

UK warship seizes “advanced Iranian missiles” bound for Yemen

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Last Thursday, in a glimpse into the British government’s support for the barbaric House of Saud, the Royal Navy reported that one of its warships had seized Iranian weapons, including surface-to-air-missiles and engines for cruise missiles, from smugglers in international waters south of Iran in January and February.

The US Navy destroyer USS Gridley supported frigate HMS Montrose in February’s operation.

A navy spokesperson said that “the seized packages were returned to the UK for technical analysis which revealed that the shipment contained multiple rocket engines for the Iranian produced 351 land attack cruise missile and a batch of 358 surface-to-air missiles.” While it did not state the missiles’ intended destination, it said the 351 cruise missile, with a range of 1,000 km, is often used by Yemen’s Houthi group to target Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

This was hailed as “proof” of Iran’s support for Yemen’s Houthi rebels which the UN have designated as “terrorists.” The Houthis have been fighting a Saudi-led coalition after they forced Yemen President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to flee the capital Sana’a in 2014 and took control of the north of the country. Both the Houthis and Iran have long denied Tehran’s support for the Houthis in the seven year-long war.

The world’s media has barely reported this act of piracy on the high seas.

The Royal Navy’s operations followed the US Navy’s seizure last December in the Arabian Sea of a large cache of assault rifles and ammunition being smuggled by a fishing ship from Iran that was probably bound for Yemen’s Houthi rebels. A US Navy statement said it had confiscated 8,700 illicit weapons in 2021 across the 2.5 million-square-mile area its 5th Fleet patrols, including the strategically important Red Sea and the Persian Gulf

The US Navy said the boat was sailing along a route

“historically used to traffic weapons unlawfully to the Houthis in Yemen.” It added, “The direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer of weapons to the Houthis violates UN Security Council Resolutions and U.S. sanctions.”

The Biden administration lifted the terrorist designation imposed on the Houthis in the last days of the Trump administration in 2021. But in February it issued fresh sanctions on members of a network it claimed worked with a branch of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) smuggling petroleum and other commodities around the Middle East, Asia and Africa to help fund the Houthis.

Days later, the UN Security Council extended its arms embargo on some Houthi leaders to the entire group after they claimed responsibility for several drone and missile assaults on the UAE and Saudi Arabia in January. The British-drafted resolution called on all countries “to increase efforts to combat the smuggling of weapons and components via land and sea routes, to ensure implementation of the targeted arms embargo.”

This was aimed at helping the US and UK’s medieval allies, who reject even the most basic norms of bourgeois democracy and ban all forms of opposition and dissent as they struggle to keep a lid on slave-labour wages and conditions, mass poverty and seething discontent.

The resolution ignored the countless crimes committed by the Saudi-led coalition against its impoverished southern neighbour Yemen in the seven-year-long war. These have deliberately targeted the civilian population, with numerous horrific attacks on civilian infrastructure and buildings—crimes under the Fourth Geneva Convention—and the inflicting of mass starvation.

These crimes followed the launching of Saudi Arabia’s air, land and sea assault on Yemen in March 2015, aided by its fellow despots in the region and covertly by the US and Britain, following the ouster of the Hadi government. Saudi Arabia hoped to restore its puppet to power and

maintain the rule of the Gulf despots across the peninsula amid seething social tensions.

Since then, Yemen has fragmented amid fighting by numerous competing militias, whose loyalties have repeatedly changed. In April, after a series of attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia's oil installations earlier this year claimed by the Houthis, and Hadi's resignation, Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreed a still fractious ceasefire.

The Saudi-led war has killed nearly 400,000 people both directly and indirectly through hunger and disease and forced more than 4.2 million people to flee their homes. It has wrecked Yemen's economy, causing the collapse of the currency and soaring inflation. The pandemic and the impact of anti-Russian sanctions in a country almost wholly dependent on imported food have exacerbated what the UN has described as the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

According to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), nearly 19 million of Yemen's 30 million population are acutely food insecure, with 7.3 million facing emergency levels of hunger. OCHA expects up to 161,000 people to face famine this year. When its 2022 appeal for \$2 billion yielded a quarter of the required funds, thanks in large part to cutbacks in humanitarian aid by the UK and US, the World Food Programme warned that it would be "forced" to cut aid to Yemen and "to steal from the hungry to feed the starving."

The UK has supplied fighter jets, bombs and missiles to the Saudi-led coalition for use in Yemen worth more than £6.8 billion, although the actual sales are far higher, under its Open Licence system. These weapons were used in the coalition's targeting of Yemen's civilian infrastructure, in contravention of the UK's own rules that say sales should not be allowed where there is a "clear risk" that a weapon "might" be used in a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law.

The government continued selling arms to Riyadh despite a 2019 court ruling forcing it to stop issuing export licences for weapons that could be used in the war in Yemen, claiming any violations of international humanitarian law were "isolated incidents." Since then, it has licenced a further £1.6 billion weapons sales, according to the Campaign Against Arms Trade, which is contesting the government's policy in the High Court.

In September 2020, a UN 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. The UK government has refused to publish its database supposedly logging civilian casualties from the coalition's airstrikes in Yemen.

The Royal Navy's belated release of the news of its seizures of Iranian-made weapons comes in the run up to US President Joe Biden's visit to the Middle East, where he will meet Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—in a reversal of his election campaign promise to make the kingdom a "pariah" after Salman's order to murder dissident Jamaal Khashoggi in 2018.

Biden's talks with Middle East leaders in Saudi Arabia's port city of Jeddah later this week are aimed at cementing an anti-Iran alliance between Israel and the US's Arab allies, even though Israel has no formal relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. He is seeking to counter China's economic presence and political influence in the energy-rich region as part of his broader preparations for war with Russia and China, with whom Tehran has forged increasingly close relations.

Last year, the US absorbed Israel into Centcom, one of the Department of Defense's 11 combatant commands, after the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco established full diplomatic relations with Israel. Centcom covers the Middle East, Egypt, the Horn of Africa, Central Asia and parts of South Asia and houses air base and forward operating headquarters al-Udeid, Qatar.

The timing of the announcement suggests that the collapsing Johnson government is anxious to demonstrate its loyalty to the US's war drive. It comes as Washington seeks to reassure its Gulf clients of continuing support after years of strained relations and to delegate its policing of the region to its more militarily advanced allies, the UK and Israel, as it refocuses attention on the Indo-Pacific region to counter China's rising economic and political influence. Washington is making it ever more difficult for Tehran to agree its terms for the resumption of the 2015 nuclear accords after the Trump administration's unilateral abrogation of the agreement in 2017 and the reimposition of sanctions the following year.



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