

Foreign Secretary statement on the Middle East conflict: 17 March

17.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

The Foreign Secretary made a statement to Parliament on the conflict in the Middle East.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the conflict in the Middle East.

Since the start of this conflict, we have seen Iran fire over nine hundred missiles and over three thousand drones across thirteen countries in the region – across countries which are partners with the UK and where hundreds of thousands of British citizens visit, work or live.

Regional air defences have intercepted the vast majority of Iranian strikes. But in recent days we have seen damage to oil export infrastructure, gas facilities, ports, and airports, and restrictions on the Strait of Hormuz, with major consequences for the global economy and impacting on the UK economy too.

US and Israeli strikes across Iran are continuing. We have seen attacks from Iranian proxy groups and troubling escalation in Lebanon.

And the UK is continuing our support for British nationals in the region, our defensive military support for partners against Iranian strikes and our intensive diplomatic activity on both security and economic issues in the UK national interest.

In Riyadh, a few days ago, I saw the work to get British nationals home from across the region, and saw how we are working to protect our people and our partners.

And I stressed the UK's support and solidarity as I met with counterparts from across the Gulf.

Over the last week alone I have held discussions with my counterparts in all six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, with the US, Israel, key European allies and other regional partners.

We want to see the swiftest possible resolution of this crisis,

That brings security and stability back to the region,

Stops Iran's threats to its neighbours.

And their efforts to hijack the global economy.

These events in the Middle East have consequences around the world.

And affect our security and our prosperity here in the UK.

So our response is based on clear principles and calm leadership.

We will support UK households under pressure.

We will protect our people in the region.

We will defend our allies under attack.

And as the Prime Minister said yesterday, we will not be drawn into a wider war.

Nor will we outsource our foreign policy.

Our decisions will be based on UK values and the UK national interest.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me update the House on support for British nationals in the region.

At the outset of this crisis, more than 300,000 British citizens were in the region.

And when the air strikes started and airspace closed, many were stuck and we have been working relentlessly ever since to help them get home.

This has been a complex task - our 24/7 crisis response centre working with our Embassies across the Gulf, partner governments in the region, and the Rapid Deployment Teams we sent to operate on the ground.

And we've worked closely with airlines.

We've laid on additional government charter flights from Muscat and from Dubai.

And we estimate now that the number of British nationals flying back from the region since the start of the war will today reach 100,000.

We continue to monitor the situation to provide the latest advice.

But I want to put on record my sincere thanks to all those involved in tireless efforts to support British Nationals abroad and to bring British citizens home.

Madam Deputy Speaker, turning to the conflict itself.

As the Prime Minister set out to Parliament, we took the decision not to be involved in the initial US strikes or to join any offensive operations.

We have taken a different position on this to the US and Israel.

Based on what is in the UK national interest.

When Iran began to target other countries across the region - putting our partners and citizens in danger - we took the further decision to support defensive action.

And in Saudi Arabia, I've seen the air defences that the British Army is helping operate to countering [sic] drones.

And we discussed additional defence assets that were pre-deployed by my Honourable Friend the Defence Secretary to the region before the conflict began and we have increased support since.

We have jets operating from sovereign base areas on Cyprus.

Eight in Qatar including the joint UK-Qatari squadron.

And as I speak, British Typhoons and F-35s are flying in defence of the Eastern Mediterranean and across Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Iraq.

The UK's defensive military action is supporting the wider region, with four extra Typhoons, three Wildcat helicopters and a Merlin helicopter already deployed.

And we are increasing our naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean as HMS Dragon and RFA Lyme Bay approach.

As the House is aware, we have given permission for US forces to use long standing basing at RAF Fairford and Diego Garcia to support defensive strikes against the ballistic missiles that are targeting the Gulf.

Let me confirm again the point the Prime Minister made last week - that our Cyprus base is not being used in those US operations.

We want to see an end to this war as quickly as possible.

The longer it goes on, the more dangerous the situation becomes.

And the more pressure on the cost of living here at home.

Iran's capabilities have been massively degraded.

But this conflict has confirmed the threat the regime poses - through its weapons and its proxies.

And why for so long there has been international determination that Iran should never be able to develop nuclear weapons.

So as this conflict eases or ends, we will need some kind of negotiated agreement to contain and constrain those threats for the future - from ballistic missiles, drones, proxies, and its nuclear programme and to safeguard international shipping.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the last seven days, we have seen Iran particularly focus their strikes on economic infrastructure in the Gulf.

Oilfields in Saudi.

Ports in Oman.

Strikes against commercial ships from Thailand and Malta.

Threatened mines in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran is seeking to hijack the global economy.

Holding hostage supplies of oil, gas and fertiliser.

Affecting prices and supply chains across the globe.

And threatening the cost of living here at home.

Causing real worry for our constituents across the country.

That is why the Prime Minister laid out yesterday how this Government will stand up for working people here in Britain.

Including providing support for households with heating oil costs.

Maintaining the energy price cut and cap.

Last week, we joined 31 other countries in the biggest co-ordinated release of oil in the IEA's history.

While maintaining our economic pressure and sanctions on Russia, because as we welcome President Zelenskyy to London today, we are determined that war in the Gulf must not become a windfall for Putin, as we continue to stand with Ukraine.

Reopening the Strait of Hormuz is vital for market stability, and for the cost of living for British households.

But as the Prime Minister has said, this is a serious and complex issue.

And there is no easy fix.

So we are discussing this with international partners in Europe and Asia, Gulf partners and the US.

These discussions are separate from the conflict itself, as the US itself has said.

Because countries from around the world have been clear that they do not want to see escalation or to be drawn into a wider conflict.

But they do want to see the Strait open and functioning.

And they do not want to see the fundamental principle of freedom of navigation undermined.

And because it is an international shipping lane, multiple nations need to be involved in planning the way forward.

And our discussions will continue to reflect serious, expert military and commercial assessments about what is credible and feasible so that commercial shipping can return as soon as possible as the conflict subsides.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me turn to Lebanon where I am extremely concerned the country is on the precipice of a widening conflict that risks disastrous humanitarian consequences.

In recent days I have spoken to the Lebanese Prime Minister, the Israeli Foreign Minister as well as discussions with the US, France and other European and Gulf partners.

We need urgent diplomatic action to avert further escalation.

But amid that danger it is possible there is also a moment of diplomatic opportunity.

And we must bring all support and pressure to bear so it is seized and not squandered.

So let me lay out the UK's position.

First, we condemn the appalling attacks by Lebanese Hizbollah who have fired hundreds of rockets at Northern Israel.

This must cease immediately.

The actions of this proscribed terrorist group - at the instigation of the Iranian regime.

Are once again drawing the people of Lebanon into a conflict they do not want and which is not in their interests.

Second, we support the sovereignty of Lebanon.

We welcome the commitments made by the Lebanese Government, including the significant decision to ban Hizballah's military activities.

And we will continue to support the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Because they - not Hizballah - are the sole legitimate defender of Lebanon.

Third, we are extremely worried about the civilian consequences of current Israeli operations.

With an estimated thousand people killed.

And one in seven Lebanese civilians reportedly displaced from their homes.

This scale of humanitarian displacement is completely unacceptable and risks devastating consequences.

So this weekend I announced that the UK would provide an additional 5 million pounds in essential humanitarian aid.

Today I can announce a further ten million pounds of humanitarian support.

To provide emergency medical care, shelter, and other life-saving assistance in Lebanon and the region to help prevent further displacement and instability that would risk escalating the regional problems with wider impact on other countries beyond the region too.

And fourth, we believe diplomatic progress can be made as there is a shared interest across both Lebanon and Israel in seeing an end to the Hizballah threats and in seeing peace and stability return.

Both the Lebanese Government and the Israeli Government have expressed an interest in joint talks.

We strongly support this path.

And the framework exists, in Security Council Resolution 1701.

Which provides the best route to lasting peace and security and stability beyond the region too.

The UK stands ready to provide diplomatic support to this process.

Madam Deputy Speaker,

This conflict in the Middle East is affecting countries across the region and across the world.

Global events affecting our security and our economy here at home.

And this Government is resolute in our determination to protect the safety, security and prosperity of British people and partners.

Pursuing the swiftest possible resolution to the conflict.

Security and stability,

In the national interest of the United Kingdom.

I commend this Statement to the House.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-statement-on-the-middle-east-conflict-17-march>