



REVEALED: OVER 100 BRITONS AMONG ISRAELI SOLDIERS AND SETTLERS

Description

WORLD : At least 80 British nationals were serving in Israel's military a month before October 7, the UK Foreign Office has confirmed. The department also holds records on "approximately 20-30 British Citizens residing in illegal settlements in the West Bank."

David Cameron's staff released the data this month in response to a freedom of information request filed by Declassified UK in November.

They took so long to answer that the Information Commissioner threatened to have the High Court hold them in contempt.

The request was sensitive because the government had previously told parliament it does not track the number of Britons serving in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) or living in illegal settlements.

The disclosure suggests parliament was misled. It will put pressure on Lord Cameron to take action against more than 100 Britons likely to be violating international law.

Israel's settlements on Palestinian land in the West Bank contravene Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which states: "The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies."

Last month, the UK government sanctioned four "extremist Israeli settlers", but declined to clarify whether they were UK passport holders.

Service in the IDF carries its own legal complications, especially while Israel is under investigation for genocide at the International Court of Justice.

Misleading parliament

Cameron's deputy, Andrew Mitchell, told parliament just before Christmas: "We are aware of reports of UK citizens travelling to fight for the Israel Defence Force (IDF), but the Government does not estimate

the numbers of those who have done so.”

Mitchell made the same statement twice, while answering two questions from Labour’s Afzal Khan MP.

The government has made similar denials in respect of settlers. Junior foreign minister David Rutley was asked last April by Kenny MacAskill MP “what estimate he has made of the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank who hold British citizenship.”

Rutley replied: “The Foreign Secretary has made no such assessment.”

The freedom of information response to Declassified seems to contradict these claims.

In it, the Foreign Office said: “We hold a record of British National lone soldiers in Israel, which according to the Israeli MFA [foreign ministry] as of September 2023, was 80.

“However, this is not the number of British Nationals serving in the IDF, this is the number of British Nationals who immigrated on their own, in order to serve.”

It added: “We have records of approximately 20-30 British Citizens residing in illegal settlements in the West Bank.”

Both figures are likely to be under estimates, as “British Nationals residing in Israel are not required to register with the British Embassy. Israelis are also not required to notify the Israeli Authorities if they hold a foreign passport.”

Soldiers

Israel’s definition of a “lone soldier” refers to anyone in the army who lacks parents living in Israel. Around half are volunteers from overseas, while others may be orphans.

The concept is closely linked to Israel’s Mahal scheme, which allows foreign nationals to serve in the IDF without permanently emigrating to Israel. According to an archived version of the programme’s official website, they are initially classed as “tourists” and receive residence permits.

Around 50% choose to stay on in Israel after their military service and acquire citizenship.

The Mahal scheme is supported by various agencies such as Garin Tzabar, which has an office in London.

It advertises how immigrants who join the IDF can earn almost twice as much as their domestic counterparts, partly due to grants from Israeli government departments.

A charity in Israel, the Lone Soldiers Center, provides further support to the volunteers. Its office in Jerusalem was visited by Boris Johnson in November, when he praised their work.

The Center states: “Most lone soldiers are placed in combat units and come highly motivated to serve in the Israeli army. At any given time, these soldiers are awake and aware, guarding Israel’s borders by land, air and sea.”

Among those met by Johnson was paratrooper Sam Sank, who emigrated to Israel in 2009 to serve in the IDF, shortly after Operation Cast Lead – an assault on Gaza in which the UN found Israel deliberately targeted civilians.

Sank has fought in the current conflict in Gaza, and told the Times that hundreds if not thousands of fellow Brits are currently serving in the IDF.

His estimate reflects the Foreign Office's view that the 80 British lone soldiers in Israel is not the total number of UK nationals in the IDF, but only those without parents in the country.

Illegal?

Britain has no effective anti-mercenary legislation to stop UK nationals fighting for foreign powers. When the most relevant law, the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870, was reviewed in parliament in 1976, it emerged no one had been convicted under it.

“The only reason we allow the loophole to exist is because of the IDF”

Labour prime minister Harold Wilson noted that a number of Margaret Thatcher's constituents in Finchley “went to fight for Israel, either because they were Israeli students in Britain—perhaps on the reserve list—or because they wanted to go to the land which is the foundation of their faith. That, I am sure, is understood by everyone.”

Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, a former Conservative cabinet minister, has previously said: “The only reason we allow the loophole to exist is because of the IDF.”

Britain has never signed the United Nations convention against mercenaries, and lobbied to weaken the treaty so recruitment of Nepalese citizens into the British army's Gurkha brigade would not be jeopardised.

The IDF is not a proscribed organisation under the Terrorism Act, unlike several Palestinian armed groups. However the Met Police war crimes unit could still investigate individuals suspected of breaching the Geneva conventions.

Settlers

Around 700,000 people live in illegal settlements on the West Bank – Palestinian land which Israel conquered in 1967 and continues to occupy militarily.

The UK government has always regarded these settlements as a violation of international law, although it has done little to stop them. British-Israeli sisters Maia and Rina Dee were murdered by Palestinians in the West Bank last April.

Their father, Rabbi Leo Dee, moved the family from London to Israel in 2014, when the youngest girl was just 6 or 7 years old.

Their funeral was attended by Israel's national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who leads the far-

right Jewish Power party and has been convicted of inciting racism.

The UK government's counter-terrorism Prevent programme, which is accused of disproportionately targeting Muslims, identifies the "important" role family members can play in radicalisation.

By contrast, Jewish parents in Britain who move their families to Israeli settlements that are in violation of international law are not typically stopped from leaving the UK.

The Foreign Office was asked to comment on what action, if any, would be taken against the 100 British nationals referred to in the freedom of information response.

BY PHIL MILLER

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Date Created

03/29/2024