

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Made in Britain, Tested on Yemenis: The Reality of Working for the “Bomb-makers”

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Jack sits down with his pint in the Fielden Arms in Mellor, and contemplates his latest shift making Typhoon warplanes for the Saudi air force.

Tucking into steak and chips, the 25-year-old talks of moving in with his girlfriend, his good pay at the nearby BAE factory – £40,000, [almost twice the local average](#) – and the security it brings.

And then he thinks of the people those planes will be sent to kill.

“You see the children in Yemen starving on the 10 o’clock news,” he tells Middle East Eye. “But you try to not pay attention and just get on with it.”

His friend, Harry, interjects: “It’s really weird and there is no way to describe it, because you are in essence building a weapon of mass destruction.”

So why don’t they quit? “Good pay and job security,” Jack responds, taking another sip of his beer. “If the military contracts go, 7,000 people go with them.”

Jack is like thousands of others who works at the BAE Systems factory in nearby Samlesbury, outside Preston in Lancashire, making parts that will be assembled in nearby Warton to create Typhoons, the most advanced jet fighters operated by the Saudis over Yemen.

There, the Saudis have contributed to a civil war with the most terrible violence: bombing civilians, blowing up hospitals, and imposing a siege that has condemned millions of Yemenis to slow starvation and poverty.

And Britain, in its wisdom, has sold the Saudis the hardware to do it. Since the war began in 2015, the UK has approved arms sales to Riyadh [worth more than \\$3.3bn](#). Many of those weapons have come from BAE factories like Samlesbury, built by workers like Jack.

This prompted anti-arms trade campaigners to launch a judicial review in February to stop arms exports to the Saudi government until it stops committing human rights atrocities in Yemen. The decision on that review is due in the coming months.



St Oswald’s church in Warton (Wikipedia)

All the while, BAE continues to expand its operations in the north-west of England, and the contracts keep coming. It is [building a solar farm](#) the size of nine football fields, creating [hundreds of new apprenticeships](#), and is already Preston's largest employer with 9,000 staff. Under the £40bn al-Salam deal, signed in 2007 to a 25,000-strong celebration in Preston, BAE has delivered 68 of 72 Typhoons ordered, and another 48 may soon [be agreed](#).

And in the surrounding villages, where the quiet life is punctuated by the sonic booms of jets and the rumble of lorries on narrow roads, the business is welcomed, even venerated. BAE is woven into the fabric of a local life, where generations have manned BAE's machine rooms.

There is pride in what they do. "Lancashire has a strong history of building fighter jets, and we are proud to be building them," said Mike Harris, who has worked as an electric fitter in Samlesbury. "We produce the best in the world."

"We can't build washing machines because we have a history of building fighter planes," Harris said. "That's what we do and want to carry on doing."

And a block on that expertise would be devastating.

Audrey Charnley sits in the old church opposite BAE's Warton factory, the main assembly site for Typhoon jets, and speaks of the "problem" for locals if it was to close or lose business due to the efforts of anti-war activists.

Many villagers like Audrey have family who have worked for there. She doesn't like the "idea" of Warton building fighter jets - "but somebody would be building the jets if Warton wasn't".

As to the war in Yemen, "we want peace, just like the peace we feel in this church", she says.

The same thought is echoed across the way at the local village hall, which Lynn Shuttleworth helps run. "If they didn't do it here they would do it somewhere else," she says, before commenting on a more pressing local issue: "Does cause a lot of traffic I must admit."



Britain has sold Saudi Arabia dozens of Typhoon fighter jets (wikimedia)

And at the Clifton Arms, next to Warton's factory, Taylor James pulls pints for the workers emerging from their shifts. He knows that victory for the judicial review will hit him and his family's pub hard.

He's never really heard of Yemen, or its current catastrophe, and neither - he says - have many people in the area.

"Because it's not personally affecting me, I don't really get involved or have an interest in what the planes are used for."

Politics by other means

Politics may not be the concern of some locals, but it plays a central part in the world in which they live. What is made by BAE has local, national and international repercussions, and has turned parties and traditional allies against each other.

Many in Samlesbury and Warton are members of Unite, the union that helped propel anti-war activist Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party. Twice.

He is opposed to Britain's relationship with Saudi Arabia and its bombing campaign in Yemen. Union representatives say opposition to Saudi exports is "misguided".

Simon Brown, who represents thousands at Warton, rationalises that position. He says maintaining trade with Saudi Arabia ensures Britain has a say in what it does.

"Trading gives us influence to talk about the things we're not happy about in these regimes," he said at a discussion at the Unite HQ in Salford. "If we left them on their own, we won't have influence."

Another senior Unite official, who spoke to MEE anonymously, skips the platitudes for a more succinct answer: it's about the jobs.

"Of course our members don't agree with what Saudi are doing in Yemen, it's barbaric," says the official.

However, he absolves his members of responsibility: "The government's created a situation where people can do nothing but work for BAE."

Andy Clough, a Unite union spokesman at Warton and worker since 1979, agrees: "I've seen whole families work there," he says. "It's still like that now. There are fathers and sons. That's the sort of culture that we have."

Nigel Evans, the local Conservative MP for the Samlesbury factory, has been a staunch defender of BAE systems in parliament.

His [last appearance in parliament](#) described the presence of BAE systems in Lancashire as "important" and providing "thousands of jobs for the Ribble Valley and Lancashire" area.

Their loss, he said, would be devastating.

But Andrew Smith from the Campaign Against the Arms Trade disagrees. He says that the arms trade is, in fact, a very small part of the British economy.

"Arms companies enjoy a huge influence in the corridors of power, which has bought them a lot of power," he says.

"We want to see an industrial strategy that puts the skills of industry workers to good use and focuses on positive, substantive jobs and not those dependent on war and conflict."

According to the [Oxford Economics group](#), BAE in 2013 exported £3.8bn worth of weapons, including missiles, naval systems and jets – 69 per cent of which was sent to countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

But that £3.8bn represents just one percent of all the British economy's exports.

Smith's group has another option – last year it launched its “[arms to renewables](#)” campaign, which argues skilled engineers could be moved into industries that can build a new future, rather than destroy it.

Skilled engineers will always be in demand, it says.



The Lightning that stands outside the Samlesbury factory (screengrab)

Back in Samlesbury, such high-minded thinking is just that.

When the shifts change, workers file in and out of the steel gates of the 700-acre site, guarded by a life-sized model of a Lightning, a famous cold war fighters built by English Electric, a forerunner of BAE.

A real one used to stand here – in active service, it was flown by the Saudis in the 1970s.

Workers who take a moment to speak to MEE have the unmistakable pride of decades of excellence, while conceding their concerns about where their jets end up.

But that's just the way it is.

And the BAE of the future will continue to build expert killing machines: The company has recently [signed a multi-million contract](#) to develop a new generation of armed drones, another weapon common in the skies of Yemen, and beyond.

Jack, in the pub in Mellor, is aware this is where his future may lie: building robots for foreign states to kill foreign people in foreign lands.

“There's nothing we can do,” he says. “We're caved in, making it impossible to work anywhere else, because we've all got specific skills.”

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