

Amid protests, Saudi ship leaves France without arms cargo

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Saudi vessel that was due to load arms sets sail without them amid protests over use of French-made weapons in Yemen.

A Saudi vessel that was due to load weapons at a northern French port has set sail without them and headed towards [Spain](#) on Friday, a day after a rights group tried to block the cargo on humanitarian grounds.

The Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT) sought to block the loading of weapons onto the ship through a legal filing on Thursday, arguing the cargo contravened an international arms treaty.

A French judge threw out their complaint but the Bahri-Yanbu moved off the coast of Le Havre shortly after.

It was not immediately clear what had caused the change of plan.

“The boat has left and without its cargo,” Laurence Greig, a lawyer representing ACAT told Reuters news agency.

“It is extremely embarrassing for the executive because we thought that we could stop this only with a legal recourse. But while we got a very terse decision against us, pressure from individuals and NGOs led to a positive result.”

The legal move by ACAT came weeks after an online investigative site published leaked French military intelligence that showed weapons sold to the kingdom, including tanks and laser-guided missile systems, were being used against civilians in [Yemen’s war](#).

[Saudi Arabia](#) leads the pro-government military coalition in the four-year civil war that has devastated [Yemen](#), killed tens of thousands and left much of the population on the brink of [famine](#).

[France](#) is one of Saudi Arabia’s main arms’ suppliers, delivering some \$1.5bn of weapons to Riyadh in 2017.

On Thursday, French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) defended the arms sales, describing Saudi Arabia and the [United Arab Emirates](#) as allies in the fight against “terrorism” and saying Paris had received guarantees they would not be used against civilians.

‘Not enough’

However, Aymeric Elluin, advocacy officer at Amnesty International France, dismissed Macron’s assurances.

"It's not enough to say 'I have guarantees', we need to be shown them. And at the same time, we would like to be told clearly how Saudi Arabia is fighting against terror in Yemen," Elluin told Al Jazeera.

At least 100 demonstrators protested near La Havre on Thursday in a bid to prevent the Saudi ship from docking at the port.

"If we French citizens do not act, if we don't try to stop arms sales, we will end up as accessories to this business. We do not want this. We don't want to be in this situation," said Jean-Paul Lecoq, member of France's National Assembly.

Government officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Al Jazeera's Paul Brennan, citing tracking websites, said the Bahri-Yanbu, which had been anchored 30km from the French port since Wednesday evening, set sail just before 10:00 GMT on Friday.

"But the question now: Has the shipment been cancelled or is French government going simply send it via another route?"

Brennan said France is one of many European countries facing pressure from activists not to arm Saudi Arabia.

In countries like Britain and France, arms deliveries to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi - regarded as close allies - are seen as critically important for keeping military influence and also preserving potentially thousands of jobs.

"There are three Scandinavian countries who have suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia specifically because of the Saudi-led coalition's prosecution of the war in Yemen and the rising number of civilian casualties," Brennan said.

"Germany has also extended a moratorium that it has imposed on selling any weapons to Saudi Arabia." Other countries have taken a far more lenient view. Britain and Spain are continuing to supply weapons to Saudi Arabia," he added.

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