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**Special report**  
Israel and the Middle East

## Secret UK ban on weapons for Israel

Blocking of sales mirrors German action

**John Hooper in Berlin and Richard Norton-Taylor**

**Saturday April 13, 2002**

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Britain has imposed a de facto arms embargo on Israel for the first time in 20 years, official sources have told the Guardian. The ban applies to military equipment that could be used in Israel's continuing operations in the Palestinian territories.

The sources insist Britain has not imposed a formal or complete ban and Whitehall officials are coy about discussing which sales have been blocked. Decisions, they say, are being taken on a case-by-case basis. However, they add that military equipment that would have been cleared before Israel's offensive against the Palestinians, is now being blocked.

One Whitehall official pointed to the government's guidelines which state that arms exports would be blocked if they were for "internal repression", affected "adversely regional stability in any significant way", or if there was a clear risk "that the intended recipient would use the proposed export aggressively against another country, or to assert by force a territorial claim".

London's undeclared policy mirrors that of Germany and is likely to be discussed today when the German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, meets Tony Blair at Chequers.

One source said the shift in Britain's stance had not been made public because of deep divisions of opinion in Whitehall over the best response to developments in the Middle East. These divisions went "a long way up", said the source.

France had also quietly suspended sales of certain arms, another source said. The parallel moves by European powers emphasise Israel's growing estrangement from its allies and make it more dependent than before on US goodwill.

In Britain's case, refusals to approve arms exports are more significant politically and diplomatically than militarily, since Britain is not a major supplier to Israel's armed forces. Nevertheless, according to the latest figures, the government last year approved £12.5m worth of military equipment for export to Israel.

It included demolition charges, general purpose machine guns, rifles, small arms ammunition, components for small calibre artillery ammunition, and components for air-to-surface missiles, armoured fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers, combat aircraft and helicopters, and tanks. Whitehall officials made it clear these items would not now be approved for export to Israel.

Ministers have demanded an explanation from Israel about its use of British equipment in actions against Palestinians in the occupied territories. The Foreign Office disclosed last month that Israeli armed forces had modified British Centurion tanks, exported between 1958 and 1970, into armoured personnel carriers.

Speaking to reporters in London on Thursday, the German defence minister, Rudolf Scharping, confirmed reports that his country was refusing export licences for tank parts and other equipment for Israel. Though he insisted Germany was not operating a formal arms embargo, Berlin had delayed shipments at what he called "this crucial time".

The Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot had reported that Germany slapped an embargo on 120 parts necessary for the construction of Merkava tanks. Britain formally embargoed arms to Israel following its invasion of Lebanon in 1982.