

America's Arms Sales Addiction: 50-Year History of U.S. Dominance of the Middle Eastern Arms Trade

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It's no secret that Donald Trump is one of the most aggressive arms salesmen in history. How do we know? Because he tells us so at every conceivable opportunity. It started with his [much exaggerated](#) "\$110 billion arms deal" with Saudi Arabia, announced on his first foreign trip as president. It continued with his White House photo op with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in which he [brandished](#) a map with a state-by-state rundown of American jobs supposedly tied to arms sales to the kingdom. And it's never ended. In these years in office, in fact, the president has been a staunch advocate for his good friends at Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and General Dynamics — the main corporate [beneficiaries](#) of the U.S.-Saudi arms trade (unlike the thousands of American soldiers the president recently [sent](#) into that country's desert landscapes to defend its oil facilities).

All the American arms sales to the Middle East have had a severe and lasting set of consequences in the region in, as a start, the [brutal](#) Saudi/United Arab Emirates war in Yemen, which has [killed](#) thousands of civilians via air strikes using U.S. weaponry and pushed millions of Yemenis to the brink of famine. And don't forget the recent Turkish invasion of Syria in which both the Turkish forces and the Kurdish-led militias they attacked [relied heavily](#) on U.S.-supplied weaponry.

Donald Trump has made it abundantly clear that he cares far more about making deals for that weaponry than who uses any of it against whom. It's important to note, however, that, historically speaking, he's been anything but unique in his obsession with promoting such weapons exports (though he is uniquely loud about doing so).

Despite its supposedly strained relationship with the Saudi regime, the Obama administration, for example, still managed to offer the royals of that kingdom a record [\\$136 billion](#) in U.S. weapons between 2009 and 2017. Not all of those offers resulted in final sales, but striking numbers did. Items sold [included](#) Boeing F-15 combat aircraft and Apache attack helicopters, General Dynamics M-1 tanks, Raytheon precision-guided bombs, and Lockheed Martin bombs, combat ships, and missile defense systems. Many of those weapons have since been put to use in the war in Yemen.

To its credit, the Obama administration did at least have an internal debate on the wisdom of continuing such a trade. In December 2016, late in his second term, the president finally did [suspend](#) the sale of precision-guided bombs to the Royal Saudi Air Force due to a mounting toll of Yemeni civilian deaths in U.S.-supplied Saudi air strikes. This was, however, truly late in the game, given that the Saudi regime [first intervened](#) in Yemen in March 2015 and the slaughter of civilians began soon after that.

By then, of course, Washington's dominance of the Mideast arms trade was taken for granted, despite an occasional large British or French deal like the scandal-plagued [Al Yamamah](#) sale of fighter planes and other equipment to the Saudis, the largest arms deal in the history of the United Kingdom. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, from 2014 to 2018 the United States accounted for [more than 54%](#) of known arms deliveries to the Middle East. Russia lagged far behind with a 9.5% share of the trade, followed by France (8.6%), England (7.2%), and Germany (4.6%). China, often cited as a possible substitute supplier, should the U.S. ever decide to stop arming repressive regimes like Saudi Arabia, came in at less than 1%.

The U.S. government's stated [rationales](#) for pouring arms into that ever-more-embattled region include: building partnerships with countries theoretically willing to fight alongside U.S. forces in a crisis; swapping arms for access to military bases in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and other Persian Gulf states; creating "stability" by building up allied militaries to be stronger than those of potential adversaries like Iran; and generating revenue for U.S. weapons contractors, as well as jobs for American workers. Of course, such sales have indeed benefited those contractors and secured access to bases in the region, but when it comes to promoting stability and security, historically it's been another story entirely.

The Nixon Doctrine and the Initial Surge in Mideast Arms Sales

Washington's role as the Middle East's top arms supplier has its roots in [remarks](#) made by Richard Nixon half a century ago on the island of Guam. It was the Vietnam War era and the president was on his way to South Vietnam. Casualties there were mounting rapidly with no clear end to the conflict in sight. During that stopover in Guam, Nixon assured reporters accompanying him that it was high time to end the practice of sending large numbers of U.S. troops to overseas battlefields. To "avoid another war like Vietnam anywhere in the world," he was instead putting a new policy in place, later [described](#) by a Pentagon official as "sending arms instead of sending troops."

The core of what came to be known as the [Nixon Doctrine](#) was the arming of regional surrogates, countries with sympathetic rulers or governments that could promote U.S. interests without major contingents of the American military being on hand. Of such potential surrogates at that moment, the [most important](#) was the Shah of Iran, with whom a [CIA-British intelligence coup](#) replaced a civilian government back in 1953 and who proved to have an insatiable appetite for top-of-the-line U.S. weaponry.

The Shah's idea of a good time was curling up with the latest copy of [Aviation Week and Space Technology](#) and perusing glossy photos of combat planes. Egged on by the Nixon administration, he was the first and only country to [buy](#) the costly Grumman [F-14 combat aircraft](#) at a time when that company desperately needed foreign sales to bolster the program. And the Shah put his U.S.-supplied weapons to use, too, helping, for instance, to [put down](#) an anti-government uprising in nearby Oman (a short skip across the Persian Gulf), while repressing his own population at the same time.

In the Nixon years, Saudi Arabia, too, became a major [weapons client](#) of Washington, not so much because it feared its regional neighbors then, but because it had seemingly limitless oil funds to subsidize U.S. weapons makers at a time when the Pentagon budget was beginning to be reduced. In addition, Saudi sales helped recoup some of the revenue

streaming out of the U.S. to pay for higher energy prices exacted by the newly formed OPEC oil cartel. It was a process then quaintly known as “[recycling petrodollars](#).”

The Carter Years and the Quest for Restraint

The freewheeling arms trade of the Nixon years eventually prompted a backlash. In 1976, for the first (and last) time, a presidential candidate — Jimmy Carter — made reining in the arms trade a [central theme](#) of his 1976 campaign for the White House. He [called for](#) imposing greater human-rights scrutiny on arms exports, reducing the total volume of arms transfers, and initiating talks with the Soviet Union on curbing sales to regions of tension like the Middle East.

Meanwhile, members of Congress, led by Democratic Senators Gaylord Nelson and Hubert Humphrey, felt that it was long past time for Capitol Hill to have a role in decision-making when it came to weapons sales. Too often Congressional representatives [found out](#) about major deals only by reading news reports in the papers long after such matters had been settled. Among the major concerns driving their actions: the Nixon-era surge of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, then still an avowed adversary of Israel; the use of U.S.-supplied weapons by both sides in the Greek-Turkish conflict over the island of Cyprus; and covert sales to extremist right-wing forces in southern Africa, notably the South African-backed Union for the Total Independence of Angola. The answer was the passage of the [Arms Export Control Act](#) of 1978, which required that Congress be notified of any major sales in advance and asserted that it had the power to veto any of them viewed as dangerous or unnecessary.

As it happened, though, neither President Carter’s initiative nor the new legislation put a significant dent in such arms trafficking. In the end, for instance, Carter decided to exempt the Shah’s Iran from serious human-rights strictures and his hardline national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, [undercut](#) those talks with the Soviet Union on reducing arms sales.

Carter also wanted to get the new [Rapid Deployment Force](#) (RDF) he established — which eventually morphed into the U.S. Central Command — access to military bases in the Persian Gulf region and was willing to use arms deals to do so. The RDF was to be the centerpiece of the Carter Doctrine, a response to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Shah of Iran. As the president [made clear](#) in his 1980 State of the Union address: “An attempt by any outside forces to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States. It will be repelled by use of any means necessary, including the use of force.” Selling arms in the region would prove a central pillar of his new doctrine.

Meanwhile, most major sales continued to sail through Congress with barely a discouraging word.

Who Armed Saddam Hussein?

While the volume of those arms sales didn’t spike dramatically under President Ronald Reagan, his determination to weaponize anti-communist “freedom fighters” from Afghanistan to Nicaragua sparked the [Iran-Contra scandal](#). At its heart lay a bizarre and elaborate covert effort led by National Security Council staff member Oliver North and a band of shadowy middlemen to supply U.S. weapons to the hostile regime of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. The hope was to gain Tehran’s help in freeing U.S. hostages in Lebanon.

North and company then used the proceeds from those sales to arm anti-government Contra rebels in Nicaragua in violation of an explicit Congressional ban on such aid.

Worse yet, the Reagan administration transferred arms and provided training to extremist mujahedeen factions in Afghanistan, acts which would, in the end, help arm groups and individuals that later formed al-Qaeda (and similar groups). That would, of course, prove a colossal example of the kind of [blowback](#) that unrestricted arms trading too often generates.

Even as the exposure of North's operation highlighted U.S. arms transfers to Iran, the Reagan administration and the following one of President George H.W. Bush would directly and indirectly [supply](#) nearly half a billion dollars worth of arms and arms-making technology to Iran's sworn enemy, Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein. Those arms would bolster Saddam's regime both in its war with Iran in the 1980s and in its 1991 invasion of Kuwait that led to Washington's first Gulf War. The U.S. was admittedly hardly alone in fueling the buildup of the Iraqi military. All five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the U.S., the Soviet Union, France, the United Kingdom, and China) [provided weapons](#) or weapons technology to that country in the run-up to its intervention in Kuwait.

The embarrassment and public criticism generated by the revelation that the U.S. and other major suppliers had helped arm the Iraqi military created a new opening for restraint. Leaders in the U.S., Great Britain, and other arms-trading nations pledged to do better in the future by increasing information about and scrutiny of their sales to the region. This resulted in two main initiatives: the United Nations [arms trade register](#), where member states were urged to voluntarily report their arms imports and exports, and [talks](#) among those five Security Council members (the largest suppliers of weapons to the Middle East) on limiting arms sales to the region.

However, the P-5 talks, as they were called, quickly fell apart when China decided to sell a medium-range missile system to Saudi Arabia and President Bill Clinton's administration began making new regional weapons deals at a pace of more than [\\$1 billion](#) per month while negotiations were underway. The other suppliers concluded that the Clinton arms surge violated the spirit of the talks, which soon collapsed, leading in the presidency of George W. Bush to a whole new Iraqi debacle.

The most important series of arms deals during the George W. Bush years involved the training and equipping of the Iraqi military in the wake of the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But [\\$25 billion](#) in U.S. arms and training was not enough to create a force capable of defeating the modestly armed militants of ISIS, when they swept into northern Iraq in 2014 and captured large swaths of territory and major cities, including Mosul. Iraqi security forces, short on food and equipment due to corruption and incompetence, were also short on morale, and in some cases virtually abandoned their posts (and [U.S. weaponry](#)) in the face of those ISIS attacks.

The Addiction Continues

Donald Trump has carried on the practice of offering weaponry in quantity to allies in the Middle East, especially the Saudis, though his major rationale for the deals is to [generate](#) domestic jobs and revenues for the major weapons contractors. In fact, investing money and effort in almost anything else, from infrastructure to renewable energy technologies, would [produce](#) more jobs in the U.S. No matter though, the beat just goes on.

One notable development of the Trump years has been a revived Congressional interest in curbing weapons sales, with a particular focus on ending support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. (Watching Turkish and Kurdish forces face off, each armed in a major way by the U.S., should certainly add to that desire.) Under the leadership of Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT), Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Senator Mike Lee (R-UT), Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA), and Representative Ted Lieu (D-CA), Congress has voted to [block](#) bomb sales and other forms of military support for Saudi Arabia, only to have their efforts [vetoed](#) by President Trump, that country's main protector in Washington. Still, congressional action on Saudi sales has been unprecedented in its persistence and scope. It may yet prevail, if a Democrat wins the presidency in 2020. After all, every one of the major presidential contenders has [pledged](#) to end arms sales that support the Saudi war effort in Yemen.

Such deals with Saudi Arabia and other Mideast states may be hugely popular with the companies that profit from the trade, but the vast majority of Americans [oppose](#) runaway arms trading on the sensible grounds that it makes the world less safe. The question now is: Will Congress play a greater role in attempting to block such weapons deals with the Saudis and human-rights abusers or will America's weapons-sales addiction and its monopoly position in the Middle Eastern arms trade simply continue, setting the stage for future disasters of every sort?

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