

Making a Killing: US-NATO Fuel New Arms Race in the Middle East

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The Middle East, a byword for political instability and conflict, is witnessing a renewed arms race, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. The region, already armed to the teeth, is in a process of upgrading its military systems with the latest hardware in fighter aircraft and surface-to-air missiles.

The latest SIPRI analysis of global arms deals shows that military exports to the Middle East for the period 2005-2009 have increased by more than 20 per cent compared with the previous five-year period. Indeed, the region accounts for 17 per cent of all total global arms trade.

Historically, the build-up of weaponry in the Middle East has been attributed to well-founded suspicions that Israel possesses over 200 nuclear warheads and receives billions of dollars worth of military aid from the US every year.

But it now seems that the catalyst for a renewed arms race in the region is fear among Arab states of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Notwithstanding Iran's consistent denial of such ambitions and the complete lack of evidence that it is seeking nuclear weapons, let alone being near to possessing such devices, the bogey-man image of the Islamic Republic is evidently a potent driver of military build-up in the region.

Now, here's where it gets interesting. The top four arms suppliers to the region are the US, France, Germany and Britain – the very Western powers that are falling over themselves to warn the “international community” of the “threat posed by Iran”.

Tellingly, within the wider Middle East region it is the Gulf enclave opposite Iran that is the growing hotspot for Western arms deals.

Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, has an annual military spend of \$33 billion – about three times that of Israel. A large chunk of Saudi Arabia's military budget has gone on Patriot SAM systems from the US and, in the last year, 72 Eurofighters supplied by the UK.

Other Gulf countries, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman, have also splurged on arms deals from these Western suppliers.

But it is the diminutive United Arab Emirates (less than four per cent of Saudi Arabia's land area) that is proving to be the most lucrative market for conventional weapons.

The UAE is now the world's fourth largest importer of arms - behind China, India and South Korea, according to SIPRI.

With a population of just six million, that makes the UAE the world's number one per capita arms importer. Over the past five years, some 33 per cent of all arms exports to the wider Middle East region is accounted for by this small federation of seven emirates.

Pieter Weseman, senior researcher at SIPRI, says: "The UAE has bought all kinds of weapons, but in the past five to 10 years a very large share of the UAE arms imports has been taken up by combat aircraft and related weapons, including surface-to-air missiles and air-to-air-missiles."

The three main arms suppliers to the UAE are the US, France and Germany. Some 60 per cent of all military imports by the UAE come from the US, which since 2003 have largely been comprised of 80 F-16e fighter jets and four Patriot SAM systems. A major part of the French slice (35 per cent) of the UAE arms market can be accounted for by the sale of 62 Mirage-2000 combat aircraft over the same period.

As if this is not enough firepower, the Gulf state is being lined up for even more arms sales. Says Weseman: "The UAE is also in negotiation with France and the USA about the possible acquisition of new and even more advanced combat aircraft to replace some of the aircraft bought only a few years ago."

What is more, the meteoric rise of the UAE as a weapons importer can be traced to an upward turning point in 2005-2006.

The political geography of the Gulf region is undoubtedly a salient factor. The Gulf sea (also called the Persian Gulf) that separates Iran from its Arab neighbours narrows to only a few kilometres of navigable water known as the Strait of Hormuz. Some 40 per cent of all globally traded oil passes through this channel. Under threats of sanctions and even a military strike by the US and its allies, Iran has warned that it will blockade the Strait - a move which at a stroke would cut off its Arab neighbours from 90 per cent of their trade revenues.

The UAE is particularly sensitive to Iran. It is the most proximate Gulf state (along with Oman) to Iran and has been in a long-running dispute over oil-rich islands located smack in the middle of the Strait of Hormuz.

These tensions were stoked by a visit to the UAE this month by Stuart Levey, undersecretary at the US Treasury, who reminded his hosts of the importance of tightening sanctions on Iran - repeating the mantra of Obama, Sarkozy, Merkel, and Brown.

So while the US, France, Germany and Britain use allegations and supposition to repeat ad nauseam that Iran represents a destabilising threat to the Middle East region, the international community may deduce from facts that the exact opposite is true. A dangerously destabilising arms race is being fuelled by these self-appointed custodians of "global security" - and they are making a financial killing from it.

And, by the way, SIPRI notes that Iran is "not a major weapons importer". It is ranked around 30th for international arms transfers. So much for the "Iranian threat".

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