

On British arms sales to Saudi Arabia

By Aron Taylor

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IGNORE THE SOCIAL MEDIA “HUMANITARIANS”

(Section 1 of 4)

The Yemen Crisis arms sales debate is oversimplified for social media clout —

For one reason or another, the recent anti-racist movement (on steroids) has suddenly made everyone a social media humanitarian. People propelling cases of human catastrophe onto their Instagram stories, hour after hour.

One such significant campaign that seems to be hitting the socials at the moment includes the death, disease and imminent famine imposed upon the people of Yemen.

Now, don't get me wrong, I can't help but offer a complete, needle fibre doormat welcome to the fact that Yemen now seems to be captivating a countless number of attentions. And believe me – needle fibre doormats dish out the crème de la crème of bienvenues.

However, I wholeheartedly hope that this much needed attention isn't just another passing virtue signalling trend. Unfortunately, I do fear this will turn out to be something fickle, being talked about now just because it's currently fashionable.

I do want to be wrong. But nevertheless, whilst it's in the limelight now, let's talk about it as much and as logically as possible. And if we are going to talk about it, no doubt the issue of arms sales to Saudi Arabia will spring up like the coils in a 25 year old mattress.

The reason we perceive these arms sales as such a poignant problem is down to the dreadful bombing campaigns the Saudis have unleashed upon Yemeni civilians.

To the vast bulk of people analysing British arms sales to Saudi Arabia, it's a very black and white issue. You either support it or you don't. But I'm going to do a Miley Cyrus and come in like a wrecking ball on that assumption and say that it's not (nor should it be dealt with) as simply as that.

A VERY BRIEF BACKGROUND ON HOW ARMS SALES RELATE TO YEMEN

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The Arab Spring —

The conflict in Yemen can be traced back to 2011 and the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that materialised in the Middle East and North Africa.

Some of these uprisings failed in overthrowing the authoritarian regimes that ruled over the 'protestors'. On the other hand, some "succeeded" in deposing their dictator or autocratic authority. But for those in the latter, it doesn't yet feel like a success – including to those in Yemen.

During the Arab Spring, Yemenis managed to strip the presidency from their authoritarian potentate of 33 years, Ali Abdullah Saleh. This led to the leadership of Yemen being left in the hands of Saleh's deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi.

This was a transition that was described as being intended to install a degree of stability. But as standard whenever an authoritarian is prised away from their position, a power vacuum ensued and caused a king-sized amount of chaos for Hadi and his transitional government.

The power vacuum —

Next – attacks were launched by jihadist extremists looking for a jostle, a separatist movement swirled in the south, many military officers didn't budge in laying their loyalty at the door of Saleh, the nation found itself in a sorry state of food insecurity, and corruption in the country was chronic.

These wounds profoundly weakened the position of Hadi. In contrast, the Houthis sought to harness this chance to solidify *their* position.

The Houthis are a Shia Muslim movement who were previously responsible for rebellions against former president, Saleh.

Even though the group claims to stand up for the Yemeni Shia minority, their movement saw many Sunni Muslims support them after being disenfranchised with the dire state of the transitional government, which was barely being held above water by Hadi.

In late 2014 and early 2015, the Houthis truly capitalised by taking the country's capital, Sada'a, and its surrounding areas out of the control of President Hadi.

This Houthi action hounded Hadi out of Yemen and forced him to flee to relative safety in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The startled Saudis —

As the Saudis believed that the Houthis were backed by their regional Shia rival, Iran, the Kingdom was startled at the rate at which the Houthis were gathering pace.

In an attempt to halt Houthi success, the Saudis formed and led a coalition which commenced an air campaign, aimed at puncturing the group in the hope that it could prevent Iran from gaining a threatening foothold in the region.

Countries such as the UK, USA and France were, and have been, involved in providing logistical support to the Saudi-led campaign. This is where the issue begins to become even more contentious.

In 2017, a ballistic missile was launched towards the Saudi capital of Riyadh. An act which compelled the Kingdom to impose a blockade on Yemen. Saudi Arabia claimed that this was imposed to halt weapon smuggling to rebel groups by Iran. A charge of which the Iranians deny.

However, the blockade hit innocent Yemeni civilians more than anyone. The restrictions, as a result of the blockade, saw the supply of goods and necessities stuck in the mud. Even worse, the country saw the price of fuel and food spike up considerably. Yemen was plunged even further into a food security crisis.

But if they didn't already have enough issues to worry about, the Yemeni people weren't only under threat from a lack of food, supplies and aid. They were, and still are, also under threat from bombs.

Saudi Arabia's escalation to recklessness —

The Saudis have been scorned by many for the bloodshed caused by their bombing campaigns. They've appeared to have launched indiscriminate air campaigns against the Houthis, dragging in the innocent lives of Yemeni men, women and children with them.

The civilian fatalities caused by such blind bombing campaigns has resulted in Western exporters of arms to the Kingdom also facing backlash.

Many accuse the likes of the UK and U.S. of being complicit in such "war crimes", owing to that fact that these nations have been supplying arms to the Saudi forces.

There has been a great deal of debate in the West about such arms sales. However, in one quantity or another, arms sales have continued to take place. But governments have been coming under increasing pressure to change this.

One key reason for Western states to support the Saudis, however, has spouted from their efforts to hold back Jihadist militant groups that have capitalised on the unrest.

To the West, muting the power of Jihadist extremists in the region is a matter of national security. Security against the kind of groups, such as Al Qaeda, that effectively want to wage war against Western civilisation. In this conflict, there's certainly a lot to think about.

THIS IS FAR FROM A SIMPLE FOR OR AGAINST ISSUE

(Section 3 of 4)

Simple anti-Saudi “symbolism” is empty and will do nothing for Yemeni civilians —

I stumbled across an ailing article by Jennifer Spindle, of Oklahoma University, who based the argument to end arms sales to Saudi based solely on “symbolism”. Spindle writes in terms of U.S. foreign policy, but it can easily apply to UK’s stance on such arms sales too.

She states that ending arms sales “would be a clear signal of American disapproval of Saudi actions in Yemen, and would be an equally important signal to Washington’s allies”.

An arms embargo on arms sales to Saudi would indeed spark the flame of “symbolism”. Sending out a “clear signal” is all well and good. But at the end of the day – what in the world are starving, displaced and dying Yemenis going to do with “symbolism”?

Western foreign policy debate seems to be more bothered about looking for reasons to pat ourselves on the back. It’s all “how can we take the moral high ground this week?”. Sprinkled with a bit of “I know it won’t help Yemen, but at least it’ll make me feel good – now where’s my Frappuccino?”.

Okay, I might be being a bit harsh. I know the majority of us have the best of intentions. But the reality is that those suffering in Yemen don’t give a flying Uncle Buck about “symbolism” or “clear signals”.

I mean, we’re talking about Saudi Arabia here. Seen as Jennifer’s a professor of international security, I’d expect someone like her to understand that the Saudis also couldn’t give a Notre Dame about “signals” or “symbolism”.

Sucking up to the Saudis will also achieve nothing for innocent Yemenis —

On the other hand however, the pro-arms sale argument claiming that we should effectively kiss the backside of Saudi Arabia, or more specifically that of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), is pitiful.

There’s no slipping away from the fact that the Saudis do a hell of an influential job in relatively subduing the vicious anti-Western influence of Iran, along with that of the similarly minded terrorist groups (of whom the Iranians often sponsor).

However, this relationship should not be one spearheaded by brown-nosing. Sucking up won’t influence the Saudis at all. Kowtowing to the Kingdom won’t help Yemen.

I'm of the opinion that our nation should not follow the tendencies of a model banana state. Despite how it sounds, such tendencies would be far from fruitful for the UK.

By that I mean, yes, we generate a swell amount of money from selling arms to Saudi Arabia. We uphold a number of jobs at home. But we should always be in a position where we can sacrifice such things in cases like these, and still remain strong as a country.

Abso-bloody-lutely, the UK (and the West in general) would benefit greatly from a wonderful working and economic relationship with Saudi Arabia. You'd be a dingbat to suggest otherwise.

However, any working or economic relationship with the Saudis should be conditional on the fact that they don't carpet bomb the hell out of innocent men, women and children in Yemen. I'd much prefer a plain, old 'absolutely' – free of the "bloody".

This is precisely why I believe that this should be seen as so much more than a simple 'for or against' issue or question. If we're against Saudi arms sales, we change nothing. But if we're for the sales, we generate money, support jobs – but still, we do nothing for innocent Yemeni lives.

That's why we need to try forge a third, more influencing and compounded path. It's an option that certainly runs the risk of also achieving nothing at all. But it stands a heck of a better chance of saving lives in such a war-torn region than the first two options do.

MEANINGFUL ACTION: THE THIRD WAY

(Section 4 of 4)

We won't sway the Saudis if we don't understand them —

To be able to actually sway the Saudis, we need to first understand that they have so much more at stake in securing a foothold in Yemen, than they do in remaining on the U.S and UK's Christmas card list.

What the Kingdom care about is really something more tangible. They have their aims in the Middle East and MBS is dead set on achieving them.

After all, he's in the slipstream of his 84 year old dad, King Salman, ready to take over and rule potentially for the best part of 50 years. MBS is the de facto Saudi leader, determined to maximise his inheritance of influence when he officially succeeds the throne.

It's reality that the West is theoretically counting on Saudi success in a number of areas, such as counter-extremism and oil. A weakness of ours that they can and do exploit. But that doesn't mean that we should discount Saudi Arabia's weaknesses.

To MBS, the scramble for Saudi success is not just one born out of nationalism. It's one that holds so much more personal value. Especially when the Iranian inferno is constantly vying to destabilise and zap away any dominance that the Saudis may hold.

MBS is fully aware that the Western nations considerably bolster their chances of anchoring down any meaningful influence over the Middle East. And that's why we need to use every ounce of leverage we have to actually achieve something meaningful for Yemen.

We wouldn't be able to tackle the Saudis alone —

Military support benefits Saudi Arabia massively. But as already made clear, if Britain simply banned arms sales to the Saudis, it would make a Barry White of difference.

Between 2014 and 2018, the UK exported £2.7bn worth of arms to the Kingdom. Granted, the amount we sent in 2018 was a relatively small share of that at £61m worth. But either way, during that time we were their second largest exporter of arms.

However, you just have to compare that to the sum that the U.S. provided. During the same period, The States sent £11.5bn worth of arms – £3.4bn of which was sent in 2018.

This illustrates how little of an impact we'd cause if we were to cease our sales alone. Before even thinking about making any lasting impact, we would need to get the Americans onside.

Getting our friends across the pond to follow our lead in the Middle East would not be a wholly simple diplomatic task. But we all know how easily the Yanks froth at the chance of throwing their weight about in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, if the sales ceased without any negotiation with MBS whatsoever, we'd still end up change next to nothing. The Saudis would still carpet bomb one way or another, albeit with a weakened arms flow. That's unless we got them to the table.

Forcing Mohammed bin Salman to the negotiating table —

If Britain, along with the Americans and other Western powers involved in the sales, were to sit down with the Saudis and deliver them an ultimatum, we'd at least stand a chance at exerting some influence.

We know that if all the major arms exporter nations imposed an embargo on the arms sales, it would scupper the Kingdom's campaign in Yemen and the wider region. But above all, MBS knows that more than anyone. Visions of the Iranians going on to dominate him thereafter would haunt his dreams.

So even though they'd still be able to cause damage in Yemen without our continued arms exports, I'm positive that they'd prefer to conduct this from a position of strength, *with* the West on their side.

But (again) such a position would *have* to be achieved around a negotiating table. Not just by simply banning arms sales without any attempt to barter with MBS.

If the Saudi Crown Prince was willing to listen (and I'm sure he would be) we'd have a number of potential options to capitalise on our leverage. From our very own position of strength, the door would open on our best chance to bring the Saudi's back in line.

The Saudis are more incompetent than sinister —

One option is that you could give them a right old rollocking. But from what's been recorded, it's not the Saudi's desperate state of affairs that's seemingly driving their bloody bombing practices. Rather, what seems to be driving it mess is sheer incompetence.

For years, the U.S. have not only been supplying arms to the Saudis, but they've also been training a great number of their fighter pilots. But even with such training, they clearly still create disastrous results during their bombing campaigns. So what's the real problem?

Numerous reports and figures have stated that the real problem with the Saudis is that they're just pathetically rubbish at planning and executing targeted bombing campaigns.

It doesn't matter how well you train these pilots, the logistical planning that they rely on will still continue to cause the destruction of civilian lives.

So stopping short of putting Western planes into the fray, the only way which we could ever hope to protect civilians (whilst continuing the air campaign) is by breathing down the Saudi's necks. I'd even go as far as suggesting that we *could* take an actual hands on approach at planning such bombing campaigns.

The British are some of the best in the world at planning and executing targeted bombing campaigns, without putting civilians at risk. I'm sure that the Americans aren't too shabby either when they want to be. So I've no doubt that our expertise and our eye to preserve innocent life would ensure that we save thousands of lives.

Seeking regional peace is most preferable —

Alternatively though, my favoured option would be to use our leverage to push MBS into seeking out some form of peace deal. At least some kind of sustainable deal that would pave the way to stability in the region.

There's two reasons why this would be my favoured option. One – because would bring us closer to a more long lasting solution for peace. And two – the possibility of a deal has shot up tenfold as countries have been hit by Coronavirus. The last thing parties in the region ideally want to be doing at the moment is funding and fighting a conflict.

Such a deal couldn't be any old botched up deal though. If it was to be supported, we'd want to see a number of key agreements.

I will be a tad brief here – but first of all, we'd obviously have to see a ceasefire agreed by the principle parties involved in the conflict.

Secondly, we'd need to see relaxations in the Saudi blockade so that aid lifelines can be opened up to support the masses of suffering Yemeni civilians.

Thirdly, we'd want to see solid commitments on the continuity and free flow of oil, amongst other shipments, through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and on to the rest of the world.

Fourthly, we'd also want to see signs of a viable path towards restoring political stability and governance to Yemen.

And fifth, we'd certainly hope to see a deal which facilitates the continuation of action against Jihadist Islamist extremists in the region.

As stated, I've kept these points brief, otherwise we'd be here for another few thousand words. Nonetheless, it sets out a thin layer of a vision to how I'd see a successful and promising deal looking.

But for sure, we can never expect anything we want to fall into line perfectly. This is the Middle East we're talking about after all.

Dealing with the Saudis if and when they kick up a fuss —

Anyway, whichever way you look at it, if the West could achieve something substantial by simply threatening to cease all arms sales to Saudi Arabia without any questions asked, we'd be quite lucky.

In reality, you'd expect MBS to kick up a fuss. If so, that's when it would be the time to hit him further in the place that's becoming more and more important – the domestic Saudi economy.

MBS isn't just trying to assert his dominance over Iran in the region militarily and territorially. He too wants to solidify his position at home economically.

Just look at his hefty Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the Kingdom's economy so that it can reduce its huge dependence on oil. A project which would christen his early reign and has left his people expecting big things.

What has made the need for Saudi economic diversification even more important however, is the impact that Coronavirus has had on the country. Economic success has never been more important to the Crown Prince in order to recover from such a pandemic.

Therefore, if he begins to twine about the West demanding that they take a role overseeing and ensuring that he doesn't carpet bomb civilians out of incompetence, or that

he is pushed to seek a peace deal, we'd kick him right between the legs in his economic crown jewels.

We can't underestimate the power that an ever increasing barrage of economic sanctions from the West would have on MBS's likeliness to crumble and give in to our human right driven demands. He'd be left with little choice.

But if MBS somehow thinks that his beard will save him (however spectacular that it might be) and decides to neither listen nor budge, it's clear that we must follow through with the arms embargo and some form of economic sanctions anyway. To back away from doing so would make us look weak.

And this is a more fitting time than any to reiterate – if Britain were alone in ceasing arms sales to Saudi Arabia, it would make absolutely no material difference. It's vital that we'd have the Americans on board in order to make any kind of positive impact.

It's also fitting to reiterate that this must be done by dragging the Saudis to the negotiating table. Real change will not be achieved by merely sending out "clear signals" and pointless "symbolism".

Either way, we can't let an opportunity go to waste —

All that said, you might be reading this and envisioning another use, or even more uses, for our leverage. If so, I'm glad that you're thinking that way.

The core point of what I'm trying to stress here is that we shouldn't let a chance of influencing the Saudis go to waste.

Of course, we may end up trying to use any leverage that we might have in vain. But the important thing is that we would have attempted to use it. All as long as we don't just stupidly throw an attempt to sway the Saudis away.

So instead of taking a simple 'for or against' stance on this, it would be so much wiser to use these arms as a point of negotiation and leverage.

We'd either achieve real change using arms sales and sanctions as a bargaining chip, or we'll embargo the arms with at least knowing we've put the shift in. Britain and the West can't seriously throw such a chance away.