

UK government refuses to reveal details of its support for the Saudi war machine

Jean Shaoul
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The UK government has refused to provide any substantive answers to questions about secret meetings with major arms suppliers to advise them on policy towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. These reactionary and corrupt monarchies, notorious for their crushing of all opposition to their policies at home and abroad, are major purchasers of British weapons and military materiel.

An all-party parliamentary committee had accused the government of using public monies to make hidden payments to institutions that have “whitewashed human rights abuses” in the Gulf, exploding the government’s claims to promote human rights on the international arena.

According to the website *Declassified UK*, in January 2016, Defence Procurement Minister Philip Dunne and junior foreign minister Tobias Ellwood held a secret meeting with a director of Raytheon, a leading US arms manufacturer, as Saudi Arabia rained bombs on Yemen, without declaring the session, as required by the ministerial rules. The meeting only came to light due to the publication in April of former foreign minister Sir Alan Duncan’s memoir, “*In the Thick of It: The diaries of a minister.*”

Duncan is a libertarian and former oil trader whose support for the Palestinians and a two-state solution incurred Israel’s wrath. Israeli diplomat Shai Masot at the embassy in London was caught on camera talking of “taking down” Duncan.

Duncan said that the Ministry of Defence’s Gulf Advisory Committee had organised the meeting, which he had attended, to discuss oil prices and future visits to Saudi Arabia by then-Prime Minister David Cameron and others.

After initially denying such a committee existed, ministers acknowledged there was a Gulf Advisory Group, apparently a different body from the equally secretive Gulf Strategy Unit, and that Richard Paniguan,

a director of Raytheon from 2015 to 2017, had been invited to the meeting. It was Paniguan who, having spent most of his working life with BP, the giant oil company, headed its delegation to UK trade minister Elizabeth Symons before the invasion of Iraq, when his team told her that Iraq’s oil would be of “immense strategic advantage.” He also helped to obtain lucrative deals with Russia and Libya before going on to run the MoD’s arms sales division.

Also in attendance at the 2016 meeting was Symons, now a Baroness and Labour peer, Conservative peer Patricia Morris and former UK military chief Lord Guthrie, whose parliamentary register of interests says he is a director of oil firm Gulf Keystone Petroleum, although *Declassified* was told he had left the company in 2015.

The government claims to have no record of the minutes of the January 2016 meeting. It simply confirmed that the Gulf Advisory Group had existed for more than two years until September 2018 and that Sir Geoffrey Tantom had also attended the January 2016 meeting. Tantom, a former MI6 controller for the Middle East, is a key adviser to Bahrain’s King Hamad. Hamad only retained his throne courtesy of Saudi Arabia’s brutal military suppression of the mass uprising in 2011, targeting the kingdom’s majority Shia community, and the imprisonment of at least 1,500 political activists. Hamad has rounded up opposition activists and sent them with regular forces to fight alongside Saudi troops in Yemen. For his contribution to maintaining Britain’s relations with this despot, Tantom was knighted in 2018.

That the meeting, its attendees and indeed the existence of the Committee were kept secret is because the public are deeply hostile to the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia for use against the people of Yemen and Bahrain, and because its agenda breaches the British government’s pledge in 2014 when it signed the Arms Trade Treaty not

to sell arms to countries that might use them in violation of international humanitarian law.

Since the start of the war in 2015, the British government has licensed more than £6.8 billion of arms sales to Saudi Arabia. But this is a vast underestimate, with Britain's largest arms manufacturer BAE Systems reporting £17.5 billion in revenue from services and sales to Saudi Arabia since 2015. While the Campaign Against the Arms Trade won a legal action in 2019 forcing the government to stop issuing export licences for arms to Saudi Arabia pending a review of how these weapons had been used in the war, the government resumed sales in July last year. Ignoring the mountains of evidence compiled by the United Nations and international aid and humanitarian agencies, it claimed that any violations of international humanitarian law were "isolated incidents" and proceeded to license a further £1.6 billion sales to Saudi Arabia, while announcing it is to cut its 2021-22 aid to Yemen by more than half.

Further evidence of the government's support for the criminal activities of the Gulf monarchs comes from the recently published parliamentary report, "The Cost of Repression", investigating Britain's support for the six Gulf States: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman. Focusing on the £53.4 million payments made via the Integrated Activity Fund (IAF) that operated between 2016 and 2020, it found that the monies benefited institutions in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia that "continue to be implicated in serious human rights and international law violations", adding that the government's mandatory human rights impact assessments are "flawed, improperly applied and entirely absent in some cases."

The report accuses the government of being "misleading and deceptive" and making "false" statements about the way the funds have been used. Their concern that the government is "at risk of complicity" in abuses comes as Prime Minister Boris Johnson pursues free trade agreements with the Gulf States post-Brexit.

As well as supplying arms, Britain has sent more than 80 Royal Air Force personnel to Saudi Arabia, some working within the command-and-control centre that selects targets in Yemen for bombing and others training the Saudi air force. Special Forces commandos were reported to be operating on the ground. A further 6,200 British contractors work at Saudi military bases, training pilots and maintaining aircraft.

Declassified has also reported that there are up to 30 troops based at Al-Ghaydah airport in Yemen's eastern

province of Mahra training Saudi forces. Britain's ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron, who was repeatedly questioned on Yemen's TV over allegations that UK forces had been seen in the east of the country, did not deny the allegations. This flies in the face of the government's claims that it is "not a party" to the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen to restore the hated government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi that was ousted by the Houthi rebel group.

The venal Saudi monarchy, which routinely assassinates its opponents, tortures, imprisons and beheads oppositionists and dissidents, serves as a crucial custodian of Britain's geostrategic interests in the energy-rich region and a key partner in Washington and London's anti-Iranian axis.

According to the World Bank, some 233,000 Yemenis had died by the end of last year, "with half the deaths caused by a lack of food or access to healthcare, as well as by the lack of basic infrastructure to provide these services". More than four million people have been displaced in the six years of war, while the horrific social and economic conditions, including a cholera outbreak that has raged since 2016 and the pandemic, have prevented people from returning to their homes. The country is on the brink of famine, with 24.1 million or 80 percent of Yemen's population dependent for their survival on aid and 58 percent living in extreme poverty, unable to afford enough food and water or sanitation services.

Speaking at a G20 event on humanitarian aid two weeks ago, David Beasley, head of the UN's World Food Programme (WFP), said Yemen was one of several countries facing a catastrophe without urgent action to address the shortage of food. "These are not just numbers, these are not just statistics, these are people with real names, real lives, fragile and literally on the brink of starvation."

Beasley gave voice to the G20's real fears when he added, "If we don't address their needs, over the next six to nine months you could have unprecedented famine of biblical proportions, destabilisation of nations and mass migration."



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