

Revealed: The Full Extent of US Arms Deals with Saudi Arabia and UAE

Commercial deals tracked by arms monitor prove the US is far more involved in the Yemen war than suspected

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The United States has struck at least \$68.2bn worth of deals for firearms, bombs, weapons systems, and military training with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates since the start of their war in Yemen – billions more than previously reported – according to data collected by an American think tank.

That colossal sum includes, for the first time, both commercial and governmental arms deals and indicates that US involvement in the disastrous war may be greater than suspected. In fact, the weapons expenditure could have funded the United Nations's [2019 humanitarian appeal for Yemen – which totalled \\$4bn](#) – 17 times over.

According to the data collected by arms trade watchdog Security Assistance Monitor (SAM) and reported here for the first time, American companies have made deals worth at least \$14bn with the Emiratis and Saudis since March 2015, when the coalition intervened in the conflict.

Government sales tend to be for major systems, like combat aircraft, tanks, bombs, and ships, some of which are more likely than others to be used in Yemen – partly because it can take years to finalise such deals, which frequently grab headlines.

But it's the smaller weapons like firearms and bombs sold in commercial sales that experts say are disproportionately likely to be used in the conflict and inflict significant damage.

William Hartung, director of the arms and security project at the Center for International Policy, a progressive think tank in Washington, DC, which houses SAM, said the commercial data shows the US footprint in Yemen is “dramatically understated” because commercial sales are “so rarely discussed, compared to big glitzy deals like the fighter planes”.

SAM's estimate was all but confirmed by a US state department official, speaking on background, who said the overall value of American weapons deals to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen since March 2015 totalled about \$67.4bn.

New details about the arms deals come amid a continued push in the US Congress to end Washington's involvement in the war in Yemen, which has displaced millions and led to widespread disease and malnutrition.

In February, the Senate passed a bill to withdraw US military support for the coalition and

the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives [voted 247-175](#) in favour of the resolution on Thursday. US President Donald Trump has threatened to veto the effort, however.

“President Trump is going to have to decide if we are going to continue to aid the Saudi military in killing thousands of civilians and blocking humanitarian aid to Yemen,” Senator Chris Murphy, one of three lawmakers behind the bipartisan bill, told Middle East Eye.

Some of the deals were struck just days after US-made weapons were shown to have been used by the Saudi-led coalition in air strikes that killed civilians, including school children on a field trip, guests attending a wedding, and an entire family, including a five-year-old girl, at their Sanaa home.

“It’s hard to imagine a more dramatic example of the negative consequences of US arms sales,” Hartung said.

“They’re supporting regimes that are murdering civilians and causing a humanitarian catastrophe... This is a stain on the United States.”

The weapons in the deals range from missile defence systems to grenade launchers to firearms, but most were offered in deals by US arms manufacturers to the Saudi and Emirati governments.

And that’s why, until now, the total figures used by journalists and researchers for approved US deals have been deceptively low: unlike government deals, data on commercial deals is difficult to obtain, with bare-bone details only made public long after Congress is notified, sometimes even 18 months later, said Christina Arabia, the director of SAM, which collected the data used in this story and is the only organisation which tracks both types of sales.

Without US weapons, experts say the coalition fighting in Yemen – which is led by Saudi Arabia and includes the UAE – would be largely unable to wage its war. As of 2017, three out of every five weapons imported by the coalition was US-made, [according](#) to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Some of those weapons have been used in more than [100](#) coalition air strikes and cluster bomb attacks which have killed civilians or targeted hospitals and villages since March 2015, NGOs and media outlets have reported.

The Saudi-led coalition is responsible for 4,764 reported civilian deaths since 2016, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)).

Yet deals over the past four years have continued largely unabated. “Most deals to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or anywhere else, basically sail through Congress without a discouraging word, much less a vote,” said Hartung.

Tracking nightmare

The main reason the total worth of US arms deals to the Saudi-led coalition has been publicly undervalued, said Arabia, is the convoluted and opaque way commercial deals are tracked and reported.

The US government [publishes](#) details about arms deals concluded with other governments – through the “[Foreign Military Sales](#)” programme – whenever the administration gives its approval. But tracking deals between commercial US arms manufacturers and foreign governments – ‘Direct Commercial Sales’ – is tricky.

Some deals are listed as going to multiple countries, hiding the true recipients of the weapons or any dollar amount. Other agreements don’t give specific weapon types, only rough categories like “firearms and ammunition”.

There are also thresholds, which mean certain, lower-value deals aren’t disclosed to Congress – any firearms deal under \$1m, for example – and some deals are only listed at a threshold amount when they are worth far more.

The US state department recently listed an arms export deal to Saudi Arabia – for work related to the Patriot air defence system – as being worth “\$50 million or more”. SAM data shows it was in fact worth over \$195.5m.

The result of this murky reporting? The public is left in the dark about where, how many and to whom US arms are sold, said Arabia.

“There’s some information about the type of weapon in one committee report,” she said. “Then another committee report will say the country name, and then I have to contact another committee to get the dollar amount of the sale.”

Sometimes, Arabia said, she only gets figures because she has built relationships with specific committee staffers. She says that since the US midterm elections in November, when the Democrats took control of the House of Representatives, she has been unable to get her usual flow of information.

However, bit by bit, Arabia has pieced together a database of commercial deals to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Combining figures from both the government and commercial deals she has tracked, Arabia’s totals show that the US has agreed on over \$54.1bn in weapons and training with the Saudis and more than \$14bn with the UAE since the coalition’s intervention in the war.

Their figures only date back to 2015, making it impossible to know how many weapons the US sold commercially to the coalition pre-war. The commercial and government sales programmes both began in 1976.

While the state department attests to the accuracy of her numbers, Arabia suspects she may still be billions of dollars too low.

Attacks followed by deals

It is now clear, using SAM’s data, that the US has approved arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE just days after the coalition were shown to have used US bombs to kill civilians in Yemen and also after the brutal killing of *Washington Post* and *Middle East Eye* columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

Most recently, on 6 December, two months after Khashoggi was dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, the Trump administration approved a commercial deal for more than \$195.5m in upgrades to Saudi Arabia's Patriot missile defence system.

The Saudis have used a Patriot system to defend against [Houthi rocket attacks](#).

Deals made soon after coalition attacks using US weapons include:

- On 9 August 2018, a coalition bomb [hit a school bus in northern Yemen](#) carrying boys on a field trip. It killed 54 people, including 44 children. A week later, Congress was notified of a commercial deal with the UAE worth \$344.8m for spare parts for a Patriot missile defence system.
- [CNN](#) reported on 17 August that the bomb used in the school bus attack was manufactured by US firm Lockheed Martin, the biggest arms maker in the world. Three days after CNN's report aired, the Donald Trump administration made a deal with the UAE for \$10.4m in rifle parts.
- Saudi-led coalition pilots bombed a wedding northwest of the Yemeni capital Sanaa on 22 April 2018, [reportedly](#) killing 33 people, including the bride. Days later, [Bellingcat](#) proved that US firm Raytheon had made part of a bomb found at the scene of the attack. The Trump administration approved a commercial deal with the Saudis on 21 June for \$2.1m in rifles and grenade launchers.
- On 25 August 2017, a laser-guided bomb [hit a residential area in Sanaa](#) and killed a couple and five of their six children. A [photo](#) of five-year-old Buthaina – the only family member who survived – taken soon after the attack went viral. In it, swollen and bruised, she pulls her eyelids apart to see. Amnesty International proved a month later that a chunk of a bomb found amid the ruins was made by Raytheon. Weeks later, on 6 October, the US authorised a deal to send a THAAD missile defence system worth \$15bn to Riyadh.

Similar Saudi-led coalition attacks and US weapons agreements happened throughout 2015 and 2016, when former US President Barack Obama was still in the White House.

The Saudis and Emiratis [led](#) a coalition of Arab countries into the Yemeni civil war in March 2015 to quell a Houthi uprising. The Saudis say the Houthis are a proxy for Iran, while analysts say the UAE seems to be attempting to crush opposition groups and gain territory in Yemen, particularly along the Red Sea.

Just before Obama left office, his administration, which authorised [\\$117bn in arms deals](#) to the Saudis in eight years, halted the sale of precision-guided munitions due to human rights concerns over attacks carried out by the Saudi-led coalition.

But in May 2017, while in Saudi Arabia on his first overseas visit as president, Trump announced he would [overturn](#) that suspension.

As a result of the ongoing conflict, Yemen – already one of the [poorest countries](#) in the Middle East – has “all but ceased to exist”, according to the [UN](#), which [said](#) the country is now facing “the worst man-made humanitarian crisis of our time”.

Unofficial channels

But while US government and commercial arms deals to countries in the Saudi-led coalition

total tens of billions of dollars, many US-made weapons also make their way into the hands of warring parties in Yemen through unofficial channels.

An arms dealer in Yemen's Houthi-controlled north offered to sell an M4 rifle to an [ARIJ](#) journalist posing as a buyer earlier this year for \$4,500.

The journalist - who asked to remain anonymous because of safety concerns - said it is common to see US firearms and grenades in Yemeni weapons markets, and that they can be found in both the north and the south.

When Houthi fighters attack coalition positions, they often take their weapons, he said. There's also a black market, where a network of traders buy and sell arms.

"It's so normal to find American weapons in Yemen," said Nadwa al-Dawsari, Yemen country director for the Center for Civilians in Conflict, a Washington, DC-based NGO.

In fact, the presence of US-made arms across the country is "not a surprise to any Yemeni".

That's in part due to the fact that the US backed former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh in the so-called war on terror after 9/11, al-Dawsari said. A former US ambassador to Yemen [said](#) in 2018 that the US had spent more than \$115m equipping Saleh's forces between 2002 and 2009.

In 2015, the Pentagon also lost track of \$500m worth of firearms, aircraft, and other military hardware in Yemen.

Now, the Saudi-led coalition appears to be diverting American-made armoured vehicles to local militias, a violation of arms agreements, an ARIJ [report](#) published last year found.

The documentary showed that the Abu Al-Abbas Brigades - a Salafi group in Taiz backed by the Emiratis, whose leader is now on a US terror [list](#) - received three US-made Oshkosh M-ATV armoured vehicles in November 2015.

The South Yemen flag was also seen flying on another such vehicle - the BAE Caiman MRAP - which is typically used by Yemeni militias backed by the UAE. Abu Dhabi claims to have trained about 25,000 Yemeni soldiers.

Endless involvement

Beyond the weapons, training and technical help, the full extent of American involvement in Yemen - in the war and in counter-terrorism - is impossible to measure.

The US has provided the coalition with intelligence support and military advice, according to a Congressional Research Service [report](#). And while Washington previously helped Saudi aircraft with mid-air refuelling, the US defence department [said](#) it stopped that programme in November.

But amid ongoing pressure to end all assistance to the Saudi-led coalition, the Trump administration has insisted Yemenis would be worse off - and the civilian casualty count much higher - without its involvement in the war.

They also argue that the threat of Iran justifies continued US arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition.

“If you truly care about Yemeni lives,” [said](#) Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a recent press briefing, “you’d support the Saudi-led effort to prevent Yemen from turning into a puppet state of the corrupt, brutish Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Senior Trump administration officials have also insisted that they are making sure the weapons are not being used to commit human rights violations.

“We will not provide arms where we believe they will be used to conduct a gross violation of human rights,” [said](#) Tina Kaidanow, who worked on arms sales for the US state department, at a conference last year.

A state department official speaking on background said US defence sales to the Gulf are part of a commitment to regional stability, and that civilian deaths would likely increase were it not for US pressure on the Saudis.

Yet the defence department [said](#) it does not track coalition planes, their targets, or the success of their missions post-refuelling.

This has been contested, with a former state department adviser who worked with the coalition until 2017 [telling the New York Times](#) that American officers had access to a database detailing every air strike.

“On the issue of the air strikes, the Pentagon has been lying about how much they know,” Hartung said.

At the same time, a new arms transfer [policy](#) under Trump, encouraging arms dealers to be more proactive and easing restrictions on manufactures, aims to increase US competitiveness in the global arms market and create more jobs.

“Under this administration there will be no more active advocate for US sales than the US government itself,” said Kaidanow.

Meanwhile, future arms deals to the Saudi-led coalition are increasingly likely to be done commercially, as pressure mounts on the US to end its role in the war, Arabia said.

The most recent \$195.5m deal with Saudi Arabia for work related to the Patriot air defence system, she added, “probably would have been halted in Congress” if it had been a government deal.

Raytheon declined to answer questions about human rights considerations and any responsibility it may bear for civilian deaths in Yemen. “I don’t think we’re going to have anything for you on that,” a spokesperson said in a phone call.

Lockheed Martin did not respond to several requests for comment to the same questions.

'A tacit alliance'

The sheer amount of weapons and training the US provides to the coalition means that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are heavily reliant on the US for their war effort in Yemen. This is especially true of the Saudis.

"It would take decades," [wrote](#) Hartung in a recent report, "for the kingdom to wean itself from dependence on US equipment, training and support."

Over two-thirds of the entire Saudi combat-ready fleet comes from the US, according to the same [report](#). In November 2015, the US [made \\$1.29bn in deals](#) for bombs, warheads, and laser-guidance tail kits because Saudi supplies were "depleted".

The US also supplies the [lion's share](#) of weapons used by the UAE and has trained thousands of their soldiers. According to Hartung, 78 of the UAE's 138 fighter planes come from the US.

Hartung said he believes a withdrawal of all channels of military support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE "would cripple their ability to wage war in Yemen [and] particularly the indiscriminate air war".

Instead, Hartung accused the administration of "putting [a] stamp of approval on what these countries are doing" in Yemen, where now about 24 million people need humanitarian [assistance](#), thousands have died of war-related malnutrition, and over 67,000 [civilians and fighters have been killed](#).

"It is essentially a tacit alliance," he said.

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