

Revealed: UK Approved £14m in Arms Sales to Israel During Gaza Protests

British government continued to sign off on licences for weapons despite concerns raised by prime minister and MPs

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The British government licensed arms deals worth over £14m (\$17.8m) to Israel last year even as Israeli soldiers were accused of intentionally firing on Palestinian protesters at the Gaza border in what the UN says may be potential war crimes.

Weapons approved for sale included ammunition, components for assault rifles, and other types of arms which could be used for repression, according to newly released details from the Department of International Trade (DIT), compiled by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT).

Revelations of the sales to Israel come after a UK court ordered the British government last week to stop approving arms sales to Saudi Arabia because it failed to fully assess whether the equipment might be used in breach of international humanitarian law in the war in Yemen.

One sale for more than \$125,000-worth of military training equipment was approved on 18 May last year, four days after 68 Palestinians were killed by Israeli troops on the most deadly day in Gaza since the 2014 Israeli offensive.

The DIT declined to give MEE more details about the equipment and how it could be used.

The sale was approved the same week Prime Minister Theresa May called the Palestinian killings “extremely concerning,” and said there was an urgent need to find out why Israeli forces had used live fire.

“While we do not question the right of Israel to defend its borders, the use of live fire and the resulting loss of life is deeply troubling,” May [said in a 15 May press conference](#). “We urge Israel to show restraint.”

The violence at the border was debated in parliament on the same day, with [seven MPs calling](#) for greater scrutiny of arms sales to Israel and some calling for an outright ban.

But the approval of licences continued, including military radar equipment, missile technology and night-vision gear, totalling about \$18m between 30 March until the end of the year.

That figure does not include sales that were approved through what are called open licences, whereby UK firms are not required to publicly disclose the values of arms or quantities sold.

Use of these opaque licences to sell arms to states in the Middle East and North Africa rose by 22 percent between 2013 and 2017, MEE has reported.

MEE understands that the DIT reviewed export licenses for Israel following the events at the border in May 2018 but found nothing to indicate that UK-supplied equipment had been used in a way that violated licensing criteria. It would, however, revoke licences if that assessment changed.

A DIT spokesperson told MEE:

“All export licence applications are considered on a case-by-case basis against international criteria, including respect for human rights. We will revoke any licenses found to be no longer consistent with these standards.

“We keep all defence exports under careful and continual review.”

‘The message it sends’

But CAAT spokesperson Andrew Smith said that while it’s not clear whether UK-made weapons were specifically used on protesters, it is the symbolism of the UK sales, which have continued through Israeli offensives on Gaza in 2008 and 2014, that matters.

“If shooting on the border didn’t stop the arms sales, if the bombardment in 2014 and 2008 didn’t stop them, what more will it take?” Smith said.

“The message it sends is that, no matter what atrocities are inflicted on the Palestinian people, arms sales will continue.”

By continuing to arm and support the Israeli military, he added, the UK is “only making it more likely that UK-made weapons will play a devastating role in the future”.

Asked about the figures, Palestinian Ambassador to the UK Husam Zomlot told MEE it is the sole responsibility of the British government to ensure that its arms sales are lawful, but he said there was a wider legal context to consider beyond the arms trade.

“The UK government can only say if it has done its due process. We are not aware of such a process to ensure that these weapons do not harm innocent Palestinians and they do not end up aiding Israel in its illegal occupation and colonisation of the land and people of Palestine,” he said.

“It’s not just about a direct specific incident only, but it’s also about the overall macro picture of the entire illegal situation of a state that has been in control of another and in daily violations of basic UK and international law.”

Shortly before the mass killing on 18 May, the UK parliament’s Committee on Arms Export Controls, the government’s arms export watchdog, [wrote to Trade Secretary Liam Fox](#),

asking whether he had any information about how sniper rifles and their components approved for sale to Israel in January 2017 had been used.

Fox responded that the company which exported the rifles and components used them to test ammunition in the company's own firing range.

"We were satisfied that there was not a clear risk that these items might be used for internal repression or in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law," he wrote.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle, an MP and member of the committee, said the answer had been "rather dissatisfactory" and called for end-use auditing that was more far-sighted.

"There is no good sending Israel arms in relative peace assuming the risk of it using them is low only to realise it is too late when it launches another disproportionate assault on their neighbours," he said.

According to Palestinian Ministry of Health figures released on Sunday, 306 people have been killed and 35,529 injured in what have been called the Great March of Return protests.

The ongoing initiative began in March 2018 after a call from local civil society actors urged Palestinians to engage in a mass march towards the Gaza fence in opposition to Israel's 11-year-old siege on Gaza.

A [United Nations inquiry](#) released earlier this year found that Israeli soldiers intentionally shot civilians and may have committed war crimes in their heavy-handed response to the protests.

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Featured image: Palestinian take cover as Israeli forces fire at protesters at the Gaza border on 14 December 2018 [Mohammed Asad/Middle East Monitor]

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