The arms trade is a deadly, corrupt business. It supports conflict and human rights-abusing regimes while wasting valuable resources. It does this with the full support of governments around the world.

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. This introduction will focus on the UK, which is one of the world’s largest arms exporters.

Around $100 billion worth of arms are sold every year, with buyers spread across the world. Some of the largest purchasers are in the Middle East and South and East Asia. The arms themselves range from fighter aircraft, helicopters and warships with guided missiles, radar and electronic warfare systems, to tanks, armoured vehicles, machine guns and rifles.

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 not only legal, but also actively supported by complicit governments.

Human rights abuses

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 does not matter 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 give a message of international acceptance and approval.

The UK Government’s 2017 Human Rights and Democracy Report identified 30 “Human Rights Priority Countries”, where human rights are a concern. In 2017, the UK approved arms export licences to 18 of these including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt.
Conflict
Selling arms to a country in conflict – whether internal or external – almost always 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.

Even when a conflict has ended, arms, particularly small arms, may remain in large numbers, fuelling further conflicts and/or criminal activity. The casualties of conflict are now overwhelmingly civilian, increasing from around 50% of war-related deaths in the first half of the twentieth century to 90% near the end of the century.

It is often difficult to work out where the arms used in conflicts have originated. However, cases of the use of UK arms in conflict zones include the use:
• by Saudi forces in the bombardment of Yemen from 2015
• by the Israeli military in the attack on Gaza in 2014
• by Libyan forces against “rebels” in 2011
• by Egyptian police against pro-democracy protesters in 2010

The UK doesn’t just pick sides; it is often very willing to arm rivals. The government considers both Saudi Arabia and Qatar to be “core” arms export markets, while India and Pakistan each receive a steady stream of UK weaponry.

Government support
The UK arms trade would not be possible without the unwavering support of the UK Government. It doesn’t just oversee the arms trade – it is an active participant. Every year, the UK Government authorises the sale of arms to well over 100 countries across the globe.

The Government’s Department of International Trade’s Defence & Security Organisation (DSO) is a vital part of the UK’s arms industry. It employs over 150 civil servants and military staff to work with arms companies to maximise exports. Civil servants and government ministers work hand-in-hand with arms companies to maximise sales. As Bob Keen, the Head of Government Relations at BAE Systems, told the House of Commons Defence Committee in 2016, “It simply is not possible to do a major defence deal without fundamental government support.”

One way that the Government supports the arms trade is by supporting arms fairs. They promote weapons sales by giving arms dealers the chance to meet and greet military delegations, government officials, other arms companies and a host of individual visitors.

Unsurprisingly, the guest lists for arms fairs frequently include regimes who abuse human rights, and countries actively involved in armed conflicts. The biggest of these is the Defence & Security Export International (DSEI) arms fair that happens every two years in London.

Arms industry influence is also created by the ‘revolving door’ between the UK Government...
and arms companies. Government ministers and officials pass between their government positions and roles in arms companies. Their contacts, influence and approaches are shared.

This means there is unquestioning governmental support for arms exports. Not only that, but this political influence has committed the UK to heavy expenditure on large items of military equipment, including aircraft carriers, fighter aircraft and Trident.

**Myth busting**

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

**Myth One: “The arms industry is good for the economy.”**

UK government support for the arms industry costs public money. The support for arms exports alone costs taxpayers £100m a year. This cost doesn’t include the huge levels of political and logistical support that arms companies are given. It also doesn’t include the huge amount of financial support that is not just focused on arms exports.

This level of support needs to be shifted to more positive and sustainable industries, such as renewable energy and low-carbon technology, which are crying out for workers with similar skill sets. Our research shows that a move towards offshore wind and marine energy could create far more jobs.

Arms exports only account for 0.2 per cent of UK jobs and around 1 per cent of exports. It is a small part of the economy, but there are certain parts of the country, like Warton and Samlesbury, where arms companies are major employers. This must be reflected in any industrial strategy that focuses on shifting priorities from arms to more sustainable jobs.

**Myth Two: “Arms sales make us safer.”**

‘Security’ is often discussed as though it is synonymous with military strength. It is not.

Many major threats such as climate change, energy security and economic marginalisation are non-military.

The money and skills being used on producing and selling arms would provide greater security and economic benefits if they were invested in addressing real security challenges such as climate change. To truly address insecurity, we need to understand what the roots of the real threats are, and what makes them worse.

A military mindset can decrease security by prioritising military solutions to problems, increasing the likelihood of armed conflict.

This approach is likely to endorse the promotion of arms exports. These worsen human rights abuse, tension and conflict. This has obvious impacts on international and UK security.

**Saudi Arabia**

Despite its appalling human rights record, the Saudi Arabian regime is by far the largest buyer of UK arms. It buys hundreds of millions of pounds’ worth of arms from the UK every year.

Since 2015 Saudi Arabia has used UK-made fighter jets and bombs in its ongoing bombardment of Yemen.

The results have been catastrophic. Thousands of people have been killed as a direct result of the bombing. Many more are still dying because of the terrible humanitarian crisis that it has created.

The bombing has destroyed schools, hospitals and homes, displacing over two million people in the process. Over one million people have been infected with cholera following the worst outbreak on record.

None of this has stopped the arms sales. The UK government is actively pushing for further sales at every opportunity. UK Ministers regularly praise the Saudi regime and support it on the world stage.

Protesters blockade at the DSEI arms fair, 2017.
Ending the arms trade

The arms trade is a business with a privileged place in the heart of government. This means that arms companies are very good at taking taxpayers’ money. They are also very good at convincing governments that the arms trade should be promoted rather than restrained.

It is clear that arms companies benefit from the arms trade. The people who have to deal with the costs are those on the receiving end of weaponry, the citizens and taxpayers of both buying and selling countries. Non-military industry and national and international security also suffer.

But the power of the arms trade is being challenged. Museums and churches have cancelled arms industry events after ethical concerns have been raised. Students all over the country are challenging university investments in arms companies, as well as arms company presence at careers fairs.

The media questions arms deals to a greater extent than before. The Parliamentary arms export committees have repeatedly called on the government to admit that the promotion of arms exports is incompatible with the promotion of human rights. We are making progress.

Take action

We can all take action to end the arms trade. We can highlight the pain and destruction it causes. We can counter the myths used to support it. Get involved in Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT):

- **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 universities@caat.org.uk.
- **Challenge your local arms company:** find out which one is 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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