



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

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Rt Hon. Sir Julian Smith MP
House of Commons
London
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Dear Sir Julian,

Thank you for your correspondence of 27 December to the Foreign Secretary, on behalf of several of your constituents, about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs). I am replying as the Minister responsible for the Middle East.

The death and destruction in Gaza is intolerable. Since the election, the UK Government has led international calls for an immediate ceasefire. The fighting must stop, Hamas must release the hostages and Israel must ensure much more aid can enter Gaza. We continue to urge all parties to engage in negotiations in good faith and show the flexibility needed to reach an agreement. As the Foreign Secretary has said, we will continue to use every diplomatic lever to bring about a ceasefire and secure the release of hostages, in co-ordination with international partners.

The UK is working closely with our international partners to drive efforts to help civilians in Gaza, including calling for urgent action to prepare the population for winter. As the Prime Minister said on 18 October, the world will not tolerate any more excuses from Israel on humanitarian assistance. The UK will continue to make significant funding available, working through trusted international partners, to ensure that UK humanitarian support reaches civilians on the ground. The UK trebled its aid commitment to the OPTs in the last financial year, and this Government will maintain significant funding this financial year to support trusted aid agencies on the ground.

We also used our UN Security Council Presidency in November to highlight the deteriorating situation in Gaza and the urgent need to bring the civilian suffering to an end. The UK continues to press Israel to take all possible steps to avoid civilian casualties; to allow the free passage and facilitation of unfettered aid into Gaza; and to respect and enable the humanitarian operations of UN agencies and NGOs acting in Gaza. As the Foreign Secretary stated to the UN Security Council on 18 November it is totally unacceptable that it's harder than ever to get aid into Gaza.

Your constituents raise the issue of arms sales to Israel. Please note that on 2 September, the Foreign Secretary announced the suspension of export licences to Israel for use in the conflict in Gaza, as required under the Export Control Act 2002. The suspended licences were for equipment where we assess there is a clear risk that the items could be used in breach of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in the current conflict in Gaza. This is not a blanket ban; but targets licences for items that might be used in military operations in Gaza. The majority of UK export licences for Israel are for civilian use, covering a range of products such as food-testing chemicals, telecoms, and data equipment. They are not for weapons.

To ensure international peace and security it was necessary to depart from the Strategic Export Licencing Criteria to exclude exports to the F-35 programme from the scope of the suspension, as previously set out to Parliament. This is due to the F-35 programme's broader strategic role in NATO and wider implications for international peace and security. Following the suspension, there are currently no extant export licenses that we assess are for use in military operations in Gaza, Lebanon or the West Bank except for exempt F35 components.

Alongside our allies, we have repeatedly communicated to the Israeli government our concerns regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza but found that those concerns have not been addressed. The UK remains fully committed to Israel's security and its right to self-defence, in accordance with international law. The IHL assessments will continue. We hope to see sustained evidence of Israel's commitment to IHL that would allow us to lift this suspension.

Regarding the use of the term "genocide", it is the UK Government's long-standing policy that any determination of genocide has occurred is a matter for a competent national or international court, and not for governments or non-judicial bodies. This approach ensures that any determination is above politics, lobbying and individual or national interest. The UK respects the independence of the International Court of Justice and awaits their decision. We cannot comment on ongoing legal proceedings and do not believe it helpful to speculate on the outcome.

As we look for a pathway out of the wider crisis, we are conscious of this conflict's complexities and are determined to listen to all sides. Our overarching goal is clear: a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, alongside a safe and secure Israel. There is no way out of this crisis without a route to both Palestinians and Israelis enjoying security, justice and opportunity in lands that they can call their own. We want a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution and are committed to recognising a Palestinian state as a contribution to a peace process, at a time that is most conducive to that process.

In pursuit of these objectives, I have spoken to the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, the Qatari Minister of State, the Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister, the Vice Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Israel, the Prime Ministers of Yemen and the Palestinian Authority, as well as to the Ambassadors to the UK of Israel, Jordan and Bahrain and the Head of the Palestinian Mission to the UK.

The Foreign Secretary has twice visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories since taking office, meeting with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, as well as families of hostages, victims of violence and members of the humanitarian community. The Prime Minister last spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on 19 October and met with President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority on 25 September. I have visited Kuwait, Egypt, and attended the Lebanon Support Conference in Paris, to meet with partners and reiterate our calls for an immediate ceasefire.

The situation in the Middle East continues to evolve rapidly. But please rest assured that the Foreign Secretary and his entire Ministerial team will continue to do all they can to secure lasting peace in the region.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hamish Falconer', written in a cursive style.

HAMISH FALCONER MP
Minister for the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan