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How Britain's Geostrategic Interests Shape Its Involvement In Yemen



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While attention has mostly been focused on the United States' role in Yemen, following President Joe Biden's decision to end "relevant" arms sales to Saudi Arabia in February 2021, the United Kingdom has played a less-spoken yet significant role in enabling Yemen's conflict. Britain's position over Yemen may seem paradoxical – torn between wanting to present an image of a "global Britain" that protects human rights, while it really seeks to protect its vast economic and military ties to the Gulf region, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Britain's historic role in Yemen can be defined through its protectorate in Aden and in Yemen, which fell in 1963 following the Aden insurgency against the British Empire. Although this may seem like it is just in the past, it is very relevant today, as Britain still sees the Gulf region as important for its geostrategic interests.

As Yemen's war takes a more violent turn, with the Houthis ramping up their efforts to capture more territories in Yemen, Saudi Arabia increasing its frequency of its airstrikes to protect the government of President Abed Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the UAE renewing its direct involvement in the conflict, the UK's role has become more important. Indeed, the UK is the penholder for Yemen at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), meaning Britain has the responsibility to draft UN resolutions focused on Yemen, and can therefore take effective measures to address the conflict.

However, Britain has been a key backer of the Saudi-led coalition since its March 2015 intervention against the Houthis. Within the UK, human rights campaigners have tried to highlight how Britain's vast arms sales to Saudi Arabia have fuelled the conflict, and this has more recently attracted further scrutiny as Riyadh increases its airstrikes on the Houthi rebels.

In fact, Britain's support for Saudi Arabia has been crucial. It has provided essential parts to Saudi fighter jets employed in the conflict. In fact, as an employee of the company British Aerospace Engineering (BAE) said, should Britain remove its support to Saudi Arabia, then the Saudi air force would be unable to function within 7 to 14 days.

Furthermore, BAE specialists provide training to Saudi pilots who otherwise have a lack of training and capabilities to operate in Yemen. And this has extended to on-the-ground efforts, particularly as Saudi Arabia has struggled to defeat the Houthis from the air. A small number of British special forces have operated on the ground in Yemen alongside Saudi forces, in order to provide training.

However, it goes beyond arms sales, as there is even direct support for Saudi Arabia's operations in Yemen. Personnel from the British Royal Air Force (RAF) have even worked alongside Saudi pilots in directing airstrikes against the Saudi-led coalition.

Ultimately, Britain has used its historical ties with Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf region to ensure it can project military and geostrategic power in the Middle East region. Such aims have increased under the current government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who seeks to extend Britain's partnerships with its traditional allies in the Gulf to ensure the UK retains its global influence after its official withdrawal from the European Union in December 2020.

Moreover, faced with economic insecurity following Brexit and the departure from the European Single Market, Britain's arms sales to Saudi Arabia have become even more vital as have its trade deals with the UAE, meaning that it is less likely to condemn both countries' actions in Yemen. Despite domestic pressure over the government's arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which resulted in Britain's Court of Appeal declaring weapons "unlawful" in June 2019, the UK sold over \$1.9 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia the following year, thus further enabling Riyadh to continue its operations in Yemen.

Despite this clear support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Britain has tried to maintain a positive humanitarian image through its engagement in Yemen. Not only has Britain claimed its arms sales are in line with international law, but it has also offered to provide aid to Yemen's humanitarian crisis. Yet critics have highlighted that this is minuscule compared to the profits it has made from weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, and that continued support for Saudi Arabia undermines these ostensible humanitarian objectives.

The UK has some active involvement in peace talks in Yemen. On January 26, Britain hosted a meeting with senior representatives of Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the US. During the meeting, the group issues a condemnation of the Houthis' role in the war and denounced the group's seizure of the Emirati Rwabee vessel off the Red Sea coast on January 3.

Additionally, the Quint agreed on the need to protect Emirati and Saudi security, following increased Houthi assaults on southern Saudi territory and the Houthi-claimed drone attack on Abu Dhabi on January 17 following the UAE's renewed involvement in Yemen.

“We agreed the urgent need to work together towards a comprehensive political solution to the conflict. We condemned the recent Houthi attacks, and agreed to maintain direct humanitarian support to Yemen,” said a UK Foreign Office statement.

Since the UK has often condemned the Houthis’ violations and Iran’s backing for them, and has often issued its denunciations in coordination with Saudi and Emirati officials, it is clearly taking the Saudi-led coalition’s side in the conflict. As the Houthis have increased their offensive on Yemeni governorates since February 2021, including on Marib, prompting renewed interventions from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the UK will seek to continue supporting both countries’ operations in Yemen.

While Britain is right to condemn Houthi violence, which is a crucial issue to address given that the faction has driven the latest episode in Yemen’s war, it would be equally important for Britain to put more pressure to the Saudi-led coalition, to ensure that there could be a more lasting peace settlement for the country.



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