

Canadian protesters renew push to end arms exports to Saudi Arabia



Protesters calling for Paddock Transport International to end its complicity in the Saudi-led war on Yemen. (Photo: courtesy of World Beyond War)

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Toronto, January 26 (RHC)-- Activists in the Canadian province of Ontario have staged a protest at the site of a transport company they say is involved in transporting Canadian-made, light armoured vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia.

Approximately 30 demonstrators blocked Paddock Transport International trucks in Hamilton, a city about 70 kilometers west of Toronto, for several hours as part of a global day of action against the ongoing war in Yemen.

The conflict broke out in late 2014 when Yemen's Houthi rebels seized much of the country, prompting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to assemble a Western-backed military coalition to try to restore the government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Since then, rights groups and activists around the world, including in Canada, have sought to end their governments' support for the Saudi-led coalition, as well as suspend weapons sales to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that could worsen the devastating humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

"We're saying very clearly to any company who is complicit in arms exports to Saudi Arabia and therefore complicit in the war on Yemen and the humanitarian crisis there, that there will be economic costs that you will face," Simon Black, a professor at Brock University and lead organiser with Labour Against the Arms Trade who participated in the protest, told reporters.

The activists remained at the site for several hours on Monday afternoon. No arrests were made, Hamilton police said. Canada's Ministry of Global Affairs and Paddock Transport International did not respond to requests for comment.

Canada's previous Conservative government, under then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in 2014 brokered a \$15 billion Canadian dollar (\$11 billion USD) agreement to export LAVs manufactured by General Dynamics Land Systems-Canada to Saudi Arabia. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government then gave final approval for the deal following the 2015 election.

Dozens of civil society organisations in Canada have signed four open letters addressed to Trudeau since March 2019 demanding that he rescind the arms deal.

The prime minister previously said it would be "extremely difficult" to break the contract as doing so could incur a large financial penalty. But in December 2018, as pressure mounted over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Trudeau changed his tone, saying that "Canada is looking for a way out of the Saudi arms deal."

The Liberal government then decided to freeze approvals of new arms export permits for Saudi Arabia pending a review. But the suspension was lifted in April 2020, with Canada citing "significant improvements" in the deal, which it said would secure thousands of Canadian jobs.

Cesar Jaramillo, executive director of Canadian peace research institute Project Ploughshares, told reporters that Monday's protest was "a manifestation of increased discontent" with how Ottawa has handled the issue. "It is utterly disappointing that Ottawa has authorised the export of more than \$1.8bn in weapons to Saudi Arabia since Canada joined the Arms Trade Treaty [in 2019], which is intended to promote responsible arms transfers," Jaramillo said. "While the Canadian government may be okay with arming a human-rights pariah, many Canadians are not."

Human rights campaigners have cited evidence – videos and photographs posted online and verified by experts – showing Canadian LAVs as well as sniper rifles being used by the Saudi-UAE led coalition in the Yemen conflict.

Around 233,000 people have been killed in the war to date, according to the United Nations, which warned in December that the window to prevent famine in Yemen was narrowing, as many faced record highs of acute food insecurity. Eighty percent of Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance, the UN says.

Meanwhile, in September, the UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen named Canada – for the first time – as one of the countries “perpetuating the conflict” in Yemen by selling arms to Saudi Arabia.

Canadian civil society groups say the country’s weapons exports to Saudi Arabia now account for over 75 percent of its non-U.S. military exports, while Canada pledged \$40 million in humanitarian aid to Yemen last year.

The demonstrators noted in a statement on Monday that despite the COVID-19 pandemic and calls from the UN for a global ceasefire, Canada has exported over \$720 million worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the pandemic. “We have to question ... what kind of a humanitarian cost is the government willing to pay for the preservation of a certain number of jobs,” Black told journalists.

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