Global Concerns on UK-Saudi Arms Ties

Why in news?

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Recently France, Germany and the UK issued a joint statement condemning the violent killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

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What is the joint statement about?

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- Jamal Khashoggi was an US-resident Saudi journalist who was a columnist for the Washington Post.
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- He was violently murdered within the premises of the Saudi embassy in Istanbul.
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- A Joint statement was issued by France, Germany and UK stating defending freedom of expression and a free press are their key priorities.
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- The statement also claimed that the threatening, attacking or killing of journalists, under any circumstances, is unacceptable and of utmost concern to our three nations.
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- The three nation’s authorities has also sought an urgent clarification from the Saudi authorities.
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What is the action of the nations in this regard?

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- Spain announced that it would stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia over concerns about the treatment of civilians in Yemen and in particular the killing of 40 children on a school bus in a Saudi bombing raid.
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- Germany had announced that it was stopping arms exports to Saudi Arabia while questions over Khashoggi's death remained and called for other European nations to follow its lead.
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- Netherlands and Sweden has implemented restrictions that arms transfers are denied approval if there is a risk of the goods being used in Yemen.
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What are the issues with such actions?

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- The decision by Germany has put the spotlight on European nations that have long sought to portray themselves as defenders of liberal values and human rights, but whose record particularly when it comes to arm sales and dealings with countries with dire human rights records has left it open to accusations of hypocrisy.
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- Spain backtracked its announcement just few days after its initial proclamation, the Spanish government confirmed that the sale of 400 laser-guided bombs would indeed go ahead, to the anger of human rights groups, who accused it of succumbing to pressure.
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- There has been limited impact on the decisions of individual nations, who continue to be among Saudi Arabia's biggest partners when it comes to arms sales, though with some restrictions.
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- In addition to economic arguments, countries have traditionally pointed to the security relationship with Saudi Arabia being key to counter-terrorism strategies.
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- In the face of unwillingness by European regimes to fundamentally change their stance on arms exports to Saudi Arabia and other countries, activists have regularly resorted to the courts.
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- Many have noted the marked contrast between Europe's relatively meek stance against Saudi Arabia following the Khashoggi murder and atrocities in Yemen to other international events.
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What are the global concerns on UK-Saudi ties?

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- The UK-Saudi Arabia relationship is a microcosm of all the difficult choices the UK is going to have to make once it has left the EU.
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- There is a contradiction between the UK presenting itself as a progressive, liberal country and defender of the international rules-based order while at the same time providing diplomatic cover for a regime, which is undermining that rules based order.
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- In addition, while around 48 per cent of British arms exports go to Saudi Arabia, total exports to Saudi Arabia accounted for just 1 per cent of UK exports and 0.004 per cent of UK Treasury revenues, according to the KCL report.
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- With public opinion increasingly wary of the relationship Britain and Europe’s justifications for maintaining the status quo on Saudi Arabia appear more and more on wobbly ground.
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- In Britain in particular the light-touch approach to Saudi Arabia has exacerbated fears that in its eagerness to forge post-Brexit trade deals it would increasingly put trade and investment decisions ahead of ethical considerations.
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Source: Business Line

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