

# Saudi Arms Restrictions Reflect U.S. Exasperation Over Yemen War

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Brief Analysis

**Recent statements out of Washington and Riyadh have inadvertently widened the differences between the two allies, hindering the incoming U.S. administration's options for resolving the Yemen conflict.**

On December 13, U.S. officials announced that the sale of about 16,000 guided munition kits to Saudi Arabia would be blocked due to concerns that the kingdom's poorly targeted airstrikes were causing too many civilian casualties in Yemen. This apparently counterintuitive measure -- such kits enable bombs to hit targets more accurately -- follows a freeze on cluster bomb sales earlier this year, as well as warnings to Riyadh that U.S. aid is "not a blank check." The Obama administration's frustration with its limited options for ending the intractable conflict was reflected in the media's contradictory reporting of the development: the *Washington Post* headline read, "With Small Changes, U.S. Maintains Military Aid to Saudi Arabia Despite Rebukes Over Yemen Carnage," while the *New York Times* declared "U.S. Blocks Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Concerns Over Yemen War."

Meanwhile, King Salman did not mention the latest arms restriction in his major December 14 speech before the Consultative Council, an appointed forum representing Saudi Arabia's nascent attempt at wider national-level political participation. Alluding to but not mentioning Iran, which supports the Houthi rebels next door, the king stated that Riyadh would "not accept any interference in [Yemen's] internal affairs or whatever affects [Yemen's] legitimacy, or [allow it to be] a base or corridor for any countries or parties targeting the security of the kingdom and the region or trying to undermine its stability." He also expressed hope that UN and Arab Gulf efforts "to reach a political solution in Yemen" would succeed.

Since the Saudi-led intervention began in March 2015, forces from the United Arab Emirates have retaken the southern port city of Aden on behalf of the internationally recognized Yemeni government. Yet Saudi forces in the

north have failed to recover territory, and the Houthis remain in control over about half the country, including the capital and the bulk of Yemen's estimated 27 million residents.

In private, American officials have scathingly criticized the performance of the Saudi military, which is the responsibility of Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the thirty-one-year-old defense minister and favorite son of King Salman. At the start of the campaign, MbS, as he is known, was happy to be portrayed as its architect. Now he is keeping his distance from any blame.

Theoretically, the Saudi military is one of the best equipped in the world. But in reality it is a paper tiger that has been a huge disappointment to its foreign suppliers, of which the United States is the biggest. The Saudi air force has performed very poorly, while the Saudi ground forces have made a dismal showing at safeguarding the kingdom's southwest border region. Riyadh has heaped blame on Iran for supporting the rebels in what amounts to a proxy war, but the kingdom's failure to win any military advantage seems to stem even more from its own inadequacy than from Tehran's meddling.

The nature of the rivalry was reflected in remarks last month by British foreign secretary Boris Johnson, who stated, "That's why you've got the Saudis, Iran, everybody, moving in, and puppeteering and playing proxy wars." The accurate but diplomatically incautious words earned him a rebuke from Prime Minister Theresa May, who let it be known they did not reflect government policy.

Along the same lines, Washington's dumping on Saudi Arabia likely comes across as strange to many regional allies at a time when the Obama administration is allowing Tehran to order new Boeing aircraft, which could be used to support future Iranian military missions. Allies are no doubt similarly exasperated by the administration's lack of concrete action in response to massive Syrian civilian casualties in Aleppo, a humanitarian catastrophe abetted by Iran's proxy forces. King Salman's recent reference to a political solution is a diplomatic opportunity that Washington should encourage, but for the moment it seems that neither bombs nor statements can hit the right targets.

*Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute.* ♦

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