

# Britain overturns ban on selling arms to Israel

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Britain's Labour government has effectively overturned its official ban on exporting arms to Israel that could be used for internal repression against the Palestinians. The pretext used would also justify the unrestricted export of arms to many other oppressive regimes.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw not only stated that F16 fighter parts will be sold to the United States, even though the completed planes will be sold on to Israel, but also announced new export guidelines agreed by the trade and industry secretary, Patricia Hewitt, covering British components that would be incorporated in weapons systems sold on to third countries.

He gave a number of excuses for allowing the export of the Head Up Display (HUDS) units, produced by BAE Systems, Britain's largest arms company, and used by pilots to lock on to bombing targets. But he stressed the need for policies that would serve Britain's multi-billion pounds arms industry and which would not antagonise the United States.

The arms export criteria needed changing because it did "not take full account of a very fast changing situation... defence industries these days are much more akin to multi-national, in this case, transatlantic, assembly lines, in which different countries are contributing components, in some cases two components, to put into final use equipment".

"What I have done is publish factors which will now be taken into account for the export of such components.

"They include whether the receiving country for the incorporation of one set of parts into the final product itself has a good export control license system. Now it happens that the United States does."

The contention that the US has an exemplary arms export control system is deeply cynical, given that the Bush administration is the major arms supplier to the Sharon government and the staunchest supporter of its

efforts to destroy the Palestinian Authority. In the last year and a half, America has exported well over \$2 billion worth of armaments to Israel.

Straw dismissed his critics, insisting that Britain was "not a pacifist country and I do not believe that we would make the world a safer place by Britain not being involved in defence expenditure here nor in responsible defence exports." He said that the US-UK defence relationship was "fundamental" to Britain's national security, while a Downing Street spokesman added, "If there is any doubt about our reliability as a supplier the Americans will go elsewhere" on the planned £100 billion joint strike fighter project due to enter service with the US air force and the RAF in the next decade.

The decision met with opposition from within the government and criticism from both the main opposition parties.

Labour's Alice Mahon warned of "real growing unease" among backbench MPs at the "completely immoral" decision. She described it as proof of the government slavishly following the wishes of George W. Bush: "It is just another example of Bush saying, 'Do this'."

Labour's Brian Iddon, secretary of the Commons All-Party Britain-Palestine Group, said: "I am very disappointed that we are aiding and abetting the Americans to attack the Palestinians."

Commons Speaker Michael Martin is deciding whether to allow a Private Notice Question, which compels ministers to answer criticism in parliament.

Straw had also faced opposition from within the Foreign Office. Former Foreign Minister Ben Bradshaw was said to be "totally dismayed" when he heard of Straw's intention to give the green light to export display units used by F-16 pilots. A desire to preserve political and military relations with the United States is certainly a major consideration for the

government, but Britain is a major international arms supplier in its own right, to many regimes including Israel.

As part of its supposedly ethical foreign policy, Labour pledged to uphold what it called “a responsible arms trade” including a commitment to not issue export licenses for sales of arms to regimes that might use them for internal repression or international aggression.

It was politically embarrassing, therefore, when the F-16s for which it builds equipment began flying regular bombing sorties over Palestinian territories in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Straw then told MPs that he was, “profoundly concerned at the scenes of widespread destruction of densely populated refugee camps.”

The UK government also formally complained in November 2000 about the use of British made components in tanks and helicopters used by the Israelis in the territories. This was purely for public consumption, following revelations of Britain’s extensive arms trade with Israel, including British components in Israeli Merkava tanks and US Apache helicopters supplied to Israel.

The *Mirror* newspaper lists UK arms exports to Israel from 1997-2001 from the Strategic Export Controls annual reports totaling 1,286 export licenses. These included over 168 that were open-ended, in orders worth millions of dollars.



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