



# Global Britain and UK Foreign Policy in Yemen

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## **The killing of 40 children in Yemen by the Saudi Royal Airforce in August 2018 demonstrated the risks that current UK policy towards Saudi Arabia has on the government's 'Global Britain' agenda.**

As the UK prepares to leave the EU in 2019 it has recommitted to upholding the rules-based international order as part of efforts to redefine its global role.

It is perhaps no surprise then that the UK's commitment to its so-called 'Global Britain Agenda' featured heavily during Jeremy Hunt's first diplomatic visit to Washington in August, where the new foreign secretary seized on the opportunity in a speech at the U.S Institute of Peace to set out the UK's objective of making "the strengthening of [Britain's] credibility in support of a rules-based international order...a central goal of [British] foreign policy".

There was, however, a sense of irony that the foreign secretary was making this speech only a week after reports emerged that 40 school children taking part in a school trip in Yemen had been killed by a botched air strike carried out by the Saudi coalition. The fact that the attack led to child casualties piled increasing pressure on the British government to defend its security partnership with Saudi Arabia and explain how it aligns with the UK's support for the rules-based order.

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While the UK tries to present itself as a neutral broker at the UN Security Council in support of the peace process in Yemen, it is also acting as a security partner to the Saudi coalition through [intelligence-sharing](#), [arms transfers](#) and [military assistance](#). This is characteristic of a general trend in UK foreign policy post-Iraq and Afghanistan, where the UK hopes to exert influence without deploying British combat troops.

No British combat troops are fighting on the frontlines in the Yemeni Civil War. However, the lack of transparency and confusing statements that surround the UK's role in Saudi targeting have left many commentators unconvinced by the UK's claims that it plays no role in the operational process. This controversy continues to tarnish the UK's so-called 'Global Britain' brand.

### **Are British Personnel Stationed in Saudi Targeting Rooms?**

During a [debate on Yemen](#) in November 2017, Foreign Office Minister, Alastair Burt attempted to clarify the role British service personnel were playing in Saudi targeting rooms:

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**“ British personnel are [in the targeting rooms] to observe what is happening in relation to international humanitarian law, so that they can be part of the process of ensuring that it is adhered to. They are not part of the operational process. They are not under command to do that or anything else. They are not taking part in the targeting or anything like it, and have not been so. ”**

This chimes with the [evidence](#) that Ministers gave to the Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC), when they explained that British personnel are present in the targeting rooms to teach best practice, including understanding of International Humanitarian Law. However, CAEC’s 2016 report concluded that despite government attempts to clarify this issue, there remains “much confusion” about the purpose of UK personnel being stationed at the Joint Combined Planning Cell HQ in Riyadh.

The fact that Ministers have [disclosed such limited information](#) has left it open to accusations that British advisors may in fact be [directing the war and assisting the Saudis with targeting](#), rather than simply acting in a liaison capacity. The scale of the humanitarian crisis has also mounted pressure on the UK government to be more transparent.

According to the UN, between December 2017 and January 2018, 97% of civilian deaths were caused by Saudi coalition air strikes. Furthermore, the [Yemen Data Project](#) has argued that many of these deaths amount to war crimes.

The UK is not necessarily breaching international law through its support of Saudi Arabia. But that doesn't necessarily make it moral, ethical—or good strategy. Attempting to set out a vision of the UK as a champion of international laws and norms, while sustaining direct engagement with a country that seemingly disregards those same laws and norms through its air campaign in Yemen, is not sustainable without incurring a degree of reputational damage.

What is also perplexing about the UK's approach to this controversy is that it has not attempted to take more concrete steps to demonstrate its positive influence over the Saudis by encouraging them to adopt an independent process to assess civilian casualties.

### **Tracking Civilian Casualties in the Yemen Conflict**

In March 2018, the Prime Minister stated that:

**“ Where there are allegations that activity has taken place that is not in line with international humanitarian law, they [the Saudi's] investigate that and they learn the lessons from it. ”**

The Prime Minister was referring to the Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT), which was set up to build Saudi capacity to monitor strikes. This could have represented an opportunity for the UK to demonstrate positive engagement with the Saudi Royal Airforce. The problem, however, is that there is little evidence to suggest the JIAT or a British presence inside the targeting rooms has led to a significant institutional shift within Saudi targeting policy or a measurable reduction in the number of civilian casualties.

Furthermore, JIAT assessments are not independently verified and instead are investigated by the Saudi coalition themselves which leaves the Saudis with no incentive to act if assessments reflect poorly on them. The UK government has suggested that the JIAT assessment carried out after the August bus attack was “almost unparalleled in terms of admitting error and pointing out where that error was”, demonstrating “hand of the United Kingdom”. But is this too little too late?

In a recent report published by the Policy Institute at King’s and funded by the Remote Warfare Programme, it was argued there is “there is little evidence, based on publicly available information, that the UK exerts either influence or leverage over Saudi Arabia.”

The announcement of a “quick and transparent” investigation into the circumstances that led to the deaths of 40 children is to be welcomed. But if it does not lead to long-term changes in Saudi targeting policy it will risk looking like a political move to silence critics. Given the growing frustration among parliamentarians about UK policy in Yemen, it is likely that the UK will have to do more to convince MPs that this marks a real turning point.

### **Continuing a Close Partnership: Is it worth it?**

If the UK is serious about its commitment to the rules-based order, it could demonstrate this by encouraging its Saudi ally to commit to a more transparent approach to recording civilian casualties and provide greater transparency on its security partnership with the Kingdom. This would potentially strengthen British credibility, but also prevent “sowing the seeds of hate” among the Yemeni population that would undermine the UK’s role at securing a peace settlement in Yemen.

The reality is that if the British government is serious about using its influence to boost conflict prevention and resolution, the UK will have to do more to demonstrate its commitment to international rules and norms. It could start with Yemen.

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## About the Author

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