Academic Paper

# British Foreign Policy

# Toward Israel since Operation al-Aqsa Flood




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## Abstract

### British Foreign Policy Toward Israel since Operation al-Aqsa Flood

Britain has historically supported the Zionist presence in Palestine, with its relationship with Israel, underpinned by mutual strategic and economic interests, has continued uninterrupted to the present day. Several factors shape British policy toward Israel, particularly trade and security ties. Although the nature of this relationship may vary with the party in power and occasionally be affected by tensions or shifts in response to Israel's aggression against the Palestinians and neighboring Arab and Muslim countries, close ties with Israel remain a bipartisan commitment. Both of Britain's major political parties regard maintaining these ties as a cornerstone of the country's Middle East strategy. This continuity was evident during Israel's war on Gaza Strip in October 2023 and its subsequent wars against neighboring countries and Iran.



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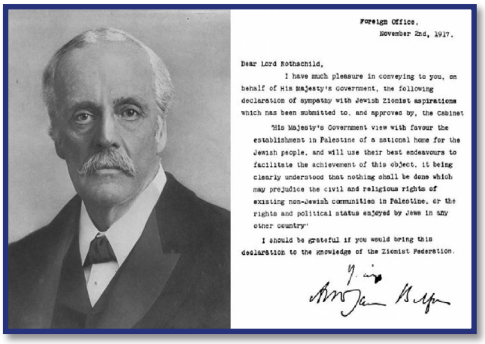
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| United Kingdom | Labour Party | Conservative Party | war on GS |
| war on Iran | Israel | RAF Akrotiri | UK-Israel Free Trade Agreement |

# British Foreign Policy Toward Israel since Operation al-Aqsa Flood

**Mahmoud ‘Abdou Salem**[1]

## Introduction

British-Israeli relations have deep historical roots that predate the establishment of Israel. In the nineteenth century, Britain was among the powers that promoted Zionism. It subsequently issued the Balfour Declaration on 2/11/1917, the first formal international declaration supporting the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. Britain also sponsored Zionist institutions during the Mandate period, beginning in 1920, provided Zionists with military experience through their participation in Allied forces during World War II (1939–1945), and joined Israel in the tripartite aggression against Egypt in October 1956.



Foreign Office.
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

These relations extend beyond their historical foundations and rest on mutual strategic and political interests, sustaining ties between the two sides to the present day. Nevertheless, political developments in the Middle East, from Operation al-Aqsa Flood in October 2023 to the US-Israeli war against Iran in February 2026, have raised questions about whether British foreign policy toward Israel has undergone a substantive shift. This paper seeks to answer those questions.

## First: Key Determinants of British Foreign Policy Toward Israel

British policy toward the Middle East, and thus toward Israel, has been shaped by two distinct, often clashing approaches. The first is a diplomatic approach that seeks to maintain the support of the Arab and Muslim worlds and “regards Israel mainly as an irritant, a factor complicating British relations with the Arab world.” Its proponents regard the Arab-Israeli conflict as the primary source of regional instability and advocate its swift resolution. The second, or “strategic,” approach divides Middle Eastern regimes into “moderate” and “hostile” camps. It views “aggressive, anti-Western governments and belief systems--radical Pan-Arab nationalism; revolutionary Islamism” as the main threats to regional stability and British interests. Accordingly, it identifies Iran, Syria under the Assad family, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and “militant and revolutionary” Islamic movements as key sources of regional instability and “direct threats to British interests.” By contrast, it regards Israel as a pro-Western regional power of potential strategic value with close ties to the US. Whereas the diplomatic approach tends to favor

[1] An Egyptian researcher and writer, he has published extensively on political and intellectual issues, with a particular focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

accommodation, the strategic approach is more willing to apply pressure or resort to confrontation when necessary.[2]

Though both concepts have always been present among the circles making British Middle East policy, power has shifted between them. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Prime Minister's Office have been the main institutional centers of policymaking, with the diplomatic approach prevailing in the former and the strategic approach in the latter. Clement Attlee (Labour, 1945–1951) and Edward Heath (Conservative, 1970–1974) can be said to have completely accepted the FCO standpoint. By contrast, several others favored the strategic approach, including Winston Churchill (Conservative, 1940–1945 and 1951–1955), Anthony Eden (Conservative, 1955–1957), Margaret Thatcher (Conservative, 1979–1990), Harold Wilson (Labour, 1964–1970 and 1974–1976), and Tony Blair (Labour, 1997–2007).[3]

Following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) on 31/1/2020, several factors shaped British foreign policy toward Israel. These include:

**1. Legislative Independence from the EU**



As a member of the EU, the UK rarely dissented from voting unity on UN resolutions,[4] but Israeli-Palestinian relations were one of the few issues where unity was often difficult to achieve. The UK has long been a vocal critic of what it perceives to be the Human Rights Council's disproportionate focus on Israel, and Britain's dissent in the EU has traditionally taken the form of abstention rather than opposition to resolutions. Following Brexit, the UK gained greater freedom from EU coordination mechanisms, enabling it to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Its voting behavior on the Israeli-Palestinian issue at the UN became one area in which it exercised this autonomy.[5]

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2 See Jonathan Spyer, "An Analytical and Historical Overview of British Policy Toward Israel," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* journal, Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs, vol. 8, no. 2, June 2004.

3 Ibid.

4 The EU does not have an independent vote in the UN General Assembly; its member states vote individually. Nevertheless, it coordinates their positions to promote unified voting. Since 2011, the EU has held enhanced observer status, allowing it to present common positions and participate in debates, thereby strengthening coordination in European foreign policy.

5 Thomas Grein, "Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy Toward the Israel-Palestine Conflict," site of The London School of Economics and Political Science, p. 6, https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-relations/assets/documents/efpu/brifpo-papers/Thomas-Final.pdf

The UK began departing from the EU's coordinated voting positions during the transition period,[6] before its formal withdrawal was complete. In December 2020, the UK broke from EU protocol for the third year straight and voted "No" to the resolution "the UN demands that Israel withdraw from the Golan." In doing so, London signalled its approval to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and joined seven other countries, including the United States, Australia, Canada and Brazil,[7] while 88 UN member states voted in favor.

**2. Trade and Security Relations with Israel**

Following Brexit, the UK sought to strengthen its bilateral ties with Israel. In 2019, the two countries signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to replace the EU-Israel Trade Agreement. In 2020, around 6,600 businesses from all four corners of the UK exported their goods to Israel. Of these firms, 5,600 were small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The agreement entered into force on 1/1/2021, and in July 2022, the UK government launched negotiations for an upgraded FTA with Israel. In November 2021 the UK and Israeli governments signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) under which they agreed to develop a bespoke roadmap that would "elevate the UK-Israel relationship to a strategic partnership." This commitment culminated in the signing of the "2030 Roadmap a for UK-Israel Bilateral Relations" in March 2023.[8] The roadmap seeks to sustain and deepen bilateral cooperation across a broad range of areas, including trade, cyber, science and tech, research and development, security, health, climate and gender.[9]

Security and military ties are also a significant component of British foreign policy toward Israel. In December 2020, the Israeli military tweeted that it had signed a military agreement with the UK. According to its announcement, British and Israeli military chiefs had agreed to "formalise and enhance the defence partnership and support the growing Israel-UK partnership." On the British side, however, the government gave the new agreement no publicity. Months passed in silence, with no press release or mention by the Ministry of Defense, together with no noticeable interest from the national media. The silence was broken in May 2021 when Kenny MacAskill MP questioned the government in parliament, requesting it to publish the accord. In response, Conservative Defense Minister James Heappey said the agreement was "being kept at a higher security

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6 The transition period was intended to preserve the status quo in UK-EU relations, keeping the UK within the EU single market and customs union while the two sides negotiated their future relationship. It lasted 11 months, from 31/1/2020 to 31/12/2020.

7 Thomas Grein, "Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy Toward the Israel-Palestine Conflict".

8 Thomas Brown, UK-Israel trade: Contribution to the economy, site of UK Parliament, House of Lords Library, 19/12/2025, https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-israel-trade-contribution-to-the-economy/

9 Bilateral relations: The State of Israel and the United Kingdom have enjoyed a fruitful diplomatic relationship, site of Embassy of Israel, London, 29/3/2026, https://embassies.gov.il/england/en/the-embassy/bilateral-relations
See also "2030 roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations," Policy Paper, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, site of GOV.UK, 212023/3/, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2030-roadmap-for-uk-israel-bilateral-relations/2030-roadmap-for-uk-israel-bilateral-relations

classification and therefore it will not be made public." He added that the accord "strengthens the defence relationship between Britain and Israel" and was "an important piece of defence diplomacy," before providing further details in extremely vague language. More than two years later, with Israel's attacks on Gaza Strip (GS) having begun, MacAskill again asked the government to publish the accord. Heappey, who was still serving as defense minister, once again refused, stating that the accord "incorporates a range of defence engagement activity, including defence education and joint training." After Labour took office in 2024, Defense minister Luke Pollard reiterated that "it is not possible to release this agreement as it is held at a higher classification." The *Declassified UK* website discovered the existence of another secret UK agreement with Israel known as HEZUK and which began in 2019–2020. This involved the British military devising a project to improve Israel's capacity to confront Iran and Hizbullah.[10]



During a session of the UK Parliament on 18/3/2025, Minister of State for the Armed Forces Luke Pollard stated, "The UK shares an important, long-standing and broad strategic partnership with the state of Israel. Our defense partnership with Israel aims to support the security of an important partner and reduce tensions in the wider region. It incorporates a range of defense engagement activity, including defense education, joint training and capability development."[11]

The UK exports military goods to Israel but not to the Palestinian Authority (PA). It also designates Hamas as a terrorist organization and imposes sanctions on it. Nevertheless, the UK is not a major supplier of Israel's arms imports, which come primarily from the US and Germany. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) data, a UK-based pressure group that seeks an end to the global arms trade, "shows the UK granted licences for military goods worth £579 million for companies to export to Israel since 2008" and until 2024.[12] "Analysis by CAAT shows that many of the licences granted were for components for military radars, electronic warfare and targeting equipment Licences were also granted for components of aircraft and helicopters." Furthermore, in 2022, the government granted standard individual export licences to Israel for military goods valued at £42 million, and it stated that this was "less than 1% of Israel's defence imports."

[10] Mark Curtis, Secret UK-Israel military deal in place throughout genocide, site of Declassified UK, 20/10/2025, https://www.declassifieduk.org/secret-uk-israel-military-deal-in-place-throughout-genocide/

[11] Luke Pollard, "Military Co-operation with Israel," contribution to the debate, UK Parliament, Hansard, House of Commons, 18/3/2025, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-03-18/debates/C5900243-EC83-4C59-BABA-F3EDEE9D8E60/MilitaryCo-OperationWithIsrael

[12] The study draws on data from 2008 to 2026, during which the British pound fluctuated considerably against the US dollar, with the exchange rate ranging from $1.0745 to $2.031 per pound. Accordingly, all amounts are retained in their original currency (British pounds) rather than converted into US dollars.

In 2023, the government granted standard individual and incorporated licences for military goods with a combined value of £18.2 million.[13]

While the British military has helped to supply Israel, it also procures weapons from the Israeli military industry. This two-way partnership supports Israeli companies in the development of military technology and deepens collaboration between the British and Israeli militaries. Between 2019 and 2023, the British military spent £125 million on contracts with Rafael, which is a state-owned firm that was originally the research laboratory of the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Furthermore, the British Ministry of Defense has spent at least £355 million on contracts with Israel's largest military company Elbit Systems since 2012. Until 2022, Elbit Systems even held a training contract for Britain's Dreadnought nuclear submarine program. While the French government has banned Israeli arms firms from showcasing their products at two major arms fairs in 2024, the British government allowed Elbit Systems to exhibit its wares at the International Armoured Vehicles conference at Twichenham in January 2024. The UK's refusal to limit the presence of Israeli firms at arms fairs is further indication of the close relationship between the Ministry of Defense and the Israeli military industry.[14]

### 3. Alignment with US Policies



**Boris Johnson**

Following Brexit, the UK gained greater latitude to pursue an independent foreign policy. Under Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2019–2022), it appeared increasingly inclined to align with US policies toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict, even when they diverged from EU positions. This was chiefly evident in the UK Government's support for President Donald Trump's *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*. Johnson supported the Plan, despite its divergence from the EU's position on a two-state solution and its inconsistency with previous Conservative Party condemnations of settlement annexation in the West Bank (WB). London also welcomed the normalization accords signed between Israel and several Arab countries since 2020, which the Palestine Mission to the UK called "a retrograde step for the Palestinian cause."[15]

Before the war on GS, October 2023, the Conservative-led UK government had applied sanctions against Hamas and other Iran aligned groups in the Middle East, such as Hizbullah in Lebanon. On 14/11/2023, it added six individuals to its counterterrorism

[13] Louisa Brooke-Holland, UK arms exports to Israel, House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, 8/1/2025, pp. 5 and 10, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9964/CBP-9964.pdf

[14] "British Military Collaboration with Israel," site of British Palestinian Committee (BCP), 28/1/2025, pp. 13–14, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/611a64c35baa3f33556d5454/t/6798b1604694e819057b4184/1738060146895/British+Military+Collaboration+Report

[15] Thomas Grein, "Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy Toward the Israel-Palestine Conflict," p. 3.

sanctions list: four Hamas members and two financiers. The measures, coordinated with the US, included travel bans, asset freezes and arms embargoes.[16]

### 4. British Political Parties' Positions on Israel

The major British political parties differ in their positions on Israel. The Conservative Party, the main opposition party, has moved beyond its historically ambivalent stance and developed close, friendly ties with Israel.[17] It has even accused its rival, the Labour Party, of damaging UK-Israel relations.[18]

Since its establishment in 1974, Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI) has played a key role in strengthening these ties. It organizes visits to Israel for British MPs and parliamentary candidates and conducts educational activities on the Arab-Israeli conflict for Conservative politicians and their advisers.[19]

In 2023, Conservative peer Sayeeda Warsi established Conservative Friends of Palestine. However, its 35 members are few compared with those of Conservative Friends of Israel, which includes approximately two-thirds of Conservative members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.[20]

Among Conservative voters, however, polling reveals divided views on Israel: 27% identify as pro-Israel, 20% as anti-Israel, and 40% express no clear position on the issue.[21]

The governing Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, faces a balancing act between its traditional diplomatic support for a two-state solution and mounting pressure from party members who have adopted pro-Palestinian positions in response to the war on GS that began in October 2023. The perception that Labour was too pro-Israel was key to their losses to the so-called "Gaza Independents" in the 2025 UK local elections and has played an outsized role in Labour's losses to the Greens since. This is despite the fact that supporters of Israel regard Labour as anti-Israel, and that the Israeli government barred

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[16] "2023 Israel-Hamas conflict: UK and international response," Research Briefing, Number 9874, House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, 30/11/2023, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9873/CBP09874.pdf

[17] Alan Mendoza, "The New Special Relationship: The British Conservative Party and Israel," *Fathom* journal, summer 2015, https://fathomjournal.org/the-new-special-relationship-the-british-conservative-party-and-israel/

[18] Dylan Difford, Which parties do Britons see as pro- and anti-Israel?, site of YouGov, 4/12/2025, https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/53627-which-parties-do-britons-see-as-pro-and-anti-israel

[19] See site of Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI), https://www.cfoi.co.uk/

[20] Muhammad al-'Ashiri, What Are the Positions of the UK's Major Political Parties on the War in Gaza?, site of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News Arabic, 27/10/2023, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c03e57lyew9o
Note: The UK Parliament consists of two chambers: the House of Commons, with 650 members representing constituencies, and the House of Lords, whose membership is not fixed. In 2023–2024, the latter had an estimated 779–800 members, making the UK Parliament the world's second-largest legislative body after China's National People's Congress.

[21] Dylan Difford, Which parties do Britons see as pro- and anti-Israel?.

two Labour MPs from entering the country in 2025, accusing them of planning to "spread anti-Israel hate."[22]

Meanwhile, Labour Friends of Israel (LFI), a Westminster-based parliamentary lobbying group, seeks to strengthen UK-Israel relations, promote a two-state solution, and encourage cooperation in security, technology and trade. Its activities include organizing visits to Israel for Labour MPs, publishing research, and lobbying for policies that support Israel's security.[23]

Within the Labour Party, Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East (LFPME) was established in 2009 to advance the Palestine issue "by pressing the UK government and the Labour Party to promote international law and human rights" in the Middle East. By April 2009, 98 MPs had joined the group, which subsequently became an influential lobbying force. One of its key achievements was helping secure the Labour Party's commitment to recognizing a Palestinian state under its then-leader, Ed Miliband. However, the group began to lose momentum during Lisa Nandy's tenure from 2018 to 2020. Nandy herself adopted a more pro-Israel stance and declared herself a "Zionist."[24]

The Liberal Democrats, which hold 72 seats in the House of Commons, support a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. The party has also taken a firm stance against the Israeli government's actions in GS, calling for an immediate ceasefire by both sides, a full ban on all military exports to Israel, and formal recognition of Palestine. It condemns both Hamas and Israel's military operations.[25]

The Scottish National Party (SNP) takes a similar position, supporting a two-state solution, recognition of an independent Palestinian state, and opposition to Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. During the GS war that began in October 2023, the party "called for an immediate and sustained ceasefire by all parties" and the unrestricted delivery of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian territories. It also demanded "the immediate and unconditional release" of Israelis held by Palestinian resistance movements, while condemning Operation al-Aqsa Flood as "terrorist." The SNP holds nine seats in the House of Commons.[26]

The Green Party, by contrast, is widely perceived as anti-Israel. Polling indicates that 60% of its voters identify as anti-Israel. The party holds four seats in the House of Commons and received about 6.8% of the popular vote in the general election held on 4/7/2024.[27]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] See site of Labour Friends of Israel, https://www.lfi.org.uk/

[24] John McEvoy, What happened to Labour Friends of Palestine?, Declassified UK, 22/4/2025, https://www.declassifieduk.org/what-happened-to-labour-friends-of-palestine/

[25] Liberal Democrats, Ending the suffering in Gaza and the West Bank, site of Liberal Democrats, 24/7/2025, https://www.libdems.org.uk/news/article/ending-the-suffering-in-gaza-and-the-west-bank

[26] John Swinney, The First Minister's Gaza statement, 3/9/2025, https://www.snp.org/the-first-ministers-gaza-statement/

[27] Dylan Difford, Which parties do Britons see as pro- and anti-Israel?.

Reform UK, a far-right party, is generally perceived as pro-Israel. Among its voters, 39% identify as pro-Israel, 13% as anti-Israel, and 38% "say they are neither pro- nor anti-Israel."[28] The party holds five seats in the House of Commons.

## Second: The Impact of Post–Operation al-Aqsa Flood Developments on British Policy Toward Israel




Given the determinants outlined above, British policy toward Israel is likely to remain based on close ties and cooperation, largely irrespective of which of the two major parties, the Conservatives or Labour, holds power or whether a pro-Israel far-right party gains influence. This raises the question of whether developments since Operation al-Aqsa Flood on 7/10/2023 have affected this policy and, if so, whether they have brought about any fundamental change.

This question can be addressed by reviewing British statements and policies toward Israel since October 2023 in light of the aforementioned determinants, as follows:

### 1. Political Support for Israel

The Conservative government expressed its support for Israel immediately after Operation al-Aqsa Flood. Then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared that the UK stood "unequivocally" with Israel.[29] He also joined the leaders of the US, France, Germany, and Italy in issuing a joint statement expressing their "steadfast and united support" for Israel and "unequivocal condemnation" of Hamas, which they characterized as a "terrorist" organization.[30] Sunak subsequently spoke by phone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, while the UK Foreign Secretary visited Israel to demonstrate solidarity and support.[31]

The Labour leader's remarks did not differ substantially from the Conservative Party's position. Indeed, the two major parties largely converged on the following points:[32]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Britain's Sunak says London 'unequivocally' stands with Israel, site of Reuters News Agency, 8/10/2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/britains-sunak-says-london-unequivocally-stands-with-israel-2023-10-08/

[30] Hayden Vernon, UK, US and allies offer Israel 'steadfast support' in joint statement, *The Guardian* newspaper, 9/10/2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/09/uk-us-and-allies-offer-israel-steadfast-support-in-joint-statement

[31] Prime Minister deploys UK military to Eastern Mediterranean to support Israel, GOV.UK, 13/10/2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-deploys-uk-military-to-eastern-mediterranean-to-support-israel

[32] Muhammad al-'Ashiri, What Are the Positions of the UK's Major Political Parties on the War in Gaza?.

- Describing Hamas's attack as brutal or terrorist.
- Expressing support for Israel.
- Affirming Israel's right to defend itself and attack Hamas.
- Emphasizing the need to comply with international law.

Regarding voting behavior in international organizations, the UK abstained in December 2023 from a UNSC vote on a resolution calling for an "immediate humanitarian ceasefire" in GS. Explaining the decision, the UK representative stated that "her country could not vote in favour of a resolution that fails to condemn the atrocities Hamas committed on innocent Israeli civilians on 7 October."[33] The UK subsequently abstained on two further UNSC resolutions aimed at ending the war. These abstentions contrasted with calls by both the Conservative government and the Labour Party in December 2023 for a cessation of hostilities in the GS.[34]

After the Labour Party came to power in July 2024, the UK government supported UN resolutions in 2024 and 2025 calling for an immediate ceasefire in the GS, the release of Israelis held by Palestinian groups, and increased humanitarian aid to the GS. Separately, Foreign Secretary David Lammy announced that the UK would resume funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) following a seven-month suspension.[35] The UK welcomed the January 2025 ceasefire agreement, and the Foreign Secretary, David Lammy said that "the agreement should be implemented in full and that it offered a chance of 'a lasting peace' for Israelis and Palestinians." However, following Israel's resumption of military operations on 18/3/2025, the foreign secretary called for the resumption of humanitarian aid to Palestinians and stated that the UK "strongly oppose[s] Israel's resumption of hostilities." The government also reiterated that the January agreement should be implemented "in full and become permanent."[36]

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[33] US vetoes resolution on Gaza which called for 'immediate humanitarian ceasefire,' site of United Nations (UN), UN News, 8/12/2023, https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144562

[34] No respite for children and families in Gaza as UN Security Council ceasefire resolution fails to pass, site of Save the Children, 20/2/2024, https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2024/no-respite-for-children-and-families-in-gaza-as-un-security-council-ceasefire-resolution-fails-to-pass-

[35] UK to restart funding to UNRWA, GOV.UK, 19/7/2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-restart-funding-to-unrwa

**Note:** In June 2026, the UK government announced an additional $30.7 million in funding for UNRWA to help ensure the continued delivery of essential services to millions of Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.
See UNRWA remains indispensable to the delivery of essential services to millions of Palestinian refugees across Gaza and the Middle East: UK statement at the UNRWA Pledging Conference, GOV.UK, 302026/6/, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/unrwa-remains-indispensable-to-the-delivery-of-essential-services-to-millions-of-palestinian-refugees-across-gaza-and-the-middle-east-uk-statement-at-

[36] "Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories: UK response to the conflict July 2024 to March 2025," Research Briefing, Number 10085, House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, 16/4/2025, p. 8, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10085/CBP-10085.pdf

In May 2025, the British government took a more forceful stance on Israel's military offensive in the GS, condemning the escalation of attacks and demanding an immediate halt to military operations and immediate, unimpeded humanitarian access to Gaza. It also summoned the Israeli ambassador and imposed new sanctions on Israeli settlers in the WB, "vowing 'concrete actions' if Israel didn't stop its new military offensive in Gaza." The then-British Prime Minister Keir "Starmer joined French President Emmanuel Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in issuing one of the most significant criticisms by close allies of Israel's handling of the war in Gaza and its actions in the West Bank." The three leaders threatened to take "concrete actions" if the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not cease its renewed military offensive and significantly lift restrictions on humanitarian aid. Netanyahu called the statement "a huge prize" for Hamas.[37] On 21/9/2025, the British government formally recognized the State of Palestine.[38]

Nevertheless, the Labour government's stance does not amount to a strategic shift in British policy toward Israel. Support for Palestinians and criticism of Israeli policies were among the factors behind Jeremy Corbyn's removal as Labour leader in 2020. His successor, Keir Starmer sought to dispel accusations of antisemitism leveled against the party under Corbyn and reaffirmed Labour's support for Israel, aligning himself with his Conservative rivals. However, he has sought to distinguish his position by balancing this support with calls for a two-state solution. Just days after Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Starmer told the UK House of Commons that the "brutal attack in Israel… was the darkest day in Jewish history since the Holocaust." He declared, "We stand with Israel and her right to defend herself against the terrorists of Hamas. We stand for international law, the protection of innocent lives, humanitarian support for Palestinians. And we do so, because we stand for a political path to a two-state solution. And a better future."[39] Similarly, when the UK officially recognized the State of Palestine, Starmer condemned Hamas and argued that recognizing Palestinian statehood would help ensure "a safe and secure Israel."[40]

Under this approach, the UK government can maintain its support for Israel in line with its broader Middle East strategy while responding to domestic and international criticism of Israeli attacks on Palestinians. It can do so by condemning these attacks, criticizing Israeli government policies, and calling for humanitarian aid to Palestinians and

[37] Brian Melley and Sylvie Corbet, UK suspends free trade talks with Israel and announces sanctions over West Bank settlers, site of The Associated Press (AP), 21/5/2025, https://apnews.com/article/uk-starmer-israel-gaza-criticism-acabcdb4da0f1368f7e8a471cf494c0e

[38] UK formally recognises Palestinian State, GOV.UK, 21/9/2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-formally-recognises-palestinian-state

[39] Muhammad al-'Ashiri, What Are the Positions of the UK's Major Political Parties on the War in Gaza?; and Keir Starmer's statement to the Commons on Israel and Gaza, site of Labour, https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/keir-starmers-statement-to-the-commons-on-israel-gaza-2/

[40] PM statement on the recognition of Palestine: 21 September 2025, GOV.UK, 21/9/2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-the-recognition-of-palestine-21-september-2025

a two-state solution, while simultaneously denouncing Palestinian resistance movements as "terrorist organizations" and imposing punitive measures on Iran and organizations opposed to Israel.

It is therefore unsurprising that the Labour government has responded to these pressures, particularly as they have also affected the British Jewish community, where attitudes toward Israel have become increasingly complex. On the one hand, British Jews have expressed "a strong sense of solidarity with Israelis, a deep empathy for the trauma of October 7, and a profound concern for Israel's security." On the other, many have felt "deeply disturbed about aspects of the war, profoundly troubled by its humanitarian consequences, or greatly troubled about political leadership in Israel. Sometimes, all these feelings sit along one another in a single person's mind." Moreover, the "British Jewish community has never been monolithic," and "levels of attachment and criticism towards Israel varied across age groups, levels of religiosity, and degrees of engagement with Jewish life." Since 7 October 2023, evidence of a "growing generational divergence around Israel" has emerged, raising concern among some observers of the British Jewish community.[41]

In this regard, the dispute over the British Consulate in Jerusalem can be understood in the broader context of tensions over British policy toward Israel. On 8/9/2026, the British government announced sanctions targeting Israeli settlement activity in PA territories, including "action against specific companies and individuals who provide services such as construction, infrastructure, financing, or real estate for settlement expansion," as well as "extremist settlers who have supported or incited acts of violence against Palestinian communities." The British foreign secretary also noted that, having "already suspended over 30 arms licences used by the IDF in Gaza," the government would "refuse all licence applications for arms and other exports that materially contribute to the occupation." These measures and statements marked a shift in the UK government's official position, as it declared for the first time that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory was illegal.[42] In response, the Israeli government announced that it would close the British Consulate in East Jerusalem within 30 days. "Israel has also barred 12 British politicians from visiting the country, told British officials and diplomats in the West Bank and a Gaza coordination centre in Israel to leave, and said Britain can no longer train Palestinian security forces in the West Bank."[43]

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[41] Omri Gal Kornblum, Holding on - and pulling away - from Israel, site of Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR), 20/4/2026, https://www.jpr.org.uk/insights/holding-and-pulling-away-israel

[42] Foreign Secretary Oral Statement on Israel-Palestine, GOV.UK, 8/9/2026, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-oral-statement-on-israel-palestine

[43] Alexander Cornwell and Rami Amichay, Israel sets deadline for Britain to close consulate as settlers warn of sanctions hit, Reuters, 9/9/2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/israel-tells-british-consulate-east-jerusalem-close-within-30-days-sources-say-2026-09-09/
Note: The consulate is located in Sheikh Jarrah, occupied East Jerusalem, and manages British relations with Palestinians in the city, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip. It also provides consular services to Palestinians. By contrast, the British Embassy to Israel is located in Tel Aviv.

The British decision reflects a framework that views a two-state solution as serving Israel's interests and ensuring its continued existence, while also bringing an end to Israeli attacks on Palestinians. From this perspective, Israeli settlement expansion in the WB and the Israeli government, led by right-wing forces, are both obstacles to achieving such a solution. The British government justified its measures by arguing that settlement expansion threatens the prospects for a future Palestinian state and emphasizing that the measures were intended to "protect the viability of a two-state solution." Notably, the official statement also referred to measures targeting Iran and reaffirmed the government's commitment to combating "antisemitism."[44]

The Israeli government, meanwhile, appeared intent on demonstrating resolve toward a country increasingly critical of its policies, particularly as campaigning intensified ahead of the Israeli legislative elections scheduled for 27/10/2026. Although the dispute threatened to escalate, several factors complicated the situation: the consulate dates back to 1839, and France had also announced sanctions, yet Israel took no action against the French Consulate in Jerusalem. The deterioration in bilateral relations also fueled speculation in Israel that "Britain could respond to the closure by expelling Israeli diplomats in London." Ultimately, however, the two sides reached an agreement on 8/10/2026, under which the Consulate General building in East Jerusalem "would remain open as an independent and operational UK Mission."[45]

**2. Military and Security Support for Israel**

In terms of military and security support, the Conservative government took several measures to support Israel. On 13/10/2023, the UK Prime Minister's Office announced that Royal Air Force (RAF) surveillance aircraft had begun conducting patrols "to help partners [including Israel] track emerging threats to regional security," including threats "such as the transfer of weapons to terrorist groups," (namely, Hamas in Palestine, Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen). The statement also announced the deployment of British forces to the eastern Mediterranean, which "will be on standby to deliver practical support to Israel and partners in the region." It further stated that the military package "includes P8 aircraft, surveillance assets, two Royal Navy ships…three merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines." In addition, the Prime Minister asked "for all military teams in Israel, Cyprus and across the region to be bolstered to support contingency planning and the efforts of neighbouring countries to deal with any spill over from instability in Israel."[46] Furthermore, the UK participated in "Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect Red Sea shipping from Houthi attacks and conducted five

[44] UK to bring forward new powers to respond to moral emergency in Palestine, and target illegal settlement activity in the West Bank to protect the viability of a two-state solution, GOV.UK, 8/9/2026, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukto-bring-forward-new-powers-to-respond-to-moral-emergency-in-palestine-and-targetillegal-settlement-activity-in-the-west-bank-to-protect-the-viabili

[45] Britain says consulate in Jerusalem to remain open as a UK mission, Reuters, 8/10/2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-says-consulate-jerusalem-remain-open-uk-mission-2026-10-08/

[46] Prime Minister deploys UK military to Eastern Mediterranean to support Israel.

air strikes against the Houthis from January to May 2024."[47] The RAF also "played in thwarting Iran's co-ordinated missile and drone attack on Israel in April 2024."[48]




Since October 2023, the UK, US and Germany have used British base in Cyprus to supply Israel with weapons, personnel, and intelligence. By 24/10/2023, the US had moved 20 "heavy transport aircraft from weapons depots in Europe to Akrotiri. The RAF undertook daily cargo flights from Akrotiri to Tel Aviv over the same period." By 31/10/2023, 40 US transport aircraft, 20 British transport aircraft, and 7 heavy transport helicopters had moved to Akrotiri. Since this moment, "Akrotiri has continued to be a central stopping point for US and UK military cargo on journeys to Israel." Furthermore, Between 3/12/2023 and 6/6/2024, "the RAF flew 250 surveillance flights from Akrotiri to Gaza. In practice, this meant between one and two overlapping flights every day excluding Saturdays. This flight pattern continued until at least November 2024."[49]

According to data released in June 2024, the Conservative government "granted 108 licences for military and non-military controlled goods to Israel" between 7/10/2023 and 31/5/2024. Following the outbreak of conflict in October 2023, the Conservative government conducted reviews of pending and existing arms exports licences to Israel. The government identified 28 existing licences involving equipment "which was most likely to be used by the [Israel Defence Forces, IDF] in offensive operations in Gaza." These included "components for: combat aircraft, utility helicopters, armoured personnel carriers, naval vessels, radars and targeting equipment." The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) also set up a dedicated team to assess Israel's commitment and capability to comply with the International humanitarian Law (IHL). In December 2023 the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, decided that he was "satisfied that there was good evidence to support a judgment that Israel is committed to comply[ing] with IHL". He recommended that the Business and Trade Secretary, Kemi Badenoch, should not suspend or revoke licences but should keep them under review. On 18/12/2023, the Business and Trade Secretary agreed with that recommendation. After further reviews, in April and May 2024, the Foreign Secretary and Business and Trade Secretary made a fresh decision to not change the government's position and to continue to grant licences. In the first half of 2024, the government granted 22 standard individual and incorporated licences for military goods to Israel.[50]

[47] "Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories: UK response to the conflict July 2024 to March 2025," p. 7.

[48] Luke Pollard, "Military Co-operation with Israel".

[49] "British Military Collaboration with Israel," pp. 4 and 15.

[50] Louisa Brooke-Holland, UK arms exports to Israel, pp. 5, 6 and 11.

When the Labour Party took office in July 2024, the Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, commissioned an up-to-date assessment of "Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law in the context of war in Gaza." On 2/9/2024, Lammy announced the suspension of around 30 licences to Israel. These include "components for fighter aircraft (F-16s), parts for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs or drones), naval systems, and targeting equipment." Licences were permitted for items which the government assesses are not for military use in the GS war. These include "items such as trainer aircraft and naval equipment, and dual-use items for civilian use in telecoms and data equipment." Lammy said he had decided to suspend licences because he had concluded that for certain UK arms exports to Israel "there exists a clear risk that they might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law."[51]

Lammy's announcement, however, did not signal a change in British foreign policy toward military cooperation with Israel. Rather, it was intended to partially limit that cooperation, at least "publicly." One of the criteria used by the UK government when assessing applications to export strategically controlled goods (arms) states that it will "not grant a licence if it determines there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law." Applying this general standard, which governs all export destinations, several British political parties, including the SNP and the Liberal Democrats, called for a complete suspension of arms exports to Israel. The Labour government's measures were therefore widely viewed in British political circles as insufficient, a concern also reflected in official statements. Layla Moran, then a Foreign Office spokesperson, welcomed the Foreign Secretary's announcement as "a step forward" but said the decision should have also included an assessment of Israel's use of UK-supplied equipment in the WB and the GS. The SNP welcomed the decision but said that the number of licences suspended was "far too limited a response" and called for the advice and legal assessment on why the other licences remain to be published. The campaign groups Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) and War on Want (WoW) issued a joint statement welcoming the announcement but said it did not go far enough and called on the government to end the exports of components for F-35 aircraft "that will then be sold to Israel." Nevertheless, the UK government sought to reaffirm the continuity of its broader policy toward Israel. The British Foreign Secretary Lammy stated that "the UK continues to support Israel's right to self-defence, in line with international law." He also emphasized that the "point of the [arms licencing] process" is "in no way to punish Israel."[52]

The Labour government further demonstrated its commitment to Israel's security through its military cooperation with Israel. In October 2024, the RAF helped thwart an Iranian attack on Israel involving coordinated missile and drone strikes. The following month, the UK government granted then Israeli Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi "Special Mission Status" to visit the UK. During his visit, he met with the Ministry of Defense,

[51] Ibid., p. 6.

[52] Ibid., pp. 4, 6 and 7.

the Foreign Office, and the Attorney General, providing further indication of the depth of military collaboration between the UK and Israel, given Halevi's role as the coordinator of Israel's operations in Gaza. On 10/12/2024, Keir Starmer visited Akrotiri to thank British personnel for their work across an "extraordinarily busy year." As Starmer explained, "although we're really proud of what you're doing, we can't necessarily tell the world what you're doing here."[53]

According to CAAT, potentially £100 million-worth of military equipment has been approved for export to Israel, including spare parts for F-35 fighter jets. This policy was scrutinized during debates in the UK Parliament in March 2025. Critics argued that F-35 parts were covered by "an open general licence, which allows unlimited exports to all approved partners worldwide." Moreover, given that "more than 15% of every F-35 is made in the UK, Israeli airstrikes would simply not be possible without British components." The parliamentary debates also brought several significant facts to light, First, it appears that RAF Marham in Norfolk has been used at least seven times to send spare parts directly to Israel. Second, since "declaring a so-called suspension of arms exports, the UK has issued 34 new licences, including those for essential aircraft components." Finally, the "Government refused to publish details of arms exports between July and September 2024."[54]

The discussions also highlighted the role of British military facilities outside the UK in supporting Israel's war on Gaza, particularly the base in Gibraltar, which was "used for the facilitation of armed shipments, harbour services, and jet fuel supplies for vessels transporting weapons from the US to Israel," and the British RAF base at Akrotiri in Cyprus. In one year alone, from December 2023 to November 2024, the UK conducted "645 surveillance and recon missions, which amounts to almost two flights a day." During the same period, the US moved heavy transport aircraft carrying military equipment to Akrotiri, and the RAF subsequently conducted daily cargo flights from Akrotiri to Tel Aviv. Although these flights were reportedly intended for "surveillance and hostage rescue," they used "RAF Atlas C1 aircraft, which are large enough to transport military vehicles and helicopters."[55]

Independent MP Shockat Adam questioned the RAF's continued deployment of Shadow R1 surveillance flights towards GS, when a stipulation of the ceasefire explicitly forbids surveillance operations. Addressing Defense Minister Luke Pollard, Adam asked, "Is that not a violation of the spirit of the ceasefire agreement? Can the Minister confirm that the Israeli armed forces will not use surveillance supplied by the RAF flights during a hostage exchange in future attacks on Gaza?" He also asked, "Were we involved, directly or indirectly, in the Israeli operation in Nuseirat in June 2024, when 276 Palestinians

[53] "British Military Collaboration with Israel," p. 16.

[54] Shockat Adam, "Military Co-operation with Israel," contribution to the debate, Hansard, House of Commons, UK Parliament, 18/3/2025, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-03-18/debates/C5900243-EC83-4C59-BABA-F3EDEE9D8E60/MilitaryCo-OperationWithIsrael

[55] Ibid.

were killed at the rescue of four Israeli hostages? Critically, has our intelligence been used to conduct air strikes? If so, under article 25 of the Rome statute, is the UK now legally complicit in war crimes?."[56]

Although the UK did not join the US and Israel in the war against Iran, which began on 28 February 2026, the Labour government nevertheless supported its allies by deploying aircraft and drones to intercept Iranian missiles and projectiles. On 16/3/2026, the Secretary of State for Defense, John Healey, says that UK forces were shooting down drones "almost daily." The UK government has made four announcements on military capability being strengthened in the region:[57]

- On 3/3/2026, the government said that "forces would be deployed to Cyprus to help counter drones and missiles." These were two Wildcat helicopters and a Type 45 Air Defence Destroyer (HMS Dragon, which arrived in the region on 24/3/2026. In April it docked for maintenance but remained available for air defense).
- On 5/3/2026, the Prime Minister said four additional jets would be sent to Qatar. The RAF's Middle East Operational Headquarters is located at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, where a joint typhoon squadron operates.
- On 24/3/2026, the government said that lightweight multiple launchers would be deployed to Bahrain, and Rapid Sentry to Kuwait. These are both types of air defense systems.
- On 31/4/2026, radars, missile launchers and a Royal Artillery battery and battle space managers were to be deployed to Saudi Arabia.

Reports also indicated that the US had used several British military bases to support its attacks on Iran. These included RAF Fairford, from which USAF heavy bombers, including the B-52H Stratofortress, B-2, and B-1B Lancer, reportedly departed to conduct strikes inside Iranian territory. RAF Mildenhall, meanwhile, reportedly served as a base for aerial refueling and logistical support operations. In addition, RAF Lakenheath was reportedly used to facilitate the transfer of F-35 and F-15 fighter jets, as well as A-10 ground attack aircraft, to military bases in the region.[58]

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Philip Loft, "Israel/US-Iran conflict 2026: Background and UK response," Research Briefing, Number 10521, House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, 24/4/2026, p. 21, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10521/

[58] Chloe Harcombe, Maisie Lillywhite and Duncan Cook, Why are UK military bases being used in Iran conflict?, site of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 20/3/2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62drgvk263o; Harry Davies et al., Bunker busters and a Burger King: a visual guide to US military bases on British soil, *The Guardian*, 12/4/2026, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/12/visual-guide-us-military-bases-british-soil-iran-war; and 100 US Jets Left UK Base To Attack Iran, site of Lakenheath Alliance For Peace, 2/3/2026, https://lakenheathallianceforpeace.org.uk/over-70-us-jets-left-uk-base-to-attack-iran/

### 3. Trade Relations with Israel



Amid mounting domestic and international condemnation of Israel's military operations in the Palestinian territories, the Labour government announced measures that appeared to signal a shift in UK-Israel trade relations, including the suspension of negotiations on an FTA. In May 2025 the UK government suspended negotiations on a new FTA with Israel. Explaining the government's decision in the House of Commons, David Lammy, then foreign secretary, argued the Israeli government's actions in GS had "made this necessary." He added the government would also be reviewing UK cooperation with Israel under the 2030 bilateral road map.[59]

Nevertheless, bilateral trade between the UK and Israel recorded a slight decline in 2025 compared with 2024. Total trade in goods and services stood at £6 billion, a decrease of 0.7% (£41 million) in current prices from 2024. The trade balance favored the UK: exports to Israel rose 2.5% (£84 million in current prices) to £3.5 billion, while imports from Israel fell 4.8% (£125 million in current prices) to £2.5 billion. Furthermore, the UK reported a total trade surplus of £1 billion with Israel in the four quarters to the end of Q1 2026, compared to a trade surplus of £935 million in the four quarters to the end of Q1 2025.[60]

At the end of 2024, the stock of UK foreign direct investment (FDI) in Israel had declined by £1.4 billion from its level at the end of 2023. This decline was expected given the security situation in Israel and the war it had waged since late 2023. Moreover, the decline was not limited to British investment. At the end of 2024, the stock of Israeli FDI in the UK stood at £1.3 billion. By the end of 2024, Israel accounted for 0.1% of the total UK inward FDI stock.[61]

Following the suspension of FTA negotiations, the British government emphasized that it could not forgo trade relations with Israel, arguing that trade between the UK and Israel "underpins key areas of UK life and UK exports to Israel support thousands of jobs in the UK." It also warned that "action to suspend trade preferences risks unpredictable consequences and significant economic disruption for British businesses." Nevertheless, the government reiterated that it suspended trade negotiations "owing to the actions of this

[59] Thomas Brown, UK-Israel trade: Contribution to the economy.

[60] Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, "Trade and Investment Factsheets," GOV.UK, 24/9/2026, pp. 4 and 6, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6ab265b38cb3c0580e500fa0/israel-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2026-09-24.pdf

[61] Ibid., p. 1

Israeli government in Gaza and the West Bank," stressing that it would "take a sustained shift in the positions of this Israeli government for the UK to consider restarting the FTA negotiations."[62]

Although seemingly contradictory, these statements reflect the British Labour Party's approach to Israel. Labour seeks to reconcile Britain's strategic commitment to Israel with the humanitarian and human rights principles it espouses as a left-wing party, while also responding to pressure from members and voters who oppose the genocide perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinians. As a result, the party has been more restrained in its support for Israel than the Conservatives, while remaining broadly aligned with Britain's strategic commitment to maintaining relations with the Israel.

**4. Relations with the US**

A December 2024 nationwide poll conducted by the Policy Institute at King's College London found that 53% of Britons would choose Europe over the US as the UK's primary ally if forced to pick, while only 31% favored the US. That's a "dramatic reversal of public opinion compared to 1967, when the exact opposite was true: 53% backed America and only 33% favoured Europe in a similar scenario."[63] This shift in public opinion, which emerged just weeks before President Donald Trump began his second term, was also reflected in the British government's approach. Several factors have prompted the UK to reassess its alliance with the US, including the following:[64]

a. **Spending priorities:** Trump has forced NATO members to up their commitment to defence, the UK included. Consequently, the British government has cut aid to poorer countries and committed to raising defense spending to 3.5% of GDP, potentially placing additional pressure on future spending reviews.

b. **Trade policy:** The UK managed to insulate itself from much of the worst impact of Trump's tariffs. But the trade environment remains fraught. The UK caved to US threats on pharmaceutical tariffs, with potential big cost implications for the National Health Service (NHS).

c. **EU reset:** The "sheer visceral contempt the Trump administration seems to harbour for many European governments, its willingness to lend support to their political opponents on the right, and its loathing for the EU" have all contributed to the UK's rapprochement with the EU. In this regard, the UK and the EU are nearing an agreement on a sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) framework aimed at reducing trade barriers arising from Brexit. Although the agreement is expected to have a limited impact on the

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[62] Thomas Brown, UK-Israel trade: Contribution to the economy.

[63] Emma Salisbury, Britain's Strategic Outlook: Growing doubt in an increasingly unstable international order, site of Marineblad, 7/10/2025, https://www.marineblad.nl/artikel/britains-strategic-outlook-america-or-europe

[64] Jill Rutter, One year on: the impact of Donald Trump on British politics and policy, site of Institute for Government (IfG), 5/1/2026, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/trump-second-term-uk-politics

British economy, it could carry broader strategic significance. Throughout 2024, Keir Starmer sought to avoid choosing between the US and the EU while simultaneously pursuing a reset in relations with China. However, reaching an agreement with the EU on agricultural standards could put the UK on a collision course with the US if Washington continues to press for greater access for American agricultural products to European markets.

The US-Israeli war against Iran further accelerated the UK government's rapprochement with the EU. At a press conference on 1/4/2026, Prime Minister Keir Starmer explicitly stated that the UK would "pursue closer economic ties with the European Union in light of the war in Iran." He also pledged to use the EU-UK summit scheduled for summer 2026 "to seek more cooperation with the bloc on the economy and security." He said, "Our long-term national interest requires closer partnership with our allies in Europe and with the European Union," adding that Brexit "did deep damage to our economy."[65]

This shift was driven partly by tensions with the US over Starmer's refusal to join the US-Israeli war against Iran, a position he reiterated at the aforementioned press conference, "I've been absolutely clear that this is not our war and we're not going to get dragged into it." He also initially refused to allow US to use UK bases for its initial offensive strikes against Iran. Nevertheless, closer ties with the EU did not signal an intention to replace the US with Europe. The UK subsequently revised its position, allowing US forces to use British bases "for defensive action against Iranian missile strikes." At the same press conference, Starmer stressed that closer EU ties would not entail rejoining the single market or customs union or restoring freedom of movement. He further emphasized that closer relations with the EU would not come at the expense of ties with the US, stating, "I'm not going to choose because I think it's in our interest to have a strong relationship with the US and with Europe."[66]

This closer alignment with the EU raises the possibility that British foreign policy toward Israel could move more into line with European positions, particularly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and international law. Although some convergence may occur, especially under a Labour government, a substantial shift is unlikely. This is primarily because Labour remains committed to preserving Israel's strategic position in British foreign policy, a commitment reinforced by closer UK-US ties rather than weakened by tensions between the two countries. Moreover, the UK seeks to maintain strong, independent bilateral security and trade relations with Israel, as outlined in the 2030 Roadmap. Indeed, its previous EU membership did not prevent Britain from adopting positions more closely aligned with Israel than those of the EU as a whole.

[65] Becky Morton, UK will seek closer ties with EU in light of Iran war, Starmer says, BBC, 1/4/2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62l6w03lwzo

[66] Ibid.

## Conclusion

The determinants of British foreign policy toward Israel are varied, but they broadly reflect a strategic commitment to Israel's security and stronger bilateral ties. What some observers have interpreted as a shift in UK policy since Operation al-Aqsa Flood, however, has not amounted to a fundamental or strategic change. Rather, it reflects a political response to mounting domestic and international pressure over Israel's actions in the occupied territories and neighboring countries. These pressures have also aligned with the Labour Party's support for a two-state solution, a position shared by several other British parties. Nevertheless, these policy adjustments do not alter the UK's underlying strategy toward Israel. Both major parties remain committed to this strategic orientation, differing primarily in their specific policy approaches rather than in their fundamental positions. This continuity is evident in the Labour government's policies since taking office in mid-2024, just as it was under its Conservative predecessor, although the latter expressed its support for Israel more openly.

Accordingly, the future of UK-Israel relations will largely depend on which party governs the UK. Under a Conservative government, or one led by a party with a similar stance toward Israel, relations are likely to remain close, with military and trade cooperation reaching their highest levels. Neither the composition of Israel's governing coalition nor Israeli actions against neighboring Arab and Muslim countries is likely to significantly affect this dynamic. By contrast, under a Labour government or one led by a party that supports a two-state solution, the UK is likely to continue balancing the preservation of military and trade ties with Israel against condemning Israeli violations against Palestinians and advocating a two-state solution. Consequently, bilateral relations may become strained, particularly under a right-wing Israeli government, and the UK may scale back certain forms of cooperation. Nevertheless, such tensions are unlikely to alter the fundamental nature of the relationship, which remains rooted in bilateral cooperation and a longstanding commitment to Israel's security and continued presence in Palestine.