



ARMS IN ACADEMIA

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MODERN
UK DEFENCE INDUSTRY

Elliot Murphy



ROUTLEDGE



Arms in Academia

This book studies how the arms trade has continued to receive generous state subsidies, along with less direct forms of financial and intellectual support from academia in the UK. It examines the ways in which arms dealing has contributed to the violation of human rights in the Middle East, North Africa, South America, Indochina and other regions of intense conflict, and in doing so, reveals how the industry sells a particular image of itself to the public.

The volume:

- Extensively covers the arms trade and its impact across the world.
- Shows how the UK arms trade has developed research, investment and consultancy links with universities, museums and other public institutions.
- Discusses the future of the arms trade and explores alternatives in terms of job opportunities, economic growth and academic research criteria.

A major intervention in international politics, this volume will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of military and strategic studies, international relations, human rights and the social sciences in general. It will also be of interest to policy analysts and defence professionals.

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Arms in Academia

The Political Economy of the
Modern UK Defence Industry

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First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Murphy, Elliot, 1991– author.

Title: Arms in academia : the political economy of the modern UK defence industry / Elliot Murphy.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020013801 (print) | LCCN 2020013802 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367509439 (hardback) | ISBN 9781003083962 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Defense industries—Great Britain. | Academic—industrial collaboration—Great Britain. | Research, Industrial—Great Britain. | Military—industrial complex—Great Britain.

Classification: LCC HD9743.G72 M87 2021 (print) | LCC HD9743.G72 (ebook) | DDC 338.4/735500941—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020013801>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020013802>

ISBN: 978-0-367-50943-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-08396-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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1 Introduction

The Chinese do not adopt either our theoretical or our practical ethic. They admit in theory that there are occasions when it is proper to fight, and in practice that these occasions are rare; whereas we hold in theory that there are no occasions when it is proper to fight and in practice that such occasions are very frequent.

Bertrand Russell (1999: 538)

In an age of Brexit and perennial Conservative dominance of the UK state, the British defence industry has typically managed to fly under the radar and remain clear of the headlines through lending itself an air of ethical credibility. This remarkable feat has been achieved through a careful integration into public institutions such as universities and museums via sponsorships, research programmes and graduate schemes – often with the taxpayer’s assistance. This book explores how the arms trade has continued to receive generous state subsidies, along with less direct forms of financial, labour and intellectual support from academia and other little-known sources. Together with briefly surveying the economic and political dynamics of how the industry sells a particular image of itself to the public, I will discuss a number of recent case studies in which the arms trade has contributed to the violation of human rights across the globe.

As Sam Walton from Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) has told me: ‘If you look at everything Oxfam do, the arms trade fuels the need for them to do it’. It will be argued here that the close relationship between ministers and the bosses of the arms trade also compromises the government’s ability to properly enforce its own export licensing laws – something which has directly contributed to escalating violence in the Middle East, North Africa, South America, Indochina and other regions of intense conflict. Through exploring these issues, one particular question will recur: How can Britain claim to be a promotor of human rights when its defence industry is deeply beholden to the needs of repressive states? Addressing closely related issues, Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, said in 2015 that human rights did not maintain the ‘profile’ the Foreign Office that

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they had ‘in the past’. Instead, the Conservatives’ ‘prosperity agenda’ was the priority (Wright 2015).

Discussing these topics requires a certain amount of context. For instance, after the 2016 Brexit vote, senior ministers at once announced their intentions to increase the value of arms and defence equipment in attempts to remain competitive. Naturally, Britain now aims to cement new relationships with non-European Union states. The difficulties arise over which states, and since the Brexit vote, many authoritarian and often dictatorial regimes have been in the government’s sights. The Conservative government cleared export licenses worth £2.9 billion in the 12 months after June 2016 to 35 countries rated ‘not free’ by the think-tank Freedom House; a 28% increase on the previous 12 months (Milmo 2018). Among these states are Equatorial Guinea, widely considered deeply corrupt and repressive, and Azerbaijan, accused by a number of human rights groups of conducting a campaign against freedom of speech and for which £1 million in arms licenses were granted. This is part of a more general push – made explicit by the government – to prioritise arms sales in Britain’s post-Brexit future, with former Defence Secretary Michael Fallon vowing that Britain would ‘spread its wings across the world’ at DSEI, a major arms fair in September 2017 (Dearden 2017). Liam Fox made visits to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait within the first few months into his appointment as International Trade Secretary in 2016; arms were very likely on the agenda. A year later, Fox announced that the UK and the Philippines far-right President Rodrigo Duterte had ‘shared values’ at the same time that human rights groups were condemning Duterte’s sanctioning of extra-judicial killings (Osborne 2017). Duterte has personally threatened to bomb schools preaching communism and regularly supports extra-judicial killings, making the ‘shared values’ comment somewhat understandable, given the UK’s recent history of Middle East and African interventions.

But leaving the EU, as the NGO Saferworld notes, ‘could result in a concomitant drift in the UK’s strategic trade controls away from the shared principles and practices that have underpinned the progressive development of controls across the EU for the past 25 years’ (Saferworld 2017). The organisation adds that with the pressure to forge new relationships and maximise revenue, ‘there is a very real risk that the UK Government may subordinate rigorous arms transfer controls in favour of export promotion’. In early 2017, the Minister for Exiting the European Union, David Jones, met with leaders from firms such as Airbus, Badcock, BAE Systems, Boeing, Lockheed Martin UK, MBDA UK, QinetiQ, Raytheon, Serco and Thales UK and declared: ‘The UK is a leader in defence technology and one of the world’s largest defence exporters. We are determined that this industry . . . will continue to thrive after our departure from the EU’ (The Staggers 2017). While the government formally declares to the UN that ‘Yemen remains a concern’ (Human Rights Council 34: ‘UK statement in response to the report by the High [Commissioner] for Human Rights’, 9 March 2017, gov.

uk), the level of concern expressed does not appear to motivate any action such as cutting ties with the war's major architect; rather, 'concern' leads to state visits from Saudi leaders. As David Wearing documents in *AngloArabia* (2018), alliances with the Gulf states are central to Britain's post-Brexit economic strategy and its aims of maintaining its global status.

It is not simply profit from arms sales which motivates Britain's continued friendship with the Gulf states (a common assumption held amongst anti-arms trade activist circles); more broadly, the motivating factors include the fact that military and business alliances contribute greatly to power projection, and that Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours sit on nearly 30% of the world's known oil reserves. Bolstering economic and diplomatic relationships through serving the military demands of the Gulf states helps Britain retain a degree of strategic control in the region. Prime Minister Theresa May's husband's Capital Group is the biggest shareholder in BAE Systems, with the connections between the state and the arms trade being extensive and little-known to the public. Arms exports are responsible for 1.6% of total UK exports in value, yet they receive 50% of export credit via loans or guarantees, assisted by the taxpayer ('UK Export Finance Annual Report and Accounts 2016 to 2017', 18 July 2017, gov.uk); meanwhile, international trade secretary Liam Fox has declared how he would 'personally lead on helping the defence and security industries to export' (Ministerial portfolios confirmed at Department for International Trade, 4 August 2016, gov.uk).

As parts of the following chapters will explore, the Conservative government's foreign policy has increasingly been driven to extremes since the Brexit vote, escalating its use of troops and drone strikes in at least seven covert wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia. It is conducting operations here without any democratic oversight. In Syria, the UK began training Syrian rebels from Jordanian bases in 2012, and by 2016, they were dressing as insurgent fighters and engaging in raids against the Isis forces while also providing weapons and equipment to the New Syrian Army. In Iraq, UK troops have recently been engaged in covert operations against the Isis forces while British Reaper drones have been deployed in the country since 2014. In Libya, since 2016, Special Air Service (SAS) forces have been secretly deployed to work with Jordanian special forces, partly to gather intelligence on Isis, and British commandos have also directed assaults on Libyan frontlines from a base in Misrata. In Yemen, British forces have recently been training Yemeni troops fighting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and assisting with drone strikes against AQAP, while RAF Menwith Hill, Yorkshire, assists the US in its illegal drone programme in the country. In Afghanistan, despite the government claiming in 2014 that its drone air strikes programme had ended in the country, it was reported in 2015 that UK special forces were calling in air strikes using US drones. Finally, in Pakistan and Somalia, US drone strikes are conducted via RAF Menwith Hill, and the UK's Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) aids the US with locational intelligence (see also Murphy

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2012). In July 2016, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon told Parliament that the government is ‘committed to the convention that before troops are committed to combat the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter’ (Fallon 2016). There is no evidence to support this claim.

The Royal Navy very openly declares its goals of ‘stabilising hotspots’ and controlling resource-rich regions (MoD Royal Navy 2018). Without the hindrance of the consultation and review processes associated with the EU Dual-Use Regulation, the EU Torture Regulation and the EU Firearms Regulation, the UK might seek to push unethical arms sales. Indeed, in September 2016 Prime Minister Theresa May hosted the Emir of Qatar, declaring his country a ‘natural partner’, not long after British firms visited the Gulf state for the Milipol 2016 exhibition, selling arms and ‘defence’ equipment (Curtis 2016). Britain’s arms exports are currently valued around the same as its exports in beverages, and there are no signs of its commitment to the industry dwindling. The trade body ADS (representing British aerospace, defence, security and space industries) estimates that Britain’s defence industry generates £23 billion per year, with £5.9 billion of this being in exports (Wipfler 2017). Due to the potential risks to the UK economy post-Brexit, the government is keen to push arms sales to ensure that this sector (if not certain others) remain profitable and secure. British and European analysts have concluded since 2016 to the present day that ‘the defence sector overall . . . will have a significant role in containing the potential damage from the Brexit decision’ (de France et al. 2017: 3) – where ‘damage’ carries the meaning of negatively impacting big business and state-corporate interests in the UK. It is unlikely that the UK will be given access to future defence research funding from the European Defence Fund, and so the need for successful arms licenses for UK firms to international clients becomes more vivid.

Some recent claims in left-wing political literature have underestimated the power and threat of the post-Brexit UK arms trade. For instance, Dorling and Tomlinson in *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* claim that because a Saudi-BAE Systems deal from 2017 was slow to materialise, this warrants the general conclusion that ‘the British now try but fail’ to ‘excel’ in arms deals. ‘So much for arms’, they add (2019: chapter 4). The following chapters will present a rather more energetic picture of current arms sales to human rights abusers, exploring cases which have been given scant or zero media attention.

In the parliamentary world, ministers are also willing to give certain dubious answers to the country’s elected representatives when asked about the government’s foreign policy. For instance, the government claimed a number of times in 2016 and 2017 that Britain is ‘not a party’ to the conflict in Yemen (Tobias Ellwood, 16 January 2017, Q&A on parliament.uk), despite its direct interests in aiding the Saudi-led coalition, and that ‘[t]he Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does not record reported number of civilian casualties, injured or displaced’ (Tobias Ellwood, 10 October 2016, Q&A on parliament.uk). The government continues to insist that ‘there can

be no military solution to the conflict and we fully support the UN Special Envoy for Yemen in facilitating a credible peace process'; these statements are made while military solutions to the conflict are encouraged through the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states involved in the conflict (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, 29 October 2018, answer to written question HL10736 on parliament.uk). The government also declares that it is 'extremely concerned at recent reports of the growing risk of famine to millions of Yemenis' (Ibid.); another statement made while weapons sold to the Gulf states intensify the famine. A typical argument from government ministers is that strategic security requirements will, on occasion, force the government to maintain an arms industry even if it may be in some ways uneconomic. Yet the maintenance of a secure homeland need not be the job of an arms industry as large and powerful as Britain's – a much smaller industry, wedded to ethical sales criteria, could perform the same strategic function.

Relatedly, the UK Attorney General, Jeremy Wright QC, revealed to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in January 2017 that the UK should evolve its military strategy to the point that it reserves the right to use force internationally 'without nailing down the specific target and timing of an attack' (Attorney General's speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 11 January, gov.uk). In the same month the Ministry of Defence Minister Mike Penning failed to note that the UK has covert forces working in Libya when asked about UK operations in the country (Mike Penning, 16 January 2017, Q&A on parliament.uk), an activity in breach of UN Resolution 1970 of 2011 requiring an arms embargo on the country which includes the provision of technical assistance and training. It also emerged in early 2017 that the government refused to discontinue bomb sales to Saudi Arabia even after it was advised to do so by the top civil servant in charge of weapons exports control (Fisher 2017); Edward Bell told the Business Secretary Sajid Javid it would be 'prudent and cautious' to suspend munitions sales to the country after numerous reports of war crimes being committed in Yemen – to no avail. North Africa, the Gulf and the Middle East are unusually volatile regions, and as such, ministers should be cautious in selling arms to places where weaponry frequently ends up in the hands of people they were not intended for. Consider UK arms sales to the Iranian Shah in the 1970s, which fell into the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 revolution, or Iraq in 2014, when Isis took over vast swathes of the country and looted extensive weapons stores. The arms trade is so extraordinarily vital to the UK government because, as Cobain (2016) points out, '[o]nly the British are perpetually at war'; for over a century, not even the US, France or Russia have military forces that are constantly engaged in operations somewhere in the world.

None of this is to say that arms exports are in principle unethical. Throughout the post-Brexit months, the UK rightly licensed £900,000 worth of protective equipment to South Sudan, gripped by vicious tribal

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conflict, enabling United Nations and NGO personnel to operate (caat.org.uk). Approximately £14 million worth of bomb-detection equipment was licensed to Afghanistan, and most of the £1.5 million of firearms and equipment licensed to Djibouti were for anti-piracy measures. Yet, a considerable number of licenses are approved for non-humanitarian means. Repressive state clients perform a number of important functions for the UK; buying arms, hosting military bases, investing in British industries, aiding in power projection, and so forth. The reasons why these often fly under the radar of the public's attention will be the major topic of this book. By establishing rich, friendly connections with a number of public and quasi-public bodies (in particular universities), the defence industry has managed to cloud many of its practices in scientific-sounding (and, therefore, progressive-sounding) developments like *aerospace*, *automation*, *artificial intelligence*, and so forth; all of which, in a military context, are code words for *arms*. This book will explore the little-known connections the UK arms trade has with sectors of society typically used to boost its professional or ethical image.

Support for the modern UK arms trade often comes from unlikely sources. A favourite of science undergraduates and the curious-minded, *New Scientist* magazine has long been an excellent, accessible source of cutting-edge information about engineering, physics, astronomy, biology and neuroscience. Despite its popularity and credibility, its obsession with technological advances often serves to cloud its ethical judgements, focusing on the fast and sleek over the ultimate uses certain machinery might have. Its regular reports about the latest drone technology are a case in point. In the autumn of 2017, it reached new heights of technophilia. The UK arms firm BAE Systems was a major sponsor of the New Scientist Live festival (touted as 'the world's most exciting festival of ideas'), with the editors and organisers showing no concern that this might compromise their ethical credibility. Even if it was made out of genuine ignorance and not cynical greed, the decision to accept a major sponsorship from BAE Systems – a firm involved in selling arms to a number of authoritarian clients, as documented in the following chapters – allowed the arms firm to piggyback off the good, progressive reputation of other firms involved in the event. For the duration of the festival, BAE Systems was not an unethical arms supplier of tyrants and torturers. It was a fellow traveller on the road to scientific wonder and discovery, entranced by the cosmos rather than the prospect of million-pound fighter jet deals. Social responsibility was carefully groomed as its main concern, not corporate expansion and the maximisation of market share.

Only two weeks before New Scientist Live, the ExCel Centre where it was held also hosted the world's largest arms fair. BAE Systems was present at both events, but for quite different purposes. Deals with repressive Gulf regimes were soon forgotten as the science festival opened its doors. BAE Systems is also often present at state-held and corporate events in places like the London Transport Museum, the British Museum and the Science Museum, typically due to substantial sponsorships. Throughout autumn of

2018, the ExCel Centre's main auditorium contained an advertisement for Saudi Tourism (sauditourism.sa) with a sweeping view of the desert and the statement 'Saudi Arabia: Enrichening experience' printed over it. These may seem like purely anecdotal examples, but as the following chapters will detail, the links between oppressive states, the UK arms trade and UK public institutions are becoming increasingly rich.

The arms trade is also inherently linked to UK foreign policy. Many of the twentieth century's largest bloodbaths have been carried out in secret, and the UK's exploits are no exception. In April 2012, it was revealed that thousands of documents recording Britain's crimes against humanity were destroyed to prevent their exposure by post-independent governments (Cobain et al. 2012). The 8,800 surviving papers from 37 former colonies were transferred to a secret Foreign Office archive at Hanslope Park, 55 miles north of London, safe from the prying eyes of the public. This cautious act, typical of violent and unaccountable states, was clearly in breach of legal commitments for the files to be transferred to the public domain. This was well understood by Iain Macleod, secretary of state for the colonies, who in 1961 ordered that any papers which 'might embarrass Her Majesty's government', 'embarrass members of the police, military forces, public servants or others eg police informers', or that might be 'used unethically by ministers in the successor government', be systematically destroyed. When a file selected for destruction was to be removed from a group of files to be kept in place, a 'twin file' (or a dummy) was put in its place (Cobain et al. 2012). The UK has maintained the standards of transparency and honesty it displayed in April 1908, when during an international scandal over conditions in the Belgian Congo,

a report on forced labour in Kenya arrived in London that had noted in the margin, 'It must on no account be published'. An official who read the report observed, 'One might almost say that there is no atrocity in the Congo – except mutilation – which cannot be matched by our Protectorate'.

(Newsinger 2006: 184)

Along with sponsorships purchasing ethical credibility, arms firms also have a number of consultancy and research links with major universities. Universities bolster the arms trade's ethical and social credibility in a variety of ways. For instance, members of the Disarm Strathclyde student group at Strathclyde University objected in June 2017 to the institution granting Nigel Whitehead, the group managing director of BAE Systems, an honorary degree, since they claimed he was 'complicit in war and human rights violations'. The institution recognised Whitehead for his 'exceptional service to engineering, education and skills' (Learmonth 2017). Earlier in the month, the university had signed a 'strategic framework agreement' with the firm to 'strengthen a long-term relationship in research, education and

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consultancy', likely leading to the university contributing to the 'development of lasers, intelligent automation systems, rapid integration and manufacturing, design simulation', according to the university announcement. Strathclyde University have also invested £136,985 in BAE and £122,584 in Cobham (Geoghegan 2016). An investigation by the BBC uncovered only a few months earlier that BAE had secretly sold advanced surveillance technology through its Dutch subsidiary to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Morocco and Algeria during the Arab Spring; technology often used against student campaigners.

After establishing an essential geopolitical and economic context in the initial chapters, this book will document recently emerging findings concerning the strong links between academia and the arms trade. As we will see, it is becoming increasingly common for British universities to accept hundreds of thousands of pounds from the world's largest defence contractors to aid them in the development of advanced military hardware. As other sources of funding disappear (partly due to Brexit, with the EU being the source of numerous scientific funding programmes, but also due to government cutbacks), science departments are becoming beholden to the needs of their defence funders and sponsors. From 2015 to 2018, 15 universities with leading engineering departments have received nearly £40 million in grants from contractors, according to figures released from a recent Freedom of Information request (Doward and Bennett 2018). Many of the firms involved are often engaged in publicly beneficial aerospace work, but many others are involved in less benevolent activities. The University of Leeds has an ongoing collaboration with Rolls-Royce to create diagnostic and prognostic systems contributing to reducing the cost of submarine ownership to the British government. At the University of Bristol, Boeing (manufacturer of the Apache attack helicopter, amongst other things) funds scholarships and internship for students, some of whom are working directly on a drone project. BAE Systems contributed £30,000 to a project at the University of Portsmouth on 'understanding the moral component of conflict'. A clear market dynamic emerges here: Major advances in telecommunications, flatscreen televisions and internet technology emerged from quasi-public institutions funded by the defence industry. But the UK government also subsidises the arms trade, with both the state and the defence industry pushing for further military involvement in university life. What universities need are consistent and steady ethical funding sources, not complicity in unethical (and often illegal) arms sales.

The reasons for these connections are manifold. Among them are several myths sustained by the arms trade to keep the public (and academic departments) on a high-alert level against looming military threats. Much of the British public fears existential threats which can seemingly only be combatted via increased defence spending. The arms trade has become a natural accessory to the manipulation of public fear levels (Holden 2017). Right-wing elements of the government are of course responsible for drumming up

irrational fear levels, but the radical left also bears considerable blame for often over-dramatising the threats to civilisation; ideas which can indirectly feed back into support for a strong, expanded defence network.

As the following chapters will explore, the moral logic of arms sales used both in academia and in Whitehall is strikingly similar to that adopted by illicit, criminal organisations. The argument goes as follows: If we do not sell Saudi Arabia advanced weaponry, somebody else will, and so it would be foolish to miss out (a similar logic is used by drug dealers). Since 2010, the UK has licensed over £10 billion worth of arms to repressive regimes and dictatorships, including £7.3 billion worth to states on the Foreign Office's 'countries of concern' list (caat.org.uk). Even as the Scottish *Sunday Mail* obtained footage of war crimes being committed against a college in Sana'a, Yemen, using British bombs, UK ministers were reluctant to address any human rights concerns surrounding arms sales. Then, as Britain became the world's second biggest arms dealer as of September 2016 (beaten only by the US), much of the mainstream media continued to sideline Britain's role in supporting the illegal bombing of Yemen. Little fuss was made over the news that from 2010, the government had approved the sale of arms to 22 of the 30 countries on its own human rights 'countries of concern' watch list (caat.org.uk). Reports of human rights abuses in Yemen were met by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson with a cautiously ambiguous claim that no 'clear breach' had occurred (Wintour 2016a). Johnson did not offer a definition of this phrase, but in Whitehall's lexicon, this typically means that a breach has in fact occurred but that insufficient pressure has been placed on the government to respond to the crisis and so, in effect, it can continue to feign concern while continuing to license arms to the Saudi-led bombing campaign. Though displaying an intense lack of concern for Britain's humanitarian credentials, Johnson was simply continuing a policy outlined by his predecessor, Philip Hammond, who, when the Saudi bombing campaign began in early 2015, said: 'We'll support the Saudis in every practical way short of engaging in combat' (Sabbagh 2020). The British minister may well have had the following information from in mind when defending an otherwise morally indefensible industry (Coughlin 2016):

Apart from maintaining traditional links on military and intelligence cooperation, [Saudi Foreign Minister] Jubeir also said post-Brexit Britain could look forward to forging new trade links with the kingdom as Saudi Arabia embarks on its ambitious plan to restructure its economy under a plan called Saudi Vision 2030. 'We are looking at more than \$2 trillion worth of investment opportunities over the next decade, and this will take the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Britain to an entirely new level post-Brexit'.

Why make an effort to halt the bombing of schools and overcrowded hospitals when new business ventures loom on the horizon?

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The largely ignored role of non-military public industries in supporting (directly or otherwise) the standard market dynamic of these arms sales will be a core theme of this book. A brief review of the UK's major arms markets will be followed by an exploration of the economic dynamics of the industry and a comprehensive review of the role that universities (and also other public bodies like museums) play in supporting the defence sector. The explicit focus will be on modern developments in the new millennium (mostly in the 2010s and 2020s), although a small number of post-World War II events will be discussed for contextual support. Although academic connections with the arms trade will be used as the key component in developing an understanding of the myriad ways the industry boosts its image, this will not be our sole focus, with the following chapters also exploring in equal depth the historical and political context of major arms deals between the UK and human-rights-abusing clients. Finally, an overview of potential future directions for the arms trade will be discussed.