



# Westminster Round-up | October 2018

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## In Brief

Westminster's October agendas were once again dominated by discussions on the value and impact of the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia. This month, it was of course in the context of the disappearance and alleged murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Members in the House of Lords and Commons expressed deep discomfort at the UK's continuous relationship with Saudi Arabia in the face of the assassination, most controversially arms transfers that have been linked to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen. While Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt promised that, if a connection was to be proven between Saudi leadership and the assassination "we will react accordingly", he proved unwilling to clarify what exactly the consequences would be, and by the end of October, no significant repercussions had been implemented.

The death of Khashoggi comes, coincidentally, in the aftermath of a report recently commissioned by the Remote Warfare Programme and written by the *Policy Institute at King's*. This report concluded that the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia does not offer the influence over political decision-making that is so often used as the reason to stay close to the Kingdom, in spite of their human rights abuses. It seems that the death of Khashoggi is a case in point, revealing the extent to which Saudi Arabia is not willing to receive lectures by Western states. A lesson we learnt all too recently from [the response the Canadian government received by Saudi diplomats](#) when it dared to criticise the regime for its appalling record on human rights. You can find the report written by the *Policy Institute at King's* [here](#).

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## Focus Points

### House of Commons

#### | 22.10.18 | Operations against IS continue

The Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has clarified that operations against IS in Iraq and Syria will not lessen, even though the group has [lost most of the territory it previously held](#). He also promised that the Ministry of Defence would assist DFID in the reconstruction after the conflict. We analysed some of the political effects of the UK's work in Syria and Iraq in our [recent report](#).

#### | 22.10.18 | MPs debate Jamal Khashoggi's death and the UK relationship with Saudi Arabia.

In a debate on the death of Jamal Khashoggi, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt clarified that the UK's strong ties with Saudi Arabia will ensure that any official response will be considered carefully. The killing of the journalist appears to be in direct conflict with Britain's recent recommitment to upholding the rules-based international system. And if the UK is not seen to act proportionately—or especially in light of retaliatory action the UK deployed against Russia in response to the Salisbury attack—it could undermine a key part of the UK's current foreign policy. It is unclear what exactly the UK government will do in response to confirmation of Saudi actions. In response to a requested clarification from Emily Thornberry, Mr Hunt emphasised that staying close to Saudi Arabia will be the best opportunity for the UK to influence their actions—an argument that is rather shaky following the Khashoggi affair but also does

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not hold up to scrutiny, as demonstrated by the recent [report](#) published by the King's College Policy Institute.

### **| 29.10.18 | Defence Budget Boost**

As part of Philip Hammond's Budget, he announced that the Ministry of Defence would receive a cash injection of £1bn. This was on top of the £800m that had already been allocated over the summer. The announcement represented a political victory for the Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson, but still falls short of the recommended 3% of GDP that the House of Commons Defence Committee recommended [in its report in June 2018](#). A commitment that would bring defence spending up to £60bn per annum. The projected defence budget for 2018/19 is £37.5bn.

### **| 30.10.18 | Foreign Secretary questioned on human rights in Saudi Arabia**

Jeremy Hunt was questioned by MPs about his discussions on human rights with his Saudi counterparts in the aftermath of the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the arrest of 17 Filipino women, for participating in a Halloween party. Mr Hunt repeated his stance that the close relationship with the Saudi's allows the UK to hold the Kingdom to account.

### **| 30.10.18 | Alistair Burt continues to defend arms sales to Saudi Arabia**

In response to questions, including an unusually provocative one on the Minister's feeling of personal guilt for Yemeni deaths, Minister for the Middle East Alistair Burt defended UK support to Saudi Arabia, stating that each arms license is carefully considered and that Yemenis must be defended against the Houthis attempting to overthrow the legitimate government.

## House of Lords

### **| 09.10.18 | Khashoggi's disappearance and its impact on Saudi relation discussed in House of Lords**

Baroness Goldie led the discussion and emphasised that the government is very concerned about media reports on Khashoggi's disappearance and (at the time suspected) murder, yet until details had been confirmed, public condemnation of the attack should be careful as Saudi Arabia constitutes an incredibly important partner for the UK.

### **| 23.10.18 | UK relationship with Saudi Arabia challenged by Lords**

After an update on the Khashoggi killing, several Lords questioned the UK's relationship with the Kingdom in the face of the assassination of the journalist, as well as its actions in Yemen, the kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime Minister, and the persecution of women protesting for their rights. Several Lords echoed the [report](#) recently commissioned by RWP which found that as the UK-Saudi relationship relies primarily on unidirectional arms sales to SA, and that the UK does not have as much influence over Saudi domestic and foreign policy as it claims.

## Committee News

### **| 17.10.18 | Gavin Williamson gives evidence to the Defence Committee following NATO summit**

During the evidence session, questions focused on contracts as well as recruitment and retention of soldiers. The evidence session was meant to also answer questions on the now-stalled MDP, yet the session was an unexpectedly short one. Nevertheless, the session displayed a desire by both the MoD and the MPs in the committee to prove value for investments in the spirit of the MDP, which RWP have written extensively on [here](#).

### **| 30.10.18 | ORG's Marwa Baabbad gives evidence to International Development Committee on Yemen**

Along with Jan Egeland, the Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, and Dina El-Mamoun, the Head of Advocacy and Policy in Yemen at Oxfam, Marwa - ORG's own Project Manager for Yemen - gave evidence on the humanitarian aid provided to Yemen by the British government, arguing that it is not only humanitarian efforts that are needed, but a wider response from civil society as well.

## **Government Announcements**

### **| 22.10.18 | MOD launches new study into mental health of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans**

Following practices set up after the First Gulf War and the Falkland War, the new study will examine causes of deaths among veterans, including rates of suicide for all personnel who deployed between 2001-2014. The [RWP has called for more openness](#) about the mental health effects of overstretching on British Special Forces, since a similar study in Australia – dubbed the

Cromptvoets report after its main author – found that such overstretching had led to significant alleged transgressions.

## | 25.10.18 | All UK military roles now open to women

This historic announcement was made in late October. The change will allow women who are already serving the army to transfer into infantry roles, while new recruits can start training in April next year. The military is not expecting a large amount of applications from women, yet the policy change will offer equal opportunities not previously offered.

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### About the Author

**Megan Karlshøj-Pedersen** is a Research and Policy Assistant at ORG's Remote Warfare Programme. She supports the team's research on changes in military engagement, as well as their work with Parliament and policy-makers. Her research interests include international security, armed groups, and sub-national conflict analysis.

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