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Chris White MP

Chair, Committees on Arms Export Controls
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

16 February 2016

Dear Mr White,

We as the UK Working Group on Arms (UKWG)¹ wish to congratulate you on your recent election as Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC). We would like to welcome you to your role and highlight certain matters of substance and process we consider relevant to the CAEC's programme of work.

We are delighted that the CAEC has been reconvened and will resume its important role scrutinising the UK's export of strategic goods. We look forward to working with you as Chair.

The delay in the formation of CAEC following the 2015 General Election has however resulted in a 10-month window of reduced parliamentary oversight at a time when licences granted for arms transfers to Saudi Arabia in particular give major cause for concern.

On resourcing, it is essential that sufficient parliamentary staff capacity is allocated to facilitate effective oversight by the CAEC, however we understand that planned clerical support for the CAEC will be very limited. Based on many years of experience interacting with the CAEC, we would strongly recommend that a full-time clerk is employed to assist Members and especially the Chair in their work. In the interim, it may be useful to consider producing a more frequent series of smaller, thematic reports as opposed to the traditional yearly omnibus. This would allow for multiple evidence sessions from Government ministers, including Secretaries of State (continuing taking evidence at Secretary of State-level was a key recommendation from the CAEC's 2014-15 report), and could be harmonised with BIS's quarterly reporting schedule.

A number of the UKWG's members are focused on implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty, working with many partners around the world in the Control Arms Coalition, as part of global efforts to ensure the Treaty's success. UK arms transfers to Saudi Arabia are particularly concerning in this context.

As you will be aware, Saudi Arabia is leading a coalition of states intervening in Yemen. The UN reports that in this conflict civilians are suffering a "terrible toll", with over 8,100 civilian casualties—including 2,800 deaths— since the conflict began in March 2015², the majority of which have been caused by airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition. A recent report of the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen documented coalition "air strikes targeting civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law" and noted that the coalition's decision to treat "the entire cities of Sa'dah and Maran as military targets [was] a grave violation of the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution."³

The latest two BIS quarterly reports on strategic export controls, covering the period 1 April to 30 September 2015,

¹¹ The UK Working Group on Arms is a UK civil society coalition working on a wide range of conventional arms issues including strategic exports policy and practice, the use of explosive weapons, the eradication of landmines and cluster munitions, and other important topics.

² UN News Centre, "Yemen: civilian casualties top 8,100 as airstrikes and shelling continue, UN reports", 5 January 2016, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52938#.Vq9nrLKLS70>, accessed 1 February 2016; see also, Ewen McAskill, "UN report into Saudi-led strikes in Yemen raises questions over UK role", *The Guardian*, 27 January 2016, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/27/un-report-into-saudi-led-strikes-in-yemen-raises-questions-over-uk-role>, accessed 4 February 2016.

³ Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014), 22 January 2016.

show that during this period the UK approved licences for Saudi-bound exports worth over £2.75 billion, including approximately £1.75 billion worth of combat aircraft and over £1 billion of bombs, rockets and missiles for the end-use of the Royal Saudi Air Force.

The CAEC must urgently begin its work in scrutinising these and other transfers. In this regard, the UKWG welcomes proposals to reduce the quorum requirements for CAEC proceedings to be more in-line with individual Select Committees. Such a move would facilitate greater productivity and should be implemented at the earliest opportunity.

We are committed to ensuring robust scrutiny of the UK's arms exports, we are keen to engage with and support the CAEC in its programme of work. The responsibilities of the CAEC are central to the application of the UK's arms export control laws and monitoring the UK's adherence to regional and international obligations such as the EU Common Position and the ATT respectively.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further with you in person and will be in touch with your office to find a mutually convenient time.

Yours sincerely,



Roy Isbister
Arms Unit,
Saferworld

On behalf of:

Iain Overton, Director of Policy, Action on Armed Violence

Oliver Sprague, Programme Director, Military Security and Police, Amnesty International UK

Thomas Nash, Director, Article 36

Helen Close, Research Associate, Omega Research Foundation

Martin Butcher, Policy Advisor on Arms and Conflict, Oxfam

Katherine Dixon, Director Defence & Security Programme, Transparency International

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