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Pressure mounts on Macron over arms sales to Saudi Arabia, UAE

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PARIS (Reuters) - Two rights groups have given the French government two months to halt weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates or face legal action, adding to pressure on President Emmanuel Macron to scale back support of a Riyadh-led offensive in Yemen.

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France's President Emmanuel Macron arrives at a European Union leaders summit in Brussels, Belgium, March 22, 2018. REUTERS/Francois Lenoir

The action comes as some European states, notably Germany, have curtailed ties with the Saudi-led military coalition due to concerns over its role in Yemen's civil war. France, Britain and the United States have not followed suit.

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France, the world's third-biggest arms exporter, counts Saudi Arabia and the UAE among its biggest purchasers, and France's biggest defense firms, including Dassault and Thales, have major contracts in the Gulf.

Droit Solidarite, a legal NGO, and Aser, which specializes in armament issues, argue that France is violating national and international law by selling arms that are being used in the conflict in Yemen.

The United Nations and rights groups accuse the coalition of targeting civilians, which amounts to a war crime. The coalition denies this.

"France is not respecting its international commitments," Aser's president, Benoit Muracciole, told Reuters.

Lawyers acting for the two NGOs sent a letter to the office of Prime Minister Edouard Philippe demanding the export licenses to be suspended.

If the French government does not meet their deadline, Aser and Droit Solidarite will take their case to the Conseil d'Etat, France's highest legal authority.

"We will go to the Council of State from May 1 if there is an explicit or implicit refusal of the government to respond," he said.

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The Saudi-led coalition is fighting on the side of an internationally recognized Yemeni government against the Iran-aligned Houthi group.

Since the war began in 2015, more than 10,000 people have been killed, at least three million others displaced and Yemen has been plunged into a multi-fronted humanitarian disaster.

In recent years, Riyadh has bought French tanks, armored vehicles, munitions and artillery, while the UAE purchased fighter jets.

Amnesty International and French rights group ACAT published a legal report on Monday warning France and its weapons suppliers faced potential legal risks over their dealings with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Unlike many of its allies, French export licensing procedures have no parliamentary checks or balances. They are approved through a committee headed by the prime minister that includes the foreign, defense and economy ministries.

Details of licenses are not public and once approved are rarely reviewed.

"Arms sales in France are governed by very strict procedures of state control," the prime minister's office said. It confirmed receipt of the letter.

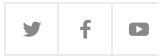
In 2016, licenses potentially worth 45 billion euros (\$55.45 billion) to the two countries were approved with deliveries worth about 2 billion euros.

"French military equipment exports are totally controlled by the state," a Dassault spokesman said. Thales declined to comment.

Additional reporting by Emmanuel Jarry and Cyril Altmeyer; Editing by Raissa Kasolowsky

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