

Agora briefing:
*the UK's relationship
with Saudi Arabia
and human rights*

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Executive summary

Recently, there have been calls for the UK to re-evaluate its relationship with Saudi Arabia. These calls have been based on the idea that the UK is muting its human rights criticism due to the country's importance as an ally and arms trading partner.

Amidst this criticism, the government has argued that human rights in the region are best promoted when security co-operation and economic interdependence with the Saudi Arabia are maintained. Others argue that human rights in the region would be better served through a more assertive strategy, and that the UK government is not genuinely concerned with human rights in the region.

Evidence suggests that the government's strategy of engaging Saudi Arabia on security matters to export more ethical international norms is not working. Moreover, any professionalisation that is achieved through continued close co-operation is overshadowed completely by the UK's continued support of Saudi Arabia's involvement in the war in Yemen.

Introduction

This policy briefing attempts to hold the government to account on its claim that human rights in Saudi Arabia and the region are best promoted when the UK sells arms to Saudi Arabia, whilst maintaining security and economic ties with the Saudi Kingdom.

The briefing initiates a discussion on whether the government's claims stand up to evidence, in an attempt to uncover the most effective strategy to improve human rights in Saudi Arabia and the region.

Background

The underlying developments that affect the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia include the Saudi-led war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The war in Yemen began in 2011 when Saudi Arabia supported the transition of power from the long-time Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to his then Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi. The armed Houthi rebel movement was and continues to be deeply hostile to Saudi influence and rejects the legitimacy of the Hadi government. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia, alongside the United Arab Emirates and other countries formed the Saudi-led Coalition to prop up the Hadi government. This has led to conflict between the rebel movement and the Coalition. The conflict is deemed by the UN as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis"¹, and a UN report has found both the Saudi Coalition and the Houthi rebels likely to be guilty of war crimes².

Regarding Yemen, the UK has been accused of being complicit in war crimes committed by Saudi Arabia³, as it has been providing arms, training and technical support to The Royal Saudi Armed Forces (RSAF).

This is complicated by legal challenges concerning the UK's arms sales to Saudi Arabia. In 2019, The Court of Appeals ruled that the UK did not adhere to its own internal processes in selling arms to Saudi Arabia as the government failed to make adequate assessments of whether these weapons could be used in breach of international law. The UK subsequently agreed not to grant any new licenses for arms exports to Saudi Arabia whilst it appealed the decision. However, on 7 July 2020, the government announced that it would end the freeze on granting new licenses for arms exports to Saudi Arabia, and withdraw the appeal. This is because a government report decided that the breaches of international law committed by Saudi Arabia were "isolated incidents" and not part of a "pattern"⁴. The government's conclusion that the breaches of international law were "isolated" is a subjective term, and does not deny that

breaches of international law by the Royal Saudi Air Force took place. The government will now “begin the process of clearing the backlog of licence applications for Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners that has built up since 20 June last year”⁵. This is another example of the government prioritising continued arms sales over compliance with the full spirit of international law.

During this period, Saudi Arabia has undergone its own changes. In 2015, King Abdullah died and was succeeded by King Salman, his half-brother. In 2017, King Salman appointed his son Mohammed bin Salman as the Crown Prince and the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. In 2016, ‘Vision 2030’ was announced. This is a package of economic and social reforms aimed at diversifying the Saudi economy. It encouraged mild social liberalisation such as allowing women to drive⁶. At the same time, since Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince, we have witnessed a more muscular Saudi foreign policy and tighter internal controls on dissent, discussed below.

Human rights in Saudi Arabia

Beyond the alleged Saudi war crimes in Yemen, there have been a number of other human rights violations which have led to calls for the UK to re-evaluate its strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia. These include the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Under official direction, Saudi security officials lured Khashoggi to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, where they tortured and murdered him. The event sparked international outrage, and threatened a number of Saudi Arabia’s key relationships.

The UK is among these key relationships, and the British government have condemned the murder. The extrajudicial killing displayed an immense disregard towards human rights, the rule of law and territorial boundaries - key British values. In the last few weeks, Dominic Raab, the UK Foreign Secretary, announced new measures which allows the government to impose sanctions on individuals and organisations implicated in breaches of international law. The first wave of sanctions under this new regime targeted 20 Saudi nationals involved in the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi⁷.

Similarly, all 28 EU members, along with Canada and Australia called on Saudi Arabia to co-operate with a UN investigation into the murder⁸. Germany, Finland and Denmark all suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Strikingly, the murder threatened the traditionally bipartisan support that Saudi Arabia had been able to rely on from the United States. Whilst Donald Trump questioned the validity of criticism against Saudi Arabia⁹, the US senate passed a resolution that held Mohammad bin Salman personally responsible for the killing¹⁰. In addition, public shaming took place in the international media with the New York Times pulling its sponsorship from a major conference which was set to be hosted by

the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh. The Virgin group also severed its ties with Saudi Arabia as a result.

This is not an isolated incident, however. Saudi Arabia has a distressing internal human rights record, with the Foreign office's Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report, listing the country as a "human rights priority country"¹¹. Human Rights Watch has noted human rights abuses in regard to the criminal justice system, the rights of women, girls and migrants, as well as the freedom of expression, association, and belief¹². The arrests of political dissidents, prominent clerics, journalists and academics are widespread in Saudi Arabia; egregious acts that are carried out frequently include mass executions. For instance, 37 executions occurred on 23 April 2019 alone, including three who were minors when arrested¹³. Capital punishment for minors is expressly prohibited under International Law. Numbers seem to be on the rise: in 2019, 184 people were executed in Saudi Arabia, up from 149 in 2018¹⁴.

Saudi Arabia has been aware of its poor image and has sought to offset this through a comprehensive public relations campaign in the UK. Over the last year, the Saudi sovereign wealth fund has been involved in an attempted takeover of Newcastle United Football Club, to deflect from their poor human rights record. This is part of a broader strategy embedded in the Saudi's Vision 2030 programme, which aims to modernise the kingdom and attract foreign investment. Saudi Arabia has also hired a host of elite government relations firms such as Consulium. Moreover, Prince Mohammad bin Salman's visit to London was widely advertised and publicised in national newspapers to announce the visit¹⁵.

UK's established relationship with Saudi Arabia

The UK's strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia is based on two fundamental tenets. First, an economic interest in maintaining the UK's arms exports to the Saudi Kingdom. Second, a common security interest in confronting the threat of Islamist terrorism.

Historically, the UK and Saudi Arabia's security ties were cemented due to their shared interest in opposing Soviet communism. During the cold war, both countries maintained a strong alliance with the United States, particularly in regional conflicts such as the Soviet-Afghan war. Saudi Arabia has also played and continues to play an important role in the expansion of Western economies through maintaining oil production at largely stable prices.

The UK's modern relationship with Saudi Arabia can be dated to 1985 when Margaret Thatcher negotiated the Al-Yamamah arms deals for British-based arms company British Aerospace (now BAE Systems) to supply arms to

Saudi Arabia. The opportunity for this arms deal presented itself after the United States Congress blocked the sale of certain fighter jets to Saudi Arabia on the grounds that the weapons could threaten Israel¹⁶. This has been the UK's largest arms deal to date, and has been worth at least £43bn for the British firm from 1985 to the late 2000s¹⁷. Over the last ten years, exports to Saudi Arabia have constituted 41% of the UK's defence exports and are a bedrock of the UK's arms industry¹⁸.

Intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia is considered critical to UK security. A prime example of this is the 2010 cargo plane bomb plot that was prevented as a result of intelligence received from Saudi Arabia's security chief¹⁹. Similarly, the UK and Saudi Arabia are both members of the US-led coalition against ISIS, and have a vested interest in joint counter terrorism operations.

More recently, encouraging Saudi Arabia to cooperate with international norms has purportedly been part of the 'Global Britain' foreign policy initiative. While not precisely defined by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, government ministers have stressed that as well as building new relationships around the globe, the UK is seeking to expand its influence and export its values of the "rules-based international system"²⁰.

Maintaining the strategic relationship

The current government believes that promoting human rights in Saudi Arabia and maintaining economic and security ties are complementary. This view assumes increased ties equates to increased influence. It attempts to spread liberal, democratic norms to Saudi Arabia by deepening the UK's ties with Saudi Arabia²¹. It takes the view that the UK can export British values through friendly engagement. Further, it believes that if the UK were to stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia, they would turn to rivals such as China and Russia who have far less regard for human rights. Severing ties with Saudi Arabia would therefore be damaging for advancing human rights.

There are three key areas in which the UK attempts to export its international norms: institutional training, diplomatic pressure and support associated with arms sales. However, the extent to which the UK has been able to moderate Saudi practices is unclear.

Firstly, Crispin Blunt MP has argued²² that maintaining close and friendly relations with Saudi Arabia allows the UK to improve Saudi institutions and encourage movements towards a more humane justice system. An example of this is the Just Solutions International contract. This was a programme where British correctional personnel provided training to (JSI) their Saudi counterparts, in the hope that it would encourage meaningful reform. Through this contract,

officials at the Ministry of Justice designed training programmes for Saudi prison officers that would supposedly encourage the Saudi prison officers to adopt more humane practices. In answering a parliamentary question regarding the Just Solutions International contract, the Minister of Justice stated in 2015 that “Part of the rationale for our work with other countries is to impact positively on human rights practices”²³. Moreover, after a freedom of information act request, copies of all communications between the British Embassy in Riyadh and the Foreign Office in London relating to the JSI contract were released. One Foreign Office official stated that “it is only by engagement that we will succeed in encouraging change”²⁴.

However, Amnesty International argued that instead of being a serious attempt to liberalise the Saudi prison system, the UK was “trying to make money out of overseas justice systems that tolerate secret detention, torture, corporal punishment and executions”²⁵. The government has not pointed to concrete examples of any liberal practices that have been taken up by the Saudi prison system as a result.

Another example is the training of Saudi officers at prestigious British military colleges. More than 40 Saudi cadets have been trained at British military academies since 2015. Whether this training inculcated British military practices is debatable. It is highly likely this training assisted Saudi war crimes in Yemen. The MoD has refused to state the amount of money that had been earned from this training, however critics such as MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle have again argued that instead of exporting British norms, the training is likely to be motivated by a desire to “make money out of human suffering”²⁶.

Secondly, the government has argued that by maintaining the current economic and security relations, the UK has greater diplomatic clout with Saudi Arabia, and thus has more power to voice human rights concerns directly. For example, in the aftermath of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Jeremy Hunt (then UK Foreign Secretary) warned the Saudi leadership that “friendships depend on shared values”²⁷.

It is plausible that the thinly veiled threat by Jeremy Hunt had an impact on the Saudi state’s willingness to accept a degree of responsibility for the murder - though it is highly likely that Mr Hunt’s phone call may have been of little significance in comparison to the broader context of the Khashoggi incident. The fact that it threatened the traditionally bipartisan support for Saudi Arabia in the US was likely much more important. The US Senate passed a resolution holding Mohammad bin Salman personally responsible for the killing. Whilst the President raised doubts over the CIA conclusions that Mohammad bin Salman knew about the murder, he also said that there would be “severe consequences” if Saudi leaders were found to have ordered the killing²⁸.

Other examples of British diplomatic pressure on the Saudi regime include the G20 Summit where then UK Prime Minister Theresa May called upon Saudi

Arabia “to find a solution to the conflict in Yemen”²⁹. Moreover, the UK’s large diplomatic presence in Saudi Arabia and its close cooperation with Saudi diplomats supposedly allows the UK to positively affect change in its various diplomatic interactions with Saudi Arabia.

Thirdly, Lieutenant General (Retired) Sir Simon Mayall argued that the military support provided to Saudi Arabia allows the UK to encourage sound military practice in Saudi Arabia’s conflicts³⁰. Alongside arms sales, the UK has provided military advisors and intelligence to Saudi Arabia. In addition, some have claimed that the UK is involved in ensuring that military targets are correctly identified as to minimise civilian casualties. For example, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office states that they have provided training and advice to the Coalition to support continued compliance with [International Humanitarian Law] and minimise civilian casualties³¹.

However, in contradiction to this statement, the UK government has also stated that it has “a very small number of...liaison officers...[that] ...are not involved in carrying out strikes”. Similarly, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister stated that “We pick the targets, they don’t”³². It seems that the government is intent on arguing that it has nothing to do with breaches of international law committed by Saudi Arabia, whilst simultaneously maintaining that the relationship is close enough for the UK to influence Saudi military practices. It is therefore unclear what influence the UK has to encourage Saudi Arabia to minimise civilian casualties and comply with international law.

Re-evaluating the strategic relationship

As the Policy Institute at King’s College London has argued, ‘there is little evidence, based on publicly available information, that the UK exerts either influence or leverage over Saudi Arabia’³³. The idea that selling arms to Saudi Arabia and promoting human rights are ‘complementary’ is a convenient justification for the strategic benefits gained from the relationship. It is likely that promoting human rights in Saudi Arabia is not a genuine priority for the government, and that human rights in the region would be better served through a more assertive strategy.

Firstly, it appears that the UK provides Saudi Arabia with diplomatic cover, thus seemingly legitimising their human rights abuses on the international stage. Instead of holding Saudi Arabia to account, the UK has not been able to fully criticise the Saudi Kingdom because of the strategic relationship. For example, in 2016 the Netherlands proposed that the UN Human Rights Council set up a formal inquiry to examine civilian deaths in Yemen. However, after the UK refused to back a full inquiry, the proposal was downgraded to a mission “to monitor and report on the situation”. Subsequently, the then Foreign Secretary

Boris Johnson, rejected the proposal because the UK already had enough information sources to create an informed opinion³⁴. It is in cases such as these, where instead of giving weight to British criticism of the Saudi regime, ties with the Saudi's actually prevent transparency and accountability on key human rights issues.

Moreover, it is likely that the UK's diplomatic soft power is overestimated. For example, in 2015, during an official visit to Saudi Arabia, Prince Charles is said to have raised the case of Raif Badawi, a pro-democracy blogger who was publicly whipped for his dissent³⁵. Prince Charles' concerns were ignored, and Raif Badawi remains incarcerated. This acutely demonstrates the limitations of the UK's diplomatic soft power in advancing human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, there is scarce evidence that the UK's logistical support and training provided to the RSAF encourages adherence to human rights law. Despite this, UK arms shipments are integral to the Saudi coalition's operation in Yemen. The UK's arms sales account for over 20% of Saudi Arabia's arms imports³⁶. In addition, British RAF personnel work as engineers and experts training Saudi personnel. The RAF's expertise is a valuable asset that is not easy to replace. The significance of British physical support to the mission in Yemen was highlighted by a BAE employee who confirmed that "if we were not there, in seven to 14 days there would not be a jet in the sky"³⁷.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that the UK's goal of exporting liberal norms to Saudi Arabia through the above mentioned measures has had limited effect. Instead, the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia has provided the Saudi Kingdom with diplomatic cover and directly aided the Saudi Coalition in Yemen.

The nature of the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia appears to be motivated by the UK's self interest, rather than the promotion of human rights. This is because the UK receives economic and security benefits from the strategic relationship and vocal criticism of the Saudi's human rights record could jeopardise this.

Therefore, this briefing recommends that in line with the House of Commons EDM #305, the government should end arms exports to Saudi Arabia. Given that the UN Human Rights Council has found 'reasonable grounds to believe that' Saudi Arabia is guilty of war crimes in Yemen, the UK should not be supporting the Saudi Coalition. The UK should also re-evaluate its broader relationship with Saudi Arabia, in order to critically assess the impact of the relationship on human rights in the region.

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