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PolicyWatch 3036

U.S.-Saudi Security Cooperation (Part 1): Conditioning Arms Sales to Build Leverage

by [Michael Knights](#)

Nov 5, 2018

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Brief Analysis

Washington should continue its selective approach to restricting the delivery of certain offensive weapons, yet leave defensive procurement on track.

This PolicyWatch is the first in a two-part series on potential adjustments to the bilateral security relationship. **Part 2 examines** U.S. operational support to Saudi forces in the Yemen war.

The U.S.-Saudi strategic relationship is built on a simple premise: Washington provides physical security for the Saudi state, while Riyadh serves as a cooperative counterterrorism partner and an apolitical, responsive supplier to global energy markets. Arms sales are integral to this relationship: the task of maintaining the large Saudi military binds Washington and Riyadh together, while the kingdom's massive purchases of U.S. armaments and related services strengthen the American defense industry and general economy.

Traditionally, the relationship was also based on the expectation that the United States would take the lead on foreign and security policies to protect Saudi Arabia. Under the Obama administration, however, this formula was replaced by a partner-based approach that encouraged the kingdom to develop more forces capable of providing security on their own. Riyadh subsequently began to take unforeseen unilateral action on its self-perceived security interests, leading to crises such as the brutal war in Yemen, the isolation of Qatar, the abduction of Lebanese prime minister Saad al-Hariri, and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

These developments have heightened the sentiment within Congress that U.S. security cooperation with Saudi

Arabia should be reviewed—an attitude that will likely grow stronger after the November 6 midterm elections. The push for such scrutiny will become particularly urgent if the parties involved in the Yemen war fail to establish the lasting ceasefire called for by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis last week.

APPRAISING AMERICA'S BIGGEST ARMS CUSTOMER

Since May 2017, President Trump has repeatedly stated that the Saudis intend to buy \$110 billion worth of weapons and associated services from the United States, a figure that appears to include both currently active sales and memoranda of intent for future sales. Whatever the exact figure ultimately proves to be, the scope of Riyadh's planned purchases is undoubtedly gargantuan. In the past ten years, the kingdom has committed to buy more arms, parts, and associated training and maintenance services than any other foreign customer, with Congress receiving notification of \$138.9 billion in potential sales: \$90.09 billion during the eight-year Obama administration and \$48.81 billion in two years under President Trump. Among the purchases reported by Congressional Research Service were:

- **\$63 billion on fixed-wing aircraft systems**, including combat and non-combat aircraft, munitions, and electronic upgrades
- **\$49.2 billion on land warfare systems**, including armored vehicles, artillery, and munitions
- **\$49.1 billion on helicopter systems**, including Apache gunships and utility transports
- **\$24.3 billion on missile defense**, including Patriot missiles and a proposed \$15 billion worth of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems
- **\$12 billion on naval systems**, including a proposed \$11.5 billion worth of littoral combat ship variants.

LAND WARFARE PURCHASES AND THE YEMEN WAR

Saudi Arabia's heavy investment in land warfare systems, helicopters, and airpower over the past decade is no coincidence. It began when Houthi rebels inflicted a series of shocking defeats on the kingdom's border forces in 2009-2010. Since then, the United States has built up the offensive capabilities of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and Royal Saudi Land Forces, the elements that spearheaded the kingdom's ground campaigns in Yemen once the current war broke out in 2015. These purchases included:

- **Immediate refit after 2010.** Initial Saudi investments in 2010-2013 focused on remedying shortfalls witnessed while fighting the Houthis, notably the need for up-armored, mine-resistant troop carriers and armored attack helicopters capable of dishing out—and taking—heavy punishment. Riyadh also purchased air-to-ground weapons, sensors, and training packages with the aim of getting the Royal Saudi Air Force ready to support new ground operations in Yemen.
- **Resupply during the current war.** In addition to clearly defensive systems (e.g., border surveillance aerostats, counter-battery radars), the Saudi military sought U.S. resupply of its land forces as they shifted from defending the border to pushing into Houthi-held parts of northern Yemen. A proposed sale of 115 M1A2S main battle tanks and support vehicles failed to obtain congressional approval in September 2016 but is moving forward under the Trump administration. In March-April 2018, Congress was notified of proposed sales involving \$2.28 billion worth of munitions and 155 millimeter self-propelled armored artillery systems for the land forces. Although tank and artillery systems can be used defensively, they should probably be viewed as offensive systems given Saudi Arabia's increase in short-range campaigns extending ten to fifteen miles inside northern Yemen.

PRECISION-GUIDED MUNITIONS

Sales of air-delivered precision-guided munitions (PGMs) are another lightning rod issue in the bilateral security relationship. Following the 2009-2010 round of hostilities with the Houthis, the kingdom sought to refresh its stock of antipersonnel bombs with a large order of 1,300 U.S.-built CBU-105 sensor-fused weapons (a higher-

reliability submunition that manufacturers say does not qualify as a cluster bomb due to its low malfunction rate). Yet by November 2015, eight months into the current war, the Saudis had used up nearly 2,600 PGMs, according to strike metrics compiled by The Washington Institute.

In response, the Saudis requested a \$1.29 billion package comprising around 19,000 air-delivered PGMs, an order that began delivery in July 2017. In addition to that package, the Senate narrowly approved a new \$500 million commercial sale of PGMs to Riyadh in June 2017—the first installment in a mammoth \$4.46 billion series of air-launched munition deals that would provide the Saudis with 104,000 U.S. PGMs in the next half decade. Riyadh may be accelerating its purchases in anticipation of a prolonged war in Yemen and the potential loss of U.S. sales down the road.

According to Washington Institute data collected in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, the kingdom's forces have used around 14,500 munitions since March 2015, almost all PGMs, with the average rate gradually declining from 333 PGMs per month in 2015 to 270 per month this year. The U.S. munitions currently arriving in Saudi Arabia were ordered in November 2015, when Riyadh recognized it might need new PGMs by 2019, but the intervening years have seen few signs of a PGM shortfall.

Based on a rough sense of prewar stocks and a constant dribble of replacements, Riyadh could probably keep bombing at its current rate for several years even if all new U.S. PGM deals were rejected. Thus, while cutting off such sales may be a good way to signal U.S. displeasure or publicly distance Washington from the war, the data indicates that it would not meaningfully slow the air campaign anytime soon.

ADJUSTING U.S. SALES

With U.S.-provided bombs used in many of the war's deadliest civilian fatality incidents, Congress has ample rationale to block, delay, or condition future arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Depending on the results of this week's election, the Senate's cross-party, forty-seven-seat opposition to such sales could become a majority. Saudi intransigence on the Khashoggi case or Yemen peace talks could also flip more senators into supporting a joint resolution against new weapons packages. In all likelihood, the president would veto any such resolution unless Congress can show that it has carefully weighed the costs—in terms of both neglecting the legitimate security needs of a long-term partner and harming America's status as a security ally and arms vendor.

To address these concerns, the U.S. government should apply some common-sense guidelines:

- **Think ahead and review the details of arms sales.** Under the Obama administration's watch, Saudi Arabia gained far greater military capabilities and was empowered to act in pursuit of its own security. The lack of a detailed, forward-looking, top-to-bottom review of U.S. arms sales to Riyadh concealed this reality. Prior to considering new sales, then, Congress should insist that the State Department and Pentagon provide an in-depth, holistic assessment of the kingdom's military capabilities, security sector organization, future plans, related purchase needs, and alternative suppliers, outlining the implications that these findings hold for U.S. security. Arms sales should be driven by a clear-eyed, long-term assessment of U.S. strategic interests, not by simple economic opportunism or the self-defined priorities of Saudi leaders.
- **Do not deny systems that are mostly defensive in nature.** Some Saudi capabilities represent welcome burden-sharing with U.S. forces in defending the Persian Gulf region and containing Iran. Washington's desire to hold Saudi leaders accountable for problematic actions is understandable, but it should not be used to craft policies that reward Tehran. The United States has a strong strategic interest in continuing to provide naval systems, missile defenses (including THAAD), and support for border defense and force protection (e.g., counter-mine and counter-indirect fire systems). These systems represent 54 percent (or \$26.5 billion) of the \$48.81 billion in Saudi arms sales proposed by the Trump administration to date, and a sizable prize for the U.S. economy.

- **Condition and slow the provision of mostly offensive systems.** As described above, the kingdom could use certain systems to take the war deeper into Yemen, including M1A2S tanks, self-propelled artillery, and PGMs. Delaying or conditioning their delivery is therefore justifiable, perhaps with a proviso that they not be deployed in Yemen unless the Houthis prove unwilling to engage in peace talks. Washington could also tie sales to a halt in high-risk urban strikes, as Secretary Pompeo suggested on October 30.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, visited Yemen and the Gulf coalition states four times this year to observe military operations on multiple fronts. ❖



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