

Report exposes UK role in Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen

By Barry Mason
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Thousands of UK personnel are intimately involved in maintaining the military war machine of Saudi Arabia, enabling it to carry out its one-sided slaughter in Yemen.

A recent report, “UK Personnel Supporting the Saudi Armed Forces—Risk, Knowledge and Accountability”, by researchers Mike Lewis and Katherine Templar, is part of a Brits Abroad study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Trust.

The Saudi Arabian-led war against the Middle East's poorest country is now in its fourth year. The Saudi regime launched the war in March 2015 to reinstall President Abd-Rabbuh Mansur Hadi who had been driven from power by Houthi rebels. Hadi is currently in exile in Riyadh, apparently under house arrest.

The US, UK and other western countries have supported the Saudi intervention. Like Saudi Arabia, they regard the war against the Houthis as a proxy conflict with Iran.

According to the UN, more than 10,000 people have been killed in Yemen since the Saudis launched their invasion in March 2015, and more than 85,000 people have been displaced since January this year.

Among the crimes carried out was the killing by Saudi planes of over 30 people at a wedding in April this year, with twice as many suffering horrific wounds. In October 2016, around 150 were killed and more than 500 injured when Saudi planes bombed a funeral in Sana'a, the Yemeni capital.

The UK has a decades long program for supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia. According to the report, 50 percent of all UK weapons and military equipment exports between 2013 to 2017 went to Saudi Arabia. In the period between 2007 and 2011 it was just over a quarter. Most materiel went to the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF), with the UK supplying nearly half its 324 Combat aircraft, along with spare parts and ammunition.

According to a *Sky News* report in March, 50 open

licences to supply weapons to Saudi Arabia were issued for the period July 2016 to September 2017—up by a third on the previous 15 months and coinciding with Theresa May's premiership. Open licences allow an uncapped number of weapons to be sent over a period of five years. Only then can the value of the licence be revealed, but the government is under no obligation to publish the figures.

The grand total of UK arms licences since the invasion in Yemen in March 2015 is more than \$6.2 billion for aircraft, helicopters, drones, bombs and missiles, according to government figures.

Lewis and Templar's report explains: “Under a sequence of formal agreements between the UK and Saudi governments since 1973, the UK Ministry of Defence and its contractors supply not only military ‘hardware’, but also human ‘software.’ Around 7,000 individuals—private employees, British civil servants and seconded Royal Air Force personnel—are present in Saudi Arabia to advise, train, service and manage British-supplied combat aircraft and other military equipment.”

The UK government claims these personnel are not involved directly in targeting, loading weaponry or in the planning of operational sorties. But confidential agreements signed between the UK government and the RSAF, which are not to be released to the public till 2027, outline the number of personnel and functions they undertake.

The UK-Saudi Al Yamamah agreement, a record arms deal signed in 1986 which included the supply and support of Tornado fighter-bombers, is still ongoing. The agreement is secret, but the report's authors were able to see a batch of Downing Street papers that were filed in the National Archive at Kew revealing some details.

Under the agreement the “United Kingdom civilian and military personnel will remain available in Saudi Arabia for preparation, including arming and support, of the

[Tornado fighter-bomber] aircraft during an armed conflict...”

Lewis and Templar interviewed technicians, managers and officials of all ranks over two years and their report notes the critical role of UK personnel in the Saudi war-machine:

“A mix of company employees and seconded RAF personnel have continued to be responsible for maintaining the weapons systems of all Saudi Tornado IDS fighter-bombers, a backbone of the Yemen air war... work as aircraft armourers and weapons supervisors for the UK-supplied Typhoon fighters deployed at the main operating bases for Saudi Yemen operations, and provided deeper-level maintenance for Yemen-deployed combat aircraft.”

UK personnel in Saudi Arabia have been placed at physical or legal risk, including from scud missiles and unexploded ordnance. Some of those who have tried to whistle-blow over possible war crimes have been harassed and have not been afforded protection under UK law.

The report unearthed evidence that some of the UK personnel are involved in the handling of cluster bombs.

Lewis and Templar also found that the UK government has used private companies to “work on behalf of the British state but with Saudi masters; without the legal protections accorded to UK civil servants or military personnel; and without any guidance or protocols for reporting risks of IHL (International Humanitarian Law) violations to the UK government, or to their employers... Whitehall’s limited oversight of their activities is a deliberately constructed choice.”

The British government singled out arms exports as a key priority post-Brexit, with former defence secretary Michael Fallon promising that the UK would “spread its wings across the world.”

Britain’s arms trade with Saudi Arabia is enormously unpopular at home, with only 6 percent of the British public supporting it according to a recent poll. A legal bid to challenge the UK’s arms exports was financed by a crowd fund appeal.

Earlier this month, the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) won its Court of Appeal bid to overturn last year’s High Court judgement that the export of arms from the UK to Saudi Arabia was lawful, despite widespread concern the trade was in breach of international humanitarian law. CAAT also won the right to challenge the closed verdict, where judges had heard evidence from the government in secret.

The court case revealed that the government went ahead with the sales despite its export policy chief telling then business secretary, Sajid Javid, “My gut tells me we should suspend [weapons exports to the country].”

The UK has long-standing interests in the Yemen. British troops first occupied the port of Aden in present day Yemen in 1839 and it soon became important as a coaling station for British warships. From 1937 the port of Aden and the surrounding protectorate became a British colony. In 1934 Britain aided Saudi Arabia when it annexed Asir, then part of Yemen. Britain enforced a treaty to give Saudi Arabia a 20-year lease on the territory which remains a part of Saudi Arabia to this day.

In 1962, following the death of King Ahmad of Yemen, Arab nationalist army officers took power and proclaimed a republic. Royalists backed by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Britain began an insurgency to restore the monarchy.

A dirty war ensued, with Britain initially supplying Jordan with fighter jets to carry out airstrikes in Yemen and embedding military advisers with its key allies. From March 1963, Britain supplied weaponry directly to the Royalist forces. At the same time, MI6 along with SAS founder David Stirling set up a British force to work with the insurgents. To mask British involvement, SAS and paratrooper forces were given temporary leave and were paid over £10,000 a year (equivalent to £197,000 today) by a Saudi prince.

In 1964 under the Labour government of Harold Wilson, covert bombing of Yemeni targets by the RAF began. Airworks Services was set up as a British company to train Saudi pilots.

Britain was eventually driven out of Aden in November 1967.

Today, driven by intractable crisis and the further erosion of its global standing, Britain is seeking to re-establish its influence in Yemen and across the Middle East as part of a new carve-up by the imperialist powers.

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