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