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THE PRIME MINISTER

25 May 2011

Dear Andy

Thank you for your letter of 3 March about the policy on UK arms exports to countries in the Middle East.

I share your commitment to building democracy and accountability in the Middle East, and I am hugely encouraged by the positive change taking place across the region. We need to do all we can to support what is potentially the greatest advance for human rights and freedom since the end of the Cold War. That is why the UK has led the international community in responding to the crisis in Libya, including by securing the UN arms embargo you refer to in your letter.

The UK takes great care to ensure that when we do engage in the defence trade, we do so in line with the tightest set of export licensing rules almost anywhere in the world. Enclosed is a copy of the criteria the UK Government applies in each case. Nevertheless, there are occasions when the decision to grant an export licence is finely balanced. In the Middle East, we have revoked a number of licences to countries affected by violence, including Bahrain, and the Foreign Secretary has announced a review of our defence trade across the region.

We should not forget, however, that all countries have the right to self-defence, and it is unrealistic to expect the smallest countries, including some in the Middle East, to manufacture and maintain every single part of their own defences. Few people would suggest that a country like Kuwait, invaded twenty years ago by Iraq, shouldn't have the right to defend itself and ensure its Armed Forces are equipped to do so.

David

Mr Andy Love MP