

Italy permanently halts arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE



Yemenis march with banners during a rally denouncing U.S. aggression. (Photo: AFP)

Rome, January 30 (RHC)-- Italy has halted the sale of thousands of missiles to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) due to their involvement in the Yemen conflict, making permanent an 18-month temporary suspension. "Today I am announcing that the government has revoked the authorisations under way for the export of missiles and aircraft bombs to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates," Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said on Friday.

"[This is] an act that we considered due, a clear message of peace coming from our country. For us, respect for human rights is an unbreakable commitment," said Di Maio, who did not mention Yemen but had referenced the conflict there when he ordered the initial suspension in July 2019.

Italy's Peace and Disarmament Network, a campaign group, hailed the move as "historic" and estimated that it would see orders for more than 12,700 ordnance cancelled. The blocked sales were part of a total allotment of 20,000 missiles worth more than 400 million euros (\$485m) agreed in 2016 under a center-left government led by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the disarmament group said.

It "puts an end, once and for all, to the possibility that thousands of ordnance manufactured in Italy could strike civilian facilities, cause casualties among the population or contribute to worsening the already serious humanitarian situation", the group said.

In 2019, several European Union countries froze arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which heads a military coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen in a conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people. The United Nations describes Yemen as the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with 80 percent of its people in need of aid.

Italy's latest figures – dating to 2019 – show Saudi Arabia and the UAE ranked 10th and 11th in the list of the biggest markets for Italian arms exports. Exports to Saudi Arabia were worth 105.4 million euros (\$128 million), while those to the UAE were worth 89.9 million euros (\$109.1 million).

Italy's decision came in the wake of controversy over former premier Renzi's guest appearance at a high-level event hosted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Renzi, a longstanding foe of Di Maio, is under the spotlight in Rome for withdrawing from the ruling coalition earlier this month and forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

In Riyadh, he spoke at the Future Investment Initiative – dubbed "Davos in the desert" – in an apparently prerecorded video with the prince, also known as MBS. Despite longstanding concerns about Saudi Arabia's human rights record, Renzi said the Gulf oil monarchy "could be the place of a new Renaissance for the future."

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