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British arms exports to Israel reach record level

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Figures reveal defence firms' sales at new high, as Prince William prepares for visit to Ramallah and Jerusalem

British defence contractors are selling record amounts of arms to Israel, new figures reveal, just days after it was confirmed that Prince William will represent the UK government on a visit to the country next month.

Figures from the Campaign Against Arms Trade reveal that last year the UK issued £221m worth of arms licences to defence companies exporting to Israel. This made Israel the UK's eighth largest market for UK arms companies, a huge increase on the previous year's figure of £86m, itself a substantial rise on the £20m worth of arms licensed in 2015. In total, over the past five years, Israel has bought more than £350m worth of UK military hardware.

Licences issued to UK defence contractors exporting to Israel last year include those for targeting equipment, small arms ammunition, missiles, weapon sights and sniper rifles. In 2016 the UK issued licences for anti-armour ammunition, gun mountings, components for air-to-air missiles, targeting equipment, components for assault rifles, components for grenade-launchers and anti-riot shields.

Human rights groups have questioned the wisdom of sending a senior royal to a country whose use of lethal force last month has been the subject of concern from the UK government.

"After the appallingly excessive response of the Israeli security forces at the Gaza border, tensions in the occupied Palestinian territories are likely to be close to boiling point when Prince William makes this historic visit," said Kerry Moscogiuri, Amnesty International UK's campaigns director.

The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, defended Israel's response, saying "every country has an obligation to defend its borders". But Theresa May backed calls for an independent inquiry into the violence, which reportedly left 58 Palestinians dead. The British prime minister said the use of live rounds by Israeli forces was "deeply troubling" and called for greater restraint. Now the UK government faces questions as to whether UK-made weapons were used by the Israelis last month.

A review by government found the UK had issued 12 licences for arms it believed were likely to have been used in the 2014 war. In 2010 the then foreign secretary, David Miliband, said Israeli equipment used in an attack on Gaza "almost certainly" contained British-supplied components.

Andrew Smith of Campaign Against Arms Trade said: "The shootings we have seen over recent weeks have been an awful reminder of the appalling collective punishment and oppression that has been inflicted on the people of Gaza. By the government's own admission, UK arms have been used time and again against Palestinians. Yet the arms sales have continued unabated. There must be a full investigation into if any UK arms have been used in the atrocities we have seen over recent

months.”

The Duke of Cambridge’s five-day trip will begin in Amman, Jordan, on Sunday 24 June, take in Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority’s capital city, and end in Jerusalem. Netanyahu has said it will be “a historic visit, the first of its kind”.

But Smith said it was taking place against the “backdrop of a massacre”. He added: “If the prince does not speak out against the violence that has been inflicted, then it will be regarded as a major political endorsement. He must not use his visit to whitewash or legitimise these terrible abuses.”

Moscogiuri said: “When he’s in Ramallah, we’d like to see Prince William going beyond the usual royal meet-and-greet by spending time talking with some of the Palestinian communities who’ve been affected by Israel’s 51-year occupation. Like everyone in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, people in Ramallah have endured years of discriminatory restrictions on their movement, with roadblocks, militarised checkpoints and off-limits roads which are for the exclusive use of those in the illegal Israeli settlements.”

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