

Airstrikes on Yemen using UK and US weapons “part of a pattern of violence against civilians”

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Britain and the United States provided the Saudi-led coalition with the weapons used in hundreds of attacks on civilians in Yemen between January 2021 and the end of February 2022, according to a recent report by Oxfam.

Martin Butcher, Oxfam’s Policy Advisor on Arms and Conflict, said that the Saudi-led coalition were responsible for at least 87 civilian deaths and 136 injuries, 19 attacks on healthcare facilities and 293 attacks that forced people to flee their homes—39 percent of all attacks causing displacement. “Our analysis shows there is a pattern of violence against civilians, and all sides in this conflict have not done enough to protect civilian life, which they are obligated to do under International Humanitarian Law.”

He added, “The intensity of these attacks would not have been possible without a ready supply of arms. That is why it’s vital the UK government and others must immediately stop the arms sales that are fueling war in Yemen.”

The Oxfam report came just days before the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) launched a lawsuit aimed at ending the British government’s multi-billion pound arms sales, including Typhoon fighter jets, missiles and bombs, as well as ongoing maintenance and support, for use in the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE)-led war in Yemen.

The UK government’s own rules, adopted in 2014 when it signed the Arms Trade Treaty, prohibit arms sales where there is a “clear risk” that a weapon “might” be used in a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Despite the overwhelming evidence that the coalition has repeatedly breached IHL, the government has continued to promote and protect weapons sales. According to CAAT, the UK has supplied arms worth over £23 billion to Saudi Arabia, when “open licences”

are taken into account, several times the official figures provided by the government, since the war in Yemen began in April 2015.

UK special forces are believed to have played a role in the war, while the British military maintains the Saudi warplanes that attack Yemen and provide intelligence support for the coalition.

The British government has persistently rejected calls from the United Nations and other international bodies for a ban on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It boasts of being the second largest exporter of defence items worldwide, after the US, based on the value of orders or contracts signed, with more than half by value going to the Middle East.

The venal Saudi monarchy, which routinely assassinates its opponents, tortures, imprisons and beheads oppositionists and dissidents, and the repressive UAE provide the major props for Britain’s defence industry—one of its few remaining manufacturing sectors. They serve as key custodians of Britain’s geostrategic interests in the energy-rich region and as allies in the Washington-led campaign to isolate Iran and its regional allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, as part of broader preparations for war with Russia and China, with which Tehran has forged close relations.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s government is intent on maintaining the barbaric House of Saud’s control over the Arabian 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.

In June 2019, a Court of Appeal ruling, following legal action by CAAT, concluded that the Government’s decision-making process for granting export licences was “irrational” and therefore “unlawful.” It forced the

government to stop issuing export licences for weapons that could be used in the war in Yemen pending a review of how these weapons had been used and to ensure that future arms sales complied with the government's own rules and procedures.

But in July 2020, then Trade Secretary Liz Truss resumed arms sales, claiming any violations of IHL were only "isolated incidents." Since then, the British government has licensed at least £2.2 billion additional weapons sales to the coalition, while cutting its 2021-22 aid to Yemen by more than half.

CAAT's latest case in the High Court challenges the government's claims that there were only a "small number" of IHL violations by coalition forces that did not form part of a "pattern," citing overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Even if there were only "isolated incidents" of violations, this could still involve a clear risk of further violations.

For the last eight years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been waging war in Yemen, the Middle East's most impoverished nation, condemned as near genocidal by rights' organisations and charities, against rebels that overthrew the hated Saudi-imposed government. 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 "a lack of food or access to healthcare, as well as by the lack of basic infrastructure to provide these services."

Some 4.3 million people have been displaced, while 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 war has destroyed much of Yemen's public health system, leaving only 50 percent of health facilities operational, with most of these barely functioning due to damaged infrastructure and lack of healthcare workers. Last year's heavy seasonal rain, windstorms, landslides, and flooding added to the catastrophic conditions, causing deaths and injuries that affected more than 210,000 people.

More than 21.5 million Yemenis are in need of assistance and 17.3 million are suffering from acute hunger, including over two million children with acute malnutrition.

Despite a six-month-long ceasefire and a significant drop in fatalities, the slaughter has continued, with at least 643 Yemeni civilians killed in 2022, including at least 102 children and 27 women, of over 3,000 casualties recorded, according to data published by the Yemen-

based Eye for Humanity Centre for Rights and Development. The destruction of over 14,300 homes, 12 hospitals, 64 schools, and 22 power stations has added to the suffering.

The British government has refused Freedom of Information requests from the website *Middle East Eye* for the release of documents surrounding its arms sales to Riyadh between October 1 and 15, 2016. A Saudi-led coalition's air strike on a crowded funeral hall in Sanaa killed more than 140 people and injured over 500 on October 8, 2016, an attack UN monitors found violated international humanitarian law. It rejected the requests after lengthy delays, firstly citing exemptions for policy-making decisions and decisions prejudicial to the UK's foreign and commercial interests and, when that was shown to be incorrect, then claiming it would be too costly to retrieve the documents.

The government's refusal to provide the information testifies to the widespread and deep hostility of the British public to the government's arming of the coalition.

The British government supports some of the most barbaric and repressive regimes on the planet. Its continued supply of arms to the Saudi-led war on Yemen explodes its claims to promote human rights and democracy on the international arena, including the torrent of hypocrisy seeking to justify NATO's military intervention against Russia in Ukraine.

In the eyes of the imperialist powers in London and Washington and their regional proxies, flagrant violations of IHL and the ensuing humanitarian crisis engulfing Yemen, as well as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, are just collateral damage in the struggle for domination over the energy rich-Middle East. Providing a stark warning of the implications of the ever-expanding war in Ukraine, this underscores the crucial importance of students and young people taking up the fight to build an international anti-war movement.



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