



From Export to Impact: How UK Defence Contracts Contribute to Civilian Harm and Human Rights Violations in Modern Conflicts: The Case of Children, Families, and War Victims

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Abstract:

The United Kingdom is one of the major exporters of military equipment. It has a significant position at the cross-section of defence industry revenues, national security and human rights responsibilities. The current research paper is based on a systematic literature review. It examines how UK defence contracts and exports of defence equipment have contributed to human suffering in recent wars, with a specific focus on children and conflict sufferers. It is found that UK defence licensing and weapon export play a role, whether direct or indirect, in grave human rights violations in recent conflicts. The innocent children and families suffered massively by means of casualties, injuries, relocation, demolition of houses, cessation of education, and long-term trauma. In spite of having formal restrictions, the export control framework of the UK still shows serious issues and discrepancies, such as poor threat evaluation of predictable human sufferings, inadequate post-delivery oversight, confined transparency in open licensing and no accountability for human sufferings. To overcome these shortcomings, serious and comprehensive reforms are required. The proposed reforms include that export licensing must clearly add child rights and safety of civilians, the defence industry members need to carry out essential human rights due diligence, transparency of open licensing should be ensured, end usage oversight needs to be proactive, and procedures of redress for victims of conflicts should be improved. The focus of future research must be on granular tracking of UK-supplied weapons to particular incidents of innocent people killing, comparative analysis of different main export countries and investigating the legal framework for redressal of victims.

Keywords: UK Defence Contract, UK Arms Export Impact On Humanity, UK Weapons Export, UK Defence Export Licensing, UK Open Defence Export Licensing.

Review Article

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are multiple aspects of international defence equipment export, such as national security, financial gains and human rights considerations. The UK is one of the major manufacturers and exporters of military equipment; this aspect is specifically serious. As per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the United Kingdom is the seventh largest exporter of traditional arms from 2018 to 2022 (SIPRI, 2023). The exports of weapons support the local manufacturing industry,

provide employment opportunities and develop strategic collaborations. Moreover, it has a significant contribution to the geopolitical influence of the United Kingdom. In contrast, there are serious moral, humanitarian and legal apprehensions regarding these arms exports as these arms are employed in wars in which innocent people suffer (UK Parliament, 2024).

The wars in this era are distinguished by the employment of air strikes, drones, and explosive materials in regions with dense

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populations. It causes an extreme threat to innocents such as children and women. As per evidence, United Kingdom-manufactured weapons have been employed in these sorts of conflicts. For example, an aerial bombardment on a wedding event in Yemen caused casualties of 47 innocent people, including 15 kids (UK Parliament, 2016). In this air strike, UK-supplied arms were involved. Because of complicated supply chains, dual-utilise technologies, and involvement of multiple actors in conflicts, it makes it difficult to attribute the UK directly (Murphy, 2025).

In contrast, the export policy of the United Kingdom incorporates the criteria for providing weapons, for which licenses must not be provided if there is an evident threat that the equipment can be employed in committing major violations against humanity. In spite of this, as per explorations, on numerous occasions, the United Kingdom's government did not comply with their export policy. For instance, according to a report of the World Peace Foundation, the United Kingdom's exports of weapons to such countries in wars are not uncommon (Stavrianakis, 2022). It is a serious concern how the United Kingdom align the aims of its defence industrial approach with its official stance and responsibilities regarding human rights.

The current research paper employs a systematic literature review to investigate how the defence agreements of the United Kingdom can have direct or indirect involvement in grave violations of human rights, with innocent civilians as a focal point. This investigation will investigate the law- and institutional-related framework driving exports of the United Kingdom, explore empirical proof of export of weapons and human rights violations, inspect the particular impact on innocent children and adults, and explore the ramifications of standards, morals and policies. The aim is to give a detailed evaluation of the role of the United Kingdom in forming the impact of recent conflicts on humans, and to underline the extreme

requirement for greater accountability, transparency, and moral supervision.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The UK Defence Export Landscape

The weapons manufacturing and export industry of the UK is quite technically modern, and as per international standards. As far as the history of the UK's defence manufacturing industries is concerned, it manufactured fighter jets, missiles, unmanned drones and other defence-related equipment in an arms manufacturing complex. Then these defence equipment and systems are sold to countries which are the UK's allies. According to the parliamentary briefing "An Introduction to UK Arms Exports", the licensing system of the United Kingdom drives "controlled products" and multiple-use products, and firms need to apply to public authorities for a license to export weapons and equipment (Brooke-Holland, 2024). As per the report of the House of Commons Library, in 2023, multiple defence equipment manufacturing organisations generated revenue of £14.6 billion from their defence equipment exports to other countries. The aerospace sector accounted for around 57% of the total revenue generated during the years 2019 and 2023 (Kirk-Wade, 2025).

In contrast, as per defence analysts, there is a regulatory framework behind this spectacular weapon manufacturing capability with structural constraints. According to a newspaper piece with title "Licensed to Kill: The United Kingdom's Arms Export Licensing Process" stated that licensing framework remained unsuccessful in six major domains such as ambiguous rules and regulations, confined usage of case-by-case evaluation, feeble contribution of pro-control authorities, pre-licensing systems which favour exporting countries, and backdated instead of preventive oversight by parliament (Stavrianakis, 2008). The other main loophole lies in transparency; the United Kingdom majorly depends on open licenses. These open licenses allow the export of weapons of unquantified worth and unstated numbers. It facilitates unlimited

exports without any mechanism for tracing the end use of these arms by countries or entities. As per the Campaign Against Arms Trade, the majority of the weapon export of the United Kingdom is carried out by means of these open licenses, which is an illusion of control while allowing unlimited delivery of weapons to countries where there is a high possibility of misuse (CAAT, 2001).

The authentic literature has emphasised that the United Kingdom's role exhibits that it prefers financial essentials over human rights responsibilities. The geopolitical partnerships, export-based financial gains, technology transfer and national repute form the policy regarding exporting weapons. This policy regarding exporting weapons is mostly implemented at the cost of moral and humanitarian considerations (Louth, 2023). These various points of view highlight the requirement to perceive the weapon exports of the United Kingdom not merely as an industrial export but as a proactive procedure with considerable human rights violation ramifications (UN, 2022).

2.2 Arms Exports and Civilian Harm

The connection between the export of weapons and human suffering is quite appropriately documented in the literature. According to a report, there are around 84 countries which received the UK's manufactured weapons. As per evidence, from these 84 nations, around 23 used explosive arms in areas which were population-dense, killing more than 59,700 innocent people during the period of 2021 to 2024 (Amnesty International UK, 2018). However, it is not certain that all of those casualties actually happened because of the ammunition of the UK, but the overall collateral damage is evident. The United Kingdom provides licenses for exporting weapons, and then the recipient countries deploy their weapons in highly populated regions, killing a large number of people. As per the legal experts, the anticipation under export-control law is the activation, not the evidence of direct involvement (Engelhart, 2015).

The scrutiny of the UK's parliament gives in-depth case evidence. For instance, the 2016 House of Commons investigation regarding UK manufactured weapons in Yemen provided authentic substantiation that the arms employed in an aerial bombardment on a wedding event, which killed 47 innocents, including 15 children, were supplied by the UK (UK Parliament, 2016). In addition, according to a 2019 report of the House of Lords, the export licenses provided to KSA by the UK government during the Yemen war were inappropriate as they violated human rights massively, as there were reports of some casualties of innocent people. As per the report's findings, the scale and sort of weapons export imply that the United Kingdom took the risk of assisting severe violations of International Humanitarian Law (UK Parliament, 2017).

Moreover, as far as high-profile cases are concerned, the investigation of the NGO highlights structural loopholes. As per the report, over 1700 assaults are carried out in Yemen during 14 months (Sabbagh, 2019). The arms employed in one-fourth of these assaults were provided by the United Kingdom and the United States. According to a World Peace Foundation report, the collective literature concludes that the weapon export of the United Kingdom has an indirect contribution to human suffering in recent warfare (OXFAM, 2023).

2.3 Vulnerability of Innocent Humans

The emphasis of literature is that in war zones, innocent children and adults are the most vulnerable ones who face the consequences of weapon-driven brutality. Children have been bombed or injured by aerial bombardment, drone assaults or shelling (Abdul, 2023). Moreover, families are dislocated, their breadwinners are killed, their homes are destroyed, schools are bombarded, and they face long-term mental trauma because of the conflicts. According to Amnesty International's 2020 report, in three years, around 514 innocent people, including almost 157 children, were killed and 380

people sustained injuries because of the United Kingdom's exported weapons (Amnesty International UK, 2018). As per the estimations of UNOCHA, over four million people of Yemen were displaced in their country from 2015 to 2020, mainly due to bombardment with supplied weapons. The most concerning thing is that such horrific possible outcomes in the form of relocation, halted education and long-term trauma between generations are often ignored while carrying out decision-making regarding giving licenses, despite being predicted by countries which export ammunition (Kirk-Wade, 2025). However, "downstream social harms" must be taken into account while assessing export threat (Louth, 2023).

2.4 Ethical, Legal and Normative Dimensions

As far as the ethical point of view is concerned, the weapons export poses serious questions regarding that responsibility, complicity and lack of morality. In case a country trades arms to a country known to use these arms in conflicts to massacre innocent, particularly children, does it make the exporting country complicit? (Sabbagh, 2021) From a legal aspect, the Arms Trade Treaty needs exporters to evaluate the threat that the traded weapons might be employed for severe violations of International Humanitarian Law and to stop trade when the threat is evident. The local control regime of the United Kingdom practices this "clear threat" level; however, investigations exhibit that the actual implementation is not up to the mark. Amnesty International (2024) and CAAT (2024) underscore that the United Kingdom's weapon export licensing is provided to countries that blatantly violate human rights. These trades are mostly carried out through open licensing and in the absence of any appropriate end-usage oversight. The moral dilemma is increased in case innocent children and adults are incriminated (CAAT, 2001).

There is concrete evidence that other nuclear-armed countries, such as the United States, France and Germany, are complicit in

war crimes against humanity. The United Kingdom is eminent because of its greater dependence on providing open licenses, greater export quantities to countries which are already impacted by conflicts and confined post-delivery validation (Lawless, 2024). In short, the standard gap between manufacturing industry gains and human rights responsibility is quite appropriately documented in the case of Great Britain (Lustgarten, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research paper's methodology is based on a systematic literature review of pertinent and updated literature for scrutinising the United Kingdom's arms export licensing, its impact on innocent human beings and the ethical as well as legal aspects of exporting weapons in modern warfare.

3.2 Search Strategies

The systematic review is carried out based on the guidelines provided by Petticrew and Roberts (Petticrew, 2006). The multiple pertinent keywords are searched in different research repositories. In order to broaden perspectives and information, the in-text references and reference lists are analysed. In addition, the titles and abstracts of various research papers are reviewed to find more relevant literature. In order to conduct the relevant research and meet the objectives of this paper, the key term employed is 'impact of UK defence contracts on innocent humans'. The different literature repositories are searched by employing this key phrase. The multiple repositories which are used in this research are Research Gate, Scopus, Web of Science, Grey Literature, and Science Direct. In addition, various other key terms and phrases are used to conduct this exploration, including 'open UK defence licensing', 'biases in UK defence licensing', 'moral issues in UK weapon exports', 'factors involved in UK defence licensing', and 'human cost of UK arms export'.

The full concentration was on seeking relevant and latest literature regarding the title

of the current document, such as the contribution of UK defence contracts to civilian harm. The abovementioned key terms are employed to find the relevant and credible data. The pertinent information is fetched from different research papers, parliament proceedings, and NGO reports. Through the inclusion criteria, peer-reviewed papers are added. Those publications which are relevant to defence and strategic studies and social sciences are included.

A few papers are not incorporated because of exclusion criteria. For instance, some of the publications which are not relevant to defence are overlooked. In addition, the papers which are relevant to defence but are not relevant to defence contracts, defence exports and related human rights violations are perceived as irrelevant. Moreover, the main terms such as 'UK defence contract', 'UK defence agreement', 'UK arms export impact on humanity', 'UK weapons export impact on humanity', 'open UK defence licensing', 'biases in UK defence licensing', 'moral issues in UK weapon

exports', 'factors involved in UK defence licensing', 'human cost of UK arms export', 'UK defence export licensing', and 'UK open defence export licensing' are checked. Those publications which have these abovementioned terms 1-3 times are incorporated. Initially, 51 publications are included. Nevertheless, 14 of the publications which are not pertinent are not added. Consequently, 37 publications are shortlisted. These publications' reference lists, as well as in-text references, are checked. In addition, backwards and forward references are reviewed. After this, around 6 more publications are shortlisted. Moreover, the 'cited by' feature helps in doing a forward search of references of 37 publications. The titles, abstracts, and keywords are reviewed for this forward search. It helped in adding 8 more pertinent publications. However, 4 remained the same, which are already added, so they are not included. Hence, the systematic review is conducted on the basis of a total of 47 publications. These publications are reviewed to make sure that they are pertinent and reliable.

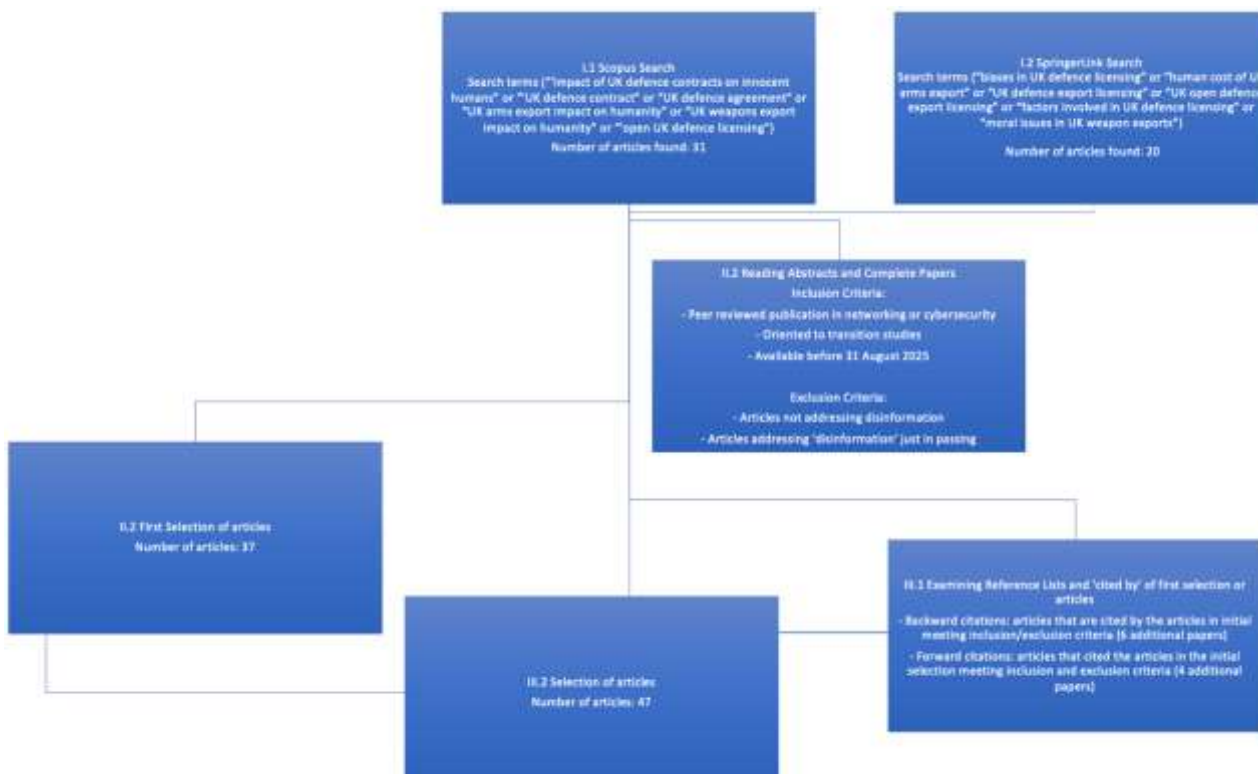


Figure 1: Flow of systematic review

4. Findings

4.1 UK Export Patterns and Risk Exposure

There is a major track record of the UK exporting weapons to countries, as well as non-state entities, which are involved in wars. From 2021 to 2024, the license for its weapon export was provided to 84 nations. From these 84 countries, around 23 remained engaged in active conflicts during which arms are employed against innocent people in high population regions (AOAV, 2025). The UK provided open licensing to numerous states, which allowed them to employ these arms without any supervision or end-usage validation. These open licensing is around 35-40% of the total defence exports of the United Kingdom (CAAT, 2024). These practices greatly impacted transparency and oversight. Some high-threat countries are periodically approved so that they can import weapons irrespective of their proven complicity in human rights violations. These countries include KSA, UAE, Israel, and Egypt (Hansen, 2023).

More in-depth research exhibits that the United Kingdom's weapon export mostly coincides with its geopolitical interests instead of humanitarian considerations (The Associated Press, 2024). For example, the UK supplied fighter planes, high-precision projectiles, and drones to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, irrespective of the fact that they carried out coordinated operations which killed a considerable number of innocent people (Stavrianakis, 2022). Likewise, UK-based manufactured gadgets were exported to Turkey, which were employed in the Northern part of Syria and Iraq for targeting civilians and relocating people (AOAV, 2025). The export control system prioritises the UK's industrial gains, geopolitical and strategic gains, over robust evaluation of possible harm to innocent people. This pattern is systematic.

4.2 Civilian Harm Across Conflict Zones

Yemen

It is substantially documented that the weapon exports of the United Kingdom played a role in the killings of civilians in Yemen.

The aerial bombardment by the Allies was conducted with ammunition manufactured in the United Kingdom. It caused more than 10,000 precious lives of innocent people from 2015 to 2020 (UNOCHA, 2021). One-fourth of these casualties were of children. Likewise, 47 innocent people, including 15 children, were killed in a wedding in al-Wahijah (Amnesty International UK, 2019). Likewise, many other assaults are carried out, which demolished vital infrastructure, disrupted essential services including food supply chain, education and medical services, and caused the displacement of millions of people. This is one of the clearest cases, as there is an established connection between UK-manufactured arms and casualties of innocent people (Gallea, 2023).

Syria and Iraq

UK-manufactured projectiles and drones are exported to Turkey, which are used in combat against the Kurdish people in Syria and Iraq (AOAV, 2025). Numerous innocent people (including children) are killed, and residential buildings are destroyed. For instance, air strikes through drones compelled 200,000 people to relocate in 2021, which impacted children's mental health on a massive scale (War Child UK, 2022).

Israel-Palestine

In Palestine, the UK supplied weapons, allowed assaults on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, educational institutions, and houses, which caused dozens of thousands of deaths of innocent people, including children, women and old people. In assaults in 2014, the children were around one-third of total killings (Al-Haq, 2023). However, the United Kingdom's defence export regime keeps giving licenses and supplying weapons. As per independent human rights organisations, the UK is complicit in severe violations of IHL in an indirect manner (Stavrianakis, 2023).

Libya

The weapon export by the United Kingdom to the Libyan National Army and

others has played a role in human suffering in the ongoing conflict. These weapons are used in densely populated areas, including Tripoli, which caused deaths and relocation on a massive scale (AOAV, 2025).

4.3 Impact on Children, Families, and Displaced Populations

Children and families suffer most in conflicts, particularly in those in which UK weapons are used. They suffered physical harm, including deaths, injuries and mental distress (Relief Web, 2009). It is estimated that more than 40 million people were relocated from 2015 to 2020, and they faced food scarcity, malnutrition and poor health conditions. The majority of people in such conflicts in different countries, such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, lost their houses and employment, and necessities, including clean water and healthcare facilities (UNOCHA, 2021). The mental trauma was quite severe as they remained exposed to bombing, they were displaced from their areas, and their family members were killed. It caused post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and behavioural changes (War Child UK, 2022). The children remained unable to continue their education. Such accumulated sufferings do not reflect in licensing evaluation despite the fact that they are well-established and documented.

4.4 Mechanisms of Harm

The United Kingdom's defence export plays a role in human suffering through numerous interlinked procedures impacting innocents.

4.4.1 Direct Use in Combat

UK-built arms and equipment are used in conflicts in a direct manner. In Yemen, the UK exported bombs and Tornado jet parts were employed in aerial bombardment on hospitals, educational institutions, and events, killing a few hundred civilians. UK arms are used in Syria and Iraq in a similar fashion (UK Parliament, 2016).

4.4.2 Indirect Capability Enhancement

UK-supplied arms improved the receiving state's operational capability, allowing increased operation (Alwishewa, 2022). The UK build fighter plane parts, unmanned autonomous vehicles, and projectiles, enhancing many countries' capabilities, which caused severe human rights violations (Stavrianakis, 2022).

4.4.3 Systemic Destabilisation

The UK's supplied arms can increase the span of wars and destabilise countries. In Yemen, large-scale supplies have increased enmities, worsened relocation, humanitarian crises and governance failure. Likewise, the UK's supply of arms to the Libyan National Army allowed them to bombard people for prolonged spans, which extended instability (Witherden, 2025).

4.4.4 Downstream Socio-Economic Impacts

The conflicts not only caused killings but also allowed recipients to inflict suffering on people by demolishing their hospitals, schools, and other infrastructure. Children remained unable to continue their education, faced malnutrition, and people faced relocation, deprivation, and mental trauma in Syria and Yemen (Bellis, 2025).

4.4.6 Legal and Ethical Implications

Every procedure increases legal and moral apprehensions. The ATT and UK law refrain from exporting to states which have a poor track record of committing severe human rights violations. The use of arms in a direct manner, capability enhancement, and intentional destabilisation helps people suffer. It highlights ethical and governance obligations (Stavrianakis, 2023).

4.4.7 Case Study Evidence

- **Yemen**

The UK exported ammunition, contributing to the casualties of hundreds of innocent people and the demolition of infrastructure (Sabbagh, 2023).

- **Syria/Iraq**

The projectiles and parts helped assaults in main cities, which killed innocent people (Merrill, 2016).

- **Libya:**

The UK exported weapons that assisted in carrying out aerial bombing on cities, which prolonged the human suffering (Johnson, 2018).

- **Israel-Palestine**

The parts of F-35 jets supplied to Israel caused severe destruction of infrastructure and severe killing of innocent Palestinians, including children (Al Jazeera, 2025).

4.5 Legal and Ethical Aspects

The weapons export to war zones in which human rights violations can be anticipated raises serious moral and legal questions. According to the Arms Trade Treaty and the local laws of the United Kingdom, the regime should stop exporting arms in case there is an evident threat that the ammunition might be employed for severe violation of IHL (Osimen, 2025). As per exploration by Amnesty International and parliamentary, propose that the United Kingdom supplies to different high-threat states, which is not consistent with these responsibilities. The moral predicament is increased when taking into consideration the unimaginable level of suffering to innocent children and adults (UK Parliament, 2019). As per scholars, the United Kingdom's weapon export develops a case of ethical complicity as supporting human rights violations while anticipating it. It must suspend licenses and enforce strict controls. Remaining unsuccessful in incorporating human rights consideration and severe human rights violations into the defence export evaluation framework shows a systematic governance loophole (Dizaji, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

The current systematic review exhibits that the United Kingdom's defence licensing

and weapon export play a role, whether direct or indirect, in grave human rights violations in recent conflicts. The innocent children and families suffered massively by means of casualties, injuries, relocation, demolition of houses, cessation of education, and long-term trauma. In spite of having formal restrictions, the export control framework of the United Kingdom still shows serious issues and discrepancies, such as poor threat evaluation of predictable human sufferings, inadequate post-delivery oversight, confined transparency in open licensing and no accountability for human sufferings. In order to overcome these discrepancies and shortcomings, serious and comprehensive reforms are required. The proposed reforms include that export licensing must clearly add child rights and safety of civilians, the defence industry members need to carry out essential human rights due diligence, transparency of open licensing should be ensured, end usage oversight needs to be proactive, and procedures of redress for victims of conflicts should be improved. It is required to align the national defence manufacturing industry and strategic interests with the moral and human rights obligations. It is imperative to avoid current human suffering. The focus of future research must be on granular tracking of United Kingdom-supplied weapons to particular incidents of innocent people killing incidents, comparative analysis of different main export countries and investigating the legal framework for redressal of victims. Only by means of such in-depth and extensive measures can the United Kingdom restore its role as an international defence exporting state with the safety of humans in war zones.

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