

Arms exports to UAE may be fuelling Yemen war, newly-released records show

 ricochet.media/en/3836/arms-exports-to-uae-may-be-fuelling-yemen-war-newly-released-records-show

Internal government communications released under access to information show questions were asked about whether Canadian weapons would be used in Yemen. But Global Affairs Canada wouldn't answer.

Canada has one of the most rigorous arms export oversight processes in the world. So goes, at least, the boilerplate statement issued by the federal government whenever any journalist, civil society group, or opposition politician asks about this country's thriving international arms sales business.

In defending its most high-profile weapons deal, struck with the Saudi dictatorship, the Canadian government has stood by this claim for years while waving away concerns about its frequent shipments of armoured vehicles.

"For Canada to say that there's no evidence, it's a farce. It's laughable — if it weren't so sad and devastating to the civilians in Yemen."

But behind closed doors in the spring of 2020, staff at then foreign affairs minister François-Philippe Champagne's office seemingly paused for a brief moment to consider what the windfall profits for weapons manufacturers — and for the federal government, which benefits handsomely from the tax revenue from these sales — might actually mean as Canada prepared to sell weapons to the United Arab Emirates. Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE is deeply implicated in the unfolding tragedy in Yemen, now one of the most horrific conflicts on the planet.

As Canadian officials prepared to approve arms exports, they requested information about the possibility the weapons would wind up contributing to the carnage in Yemen. Against this backdrop of violence, in the dry language of bureaucracy, they wrote, "For UAE, please confirm that they are not utilized in the war in Yemen" and "we would need an analysis of whether there is any risk that these items be used in Yemen."

Ricochet has spent the past year seeking records of what resulted from these inquiries about sales to the UAE. Newly obtained internal government files provide insight into these exports — as well as the ways Canada justifies the uninterrupted flow of weapons to one of its preferred partners in the Middle East.

A 'Canadian-backed' conflict

The current Yemeni government recognized by Canada is actually not based in Yemen but rather in Saudi Arabia, having operated partly in exile since President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi fled the country in the face of street protests and military setbacks in early 2015. A separate administration pushing for autonomy from the central government governs the formerly independent south of the country. Meanwhile, the Ansar Allah-led government, commonly referred to as the Houthis, controls the Yemeni capital Sana'a and much of the rest of the country.

Nearing its eighth year, the war in Yemen has led to the deaths of more than 350,000 people, many of whom are children. After being deadlocked for years, the Houthis have recently made significant gains in territory and in their military capabilities. Though the full extent of their external support is hotly disputed, many analysts tend to downplay internal Yemeni dynamics and instead view the Houthis primarily through the lens of the geopolitical conflict with Iran.

Most media reports invariably insert the words "Iran-backed" prior to any mention of the Houthis and "Saudi-led" before mention of the regional coalition supporting Hadi's government, to explain the way the war has actually become a larger conflict. The UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, which was tasked with investigating

violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the war and identifying those responsible, has been very clear about the support that Western countries have also provided. But the words “Canada-backed” or “U.S.-backed” rarely precede introductions of the other main parties to the conflict.

“This places a heightened onus on the leading arms suppliers to the parties to the conflict, including Canada.”

Dr. Ardi Imseis is a professor of international law at Queen’s University. Before joining the law faculty, he spent more than a decade as a UN official working on refugee issues. He recently served as a member of the UN Group of Eminent Experts.

He pointed out that in two separate reports by the UN team, Canada was specifically listed as a state transferring arms to some of the parties to the conflict, and this was not solely due to the Saudi deal.

“Canada was first expressly mentioned in our third report (September 2020) because there was an up-tick in Ottawa’s provision of arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE that reporting year,” he told Ricochet.

“All states have the obligation to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law,” he said, adding that a country’s responsibility to take measures to ensure respect for the law increases according to its level of influence over the parties to the conflict.

“This places a heightened onus on the leading arms suppliers to the parties to the conflict, including Canada.”

UN reports named the UAE as a key party to the conflict, despite the UAE repeatedly denying requests by the group to visit the country. Though the war is still ongoing, the UN Group of Eminent Experts was disbanded in October last year, a move Imseis describes as “a great stain on the UN, and indicative of the international community’s abandonment of the people of Yemen.” Last year it was revealed that the phone of the group’s chairperson had been hacked with spyware made by Israeli company NSO Group — apparently at the behest of Saudi Arabia, which, together with the UAE, aggressively lobbied to disband the UN Group of Eminent Experts.

While there are no indications that any Canadian firms participated in that spying, multiple Canadian companies are known to collaborate with the UAE on surveillance activities, including AWZ Ventures, a firm linked to former prime minister Stephen Harper. Canada’s export of surveillance products to the UAE is particularly controversial in light of recent revelations by the Washington Post that the country placed spyware on a phone belonging to the spouse of Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi before he was murdered.

What is Canada selling the UAE?

Regarding one type of Canadian surveillance product for export to the UAE, the foreign minister’s office questioned officials by email on whether they could confirm that the product would not be used in the war in Yemen. It also asked, “[Redacted] which kind of surveillance would the end users be doing with the item? Will this be mounted [redacted]?”

The quoted questions had to be pieced together from multiple records, in a case where the arbitrary nature of the Canadian government’s own access-to-information system appears to have worked against it. Initially government censors redacted the word “surveillance” in a version of the document disclosed to Parliament. Another version of this same document left this word visible while obscuring references to the UAE. Then records obtained by Ricochet revealed the originally redacted words “be mounted.” This language indicates the Canadian-made surveillance product under discussion did not concern only digital surveillance and included physical surveillance systems that can be mounted by the UAE on vehicles or aircraft such as drones or fighter jets.

- UAE: [REDACTED] which kind of [REDACTED] would the end users be doing with the item? Will this [REDACTED]? Please advise.
pour l'UAE, s'il vous plaît nous confirmer qu'il ne sont pas utilisés à la guerre au Yémen
- [REDACTED] which kind of surveillance would the end users be doing with the item? Will this [REDACTED]? Please advise.
pour [REDACTED] s'il vous plaît nous confirmer qu'il ne sont pas utilisés à la guerre au Yémen
- UAE: [REDACTED] which kind of [REDACTED] would the end users be doing with the item? Will this be mounted [REDACTED]? Please advise.

Three redacted versions of the same passage from the foreign minister's office reveal elements that government censors wanted hidden.

Ricochet's access-to-information request asked for records of the government analysis of how the surveillance product would be used, and whether it was to be deployed by the UAE in the war in Yemen. The files provided by the government did not answer those questions. Ricochet has [previously reported](#) on the sophisticated Canadian surveillance systems that the government has repeatedly approved for export to various governments, including the UAE.

Multiple documents reference ongoing rifle sales to the UAE's military and security services. Export permits requested by a gun manufacturer called Cadex Defence were listed as "urgent" by the department as of late-2020, with a potential sales value estimated at around \$17 million. Emails from Global Affairs also note the rifle maker hired Ottawa lobbying firm Rubicon Strategy and had interactions with senior officials to try to expedite the approvals.

Had the privilege to design [@donaldjtrumpjr](#) a custom [@cadexdefence](#) .375 CT in a 7 twist barrel. This guy really knows his stuff when it come to long range precision!????
<https://t.co/SSgi7ZJck6> pic.twitter.com/W4uvqgmBEE

— Cadex Defence (@Cadexdefence) [April 29, 2019](#)

Curiously, none of the three lobbyists who were registered for Cadex Defence with the Lobby Commissioner around this time — nor the president of the firm, who was also registered to lobby — ever filed any disclosure reports stating they communicated with a government official during their registration periods, as required under the Lobbying Act, so it is unclear which officials were involved.

Neither the lobbyists nor Global Affairs Canada responded to requests for comment.

The result of this review was completely censored — as was any answer about the fighter jet's use in Yemen.

Canadian officials were also concerned about the possibility that Canadian components for Emirati fighter jets might be used by the UAE in Yemen.

"Is the fighter jet involved in the war in Yemen" asked an unnamed official in French. Instead of answering the question, Global Affairs Canada responded that it had reviewed the exports against the Arms Trade Treaty criteria instead. The result of this review was completely censored — as was any answer about the fighter jet's use in Yemen. Emirati jets have been active in the skies over Yemen as recently as late January.

By reviewing exports through the narrower lens of the Arms Trade Treaty — which government officials themselves pointed out is only applicable to “a small subset” of exports and “does not include GBV [gender-based violence] as part of the overriding risk provision” — Canada can avoid any admission that Canadian companies are implicated in conflicts overseas. Officials can simply state that the government does not have evidence that these items would be exported in contravention of the treaty.

This allows Canada to continue to approve arms exports regardless of whether they contribute to the war in Yemen. This is a much lower bar for approval and shows that whether Canada is fuelling the war or breaking international law are very different questions.

‘Wanting to be convinced’

Another heavily redacted April 2020 email obtained by Ricochet under the access-to-information law shows that in the course of assessing whether exports to the UAE should be approved, Global Affairs Canada assured the foreign minister’s office that the UAE had effectively ended its military operations.

“They just moved the ground troops out of the country and continued business as usual. In modern times we don’t actually need boots on the ground to be waging war,” said Shireen Al-Adeimi, a Yemeni-Canadian activist and assistant professor at Michigan State University. She told Ricochet that the UAE had “a massive PR campaign essentially and convinced some people — who were willingly, readily, wanting to be convinced — that the UAE is no longer involved in the war in Yemen.”

“Canada is one of a shrinking group of countries that have not, in some way, tempered arms exports to members of the Saudi-led coalition in response to abuses in Yemen.”

A 2020 briefing note prepared for the Canadian minister of foreign affairs prior to a call with the UAE foreign minister shows the Canadian minister was briefed on a variety of topics — including trade relations and Canada’s desire to engage with the UAE as leverage against Iran — but no references to the UAE’s role in the war in Yemen were visible.

While some actors within the foreign affairs ministry asserted that the UAE was no longer a major player in the war, behind the scenes other senior officials at Global Affairs Canada were implying otherwise in their communications. In an April 2020 email, an assistant deputy minister told what appears to be a Canadian firearms exporter that approval of its exports may be delayed as “exports to the UAE are subjected to considerable scrutiny, given its involvement in the Yemen conflict.”

In reality the Emiratis have continued to conduct airstrikes in Yemen, occupy Yemeni territory near key passages of the Red Sea, have ground troops located at a strategic natural gas facility in Yemen, and actively provide weapons and equipment to various Yemeni proxy forces and local militias.

Human rights redaction

The UAE’s support for militias in Yemen has been a longstanding issue that some Canadian activists have often criticized. “Canada has turned a blind eye to the human rights crisis facing the Yemeni people,” said Michael Bueckert, vice president of the advocacy group Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, in a statement. He called exports to the UAE “alarming” in light of the country’s support for local armed groups.

Amnesty International arms control researcher Patrick Wilcken has also previously noted that “Emirati forces receive billions of dollars’ worth of arms from Western states and others, only to siphon them off to militias in Yemen that answer to no-one and are known to be committing war crimes.”

Ongoing UAE support for one local militia, known as the Giants Brigades, proved critical in a recent offensive in Yemen's Shabwa region. Houthi forces suffered major setbacks in the area, jeopardizing their supply lines as they continued their push to take the vital Marib region and control over its natural resources. The Houthis then retaliated against the UAE in January with high-profile missile and drone strikes in the vicinity of the airport in the Emirati capital, Abu Dhabi.

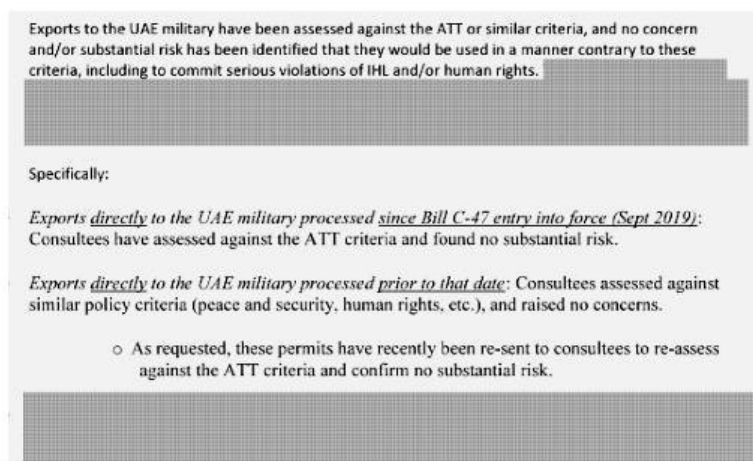
While Canada strongly condemned the strikes on the UAE airport, prior air strikes by the Saudi-UAE coalition on the main airport in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a elicited no such condemnation from Canadian officials. A spokesperson for the aid organization Norwegian Refugee Council said in a [statement](#) that the Sana'a airport closure has exacerbated the lack of medicine and essential medical supplies coming into the country. Global Affairs Canada did not respond to a request for clarification on this discrepancy.

A report published in late 2021 by the UN Development Program on the impact of the conflict in Yemen noted that approximately 70 per cent of those killed are children under the age of five, primarily due to causes such as preventable diseases, lack of healthcare, and extreme hunger, on top of those killed by air raids. A child under the age of five died every nine minutes in 2021 because of the conflict, according to the report — a substantial deterioration from the year before. The World Food Programme also declared around this time that 5 million people in Yemen were on the brink of famine and a further 16 million were “marching toward starvation.”

Canadian officials are presumably well aware of the dire humanitarian situation in the country. However, the section of analysis surrounding the arms transfers titled “Human Rights in Yemen” was entirely redacted by the government before being provided to Ricochet, so it is unclear how seriously this is considered whenever the government approves arms exports.

While avoiding a paper trail with direct answers on whether Canadian arms are used in Yemen, the records ultimately show that officials conducted the mandatory risk review. In their view, “exports to the UAE military have been assessed against the ATT [Arms Trade Treaty] or similar criteria, and no concern and/or substantial risk has been identified that they would be used in a manner contrary to these criteria, including to commit serious violations of IHL [international humanitarian law] and/or human rights in Yemen.”

Ricochet asked Global Affairs Canada whether any export permits to the UAE have ever been denied based on potential usage in the war in Yemen, but did not receive a response.



Redacted excerpt of a Canadian analysis of arms sales to the UAE

Last year a report by the House of Commons foreign affairs committee concluded that “exports involving volatile regions of the world and emerging military technologies should be approached with a default toward hesitance, without the need for there to be incontrovertible — overwhelming — evidence of misuse.”

Evading responsibility

While the government often states that it has no evidence Canadian arms are misused, this might really mean they have no evidence at all.

Officials admitted last year in written testimony to Parliament that neither Global Affairs Canada nor the Canada Border Services Agency conducts post-shipment verification of Canadian arms exports. The foreign ministry told Parliament that Global Affairs Canada “inspectors do not have the authority to investigate whether the end-user of a controlled good or technology is using that good or technology in a manner consistent with the End-Use Statement — even if that good or technology was exported from Canada under the authority of a permit issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.” Even if they had the authority, they would still need “to obtain the consent of the host State before such inspection could take place.”

The documents obtained by Ricochet underline another apparent loophole in the oversight of arms components, with Global Affairs Canada noting that most of the export permits under review are for Canadian items “that are going to be incorporated in to something else” and that “under the ATT [Arms Trade Treaty], it is the country of final manufacture that is responsible for assessing the risks for the export of the final product.”

Apparently when Canada exports crucial components for lethal military equipment, rather than complete off-the-shelf products, it is effectively off the hook.

In April 2020, at the same time staff in the foreign minister’s office were querying officials about potential Canadian links to the war in Yemen, the minister of foreign affairs announced the creation of an arms-length advisory group tasked with reviewing best practices regarding arms exports. Nearly two years later this panel is still nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, some of Canada’s allies have already taken steps to halt arms exports to the UAE in light of the risk of their products being used in Yemen.

“Canada is one of a shrinking group of countries that have not, in some way, tempered arms exports to members of the Saudi-led coalition in response to abuses in Yemen,” notes Kelsey Gallagher, a researcher with Project Ploughshares who has previously testified before Parliament on arms sales.

Italy did just that in early 2021, for example, citing human rights concerns. Denmark has also done the same, with its foreign minister, Jeppe Kofod, stating in May 2020, “My line is very clear: weapons and military equipment should not be exported to either Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates from Denmark, as long as the products in question risk being used in the Yemen conflict.”

Gallagher is alarmed by how Ottawa consistently fails to acknowledge that Canadian weapons could contribute to violations of humanitarian law in Yemen, pointing out that the UAE has previously diverted weapons to allied groups there and that “some of these groups face serious allegations of violating human rights and are not beholden to export regulations. This is relevant information that informs the risk associated with Canadian arms exports to the UAE.”

As for the former member of the UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, Imseis was unable to comment on Ottawa’s apparent conclusion of “no substantial risk” related to the arms transfers given he did not have access to the information on which that conclusion was made. But he told Ricochet that “based on patterns of behaviour by all parties to the conflict, including parties that Canada continues to arm, there is no reason to believe attacks directed against civilians and civilian objects will cease in the Yemen war.”

“By supplying arms to countries that are actively engaged in armed conflict, there is a real and substantial possibility that those arms will somehow be used in or impact that conflict,” he added.

Al-Adeimi also isn't swayed by the government's stance on UAE exports, seeing this as a demonstration of how Canada is more interested in the diplomatic and trade connections on offer. In her view this conclusion allows Canada to publicly clear itself of any responsibility while it continues to promote its exports.

"Whatever aid Canada provided to Yemen, or whatever public support they've given, pales in comparison to complicity in war crimes that they continue to enable in Yemen," she said. "I think when it comes to Canada and Canada's relationship with the UAE, it's just as important as the arms deal with Saudi Arabia."

"The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have been engaged in a seven-year asymmetrical war essentially in Yemen, where they have bombarded entire cities, they have blockaded the country, created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and for Canada to say that there's no evidence, it's a farce. It's laughable — if it weren't so sad and devastating to the civilians in Yemen."

You might also be interested in...

As a top polluter, what is Canada's responsibility to humanity?

November 7, 2022

The Dirty Dozen: 'Carbon bombs' threaten to blow up Canada's climate commitments

November 22, 2022

I was raised in an Indigenous community — but even that doesn't make me Indigenous

Kelly Pollock

October 17, 2022



Become a member

Ricochet produces independent journalism and ideas in the public interest. Support this experiment in crowdfunded news by becoming a member today.

* By continuing, you agree to be subscribed to our weekly newsletter.