

Starmer government's weasel words over Netanyahu arrest warrant make clear he will face no UK action

Paul Bond
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Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government responded to the arrest warrants against Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former defence minister Yoav Gallant with pro forma statements that it would observe the International Criminal Court (ICC) rulings. But they were framed to make it clear that no action is intended.

The ICC issued warrants last week against Netanyahu and Gallant for "the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare," and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution and other inhumane acts. The court also issued an arrest warrant for Hamas military leader Mohammed Deif, who is believed to have been killed by Israel.

Starmer's government, which includes former lawyers—including the prime minister and Foreign Secretary David Lammy—issued formulaic acknowledgements of the ICC's authority. A Downing Street spokesman said November 21, "We respect the independence of the ICC, which is the primary institutional institution for investigating and prosecuting the most serious crimes in relation to international law."

Asked whether Netanyahu would be arrested if he came to Britain, however, the spokesman replied, "We are not going to get into hypotheticals."

Home Secretary Yvette Cooper also refused to say that Netanyahu would be arrested in Britain, stating, "Obviously we have always respected the independence of the International Criminal Court but those issues that they investigate are matters for them rather than for the government." She told *Sky News*, "We've always respected the importance of international law, but in the majority of the cases that they pursue, they don't become part of the British legal process."

Downing Street's statement was in fact a further full-throated defence of the Israeli regime, war crimes and all. "This Government has been clear that Israel has a right to defend itself in accordance with international law," it reiterated.

What Downing Street calls "self-defence" has so far seen mass murder, more than 90 percent of the population of Gaza internally displaced, and the systematic destruction of infrastructure. Most houses, schools, hospitals and universities have been destroyed or damaged, and journalists attempting to report the onslaught have been assassinated by the Israel Defense Forces.

This formed part of the charge of the ICC, who determined there are "reasonable grounds to believe" that Netanyahu and Gallant "intentionally and knowingly deprived the civilian population in Gaza of objects indispensable to their survival, including food, water, and medicine and medical supplies, as well as fuel and electricity."

The official death toll stands at 44,000 Palestinians, with 104,000 injured and leading British medical journal *The Lancet* has found "no evidence of inflated mortality reporting from the Gaza Ministry of Health." In its own report in July, moreover, *The Lancet* suggested in what it said was a "conservative" estimate that the death toll could be 186,000 or more.

The Downing Street spokesman said the government remained "focused on pushing for an immediate ceasefire to bring an end to the devastating violence in Gaza which is essential to protect civilians, ensure the release of hostages, and to increase humanitarian aid into Gaza."

On this basis it has made explicit its determination to continue backing Netanyahu's Zionist regime. A spokesman confirmed, "The Prime Minister will continue to speak to the prime minister of Israel and indeed all allies in order to conduct the essential business of reaching a ceasefire in the Middle East... it's obviously important that we have a dialogue with Israel at all levels to find a diplomatic solution to this war."

All such statements are a cover for supporting Israel all down the line. Israel's fascist regime has responded to every ceasefire announcement with a renewed escalation of military activity across the broader region. And Downing

Street dutifully insisted, “There is no moral equivalence between Israel, a democracy, and Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah, which are terrorist organisations.”

Other international heads of state were less equivocal in their reaction. The Dutch government of Dick Schoof stated it would arrest Netanyahu if he entered the Netherlands, while Irish Taoiseach Simon Harris replied to the question: “Yes, absolutely. We support international courts and we apply their warrants.”

These statements also rest on a determination to prevent that embarrassing position from arising in the first place. Starmer’s response was in part required because Britain—unlike Israel and America which have both been bullish in their contempt of the warrants—is a member of the ICC.

This did not stop France, an ICC founder state, from declaring Wednesday it would not break relations with Israel and would not arrest Netanyahu. Stating that it would “comply with its international obligations,” the French argued that its other obligations under international law required it to respect Netanyahu’s immunity. This, it said, was guaranteed precisely because Israel has not joined the ICC and had therefore not waived such immunities.

The ICC’s charges do not just condemn Israel. Those who finance, direct and authorise a crime can also be held legally culpable in its commission. Shortly after Israel launched its attack on Gaza, Starmer told LBC radio interviewer Nick Ferrari, “Israel must have that right, does have that right, to defend herself.” Ferrari asked, “A siege is appropriate? Cutting off power? Cutting off water?” Starmer replied, “I think that Israel does have that right,” while claiming that “everything should be done within international law.”

Ever since Starmer and his Foreign Secretary David Lammy have doubled down, in the face of international human rights law, refusing to describe the mass slaughter in Gaza as a genocide.

The French position on immunity is being heavily promoted by senior legal academics at the right-wing Policy Exchange thinktank. Conservative Shadow Foreign Secretary Priti Patel echoed government condemnation of any suggested “moral equivalence,” calling on Labour explicitly to “condemn and challenge” the warrants.

The Starmer government’s attitude to “international law” and genocide, and refusal to declare for Netanyahu’s arrest, can be understood most clearly in the recent appointment of veteran Blairite Jonathan Powell as national security adviser.

Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998 for extradition to Spain on charges relating to the murder of more than 3,100 people during the 1973 military coup. He was feted and protected by the British

bourgeoisie, with his “house arrest” served in luxury at the Wentworth estate in Surrey and lightened by a gift of fine malt Scotch from his admirer, former Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

Pinochet eventually escaped extradition and the courts thanks to a deal between Tony Blair’s Labour government and then Chilean President Eduardo Frei brokered by Powell. The only senior adviser to last the whole period of the unindicted old war criminal’s 10 years as prime minister, Powell also played a pivotal role in Blair’s decision to back the US in the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

As Blair’s right-hand man, he was subsequently involved in 2005 negotiations for a £40 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia. He worked there alongside his brother Lord Charles Powell—a former adviser to Thatcher—and as Blair’s 2001 envoy to Syria and then a consultant to arms manufacturer BAE Systems.

Figures close to the fascist incoming US President Donald Trump have threatened a brusque response over the ICC warrants. The Heritage Foundation thinktank, creator of Project 2025, has warned “there will be hell to pay for any international leader buying into this bulls**t.”

Starmer is fully in line with the interests of British imperialism as the reliable junior partner of US imperialism. As Director of Public Prosecutions (2008-2013), he made four trips to Washington to liaise over what ended up a 14-year persecution in London of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. He played a key role in ensuring Assange’s continued detention during that time. His response to the ICC warrants points to him remaining a point man for Washington, as Trump prepares to take office.



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