

An introduction to the arms trade

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A Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jet on display at the Farnborough International Airshow, a biennial UK arms fair.

The arms trade is a deadly business. It supports conflict and human rights abusing regimes while squandering valuable resources.

The arms trade is dominated by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: China, France, Russia, UK and the US, along with Germany and, increasingly, Israel. The permanent members alone account for around three quarters of exported arms.

While relatively few countries sell large volumes of weaponry, the buyers are spread across the world. Some of the largest purchasers are in the Middle East and South and East Asia. The sales range from fighter aircraft, helicopters and warships with guided missiles, tanks and armoured vehicles to machine guns and rifles. They also include components and surveillance equipment.

There is often confusion about the legality of the arms trade, with the impression given that

it is the illegal trade that is damaging while the legal trade is tightly controlled and acceptable. However, the vast majority of arms sold around the world, including those to human rights abusing governments or into conflict areas, are legal and actively supported by governments.

Human rights abuse

The arms trade exists to provide weapons to those who can pay for them. As long as they have the money, what the buyers do with the arms is largely irrelevant to the seller.

Human rights abuses are facilitated by arms sales in three main ways:

- The arms can be used to carry out the abuse directly;
- The arms sales increase the military authority of governments and their capacity for abuses;
- The sales convey a message of international acceptance and approval.

The UK Government's 2014-15 Human Rights and Democracy Report identified 28 "countries of concern". In 2014, the UK approved arms export licences to 18 of these including Israel, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Despite its well documented repression and human rights abuses, Saudi Arabia has been a "priority market" for UK arms sales for over 30 years.

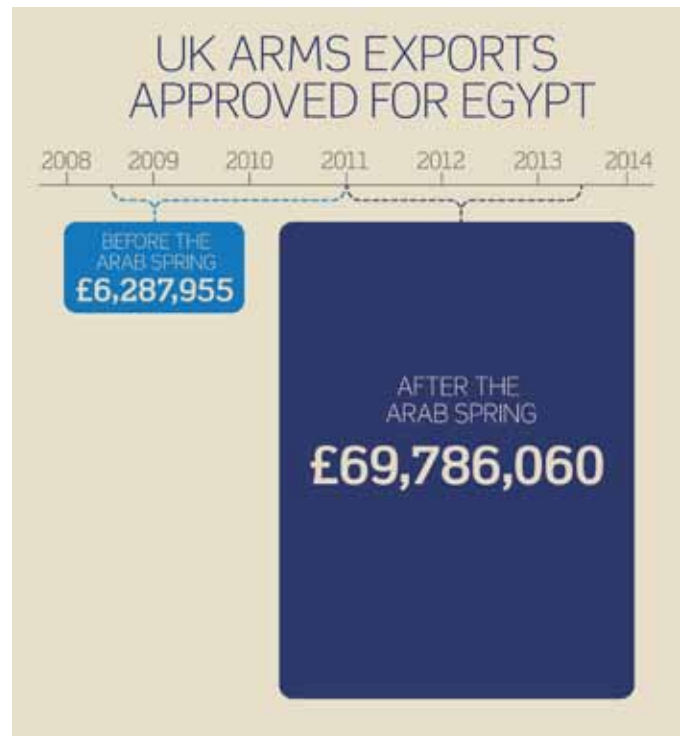
Conflict

Selling arms to a country in conflict - whether internal or external - makes the conflict more deadly and last longer. If there is tension between countries or within a country, arms purchases are likely to increase this tension and make actual conflict more likely.

It is often difficult to establish where the arms used in conflicts have originated. However, the use of UK arms in conflict zones include the use:

- by Libya against "rebels" in 2011
- by Israel in attacks on Gaza
- by the Indonesian military in East Timor, Aceh and West Papua
- by the US in the invasion of Iraq
- by Zimbabwe in the Democratic Republic of Congo
- by Argentina in the Falklands War

The casualties of conflict are now overwhelmingly civilian. Even when a conflict has ended, arms, especially small arms, may remain in large numbers, fuelling further conflicts or criminal activity.



Influential arms companies

The arms industry is dominated by a small number of major corporations that have their headquarters in one country, but produce weaponry internationally. They include Lockheed Martin (US), BAE Systems (UK), Boeing (US), Raytheon (US), Airbus (Europe) and Finmeccanica (Italy).

Although arms companies are not particularly large by international business standards, they are incredibly powerful due to their political connections. A complex web of relationships between arms companies and government means that policy-making is distorted in favour of arms company interests.

One of the more tangible manifestations of this is the 'revolving door'. A steady stream of government ministers and officials moves to companies, where their contacts and influence can then be tapped. A particularly shocking example occurred in 2011 when Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, former UK Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, moved to BAE Systems. As Ambassador, he had pressured the Serious Fraud Office to drop its investigation into BAE-Saudi arms deals.

Aside from ensuring support for arms exports, this political influence has led to the UK being committed to heavy expenditure on large items of military equipment, including aircraft carriers, fighter aircraft and Trident. The utility of these in tackling threats to UK security is questioned even by some of those within the military.

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An injured woman is carried away during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, when the military and police fired on unarmed protesters.

Government support

The influence of arms companies is felt right at the top of government. Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and David Cameron have all led delegations to promote arms sales, including to some of the world's most repressive regimes. When clinching the deal becomes difficult the help of the Royal Family is enlisted. Prince Charles famously did a sword dance in Saudi Arabia in 2014 to secure a fighter jet deal for BAE.

Complementing the high profile visits, the government has had an arms sales agency since 1966, currently the UK Trade & Investment Defence and Security Organisation (UKTI DSO). With around 130 civil servants, it works behind the scenes, arranging contacts and smaller scale visits. They also manage the UK presence at international arms fairs and the official invitations to those in the UK, such as London's DSEI.

This support for military sales is completely disproportionate. While arms account for less than 1.4% of UK exports, the sectors which cover the remaining 98.6% have just 107 dedicated civil servants promoting their exports

Aren't there controls?

Since it is government policy to vigorously support arms exports it is hardly surprising that the government's export licensing process does little to impede the trade. It is supposed to take



Destroyed ambulance in the Gaza Strip, 2014

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human rights, conflict and other concerns into account, but with, for example, military goods going to Israel while it was bombing Gaza in 2014, it seems little more than a paper exercise. The only meaningful constraint on arms exports is political embarrassment.

The international Arms Trade Treaty, which came into force in December 2014, seems unlikely to change anything. In fact, the arms companies in the UK see as providing a "level playing field" with the potential for improving their marketing opportunities.

How do they justify arms sales?

Two justifications for arms sales are generally advanced. Both are myths.

- **National security** is the government's main official argument. It focuses on the false assumption that arms exports can help guarantee the supply of equipment to the UK armed forces. However, arms companies are global businesses, and most equipment contains components imported from elsewhere. More importantly, using such an argument reinforces the equation of national security with military solutions, and marginalises major security threats such as climate change, energy insecurity and inequality.
- **Jobs and economic benefits** are frequently cited in favour of selling arms, but do not stand up to examination. The arms industry is in long-term decline and receives massive financial subsidy and support from the government. Moving the subsidy from the arms industry to supporting renewables could result in more engineering jobs in an industry which is growing not declining, and help create a safer, rather than a more dangerous, world.





In 2013, activists blocked military equipment from entering the ExCeL centre in East London a few days before one of the world's largest arms fairs was due to take place.

Ending the arms trade

The arms trade is a business with a privileged place in the heart of government. In practice, this means arms companies are incredibly adept at taking taxpayers' money and convincing governments that the arms trade should be promoted rather than restrained.

While the benefits of the arms trade accrue to international companies, the costs are to the people on the receiving end of the weaponry, the citizens and taxpayers of both buying and selling countries, non-military industry, and national and international security.

The power of the arms lobby is, however, being challenged. Museums and churches have cancelled arms industry events after ethical concerns have been raised. Students have challenged university investments in arms companies as well as the latter's presence at careers fairs. The media is questioning arms deals to a greater extent than before while the parliamentary arms export committee has repeatedly called on the government to admit that the promotion of arms exports is incompatible with the promotion of human rights.

Take action

We can all take action to end the arms trade, highlighting the pain and destruction it causes and countering the myths used to support it.

- **New to campaigning?** Email action@caat.org.uk to find out how to get involved. You can sign up to receive regular email updates and our magazine CAAT News on our website www.caat.org.uk
- **Find out about our latest actions** caat.org.uk/act
- **Get involved in your local CAAT group:** contact outreach@caat.org.uk to find out about your nearest one.
- **Are you a student?** Find out about taking action on campus by emailing students@caat.org.uk
- **Challenge your local arms company:** find out which one's near you: caat.org.uk/map

There is more information on all of these topics on CAAT's website: www.caat.org.uk

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