

Campaign Against Arms Trade
Unit 4, 5-7 Wells Terrace
London N4 3JU

020-7281 0297
07814 410893
ann@caat.org.uk

Submission from the Campaign Against Arms Trade to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into Autocracies and UK Foreign Policy

1. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) in the UK is working to end the international arms trade. This trade has a devastating impact on human rights and security, and damages economic development. CAAT believes that large scale military procurement and arms exports only reinforce a militaristic approach to international problems.
2. CAAT welcomes your Committee's inquiry into Autocracies and UK Foreign Policy, but questions the assumptions behind your Chair's introductory statement and some of the questions which follow it.

No easy division

3. The statement seems to assume that the world can be divided into democracies, which abide by the rules-based international system and adhere to the rule of law, and autocracies which undermine international order. However, unfortunately, a growing number of countries, including some in European Union, have democratically elected leaders who are behaving like autocrats. This includes taking power over the legal system and suppressing critical media and civil society.
4. Successive UK governments have also made a *de facto* division of autocracies into "good" and "bad", the former being the purchasers, current or potential, of UK arms. UK condemnations of the violation of human rights and the rules-based international order more generally by the "good" autocracies is muted. Thus no real sanctions have been applied to Saudi Arabia for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi or the prosecution of human rights activists on trumped up charges; to Egypt for the military coup, elections where opposition candidates have been banned, and mass executions of opponents; or Turkey for the military assault on the Kurds in Afrin, or the jailing of MPs, journalists or human rights defenders.
5. The "good" autocracies the UK treats as allies also undermine security and the rules-based international order in other ways. These include corruption and money laundering, forced displacement of peoples and facilitating uncontrolled arms flows.
6. It is also a seeming premise of the inquiry that the UK itself always abides by the rules-based international order. On some issues, including the arms trade, the UK currently stands accused of undermining international agreements which it helped establish. Together with the inconsistent approach from the UK to human rights violations by different countries mentioned above, seemingly based on commercial opportunities, means that UK advocacy for a rules-based international order increasingly lacks credibility.
7. Your predecessor Committee's April 2016 report into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's funding and administration of its human rights work overseas ([HC860](#)) discussed the implications of what was at the very least the perception that human rights had been de-prioritised in favour of trade. This was denied by the then Government, but now, with the addition of Brexit, trade very much appears to take precedence over human rights and other concerns.

Arms trade

8. The UK played a leading role between in securing both the EU Common Position on Arms Exports and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). However, it has also been a priority of successive UK government's to promote arms exports.

9. Both the Common Position and the ATT contain provisions on the violation of international humanitarian law and the granting of export licences for military equipment. Any government wishing to uphold human rights, or support a rules-based international order, would interpret these Common Position and ATT provisions to mean that export licences would be refused or revoked in the case of Saudi Arabia since it began bombing Yemen in March 2015, which together with the subsequent blockade has caused the world's worst humanitarian disaster.
10. Instead, the UK government not only continues to issue new licences and refuses to revoke existing ones, even where it admits the equipment is being used by Saudi Arabia in the bombing, but also lobbied the German government in February 2019 in an attempt to persuade it to lift its embargo which was affecting BAE Systems' ability to honour its contract to service UK-supplied Eurofighter Typhoons. ([Guardian, 20.2.19](#))
11. It is quite clear that the UK government puts BAE's commercial interests ahead of those of the Yemeni people, or adherence to the Common Position or the ATT.
12. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia is not the only recipient of UK-produced arms with a human rights record to which a blind eye is turned for commercial advantage. It may be the most egregious case, but Bahrain, Colombia and Egypt were also simultaneously Foreign and Commonwealth Office [human rights priority countries](#) in 2018 and Department of International Trade Defence and Security Organisation [core markets](#) for 2018/19. This raises further questions about the UK's commitment to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Common Position and ATT.

New technologies

13. Your Chair's introductory statement mentions the effects of new technologies. Today even those living in some of the world's remotest regions can quickly receive news from around the globe. Those whose human rights are being violated by their own government can be swiftly aware that, for example, the UK government, while espousing journalistic freedom, is welcoming their autocratic leader. When Turkey's President Erdogan came to the UK for three days in May 2018, meeting both the Prime Minister and the Queen, Kurdish groups in the UK protested, something fellow Kurds in Turkey and Syria would undoubtedly have been aware of. ([Middle East Eye, 11.5.18](#)) Once again, arms exports were involved. In January 2017 BAE Systems had secured a [£100million fighter jet deal](#) with the Turkish government.
14. New technologies can also assist autocrats in maintaining control. The UK must take steps to prevent such technology reaching them, yet the Home Office's Security and Policing event in March 2019 brought together technology companies supplying surveillance equipment and autocratic governments. ([Vice, 8.3.19](#)) These included Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. (Written Parliamentary Answer, [128137](#), 23.2.19)

Domestic UK action

15. If the UK government wishes to encourage human rights overseas, it is vital that its own domestic record is exemplary. The "hostile environment" accorded refugees, deaths in custody, wrongful deportation, arbitrary stripping of citizenship by executive action and Closed Material Procedures in the Courts are just some examples where the UK's record undermines its international credibility as a human rights champion. A race to the bottom on human rights can give succour to the autocrats while undermining others' work to democratise their countries.

Way forward

16. The UK should aim to influence the domestic regimes of overseas states, to encourage them to strengthen the rule of law and to encourage civil society participation. However this will only happen if, in the future, UK governments put human rights, in the UK and overseas, at the very heart of their policy. Both the reality and the perception must be that for the UK government human rights take precedence over commercial interests, something which is not the case today.

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