

UK deploys RAF jets to support Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen

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Prime Minister Andy Burnham's Labour government has announced the dispatch of Royal Air Force (RAF) Typhoon fighter jets to support Saudi Arabia's war on Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. It is Burnham's first major military deployment since becoming prime minister.

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced Monday that RAF Typhoon fighter jets would take part in a "defensive" mission to protect Saudi airspace and critical infrastructure against missile and drone strikes by the Houthis.

The MOD's "operational update" said that an RAF A400M would be sent "to support the movement of defence materiel within Saudi Arabia", UK military advisers would be deployed "to support Saudi staff officers," and air-to-air refuelling support would be extended for another 90 days.

In recent weeks, Houthi rebels have launched drone and ballistic missile strikes on key energy, aviation, and military infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia. King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh was struck on October 10, killing 13 people. In September, the Houthis captured Yemen's southwestern coastal towns of Mokha and Dhubab and Perim and Zhugar islands, giving them control of entry and exit points to the Red Sea.

Defence Secretary Wes Streeting portrayed Britain's military support for the blood-soaked Saudi monarchy, a key UK ally in the Middle East, as a humanitarian mission. Having enabled Israel's genocide in Gaza for more than three years, Streeting told the BBC, "When civilians are under attack, we have a responsibility to respond." He declared that RAF planes would "shoot down those rockets and missiles that have been causing hundreds of civilian casualties."

Britain's claim that RAF assets will be used only for

"defensive" actions is absurd on its face. Andreas Krieg, a senior lecturer in defence studies at King's College London, told *Time* magazine that Britain's Voyager refuelling aircraft "basically allows the Saudi Air Force to stay in the air over Yemen for longer without having to fly a single sortie and then return to base. It increases the operational tempo in terms of targeting strikes."

Speaking in parliament, Streeting underlined the geostrategic and economic interests underpinning Britain's military deployment: "The Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb strait are among the world's most important maritime trade routes. We cannot allow international shipping to be threatened or held to ransom." He told MPs, "Continued instability risks disrupting global trade and energy supplies", and that support for Saudi Arabia "is firmly in the United Kingdom's national security and economic interests."

The UK has extensive military and political ties with Saudi Arabia. Between 2015 and 2022, it provided key support for Saudi Arabia's illegal war on Yemen, described by the UN as a "humanitarian catastrophe". This war led to 377,000 deaths, including 150,000 killed through direct armed conflict and 15,000 killed by airstrikes.

Britain contributed at least £6.2 billion in arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition, more than 80 RAF personnel and 6,200 contractors working at Saudi military bases. British Special Forces were deployed on the ground in Yemen, fighting alongside Saudi coalition partners and al-Qaeda-linked militia allies. Under the secret Al Yamamah agreement, British personnel armed and supported Tornado fighter-bombers—the backbone of the Yemen air war.

British imperialist interests in Yemen reach back to the nineteenth century. The British East India Company captured the port of Aden in 1839, as a coaling station for steamships travelling between Britain and India. The

opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, jointly owned by France and Egypt, transformed the Red Sea into a primary global trade artery. Britain bought Egypt's 44 percent share in 1875. It sought to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait, establishing Aden as a British protectorate.

The boundaries of the protectorate were codified on the eve of World War I, when Britain and the Ottoman Empire agreed on a "Violet Line" separating British-protected South Yemen from Ottoman-ruled North Yemen. After World War I and the Ottoman Empire's collapse, Britain consolidated control over the south to protect its maritime trade routes. In 1937, Britain made Aden a Crown Colony, and control over the broader hinterland was maintained through a savage policy of "Air Control", with RAF bombing raids against dissident villages and tribes.

By the late 1950s and 1960s, after Britain lost Suez and Iraq, Aden became headquarters of Britain's Middle East Command. But the rising tide of anti-imperialist struggle across the Middle East and North Africa forced Britain to relinquish control of Aden in 1967.

The US-led war on Iran launched on February 28 has set the entire region ablaze, destabilising the Persian Gulf states and opening a new scramble by the European imperialist and regional powers for control of territory, resources and geo-strategic influence.

France has deployed troops, radar units, and air defence systems to Saudi Arabia. President Emmanuel Macron held talks on Wednesday with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, pledging "full support" for war on the Houthis, while Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot met his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan on Monday, where they discussed bilateral relations and the need to protect "freedom of navigation".

Italy announced the deployment of warships to the Red Sea on September 17, with Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani claiming that Italy was "not at war." After an Italian F-2000 aircraft sustained damage during a Houthi strike on Taif Air Base in Saudi Arabia, Defence Minister Guido Crosetto declared that Rome would not wait for a joint EU decision to act.

Greece has deployed military force, including the Greek-operated Patriot Missile Defence System in the Yanbu region of Saudi Arabia. Greece commands Operation Aspides, the naval mission protecting commercial shipping in the Red Sea on behalf of the European Union.

Egypt is rapidly mobilising military assistance, including air defence systems and combat aircraft, while ruling out the deployment of ground troops inside

Yemen.

Turkey and Pakistan signed a Mecca Joint Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia on August 7. The pact mirrors NATO's collective security provisions, treating an attack on one member as an attack on all. Following this month's strikes by Houthi rebels on Riyadh airport and on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facility, the alliance was formally activated, triggering rapid "defensive" deployments by Pakistan and Turkey.

Professor Sohail Ahmad, an international relations analyst at COMSATS University Islamabad, noted this week that while Egypt was intervening to defend its interests in the Red Sea, including Suez Canal revenues, "The strategic danger lies in alliance entrapment. Defensive cooperation involving Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and Türkiye does not mean these states share identical objectives or are committed to offensive operations inside Yemen. Yet an attack on deployed personnel or critical infrastructure might create pressure for retaliation, turning a limited security commitment into a wider military obligation."

The situation resembles World War I, when a complex system of alliances rapidly transformed a local conflict into a worldwide military conflagration. Amid an expanding regional war, the unpredictable actions of the US against Iran and the recklessness of the European powers, the distinction between defensive and offensive military deployment can be obliterated in seconds.

Burnham's deployment to Saudi Arabia on behalf of British imperialism underscores Labour's role as the party of war. On July 22, less than 48 hours after becoming prime minister, Burnham had approved US fighter jets launching airstrikes on Iran from UK bases, a clear escalation of the "defensive" military involvement greenlit by his predecessor, Keir Starmer.



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