Ministers Move to Change Universal Jurisdiction Law

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The government is moving swiftly to change the law on universal jurisdiction to abolish the ability to bring private prosecutions for international crimes in the UK.

The foreign secretary, William Hague, has said the coalition government is already examining the law in detail, amid fears that the threat of arrest is preventing high-ranking Israelis from visiting the UK. "We cannot have a position where Israeli politicians feel they cannot visit this country," Hague said. "The situation is unsatisfactory [and] indefensible. It is absolutely my intention to act speedily."

Use of universal jurisdiction in the UK has attracted controversy after several high-profile attempts to obtain arrest warrants for senior Israelis, including the deputy Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, and the opposition leader, Tzipi Livni.

The law has developed rapidly since the General Pinochet case in 1999. It allows suspected perpetrators of crimes such as genocide, torture and war crimes to be prosecuted in the national courts of countries other than those where the alleged crimes were committed.

Last year, the Labour government announced it would change the law to require the attorney general's consent to any warrants being issued to make it harder to prosecute foreign officials.

That decision prompted outrage among backbench MPs, with Labour's Jeremy Corbyn bringing an early day motion last December to block the changes. A number of Liberal Democrats opposed changing the law, including current cabinet members Vince Cable and Chris Huhne, and Jeremy Browne, who is now a junior minister in the Foreign Office.

Sources say Hague's latest announcement comes amid intense pressure from the US and Israel.

The US Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, is trying to kickstart peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians after a 17-month break in the negotiations, prompting concerns that the law is hindering the UK's role in the peace process.

But suggestions that the law on universal jurisdiction is relevant to peace negotiations has infuriated lawyers representing victims of alleged war crimes who want to pursue actions in the UK courts.

"It is disgusting that the Foreign Office is exaggerating the impact on the peace process to get a few people who are suspects of very serious international crimes off the hook," said Daniel Machover, partner at the law firm Hickman & Rose.