

# Trump's Decision to Arm the Saudis Against Iran Will End in Disaster

He's circumventing Congress and risking a war that most people on both sides don't want.

By [Daniel R. DePetris](#)

Global Research, May 30, 2019

[The American Conservative](#) 28 May 2019

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD, US NATO](#)

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*Developments in the Persian Gulf are heating up, and they are heating up fast.*

*An [additional 1,500 U.S. troops](#) are packing their bags for the region—this on top of an accelerated deployment of an American aircraft carrier battle group and B-52 bombers. Add to that [pledges](#) of steadfast resistance from Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and [personal animus](#) between American and Iranian officials, and you've got a very real possibility that an abrupt miscalculation could become a war that almost no one wants.*

It's obvious what this situation calls for: a direct line of communication between Washington and Tehran with the express purpose of calming the waters and preventing a conflagration. And yet the Trump administration seems to be gunning for the opposite—more bellicose threats, more military assets, and more sanctions.

More weapons sales are also evidently part of the picture. Last Friday, the administration officially [informed](#) Senator Robert Menendez, the top Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, that it would leverage a little-used loophole in the Arms Export Control Act to expedite the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, Iran's chief regional adversary. President Trump has declared that "an emergency exists which requires the proposed sale in the national security interest of the United States." That allows him to completely bypass Congress and finalize the sale on his own.

The provision, meant to be used in only the most dire emergencies, essentially eviscerates the congressional review process and steals power away from lawmakers who would ordinarily need to sign off on such a move.

One envisions National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo whispering in Trump's ear as he sits behind the big desk in the Oval that sending more weapons to Riyadh will deliver a message of resolve (a favorite Beltway buzzword) to the Iranians.

But there aren't enough adjectives in Webster's dictionary to describe just how counterproductive, and, well, plain dumb this would be.

First, such a decision would demonstrate total and complete contempt for a bipartisan

majority in both houses of Congress that just two months ago [voted](#) to pull U.S. military support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. President Trump went on to veto the resolution shortly thereafter, rendering the effort moot. Yet the fact that the measure passed was a clear-cut expression of congressional intent—the first time in history that the 1973 War Powers Act was used successfully in an attempt to withdraw the United States from an overseas conflict that wasn't authorized by Congress. Trump would be spitting in the face of the legislative branch were he to continue this aggressive stance towards Iran.

Trump, of course, has shown that he doesn't particularly care much about Congress's concerns. But presumably, he does care about getting the United States out of the Middle East's proxy conflicts and sectarianism-infected rivalries. This is one of the main reasons more weapons to the Saudis is such a colossal mistake. By tying Washington to the Kingdom so closely, it reinforces a narrative already prevalent among the Gulf monarchies that Trump is a man who can not only be bought but used.

The fact that Washington is selling these weapons to Riyadh rather than giving them away doesn't make this ordeal any less pathetic. The president may not grasp the connection, but by opening up America's arsenal to the Saudis, he is indirectly deepening America's role as a combatant in a Saudi-Iranian rivalry that has torn the Middle East apart and done next to nothing to make the American people safer. At a time when the United States should be rebalancing its force posture and taking a hard look at where and how it allocates its limited military resources, Trump is bringing us deeper into a region of diminishing geopolitical importance.

Finally, we need to evaluate this latest arms sale through the prism of today's events. American-Iranian relations are in the pits. Direct communication between the two nations is likely nonexistent. Washington is passing messages and warnings to Tehran through intermediaries like the Iraqis, Omanis, and Swiss. And the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps remains on high alert status, monitoring moves by U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf that could be construed as aggressive or preparations for an attack.

Trump has talked rightly about war being the last thing he wants and has broached the idea of a bilateral negotiation with Tehran on issues of concern. Establishing more communication nodes with the Iranians is the correct approach.

More weapons in the hands of the Saudis, however, sends Iran the opposite message—that the United States is only interested in talking if the topic is full surrender. And if Iran remains resistant to the idea, Washington will sell munitions to its adversaries until it's ready to sign off like the Japanese in 1945.

It should go without saying that this is not something the Iranians will respond kindly to. The administration is confident that maximum pressure will eventually frighten Iran to the table where it will give up everything. More likely is the opposite—the Iranians will stiffen their spines.

It's not too late for President Trump to reverse a potentially calamitous decision. For the good of America's security, one hopes he has second thoughts and recognizes that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia don't always align.

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*Daniel R. DePetris is a columnist for the Washington Examiner and The American Conservative.*

*Featured image: President Donald Trump poses for photos with ceremonial swordsmen on his arrival to Murabba Palace, as the guest of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, Saturday evening, May 20, 2017, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)*

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