

By Peter Malonis

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The Saudi government's murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has led to increased condemnation of the regime's human rights abuses, including its devastating war in Yemen. With the war finally making headlines after three years, it is worth scrutinizing the involvement of James Crown, one of the most influential trustees of the University of Chicago.

Mr. Crown is a longtime University trustee and former chair of the Board of Trustees from 2003 to 2009. During his tenure as chair, he [led](#) the search committee which hired University President Robert J. Zimmer in 2006. Mr. Crown is also the [Lead Director](#) of the board and a major shareholder of General Dynamics Corporation, the [sixth-largest defense contractor](#) in the world. General Dynamics has sold billions of dollars worth of bombs, tanks, and armored vehicles to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in recent years.

Arms sales to Gulf states from the U.S. and other western countries have played a critical role in war against Yemen since 2015. The arms have been used by the Saudi-led coalition, with U.S. logistical support, to destroy civilian infrastructure and block critical aid from entering the country. This has caused a cholera epidemic and left millions of Yemenis on the brink of starvation. The coalition has dropped U.S.-made bombs on marketplaces, health-care facilities, and schools; one such strike in August [killed](#) 44 children on a school bus. Bomb fragments recovered at the scene showed that the bomb was manufactured by General Dynamics.

As the Lead Director of the General Dynamics board, Mr. Crown is complicit in these crimes. As a major shareholder, he profits from them. The values of the University reflect the values of its leaders, so the actions of Mr. Crown deserve the attention of the University community.

Mr. Crown comes from one of Chicago's richest and most influential families. The Crown family was named the 27th wealthiest family in the country by [Forbes](#) in 2015, with a net

worth of \$8.8 billion. General Dynamics has been their largest investment since Henry Crown, James Crown's grandfather, bought a controlling stake in General Dynamics in 1959. The company expanded in the midst of the Cold War arms buildup, manufacturing systems such as the M1 Abrams tank, the F-16 fighter, the Tomahawk cruise missile, and various bombs and ordinances. In addition to supplying wars launched by the U.S. and its allies, General Dynamics has received particular condemnation from human rights groups for its manufacture of internationally-banned

[C](#)

[luster bombs](#)

, as well as the chemical/incendiary weapon

[white phosphorus](#)

[Filings](#) with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) indicate that Mr. Crown owns more than 22 million shares of General Dynamics stock, currently worth over \$3.9 billion. The company's fortunes are tied to the prospects of war and military spending. In the four days following the election of President Donald J. Trump, General Dynamics' [stock price](#) shot up 10 percent, meaning the value of the stock currently owned by Mr. Crown increased by \$370 million. However, since the day the Turkish government

[announced](#)

evidence that Khashoggi was killed at the Saudi consulate, straining U.S.-Saudi relations, General Dynamics shares have becoming markedly more volatile, reaching their lowest value in two years last week.

The crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations comes as the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is reaching a tipping point. The U.N. is [expected](#) to officially declare a famine in coming weeks, and the coordinator for Yemen recently reported that 13 million Yemenis faced starvation if the war continues. In September, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) [stated](#) that "the chances of survival are becoming slimmer by the day for the nearly 400,000 severe acutely malnourished children fighting for their lives in Yemen."

A [report](#) from the London School of Economics concluded that the Saudi-led coalition is deliberately using mass starvation as a means of warfare. The report found a consistent pattern of military strikes against farms, irrigation systems, fishing boats, roads, ports, marketplaces, and other infrastructure necessary for feeding the country. It also pointed to the coalition blockade of critical humanitarian aid, and quoted a Saudi diplomat saying in reference to the Yemeni population that "once we control them, we will feed them."

In the face of growing outrage over U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia, a defense industry trade group [defended](#) their role, stating that they “support U.S. national security and foreign policy goals, and our companies will continue to look to the government for direction on how best to support those goals.” In other words, they only make the bombs, and where they land is the concern of the U.S. government. Putting aside the ethical vacuousness of this argument, it does not account for the active role of the arms industry in shaping government policy. General Dynamics alone spent \$11 million on lobbying last year. The arms industry also funds influential foreign policy think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Atlantic Council, as do the [Gulf states](#). These think tanks help build a consensus in Washington in support of militarist policy and maintaining alliances with the coalition waging war on Yemen. General Dynamics and rest of the arms industry not only profit from war, but also invest those profits into pushing for more war.

While until recently the Saudi-led assault on Yemen has received steadfast support from Trump and, before him, Obama (who has received millions of dollars in donations from the Crowns), as well as from other western leaders, that is beginning to change. At the end of October, the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. finally called for a ceasefire. However, such statements are little more than symbolic as long as these countries maintain their commitment to supplying arms to the Saudis. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently [announced](#) that he was unlikely to halt a \$15 billion sale of armored vehicles to the Saudis from General Dynamics’ Canadian unit. Trump [ruled out](#) stopping the arm sales because he did not want to jeopardize lucrative deals for U.S. arms companies. Taking these statements at face value, the major obstacle to peace is concern for the profits of people like James Crown.

With the crisis in Yemen at a critical juncture, the University Board must remove Mr. Crown if he does not end his involvement in the war immediately. Those who enable this atrocity must know that as long as it continues they will not be able to carry on with their normal civic life. Such pressure could play a critical role in ending the war, and an action with even a small chance of stopping a man-made famine on track to kill millions is an absolute moral imperative. If the trustees do not act, they will be complicit.

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