



Crimes against Humanity: Britain's Complicity In Saudi Arabia's Terror Campaign Against Yemen

Par [Media Lens](#)

Mondialisation.ca, 14 septembre 2016

[Media Lens](#) 13 septembre 2016

Région : [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Thème: [Intelligence](#), [Military](#) and

[WMD](#)

The 'mainstream' Western media is, almost by definition, the last place to consult for honest reporting of Western crimes. Consider the appalling case of [Yemen](#) which is consumed by war and an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe.

Since March 2015, a 'coalition' of Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, and supported by the US, Britain and France, has been dropping bombs on neighbouring Yemen. The scale of the bombing is indicated in a recent [article](#) by Felicity Arbuthnot - in one year, 330,000 homes, 648 mosques, 630 schools and institutes, and 250 health facilities were destroyed or damaged. The stated aim of Saudi Arabia's devastating assault on Yemen is to reinstate the Yemeni president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and to hold back Houthi rebels who are allied with the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Saudis assert that the Houthis, who control Yemen's capital, Sanaa, are 'proxies' for Iran: always a convenient propaganda claim to elicit Western backing and 'justify' intervention.

Philip Hammond, who was UK defence secretary when the Saudi bombing began in 2015, [promised](#):

'We'll support the Saudis in every practical way short of engaging in combat.'

The British government has been true to its word; in this respect at least. Campaign Against Arms Trade [says](#) that UK sales to Saudi Arabia since the start of the attacks on Yemen include £2.2 billion of aircraft, helicopters and drones, £1.1 billion of missiles, bombs and grenades, and nearly half a million pounds of armoured vehicles and tanks. Just days ago, it was [revealed](#) that Britain is now the second biggest dealer of arms in the world. Is there any clearer sign of the corrupt nature of UK foreign policy?

Perhaps there is. Last month, Oxfam [reported](#) that in excess of 21 million people in Yemen, out of a total population of around [27 million](#), are in need of humanitarian aid, more than in any other country. Over 6,000 people have been killed, more than 3 million displaced and more than 14 million are suffering hunger and malnutrition.

Amnesty International [reports](#) that British-made cluster bombs have been used in deadly attacks on civilians. Children are among those who have been killed and maimed. The human rights organisation [says](#) that the UK should stop all arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Amnesty has also [called](#) for Saudi Arabia to be dropped from the United Nations Human Rights Council because of 'gross and systematic violations of human rights', both at home

and abroad.

‘They Call It Natural Death. But It’s Not.’

In a [two-part piece](#) for BBC Newsnight last year, Gabriel Gatehouse commendably reported from Yemen on the plight of civilians there, including the Saudi targeting of civilian infrastructure. The BBC journalist also alluded to ‘the British dimension’ in which the Saudi ‘coalition’s efforts are supported by Britain and the United States’, with British-supplied weaponry being used by the Saudis. Although a welcome deviation from the norm, his criticism of UK foreign policy was muted and not subsequently maintained by BBC News, as far as we could see (with limited recent exceptions as we will discuss later).

Peter Osborne is a rare example of a Western journalist reporting from Yemen, *also pointing unequivocally to British complicity* in the country’s nightmare. Together with his colleague Nawal Al-Maghafi, Osborne [notes](#) in a recent article that:

‘We discovered indisputable evidence that the coalition, backed by the UK as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is targeting Yemeni civilians in blatant breach of the rules of war.’

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has imposed a brutal blockade on Yemen preventing vital commodities from getting into the country. One doctor at the Republic teaching hospital in Sanaa told Osborne:

‘We are unable to get medical supplies. Anaesthetics. Medicines for kidneys. There are babies dying in incubators because we can’t get supplies to treat them.’

The doctor estimated that 25 people were dying every day at the Republic hospital because of the blockade. He continued:

‘They call it natural death. But it’s not. If we had the medicines they wouldn’t be dead.’

‘I consider them killed as if they were killed by an air strike, because if we had the medicines they would still be alive.’

This is shocking enough. But Osborne adds that there is:

‘powerful evidence that the Saudi-led coalition has deliberately targeted hospitals across the country. Four MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] hospitals had been hit by Saudi air strikes prior to the organisation’s withdrawal from the country, even though MSF were careful to give the Saudi authorities their GPS positions.’

Osborne, who [resigned](#) as political commentator from the Telegraph last year, places Western complicity in Yemen’s nightmare at the front and centre of his reporting. He points out that Britain has continued to sell arms to Saudi Arabia and its partners, despite copious evidence of breaches of international humanitarian law presented by human rights

organisations.

This is an echo of Britain's shameful role in arming Indonesia while it crushed tiny independence-seeking East Timor, killing around 200,000 people – about one-third of its population. Noam Chomsky [described](#) it as a 'slaughter' of 'near-genocidal' levels. He noted that:

'By 1998, Britain had become the leading supplier of arms to Indonesia...over the strong protests of Amnesty International, Indonesian dissidents, and Timorese victims. Arms sales are reported to make up at least a fifth of Britain's exports to Indonesia (estimated at one billion pounds), led by British Aerospace'.

(Noam Chomsky, 'Rogue States', Pluto Books, 2000, p. 232)

In the present case of Yemen, the British Foreign Office has repeatedly denied that Saudi Arabia had broken humanitarian law, asserting until a couple of months ago that the FO's own 'assessment' had cleared the Saudis of any wrong-doing. As Osborne notes, however, on July 21 this year, the last day of parliament before the long summer recess:

'the British government was forced to admit that it had repeatedly misled parliament over the war in Yemen.'

It turns out that no such 'assessment' had taken place; a grudging and potentially damaging admission that ministers had clearly hoped to slip out quietly without proper scrutiny. Osborne describes it as 'a dark moment of official embarrassment.' You have to dig deep in the BBC News website to find [scant mention](#) of this shameful episode.

Moreover, Britain has supported the UN Security Council resolution backing a Saudi blockade, and the UK has also provided the Saudis with intelligence and logistical support.

'Perhaps most crucially of all, Britain and the United States have provided Saudi Arabia with diplomatic cover. Last year, Britain and the United States [helped to block](#) a Dutch initiative at the UN Human Rights Council for an independent investigation into violations of international humanitarian law.'

In a powerful accompanying filmed report on the destruction of Yemen's capital Sanaa, Osborne [concludes](#):

'This city of old Sanaa is as extraordinary, as priceless, as unique as any of the masterpieces of Western civilisation – like Florence or Venice. Just imagine the outcry if bombs were falling on Florence or Venice. But because this is old Sanaa, in forgotten Yemen, nobody cares a damn.'

And least of all Britain's new Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, who callously waved away copious evidence of Saudi breaches of international humanitarian law. The Guardian's diplomatic editor Patrick Wintour [writes](#) of Johnson's assertion that the Saudis are not 'in clear breach' of humanitarian law:

‘His judgment is based largely on a Saudi-led inquiry into eight controversial incidents, including the bombing of hospitals.’

To his credit, Wintour notes that Johnson was ‘defending the credibility of a Saudi-led inquiry exonerating Saudi targeting’. Comment seems superfluous. He then adds Johnson’s own unwittingly self-damning statement:

‘They [the Saudis] have the best insight into their own procedures and will be able to conduct the most thorough and conclusive investigations. It will also allow the coalition forces to work out what went wrong and apply the lessons learned in the best possible way. This is the standard we set ourselves and our allies.’

Indeed, this is the same standard that the world saw with [horror](#) last year when the US investigated, and largely [exonerated itself](#), over its [dreadful bombing](#) of an MSF hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan.

Boris Johnson is sweeping aside compelling evidence of serious breaches of international law in a cynical move to maintain lucrative UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and to protect close strategic ties with a brutal kingdom of state beheaders and torturers. All this belies his carefully-crafted media image as an amiably bumbling and largely harmless P.G. Wodehouse-like character. In reality, he is a dangerous, extreme right-wing politician with too much power. Sadly, even the often admirable Peter Osborne’s judgement went awry on his return from Yemen when he [appealed](#) to Johnson to ‘act boldly to reset Riyadh [i.e. Saudi Arabia] relations’:

‘Boris Johnson has the potential to be one of the great British foreign secretaries of the modern era.’

Sadly, this line by Osborne does not appear to be satire.

Meanwhile, on September 5, the foreign office minister, Tobias Ellwood, addressed the Commons after being requested to do so by the Speaker, John Bercow, because of previously misleading statements on Yemen given by ministers to parliament. Wintour claims in his Guardian [report](#) that Ellwood ‘apologised’ for these ‘inaccurate answers’. But the quoted wording is far from a proper apology. Indeed, the foreign minister obfuscated further in support of Saudi Arabia. Ellwood:

‘said it was not for the UK government to conclude whether individual bombing incidents by the Saudis represented breaches of international humanitarian law (IHL), but instead to « take an overall view of the approach and attitude by Saudi Arabia to international humanitarian law ».’

In effect, the UK would continue to rely on Saudi Arabia’s assessments on whether the latter had breached international humanitarian law. Worse, while Yemenis continued to die under US/UK-supported bombing, Ellwood went on to support the Saudis:

‘Defending the Saudi response to criticisms of its campaign, Ellwood said: « It was new territory for Saudi Arabia and a conservative nation was not used to

such exposure. »’

This was sophistry of the worst order. ‘New territory’ entails a murderous bombing campaign and a crippling blockade. And describing Saudi Arabia – a brutal and repressive regime which ranks amongst the world’s worst offenders of human rights – as merely ‘a conservative nation’, speaks volumes about the mental and ethical contortions required to defend British foreign policy.

But there is even more to say about the UK’s shameful complicity in Yemen’s destruction. And, from what we have seen so far, it has had zero coverage in the ‘mainstream’ media.

Media Silence Over UK Role In ‘Targeted Killing’

Last week, the online investigative journal *The Intercept* published an in-depth [piece](#) on revelations about spying based on top-secret documents provided to them by Edward Snowden, the US National Security Agency whistle-blower. Titled ‘Inside Menwith Hill. The NSA’s British Base at the Heart of U.S. Targeted Killing’, the article was written by Ryan Gallagher, a UK-based journalist specialising in government surveillance, technology and civil liberties.

The RAF Menwith Hill base lies a few miles from Harrogate in North Yorkshire and is the largest electronic monitoring station in the world. As Gallagher notes: ‘it is a vital part of the NSA’s sprawling global surveillance network’. Consequently, its activities are shrouded in secrecy, despite the best efforts of human rights groups and a few British politicians demanding greater transparency. These efforts have been continually rebuffed by the UK government ‘citing a longstanding policy not to discuss matters related to national security.’

Now, however, the NSA files released by Snowden:

‘reveal for the first time how the NSA has used the British base to aid « a significant number of capture-kill operations » across the Middle East and North Africa, fueled by powerful eavesdropping technology that can harvest data from more than 300 million emails and phone calls a day.’

Over the past decade, advanced surveillance programmes at Menwith Hill have located ‘suspected terrorists accessing the internet in remote parts of the world’ and ‘provided support for conventional British and American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.’

But, adds Gallagher, ‘they have also aided covert missions in countries where the U.S. has not declared war’, including Yemen. These disclosures ‘raise new questions about the extent of British complicity in U.S. drone strikes and other so-called targeted killing missions, which may in some cases have violated international laws or constituted war crimes.’

Kat Craig, legal director of London-based human rights group [Reprieve](#), told Gallagher that Snowden’s revelations are:

‘yet another example of the unacceptable level of secrecy that surrounds U.K. involvement in the U.S. « targeted killing » program. It is now imperative that the prime minister comes clean about U.K. involvement in targeted killing’.

Gallagher describes a number of surveillance programmes, including one called GHOSTWOLF used to monitor ‘terrorist’ activity in internet cafes in the Middle East. This information is being used to ‘capture or eliminate key nodes in terrorist networks’.

As Gallagher observes:

‘GHOSTWOLF ties Menwith Hill to lethal operations in Yemen, providing the first documentary evidence that directly implicates the U.K. in covert actions in the country.

‘Menwith Hill’s previously undisclosed role aiding the so-called targeted killing of terror suspects highlights the extent of the British government’s apparent complicity in controversial U.S. attacks — and raises questions about the legality of the secret operations carried out from the base.’

The British government has consistently asserted that operations at Menwith ‘have always been, and continue to be’ carried out with its ‘knowledge and consent.’ In the context of the commission of war crimes, this is a damning admission.

Gallagher expands:

‘For several years, British human rights campaigners and lawmakers have been pressuring the government to provide information about whether it has had any role aiding U.S. targeted killing operations, yet they have been met with silence. In particular, there has been an attempt to establish whether the U.K. has aided U.S. drone bombings outside of declared war zones — in countries including Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia — which have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and are in some cases considered by United Nations officials to possibly constitute war crimes and violations of international law.’

These new, deeply damaging revelations by Snowden appear to have been completely blanked by the ‘mainstream’ media. Searches of the Lexis-Nexis newspaper database yield zero hits on Snowden’s Menwith revelations, and there appears to have been nothing published on the BBC News website. Indeed, this dearth of coverage by UK media, including BBC News, had been [anticipated](#) by US investigative reporter Glenn Greenwald, who previously worked with Snowden.

Not unusually, one has to go to media such as [RT](#) or [PressTV](#) to find any coverage; another reason why these outlets are so often bitterly denigrated as ‘propaganda’ operations by corporate journalists who haven’t done their job of holding Western power to account.

The Post-Brexit, \$2 Trillion Saudi Carrot

On September 7, BBC Newsnight [revealed](#) how a draft report by MPs on the influential committee on arms export control was being [watered down](#) to remove the call for a suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia (clip available [here](#)). A statement in the draft report had [said](#):

‘The weight of evidence of violations of international humanitarian law by the Saudi-led coalition is now so great, that it is very difficult to continue to support Saudi Arabia.’

But a number of 'pro-defence' MPs had then tabled more than 130 amendments, including a move to remove the call to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The Guardian [noted cautiously](#) that this attempt:

'underlines the sensitivity of the issue of UK-Saudi relations at Westminster, the importance of the Gulf to the UK defence industry and the concern that Britain, for a variety of security reasons, is too ready to take Saudi assurances about how it is conducting a difficult civil war in Yemen.'

That is putting it all too mildly; a point to which we return below.

The following evening (September 8), Tory MP Crispin Blunt [refused to respond](#) when pressed by Newsnight presenter Kirsty Wark about [reportedly](#) walking out of the committee meeting in order to stall a vote. It appears that Blunt had feared his amendments were about to be rejected, and by walking out of the meeting the quorum requirement would fail and no valid vote could take place.

But the sickness of government priorities at the intersection of foreign policy and economic imperatives was *really* highlighted when the Saudi foreign minister [declared](#) last week that it was 'in Britain's interest' to continue supporting Saudi Arabia in its murderous assault on Yemen. Or, as the neocon Telegraph defence editor [Con Coughlin put](#) it:

'to continue supporting the Saudis in the battle to prevent Yemen falling into the hands of Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.'

Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi foreign minister, then dangled a carrot in front of British ministers' noses.

'Apart from maintaining traditional links on military and intelligence cooperation, Mr Jubeir also said post-Brexit Britain could look forward to forging new trade links with the kingdom as Saudi Arabia embarks on its ambitious plan to restructure its economy under a plan called Saudi Vision 2030. « We are looking at more than \$2 trillion worth of investment opportunities over the next decade, and this will take the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Britain to an entirely new level post-Brexit. »'

Sometimes, you have to go to the extreme right-wing press to have the crude *realpolitik* spelled out so clearly.

Saudi pressure is considerable and difficult to resist. In June, it was reported that even the UN [succumbed](#) when it removed Saudi Arabia from a blacklist of countries responsible for child casualties in conflicts around the globe. Saudi Arabia had been placed on the list for [killing and maiming children](#) in Yemen bombing attacks. The country, along with other Arab and Muslim countries, had [reportedly](#) threatened to withdraw funding from vital UN humanitarian programmes. One anonymous diplomat [spoke](#) of 'bullying, threats, pressure', and summed it up as 'real blackmail'.

The reports on Yemen cited in this media alert from the Guardian and BBC News show the permissible limits of occasional - very occasional - challenges to state power. What is routinely missing, and what would be prominent in coverage of British foreign policy in

honest news media, has never been better highlighted than by historian Mark Curtis. For many years, he has extensively analysed formerly secret government records detailing internal discussions about state policies and priorities. In his book, 'Web of Deceit', which lays out 'Britain's real role in the world', Curtis concludes that the primary function of the British state:

'virtually its raison d'être for several centuries - is to aid British companies in getting their hands on other countries' resources.'

(Mark Curtis, 'Web of Deceit', 2003, Vintage, p. 210)

To pursue such state policies means initiating war, military interventions, threats, bullying, and other aggressive actions, usually in support of the United States and/or Nato. This global imperialism is dressed up in propaganda garb as 'countering terrorism', 'improving world security', 'working with our allies' and similar pieties propagated by the 'mainstream' media. Curtis lays particular responsibility for such propaganda at the door of the 'liberal' media, notably the Guardian and BBC News:

'The liberal intelligentsia in Britain is in my view guilty of helping to weave a collective web of deceit.... To read many mainstream commentators' writings on Britain's role in the world is to enter a surreal, Kafkaesque world where the reality is often the direct opposite of what is contended and where the startling assumptions are frighteningly supportive of state power.'

(Ibid., p. 4)

This 'surreal, Kafkaesque world' - in which Britain shares responsibility for appalling violence, while proclaiming its supposed desire for 'peace' and 'security' - will continue for as long as we do not have an honest media that *seriously and consistently* challenges brutal state power.

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