

Advocates see opportunity in U.S. review of Saudi arms sales

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For several years, human rights activists in the UK, Canada, France and elsewhere have called on their governments to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia over the war in Yemen [File: Tolga Akmen/AFP]

Washington, April 5 (RHC)-- Nearly two months after the United States announced it would halt “offensive” support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, as well as “relevant” arms sales, the administration of President Joe Biden has offered little clarity on how it will define those parameters.

The move, though short on specifics, was welcomed by U.S.-based advocates, who had long argued that Washington should end its backing of the coalition due to reports of widespread human rights abuses and the conflict's punishing humanitarian toll on Yemeni civilians.

Activists in other countries that provide arms to Riyadh also took note of the Biden administration's policy pivot, hoping it could influence their own governments' respective positions on the war in Yemen and weapons exports to the Saudi government.

But several weeks after Biden's announcement, advocates outside of the U.S. say little has changed. "In terms of arms sales, we've got six years now of the United Kingdom with shockingly high sales figures, licensing figures and absolutely no indication whatsoever, that that's going to change," said Martin Butcher, policy adviser on arms and conflict with Oxfam International. "And if anything, they've taken a somewhat harsh tone in reaction to the Biden initiative."

The British government has stressed it has a separate relationship with Riyadh from the U.S. -- both longstanding allies of the country -- and has maintained it has strict humanitarian criteria for arms exports.

On February 8, James Cleverly, the UK minister for the Middle East and North Africa, told parliament the government had "noted" the Biden administration's move, but cited a Houthi offensive on Marib, the last government stronghold in the north of the country, cross-border drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, and atrocities committed by the Houthis as justification for UK support and sales to Riyadh.

In a statement to Al Jazeera, a government spokesperson said "the UK operates one of the most comprehensive export control regimes in the world." "The government takes its export responsibilities seriously and rigorously assesses all export licences in accordance with strict licensing criteria. We will not issue any export licences where to do so would be inconsistent with these criteria," the spokesperson said.

The UK accounted for nine percent of Saudi Arabia's weapons imports from 2016 to 2020, second only to the US at 79 percent, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, accounted for 32 percent of the UK's weapons exports during the period, the largest share of any country the British government exported to. Since March 2015, the UK has licensed more than \$9.3 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia, including \$3.7 billion in the category that includes aircraft, helicopters and drones, and \$5.3 billion in the category that includes grenades, bombs and missiles, according to the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT).

Advocates have also noted that the government has halved aid to Yemen this year compared with last.

While the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson has shown little willingness to budge on the issue, Butcher said a clearer determination from the US on what it considers offensive weapons related to the Saudi coalition in Yemen could potentially undermine UK-made arms supply chains that rely on US parts.

Such clarity could come from a current "inter-agency" review being conducted by the Biden administration.

"There are significant exports of Paveway bomb guidance kits from the Raytheon plant in Scotland, in Fife, and those depend on buying in" components from the U.S., he said. "So when the Biden review finishes, if there's a clear definition of offensive weapons, then that could easily affect UK exports, whether the UK wants it to or not," he said.



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