



SAUDI BRITISH
JOINT BUSINESS COUNCIL

SBJBC at the World Defence Show 2026

Building the Foundations of the SBJBC Defence & Resilience Stream

8–12 February 2026 | Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Why the World Defence Show Matters

The World Defence Show (WDS) has established itself as one of the largest defence exhibitions in the world in the space of three editions. The 2026 show, organised by the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) under the patronage of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, ran from 8 to 12 February at a purpose-built venue outside Riyadh. The final figures were impressive, with 1,486 exhibitors from 89 countries, 513 official delegations from 121 countries, 137,000 visitors, and 272,500 square metres of exhibition space, a 58% increase over the first edition in 2022. All of the world's top 10 defence companies exhibited at WDS 2026.¹

Over the five days, 60 military and defence deals were announced with a combined value of approximately SAR 33 billion (US\$8.8 billion), alongside 73 Memoranda of Understanding and 220 agreements in total.² The show delivered 355 live demonstrations and more than 700 static military assets, while the air programme included 63 static aircraft and 25 live flight demonstrations featuring F-15, F-16, F-35, and Typhoon platforms.²

This edition introduced several new features, such as a dedicated Naval Zone addressing maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf, an Unmanned Systems Zone, a Space Domain area, and the Future Defence Lab covering AI, robotics, autonomous systems, quantum technologies, and cybersecurity. A Saudi Supply Chain Zone was added for the first time to connect Saudi SMEs and startups with international defence companies. 70 thought-leadership sessions ran across three theatres with 151 speakers.^{2,3}

The context for the show's scale is Saudi Arabia's broader defence transformation. Defence localisation in the Kingdom has increased from 4% in 2018 to 25% in 2024, against a Vision 2030 target of 50%, and the military budget stands at approximately \$78 billion.³ GAMI and SAMI are using WDS as the forum to convert that spending into domestic industrial capacity, and international primes such as Boeing, Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems, and Rolls-Royce are responding by shifting from supplier relationships towards production partnerships and technology transfer arrangements.³ Knowledge exchange remains a critical area of interest, with international companies focused on training and developing the local Saudi population to work towards key Saudisation targets critical to the success of the localisation agenda.

The British Presence

ADS Group organised the United Kingdom Pavilion at WDS for the third consecutive edition,^{4,5} and the British presence expanded by 15% compared with 2024.^[6] Participants on the UK Pavilion included BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Draken, Systematic, and Rheinmetall UK, with a wider contingent of British SMEs on the show floor.⁴

BAE Systems used WDS 2026 to mark 60 years of partnership in Saudi Arabia. The company employs 7,000 people across 11 locations in the Kingdom, with 80% being Saudi nationals. Steve Clutton, Managing Director of BAE Systems Saudi Arabia, noted that the show reflected how far the partnership had matured, with a focus on investing in Saudi talent and strengthening local industry.⁷ BAE Systems served as Principal Partner of the Future Talent Programme⁸ and showcased capabilities across air, land, sea, and training domains, including Typhoon, future uncrewed platforms T-150 and Koios, and the Azalea low-Earth-orbit satellite constellation.⁷

Rolls-Royce, participating for the third consecutive edition, reinforced its six-decade relationship with Saudi Arabia. The company's workforce in the Kingdom is now over 80% Saudi nationals, and it supports multiple Royal Saudi Air Force platforms, with hundreds of engines in service for Tornado, Typhoon, and Hawk aircraft. Cate Wilkinson, Senior Vice President for the Middle East, stated that the show provided a platform to demonstrate partnerships and capabilities aligned with Vision 2030 priorities.⁹

SBJBC Attendance and Engagement

The Saudi British Joint Business Council attended WDS 2026 with CEO Cordelia Begbie and Researcher Robert McNamara. During the show, SBJBC held meetings with Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems, and ADS Group, alongside a number of SMEs across the defence supply chain. The team attended the British Embassy Reception on 9 February and heard from the UK Defence Attaché to KSA and Luke Pollard MP, Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry,¹⁰ who spoke about the UK Government's commitment to the bilateral defence industrial relationship.

At the invitation of BAE Systems, SBJBC also attended a GAMI Supply Chain Workshop which focused on the localisation of Typhoon spare parts, but also on Ministry developments focused on the defence supply chain. SBJBC had the privilege to hear from the Ministry of Investment (MISA), General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI), Ministry of Industry and Mineral Resources (MIM), and, of course, BAE Systems Saudi Arabia (BAESSA).

These engagements gave SBJBC direct insight into both government and industry thinking on where the UK-Saudi defence relationship is heading, and what role organisations like SBJBC should play in supporting commercial engagement between British and Saudi defence businesses. Future programming for the Defence & Resilience Stream is being organised, with a workshop and roundtable planned for April and further activity built around the Farnborough International Airshow in July 2026.

The UK-Saudi Defence Relationship: A Brief Overview

The UK-Saudi defence relationship dates back 60 years and includes the Al-Yamamah agreements of the 1980s, under which BAE Systems supplied Tornado and Hawk jets, and formed the basis of modern defence cooperation. A subsequent 2005 deal for Eurofighter Typhoons extended this industrial relationship further, and talks remain of a further purchase for the aircraft type. The 2017 Military and Security Cooperation Agreement formalised broader collaboration across counterterrorism, intelligence, training, and logistics.^{11, 12}

The relationship is supported on the UK side by the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Programme (MODSAP), through which more than 280 UK MoD civil servants and military personnel manage the Saudi British Defence Cooperation Programme and the SALAM Project.¹²

Under the current UK Government, the defence relationship has received renewed attention. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer visited Saudi Arabia in December 2024, with defence industrial cooperation identified as a priority.¹² The 2025 Strategic Defence Review called for the UK to build on its relationships in the Middle East to bolster security,¹⁴ and in 2024 Saudi Arabia was the largest single recipient of UK single export licences by value, at £2.9 billion.¹² At WDS 2024, the UK Defence

Secretary and Minister for Defence Procurement agreed with their Saudi counterparts to establish a Strategic Capability Partnership Committee, focusing on cooperation in equipment, R&D, and training across land systems, air defence, uncrewed aerial systems, and precision-guided missiles.¹³

Saudi Arabia remains the UK's primary trading partner in the Middle East, and the defence component of this relationship is substantial, and WDS 2026 demonstrated the continued appetite on both sides for deeper industrial cooperation which SBJBC remains ready to support. To learn more about the Saudi Defence Sector, consult the sources below or email **Robert McNamara**, SBJBC Research Officer, at **robert@sbjbc.org** to request your copy of the SBJBC **Saudi Arabian Defence Sector Whitepaper**, available only to SBJBC members.

Sources

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