

Middle East Loses Trillions As U.S. Strikes Record Arms Deals

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The Internet has provided the world with, if nothing else, instantaneous access to news and in-depth information previously available only to governments and think tanks. It has also allowed for the exchange of data and analyses between groups and individuals around the globe, in part by making one tongue, English, the language of the World Wide Web. It remains to be seen whether the keystroke is mightier than the sword.

An illustrative case in point is an August 29 report from China's Xinhua News Agency on a news article by Egypt's Middle East News Agency regarding a study conducted by the Strategic Foresight Group in India. The latter, a report published in a book entitled *The Cost of Conflict in the Middle East*, calculates that conflict in the area over the last 20 years has cost the nations and people of the region 12 trillion U.S. dollars.

The Indian report adds that the Middle East has recorded "a high record of military expenses in the past 20 years and is considered the most armed region in the world." [1]

The study was originally released in January of 2009 and was recently translated into Arabic by the Institute for Peace Studies of Egypt. It estimates that in a peaceful environment the nations of the Middle East could have achieved an average annual growth in gross domestic product of 8 percent.

Sundeep Waslekar, president of the Strategic Foresight Group and one of the report's authors, was quoted in January of last year saying of the region's nations, "The choice they have to make is the choice between the danger of devastation and the promise of peace." [2]

An account of the presentation of the report last year added that the cost of conflict in the region is estimated at 2 percent of growth in gross domestic product.

In regards to specific cases, it stated:

"One conclusion is that individuals in most countries are half as rich as they would have been if peace had taken off in 1991.

"Incomes per head in Israel next year would be \$44,241 with peace against a likely \$23,304. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip they would be \$2,427 instead of \$1,220.

"For Iraq, income per head next year is projected at \$2,375, one quarter of the \$9,681 that would have been possible without the conflicts of the past two decades." [3]

Other sources estimate the overall rate of unemployment in the Middle East at 20-25 percent, with joblessness in nations like Lebanon and Yemen at 30 percent or more. This despite the fact that the region has achieved one of the more impressive successes in improving educational opportunities, measured by the amount of years students spend in school, in the world.

The Middle East requires comprehensive regional development, but instead is receiving billions of dollars worth of arms. The area's nations could be spending that sum on rural and urban infrastructure, dams and reservoirs, desalination and irrigation, forestation and fisheries, industry and agriculture, medicine and public health, housing and information technology, equitable integration of cities and villages, and repairing the ravages of past wars rather than on U.S. warplanes, attack helicopters and interceptor missiles.

An American news report of a year ago revealed that, according to a U.S.-based consultancy firm, several Middle Eastern nations are slated to spend over \$100 billion on weapons in the upcoming five years. Most of those arms purchases - "unprecedented packages" - will be by Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the "core of this arms-buying spree will undoubtedly be the \$20 billion U.S. package of weapons systems over 10 years for the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council - Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain." The expansion of American arms sales and military presence in the Persian Gulf targets Iran in the first place.

The same feature documented plans for the U.S. to supply Egypt with a \$13 billion arms package and Israel with \$30 billion in weaponry over ten years, the latter "a 25 percent increase over previous levels." [4]

A year later it was disclosed that Washington will sell \$13 billion worth of arms and military equipment to Iraq, "a huge order of tanks, ships and hardware that U.S. officials say shows Iraqi-U.S. military ties will be tight for years to come." A \$3 billion deal for 18 F-16 Fighting Falcon multirole jet fighters is also in the works. Iraq will become one of the largest purchasers of U.S. weapons in the world.



F-16 Fighting Falcon multirole jet fighter

According to the U.S. Army's Lieutenant General Michael Barbero, ranking American officer in charge of training and advising Iraqi troops, such military agreements help "build their capabilities, first and foremost; and second, it builds our strategic relationship for the future." [5]

With 4.7 million Iraqis displaced since 2003, 2.2 million as refugees in Jordan, Syria and other nations, and a near collapse of the nation's civilian infrastructure since the U.S. invasion, surely there are better ways of spending \$16 billion than on American arms.

To Iraq's south, last month the U.S. announced one of the largest weapons sales in its history: A \$60 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia. The Pentagon notified Congress of the colossal transaction which the U.S. legislative body will approve later this month.

Over the next decade Washington will supply Saudi Arabia with F-15SA Strike Eagle jet fighters (SA is for Saudi Advanced), 72 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, 60 AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters, helicopter-carrying offshore patrol vessels and upgrades for the 96 Patriot Advanced Capability-2 interceptor missiles already stationed in the kingdom.

Last month Kuwait announced that it planned to purchase more than 200 U.S. Patriot anti-ballistic missiles in a \$900 million deal. The U.S. Defense Department also advised Congress of that transaction, stating "Kuwait needs these missiles to meet current and future threats of enemy air-to-ground weapons."

The news agency which reported the above, Agence France-Presse, also provided the following information:

"The U.S. has several military bases in Kuwait, including Camp Arifjan, one of the biggest U.S. military facilities in the region. There are between 15,000 and 20,000 U.S. troops stationed in Kuwait." [6] The American Fifth Fleet is headquartered in neighboring Bahrain.

The U.S. is also providing Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates with Patriot Advanced Capability-3 missile interception batteries.

Last year Washington approved the transfer of a Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile shield system to the United Arab Emirates. The deal, estimated to cost \$7 billion, is the first transfer of the advanced interceptor missiles outside the U.S.

In May the Barack Obama administration requested \$205 million from Congress for the Israeli Iron Dome layered interceptor missile shield, in the words of a Pentagon spokesman "the first direct U.S. investment in the Iron Dome system." [7]

In the autumn of 2008 the U.S. opened an interceptor missile radar base in Israel's Negev Desert centered on a Forward-Based X-Band Radar with a range of 2,900 miles.

This August 15 Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak announced his country is to receive – one can't say buy – 20 U.S. F-35 Joint Strike Fighters worth \$96 million apiece along with spare parts, maintenance and simulators. "The \$2.7 billion deal will be paid for using U. S. military assistance." [8] The fifth generation stealth warplanes are the world's most advanced. According to Israeli government sources in reference to the prospect of eventual

deployment of Russian air defenses to Iran and Syria, “the purchase of F-35 fighters would effectively eliminate the threat from Russian-made S-300 air defense systems because a series of computer simulations had clearly demonstrated that new U.S. stealth fighters outperform the Russian missiles.”

This year the State Department confirmed that \$2.55 billion in U.S. military assistance was given to Israel in 2009 and that the figure will “increase to \$3 billion in 2012, and will total \$3.15 billion a year from 2013 to 2018.” [9] That is, will grow by almost 25 percent.

Since the administration of Jimmy Carter and his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski bought off Anwar Sadat and through him Egypt in 1978 at the expense of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and other Arab states, Washington has provided Cairo with \$1.3 billion a year in military aid, adding up to \$50 billion by 2008.

In January of this year General David Petraeus, then head of U.S. Central Command and now in charge of 150,000 American and NATO troops in Afghanistan, visited Yemen and called for more than doubling military aid to the strife-torn nation from \$70 to \$150 million annually. He was later forced to retract his comments, but the Wall Street Journal reported on September 2 that “The U.S. military’s Central Command has proposed pumping as much as \$1.2 billion over five years into building up Yemen’s security forces.” The United Nations Statistics Division estimated Yemeni gross national income per capita for 2008 at \$1,260.

The U.S. has launched several missile strikes inside Yemen over the past nine months and “U.S. Special Operations teams...play an expansive role in the country.” [10] Funding for what the Pentagon describes as a counterterrorism program in the country has grown from \$5 million a year in fiscal year 2006 to over \$155 million four years later.

Washington is planning to add unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) equipped with lethal missiles operated by the Central Intelligence Agency to its operations in Yemen, replicating the same arrangement in Pakistan.

After the so-called Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005 – modeled after comparable “color revolutions” in the former Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003, 2004 and 2005 respectively – led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country and the installation of pro-Western Fouad Siniora as prime minister, the U.S. reestablished military contacts with Lebanon, which had been broken off after 1983. A dozen U.S. military officials travelled to Beirut at the end of the year, inspecting bases as part of a “comprehensive assessment of the condition of U.S.-made equipment in the Lebanon armed forces.” [11]

After the Israeli invasion of the country the following summer, Washington started military aid to the nation of four million people which two years later had exceeded \$410 million. According to an Associated Press account in 2008, “The [George W. Bush] administration has spent about \$1.3 billion in the past two years trying to prop up Siniora’s Western-allied government, including about \$400 million in military aid.” [12]

On October 6, 2008 the U.S. established a joint military commission with Lebanon “to bolster military cooperation.”

The, by Lebanese standards, unprecedented donations of arms and military equipment by the Pentagon were explicitly for internal use – against Hezbollah – and for deployment at the Syrian border. Not for defending the nation against the country that had invaded it in 1978,

1983 and 2006 – Israel.

On August 2 of this year, a day before two Lebanese soldiers were killed in a firefight with Israeli troops on Lebanese territory, Congressman Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, blocked a \$100 million security assistance package to the Lebanese military. There should be no misunderstanding: The Pentagon has not built up the armed forces of post-“Cedar” Lebanon to defend the nation, its people or even the army itself.

The sum blocked by Berman, added to that already provided by the Pentagon, well exceeds half a billion dollars. That amount of money would go a long way in alleviating the suffering of 900,000 Lebanese displaced and in rebuilding some of the 30,000 housing units destroyed by the Israeli military in 2006.

Weapons are the most expensive of manufactured goods and the least productive, generating no value and designed only to destroy and kill. They are not produced solely or primarily to be displayed in parades or at air shows.

The Middle East is that part of the world that has known the least peace in the past 60 years and that is in most need of it. Regional disputes – over land and borders, over water and other resources – need to be resolved in a non-antagonistic manner.

The foreign and national security policies of the region’s states need to be demilitarized. Disarmament of both conventional and nuclear forces is imperative.

Washington pouring over \$100 billion in new arms into the Middle East will not contribute to the safety and security of its inhabitants. It will not benefit the nations of the region. In truth not a single one of them.

Notes

- 1) Xinhua News Agency, August 29, 2010
- 2) Reuters, January 23, 2009
- 3) Ibid
- 4) United Press International, August 25, 2009
- 5) USA TODAY, August 31, 2010
- 6) Agence France-Press, September 1, 2010
- 7) Reuters, May 13, 2010
- 8) Russian Information Agency Novosti, August 15, 2010
- 9) Reuters, May 13, 2010
- 10) Wall Street Journal, September 2, 2010
- 11) Chicago Tribune, March 2, 2006
- 12) Associated Press, May 14, 2008

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