

Good evening

Local governments in Libya actively encourage the slave trade as a way to increase revenue. The Saudi government is guilty of killing thousands of children and in Egypt 99% of women have experienced some form of sexual violence. What do these countries all have in common? They buy weapons from us. And it is my belief that any economic benefits we garner from selling these weapons is negated by the death and destruction that they cause in the wider world.

The UK is the second largest exporter of arms in the world, just behind the us, and due to the lack of restrictions our government actively enforces our customers feature a collection of countries with truly shocking human rights records. Among them are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, and Libya. This clientele mean that British made bombs are found in unjust conflicts across the world.

In 2019 the UK sold 1.3bn pounds worth of arms to Saudi Arabia; in turn, Saudi Arabia bombed and killed thousands of Yemenis citizen and civilians, and plunged a further 20 million people into food insecurity.

Using our weapons Saudi Arabia took away the lives and hopes of millions of people; using our weapons Saudi Arabia bombed mosques, busses, schools, and weddings; using our weapons Saudi Arabia started a humanitarian crisis. And it's likely to be at our expense that the damage caused by this crisis will be fixed. What makes this tragedy more brutal is the hypocrisy our government exhibits in allowing these sales to take place. British law is clear in stating that it is illegal to sell arms to a state that is at a "clear risk" of committing international humanitarian crimes. So why does the government insist on selling weapons to countries that are known to break international law? The simple answer is the money: arms are sold for profit, apparently to whomever has the cash.

But the government is not powerless in allowing these sales to take place. Many Countries make pittance from the arms industry; the UK is remarkably weak in this area - of the 30 countries that our own government has "serious human rights concerns about", two thirds can still buy weapons from us should they so wish. It's clear then that in the UK government's opinion killing small children and targeting hospitals is acceptable when the people suffering are halfway across the world and unlikely to vote in the next election or even live that long.

This brings me onto my next point. There are an estimated 79 million refugees in the world. It would be unfair to claim the UK government is responsible for this huge number but what's certainly true is that conflict fueled by our weapons is to blame for a significant number of displaced children and families.

The refugee crisis is one that gets a huge amount of media attention, with refugees regularly becoming the scapegoats for anything from a leaky pipe to an underfunded healthcare system, but next time immigrants are blamed for our comparatively insignificant problems, whomever is making the point should be reminded that 3.6 million people were displaced from Yemen due to a conflict we profited off.

This is not to ignore the fact that some 170,000 people are employed by the arms industry in the UK, or that the arms industry contributes significantly to the country's GDP. Given the corona virus pandemic, and the perhaps inevitable recession, these jobs and livelihoods are more valuable than ever, but if this pandemic has shown us anything it's that people are capable of incredible empathy and self-sacrifice for the greater good. The arms industry and the UK government should not be exempt from that, just as they should not be exempt from the law.

No UK politician (to my knowledge) has ever said that causing damage, death and destruction, is fine because it stimulates the economy. But actions speak louder than words and every day their inaction proves that they think it's fine that buildings in Yemen are being blown to dust, so long as they don't have to provide education to refugee children.

Part of our collective identity comes from the idea that we're the freedom fighter of the world, a tiny little island that spreads democracy stands against fascism and unjust societies. We cling to this Churchillian idea that "we will never surrender" and that we will defeat all the evils of the world. But the fact is we are not always in the right; what really distinguishes a good fair country, one that strives for better, from one that's happy exploiting inequalities, is that country's ability to right the wrongs it's guilty of. And I am saying now and I hope you agree, in this our government and our country is guilty. We must strive for better.

Thank you