

Written by Joan Russow
Saturday, 29 July 2017 03:59 -

SAUDI ARMS DEAL

Ottawa calls for investigation into Saudi Arabia's apparent use of Canadian-made armoured vehicles against citizens

[STEVEN CHASE](#) AND [ROBERT FIFE](#)

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Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland's department says she is "deeply concerned" that Saudi Arabia's rulers appear to be deploying Canadian-made armoured vehicles in an escalating conflict with Saudi citizens.

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Ms. Freeland has asked officials to investigate the matter. Global Affairs Canada released a statement shortly after The Globe and Mail published a story Friday on the apparent use of Canadian-made combat vehicles in Saudi Arabia's violence-plagued Eastern Province.

For the first time, video footage and photos have surfaced on social media allegedly showing the Islamic kingdom using Canadian weaponized equipment against Saudi civilians – a development that spurred calls Friday for the Liberal government to halt defence exports to the oil-rich nation.

Military equipment experts consulted by The Globe identified the machines appearing in these videos and photos as Gurkha RPVs, produced by Terradyne Armored Vehicles in Newmarket, Ont., just north of Toronto.

“The minister is deeply concerned about this situation and has asked officials to review it immediately,” Global Affairs told The Globe. “If it is found that Canadian exports have been used to commit serious violations of human rights, the minister will take action.”

The response from Ms. Freeland's department comes a day after the Trudeau government released a rare statement criticizing how the Saudis are handling an intensifying showdown between the Sunni-dominated regime and militants from the country's Shia minority in the al-Qatif region.

“The government is actively seeking more information about Saudi Arabia's current efforts to deal with its security challenges, the reports of civilian casualties, and the reports that Canadian-made vehicles have been used by Saudi Arabia in its current security operations,” Global Affairs spokesman John Babcock said. “Canada will review all available information as it determines an appropriate course of action.”

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The House of Saud's use of combat machines against its Shia population in the eastern part of the country, goes to the very heart of the controversy over whether the Trudeau government is violating Canada's weapons export-control rules, particularly with a \$15-billion sale of weaponized armoured vehicles to Riyadh for which the Liberals approved export permits in 2016.

Canada's export-control rules call for restrictions on arms exports to countries that have "poor human-rights records" and a "record of serious violations of the human rights of their citizens." Shipments are supposed to be blocked if there is a chance the buyer could turn the arms against its own population.

In recent days, a fight between the Sunni-dominated regime and minority Shia dissidents in the country's Eastern Province has grown more violent with heavy crackdowns by the Riyadh regime. Reuters reported that at least five people have been killed over two days as security forces begin an operation to flush out suspected Shia militants from the town of Awamiya in the al-Qatif region.

The Saudis have brought in more weaponry to bolster their tactical forces, and videos and photos circulated by Shia activists on the Internet show these additional assets include what appear to be armoured vehicles produced by Terradyne Armored Vehicles.

"The Gurkha is the only vehicle I know that looks like this," Jeremy Binnie, the Middle East & Africa editor for Jane's Defence Weekly, a magazine dedicated to military affairs, after viewing the videos and photos.

Mark Hiznay, associate director of the arms division of Human Rights Watch, said the vehicles in question are Terradyne Gurkha RPVs.

A retired Canadian general who spoke on condition of anonymity also identified the vehicles as made by Terradyne of Newmarket, Ont.

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Terradyne president Durward Smith did not immediately respond to e-mail and telephone requests for comment from The Globe.

Ms. Freeland's predecessor at Global Affairs, Stéphane Dion, vowed in April, 2016 that he would cancel export permits to a given country if the equipment was being used "in any human-rights abuses."

Global Affairs said Friday that it is now probing the matter.

Mr. Babcock, the Global Affairs spokesman, added that the "end use and end user of [military] exports, as well as regional stability and human rights, are essential considerations in the authorization of permits for the export of military goods from Canada."

This move by Global Affairs follows Ottawa's statement Thursday that criticized Saudi Arabia over the conflict in the al-Qatif region of the country.

"Canada is concerned by the escalating violence in eastern Saudi Arabia, which has resulted in civilian and security-force casualties. We recognize that Saudi Arabia faces security challenges, but we urge local authorities to work with all communities to defuse tensions. All such challenges must be addressed in a manner that abides by international human-rights law," the Canadian government said.

Al-Qatif has long been described by experts as an area under lockdown. It's a hotbed of opposition to the reigning House of Saud and the Saudis frequently cite terror threats when they go after the area's militants.

The Globe and Mail has previously written about Terradyne's export of armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia – machines that are advertised with options such as gun turrets and remote weapons systems. Photos of what military equipment experts identify as Terradyne Gurkhas have for several years now turned up in Mideast media coverage of a demonstration exercise

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by Saudi special forces, in stories on Saudi border posts embroiled in Riyadh's war with Yemen and elsewhere.

It's difficult to prove the videos and photos were shot in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, but in two cases activists circulating the footage were able to demonstrate with other photos that the backdrop in the clips matches street scenes in the area.

Amnesty International Canada secretary-general Alex Neve called on Canada to stop armoured-vehicle exports to Saudi Arabia, including the \$15-billion deal to supply Riyadh with light armoured vehicles (LAVs) equipped with machine guns and anti-tank cannons that are being produced in London, Ont., by defence contractor General Dynamics Land Systems.

"Indications that Canadian-made armoured vehicles are perhaps being utilized as Saudi forces mobilize in the east of the country highlight how crucial it is that the government intervene and put an immediate end to the Canadian/Saudi LAV deal," Mr. Neve said.

Conservative foreign affairs critic Peter Kent said Friday that an investigation now is necessary – and called on the Liberals to terminate export permits if there is "hard evidence" the Canadian weaponized armoured vehicles are being used against Saudi Arabia's Shia minority.

"The government should respond to tangible evidence," Mr. Kent told The Globe. "If there is evidence, we expect the government to act and to suspend and to terminate those contracts."

When the former Harper government first struck the \$15-billion deal in 2014 – the largest advanced manufacturing export contract in Canadian history – Mr. Kent said the end-user conditions were contingent on Saudi Arabia not using the light-armored vehicles against its own civilian population.

After the Liberals came into power in 2015, Mr. Dion signed off on export permits to approve the shipment of the LAVs based on an assessment that the Saudis would not use the armoured vehicles against civilians but to defend the country from attacks from terror groups such as the Islamic State.

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Mr. Kent said cancelling the General Dynamics contract at its London, Ont., plant would result in significant job losses, but he said it is a price worth paying.

“We know there is a consideration of domestic employment jobs here in Canada but that should not be a factor if there is a violation of the end-user conditions in the original contract,” Mr. Kent said.

NDP MP Charlie Angus, who is running for the party leadership, joined the Conservatives in urging the Liberal government to cancel the contract.

“The Canadian people were told this contract was strictly for peacekeeping and they are using them against civilian populations, so there is no reason that this contract should continue,” Mr. Angus said. “We should not be kissing up to the Saudi regime.”

Mr. Angus said the issue is also a test of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's credibility as an international actor, who portrays himself as a leader who promotes peace.

“We are in major arms promotions with the Saudis who have destabilized so much of the Middle East. How can people take us seriously as an actor for any kind of reconciliation or peace building in that region when they are making deals like this?” he said. “They have a deplorable human-rights record but our Prime Minister seems to think they are good business partners.”

Saudi Arabian officials have argued that military purchases that it makes from Canada, such as the \$15-billion deal to supply Riyadh with General Dynamics vehicles, should be seen as a goodwill gesture by the Islamic kingdom to cement its friendship with Canada.

The Saudis have also denied the authenticity of reports that show older Canadian-made combat vehicles taking part in the bloody civil war in Yemen – a use for the machines that was not contemplated when Canada sold them to Saudi Arabia to maintain internal security.

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The most recent conflict in Eastern Province began to flare up in early 2017, when Saudi Arabia sought to raze a minority Shia Muslim neighbourhood in al-Qatif. Al-Masora, a 400-year-old walled quarter in Awamia, a village in the al-Qatif region bordering the Persian Gulf, has been a flashpoint in the conflict between Saudi Arabia's ruling Sunni Muslim majority and its tiny, disenfranchised Shia minority.

The Saudi government has said it wants to remove and redevelop the ancient neighbourhood of al-Masora for health and safety reasons. Shia activists, however, say the Saudis wanted to eliminate a hideout for militants trying to avoid police. The quarter's narrow streets, for example, thwarted the passage of combat vehicles that authorities use to control Awamia.

United Nations human-rights monitors, including a Canadian expert, recently condemned Saudi Arabia's use of force in Awamia and called for an end to the teardown. The group includes Leilani Farha, a Canadian who serves as the UN's special rapporteur on adequate housing.

Al-Qatif featured prominently in a 2016 national debate over Canada's sale of \$15-billion in combat vehicles to Saudi Arabia. Back then, The Globe [published](#) footage showing Riyadh's forces using armoured vehicles against civilians. Those vehicles were not Canadian-made, but they demonstrated the Saudis's proclivity to use such weapons against their people.

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