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Canadians Keep Asking Questions About Saudi Arms Deal

By Erika Simpson
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Headline news revealed last week that London's mayor Matt Brown and top city manager Art Zuidema emailed 14 city councillors not to speak publicly about the \$15-billion arms deal involving General Dynamics Land Systems in London. Councillors were directed in January to refer interview requests to a city hall spokesperson who would give a corporate response to media inquiries about the local contractor's deal to build light armoured vehicles (LAVs) for Saudi Arabia. Brown pledged during his 2014 mayoral campaign to create a new era of accountability and transparency at city hall but the directive co-signed by "Matt and Art" is raising questions about muddied waters at the federal, provincial and local level, as well as city councillors' individual autonomy and right to express opinions contrary to corporate policy.

Many locals in south-western Ontario cheered in February 2014 when General Dynamics scored the multi-billion dollar contract to build armoured vehicles for Saudi Arabia — creating and sustaining about 3,000 jobs in economically hard-hit London— but since then the abysmal human rights record of Saudi Arabia, long cited as a serious human rights abuser by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, has raised a rising chorus of questions about the ethics of providing Saudi Arabia with Canadian-manufactured LAVS.

According to a new report by Amnesty International last week, the number of executions carried out worldwide reached a 25-year high last year due to a dramatic rise in the number of people being put to death in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan. In Saudi Arabia, the only country in the world to carry out the death penalty by beheading, at least 158 people were executed last year.

Saudi Arabia shocked the world in January by executing 47 people in a single day, including the Shiite Muslim cleric Sheikhi Nimr Al-Nimr. The recent arrest of prominent human rights defender Samar Badawi is just the latest example of Saudi Arabia's contempt for its human rights obligations and provides further proof of the authorities' on-going campaign to suppress all signs of peaceful dissent.

Saudi Arabia has brazenly flouted its international obligations and displayed a flagrant disregard for rights to freedom of expression and association. John Polanyi, a Nobel laureate in chemistry at the University of Toronto cites recent UN reports that Saudi Arabia is targeting civilians as it bombs Yemen, therefore he thinks we have a moral and legal obligation to reconsider the sale.

Prime Minister Trudeau says he does not want to renege on the deal negotiated by the previous Conservative government. His minister of foreign affairs, Stephane Dion says the federal government will engage in a "very vigorous process" to ensure the LAVS are not misused. He told reporters at the UN recently that Canada will strengthen rules on the sale of weapons but critics say the rules were already in place and needed enforcement.

Project Ploughshares has established that at the time the Saudi deal was announced in February 2014, the required export permits were not issued. This is especially significant as a key element of the export permits is a human rights assessment to determine that the deal in question does not contravene Canada's export control

policies. The federal government should have enforced, from the very beginning, the strict export regulations that guarantee our military equipment is not used against civilians. “Existing norms are already sufficiently clear,” says Cesar Jaramillo, executive director of Project Ploughshares. “The purpose of these rules is precisely to ensure that Canadian-made goods are not misused.”

Canada previously sold light armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia, with more than 1,000 delivered in the early 1990s and 700 in 2009. By now the Saudis have used Canadian LAVs for 20 years, so tradition and familiarity are considerations when they are going to buy. Canada’s LAVs are some of the best multi-role wheeled vehicles in the world, and Saudi Arabia’s geography and road network is challenging, so the Saudis will get all the benefits of the vehicles’ low maintenance, high performance and flexibility with fewer rollovers, stuck vehicles and other terrain issues.

With this major contract, Canada beat out competition from France and Germany. So if we had not won the contract, presumably the Saudi government would have bought similar systems from the Europeans. But selling Canadian equipment for \$10 to \$15 billion does mean Canada is helping prop up the Saudi government until 2028 — the end of this 14-year deal — which is a very long time to stickhandle questions about Saudi Arabia’s terrible human rights record.

In future, the LAVs could be used against civilians in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen by the National Guard, which is separate from the rest of the military and acts as a political counterbalance. But the LAVs’ end use remains uncertain. It should be transparent. Michael Byers, a UBC professor who holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law says evidence from a UN panel indicates Saudi actions in Yemen are possible war crimes and crimes against humanity — and because the prohibition on targeting civilians in a widespread and systematic manner has the same legal weight as the prohibition on genocide — “The contract with Saudi Arabia is void.”

Beheading, stoning and flogging are all acceptable forms of criminal punishment in Saudi Arabia. Homosexual acts are punishable by flogging, imprisonment and even death, as is drug use. Courts can impose sentences of flogging of 1,000 to 2,500 lashes, and thousands of people receive unfair trials and are subject to arbitrary detention. The country’s anti-terrorism regulations can be used to criminalize almost any form of peaceful criticism of the authorities, and dozens of human rights defenders and others are serving long prison sentences for criticizing authorities or demanding political and human rights reforms. “The reality is that the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is abysmal and anyone who risks highlighting flaws in the system is branded a criminal and tossed in a jail cell,” says Said Boumedouha, Amnesty International’s deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

At first, the Conservatives, defence experts and executives at General Dynamics effusively praised each other for their stalwart efforts to win the bid for Ontario’s manufacturing industry. “This is an Olympic win for Canada and for Canadian manufacturers,” Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters president Jayson Myers said in a press release. “Like all victories, it’s been the result of a team effort in which the government has played a crucial role. All Canadians should be proud of this record achievement.”

Unfortunately the previous federal government failed to carefully review this proposed arms export, and failed to grant a permit that would have ensured that serious human rights violations in Saudi Arabia were seriously taken into account. We should not have to wait for the next federal or municipal election in order to raise the issue.

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