

Air New Zealand admits to working for Saudi Arabian navy

Tom Peters
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TVNZ's "One News" reported on February 8 that Air New Zealand, the national airline, "has been secretly helping the Saudi Arabian military despite it fuelling a humanitarian crisis in Yemen."

For "nearly eight weeks," the report stated, Air NZ refused to answer questions about its involvement with Saudi Arabia: "First it ignored media queries then claimed it would never discuss its clients."

Finally, the airline issued a short statement admitting that Gas Turbines, a business unit of Air NZ, had worked "on two engines and one power turbine module from vessels belonging to the Royal Saudi Navy." The \$3 million contract was signed with a German company acting as a third party for the Saudis.

Since 2014, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, supported by the United States, have carried out a brutal war in Yemen, aimed at crushing the Houthi rebellion and installing a pro-Saudi regime. A naval and air blockade has prevented fuel, medicine and food from entering the country, resulting in mass starvation and a cholera epidemic that the World Health Organisation says has infected 500,000 people.

By 2018, an estimated 85,000 children had died of starvation. About 100,000 people have been killed, including through intensive bombing by Saudi warplanes. Three million people have been displaced by the war.

The revelation that Air NZ, which is 52 percent owned by the government, has been assisting the Saudi war effort, potentially making it complicit in war crimes, triggered a crisis for the airline and the Labour Party-Greens coalition government, which rushed to wash its hands of any culpability.

Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson, the minister responsible for Air NZ, claimed the government had no knowledge of the deal until contacted by TVNZ. He

said he was "alarmed," adding: "I think most New Zealanders would find it unacceptable to be doing that work." Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the deal was inappropriate and "has ramifications for New Zealand, its reputation."

Air NZ chief executive Greg Foran issued an apology, saying "this is not the type of work that we... should be engaging in." He said he did not know about the contract because it was not large enough to require his oversight. He refused to say who authorised the deal, telling the media there would be an internal "review" of how such contracts are approved.

When the contract was signed in May 2019, the airline's chief executive was Christopher Luxon, now a member of parliament in the opposition National Party. Luxon told the media he had "no recollection" of the deal, which he called an "error in judgement."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade is investigating whether the contract was legal. Foran told a parliamentary committee hearing on Thursday that the ministry was not notified about the deal. Air NZ did not obtain any export permits for the engines it was sending to the Saudi navy.

The denials issued by Robertson, Foran and Luxon are not credible. It beggars belief that Air NZ is allowed to sign multi-million dollar contracts with foreign militaries, especially those actively engaged in war, without any scrutiny from the airline's leadership or government officials.

This is not the first time that Air NZ has been implicated in a criminal war in the Middle East. In August 2007, then-Labour Party government ministers feigned outrage after revelations that the airline had a contract to transport hundreds of Australian soldiers to join the US-led war in Iraq.

This further undermined then-Prime Minister Helen

Clark's claims that her government was not supporting the war. In fact, the government had sent 61 army engineers to Iraq to support the occupation, and dispatched frigates to the Persian Gulf on rotating tours of duty. The Clark government, backed by its pseudo-left coalition partner, the Alliance, also sent special forces to join the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The latest criticisms of Air NZ from the Ardern government, including its coalition partner the Greens, are similarly hypocritical.

Green Party spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman said: "We as a nation have an absolute legal and moral duty to investigate, and hold to account anyone in Air New Zealand's leadership who may be found to have knowingly provided support and assistance to the atrocities committed in Yemen." New Zealand had "to stand as an independent principled voice for peace."

But Foran told Radio NZ: "It is not a secret that we have been doing work for navies, such as the US navy and the Australian navy, in terms of fixing engines... This has been part of our business now for many years." This practice has not been opposed by the Greens, or anyone else in parliament, or by the Labour-affiliated E t? union, which has thousands of members at Air NZ. E t? has remained silent about the airline's Saudi contract.

The US is a participant in the war in Yemen; it has helped to enforce the Saudi blockade, provided intelligence and carried out air strikes against Houthi forces. Australia sells weapons to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

At Thursday's parliamentary committee hearing, the Greens' Ghahraman asked whether any other militaries had contracts with Air NZ. Foran replied, "you need to give us a little bit of time" to produce a complete list of military customers.

Far from being a "voice for peace," the Labour Party-Greens coalition government, which from 2017 to 2020 also included the far-right NZ First, has increased military spending and recruitment and further strengthened the alliance with US imperialism. The government kept hundreds of troops in Iraq until mid-2020. A small number remain stationed there and in Afghanistan. Military personnel are also deployed in Japan as part of the encirclement of North Korea.

The Green Party sought to justify the government's military spend-up, including the purchase of new

planes and naval vessels, by depicting it as necessary for "humanitarian" interventions. In fact, the Ardern government's 2018 defence strategy identified China and Russia as the main "threats" to the global order, in line with Washington's preparations for war against China. New Zealand has boosted its military presence in the Pacific and welcomed the growing US militarisation of the region to push back against China and defend New Zealand's own interests as a minor imperialist power.



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