

Complicity with Saudi Crimes Limits Canada's Response

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Governments, like gardeners, reap what they sow. Trudeau's continuation of Harper's Conservative Mideast foreign policy has reaped the current mess with Saudi Arabia.

The Liberal brain trust must be wondering, "what do we have to do? We slavishly back the odious Saudi regime and they freak over an innocuous tweet."

The Trudeau government has largely maintained the Conservative government's pro-Saudi policies and support for Riyadh's belligerence in the region. They've mostly ignored its war on Yemen, which has left [15,000 civilians](#) dead, millions hungry and sparked a cholera epidemic. Rather than oppose this humanitarian calamity, Ottawa armed the Saudis and openly aligned itself with Riyadh.

Some of the Saudi pilots bombing Yemen were likely trained in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Since 2011 Saudi pilots have [trained](#) with NATO's Flying Training in Canada (NFTC), which is run by the Canadian Forces and CAE. The Montreal-based flight simulator company [trained](#) Royal Saudi Air Force pilots in the Middle East, as well as the [United Arab](#) Emirates Air Force, which joined the Saudi-led bombing of Yemen.

As [Anthony Fenton](#) has demonstrated on Twitter, Saudi backed forces have been using Canadian-made rifles and armoured vehicles in Yemen. Saudi Arabia purchased Canadian-made Streit Group armoured vehicles for its war, which have been videoed targeting Yemeni civilians. The Trudeau government signed off on a \$15 billion Canadian Commercial Corporation Light Armoured Vehicle (LAV) contract with the kingdom. Over a decade and a half, General Dynamics Land Systems Canada is to provide upwards of a thousand vehicles equipped with machine guns and medium or high calibre weapons. The largest arms export contract in Canadian history, it includes maintaining the vehicles and training Saudi forces to use the LAVs.

With the LAV sale under a court challenge, in late 2016 federal government lawyers described Saudi Arabia as "[a key](#) military ally who backs efforts of the international community to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the instability in Yemen. The acquisition of these next-generation vehicles will help in those efforts, which are compatible with Canadian defence interests." In a further sign of Ottawa aligning with Riyadh's foreign policy, Canada's just-expelled ambassador, Dennis Horak, said in April 2016 that the two countries have had "[nearly similar](#) approaches on Syria, Yemen, Iraq and the Middle East Peace Process" and the Canadian Embassy's website currently notes that "[the Saudi](#) government plays an important role in promoting regional peace and stability."

Within six weeks of taking up his new post, Trudeau's first foreign minister Stéphane Dion met his Saudi counterpart in Ottawa. According to briefing notes for the meeting, Dion was advised to tell the Saudi minister,

["I am impressed](#) by the size of our trade relationship, and that it covers so many sectors ...You are our most important trading partner in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region."

The Trudeau government also sought to deepen ties to the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whose members almost all intervened in Yemen. Announced in 2013, the [Canada-GCC Strategic Dialogue](#) has been a forum to discuss economic ties and the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Dion [attended](#) the May 2016 meeting with GCC foreign ministers in Saudi Arabia.

Canada is a [major arms](#) exporter to the GCC monarchies. Canadian diplomats, the Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC), and the Canadian Association of Defence and Security Industries (CADSI) promoted arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC. With support from Global Affairs Canada and the CCC, a slew of Canadian arms companies flogged their wares at the Abu Dhabi-based International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in 2016, 2017, 2018 and are already [preparing for 2019](#).

Canadian companies and officials sold weapons to monarchies that armed anti-government forces in Syria. In an effort to oust the Bashar al-Assad regime, GCC countries supported extremist Sunni groups, which have had ties to Daesh/Islamic State.

The Trudeau government continued with the previous government's low-level support for regime change in Syria. It provided [aid to groups](#) opposed to Assad and [supported US](#) cruise missile strikes on a Syrian military base in April.

With the Saudis, Israel and the US generally antagonistic to Iran, there has been only a minor shift away from the Harper government's hostile position towards that country. The Trudeau government dialed down the previous government's most bombastic rhetoric against Tehran but has not restarted diplomatic relations (as Trudeau [promised](#) before the election) or removed that country from Canada's state sponsor of terrorism list. One aim of the Canada-GCC Strategic Dialogue is to isolate Iran. A communiqué after the May 2016 Canada-GCC ministerial meeting expressed "[serious concerns](#) over Iran's support for terrorism and its destabilizing activities in the region." An April 2016 Global Affairs memo authorizing the LAV export permits noted that "[Canada appreciates](#) Saudi Arabia's role as a regional leader promoting regional stability, as well as countering the threat posed by Iranian regional expansionism."

The Trudeau government continued to criticize Iran for their human rights abuses while regularly ignoring more flagrant rights violations by the rulers of Saudi Arabia. In the fall of 2017, Canada again led the effort to have the United Nations General Assembly single Iran out for human rights violations.

Saudi Arabia's over the top response to an innocuous tweet has given the Liberals a unique opportunity to distance Canada from the violent, misogynistic and repressive regime. If there were a hint of truth to Trudeau's "feminist", "human rights", "Canada is back", etc. claims the Liberals would seize the occasion. But the Saudis are betting Canada backs down.

Based on Trudeau's slavish support for the kingdom so far it is a safe bet.

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