

UK government refuses to publish list of airstrikes in Yemen involving civilian casualties

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The British government has refused to publish its database supposedly logging civilian casualties from murderous airstrikes in Yemen carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, which is armed by the UK and US.

While the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has listed a staggering 516 potential International Humanitarian Law (IHL) violations by the coalition of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the real number is far higher.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government is intent on maintaining the barbaric House of Saud's control over the Arab Peninsula. It is suppressing any information that Riyadh or its backers are committing war crimes and avoiding accusations that the UK is violating its own rules against supplying arms likely to be used in violation of IHL.

The UK is a crucial supplier of weaponry to the coalition, having licensed more than £6.5 billion worth of arms in the five years since April 26, 2015, when the bombing began. Many of the bombs, missiles, and aircraft components are licensed via the opaque and secretive Open Licence system that is "more flexible" than a standard licence and "avoids the need to apply for a new licence for every export." The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) therefore estimates that the real value of the UK's arms sales to Saudi Arabia since the start of the war is £18 billion, around three times the official figure.

In July 2019, the Court of Appeal, in a case brought by CAAT, ruled that the government had failed to assess whether British-supplied weapons would be used in Riyadh's murderous war in Yemen, in breach of both IHL and Britain's own laws prohibiting the sale of weapons when there is a "clear risk they might be used

in violations of international humanitarian law." It banned further sales pending a review of the government's vetting procedures, which had revealed that the government had simply stopped recording whether suspected violations had occurred.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has shown that the Saudi-led war against Yemen—waged with the full backing of Washington and London—has killed over 100,000 people, mostly civilians. The attacks have targeted food production, schools and hospitals, creating the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Around 24 million of the country's 28 million people need humanitarian aid, with at least half the population on the brink of starvation. Many thousands have died of starvation, including at least 75,000 children under five, while the worst cholera epidemic in modern history has infected 1.2 million.

In September, a United Nations expert panel concluded that Saudi-led forces had been responsible for IHL breaches and concluded that those who armed the perpetrators, including the UK, could be "aiding and assisting" war crimes.

From the start of the war in April 2015, the Saudi bombing campaign has depended on the UK. More than half of Saudi Arabia's combat aircraft used for the bombing raids are UK-supplied, as well as bombs, missiles, intelligence and elite Special Forces commandos used to target civilians, as even the MoD's own limited database shows.

The government carried out a review of its vetting procedures and ignoring the documentary evidence, concluded that any IHL violations committed by the Saudi coalition were "isolated incidents." It used this whitewash to resume arms sales to Riyadh in July

2020. The CAAT is now seeking a Judicial Review into the legality of the government's decision.

Glimpses into the scale of the government's deception have been revealed by the MoD's answers to parliamentary questions showing the omission of several air strikes that breach IHL, as recorded by security, human rights groups and humanitarian groups, including the Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) and the Yemen Data Project.

The MoD confirmed that most of the incidents listed by Labour's shadow international trade secretary Emily Thornberry were not on its database, including attacks in January 2018 on a bridge and a market in Al-Mufdhah area that led to the deaths of 17 people and the wounding of more than 20 others, and a September 2015 air strike on a funeral gathering in Khabb wa al-Sha'af neighbourhood that killed 30 people.

The origins of the war lie in the 2011 Arab Spring, when mass protests broke out against the 32-year-long dictatorial rule of US and Saudi-backed president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who turned the military on the protesters. Following Saleh's resignation, his vice-president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi took over, promising reforms in an election without any opposition candidates. Houthi rebels in the north of the country rejected Hadi's cosmetic reforms and, with the support of the former dictator, captured the capital Sana'a, forcing Hadi to take refuge in Saudi Arabia.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia invaded Yemen, claiming that the Houthi rebels were Iran's proxies, and seeking to reimpose Hadi, expecting a speedy victory for its military coalition with the UAE and other Arab countries. While the Saudis prosecuted the war by air, launching about 257,000 air strikes, the UAE blockaded Hodeidah, Yemen's principal Red Sea port, seized the strategically located Socotra Islands and provided many of the ground troops, along with local or tribal militias operating in unstable and fluid alliances—some backed by Riyadh and some by Abu Dhabi. The UAE pulled out of the war in late 2019 amid growing disagreements with the Saudi-backed Hadi government, accusing it of aligning with the Islah party, viewed as close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Under the pressure of a military onslaught, Yemen has fragmented into three areas. The first is controlled by the Houthis in the north. The second is controlled by the UAE-backed secessionist Southern Transitional

Council (STC) in the south, and the Republican Guards on the western coast, led by former president Saleh's nephew. The third, in the eastern provinces, is controlled by Hadi's dwindling forces.

In November 2019, the US and France brokered the Riyadh Agreement, signed by the Hadi government in exile and the STC, for a power sharing deal. Nevertheless, the war continued as the Houthis refused to agree a ceasefire.

In December, a new government under Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed was sworn in, in Riyadh, in what was heralded as a reconciliation between Hadi and the STC that would fight the Houthi rebels. Days later, when this new government flew into Aden airport on December 30, it was greeted with a huge explosion, killing at least 22 people and injuring dozens more. The new cabinet was unhurt, but the blast killed five members of the International Red Cross.

Riyadh blamed Iran and the Houthis, a claim they denied, while the STC--which had declared self-rule in Aden in April, triggering clashes with Hadi's forces--viewed the new government as a Saudi puppet. The STC calculated that Riyadh would favour the northern part of the country and take over the oil and gas fields in the south, eliminating the STC as a political and economic force. The agreement made no mention of taking back control of the Socotra Islands from the UAE, the STC's erstwhile backer which is reportedly considering establishing military bases there that would also serve Israel. Saudi forces ordered the arrest of Abdel Nasser al-Bawa, a senior STC military and pro-secessionist official, accusing him of being involved in planning and carrying out the attack.

For the imperialist powers in London and Washington, and their regional proxies, Yemen and the humanitarian crisis engulfing its people are merely collateral damage in the struggle for domination over the energy rich-Middle East.



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