

**UK foreign policy**

## **Labour stands on the law to defend UK policy shift on Israel**



But Keir Starmer faces accusations that actions on arms exports go too far or not far enough

**Lucy Fisher** and **Andrew England** in London YESTERDAY

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Sir Keir Starmer has dramatically reshaped the UK's relationship with Israel since taking office. But senior Labour figures insist politics has not driven significant decisions taken by the prime minister.

A former human rights lawyer, Starmer restored funding to the UN agency that supports Palestinian refugees, changed the UK's stance on arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, and now [suspended some arms export licences](#) to Israel.

The decisions have amounted to one of the most significant divergences in UK foreign policy from the previous Conservative administration, that Starmer defeated in July, and from the US.

As the new British prime minister faces heavy Israeli criticism over the arms decision in particular, it is the black-and-white legal dynamics, rather than muddier political and diplomatic considerations, that Starmer's allies are keen to emphasise.

One senior Labour figure said Starmer had come at key policy questions relating to Israel solely "as an international humanitarian law specialist".

The prime minister's biographer Tom Baldwin, a former Labour official, added that Starmer's approach on Israel was another example of how he "cleaves to the rule of law".

Starmer's past life as a barrister involved defending human rights in British courts as well as fighting a case on genocide at the International Court of Justice.

"Human rights provides a framework for these decisions which are much harder to justify if you're relying on political judgment," said Baldwin.

He added that "making it a legal decision is a good way of cutting through the politics of something like this".





Protesters outside a BAE Systems factory in Blackburn, Lancashire © Joel Goodman/LNP

On Monday the UK [announced](#) it was suspending around 30 out of 350 arms export licences to Israel for use in military operations in Gaza — including parts for military aircraft, after a British government review found possible breaches of international humanitarian law by Israel.

Although the UK is not a major supplier of weapons to Israel, the decision by such a traditionally close Israeli ally dealt a symbolic blow to Benjamin Netanyahu’s government.

But despite the UK’s emphasis on the legal process behind the decision, Starmer has been accused both of going too far, and of not going far enough.

The Israeli prime minister derided the decision as “shameful”, highlighting its timing two days after the killings of six Israeli hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.



Hostages killed in Gaza (top row left to right) Ori Danino, Alexander Lehanov, Carmel Gat (bottom row left to right) Hersh Goldberg-

hostages killed in Gaza (top row left to right) Ori Danino, Alexander Lobanov, Carmel Sar (bottom row left to right) Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Eden Yerushalmi and Almog Sarusi. © The Hostages Families Forum

The UK's chief rabbi, Sir Ephraim Mirvis, said [on social media platform X](#) that the move “beggars belief . . . at a time when Israel is fighting a war for its very survival on seven fronts”.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are among organisations that complained the decision took too long and should have led to more arms sales being blocked. They have also decried the exemption of some components of F-35 fighter jets from the decision.

UK defence Secretary John Healey insisted on Tuesday that the move resulted from Britain's “duty to the rule of law” and was “not a decision about pleasing any side” in the conflict.

Domestic tensions have also simmered within the Labour party.



UK chief rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis © Amanda Rose/Alamy

Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East on Tuesday said it would “like to see further suspensions” of export licences to Israel, including on equipment used in the occupied West Bank.

The licences suspended this week relate to items used in Gaza, where Israel's offensive has killed more than 40,000 people, according to Palestinian officials, and triggered an acute humanitarian crisis.

Labour Friends of Israel meanwhile said it was “deeply concerned” by the signal Britain’s move had sent to Iran and warned that it risked “encouraging Israel’s enemies”.

After Hamas’s October 7 attack triggered the war in Gaza, the UK, like Israel’s other allies, rallied to support the country and its right to self-defence.

But as the death toll in the enclave increased and the humanitarian crisis deepened, then-UK foreign secretary Lord David Cameron, a Conservative, became more critical of Israeli restrictions on aid deliveries into the besieged strip and the huge loss of civilians.

He also said the UK would consider recognising a Palestinian state as part of diplomatic efforts to create progress towards a two-state solution to end the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Demonstrators gather by the border fence with Egypt this year, as they attempt to block humanitarian aid trucks from entering Israel on their way to the Gaza Strip © Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP via Getty Images

Yet despite regular legal assessments examining whether Israel was violating international humanitarian law in Gaza, the Conservative government chose not to suspend arms sales and remained in lock-step with US President Joe Biden’s administration.

Labour began to shift the UK’s policy in July, a fortnight after it won an election, when ministers [restored funding to UNRWA](#), the UN agency that supports Palestinian

refugees and is a key humanitarian actor in Gaza.

Support had been suspended in the wake of Israeli allegations that about a dozen of its 13,000 staff in Gaza had participated in Hamas's October 7 attack that killed 1,200 people, according to Israel.

Britain's announcement came after the EU and a handful of other countries resumed funding. The US, historically the largest donor to UNRWA, has kept its ban in place.



© Mohammed Salem/Reuters

A week later Starmer [dropped a proposed UK challenge](#) to the International Criminal Court's prosecutor's request to issue arrest warrants against Netanyahu and his defence minister Yoav Gallant, as well as Hamas leaders.

These moves followed intense political pressure on Labour from pro-Palestinian campaigners in the lead-up to the UK general election.

Starmer horrified many leftwingers in his ranks when he said in the days after Hamas's October 7 attack that Israel had a right to withhold power and water from Gaza. He later insisted he had misspoken, but was slow to correct the record.

In the election Labour lost five constituencies to pro-Palestinian independent candidates, while a raft of other Labour MPs saw their majorities narrow as support ebbed away on this issue.

Former Labour frontbencher Jonathan Ashworth, one of those who lost their seats in

FORMER LABOUR M.P. JONATHAN ASHWORTH, ONE OF THOSE WHO LOST THEIR SEATS IN this manner, insisted that the UK's pivot should surprise nobody.



Former Labour MP Jonathan Ashworth © Hollie Adams/Bloomberg

Starmer signalled ahead of the election that legal advice on UK arms exports to Israel would be reviewed. “Labour has delivered on a promise it has made before the general election,” Ashworth told Sky News.

But Downing Street denied there had been a fundamental shift in the UK's relationship with Israel under the Labour administration. Indeed other UK leaders have taken similar actions in the past. Tory prime minister Margaret Thatcher imposed an arms embargo on Israel following its invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

An official said: “This government continues to support Israel's right to self-defence in accordance with international law. The UK remains fully committed to Israel's security against threats from Iran and other regional actors.”

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