

SOAS ICOP Policy Briefings

To Inform Government and Parliamentary Debate



UK Arms Exports - Global Britain, Humanitarian Considerations and Evidence-based Controls

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On 02nd March 2021, the UK Government significantly cut humanitarian aid to Yemen, by 40% for 2021/22. This huge slash from 2019/20 will be devastating for civilians in Yemen as the worst humanitarian [crisis](#) in recent times intensifies. In parallel, the UK government has maintained UK-arms exports to countries that are part of the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition involved in the ongoing war there —many of which are on the FCO [list](#) of human rights concerns. Hypocritically, the UK remains one of the world's largest arms suppliers to Saudi Arabia, with an estimated [£1.4bn](#) in weapons exports in 2020 alone. Rather than persisting with a policy of blanket-arms sales to countries in the Saudi-led coalition with [documented](#) histories of human rights violations, **the UK Government must halt arms exports licensing to end ongoing [abuses](#) immediately. It must also restore the cuts and use the full aid to ease the deadly humanitarian crisis.**

On the international stage, **the UK becomes more isolated** as it increases its military support of dictatorships without due accountability and enforcement measures. **Britain's very continuation of arms sales amid inadequate compliance measures constitutes deliberate harm to civilians in conflict zones.** This contrasts with the positive action taken by major allies: the Biden Administration has temporarily [paused](#) arms supply to Saudi Arabia, while the European Union has [joined](#) the initiative to consider the primacy of humanitarian factors in the provisions of arms exports. The lack of adequate safeguarding measures to ensure arms transferred from the UK are not used in war crimes indicates **a lack of political will by the British Government to hold the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition accountable for alleged violations in Yemen.**

The UK Government must join international efforts towards practical arms control. This would include in-depth auditing of the end-use of UK arms exports and the deployment of compliance measures and enforcement tools, such as warning letters, seizures, compound penalties, and prosecutions. Moreover, **human rights violations must take centre stage in decision-making.** UK civil society organisations that already collate massive volumes of [digital evidence](#) are vital partners in this process.

As other world leaders signal a need to address serious violations of international law around the world effectively, Britain risks becoming a pariah at a time when it needs all the goodwill and trade deals that it can secure. This situation could be rapidly reversed by the UK **faithfully implementing existing standards and International Humanitarian Law provisions.** However, **it is vital that the UK government recognises the factors that underscore Britain's instrumental role in enabling humanitarian catastrophes in armed conflicts,** particularly in Yemen.

As such, we call on all MPs and Peers to increase pressure on the government to implement the following measures:

- Introduce multi-layered arms trade [sanctions](#) for swift responses to [documented](#) incidents of war crimes where UK-manufactured weapons are used
- Build on the Foreign Office's [call](#) to hold accountable UK arms licensed-governments that are responsible for war crimes
- Establish communication with international non-governmental human rights [organisations](#) operating in armed conflict zones where UK arms are used to scrutinize existing legislative provisions and reassess arms control methods
- Support key allies to help lead a committed and credible change, from political-military to political-diplomatic engagement, and
- Restore UK humanitarian aid cuts to Yemen.

Visit our website for further briefings (<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>). If you would like a clarification on any of the issues raised here, please contact the co-author at ro16@soas.ac.uk. Do contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann and her team for further briefings and access to other experts as150@soas.ac.uk or ko21@soas.ac.uk. *The views expressed in SOAS COP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*