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New UK Sanctions Powers Enable Action Against Supporters of Illegal Israeli Settlements

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Author: Patrick Wintour – Diplomatic Editor, The Guardian

The United Kingdom is expanding its sanctions powers to enable the freezing of assets and the targeting of entities that facilitate illegal Israeli settlement activities, obstruct the delivery of humanitarian assistance, or unlawfully detain individuals.

The new statutory instrument, which introduces amendments to the global sanctions regime concerning human rights and international humanitarian law, adds three new grounds to the sanctions framework established in 2020:

1. Serious violations of international humanitarian law.
2. Obstruction of humanitarian assistance.
3. Serious violations of the right to liberty and security of person.

Illegal settlement activities will fall within the scope of sanctions as violations of international humanitarian law, including the provisions of the Geneva Conventions relating to occupation.

The Israeli government closed the British consulate last week in protest against the UK's position, forcing the United Kingdom to withdraw 21 diplomats and downgrade the consulate to the status of a mission. However, this retaliatory measure by Israel does not appear to have deterred the British government from proceeding with its plans.

The proposed new powers expand the scope of government action beyond those directly responsible for violations to include individuals and entities that facilitate, incite, promote, or support conduct subject to sanctions; provide financing, goods, or technology necessary for such conduct; conceal related evidence; or benefit from it.

Banks and commercial entities may also fall within the scope of these measures, as designation under the sanctions regime requires only reasonable grounds to suspect involvement in the relevant activities.

The proposed sanctions measures include asset freezes, prohibitions on making funds or economic resources available to designated individuals and entities, travel bans, and disqualification from serving as company directors.

A new urgent procedure will also allow British ministers to adopt sanctions designations previously imposed by the European Union, the United States, Canada, or Australia for up to 112 days while a separate UK-specific case is prepared against the targeted individual or entity.

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British Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband is seeking to expedite these measures after the Israeli government pledged to proceed with a settlement project in the E1 area of the occupied West Bank, involving the construction of 1,234 housing units.

Many observers believe that implementing this project would sever the geographical continuity necessary for establishing a viable and territorially contiguous Palestinian state, making the so-called two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict nearly impossible.

The deadline for submitting bids for the E1 project is 19 October. However, the Israel Land Authority has confirmed that the tender box will not be opened, nor will the submitted bids be considered, before 19 November, following the Israeli elections scheduled for 27 October.

The British Palestinian Project stated that the Israeli postponement:

“Does not remove the need to deter commitments being made now, since bidders and their backers commit on 19 October, contracts could still be signed before a new Israeli government is formed.”

The project welcomed the inclusion of the right to liberty and security of person in the new legislation, considering it a pathway for imposing sanctions in cases of serious arbitrary or unlawful detention, including the detention of Palestinian children, as well as against those responsible for or facilitating such practices.

In November 2023, Save the Children estimated that approximately 10,000 Palestinian children had experienced Israeli military detention over the preceding 20 years.

A 2026 United Nations report on children and armed conflict also verified that Israeli forces detained 981 Palestinian children during 2025, with 180 of them remaining in administrative detention without charge or trial at the end of the year.

The United Kingdom has previously imposed sanctions relating to restrictions on humanitarian assistance in Sudan and South Sudan. However, this marks the first time that this general power has been incorporated into a new worldwide sanctions regime that also encompasses Israel.

Under the new framework, refusing to issue permits or preventing humanitarian aid convoys from passing may constitute sufficient grounds for sanctions, without requiring proof that the obstruction formally amounts to a violation of international humanitarian law. This effectively lowers the legal threshold for taking action.

Separately, British officials are continuing to work with their European counterparts to explore legal mechanisms for prohibiting British trade with illegal Israeli settlements.

Source: The Guardian, Patrick Wintour, 14 October 2026.

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