

US Defense Companies Sued by Yemenis Over Weapons Used in Civil War

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Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and General Dynamics, [three of the five largest U.S. defense contractors](#), supported war crimes by selling weapons to Saudi Arabia and UAE-led coalition forces during the civil war in Yemen, seven Yemeni civilians alleged in a lawsuit.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Washington on March 2, also names Saudi Arabian and UAE officials for their alleged direct involvement, while including Pentagon officials, U.S. agency heads and industry CEOs for indirect participation.

The companies and their chief executives are named "because they are aiding and abetting the war crimes committed by the Saudi and UAE officials," Terry Collingsworth, the lead lawyer for the seven plaintiffs and executive director of the International Rights Advocates policy group, told Military Times.

"We just have to really show that they knew or should have known — or recklessly disregarded — that the weapons that they were providing were causing civilian deaths," he said.

Officials with Raytheon and the Defense Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The State Department press office and spokespersons for General Dynamics and Lockheed said they do not comment on ongoing legal cases.

The Yemeni civil war has served as a proxy war for competing interests in the Middle East since 2014, when Iranian-backed Houthi rebels took control of the government. Then, in March 2015, a coalition of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia began a military campaign of airstrikes against the rebels with U.S. logistical and weapons support.

Nearly 15,000 civilians have been killed in direct military actions since the conflict began, according to the [Campaign Against Arms Trade](#). Sixty percent of the deaths, the group said,

have been the result of airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition.

The Government Accountability Office published a report in June 2022 that found the Pentagon administered at least \$54.6 billion in military support to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi from 2015 to 2021. The State Department approved foreign military sales of equipment, including F-35 joint strike fighters, Patriot missiles and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense systems to Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the course of the same period, according to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency.

Defense Department officials told the GAO investigators that they “lacked guidance” for reporting any alleged incidents in which U.S. defense articles were used on civilian populations, the report said.

“[D]espite several reports that airstrikes and other attacks by Saudi Arabia and UAE have caused extensive civilian harm in Yemen, [DoD] has not reported and [the] State [Department] could not provide evidence that it investigated any incidents of potential unauthorized use of equipment transferred to Saudi Arabia or UAE,” the report stated.

A wedding and a funeral

The plaintiffs’ case revolve around two specific incidents in the Yemeni civil war.

On Oct. 7, 2015, a wedding was taking place in the village of Sanaban, a little more than 85 miles south of the capital city of Sana’a. At around 10 p.m., coalition aircraft reportedly launched two missiles toward the party, hitting a house and the tent where guests were gathered. The strike killed 49 people, including 13 women and 22 children, according to a report from the Legal Center for Right and Development.

The other attack in question occurred one year later — on Oct. 8, 2016 — in Yemen’s capital. Hundreds were gathered at the Great Hall of Sana’a City for the funeral of a tribal leader, when a Raytheon and Lockheed-made GBU-12 Paveway II 500-pound laser-guided bomb leveled the area, killing 140, according to a Human Rights Watch [report](#).

Subsequent weapon identification was based on a “review of photos and footage of an intact guidance fin assembly with legible manufacturer’s markings,” the report stated.

“There’s no bringing back my family or the thousands of other lives lost to these horrors,” Ayman Mhamad Saleh Al-Sanabani, a plaintiff in the case who witnessed the wedding bombing, said in a statement. “But ensuring there are consequences for those committing and abetting war crimes is a necessary precedent.

“What we seek from this case is not just the necessary relief we need as a result of this devastating war, but also a line in the sand for international warmongers going forward that there is a price to pay if you kill innocent people.”

The incidents outlined in the complaint offer examples of the human cost of years of conflict that culminated in what the UN World Food Program called one of the “worst humanitarian crises” on the globe.

Torture Victim Protection Act

The Yemeni civilians' lawsuit is being filed under the parameters of two U.S. laws, the Alien Tort Statute and Torture Victim Protection Act. The former allows plaintiffs to sue foreign individuals in U.S. courts who are directly responsible for war crimes and extrajudicial killings. The only issue, when using this framework, is convincing the courts that the case carries enough weight to be tried stateside.

The Torture Victim Protection Act allows anyone to be sued for extrajudicial killings or torture. However, the Supreme Court has stipulated that only individual persons can be sued under this framework, not companies. To work within those boundaries, the Yemeni lawsuit specifically named Riyadh and Abu Dhabi officials as well as the heads of the defense companies.

Collingsworth said the litigation is seeking to make a distinction in the goals of suing under each of the three statutes. Under the Administrative Procedure Act, the Yemeni civilians are seeking to obtain an order requiring the Pentagon and State Department to prevent the future use of U.S. weapons in the commission of war crimes.

Through the Alien Tort Statute and Torture Victim Protection Act, the civilians are seeking monetary damages to be paid by Saudi and Emirati officials, as well as the U.S. defense contractors.

"This is a challenging case, mainly because we are directly confronting, for lack of a better term, the military industrial complex," Collingsworth said.

"I think most judges are going to be very afraid of issuing decisions that would somehow step into the dynamics of the ... weapons supply relationships between the U.S., Saudi Arabia and UAE. But ... we have to at least try."

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