

Worrying Rise of US Weapons Sales Greeted by a Middle East Engulfed in War

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An F/A-18C Hornet attached to the Golden Warriors of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 87 launches from the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush. (Photo: US Navy)

Conflicts and war across the region, says one analyst, 'have been an economic boon to those who wipe away crocodile tears with one hand and sign weapons contracts with the other.'

With ongoing wars and armed conflicts currently underway across the Middle East, South Asia, and large portions of Africa, the role that U.S. weapons makers play across the region was highlighted in weekend reporting by the *New York Times*, which showed how the drive for corporate profits has unleashed an arms race with perilous human consequences and no end in sight for people living in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere.

"As the Middle East descends into proxy wars, sectarian conflicts and battles against terrorist networks, countries in the region that have stockpiled American military hardware are now actually using it and wanting more," the *Times* [reports](#). "The result is a boom for American defense contractors looking for foreign business in an era of shrinking Pentagon budgets — but also the prospect of a dangerous new arms race in a region where the map of alliances has been sharply redrawn."

With a loosening of arms sales to many of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations—including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—the *Times* shows how an influx of advanced weaponry, such as missiles, fighter jets, and drones, is having a direct impact on both the simmering and broiling conflicts that have engulfed the region in recent years.

According to the *Times*:

Saudi Arabia spent more than \$80 billion on weaponry last year — the most ever, and more than either France or Britain — and has become the world's fourth-largest defense market, according to [figures released last week](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which tracks global military spending. The Emirates spent nearly \$23 billion last year, more than three times what they spent in 2006.

Qatar, another gulf country with bulging coffers and a desire to assert its influence around the Middle East, is on a shopping spree. Last year, Qatar signed an \$11 billion deal with the Pentagon to purchase Apache attack helicopters and Patriot and Javelin air-defense systems. Now the tiny nation is

hoping to make a large purchase of Boeing F-15 fighters to replace its aging fleet of French Mirage jets. Qatari officials are expected to present the Obama administration with a wish list of advanced weapons before they come to Washington next month for meetings with other gulf nations.

American defense firms are following the money. Boeing opened an office in Doha, Qatar, in 2011, and Lockheed Martin set up an office there this year. Lockheed created a division in 2013 devoted solely to foreign military sales, and the company's chief executive, Marillyn Hewson, has said that Lockheed needs to increase foreign business — with a goal of global arms sales' becoming 25 percent to 30 percent of its revenue — in part to offset the shrinking of the Pentagon budget after the post-Sept. 11 boom.

American intelligence agencies believe that the proxy wars in the Middle East could last for years, which will make countries in the region even more eager for the [F-35 fighter jet](#), considered to be the jewel of America's future arsenal of weapons. The plane, the world's most expensive weapons project, has stealth capabilities and has been marketed heavily to European and Asian allies. It has not yet been peddled to Arab allies because of concerns about preserving Israel's military edge.

For critics of the weapons industry and the support they receive from the U.S. government—which sanctions and paves the way for such sales—the trend is a deeply troubling one.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, told the *Times* he views the increase in arms sales to the region “with a great deal of trepidation, as it is leading to an escalation in the type and number and sophistication in the weaponry in these countries.”

Sharif Nashashibi, an award-winning journalist and expert on the Middle East region, [noted](#) in a Sunday column in the *Middle East Eye* that though war-profiteering is anything but new, the current scale of the problem is worrying. “Weapons exports provide massive economic benefits,” notes Nashashibi, “which translate to *political benefits, domestically and in terms of influence with clients*. The Middle East and North Africa has long been a theatre of combat—often on numerous fronts—and hence among the most lucrative markets on the planet. However, weapons purchases have skyrocketed in recent years as unrest, tension and war between and within states have increased markedly.”

He continued:

Arms suppliers derive maximum benefit from just the right amount of destabilisation: enough to make clients bulk-buy, but not enough to existentially threaten them or disrupt energy supplies. That is why, for example, the US profited so immensely from the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s - it armed both sides, resulting in a war of attrition that lasted almost a decade.

Similarly, the Arab Spring, Arab-Iranian tensions and the rise of the Islamic State, among other current crises, have been an economic boon to those who wipe away crocodile tears with one hand and sign weapons contracts with the other. Operation Decisive Storm over Yemen will no doubt add to the buying frenzy.

Also responding to the *Times*' latest reporting was journalist and analyst Richard

Silverstein. [Writing](#) in Sunday's *Eurasia Review*, he questioned the overall strategy of U.S. military intervention and weapons proliferation throughout the Middle East, which he argues has been not only counter-productive, but "almost universally deadly."

With specific attention to the legacy of President Obama, Silverstein added:

We've been responsible for the deaths of millions in the past decade. Why do we continue with policies which have failed so miserably? Do you remember Obama's "famed" Cairo speech of 2008? We were going to bring a new form of engagement to the Arab world. One not based on military might or dictating our political views or values. We were going to treat the Arab states as partners.

Whatever happened to that Obama? How did he turn into the president whose sole policy seems to be sending drones to kill Islamists and many unarmed civilians? Now, he wants to become the president who presided over a U.S. weapons fire sale there. The leader who confirmed that America's become "War Inc."

And as William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, [wrote](#) in piece that appeared on *Common Dreams* in October, "If there's one thing we should have learned over the past 13 years of war, it's that war is good business for those in the business of war."

As Nashashibi concludes, it should be no surprise that when it comes to the U.S. government, "the talk these days is of cooperation with the region's autocrats—they are the ones buying the most weapons. A democratic, peaceful Middle East and North Africa is far less profitable. Arms exporters will never say so, but peace does not pay the bills."

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