

To Arm or Not to Arm? Khashoggi Case Puts Saudi Actions in Yemen Front and Center



Soldiers loyal to Saudi-led coalition forces are seen in the southern Yemeni port of Aden on October 29, 2018. Saudi ambassador to Yemen arrived in the southern Yemeni port of Aden to oversee an aid delivery of fuel from Saudi Arabia. Photo AFP

The assassination of Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) on 2 October 2018 while he was inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul prompted [a multitude of reactions](#) from the international community, particularly regarding [Saudi Arabia](#), whose authorities are suspected to have ordered the killing. At the forefront of these reactions is how to address arms deals with the kingdom.

The months following Khashoggi's murder have seen numerous declarations by international leaders regarding the implications of his death, including those countries' respective arms deals with Saudi Arabia. Since March 2015, the kingdom has led a military intervention in [Yemen](#) against the [Houthi forces](#), who the Saudis believe are backed militarily by regional Shia power [Iran](#), its enemy for control

over the region. The war on Yemen has led to an unmitigated **humanitarian disaster** which has been vociferously **denounced** by international organizations.

Khashoggi's case has shed light on a conflict that, until then, had been largely ignored by international media and politics and as a result has pushed political leaders all over the world to take a stand on several issues related to the war, including the fact that Saudi Arabia buys weapons from many Western countries – the very same weapons currently being used against civilians on Yemen.

Finland, Denmark and Germany have since **announced** a decision to halt weapons sales to Saudi Arabia; Germany and Denmark cited the killing of Khashoggi, while Finland said in a statement that much of its decision was related to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Germany has also **banned 18 Saudis** suspected of involvement in the killing of Khashoggi from much of Europe. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the decision had been closely coordinated with France, which is part of the Schengen zone, and Britain, which is not, and that other European Union (EU) states had expressed “great support.”

“Even if the Khashoggi case revealed the true nature of Saudi power, this tragedy wouldn't have brought forth the question of arms sales if there weren't also war crimes being perpetrated by the Saudi-and Emirati-led coalition,” Benoît Muracciole, president of ASER organization, told Fanack. He **listed** the countries most committed to military support for Crown Prince **Mohammad Bin Salman's** regime as Canada, the United States (US), France, the United Kingdom (UK) and Italy, and the ones currently opposed as Germany, Finland, Norway and The Netherlands.

The US has not halted its own arms deals yet, with President Trump saying the US would not be **imposing sanctions** on Saudi Arabia or changing its business or strategic relationship with the kingdom. Trump explained that decision was taken at least partly because of Saudi Arabia's historic opposition to Iran, and repeated Israel's claim that Iran was “the world's leading sponsor of terror.” Behind these comments lay the decision by the kingdom to **lower oil prices**, as the President tweeted, hours after refusing to condemn Saudi Arabia for the murder of Khashoggi, “oil prices getting lower. Great! Like a big Tax Cut for America and the World. Enjoy! \$54, was just \$82. Thank you to Saudi Arabia, but let's go lower!”

However, not all American officials agree: on 28 November 2018, the US Senate **voted** 63 to 37 for a **resolution** to halt US support to Saudi Arabia in Yemen. The vote represents an unprecedented effort to invoke Congressional authority to put a stop to a Yemen policy that began under the Obama administration without the authorization of Congress.

In reaction, speaking at the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) security forum in Abu Dhabi, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Gulf Affairs Timothy Lenderking expressed on 9 December 2018 his concern over the Senate vote: “Obviously there are pressures in our system... to either withdraw from the conflict or discontinue our support for the coalition, which we are strongly opposed to on the administration side. We do believe that the support for the coalition is necessary. It sends a wrong message if we discontinue our support.” Trump also reiterated his support to the Crown Prince on 12 December 2018. Saudi Arabia is the **top buyer** of American weapons, although the actual value of US arms sales to Riyadh since Trump took office is \$14.5 billion, according to a **report** by the Center for Internal Policy, which differs significantly from **Trump's claim** that defence sales to the Saudi regime total \$110bn.

Similarly, the UK and **France** did not halt their own arms deals with Saudi Arabia. With regards to the former, Andrew Smith of Campaign Against Arms Trade, **said** “as the crisis worsens, and even after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, it is clear that Downing Street is more concerned with securing arms sales than promoting human rights.” And asked if Paris would heed Berlin's call to suspend weapons

sales, French Foreign Ministry Deputy Spokesman Olivier Gauvin **said** only that France's arms sales control policy was strict and based on a case-by-case analysis by an inter-ministerial committee. In 2017 alone, French licenses potentially worth 14.7 billion euros to Saudi Arabia were approved.

"There have been important debates, notably in France and Spain, on the question of selling weapons that could be used against civilians," Tony Fortin, in charge of studies at the French organization **Observatoire des Armements** (armaments observatory), told Fanack. "In general, can we keep on feeding countries at war with weapons? Some countries also set up subsidiaries abroad, for example, in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. European countries are dependent on the Gulf countries. For example, France exports 60% of its defence systems to the Middle East and Saudi Arabia is its second client after India. The UK also transfers competencies on top of technologies, so Saudi Arabia and the Emirates are able to wage war based on the most advanced material and competencies. Here, these countries sort of co-built the war on Yemen. The European responsibility is very visible and they don't want their responsibility to be revealed in the media."

Fortin identified two movements on arms control: "There is a **regulation** on not selling to countries at war, but no external authority to establish sanctions, so the existing debate is on how to identify responsibility and implement the rules using sanctions, in other words, how to make countries respect international laws. That's the short-term movement. In the long-term, there is a growing movement demanding more respect for human rights, but that is something that will take 20 to 30 years in order to have a practical impact on international and national laws. Civil society needs to be able to maintain the human rights questions in public and political debates."

For now, international organizations and civil society have managed to attract attention and mobilize socially and politically on the **Yemen war**, but how long can this momentum last? In the meantime, according to Muracciole, "all countries, like companies, need to look after their image in order to attract investors and prepare for the future in the medium-and short-term; it is the case for Mohammad bin Salman too."

If more countries were halting their weapons deals with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, the Saudi-led coalition might be obliged to stop their war on Yemen – if nothing else, to save face as well as maintain their political and commercial partnerships worldwide. But some countries, like the US, UK and France, apparently need more than a humanitarian crisis and clear violations of international laws to react.