

# Australian Labor government defends arms exports to Saudi Arabia, UAE

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A recent report by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed that Australia is continuing and expanding a lucrative trade in arms exports to regimes associated with war crimes and human rights abuses, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indonesia.

Using official government figures, the ABC found more than 200 separate arms sales to the three countries over a period of less than two years.

The overall figure and the breakdowns underscore the extent of the trade. In the 2021 calendar year, there were 17 exports to Saudi Arabia, 36 to the UAE and 52 to Indonesia. Over the ten months of 2022 to November 9, the figures were 21 to Saudi Arabia, 25 to the UAE and 49 to Indonesia.

While the exports are likely primarily from private arms corporations, their dispatch abroad requires government approval, through the issuing of a Defence Department military or dual-use permit.

As the ABC noted, the precise nature of the shipments is shrouded in secrecy, with no details provided on the grounds of “commercial sensitivities.” This contrasts with the US and a number of European countries, which provide publicly accessible information of officially approved weapons exports.

Previous exposures, however, give a glimpse into the sophisticated weaponry and materiel that may be making its way from Australia to despotic and dictatorial regimes.

In 2018, the ABC reported on a \$410 million weapons deal involving Australian company Electro Optic Systems (EOS). It stated that two sources had told the broadcaster that the weapons were bound for the UAE. This included the RWS, an advanced system involving a platform that could be affixed to a vehicle, with guns, missile launchers or cannons placed inside it. With sensors, lasers and remote-control features, this would allow soldiers to fire their munitions from the safety of a military truck or car.

EOS said that it could not confirm or deny the recipient of its systems.

The following year, the ABC reported that the company had signed a letter of intent with the Saudi Arabian government for the sale of 500 RWS units.

Over the preceding period, the then Liberal-National Coalition government had provided EOS with some \$36 million in government funding. Its defence minister Christopher Pyne had lobbied in Saudi Arabia for greater Australian arms exports. While EOS denied the reports, the ABC subsequently published photographs of pallets in a factory. Their delivery dockets showed that EOS products were bound for Saudi Arabia, though with an American company as intermediary.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are waging a war against rebels in the impoverished nation of Yemen, that has been condemned as near genocidal by rights’ organisations and charities. At the end of 2021, the UN estimated that the protracted onslaught had claimed the lives of 377,000 Yemenis, 150,000 as a direct result of the war and the rest through resulting social calamities including famine.

Australian governments have persistently rejected calls from the UN and other international bodies for a ban on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Indonesian military, with which Australian companies are doing extensive business, is also implicated in major human rights violations, both in West Papua and against domestic opponents.

The Labor government responded to the latest ABC report by making plain that its position is identical to that of its Coalition predecessor.

Labor Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy asserted that all exports were scrutinised closely on a “case by case basis... This includes careful consideration of a broad range of factors, including Australia’s international legal obligations, as well as human rights, regional and national security, and foreign policy considerations.”

Labor Defence Minister Richard Marles declared: “If overriding risks to Australia’s security, defence, or international relations had been identified, the permits would have been refused.”

The permits, however, will not jeopardise “security” or “international relations,” because Saudi Arabia and the UAE are allies of the US and its partners, including Australia. The collaboration with such regimes underscores the hypocrisy of claims by Washington and Canberra that they are defending “democracy” and “human rights” against China in the Indo-Pacific.

In fact, this bogus campaign against purported Chinese aggression is being used to justify preparations for an aggressive US-led war, aimed at reasserting American imperialist hegemony. Australia’s continued development of a weapons industry, including exports, is inextricably tied to its central role in these plans.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, released last month, claimed that the defence industry contributed \$8.8 billion to the economy last financial year, up \$1.8 billion over 12 months.

A 2021 article in the *Conversation* by University of Queensland academic Megan Price noted that the estimated value of approved arms exports increased from \$1.5 billion in 2017–18 to \$5.5 billion in 2019–20.

“Since 2018, Australia has been seeking to become a top ten global defence exporter. Its main exports are products and components that fit into broader global supply chains for weapons and weapons systems. For example, the government boasts there isn’t a single F-35 fighter jet production operation that doesn’t feature Australian-made components. The government sees further export potential for products and components to be used in armoured vehicles, advanced radar systems, and patrol boats, as well,” Price wrote.

In line with the ratcheting up of the US war drive against China under successive administrations, Australian governments have presided over a rapid military build-up. Defence spending is at record levels, with a bipartisan commitment of \$575 billion to the sector over the decade, including \$270 billion on military hardware.

In reality, the costs will be far-greater, as those figures were agreed before it was announced that Australia will acquire nuclear-powered submarines, as well as other advanced arms systems such as hypersonic missiles, as part of the militarist AUKUS pact with Britain and the US. A review, commissioned by the current Labor government into military capabilities is due to be

completed in March. Media previews of the interim report indicated that it will call for a major expansion of missile systems, the purchase of more fighter jets and other aggressive weaponry.

This program involved major handouts to arms companies. In 2021, the Coalition government announced a \$1 billion spend on a Sovereign Guided Weapons Enterprise, aimed at establishing a domestic missile manufacturing sector. That is part of the broader push, being continued by Labor, to boost domestic production of weapons. Such programs almost invariably involve contracts to the Australian divisions of the largest US-based weapons corporations.

The universities are a central focus of this program, with the aim to harness scientific and technical expertise ever more directly to the war machine. As the WSWS reported last June, all 37 of the country’s public universities are now part of the Defence Science Partnership. It is a program initiated by the Defence Department to “provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects.”

In January 2021, the WSWS reported, the then Coalition government “announced a Defence Trailblazer Concept to Sovereign Capability program—a \$242 million package aimed at the ‘commercialisation’ of universities through their partnership with military companies. The program’s focus is researching quantum technologies, hypersonics, cyber warfare, robotics, artificial intelligence and space warfare.” Virtually every major university in the country is engaged in one or another research or development project with the arms corporations.

That underscores the crucial importance of students and young people taking up the fight to build an international anti-war movement. A December 10 webinar of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality outlined the socialist perspective, based in the working class, upon which such a struggle must be based.



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