

UK says it will continue to sell weapons to Israel despite U.S. hesitation due to Rafah assault

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Protests in London: Workers and trade unionists shut down major UK sites involved in arms supplies to Israel. [Giorgia Bianchi/Middle East Monitor]

London, May 9 (RHC)-- British Foreign Secretary David Cameron has said the United Kingdom will not halt arms sales to Israel even if the regime stages a large-scale assault on the southern Palestinian city of Rafah.

In a speech on Thursday David Cameron claimed that UK arms sales were not the same as those from the U.S. to Israel. The top British diplomat said there was "a very fundamental difference" between the U.S. government, which supplies weapons directly as a state to Israel, and the UK government, which licenses the export of arms sold by companies.

"The U.S. is a massive state supplier of weapons to Israel. We do not have a UK government supply of weapons to Israel, we have a number of licenses," Cameron said.

In the main part of his speech, Cameron said Britain and its allies had to show more courage in facing down adversaries in "a moment of peril." But he was unwilling to describe what Israel would have to do in Rafah to be deemed to have crossed a red line.

Katie Fallon, at the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (Caat), said Cameron's comments show "absolutely no regard for the survival of Palestinians in Gaza or for the rule of law in the UK."

"It is beyond alarming, and unlawful, that our foreign secretary and government think that the risk of genocide and war crimes are simply irrelevant in their decision to license UK-made arms and components to Israel for use in Gaza," she said.

The current licenses cover the export of components for combat aircraft, armored personnel carriers and targeting equipment. "F-35 jets that have been dropping bombs on Gaza for the last seven months would not be in the sky without the components made all across the UK," Fallon said.

President Joe Biden recently threatened to stop sending some US weapons amid concerns about an invasion into Rafah.

British lawmakers have pressed Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to follow the United States. "It's been reported that the United States has paused an armed shipment to Israel. The UK will now follow suit, won't it?" Scottish National Party MP Stephen Flynn said in Parliament.

In response, Sunak said: "The right honorable gentleman may not realize, but the UK government doesn't itself directly provide arms or ship arms to Israel."

Sunak, however, went on to acknowledge that the UK government licenses the export of arms to Israel.

The government drew similar distinctions when asked tough questions about UK arms exports to Israel in February.

London is facing a domestic pressure since an Israeli attack on the World Central Kitchen convoy killed three British nationals last month in Gaza. Government officials have repeatedly emphasized in recent months that UK defense exports to Israel were very small. In 2023, Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said such exports were "just £42 million (\$53 million) last year."

Anti-arms campaigners have said that the true figure could be much higher, because the items sold under opaque open licenses keep the value of arms and their quantities secret.

They also point to how critical UK-made components may be to Israel's war effort.

According to Caat, British companies provide around 15 percent of the components of the F35 stealth combat aircraft that Israel has used to bomb the besieged Palestinian territory. It also believes the real value of arms exports to Israel is twice as high as the government claims it is, reaching at least £1 billion (\$1.3 billion) since 2015.

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