The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a damp squib? Unpacking the paradox of UK-Saudi arms trade in the shadow of Sustainable Development Goals.

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Table of Contents

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
CAAT	Campaign Against Arms Trade
DFID	Department for International Development
ECJU	Export Joint Control Unit
ESOHR	European Saudi Organisation of Human Rights
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
GNI	Gross National Income
ICRC	International Commission of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
RSAF	Royal Saudi Air Force
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
WA	Wassenaar Arrangement
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

1 Background and introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents the United Nations' declarative blueprint for "transforming our world" (UN 2015). Its accompanying roadmap, the Sustainable Development Goals, or its oft-cited acronym: the SDGs, encompass a comprehensive framework of seventeen interrelated goals for the year 2030. These objectives target the universal provision of sustenance (SDG 1-3), social justice (SDG 4, 5 & 10), energy and environmental security (SDG 6, 7 & 11-15), robust economics (SDG 8 & 9), good governance, and peace (SDG 16) (UN 2022c). Collectively, the SDGs comprise a mass of one-hundred and sixty-nine targets, serving as the metrics for realising this ambitious agenda (Ibid.).

Scholars posit that SDG 16 – the promotion of peace, justice, and strong institutions – is a conduit to all sustainable development (Kumar & Roy 2018). However, in the wake of cascading conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine, global peace is in retreat and the attainment of the SDGs appears to have stalled (IEP 2022, 2). With world leaders' professing such zeal for the SDGs, it is puzzling that peacefulness is in decline. The United Kingdom is enmeshed in this paradox as a signatory of the 2030 Agenda that simultaneously plays host to a titanic, domestic arms industry – the biggest in Europe (SIPRI 2022, 6).

Through submitting a case study analysis of the UK's arms trade with Saudi Arabia since affirming the SDGs in 2015, this paper scrutinises the UK's commitment to the 2030 Agenda. By situating this discussion within a neoliberal institutionalist framework, this paper intends to illuminate the forces shaping state behaviour in this context and offer a contemporary analysis of the perennial question in international relations scholarship: namely, what degree of influence do international institutions exert on the international stage? Further, in its critique

of the 2030 Agenda, this paper means to advance a more informed understanding of what constitutes effective and actionable international agreement.

The UK's military partnership with Saudi Arabia is a microcosm of the forces complicating its own fulfilment of the SDGs. The Saudi regime's human rights record, say its detractors, has deteriorated since the Crown Prince's ascent to power in 2015; and, indeed, its hand in the assassination of Jamaal Khashoggi and the bombing of Yemeni civilians appears damning (Barnes & Sanger 2021; Chulov 2023; Reprieve 2023; Milanovic 2020). For the UK, upsetting the Saudi regime by protesting its human rights record is an awkward proposition. As its strategic relationship with the petrostate hinges on the exchange of oil for munitions, the UK is hesitant to evoke any economically or diplomatically destabilising reaction from her Saudi partners (Van Rijk et al. 2018, 22).

In a word, this paper finds that the UK's strategic interest in maintaining a consistent supply of arms to Saudi Arabia supersedes its pursuit of sustainable development. In demonstrating the UK's failure to tangibly protest the Saudi regime's alleged breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the arms trade casts a shadow over the UK's professed commitment to the SDGs, revealing a hypocrisy that pervades both the government's regulation of arms exports and its institutional obligations under the 2030 Agenda. This paper concludes that the UK/Saudi case is indicative of the intrinsically self-serving constitution of state actors, which the 2030 Agenda appears ineffectual against. Even in the context of its most profound goal, SDG 16, it has thus far failed to inspire any foregrounding of sustainability into the UK's arms exports practices due to its voluntary, self-enforcing nature.

In recognising the explanatory limits of rationalism and materially-focused theoretical analyses in international relations, I briefly suggest that a constructivist critique of the 2030 Agenda would be an appropriate avenue for further research, positing that it may uncover how ideational factors elicit change in international politics when material factors appear not to.

2 Literature review

This paper problematises the UK's sale of arms to Saudi Arabia since ratifying the 2030 Agenda through a neoliberal institutionalist analysis. By offering a synergy of the existing literature pertaining to the 2030 Agenda and the arms trade, the following section invites readers to gain a more informed understanding of the context behind the forthcoming discussion; and why it is a phenomenon requiring further inquiry.

2.1 A further word on the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development constitutes a global partnership built upon decades of international collaboration and its predecessor, the Millennium Declaration, which tabled the eradication of extreme poverty by 2015 (UN 2015c). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were partly successful in so far as the number of people living on less than $1.25 per day in developing countries declined from 47% in 1990 to 14% in 2015 (UN 2015d, 4). A similar barometer, universal primary education enrolment, reflects the MDGs unfinished progress. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of primary school age children not enrolled at a school decreased from 100 million to 57 million (Ibid., 4). Its successor, the SDGs, are more radical and more comprehensive in scope.

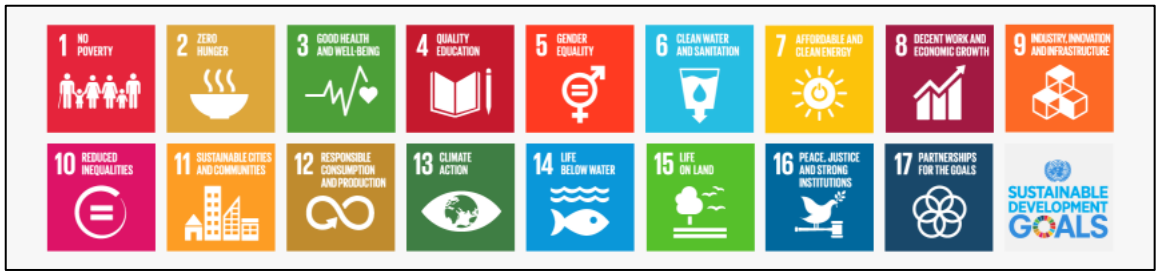

Figure 1: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNSCEB)

As displayed above, the seventeen goals incorporate environmental and energy security, robust economics, good governance, social justice and peacefulness.

2.1.1 UN member states' obligations under the 2030 Agenda

The 'SDGs' have become a buzzword in international politics. The UK Government boasts about having been "at the forefront of negotiating the SDGs" and pledges to be "at the forefront of delivering them" (UK Gov. 2021b). Having embraced the Sustainable Development Goals with such gusto, the UK would presumedly be fulfilling its obligations to the 2030 Agenda.

Under SDG 17, member states are required to "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development" (UN 2021). However, the only quantifiable obligation is to contribute 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to developing countries per annum in the form of official development assistance (ODA) (Ibid.).

It is revealing, therefore, how Boris Johnson scrapped the Department for International Development (DFID) when he was Prime Minister (UK Gov. 2020a). Since 1997, the UK had been one of only five UN member states that exceeded the official development assistance target of 0.7% of GNI (UN 2015d, 7). However, in 2019, Johnson's position on ODA was laid bare in an interview with the *Financial Times*, remarking: "we can't keep spending sums of British taxpayers' money as though we were some independent Scandinavian NGO" (Payne

2019). Despite the DFID consistently rating amongst the world's most effective aid agencies – ranking third in the 2018 Aid Transparency index – Johnson deemed greater alignment with "political and commercial interests" justified its re-merger with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (Ibid.; Young-Powell 2019).

2.1.2 Critical reception of the SDGs

Criticism of the 2030 Agenda deserves greater attention. It has been identified how the self-enforcing nature of the SDGs affords both state and non-state actors the privilege of engaging with them at their own discretion or even ignoring them entirely. Johnson's decision to scrap the DFID suggests that the SDGs are not in the mainstream of UK politics.

A 2022 study by Fuldauer et al. concluded that the SDGs are not sufficiently integrated into government planning. Its analysis of National Adaptation Plans for climate-change prevention strategies found that only four of the existing twenty mention the SDGs (Fuldauer et al. 2022). If governments are failing to incorporate the SDGs into national policy, it becomes harder to conceive of corporations doing so with any effect. This is happening at the sub-state level and in various sectors. For example, scholars have accused companies of "SDG-washing:" disseminating false information about oneself so as to project a sustainability-focused image (Zanten & Tulder 2021, 3703).

It is a challenge locating the impetus for the 2030 Agenda outside of UN forums. For that reason, the rhetorical infrastructure surrounding the SDGs seems inappropriate. Why does His Majesty's Government sell itself as a frontrunner in the 2030 Agenda, yet seemingly do so little to practice it?

This paper means to expose a more damaging case of this hypocrisy through a discussion of the UK's arms trade to Saudi Arabia. Forming the basis of its critique, this paper's use of theory helps to conceptualise the 2030 Agenda form an international relations perspective and identify how its structure of voluntary participation imparts such leeway upon its signatories that it renders itself unable to overcome their self-interests.

2.1.3 The significance of SDG 16

The UK-Saudi case is a compelling entry point for understanding the influence of the 2030 Agenda in international relations. This is because their prolific arms trading is interconnected with arguably the most consequential SDG. Beyond the intrinsic guarantors of human survival, scholars have posited that SDG 16, to "promote *peaceful* and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels," is the bedrock of sustainable development (UN 2022b). Focusing on peacefulness, the non-achievement of SDG 16 – or the state of active conflict – reacts in a feedback system with all other goals. In many ways, it is a multiplier of unsustainability and non-development.

This reality is communicated by the fact that conflict-afflicted countries have the highest poverty rates, see 50% of their children leave primary education and, despite globally declining, having an increasing number of slums (UN 2015d; Kumar & Roy 2018). In addition, conflict causes indirect socioeconomic catastrophes in physical and sexual trauma, non-communicable diseases; as well as exacerbating inequalities (UN 2022b; Garry & Checchi 2019, 287).

Due to the gravity of SDG 16, one would hope that states are targeting it vigorously (Hope Sr. 2019, 57). In arms-manufacturing nations, such as the UK, this must start with arms control. Here, employing diligence in arms exports licencing is fundamental; for instance, ensuring that munitions are not arming hawkish regimes and will not to be used for internal repression, nor in the commission of serious violations of IHL. IHL is also known as the law of war: a "set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict" (ICRC 2004).

The obligation under the 2030 Agenda to responsibly export arms is what this paper means to problematise. Accordingly, the UK's post-2015 arms trade with Saudi Arabia presents an appropriate case for scrutinising this notion and, by extension, explicating the limited influence of the 2030 Agenda over its signatories.

2.2 Regulating strategic exports

The arms trade is a legitimate industry. Moreover, it has been argued that the international trade in military equipment empowers governments to safeguard citizens, preserve law and order, and protect national security (UK Gov 2022b). Consequently, it can be posited that the legitimate sale of arms is *not* incompatible with the SDGs; perhaps, even supportive of its agenda.

This paper does not enter the debate of whether militarisation is a guarantor of national or global security. Rather, its foci are the circumstances motivating the UK's decision to continue supplying arms to Saudi Arabia, despite its human rights record; and how this reality can reveal the limitations of the 2030 Agenda from an international relations perspective.

2.2.1 Domestic controls

Arms export regulations are in place to prospectively ensure military equipment is not used to violate human rights – amongst other reasons that are outlined below. The world's governments are obliged to control the export of arms from their respective territories.

When questioned on this responsibility, past and present cabinet ministers, including James Cleverly, Liz Truss and Liam Fox, all recite the mantra: the UK "has one of the most rigorous defence export regimes in the world" (Rigorous Repetition 2023; Stone 2021; UK Parliament 2020). Yet, the integrity of this proposition has been questioned by activists, news outlets and scholars for decades. Before scrutinising the impact, if any, that signing the 2030 Agenda has had upon the UK's arms trade, it is appropriate to review the UK's arms control policies and existing criticisms of their (non)application.

In the UK, arms manufacturers must apply for licences for 'strategic exports.' Strategic exports are military or dual-use goods; dual-use referring to off the shelf items that have "enhanced capabilities that are useful in chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or conventional weapons" (UK Gov. 2022b). The Export Control Joint Unit (ECJU) review applications against a licencing criteria. The criteria are designed to support foreign policy and national security objectives, maintain international peace and security, prevent terrorism, and importantly, deter and provide accountability for activities which would amount to "a *serious violation*" of IHL by the recipient state (UK Gov. 2020b). The UK Government also exercises arms sanctions and embargoes over states to reinforce these positions (UK Gov. 2020d).

It is a criminal offence to breach export control regulations. A breach could incur: “revocation of licences, seizure of items, issuing of a compound penalty fine, imprisonment for up to ten years” (UK Gov. 2012a).

2.2.2 International controls

International export control arrangements help coordinate domestic policy. Principally, the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-use Technologies (WA) is a multilateral agreement amongst forty-two participating countries that promotes the transparent exchange of information relating to exports of controlled goods (Kimball 2020). Similar regimes target Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) non-proliferation, such as the Missile Technology Control Group and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG 2019; US Gov.).

The United Kingdom is a member of these institutions, although they are all *self-enforced* and not legally-binding. Since Brexit, the UK’s controlled exports list is largely consistent with the European Union Common Position and WA (Cops & Vanheuverswyn 2022, 40; Brooke-Holland 2022, 4). Again, a requirement recurrently signalled by these arrangements is that export recipients adhere to IHL (Cîrlig 2013, 2).

2.2.3 Historic failures of export controls

Prior to 2015, governments party to these multilateral agreements have been criticised (in the press and academic circles) for not stringently applying the criteria; particularly, vis-à-vis due diligence of human rights adherence in the recipient state.

One such case is European states' supply of arms to Middle East and north African (MENA) regimes prior to the Arab Spring despite reportedly 'having evidence of a substantial risk that they could be used to commit serious human rights violations' by their repressive handlers (Amnesty International 2011, 1). This inconsistency between policy and practice echoes the astute analysis of Stephen Krasner. Krasner dubbed the reality of Western states frequently compromising their Westphalian principles when it so suits as: "organised hypocrisy" (Krasner 1999, ix). This analysis has a twisted significance when applied to the condolences offered by Western statespersons in the wake of the Arab Spring. Supplying the munitions used to 'kill, injure and arbitrarily detain thousands of peaceful protestors' in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, and then declaring solidarity with the victims of this unchecked violence is, to be sure, glib-tongued hypocrisy (Independent 2011; Amnesty International UK 2015).

The United Kingdom is embroiled in these accusations as a 'main supplier' to the region (Amnesty International 2011). An Amnesty International Report into this seeming scandal concluded that the UK's weapons were amongst those used in the killing of two-hundred Yemeni protestors in 2011 (Ibid., 1). As further evidence, the UK Government licenced £120mn worth of arms to Gaddafi prior to the Libyan Civil War; Gaddafi's forces were convicted of multiple crimes against humanity (Simons & MacFarquhar 2011). The UK also trained Gaddafi's elite Brigade, Khamis, responsible for the August 2011 massacre of seventeen unarmed prisoners (Feinstein 2011; Human Rights Watch 2011). David Cameron shared his 'pride' in the role Britain played in Gaddafi's ignominious death – vis-à-vis the NATO sortie campaign – on the steps of Number 10 (Independent 2011). Regrettably, many of the 40,000 martyrs during Gaddafi's premiership were killed by UK-manufactured munitions knowingly sold to the tyrant (Feinstein 2011).

In the aftermath of the uprisings, the UK parliament's committee on arms exports controls concluded that "both the present government and its predecessor misjudged the risk that arms approved for export to certain authoritarian countries in [MENA] might be used for internal repression" (Doward 2017).

These licences may have been politically misjudged but were doubtless money-spinners for the UK's arms manufacturers. Consequently, critics, including scholars and NGOs, have slammed the UK Government for seemingly sacrificing humanitarian concerns on the altar of economic affections (Cîrlig 2013, 5). A prominent critic, the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), questioned the UK's sincerity towards export controls when, as repression worsened in the years after the Arab Spring, UK sales of small arms, ammunition, and armoured vehicles to Middle Eastern regimes doubled in the five years after the crisis (Doward 2017). As well as facilitating repression, arms proliferation compromised the 'development of independent universities, civil movements groups and unions as well as free and transparent media, religious and judicial bodies" (CAAT 2021). Again, a firm indication of how conflict upsets all processes of sustainable development.

2.2.4 Criticisms of export controls

When it comes to states using military equipment to violate IHL, there is consensus that the ultimate responsibility lies with the governments themselves (Hinds 1997, 27). However, scholars have argued that arms-exporting states enjoy operating in the 'grey market' of arms trading (Ibid., 37). Fearing that the law has become a "hollow feckless gesture", Musa has identified how it is difficult to establish how stringently export controls are applied due to the opacity of "secretive licencing procedures" (Musa 2017, 462). The inclusion of human rights criteria in arms exports licencing procedures "reflects both the humanitarian concerns felt by

governments and the threat posed to international security by severe human rights abuses" (Hinds 1997, 30). Ultimately, Hinds concludes that these concerns are flexible and more often reflect "a rhetorical commitment" than "actual government policy" (Ibid., 30).

In this context, NGOs and scholars are concerned that states' conflicting interests undermine their integrity as licencing arbiters (Gärtner 2009, 139-140). For example, CAAT have questioned the assumption that the UK Government can 'control' the exportation of military equipment when it is simultaneously a promoter of the arms industry (CAAT 2022). Numerous government attachés participate in arms fairs and arms promotion units, as well as providing insurance for arms deals, which speaks to the UK Government's vested interest in selling munitions (CAAT 2020a & 2020b). This ethical tangle is unresolved by international export control arrangements, such as WA, because they are all *self-enforcing* (Kimball 2020).

Now, it is this paper's objective to discuss whether the 2030 Agenda has ushered in a new era of sustainably-focused arms trading; whether it demarcates todays processes of arms licencing from the scandals of yesteryear; or whether its endorsement is simply lip service in this context.

3 Research context: UK-Saudi relations; the long view

To the layman, the UK's willingness to supply arms to Saudi Arabia, despite the current regime's dubious human rights record, may be perplexing. Locating this phenomenon in a history of UK-Saudi relations reveals the complexity of the UK's economic and military alignment with the Arab state. Consequently, it becomes clear that the UK's decision whether to withhold the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia is far less black and white than a more superficial reading of the circumstances may contend.

3.1 Trade

The UK's post-1945 relationship with Saudi Arabia is longstanding and heavily concentrated on economics and security (Van Rijk et al. 2018, 2). It is best described as a military-diplomatic partnership that is centred on the exchange of arms for oil (Devanny & Berry 2021, Stavrianakis 2015, 93). BAE Systems, formerly British Aerospace, has been the key contractor in this government-to-government arrangement (BAE Systems). Proceedings between the two governments began in 1966 with "Operation Magic Carpet," which involved the supply of Lightning and Hunter jets to the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) (Leone 2019).

The lucrative Al-Yamamah arms deal cemented the partnership in 1986. It remains the UK's largest export agreement in history (Project AY 2001). The series of record arms sales were financed by shipments of up to 600,000 barrels of crude oil per day to the UK Government; earning BAE Systems, the UK's biggest defence group, £43 billion in twenty years (Connell 2006; BBC 1999). In 2006, the partnership was buttressed by the Al-Saman contract for BAE Systems' Eurofighter Typhoons, worth £10 billion (Robertson 2006).

The econometric analysis of the UK's arms trade with her Saudi partners is mixed. A 2016 study by CAAT and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) concluded that arms exports to Saudi Arabia are an insignificant source of public income. This is because the arms industry is heavily subsidised from the public purse. The study found that arms exports to Saudi Arabia generated only 0.004% of the Treasury's net revenue in 2016 (UK Gov. 2017; Perlo-Freeman 2016, 13 & 28). However, the data used to make these valuations are tenuous because the UK only releases data on arms exports licences and agreements as opposed to total exports (SIPRI 2019).

The arms industry is a big player in the UK's private sector economy. The UK boasts eight of SIPRI's top 100 companies for total, global sales in armaments; and a 6.8% share of global annual sales: eclipsing any European country (SIPRI 2018, 2 & 6). SIPRI estimated that annual sales surpassed $112 billion in 2020 – although "the true figure is likely to be higher" (SIPRI 2019).

Moreover, maintaining the arms trade is motivated by the fact that arms manufacturing is an economy of scale; meaning unit cost is proportional to the size of the market (Dunne & Smith 2016, 13). The internationalising of the market creates the necessary demand to reach the minimum level of economic efficiency. Furthermore, barriers to market exit are significant, reflected in the relatively stable list of companies that are in the SIPRI Top 100 (Ibid., 13). These include companies' highly-specialised assets, which would be hard to sell off or relocate; and the Government itself, due to its close regulation of companies. Together, these factors discourage any downturn in the industry.

In addition, the autonomous manufacturing and supply of weapons is advantageous for national security. Healthy sales ensure the maintenance of an autonomous defence industrial base (Taylor 1980, 259). If sales were to decline over an extended period, manufacturing would become too expensive, and the Government would be forced to import.

However, the UK's arms trade with Saudi Arabia is increasingly cast in doubt as the Saudis continue to invest heavily in domestic defence infrastructure. In 2016, only 2% of the Saudi defence equipment budget procured weapons from domestic companies, but by 2030, the Kingdom plans for this figure to rise to 50% (Van Rijk et al. 2018, 3). This would cramp the UK's returns from Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Security

The slogan, "Gulf security is our security," has become part of the Conservatives' foreign policy rhetoric, recognising the importance of promoting regional stability to the UK's energy security (Devanny & Berry 2021, 148). As was felt in the turbulence of the first oil crisis caused by the Yom-Kippur War (1973), the incidence of destabilising political or military events in key oil exporting countries threatens to send shockwaves throughout the global economy (Fried & Trezise 2010, 1-2). Furthermore, ensuring the free and safe passage of ships in the Red Sea, which both neighbours Saudi Arabia and is one of the UK's busiest trade routes, is crucial for the smooth functioning of the UK economy (UK Gov. 2012b).

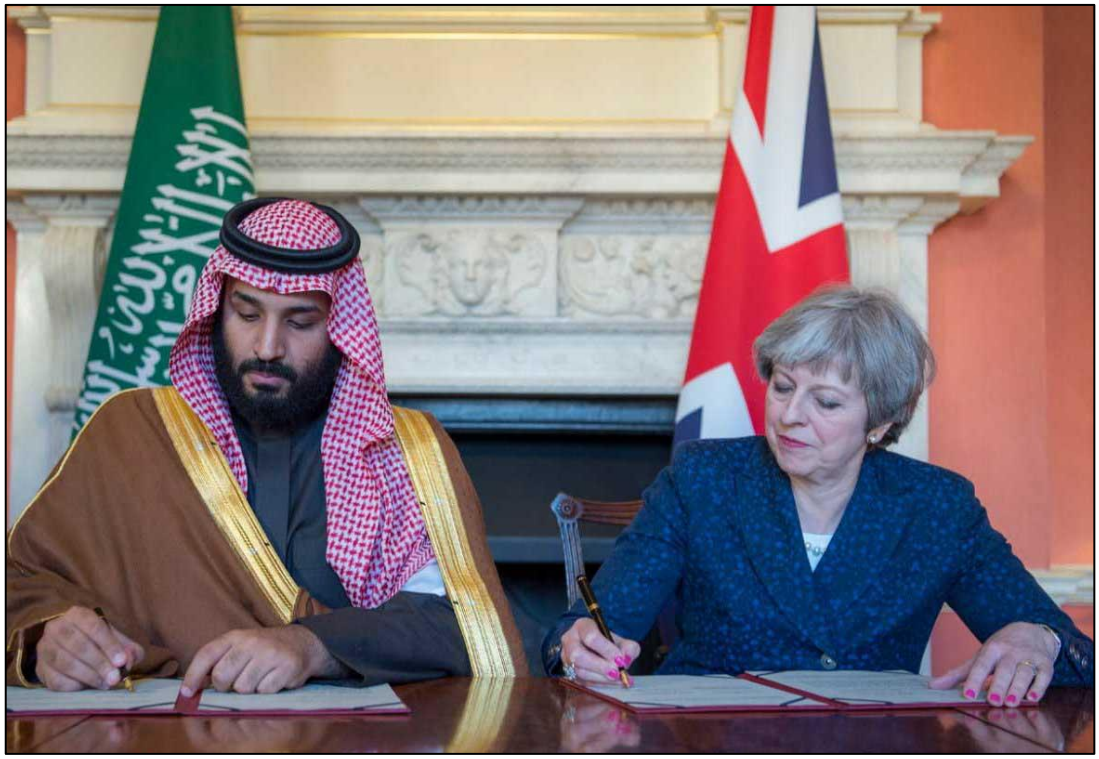

Figure 2: Theresa May and bin Salman agree to the goal of £65 billion in mutual trade and investment after leaving the European Union (Arabian Business 2018)

In a more token display of UK-Saudi solidarity, the two countries share joint training exercises, officer exchange programmes and joint working groups (UK Parliament 2016; UK Gov. 2012b; War Child UK 2017). An immemorial tradition of training foreign royals at the Royal Military

Academy Sandhurst, including those from Bahrain, Jordan, Oman and Saudi Arabia, speaks to the UK's vested interest in Middle Eastern security (BBC 2014).

In a more immediate sense, the FCO has stated that maintaining a working relationship with Saudi Arabia keeps the streets of Britain safe from terrorist attacks. In the field of counter-terrorism, the FCO considers Saudi Arabia a key operational partner, particularly against the threat of Islamist terrorism (Van Rijk et al. 2018, 15).

The UK's partnership with Saudi Arabia is complex and multifaceted, extending beyond arms sales to encompass a range of bilateral security ties and shared strategic interests. As part of its post-Brexit foreign policy strategy, which has been grandiosely dubbed, "Global Britain," the UK aims to 'build a permanent and more substantial UK military presence' in the Gulf region (UK Gov. 2015, 55). This intention is in line with the UK's longstanding and current interests in the region.

4 Methodology: case study discussion

This paper employs a case study discussion of the UK's continued supply of arms to Saudi Arabia since ratifying the 2030 Agenda. The case is an appropriate lens through which to scrutinise the practical application of international agreements and the forces governing state behaviour in the international system; partly, because the UK's arms trade relationship with Saudi Arabia has taken on a new significance since 2015.

As well as being the year that the 2030 Agenda was ratified by the UK (as well as Saudi Arabia for that matter), 2015 was the year that bin Salman became Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Chairman of the Council of Development and Economic Affairs, Chairman of the Council of Political and Security Affairs, Minister of Defence, and de factor leader. Under his leadership,

the regime has come into international disrepute for allegations of repeated human rights abuses; spearheaded by accusations that Saudi Arabia have committed numerous crimes against humanity during its military involvement in the Yemeni Civil War.

Therefore, the UK's approach to navigating these allegations facing Saudi Arabia should offer insight into the factors of greatest influence over the UK's behaviour in the international arena; and the influence of the 2030 Agenda as an international agreement. Motivated by the rivalling incentives of strategic gains versus the fulfilment of SDG 16, the UK's decision to either continue or withhold the supply of arms to Saudi Arabia becomes a locus for the clashing forces of state egotism and institutional obligation.

Furthermore, this paper's neoliberal institutionalist critique means to bring the 2030 Agenda into the realm of international relations theory, which has yet to be done.

5 Theoretical framework: neoliberal institutionalism

The UK's balancing act of pledging support to the SDGs whilst maintaining an arms trade with Saudi Arabia is a microcosm of the tensions states encounter when reconciling with their institutional obligations. By extension, the influence international institutions exert (or do not exert) upon state decision-making processes is the subject of this paper's discussion. It follows that this paper shall situate its theoretical framework in neoliberal institutionalism.

5.1 Key assumptions: state-centrism and international anarchy; the positive view

What constitutes an 'international institution'? Comprehensively, Keohane defines an 'institution' as 'a general pattern or categorisation of activity' or 'a particular human-constructed arrangement, formally or informally organised' (Keohane 1988, 383). Accordingly, both the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs could be interchangeably referred to as

institutions. These ‘institutions’ constitute ‘persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations’ (Ibid., 383). For our purposes, an expectation of the UK – as a ratifying member of the UN SDGs – would be the promotion of peace, justice and strong institutions as per SDG 16.

A school of thought developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin, neoliberal institutionalism, concurs with (neo)realist theories on some central tenets (Whyte 2012, 1). It argues that states are rational egotists and that the international system is anarchic (Keohane & Martin 1995, 39). In layman’s terms, this means that in the absence of a supranational sovereign power in the metaphysical international arena, states can and, therefore, do act according to their own self-interests. However, neoliberal institutionalists maintain that international cooperation is reinforced by international institutions (Sterling-Folker 2021, 89). Comparatively, neorealism understands state behaviour through conceptions of power politics; ultimately viewing institutions as futile (Whyte 2012, 2).

Aligning with neorealist theories, neoliberal institutionalism understands states as egotists. Dwelling in perpetual anarchy, both argue that states are free to pursue sovereign interests in the absence of a supranational sovereign and that this can preclude the attainment of common goals (Oye 1985, 1). Neorealists interpret the international order in a Hobbesian sense. Its proponents suggest that cooperation will always be hindered by man’s restless desire for power (Keohane, 1986, 211-212). Accordingly, states are intrinsically paranoid about international relations, which is frequently a zero-sum game; that is, a game in which one player’s gain is equivalent to another’s loss.

Contrastingly, neoliberal institutionalist scholars have greater confidence in the ability of human beings to progressively converge around shared tenets and 'obtain progressively better collective outcomes that promote freedom, peace, prosperity, and justice on a global scale' (Sterling-Folker 2021, 90) vis-à-vis *international institutions*. However, they declare that they are not idealists, for whether international institutions have substantially mitigated the negative impact of anarchy on international collective action is the primary subject of neoliberal institutional analysis (Ibid., 90). The forthcoming discussion builds upon this line of inquiry.

Neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism are both state-centric theories of international relations. Unlike constructivism, which understands states as a soup of different interests and identities, neoliberal institutionalism interprets states as homogenous entities (Hernández 2021, 3).

5.2 Rationality and game theory

Like neorealists, neoliberal institutionalists understand states as rational, utility-maximising actors. It follows that a state's decision-making is complicated by fears of non-reciprocity and cheating in inter-state relations. This phenomenon is explained by game theory, which shall be expanded on here. To neorealist pessimisms about the hindrances these complications present, neoliberal institutionalists answer that international institutions provide a 'coordinating mechanism to help states capture potential gains from their cooperation' (Whyte 2012, 2). Maintaining that states are egotists, these institutions provide a unitary body to facilitate coordination and cooperation, for the benefit of all involved.

Constructivism is seen as pitched against rationalism and neoliberal institutionalism in this regard (Zehfuss 2002, 4). Constructivists consider that anarchy is not an unavoidable feature

of international reality; rather it is, as Alexander Wendt famously wrote, “what states make of it.” Its proponents believe that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces. Accordingly, interests of actors in the international arena are constructed and fluid in nature, not intrinsically given (Ibid., 12).

Neoliberal institutionalists introduce game theory – a mathematical framework for modelling the strategic interactions between actors in situations where the outcome of each actor’s decisions depends on the decisions of the other actors – into their materialist analysis of state decision-making. They ask: how can cooperation materialise in some cases and not in others? Oye argues that three different factors influence the likelihood of collaboration and cooperation:

1. Firstly, orthodox game theorists emphasise payoffs and altering payoffs. In each round of play, the ‘benefits of mutual cooperation relative to mutual defection’ and the ‘benefits of unilateral defection relative to unrequited cooperation’ (Oye 1995, 4) are fundamental to the analysis of likelihood of cooperation.
2. Secondly, game theorists explore how iteration influences decision-making. They consider that reciprocity provides more desirable conditions than single-play games. The Prisoner’s Dilemma illustrates the implications of single-play state interactions. The Prisoner's Dilemma is a classic game theory scenario that involves two individuals who have been arrested and are being held in separate cells. The two prisoners are given the option to confess to a crime or remain silent. If both prisoners remain silent, they will each receive a relatively light sentence. However, if one prisoner confesses and the other remains silent, the confessor will receive a much lighter sentence and the other will receive a much harsher sentence. If both prisoners confess, they will both receive a moderate sentence (Poundstone 1992, 21-28). The dilemma communicates how self-

interested behaviour leads to a suboptimal outcome for both parties but remains the best option from a purely self-interested perspective. Returning to the strategic decisions of state actors, states are tempted by the immediate gains of unilateral defection, and fearful of unrequited cooperation (Oye 1985, 4).

3. Thirdly, Oye's argument posits that as the number of actors increases, the likelihood of cooperation decreases. This is for two reasons. Firstly, information and transaction costs increase with the number of actors, making the realisation of mutual interests and policy coordination around them more challenging. Secondly, as the number of players increases, the 'feasibility of sanctioning defectors diminishes' (Ibid., 20).

Snidal resolves that 'the ultimate promise of game theory lies in expanding the realm of rational-actor models beyond the restrictive confines of the traditional realist perspective.' He invites one to look 'less exclusively with problems of conflict as much with problems of cooperation' (Snidal 1985, 25). Through international institutions, he argues, this can be realised.

5.3 Institutional design limitations

Game theorists identify two fundamental problems with institutional design. The first being the bargaining process; during which, relevant parties seek outcomes that provide themselves with the greatest benefit, though pareto-optimal solutions (Sterling-Folker 2021, 94).

The second issue is the risk of defection in a self-enforcing agreement and how to overcome it. The two 'solutions' are induced compliance and enforced compliance (Ibid., 96). Mitchell emphasises the importance of transparency as the 'major goal of any treaty's compliance information system,' suggesting it is an essential prerequisite of any prescription to increase

compliance (Mitchell 1994, 57). Transparency also changes according to the type of activity that is being regulated within an institution; some are multilaterally observed, others are hidden in government self-reporting.

6 Discussion

6.1 Saudi human rights abuses and alleged UK involvement; an integrated review

Since 2015, the Saudi regime has come into international disrepute over allegations of human rights abuses in domestic and foreign contexts. The general response from Whitehall has been that concerns have been raised with the Saudi government. This discussion means to scrutinise the integrity of these claims. Further, it means to analyse whether the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia in this period could be defined as consistent with the SDGs; and as a soi-disant "frontrunner" for the 2030 Agenda.

6.1.1 Implicating the UK in alleged Saudi war crimes in Yemen

Civil conflict had been festering in Yemen's North-Western province since 2004. Emboldened by Iranian support, Houthi insurgents took over the capital, Sana'a, and ousted President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi in 2014, engulfing the country in Civil War. A Saudi-led coalition entered Yemen to support the Yemeni Government in March 2015. By the time coalition forces entered Yemen, power-sharing negotiations had all but collapsed and the Government was largely incapacitated (Bennet-Jones 2009; UN 2012; Van Rijk et al. 2018, 8-9). Since, Yemen has been in the grip of a protracted political, humanitarian and developmental crisis. 75% of the population need aid and public institutions are collapsing (UN 2012). There have been over 12,500 civilian casualties; and tens of thousands more deaths due to malnutrition and a persistent famine (Al Jazeera 2021).

Experts reporting to the UN Human Rights Council have 'strongly suggested' that both parties to the armed conflict "perpetrated, and continue to perpetrate, violations and crimes under international law" (UN 2018; UNHRC 2020, 69). The reports noted that "coalition air strikes have caused most direct civilian casualties" and "may have conducted attacks in violation of the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution that may amount to war crimes […] showing little evidence of any attempt to minimise civilian casualties" (UN 2018). An Oxfam warehouse and at least four *Médecins Sans Frontières* hospitals have been shelled by coalition forces; and two hundred and sixteen attacks have been carried out on educational facilities (Stavrianakis 2017b, 94; War Child).

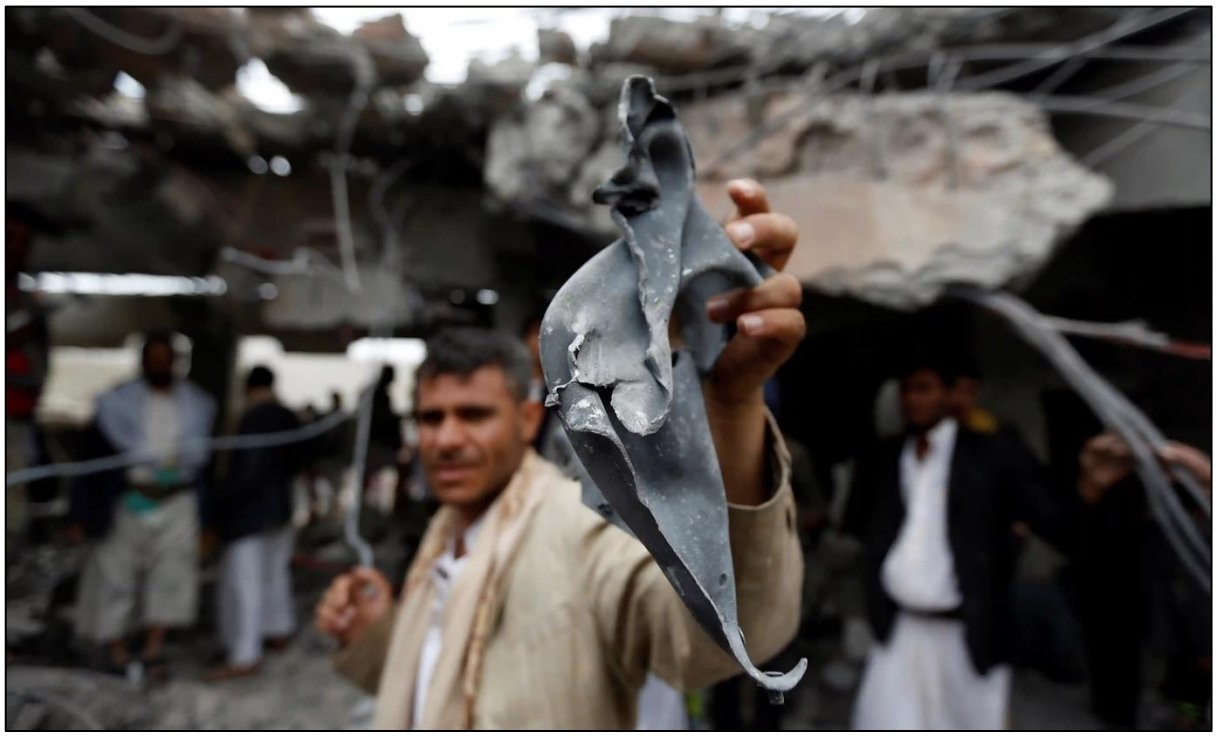

Figure 3: A man with a fragment of a missile found at the site of a Saudi-led air strike in Yemen in 2016 (Khaled Abdullah/Reuters)

The UK has remained a major arms supplier to Saudi Arabia throughout the conflict. There is a weight of evidence implicating the UK in Saudi Arabia's laws-of-war breaches, including the

conclusive finding of UK-manufactured cruise missiles in the debris of a civilian factory (Human Rights Watch 2017; Musa 2017, 437). Disputing this in September 2016, then Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, maintained that any indication that the continued exports of arms to Saudi Arabia presented a clear risk that those weapons would "be used in a commission of a serious violation of IHL" had *not* been established (UK Parliament 2016a). Johnson, again, declared that the UK "operates one of the most robust arms export regimes in the world" (Ibid.).

In 2017, CAAT sued the government for allegedly failing to consider the risk that arms exported to Saudi Arabia would be used in violation of IHL and that the licensing of arms exports to Saudi Arabia had been unlawful and not demonstrated adequate consideration of the strategic exports licencing criteria (Human Rights Watch 2017). The High Court ruled that the UK had *not* contravened IHL by sanctioning the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia (War Child UK 2017, 12). Judges Burnett and Haddon-Cave concluded that the Secretary of State was *not* entitled to conclude Saudi forces were deliberately targeting civilians, in conjunction with closed evidence that was not made public on grounds of national security (Judiciary UK 2019).

Tellingly, following an appeal by CAAT, the Court of Appeal ruled that the UK Government's licensing of arms sales was, in fact, *unlawful* (Sabbagh & McKernon 2019). Sir Terence Etherton, Master of the Rolls, said that ministers had "made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of IHL in the past, during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so" (Ibid.). The Department of International Trade was forced to immediately halt strategic exports to Saudi Arabia. However, within a year, International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss, assessed that Saudi Arabia's IHL violations were "isolated incidents," suggesting that there were no "patterns" of non-compliance, emphasising

that “Saudi Arabia has a genuine intent and the capacity to comply with IHL” (UK Parliament 2020). The licensing of military exports to the Kingdom was immediately resumed.

In Truss’ defence, Saudi Arabia has shown its commitment towards IHL through a particularly combative stance towards terrorism. Pledging $110 million to establish the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre in 2011, decreeing that sympathisers of the Muslim Brotherhood – a “terrorist organisation” – will face imprisonment, and placing an embargo on Qatar on grounds of “supporting terrorism” are, together, fair reflections of a dutiful member of the international community that is committed to civilian wellbeing (Saudi Embassy 2017, 6; Sleiman-Haidar 2017; Kerr 2017; Lacroix 2014).

Yet, a doubling in the rate of executions, the high-profile assassinations of Jamaal Khashoggi, Israa al-Ghomgham, Salam al-Shebab and Saee al-Qahtani (among others), and the perpetration of crimes against humanity in Yemen, forces the onlooker to seriously doubt the integrity of this reformism and question Truss’ conclusions (Riedel 2016).

Importantly, Truss’ judgement to continue supplying arms to Saudi Arabia must look beyond the incidents of personal tragedy. The occasions of tragedy, such as the bombing of hospitals or a funeral that killed more than one hundred and forty civilians, are compelling in isolation; but when taken in the context of the whole humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the accumulative effects of the war create the most irresistible argument against the supply of munitions to the coalition (Stavrianakis 2017b, 94; Human Appeal).

Today, Yemen is commonly considered the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world (World Food Programme). There is evidence to suggest that the coalition bombing campaign has

targeted food producers (farmers, herders and fishers) and food processing, storage and transport in urban Yemen (Bridget 2018, 18). This "economic war" has not only been the source of the worsening food crisis and the subsequent deaths of tens of thousands but is also a breach of the 1977 Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions (ICRC 2016). As Yemen is hit every day by "British bombs – dropped by British planes that are flown by British-trained pilots and maintained and prepared inside Saudi Arabia by thousands of British contractors" it is undeniable that the UK is arming and maintaining the Saudis' operation and, therefore, prolonging the war (Merat 2019).

The crisis in Yemen is quintessential of how SDG 16 occupies the atrium of the 2030 Agenda; the state of conflict is ravaging the country's supply chains, devastating its infrastructural and economic base; leaving civilians helpless. Moreover, in identifying how profound the situation in Yemen is, the UK Government's decision to reinstate licensing to Riyadh exposes the falsity of its support for the SDGs.

6.1.2 Business as usual

Throughout the twentieth century, Saudi Arabia was free from any serious international pressure to modernise its political or social policies whilst the flow of oil to the West remained uninterrupted (Al Rashaad 2010, xii). The 1945 Quincy Agreement; a secret pact between President Roosevelt and Ibn Saud, the first King of Saudi Arabia, for the exchange of US military security and Saudi oil; epitomised this understanding (Crethi Plethi). Even in the scourge of 9/11 when criticisms of the Saudi autocracy were hitherto loudest – as fifteen Saudi nationals were implicated in the attacks – the country's internal adjustments simply '[appropriated] the rhetoric of reform' (Al Rashaad 2010, xiii).

With UK arms-manufacturers generating £6.2bn in revenues – and pocketing £600 million in profits – from dealings with Saudi Arabia in the first two years of the coalition's intervention in Yemen alone, it seems that economic affections still dominate the UK's proceedings towards her Saudi partners (War Child UK 2017, 9). Truss' decision to undermine the Court of Appeal's ruling and begin re-licensing military exports to Saudi Arabia seems a flagrant indication of the government's disregard for human rights and its international commitments vis-à-vis export controls.

In 2015, *Channel 4* commentator, Jon Snow, called the UK's efforts to address Saudi Arabia's IHL violations "squalid" (Channel 4 2015). Certainly, the UK has been more reticent towards Saudi Arabia than other Western European countries. Germany, Belgium and Norway have all, to varying degrees, halted arms transfers to Saudi Arabia (Van Rijk et al. 2018, 9). When faced with criticism, David Cameron stated that humanitarian concerns have been raised with his Saudi counterparts "in the proper way," all the while the government was licensing a steady supply of munitions to coalition forces; it continues to do so (Channel 4 2015; Reuters 2021).

Comparatively, Angela Merkel withheld Germany's supply of arms to Saudi Arabia "due to growing outcry over the human toll of the conflict" (Sleiman-Haidar 2017). Her criticisms provoked bin Salman to declare that Saudi Arabia would never again deal in arms with Germany (Ibid.). Clearly, the UK is cautious of aggravating the Saudi Crown Prince. On the UK's list of priorities, it seems that sustainable development assumes a much-subordinated role to maintaining steady relations with Saudi Arabia, dovetailing her commercial fortunes and security guarantees.

6.1.3 Government subterfuge

In the first twelve months of the coalition's intervention in Yemen, six ministerial statements to parliament had been quietly corrected for falsely claiming that the Saudi military had not targeted civilians, nor committed war crimes (Stone & Mortimer 2016). This speaks to the secrecy of the arms industry. Furthermore, a Netherlands-led proposal for an International Commission of Inquiry into coalition laws-of-war crimes, which would have seen its findings referred to the International Criminal Court, was blocked by Saudi Arabia and the Arab League, as well as by the P3 (the UK, US and France) – all being exporters of weapons to the Saudi-led coalition (Van Rijk et al. 2018, 20).

It would be fair to conclude that Cameron's assurances that concerns had been addressed in "the proper way" were insincerely made. This hypocrisy shows that little has been learnt since the parliamentary committee's ruling over the government's licensing of weapons to MENA regimes around the time of the Arab Spring that was outlined earlier in the paper. The 2030 Agenda doesn't appear to have altered the government's psyche in this context; nor made the Department of Trade interpret arrangements such as WA with any greater seriousness.

It seems that the Saudi/Yemen case validates Musa and Hinds aforementioned concerns that processes of exports licensing are hollow and too secretive to ensure governmental accountability (Musa 2017, 462; Hinds 1997, 30). Convincingly, Hansen and Stavrianakis build on this idea of the "grey market" of arms exports licensing in relation to the Saudi/Yemen case. They have argued that the High Court ruling discloses a loophole in the UK's licencing controls; that the government has constructed a linguistic ambiguity in their criteria that they are able to exploit and, therefore, manage the competing demands of domestic dissent and satisfying relations with arms recipients (Stavrianakis 2017a, 563; Hansen 2022, 1). Aside from

the tautologous technique of chiming about the UK's "rigorous" exports criteria, Stavrianakis identifies how the government's criteria is framed in a way as to create a state of "wilful non-knowledge" about how strategic exports could be prospectively used. The use of ambiguous indicators such as "clear" risk and "serious" violation are purposefully indeterminant so to afford the government some politically-desirable, legal leeway (Hansen 2022, 3).

These tactics of achieving politically-desirable ends have led Stavrianakis to the conclusion that the government has hardly progressed from the Arms-to-Iraq scandal (1984-1990). The landmark Scott Report (1996), which exposed the government-endorsed sale of arms to Iraq at the time of Saddam Hussein's leadership, painted an "unprecedented picture of Whitehall," concluding that ministers had "practised to deceive" (Barker 1997, 48). Although the Scott Report prompted constitutional change in the form of the 2000 Freedom of Information Act; which formed the basis of CAAT's 2016 prosecution case against the UK government; the Yemen case highlights that political and legal manoeuvrings still dominate the government's arms export policy (UK Parliament 1996; UK Gov. 2000; Stavrianakis 2017b, 92-98).

6.1.4 The tip of the iceberg

Making it harder for the UK Government to justify the judgement that the coalition's breaches of IHL do not display any pattern, the allegations of Saudi Arabian war crimes in Yemen are not isolated blemishes on an otherwise flawless human rights record. Since the signing of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, Saudi Arabia's credibility has been sinking in a mire of its own neglect for human rights. Throughout this time, the UK has remained a contented trade partner of the Saudi regime; all the while declaring its commitment to the SDGs at various international forums.

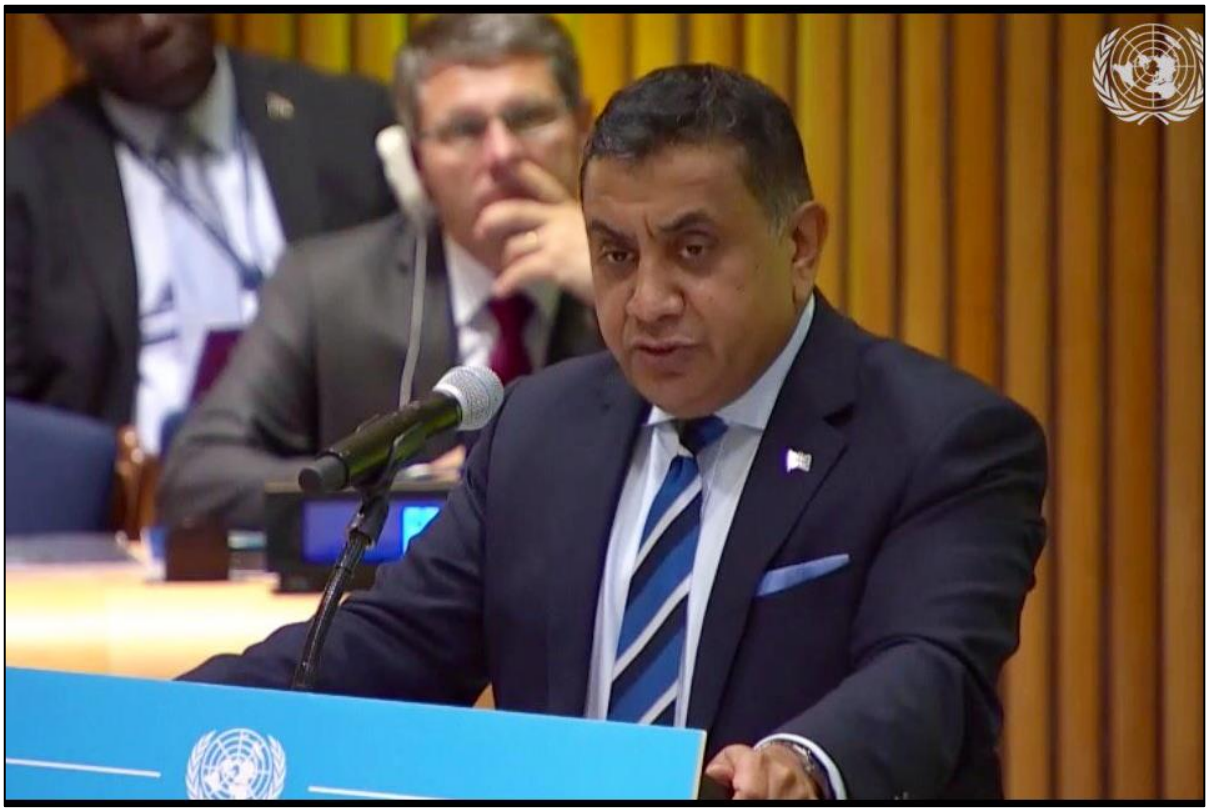

Figure 4: Minister Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon spoke at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) summit (September 2019)

Jamal Khashoggi's assassination on 2 October 2018 brought this reality to global attention. The US resident and *Washington Post* journalist had previously served as an advisor to the Saudi government and was close to the Saudi Royal Family (Barnes & Sanger 2021; BBC 2018). He was murdered and brutally dismembered using a bone saw in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul (Milanovic 2020, 1). The assassination was approved by bin Salman (Breuninger et al. 2021). The murder was reportedly "in flagrant violation of the negative obligation to refrain from arbitrary deprivations of life under Article 5 of the Arab charter and customary international law" (Milanovic 2020., 50-51).

This was in many ways an extraordinary case, but by no means a unique one. (Ibid., 51). Since 2015, the number of executions has near doubled. An average of 129.5 people have been executed per year since bin Salman's appointment as the de facto head of state; an increase of

82% on the years before his tenure (Blake 2023). Furthermore, the European Saudi Organisation of Human Rights (ESOHR) has concluded that punishments have been discriminatory and unjustly applied; disproportionately targeting activists and dissidents (Chulov 2023).

In continuing to sell arms to Saudi Arabia, the UK is turning a deaf ear to flagrant violations of IHL. This communicates, with some emphasis, how sustainable development is, in practical terms, subordinate to its immediate strategic interests and politico-economic gain.

6.2 A neoliberal institutionalist critique of the 2030 Agenda; voluntary action in anarchy

In 'Leviathan,' Hobbes regarded that, in the absence of a common power, man is in a condition of war, "and such is a war of every man against every man" (Hobbes 1651, par. 13.8). Hobbes' conception of the state of nature has become "a common rhetorical and analytical touchstone" for understanding anarchy in international relations (Williams 2009, 214). In this anarchic system, states may act freely in the absence of a supranational sovereign.

In the UK/Saudi case, the UK Government's failure to tangibly protest Saudi Arabia's human rights record (through halting the supply of arms) speaks to the intrinsically egotistical quality of state behaviour. To a significant extent, the case indicates that the 2030 Agenda is unable to curb states' pursuit of self-interest. The UK's satisfaction with fuelling the war in Yemen demonstrates a preference for self-serving policy over the altruistic; that is, international developmental policy. An applied game-theoretic analysis offers some explanatory value of this phenomenon.

6.2.1 Altering economic payoffs of compliance versus defection

Figure 4 is a payoff matrix for a game that is an extremely simplified representation of the UK's choice to sell arms to Saudi Arabia. It interprets the payoffs from a solely economic point of view. Play occurs concurrently with the 2030 Agenda, which obliges states to withhold arms sales although it offers no economic return for doing so. The model assumes that states are trying to maximise economic return. The first entry in each combination represents the payoff for player *A*; the second represents the payoff for player *N.* A higher number corresponds to a higher payoff. The game is played once.

Strategies of player *A*. (United Kingdom)	Strategies of player *N*. (Other UN member states)	
	1. Sell arms	2. Withhold arms
1. Sell arms	(1, 1)	(2, 0)
2. Withhold arms	(0, 2)	(0, 0)

Figure 5: A payoff matrix of the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia

The logic of this analysis is fairly reductionist but assumes a supply and demand model of price determination. In situation (1, 1), both players make moderate gains because both get returns from the sale of arms in a more saturated market. Situation (2, 0) is the most profitable as player *A* is selling into a market where supply is less, meaning the demand for ones' goods is higher, increasing their value accordingly. In the reverse (0, 2), the payoff is zero. In situation (0, 0), neither player makes returns. Accordingly, the most economically optimal solution for player *A* is always to sell arms.

6.2.2 Overcoming anarchy?

Prior to considering the role of the 2030 Agenda, both the neoliberal institutionalist and neorealist would interpret from this model that player *A* – the UK – as a rational, utility-maximising actor, will always choose to sell arms. This strategy is the most economically optimal. They would both then argue that player *A* fears unrequited cooperation with the 2030 Agenda and the relative economic gains of other states. This apprehension over the other players' actions further incentivises the sale of arms/defection.

Now, neorealists would theorise that the obligation to withhold arms under the 2030 Agenda would be ineffectual at changing player *A*'s strategy from always selling arms. This understanding is predicated on the fact that withholding arms returns no material benefit, rendering compliance with the 2030 Agenda disadvantageous. Therefore, the 2030 Agenda would not influence player *A*'s original strategy (Whyte 2012, 2).

Neoliberal institutionalists would posit that the 2030 Agenda creates external conditions upon the game that discourage defection. Institutions can often incur future costs that outweigh the immediate gains of defection. Often, an awareness of future iterations of a game will increase the likelihood of cooperation due to the risk of restrictions or punishments being placed upon a detracting player (Poundstone 1992, 21-28).

However, the game under question does not have external conditions that encourage such cooperation. The game occurs outside of any institutionalised arrangement; that is, the selling or withholding of arms is not directly coordinated by the 2030 Agenda. This means that the game can only be viewed as one iteration of play. As a single-play, Prisoner's Dilemma-style game, the shadow of the future and the prospect of future punishment diminishes, meaning

self-interested behaviour becomes more prevalent (Hernàndez 2021, 1306). Moreover, as there are multiple members of the 2030 Agenda who are arms-exporting nations, 'the feasibility of sanctioning defectors' is reduced, again, encouraging self-interested play (Oye 1995, 20).

6.2.3 Institutional design limitations of the 2030 Agenda

The game-theoretic analysis explicates how the self-enforcing nature of the 2030 Agenda fundamentally limits its practical value and its ability to overcome the implications of international anarchy. As has been discussed, the 2030 Agenda failed to inspire the UK into protesting Saudi Arabia's war crimes in Yemen (and beyond) when it required personal sacrifices.

Sterling-Folker argues that the solution can be found in creating mechanisms that either induce or enforce compliance (Sterling-Folker 2021, 96). The prospect of establishing a legally-binding mechanism that would enforce compliance with the SDGs is slim. With all 193 members of the United Nations party to the 2030 Agenda, it is hard to conceive of an eventuality whereby all members would agree to a loss of sovereignty that would likely incur different implications and inconsistently reflect the priorities of different member states.

Therefore, this paper offers its support of scholars who have endeavoured to present the importance of transparency for inducing compliance with international institutions. Namely, Mitchell has emphasised to scholars and policy-makers that transparency is a "major goal of any treaty's compliance information system" (Mitchell 1994, 57). In the case of arms exports, the case for transparency is profound. As has been identified, SDG 16 is integral to the prospect of sustainable development. Accordingly, transparency must take on greater primacy within the global arms trade. Although this may frustrate national security agendas, there is growing

precedence for an arrangement amongst UN member states to engage in frequent and specific disclosures about their international arms exports if serious progress towards the SDGs is to be achieved. The Saudi/Yemen case reveals that existing arms exports protocols; domestic and international; must be pushed further. At present, China does not provide the UN with any information pertaining to arms exports; this should be encouraged.

6.3 Limitations

In seeking to offer a neoliberal institutionalist analysis of the 2030 Agenda in light of the UK/Saudi case, this paper has concluded that the elements of the discussion lack a degree of experimental empiricism. The rationalist perspective this paper offered as an explanation of the UK's decision-making under anarchy is limited to presuppositions made about the game (Keohane 1988, 381). It assumed that the player/state's utility function was the maximising of economic gain. This reflects the materialist focus of the paper; security and wealth; over norms and values. If player *A* represented Germany, the model would fail to explain Germany's real-life decision to withhold the sale of arms from Saudi Arabia. The material focus of neoliberal institutionalism and rationalist theoretical analysis has limited explanatory value for the social processes of norms and values –humanitarian concerns – that seemingly prompted the German government into stopping (Owens & Smith 2005, 279).

Therefore, the critique that an emphasis on "rationalism ignores the social processes that lead to changes in the outlook of world politics" would apply to this paper and its application of neoliberal institutionalism (Whyte 2012, 5). Indeed, neoliberal institutionalists consider institutions to be facilitators of international cooperation; or means of converging around shared tenets for the betterment of humanity. However, the locus of observation may need to expand beyond the material. A norms-based analysis may provide insight to how the 2030

Agenda is a changeful institution within international relations. At present, this paper's analysis has shown it cannot explain the complex relationship between the interests of individuals states and the role of general principles and norms shared between an institution; a perennial criticism of neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist analyses (Gärtner 2009, 139).

In realising the limitations of this paper's theoretical scope, I would offer encouragement of any research that strives to bring the 2030 Agenda into the realm of constructivist theories of international relations. Through endeavouring to deconstruct the possible role of ideational factors in the functioning of our international institutions, constructivism may better forecast for the truly human element being perpetuated by the SDGs (Barnett 2018, 89).

7 Conclusion

In attempting to unpack the paradox of the UK's arms trade with Saudi Arabia since affirming the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda, this paper has sought to offer a contemporary analysis of the authority international institutions command over state actors. It has argued that the UK's continual supply of arms to the Saudi regime reveals an undeterred preference for satisfying personal goals over those of sustainable development. This conclusion was formed on the basis that economic affections and strategic interests seemingly dissuaded consecutive Conservative Governments from confronting Saudi Arabia about its alleged breaches of international humanitarian law. The discussion later employed a game-theoretic analysis of the case, which explicated how the 2030 Agenda is unable to discourage self-interested behaviour of this sort. As a prescription for increasing compliance, this paper echoed Mitchell's analysis that integrating more transparent mechanisms for reviewing members' progress is required, particularly in the context of SDG 16 and the responsible export of arms.

When fellow European states withheld the supply of arms to Saudi Arabia over evidence suggesting RSAF bombing campaigns had indiscriminately targeted Yemeni civilians, the UK showed dogged support of her Gulf ally. Successive governments have licensed exports of billions of pounds worth of munitions even after being ruled unlawful by the highest of senior courts of England and Wales. Whilst it may be a criminal offence to breach export control regulations as a manufacturer, the UK faced no retribution for breaching its own laws; a paradox that speaks to the hypocrisy plaguing the government's dysfunctional role as simultaneous licensing arbiter and sales promoter of military exports.

This paper's case study analysis has navigated some of the deepest and darkest policy waters in Whitehall. The UK's sale of arms to Saudi Arabia has revealed the legal meanderings and political management compromising the integrity of arms exports licensing; a process which, if the 2030 Agenda is to be taken seriously, should be reviewed with immediate effect to ensure human rights are never compromised in the pursuit of personal profits. As the Scott Report concluded over twenty years ago, when it comes to selling weapons, "government secrecy is dominant and the contrary values of open government and public accountability are most remote" (Barker 1997, 94). Regrettably, this conclusion still applies today.

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