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Israel fury at UK attempt to arrest Tzipi Livni

Israel has reacted angrily to the issuing by a British court of an arrest warrant for the former Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni.



Tzipi Livni was foreign minister during Israel's Gaza offensive

The warrant, granted by a London court on Saturday, was revoked on Monday when it was found Ms Livni was not visiting the UK.

Ms Livni was foreign minister during Israel's Gaza assault last winter.

It is the first time a UK court has issued a warrant for the arrest of a former Israeli minister.

Ms Livni said the court had been "abused" by the Palestinian plaintiffs who requested the warrant.

"What needs to be put on trial here is the abuse of the British legal system," she told the BBC.

"This is not a suit against Tzipi Livni, this is not a law suit against Israel. This is a lawsuit against any democracy that fights terror."

She stood by her decisions during the three-week assault Gaza offensive which began in December last year, she said.

Israel's foreign ministry summoned the UK's ambassador to Israel to deliver a rebuke over the warrant.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the situation was "an absurdity".

“ We completely reject this absurdity taking place in Britain ”

Benjamin Netanyahu
Israeli Prime Minister

"We will not accept a situation in which [former Israeli Prime Minister] Ehud Olmert, [Defence Minister] Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni will be summoned to the defendants' chair," Mr Netanyahu said in a statement.

"We will not agree to have Israel Defence Force soldiers, who defended the citizens of Israel bravely and ethically against a cruel and criminal enemy, be recognised as war criminals. We completely reject this absurdity taking place in Britain," he said.

Pro-Palestinian campaigners have tried several times to have Israeli officials arrested under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

'Cynical act'

This allows domestic courts in countries around the world to try war crimes suspects, even if the crime took place outside the country and the suspect is not a citizen.

Israel denies claims by human rights groups and the UN investigator Richard Goldstone

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- ▶ Guardian.co.uk Tzipi Livni arrest warrant prompts Israeli government travel 'ban' - 2 hrs ago
- ▶ Times Online Israel fury over British war crimes warrant - 2 hrs ago
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that its forces committed war crimes during the operation, which it said was aimed at ending Palestinian rocket fire at its southern towns.

The Palestinian militant group Hamas has also been accused of committing war crimes during the conflict.

Israel's foreign ministry said in a statement on Tuesday: "Israel rejects the cynical act taken in a British court," against Ms Livni, now the head of the opposition Kadima party, "at the initiative of extreme elements".

It called on the British government to "act against the exploitation of the British legal system against Israel".

Addressing a conference in Tel Aviv on Tuesday, Ms Livni did not refer specifically to the arrest attempt.

But she said: "Israel must do what is right for Israel, regardless of judgements, statements and arrest warrants. It's the leadership's duty, and I would repeat each and every decision," Israeli media reported.

'Strategic partner'

Israel says it fully complies with international law, which it says it interprets in line with other Western countries such as the US and UK.

On Monday Ms Livni's office denied the reports that a warrant had been issued and that she had cancelled plans to visit the UK because of fears of arrest.

It said a planned trip had been cancelled two weeks earlier because of scheduling problems.

The British foreign office said it was "urgently looking into the implications of the case".

"The UK is determined to do all it can to promote peace in the Middle East, and to be a strategic partner of Israel," it said in a statement. "To do this, Israel's leaders need to be able to come to the UK for talks with the British government."

Palestinians and human rights groups say more than 1,400 people were killed during Israel's Cast Lead operation between 27 December 2008 and 16 January 2009, more than half of them civilians.

Israel puts the number of deaths at 1,166 - fewer than 300 of them civilians. Three Israeli civilians and 10 Israeli soldiers were also killed.

The BBC's Tim Franks says that, privately, senior Israeli figures are warning of what they see as an increasing anti-Israeli bent in the British establishment.

In turn, our correspondent adds, there is clearly concern among British officials that should further arrest warrants be issued, relations with Israel could be damaged.



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PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO ARREST ISRAELI OFFICIALS

- ◆ **Oct 2009:** Former military chief Moshe Yaalon cancelled a UK visit because of fears of arrest for alleged war crimes
- ◆ **Oct 2009:** Filed attempt to raise warrant against Defence Minister Ehud Barak. Court ruled he had diplomatic immunity
- ◆ **Sept 2005:** Arrest warrant issued for a former head of Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip Gen Doron Almog. He received warning before disembarking from an aircraft at Heathrow Airport, and flew back to Israel