

Europe makes delayed criticism of Saudis over Khashoggi murder

Jean Shaoul

23 October 2018

Britain has issued a joint statement with France and Germany condemning “in the strongest possible terms” the torture and murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The foreign ministers said there was an “urgent need for clarification on exactly what happened” after Khashoggi entered the consulate on October 2. “Defending freedom of expression and a free press are key priorities for Germany, the United Kingdom and France,” the three declared.

The hypocritical protest comes in the wake of the media’s almost universal dismissal of Saudi Arabia’s latest version of the events surrounding Khashoggi’s assassination, calling it a crude cover-up to protect Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is presumed to have ordered the assassination.

All three imperialist powers have extensive economic interests in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, none more so than Britain. London, taking its cue from the US, barely commented on the affair until President Donald Trump, under pressure from the political establishment in Washington, qualified his previous support for the Kingdom’s transparent lies, saying he was “not satisfied” with the Saudi explanation and was dispatching Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Riyadh.

Even then, Britain’s comments were carefully calibrated. At the end of last week, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said the “response will be considered” if Saudi Arabia was found to be responsible for Khashoggi’s disappearance. When asked if the UK would stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia, he cited a “strategic relationship” and told the BBC that the UK had “a very strict arms sale control mechanism.”

A spokesman for International Trade Secretary Liam Fox, who has now pulled out of this week’s investment conference in Saudi Arabia, said, “The UK remains very concerned about Jamal Khashoggi’s disappearance...

those bearing responsibility for his disappearance must be held to account.”

Britain’s “considered” response contrasts starkly with its virulent anti-Russia campaign after the alleged novichok poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in March. Theresa May’s Conservative government insisted that the father and daughter were the victims of an operation ordered by President Vladimir Putin. May expelled dozens of Russian diplomats and called for an extension of sanctions against Moscow, without offering any evidence proving Moscow’s culpability.

Britain’s quiescence reflects its dependence on the House of Saud for policing the oil-rich Gulf, as well as concerns for its massive arms sales to the kingdom and other equally reactionary petro-monarchies as they come under threat from their own populations. Since 9/11, this has been legitimised with the rhetoric of “combatting terrorism and radicalisation,” with successive governments piously invoking the catechism, “Gulf security is our security.”

London’s fundamental interest in the Gulf, at one time under its imperial “protection,” is to ensure that profits accrue to its oil corporations, BP and Anglo-Dutch Shell.

Israel’s defeat of the Arab nationalist regimes in 1967 and 1973, the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973 after the establishment of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and rising demand for oil served to strengthen and enrich the feudal states of the Arabian Peninsula and enhance their influence.

By 1976, Britain was an economically spent force and had to turn to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout. Under those conditions, it bent over backwards to ensure that the Gulf states’ wealth was recycled through the City of London and used to buy British military hardware and manufactured goods.

The higher oil prices also helped to make the exploration of North Sea oil economically viable, with the

result that Britain now obtains only 3 percent of its oil and 20 percent of its gas supplies from Qatar. As a major producer, the British oil sector—like its US counterpart—gains from higher prices in a way that non-producers do not, while the government gains additional revenues via taxation. This makes a close working relationship with Saudi Arabia, whose significant reserves enable it to act as a “swing producer,” advantageous.

The Gulf has become even more important since 2016, with the May government making a concerted push—under the rubric of “Global Britain”—to offset the implications of Brexit for the UK.

Today, the Gulf’s sovereign wealth funds and private fortunes constitute a vital source of investment in Britain’s property market, corporations and banks. These capital flows have helped balance the UK’s chronic trade deficit, maintain the value of the pound and generate profits for the British financial sector.

The £43 billion al-Yamamah arms deal signed in 1985, and secured by Britain’s largest manufacturing corporation BAE with massive bribes, provided the House of Saud with a modern air force and aerial defence system. In 2006, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair intervened to stop a Serious Fraud Office investigation into bribery by BAE in order to secure another Saudi arms deal worth £40 billion, which was signed in 2007.

These weapons, and the military training that goes with them, were used by the Saudi royal family and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to suppress dissent in Bahrain—Britain’s former colonial possession—in 2011. Media reports revealed that Britain had provided extensive training for the Bahraini military and police, alongside a Defence Cooperation Agreement to provide “a framework for current and future defence engagement activity, including training and capacity building, in order to enhance the stability of the wider region.”

Bahrain, where Britain recently opened a permanent military base staffed by up to 500 soldiers, sailors and airmen, provided Britain with an important staging post for operations against Afghanistan and Iraq. The new facilities will enable Britain to police the Gulf and the strategic Straits of Hormuz and play a key role in a military conflict with Iran.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, writing in 2011, Britain had a secret military training unit in Saudi Arabia, where British personnel trained security forces in crowd control. The House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs provided more details in 2014, confirming

that British army personnel were training the National Guard and stating that the UK had some 130 military personnel stationed in Saudi Arabia.

Britain has continued to supply arms, intelligence and training to Riyadh, as well as diplomatic cover for its military operations in Yemen. According to the United Nations, the war in Yemen has caused the deaths, including indirectly through famine, of more than 60,000 people, mostly civilians, with 14 million now facing starvation.

Speaking of the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir stated in January 2016, “We have British officials and American officials and officials from other countries in our command and control centre. They know what the target list is and they have a sense of what it is that we are doing and what we are not doing.”

As well as civil servants and military personnel, BAE’s contracts with the kingdom include joint activities with the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Projects (MODSAP), with the line between the government, BAE and its subcontractors increasingly blurred.

These arms deals play a major role in sustaining British arms exports and the UK defence industry, positioning Britain as the world’s second largest arms exporter. They also underpin the viability of the Gulf’s petro-monarchies and Britain’s position as a military power. Just last year, the UK signed a new Military and Security Cooperation Agreement confirming its commitment to the House of Saud.

London’s reluctance to comment on the Khashoggi assassination stems from its fear that the crisis triggered by the killing will compound economic problems in Saudi Arabia and fuel demands for sweeping social change. Seven years after the revolutionary movement that swept the Mubarak dictatorship from power in Egypt, the former colonial power dreads a mass political upheaval in the oil-rich country and its Gulf neighbours.



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