

Tone Deaf? Biden Administration Brags About 55% Hike in Foreign Arms Sales

Washington's sanitized view of unleashing \$80.9 billion in weapons on the world, especially now, is a bit curious

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The State Department wants you to know that the Biden administration made a record value of major arms sales last year - \$80.9 billion under the U.S. government-administered Foreign Military Sales program and related "security cooperation activities" with U.S. allies.

This is a 55% increase in this category of weapons transfers from the prior year, and, [according to the State Department](#), "the highest annual total of sales and assistance provided to our allies and partners."

There is some question as to whether major weapons transfers are actually at their highest levels ever. The Obama administration [entered into](#) \$102 billion in Foreign Military Sales agreements in 2010, including \$60 billion in deals with Saudi Arabia, many of them for weapons that were later used in Riyadh's brutal war in Yemen.

But the fact that the State Department wants to brag about "record" sales is instructive. The rest of the [fact sheet](#) announcing the new figures makes it sound like recent U.S. arms sales will only have positive outcomes: no risks, no downsides. Boilerplate language on the benefits of runaway arms trading included the following:

"Each proposed transfer is carefully assessed on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the Arms Export Control Act and related legislation . . . Major defense transfers are also subject to Congressional notification and review." In other words, what could possibly go wrong?

Some transfers — like the tens of billions in arms supplied to Ukraine to defend itself from a Russian invasion — have a legitimate rationale, as long as they are not the only expression of U.S. policy, to the exclusion of exploring diplomatic approaches to ending the conflict on terms the Ukrainian government and people can agree to.

And a substantial portion of the rest of U.S. arms transfers in 2023 went to European allies concerned about possible future actions by Russia, which may be a distant prospect given Moscow's mixed record in fighting a far less populous nation in Ukraine. It's not clear that the Russian military is in any shape to take on the 31-member NATO alliance. Nonetheless, sales made with Russia in mind included over \$30 billion in deals with Poland, \$8 billion worth of military helicopters to Germany, and \$5.6 billion in F-35 combat aircraft to the Czech Republic.

The legitimacy surrounding the provision of arms to Ukraine and European allies is decidedly not present with respect to recent arms aid to Israel, which has used U.S. weapons in an assault on Gaza in which the International Court of Justice has indicated that it is [“plausible”](#) that Israel is engaged in genocide. Leaving aside the dispute about whether Israel is committing genocide or “just” widespread war crimes, its military activities have killed over [26,000](#) Gazans, displaced 1.9 million people, and hindered the delivery of medical and food aid. This could not be, and is not, in line with U.S. law or the Biden administration's stated policies.

Israel has been routinely [exempted](#) from U.S. human rights strictures with respect to its use of U.S.-supplied weapons. And to make matters worse, the Biden administration has made it [harder](#) for Congress and the public to know what weapons it is supplying to the Israeli military by circumventing Congressional notification requirements and providing weapons from stockpiles without reporting on what is being taken and transferred.

Needless to say, the State Department has been silent on this counterexample to its happy talk about how all U.S. arms sales are good U.S. arms sales. Nor did it emphasize the revival of U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia, to the tune of over [\\$2 billion](#) in 2023, with more likely to come this year. This is a far cry from the days when candidate Biden called Saudi Arabia a “pariah” and President Biden pledged to curb weapons transfers to that nation.

In short, instead of bragging about the enormous value of U.S. arms transfers and providing a sanitized view of their impacts, the Biden administration should take a hard, cold look at the risks of unrestrained arm exports on the reputation and security of the United States, as well as the human consequences of their use by U.S. allies. A good start would be to withhold further transfers to Israel as leverage to force a ceasefire in Gaza.

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