

Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia: Which Countries Are Still Exporting?

Following US pause on weapons deals to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, MEE looks at how other major military exporters have responded

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Three weeks ago, the United States [issued](#) a temporary freeze on pending arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as part of an effort to end the civil war in Yemen.

In one of its first major foreign policy announcements, the new US administration of President Joe Biden paused the implementation of recent [Trump-era](#) weapons deals, including the sale of munitions to Saudi Arabia and F-35 fighter jets to the UAE.

A Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen’s civil war in March 2015, and have since carried out more than 20,000 air strikes in an effort to roll back the Houthi rebels, who seized the capital Sanaa in late 2014. One-third of those strikes have been on non-military sites, including schools, factories and hospitals, according to the Yemen Data Project.

Since Washington’s decision, pressure has mounted on other Western countries that sell arms to Riyadh and its allies.

Middle East Eye breaks down which other major military exporters continue to arm the Saudi-led coalition, which countries have cancelled contracts, and what action is being taken by campaigners across the globe.

UK

Despite its US allies halting arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition, the UK – the second largest military exporter to Saudi Arabia – has refused to follow suit.

“The decisions the US takes on matters of arms sales are decisions for the US. The UK takes its own arms export responsibilities very seriously, and we continue to assess all arms export licences in accordance with strict licensing criteria,” James Cleverly, a foreign office minister, said.

The UK authorised the sale of [\\$1.88bn](#) worth of arms – including missiles and bombs –

between the period of July and September 2020, according to figures released by the Department of International Trade last week.

London paused all new arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition in June 2019, after the UK Court of Appeal ruled that the government had failed to make an assessment of whether there was a risk that the weapons could be used to breach international humanitarian law in Yemen.

However, the transactions started up again in July last year, with international trade secretary Liz Truss stating that any breaches of international law were [“isolated incidents”](#).

Saudi Arabia represented [40 percent](#) of British arms exports between 2010 and 2019, and sources [told](#) The Times that the UK’s Typhoon aircraft programme would no longer be financially viable if the Saudis lost interest.

France

Last week, the European Union [voted](#) overwhelmingly to end the sale of European security equipment that fuels conflict in Yemen, and demanded accountability for member states that violate EU arms export rules.

However, several French legislators were notable abstainees. Twenty-two of the 23 French MEPs in the liberal “Renew Europe” political bloc, including several members of President Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche party, abstained on the vote.

France is the third largest exporter of arms to Riyadh, with Paris accounting for 4 percent of the kingdom’s arms imports between 2015 and 2019, behind the US (73 percent) and UK (13 percent), according to the most [recent figures](#) released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Over the same period, France was the second largest exporter of arms to the UAE.

An investigation by EU Observer in November [found](#) that French companies were training Saudi soldiers despite concerns about the war in Yemen.

Human rights groups, including Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, have [called](#) on the French government to hand over control of arms sales to the country’s parliament, which has little oversight on the issue. However, there has been no indication from Macron’s government of any change of course.

Italy

Following Washington’s decision in late January, Italy [announced](#) the blocking of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE over concerns the weapons could be used to kill civilians in Yemen.

Activists hailed the “historic” ruling, which will result in a complete blockade of exports, rather than a temporary suspension.

The move includes the cancellation of 12,700 missiles that were to be sold as part of a \$485m arms deal agreed by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in 2016, according to Italy’s Peace and Disarmament Network.

Renzi, who is a senator for the city of Florence, [came under fire](#) from Italian commentators last month for flying to Riyadh for an economic conference, at which he interviewed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, just days after Italy's announcement.

Canada

Canada's arms sales to Riyadh have come under intense scrutiny in recent weeks since their North American neighbours froze exports.

On 25 January, activists in Ontario [staged a protest](#) at the site of a company believed to be involved in transporting Canadian-made, light armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia. Protesters in Halifax, Nova Scotia, also [gathered](#) outside Raytheon Canada Limited, whose parent company in the US has manufactured precision-guided munitions which have [killed](#) civilians in Yemen.

Figures [released](#) in June found that Canada had sold \$2.2bn worth of military hardware to the Saudis in 2019 – more than double that of the previous year. The majority of those exports were light armoured vehicles, and were part of an \$11bn deal brokered in 2014 by the then-Conservative government.

Current prime minister Justin Trudeau approved the deal in 2015, stating that it would be “extremely difficult” to break the contract, incurring penalties “in the billions of dollars”.

However, after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, Trudeau announced a freeze on new arms exports to Riyadh pending a review.

The suspension was lifted in April last year, after a government review found no clear evidence that Canadian military hardware was being used for human rights violations.

Spain

In line with their French counterparts, seven out of nine Spanish liberal MEPs in the centrist Renew Europe bloc abstained on last week's vote to restrict European arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition.

Spain has consistently been one of the EU's largest exporters to the Saudi-led coalition.

Between 2015 and 2019, it [authorised](#) the sale of arms to the coalition worth more than €2.6bn, and exported weapons, predominantly ammunition and aircraft, worth almost €2bn. Most of those exports went to Saudi Arabia (€1.2bn) and the UAE (€276 million).

“Yes, it adds pressure and we hope that the Spanish government will adjust and take the side of legality and morality,” [said](#) Alberto Estevez, Amnesty spokesman on arms trade, reacting to Washington's suspension.

“The government must choose between remaining on the dark side with the merchants of death who have fuelled the six-year-long conflict, alongside France and the UK on the podium of the pariahs who sell arms to two countries that have committed dozens of war crimes, or join a growing list of countries that have said enough of the atrocities.”

Germany

Germany was one of the first major exporters to the Saudi-led coalition to subsequently ban arms sales.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition government decided in late 2018 that it would not deliver arms to Saudi Arabia, over concerns about the situation in Yemen and also because of the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. The ban has been renewed multiple times since then, most recently in December when it was extended until the end of 2021.

Prior to blocking arms exports, Germany had sold \$550m worth of arms to Riyadh in the third quarter of 2017, according to German broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir has called Germany's ban "illogical", and said it "does not make a difference".

"The idea that weapon sales were stopped to Saudi Arabia because of the Yemen war I think is illogical," he told German press agency dpa in November. "We think it's wrong because we think the war in Yemen is a legitimate war. It's a war that we were forced into it."

"We can buy weapons from a number of countries, and we do so. Saying we're not going to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia doesn't make a difference to us."

Australia

Australia confirmed last week that it would not ban arms sales to Saudi and the UAE, despite concerns from civil society groups over violations of international humanitarian law in Yemen.

Between August 2019 and October 2020, Australia has granted five permanent permits for the export of military goods to Saudi Arabia, and nine permits to the UAE.

In neighbouring New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has [called](#) for an inquiry after an investigation earlier this month revealed that the majority state-owned Air New Zealand worked on the engines of a Saudi navy ship.

Ardern said the contract arrangement was "completely wrong" and "doesn't pass New Zealand's sniff test".

Belgium

Belgian military exports have come into the spotlight after an [investigation](#) on 10 February found that arms produced in the country were being used by Saudi forces in Yemen.

Vredesactie, a Belgian NGO, analysed video footage and satellite images to show that weapons manufactured in Belgium's Wallonia region by arms companies FN Herstal and Mecar were used in the Battle of the Jabara Valley in North Yemen in 2019.

The government of Wallonia, a southern region in Belgium which has considerable autonomy, including decision making power over foreign policy, halted arms sales to Saudi Arabia in February last year over concerns about its conduct in Yemen.

Further to the southern region's decision, Belgium's top legal authority imposed a country-wide suspension on arms export licences for shipments to Saudi Arabia's National Guard in August.

In addition to Belgium, Italy and Germany, other EU members to have passed legislation to impose restrictions on military exports to the Saudi-led coalition include Denmark, Finland, Greece and the Netherlands.

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