

UK Labour government's token sanctions against settlers conceal continued collusion with Israeli genocide

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Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband announced government plans Tuesday to ban trade with Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which Britain has long deemed to be in breach of international law, and sanction individuals and companies facilitating settlement expansion. He also announced plans for a ban on arms licences and other exports that “materially contribute to the occupation”, as well as on the advertising of illegal settlement properties in Britain.

Britain's plans were announced in coordination with Canada and France, with other countries pledging to follow suit. It comes decades after these governments denounced the settlements while continuing to trade with the businesses that sustain them.

It was widely seen as a belated—and face-saving—attempt by incoming Prime Minister Andy Burnham to shore up support for Labour in the wake of its slavish support for Israel's three year-long genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza under Keir Starmer. Labour faces a by-election in Starmer's former Holborn and St Pancras seat that Green party leader Zack Polanski will contest. Polanski has won popular support in large measure due to his opposition to Israel's assault on Gaza.

Giving the lie to any notion that the sanctions would have a significant impact, British diplomats reportedly told their US counterparts that the move was “largely symbolic” and would have “no material impact on the UK's wider relationship with Israel on trade or security”.

This distinction is even clearer in Britain's military relationship with Israel. While Miliband said the government would impose further restrictions on the export of arms to Israel, over and above those announced in September 2024, UK firms will continue supplying parts for the F-35 fighter jet, of which the UK builds 15 percent by value, under a “carve-out”. Israel has used its US-supplied F-35 jets in its illegal wars on Gaza and Iran, as well as its attacks on Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.

Miliband, in a handwringing speech, told the House of

Commons that Britain could no longer stand back and watch the suffering in the West Bank and Israel's destruction of the two-state solution. Nearly 60 years after Israel seized the West Bank in the 1967 Arab Israeli war, he declared that the British government officially regards the occupation as unlawful and stated that ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is taking place in the West Bank.

It comes more than two years after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion in July 2024, at the request of the UN General assembly, confirming yet again the illegality of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem under international law. The ICJ called for settlement building to stop and Israeli settlers to leave occupied Palestinian territory and for governments to stop helping sustain Israel's unlawful presence.

Miliband added, “The British government agrees that there is ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in areas of the West Bank—perpetrated by settler terrorists. And all too often the Israeli government has turned a blind eye to this and worse, members of it have made statements and taken actions to support the forced displacement of Palestinians.”

Britain is now acknowledging that ethnic cleansing is taking place in the West Bank while insisting that its sanctions target settlements and settlers, not Israel. But the Israeli government promotes settlement expansion, protects settler violence and advances the displacement of Palestinians.

He added that legislation would only follow in six to nine months. This delay would allow the ban to be modified or abandoned should the Israeli elections, set for October 27, lead to the fall of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and install a less openly belligerent government, although there is cross-party support in Israel for the expansion of the settlements and opposition to Palestinian statehood.

The economic significance of the trade ban is extremely limited. Total UK-Israel trade in goods and services was

£5.9 billion (\$7.86 billion) in the four quarters to March 2026. Goods originating in Israeli settlements are not separately identified in British trade statistics, but settlement goods are only a tiny proportion of Israel's overall exports. The latest available figures put total UK trade with the Occupied Palestinian Territories at only about £40 million.

More revealing is the extent to which Britain remains economically entangled with companies linked to the settlements. An *Al Jazeera* investigation found that at least 17 such companies hold UK public-sector contracts worth more than £2.1 billion. (\$2.95 billion).

The government has provided little detail on how it will distinguish settlement goods from other Israeli products as they pass through companies, distributors, packing centres and complex supply chains, or how it will prevent goods being routed through other channels.

By presenting the problem as one of “settler terrorists”, Miliband turned a system of state-supported territorial expansion into a problem of a few extremist individuals. Yet settler attacks take place under the protection of the Israel Defence Forces, while the Israeli state provides the land, infrastructure, military protection and legal framework through which settlement expansion takes place. The foreign secretary insisted, “The sanctions regime will target illegal settlements and settlement expansion, not Israel.”

Britain's token sanctions are not only an attempt to distance London from Israel's past crimes, but from worse crimes to come.

Miliband again refused to describe Israel's actions in Gaza as war crimes, saying only that there was “increasing evidence” that war crimes appeared to have been committed. Yet ministers in Netanyahu's government are openly discussing the ethnic cleansing of Gaza's Palestinian population. On September 2, Defence Minister Israel Katz said there was “no real solution” for Gaza without such “migration”, while National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir proposed removing the entire population over seven years.

Miliband reiterated Britain's support for the long-abandoned two-state solution, declaring unctuously, “Securing the two-state solution in its fullest form is the North Star of this government's policy, and indeed of successive British governments over decades”.

His invocation of the two-state solution is totally detached from reality. The Oslo process did not halt settlement expansion; the settler population continued to grow while successive Israeli governments expanded their control over the West Bank. Today, most Israeli political parties openly reject Palestinian statehood, and the Israeli state is carrying out genocide and ethnic cleansing.

In August, Israel issued a tender for the construction of

more than 1,000 housing units in the E1 area east of Jerusalem. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich had earlier praised the plan that “practically erases the two-state delusion” by splitting up the territory designated for a future Palestinian state.

There was predictably a furious response from Israel to Miliband, with Foreign Minister Gideon Saar calling the announcement “morally distorted” and accusing the UK of “blatant interference in the affairs of a sovereign state and its electoral process.”

Israel said it would close the British consulate in East Jerusalem and exclude British representatives from the International Gaza Support Centre in Kiryat Gat. It announced that Britain would no longer be permitted to train Palestinian security forces in the West Bank and that 12 British lawmakers and other nationals, including former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, would be barred from entering the country.

Britain's Orthodox chief rabbi, Sir Ephraim Mirvis, who functions as a cheerleader for the Netanyahu government, claimed that action against Israel's illegal settlements would unleash a new wave of antisemitism, endangering the safety of Britain's Jewish population.

His comments came a few days after US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee accused the British government of “Jew hate”. However, an Axios report said that US President Donald Trump did not oppose British plans to sanction Israeli settlements in a briefing on the plan during a conversation with Burnham ahead of Tuesday's announcement.

This is a true measure of their limited character, as a means of posturing over some of Israel's crimes while leaving untouched British imperialism's fundamental relationship with the Zionist state, even as it plans to remove Palestinians from Gaza and to annex the West Bank.



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