UK affirms ICC support after opposing war crimes suits against Israel

April 22, 2021

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The Jerusalem Post

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/uk-affirms-icc-support-after-opposing-war-crimes-suits-against-israel-665917>

The United Kingdom upheld its support for the International Criminal Court, after Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued an unusual statement against the court’s decision to probe Israeli actions in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

“We absolutely respect the independence of the International Criminal Court and we do expect it to comply with its own mandate,” UK Minister for the Middle East and North Africa James Cleverly told the UK Parliament on Tuesday. The “UK will remain a strong supporter of the ICC,” he added.

He was responding to a question by Labour Member of Parliament Wayne David, who later tweeted that Cleverly’s comment was a “slap in the face” to Johnson.

Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian Authority envoy to the UK, interpreted Cleverly’s statement as a rejection of Johnson’s opposition to a possible war crimes probe against Israel at the ICC.

“We appreciate the UK government’s support of the ICC, no exceptions,” Zomlot tweeted. “We also appreciate the role of the (Labour) opposition in clarifying matters. War crimes must be punished no matter who commits them.”

UK Ambassador to Israel Neil Wigan spoke with Jerusalem Post Editor-in-Chief Yaakov Katz and Senior Contributing Editor Lahav Harkov that will be published on the Post’s weekly podcast later this week.

Wigan said his country was a strong ICC supporter, adding that it respects the court and wants it to be successful.

“But as Prime Minister Johnson set out, we have had real concerns about how it is approaching the situation in Palestine, both from a jurisdictional point of view but also given our support for Israel,” said Wigan. “We have made that position public. The court has to have its independence to decide how it wants to address that. But we felt it was important to get that position out there publicly. It is very unusual, it is very rare, that we comment publicly on an ICC issue, so this is an important statement for us.”

In response to a query by the Conservative Friends of Israel, Johnson affirmed his support for the ICC’s independence.

“As a founder member of the ICC, we have been one of its strongest supporters and continue to respect the independence of the institution,” Johnson wrote. However, “We oppose the ICC’s investigation into war crimes in Palestine. We do not accept that the ICC has jurisdiction in this instance, given that Israel is not a party to the Statute of Rome and Palestine is not a sovereign state. This investigation gives the impression of being a partial and prejudicial attack on a friend and ally of the UK.”