

Trudeau government exploits pandemic to renew \$14 billion arms deal with despotic Saudi regime

By Laurent Lafrance
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Whilst workers, health professionals and the general population have been absorbed by the coronavirus pandemic and the ruling elite's reckless push to "reopen" the economy, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government has moved to patch up its relations with the despotic Saudi regime—including as a leading arms supplier.

On April 9, just as Canada was beginning to see a dramatic surge in COVID-19 infections across the country, the Trudeau government lifted its moratorium on the issuing of new export licences for arms shipments to Saudi Arabia. The ban was originally adopted as part of a hypocritical public relations exercise, undertaken by the Trudeau government after the Saudi regime's grisly murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 had provoked international anger and revulsion.

The Liberals' "moratorium" was adopted above all to divert attention from revelations that the Saudi army used Canadian-made light armoured vehicles (LAVs) and other military equipment to suppress an uprising in the eastern part of the country in 2014. Canadian military equipment has also played a role in Riyadh's bloody war on neighboring Yemen, which has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians and left the country in ruins.

The Trudeau government launched a year-long "review" of how the Saudis have used LAVs manufactured at a London, Ontario-based General Dynamics' subsidiary under a \$14 billion Canadian government-brokered arms deal. The probe was conducted by Global Affairs, the new name given to Canada's Foreign Ministry, which plays a central role in advancing Canada's imperialist interests and ambitions abroad.

Predictably, the government review, which will not be made public, concluded that there was "no substantial risk" that the Saudi government, which beheads dozens of people every year and tortures political opponents, would use Canadian-made arms to violate human rights. It even claimed that the exports would "contribute to regional peace and security."

Amnesty International, Project Ploughshares, Oxfam and other groups have condemned the Trudeau government's decision, which they claim will inevitably cause death and devastation in the entire region. These organizations also criticized the "hypocrisy of the Canadian government" for approving military exports to Saudi Arabia while voicing support, only days later, for a UN call for a global ceasefire during the pandemic.

The attempt by Canadian imperialism to pose as a defender of "human rights" merits unreserved condemnation and contempt. As the Trudeau government works behind the backs of the population to ratchet up exports of weapons to one of the most world's repressive regimes, it has engaged in public criticism of China over its "human rights violations" in Hong Kong. In alliance with the Trump administration, which has incited police and National Guard troops to brutally attack the mass protests against police violence currently sweeping the US, Trudeau's Liberals are cynically invoking human rights to facilitate an imperialist campaign of aggression against Beijing. This includes economic pressure and preparations for military conflict.

The government "review" of Canada's Saudi arms exports was, from the beginning, a "democratic" farce not worth the paper it is written on. It is no secret that the absolutist Saudi regime—long the world's largest purchaser of foreign weapons—has one of the world's worst human rights records, at home and abroad. Now led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, it has invaded Yemen, financed al-Qaeda linked militias in Syria and Libya, and in close cooperation with Washington is engaged in intrigue across the Middle East, above all in US preparations to wage war on Iran.

While government officials still refuse to divulge details of the contract between Saudi Arabia and General Dynamics Land Systems Canada (GDLS), CBC obtained details of the 2014 contract two years ago. It called for the sale of more than 700 of the newly developed LAV 6s, including 119 with "heavy assault" 105-millimetre cannons. It also included a 14-year support program that involves maintenance, as well as ammunition and crew "training" in Canada and Europe.

Showing that the "humanitarian" rhetoric of Trudeau and his Liberals is nothing but demagoguery, Foreign Affairs Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne acknowledged that "the human rights record of Saudi Arabia remains troubling" even as he announced the lifting of the ban on new military export permits. Typical of the Liberals' deceit and hypocritical cant, he went on to claim that Canada "will continue to advocate for human rights." Champagne pledged to create an "advisory panel of experts" to "strengthen" Canada's arms export approval process and to push for an "international inspection regime" for arms sales. These gestures are transparently "democratic" varnish meant to cover over Canadian imperialism's criminal activities abroad.

With the aim of obscuring Canada's support for the Saudi regime, Champagne justified Ottawa's decision to resume issuing export licences for the LAVs with the claim that failure to do so would have "resulted in billions of dollars in damages." He also said the decision would "save" thousands of Canadian manufacturing jobs and help alleviate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Liberals' supposed concern for jobs should not be taken seriously by anyone. It comes from a government whose response to the coronavirus crisis has focused on bailing out the major banks and big business to the tune of more than \$650 billion, while placing workers on rations. The widely-touted wage subsidy program, through which the government pays 75 percent of a worker's wages if their employer keeps them on the payroll, has largely been shunned by businesses determined to carry out job cuts, so they do not have to pay payroll taxes and any benefits. Even those companies that initially participated in the scheme, like Air Canada, have used it to buy time in order to carry out comprehensive restructuring plans at workers' expense. (See: "Air Canada announces layoff of up to 22,800 workers")

Another argument advanced by the Liberal government to justify the arms deal is that it was imposed upon them by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. This claim passes over the fact that although the deal was signed under Harper, it was finalized under the Liberal government.

The Liberals employ somewhat different foreign policy rhetoric than did Harper, who celebrated Canada as "a warrior nation." This includes Trudeau's claims that Canada is pursuing a "feminist" foreign policy. But behind phony "human rights" rhetoric, the Liberal government has integrated Canada ever-more fully into the military-strategic offensives of US imperialism, the world's most aggressive and lawless power, including in the Middle East.

Ottawa has lent support to the development of a US-led anti-Iranian alliance involving Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms. This found its clearest expression in the Trudeau government's endorsement of the Trump administration's illegal assassination of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani in January.

The Trudeau government, like its Liberal and Conservative predecessors, has invoked "human rights" to justify a series of violent Canadian imperialist military interventions around the globe. Under Trudeau, Canada expanded its involvement in the ongoing US-led war in Syria and Iraq and is playing a major role in NATO's drive to threaten and strategically encircle Russia and China.

The trade union-backed New Democratic Party and Bloc Quebecois have criticized the Trudeau government's highly unpopular decision to continue arming the Saudi regime. But their criticisms of Liberal hypocrisy over "human rights" are utterly hollow since they themselves fully support Canadian imperialism's alliance with Washington—the bulwark of the Saudi regime, Israel and reaction in the Middle East, as around the world. During the campaign for last October's federal election, the NDP even attacked the Liberals from the right, demanding that their planned massive military spending increases be implemented

more effectively to ensure the rapid rearmament of Canada's Armed Forces. (See: "NDP advocates spending tens of billions on Canada's military")

For the Canadian ruling class, the Saudi arms deal will serve to improve relations with the despotic regime in Riyadh, as well as pleasing Washington. Canada-Saudi diplomatic relations soured in 2018 when Riyadh reacted angrily to Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland's criticism of the Saudi security forces' arrest of women's rights activists, including Samar Badawi, the sister of jailed blogger Ralph Badawi, whose wife is a Canadian citizen.

Freeland's social media post was part of the Liberal government's efforts to conceal Canada's substantial economic ties with, and political support for, the Saudi dictatorship. But to the ruling elite's dismay, Saudi Arabia retaliated with punitive economic and diplomatic measures, including threats to block commercial deals with Canada and conduct a fire-sale of Canadian-held assets, with no opposition from the Trump administration. (See: "Canada and Saudis in raucous diplomatic spat over Ottawa's posturing over human rights")

Behind the diplomatic standoff, the two countries pursued their commercial relations. It was revealed that even pending the outcome of Ottawa's "investigation" of Saudi human rights violations, Canada sent military equipment to the country, including LAVs worth more than \$1 billion.

Reports have documented how the Saudi regime has deployed Canadian-made weaponry as part of its near-genocidal war against the Yemeni population. The conflict, launched in 2015, has killed tens of thousands of people, including countless innocent women and children. According to relief agencies, 80 percent of Yemen's population is in need of humanitarian aid, while over half of the 30 million population is on the brink of starvation.

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