

## ARMING SADDAM - a preface

During the 1980's much of the Campaign Against Arms Trade's work focused on sales to Iran and Iraq, countries which had been at war with one another since September 1980. CAAT pressed for a complete arms embargo to be imposed on both states.

The UK was not in the big league as a supplier to either side, but nonetheless did play a vital role in maintaining both military machines. CAAT produced a regularly updated briefing detailing the UK's military connections with the protagonists, or, more correctly, what was known of them from publicly available sources. For a long time, CAAT knew more about links with Iran than with Iraq, although, since the UK was closer to the latter, it was always assumed the ties would be greater.

CAAT's campaign brought some successes, albeit appallingly limited given the bloodbath the Iran-Iraq war was. In 1986, CAAT brought to public attention the attendance at the UK government's British Army Equipment Exhibition of an Iraqi delegation headed by the country's Director of Armaments and Supplies. After an outcry, the invitation to the equivalent naval event the next year was withdrawn. In 1989, just a year after Saddam's forces massacred the Kurds at Halabja using chemical weapons, UK companies were in Baghdad exhibiting their wares at a military exhibition. Protests forced the UK government not to grant the temporary export licences necessary for BAe (now BAE Systems) to show its Harrier and Tornado aircraft, though the Hawk 100 fighter trainer was there. The company had hoped to sell between 50 and 70 of these planes to Iraq. After months of hard campaigning by CAAT, Iraqi exile groups and, as we now know, concerned individuals within the Ministry of Defence, the UK government refused a licence for their export. Almost a year to the day later, Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Kuwait.

The campaign to stop the supply of weaponry to Saddam received only modest press coverage. This was not for want of trying, but the arms trade was not then the newsworthy issue it is today. There was parliamentary support. Early Day Motions (or parliamentary petitions) were tabled condemning the Halabja massacre, the companies' attendance at the Baghdad exhibition and the proposed Hawk sale. Interestingly, some of those most keen to use military force against Iraq now, such as Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, did not sign these EDMs.

"Arming Saddam" was written in late 1990 and early 1991. It looks at the supply of components and technology, as well as complete weapons systems. Today, following the debacle of the Matrix Churchill trial and Lord Justice Scott's subsequent Inquiry, more is known. Scott's "Report of the Inquiry into the Export of Defence Equipment and Dual-Use Goods to Iraq and Related Prosecutions", published on 15th February 1996 and running to five volumes plus an index, tells the full story. Overall it confirms the picture drawn in "Arming Saddam". The Government and companies put exports and profit before the lives of the people of Iraq.

Has anything changed since? Certainly, there is now more publicly available information about arms sales. The UN Register broke new ground when it was set up in 1991. Though far from adequate, it nonetheless started a trend which has seen many countries producing their own reports on arms exports. In the UK, the first of these was in 1997 and they are now annual, each year being more informative than the previous one. However, the reports are retrospective and nothing has been done to allow parliament and the public a chance to comment before export licence decisions are made.

Since 1991 too, a whole category of weaponry has been demonised. By September 2002 some 145 countries had signed the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines; 129 of these have ratified. Small arms, one of the world's weapons of mass destruction, is now receiving similar international attention.

Most importantly, arms exports are now a big political issue with the media and hence the public is aware of them in a way that was simply not the case in the 1980's. Unfortunately, disquiet at the arming of human rights violators and countries in regions of conflict has not translated into action by governments. In 2002, Tony Blair is leading the push to sell BAE Systems Hawk aircraft to India, despite the threat of a nuclear confrontation between that country and Pakistan. Meanwhile his Foreign Secretary has changed the rules to allow the export of BAE Systems Head Up Displays to the United States for incorporation into F-16s bound for Israel. The lives of the people of Palestine count for less than the wish of UK companies to participate in US military programmes.

It seems that, despite the awful lesson of the courtship of Iraq and Saddam Hussein, UK governments are still willing to assist the arms companies without regard for the consequences. Certainly, the Government cannot realistically be swayed by economic arguments. CAAT's compilation of the latest research suggests that there is a net subsidy of £763 million a year. Military goods only account for around 2% of UK visible exports, but the sector is the most heavily subsidised in the UK economy apart from agriculture. Even a recent report provided by the Ministry of Defence at the request of the Defence Committee and authored by two economists from the MoD and two academics concluded that "the balance of argument about defence exports should depend mainly on non-economic considerations".

Nor can the arms trade be justified by the employment some believe it supports. Jobs dependent on military exports represent only 0.3% of all UK employment. With unemployment at its lowest level in 25 years, many localities with plants making military equipment for export are now experiencing labour shortages. In these circumstances, most of those working in the arms industry are likely to be able to find alternative employment fairly speedily. Those who do not, could benefit from supportive policy initiatives that would cost far less than the support given to military industry at present.

So what is the attraction of the arms trade for Governments? Why, whatever they might say in opposition, do governments still support an industry that is increasingly questioned by the electorate? In the 21st century, are governments still seduced by an image which equates authority and influence with military might? This obsession with arms needs to be shed if the UK is to avoid arming other dictators and supplying them with the wherewithal to manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

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