

Is Canada's Minister of Defence an Arms Pusher?

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Global Research, May 14, 2019

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Would it surprise you to learn that Canada's minister of defence is an arms pusher?

Last Friday members of Mouvement Québécois pour la Paix [interrupted](#) a \$135-a-plate luncheon to confront defence minister Harjit Sajjan. At an event sponsored by SNC Lavalin, Bombardier, Rio Tinto, etc., [we called](#) for cutting military spending, for Canada to withdraw from NATO and an end to weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.

While Sajjan's responsibility for NATO and military spending are straightforward, his role in fueling the Saudi led war in Yemen is less obvious. But, the Department of National Defence (DND) plays a substantial role in Canadian arms exports to Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

As he did the [last three years](#), Sajjan is set to speak at the CANSEC arms bazar in Ottawa later this month. For more than two decades the annual Canadian Association of Defence and Security Industries (CADSI) conference has brought together representatives of arms companies, DND, Canadian Forces (CF), various other arms of the federal government and dozens of foreign governments. In 2018 more than [11,000 people](#) attended the two-day conference, including 16 MPs and senators and many generals and admirals.

The corporation supplying Saudi Arabia with more than \$10 billion in Light Armoured Vehicles produces the same LAVs for the CF. In a 2012 Canadian Military History article Frank Maas writes, "[the CF](#) has continued to purchase LAVs because they have been successful in the field, and they support a domestic producer, General Dynamics Land Systems Canada (GDLS-C), that cooperates closely with the military." GDLS' London, Ontario, operations exist largely because of interventionist military industrial policy. A 2013 Federal government report on "[Leveraging Defence](#) Procurement Through Key Industrial Capabilities" lists GDLS as one of three "Canadian Defence Industry Success Stories."

Beyond contracts, subsidies and various other forms of support to Canadian weapons makers, DND has long promoted arms exports. Its website highlights different forms of support to arms exporters. "[Learn how](#) the Department of National Defence can assist in connecting Canadian industry to foreign markets", explains one section. Another notes: "Learn how the Department of National Defence keeps Canadian companies informed of business opportunities at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)."

Based in 30 diplomatic posts around the world (with cross-accreditation to many neighbouring countries), Canadian Defence Attachés promote military exports. According to DND's website, Defence Attachés assist "[Canadian defence](#) manufacturers in understanding and accessing foreign defence markets ... facilitate Canadian industry access to relevant officials within the Ministries of Defence of accredited countries ... support Canadian industry at key defence industry events in accredited countries ... raise awareness in

accredited countries of Canadian defence industrial capabilities ... provide reports on accredited country defence budget information, items of interest, and trade issues to Canadian industry.”

Representatives of DND often talk up Canadian military equipment as part of delegations to international arms fairs such as the [UK's Defence Security and Equipment International](#) exhibition. According to a FrontLine Defence story titled “[Representing](#) Canada in the UAE IDEX”, representatives of DND helped 50 Canadian arms companies flog their wares at the Abu Dhabi-based International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in February. To help the companies move their wares at the largest arms fair in the Middle East, Commander of the Bahrain-based Combined Task Force 150, Commodore Darren Garnier, [led a Canadian](#) military delegation to IDEX.

International ports visits by naval frigates are sometimes designed to spur arms sales. Lieutenant Bruce Fenton writes, “Canadian warships can serve as venues for trade initiatives, as examples of Canadian technology, and as visible symbols of Canadian interest in a country or region. In countries where relationships are built over time, as is the case with many Asian and Middle Eastern countries, a visit by a Canadian warship can be an important part of a dialogue that can lead to commercial opportunities for Canadian industry.”

To get a sense of the interaction between the various components of the military industrial complex, the FrontLine Defence story detailing Canada’s participation in IDEX was written by Brett Boudreau. His byline notes that he “[is a retired](#)CAF Colonel, a Fellow with the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, and former Director of Marketing and Communications at CADSI.” Boudreau’s trajectory — from the CF, to arms industry spokesperson, to [militarist think tank](#), to writing for a militarist publication — is a stark example of one individual moving through the various components of the military industrial complex. But Boudreau is not unique. It is common for retired CF and DND officials to take up arms industry posts, including senior positions. It wouldn’t be surprising if Sajjan ended up on the board of an arms company after he leaves politics.

Harjit Sajjan heads a ministry intimately tied to a globally oriented corporate weapons industry that profits from war. Is this something Canadians understand and support? Or would the majority of us be upset to learn their Minister of Defence is an arms pusher, promoting sales to anti-democratic, repressive regimes?

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Featured image: Minister of Defence Harjit Sajjan (Source: Yves Engler)

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