

Interactions *Between The* *UK* and Palestine

May 2025



Introduction

The following monthly interactions report for May 2025 provides a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of Palestinian rights campaigns and advocacy in the United Kingdom. This report aims to offer readers a clear understanding of the status of the Palestinian issue and the advocacy movement in the UK as of May 2025. The information presented is crucial for NGOs, iNGOs, interest groups, private individuals, and all other relevant stakeholders engaged with matters concerning Palestine and the UK, providing essential insights.

Government

- On 7 May, 75 Labour parliamentarians - 69 MPs and six peers - sent a private letter to Prime Minister Keir Starmer urging him to seize a 'unique window of opportunity' to join France in recognising the state of Palestine at a planned summit in June, as President Macron has indicated he may do. The letter was written on behalf of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East (LFPME) by its parliamentary chairs, Andrew Pakes and Sarah Owen, and stresses the need for the UK to support Palestinian statehood; the list of signatories remains private. While No.10 has not responded, Foreign Secretary David Lammy confirmed the UK is in talks with France, reiterating that recognition should have 'impact on the ground' and support a two-state solution rather than be merely symbolic.
- On 7 May, a new investigative report – authored by Progressive International, Palestine Youth Movement (PYM), and Workers for a Free Palestine - revealed that the UK has exported over 160,000 military items to Israel since October 2023, contradicting official government claims and raising serious concerns that Foreign Secretary David Lammy and other ministers may have misled Parliament. Despite public assurances that UK exports were limited to 'defensive' equipment like helmets and goggles, the data - sourced from the Israel Tax Authority - shows thousands of direct shipments of lethal arms, including bombs, grenades, and parts for F-35 fighter jets, even after supposed licence suspensions in September 2024.

- At the United Nations on 13 May, the UK's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Dame Barbara Woodward, urged Israel to 'lift its block on aid', warning that 'the whole of Gaza is at the risk of famine' and that 'tonnes of food are currently sitting rotting at the border'. Woodward stressed that the UK would reject any aid mechanism that 'seeks to deliver political or military objectives' or endangers civilians. She condemned the killing of aid workers and strikes on a UN compound, calling Israel's lack of accountability 'disappointing'.
- On 14 May, it was reported that NHS staff will be banned from wearing uniforms at pro-Palestine protests and from displaying pro-Palestinian symbols at work, under new guidance from Health Secretary Wes Streeting. The rules, which reaffirm existing policy, permit only badges linked to professional roles and allow protest participation only on health-related issues.

Critics, including Dr Rehiana Ali, say the move is politically motivated and inconsistently applied, pointing to the continued display of symbols like yellow ribbons for Israeli hostages. The guidance follows lobbying by pro-Israel groups and comes amid protests by NHS staff over Israeli attacks that have killed over 700 healthcare workers in Gaza.

- On 15 May, Brent Council approved a twinning agreement with the Palestinian city of Nablus, aiming to foster cultural exchange and grassroots cooperation. The initiative, supported by the Brent-Nablus Twinning Association, will be independently funded and feature school programmes, artistic collaborations, and community events to deepen understanding of Palestinian life under occupation.

The vote revealed political divisions. Conservative councillor Maurice opposed the move, claiming 'Nablus is controlled by Hamas', and warning it could damage Brent's reputation. Liberal Democrat Cllr Lorber raised concerns about LGBTQ+ rights, saying they would not oppose the twinning 'if undertakings were received that gay people would be safe there'. Despite abstentions and absences, the motion passed overwhelmingly, with proponents emphasising the partnership's community-driven nature.



- On 20 May, UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy announced a suspension of new free trade negotiations with Israel and imposed sanctions on individuals and entities linked to illegal West Bank settler activity, calling Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza 'morally unjustifiable', 'wholly disproportionate', and 'utterly counterproductive'. Lammy condemned Israel's 11-week aid blockade and accused ministers in Prime Minister Netanyahu's government of using 'repellent' and 'monstrous' rhetoric, including calls to "cleanse" Gaza. Lammy also summoned the Israeli ambassador and confirmed a review of the UK-Israel strategic cooperation roadmap.

- However, just six days later, on 26 May, UK Trade Envoy Lord Ian Austin visited Israel to promote bilateral trade, visiting infrastructure sites in Haifa and celebrating UK-Israel 'cooperation at every stop', as shared by the UK embassy on social media. The visit sharply contrasted with the foreign secretary's measures and sparked backlash from within the Labour Party, with MPs calling for Austin's removal and accusing the government of policy incoherence. Critics argued the trip undermined Lammy's stance and exposed the UK's unwillingness to apply consistent, tangible pressure on Israel. The dissonance between the trade envoy's promotional activities and the foreign office's stated condemnation of Israeli actions has led to renewed scrutiny of Labour's approach.



Parliamentarians, political parties, and semi-official bodies

- In a letter sent to Prime Minister Keir Starmer on 6 May, seven Conservative MPs and six members of the House of Lords broke with Conservative party policy by calling for the immediate recognition of a Palestinian state. Organised by former minister Kit Malthouse MP, the letter argued that recognition is a necessary step to uphold justice, international law, and Palestinian self-determination, stating it 'should not be treated as a distant bargaining chip'. Signatories include MPs Edward Leigh, Simon Hoare, John Hayes, Desmond Swayne, and peers Hugo Swire, Nicholas Soames, and Patricia Morris.

The move marks a rare public split within Tory ranks over Middle East policy, amid growing unease about Israel's war in Gaza. One Conservative MP told the Commons he had "withdrawn" his long-standing support for Israel after backing it "pretty much at all costs" for two decades.

- On 15 May, the British Museum in London hosted a controversial event marking Israel's Independence Day - a date that coincides with the Palestinian Nakba, the 1948 displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians. The gathering, held in secrecy and described publicly as a 'corporate event', included high-profile right-wing figures such as UK Minister Kemi Badenoch, Israeli Ambassador Tzipi Hotovely, and Reform Party leader Nigel Farage. The presence of comedian Jimmy Carr, who declined to acknowledge questions from protesters, further intensified criticism.

The event drew sharp backlash from advocacy groups like Energy Embargo for Palestine, which condemned the British Museum for hosting what they described as a propaganda event amid ongoing genocide in Gaza.



- At the Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI) business lunch on 19 May, Kemi Badenoch declared the Conservative Party the 'last line of defence' for Israel in Parliament, warning of an 'unholy alliance between the hard-left and Islamist extremists' on UK streets. Reaffirming her party's stance, she said, 'Israel is not alone – we stand with you', and described support for Israel as aligned with 'British values' and 'Conservative values'.

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- On 25 May, Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch described Israel's genocide in Gaza as a 'proxy war on behalf of the UK' during a Sky News interview, framing it as aligned with British strategic interests similar to Ukraine's fight against Russia. She refused to condemn Israeli military actions or Prime Minister Netanyahu's inflammatory rhetoric, denying that the conflict amounts to genocide despite mounting evidence and ongoing investigations by the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice.

Badenoch's remarks sparked strong criticism from MPs and human rights advocates, including British MP Ayoub Khan and Chris Doyle of the Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU), who accused her of ignoring the humanitarian catastrophe caused by Israel's blockade, starvation policies, and attacks on civilians in Gaza.

- On 28 May, Britain's Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis delivered the keynote speech at an Israeli Government-backed conference on antisemitism in Jerusalem, attended by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, and international dignitaries. Mirvis declared, 'If you are anti-Zionist, you are also anti-Jewish. But more than that, you're anti-Judaism', describing anti-Zionism as the 'new antisemitism' and highlighting Israel's deep religious significance to Judaism. He praised the IHRA definition of antisemitism, urging its global adoption, and addressed concerns that it might stifle criticism of Israel by clarifying it 'specifically allows for a person to make constructive criticism'.



NGOs – Solidarity groups

- On 10 May, UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) faced strong criticism after its chief executive, Jonathan Turner, suggested in a letter that reduced obesity resulting from the genocide war in Gaza could potentially increase life expectancy - a claim made while disputing a motion at the Co-op's AGM and challenging a projected death toll cited from a Lancet letter. The remarks, made amid growing famine concerns, were widely condemned by rights groups as callous and dehumanising.
- On 17 May, more than half a million people marched through central London to Downing Street to mark the 77th anniversary of the Nakba and call for an end to UK arms sales to Israel and the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Organised by a national coalition - including the Palestinian Forum in Britain (PFB), Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), Stop the War Coalition (STW), Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CnD) - the protest drew families, faith groups, trade unions, and artists. Speakers included historian William Dalrymple, Palestinian Ambassador to the UK Husam Zomlot, Apsana Begum MP, Jeremy Corbyn MP, and Fares Amer on behalf of PFB.



- On 19 May, it was reported that 73% of Co-op members voted in favour of a motion urging the retailer to end all trade with Israel in response to its genocide in Gaza - raising the possibility that the Co-op could become the first major UK supermarket to boycott all Israeli goods. Passed at the Co-op's Annual General Meeting, the motion described Israel's genocide as the 'complete destruction' of Gaza and called on the board to show 'moral courage and leadership'. Campaigners, including the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, hailed the result as a powerful message of grassroots support for Palestinian rights and a call for ethical consistency in corporate practices.
- On 20 May, King's College, Cambridge became the first Oxbridge institution to commit to full divestment from the arms industry and companies complicit in the illegal occupation of Palestine, following a year-long campaign by King's Cambridge 4 Palestine. The college will implement a new 'responsible investment' policy by the end of 2025, excluding investments tied to military weapons and internationally recognised illegal activities such as occupation.
- On 27 May, over 800 British legal experts - including former Supreme Court justices Lord Sumption and Lord Wilson, Court of Appeal judges Sir Stephen Sedley and Sir Alan Moses, and senior barristers Matthias Kelly KC and Brian Fee KC - called on Prime Minister Keir Starmer to impose sanctions on Israel and consider suspending it from the UN to meet the UK's international legal obligations. They highlighted mounting evidence of war crimes and the serious risk of genocide in Gaza, criticising the government's limited response, including the suspension of free trade talks, and demanding urgent action such as sanctioning Israeli ministers and military officials linked to incitement and illegal settlements.

The signatories condemned Israel's attacks on UN agencies like UNRWA as a direct challenge to the UN charter, and called for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire and full humanitarian access to Gaza. They urged the UK to enforce ICC arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, including Netanyahu and Gallant.

- On 31 May, the group Cambridge for Palestine (C4P) relaunched a protest camp outside Trinity College, demanding the University of Cambridge disclose and divest from companies implicated in Israel's genocide in Gaza, including Elbit Systems and Barclays. This action follows recent university-imposed restrictions on pro-Palestine protests, which activists say criminalise dissent amid the ongoing genocide. Despite King's College's recent divestment, C4P vows to continue pressuring Cambridge's autonomous colleges to end financial ties to the Israeli occupation.



Conclusion

March 2025 has marked a turning point in the UK's relationship with the issue of Israel-Palestine, revealing deep institutional dissonance within government policy. Foreign Secretary David Lammy's unusually forceful condemnation of Israel's military offensive and the suspension of bilateral trade negotiations reflect a nascent but significant recalibration - rooted in legal risk exposure, international scrutiny, and rising domestic discontent.

However, this trajectory is undercut by parallel state actions such as Lord Austin's trade-promotion trip to Haifa, NHS restrictions on Palestine solidarity expression, and the UK's continued military exports to Israel. These contradictions reveal a fragmented executive, where rhetorical divergence from Israel coexists with entrenched logistical and ideological alignments.

Parliament and civil society now form increasingly divergent pressure poles. In Westminster, cracks have deepened in cross-party consensus. Kemi Badenoch's elevation to Leader of the Opposition has further polarised the debate: her statements portraying Israel's war on Gaza as a 'proxy war' for Britain and aligning Conservative identity with Zionist ideology crystallise a hardline position that starkly contrasts Labour's evolving stance.

Outside Parliament, solidarity movements are not only expanding but institutionalising: the Co-op's member-backed call to boycott Israel, King's College Cambridge's commitment to arms divestment, and coordinated legal demands from top jurists exemplify a sophisticated, multi-front civil mobilisation. These developments position Palestine as a litmus test for political coherence, legal integrity, and public legitimacy. Whether the UK's response hardens into a consistent, principle-driven policy or collapses under the weight of factionalism and external lobbying will define the next phase of British engagement with the issue.

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