U.S. Arms Transfers to Saudi Arabia and the War in Yemen

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Introduction

The recent debate over the U.S. offer to sell M1A2 Abrams battle tanks to Saudi Arabia raised the question of Saudi dependency on U.S. equipment for its defense needs in general and for the prosecution of its war in Yemen in particular. Saudi Arabia requested up to 153 tanks, 20 of which are being used to replenish vehicles that the Pentagon has described as “battle damaged.” The deal also included related equipment, including machine guns, grenade launchers, night vision devices, and ammunition.¹

The tank deal, worth an estimated $1.15 billion, is the third recent offer that has involved replenishing Saudi weaponry damaged or used up in Yemen. The others were a July 2015 offer of $500 million in ammunition to the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) and a November 2015 offer of $1.29 billion worth of bombs and air-to-ground missiles to the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF).²

Although a resolution to block the tank deal, co-sponsored by Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT), Rand Paul (R-KY), Al Franken (D-MN), and Mike Lee (R-UT), was not successful, it has placed the issue of U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia squarely on the policy agenda. As Bruce Reidel of the Brookings Institution put it, the era in which an administration could offer large quantities of arms to Saudi Arabia through Congress “with virtually no debate on the Hill is over.”³

The tank deal is just one of 42 major arms sales offers made by the Obama administration since 2009. The 42 deals are worth over $115 billion, the highest level of arms sales offers by any administration in the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The tank deal sparked controversy in Congress because it signals continuing U.S. support for the Saudi military effort in Yemen despite its devastating humanitarian impact, which has included bombings of schools, hospitals, marketplaces, and even a funeral. Houthi forces have also inflicted civilian casualties that appear to violate the laws of war, but UN officials estimate that that the majority of the 3,000 civilian casualties in the war are the result of air strikes by the Saudi coalition.⁴ According to U.N. human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad al Hussein, “It would seem the coalition is responsible for twice as many civilian casualties as all other forces put together, virtually all as a result of air strikes.”⁵ Analyses by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also found that the Saudi air campaign has included the use of U.S.-supplied cluster munitions, which are banned under a treaty signed by 119 nations – but not by the United States or Saudi Arabia.⁶

The Saudi-led intervention has included a naval blockade which has made it difficult to get basic supplies into the country, contributing to a humanitarian emergency that has left millions of Yemenis without adequate food, clean water, or medical care.⁷

Rep. Ted Lieu (D-CA), who took a lead role in putting together a bipartisan letter signed by 64 members of Congress calling for a delay in the tank deal, has denounced the Saudi war in Yemen in no uncertain terms: “The actions of the Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen are as reprehensible as they are illegal. The multiple, repeated airstrikes on civilians look like war crimes.”⁸ Lieu has also said that “the Saudi military’s operational conduct in Yemen and the killing of civilians with U.S.-made weapons have harmed our national security interests, and I will continue to oppose any arms sale that contributes to its operations in that arena.”⁹ Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT), who has co-sponsored legislation with Rep. Rand Paul (R-KY) that would set additional conditions on military sales to Saudi Arabia – including proof that the Saudis are taking “all feasible precautions” to prevent civilian harm in Yemen -- told CNN that “there is an American imprint on every civilian life lost in Yemen.”¹⁰
Another sign of growing Congressional opposition to providing U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia that could be used in its intervention in Yemen came earlier this year when an amendment to prohibit the sale of U.S. cluster munitions, initiated by Rep. John Conyers (D-MI), almost passed the House, losing on a vote of 216 to 204.\textsuperscript{11}

The tank deal is just one small portion of the tens of billions worth of U.S. arms that have been offered to Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the Obama administration. The salience of the deal derived from its timing, in the midst of Saudi-led intervention in Yemen that has had devastating effects on civilians in that country. The debate over the deal was about more than just tanks. It was about whether the United States will continue to fuel the Saudi war effort without demanding, at a minimum, that the Saudis demonstrate a serious commitment to preventing civilian casualties. While the tank deal ultimately went through, opposition to the tank deal in Congress continues to grow.

This issue brief provides information on the amounts and types of U.S.-supplied equipment in the Saudi arsenal, with a focus on air and ground forces. Much of this equipment has been put to use in the war in Yemen.

**Major U.S. Arms Sales Offers to Saudi Arabia Since 2009**

Since taking office in January 2009, the Obama administration has offered over $115 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia in 42 separate deals, more than any U.S. administration in the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.\textsuperscript{12} The majority of this equipment is still in the pipeline, and could tie the United States to the Saudi military for years to come.\textsuperscript{13}

U.S. arms offers to Saudi Arabia since 2009 have covered the full range of military equipment, from small arms and ammunition, to howitzers, to tanks and other armored vehicles, to attack helicopters...
and combat aircraft, to bombs and air-to-ground missiles, to missile defense systems, to combat ships. The United States also provides billions in services, including maintenance and training, to Saudi security forces. For example, Vinnell Arabia, a division of Northrop Grumman, is involved in a $4 billion effort to train and equip the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, has played a key role in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.

The following sections will focus on U.S. arms currently in the Saudi arsenal as well as those that are on the way.

**Ground Forces**

Whether or not the tank deal goes through, Saudi Arabia will have a substantial number of U.S.-supplied armored vehicles. Data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) indicate that the Saudi Royal Land Forces (RSLF) possess over 2,000 U.S.-origin armored vehicles, including 200 M-1A2S main battle tanks that are ready for combat, with 170 more in various states of disrepair; 390 M-60A3 tanks (the generation prior to the M-1); 385 Bradley armed infantry fighting vehicles; and 1,190 M-113 armored personnel carriers. The Saudi land forces also possess a variety of U.S. artillery pieces, including 110 M-109A1B/A2 howitzers. The new tank deal, if approved, would represent a major increase in the number of modern tanks available for use in conflicts like the current war in Yemen – 153 M1A2/A2S vehicles versus the 200 currently in service.

While Riyadh’s most prominent role in the war in Yemen is its leadership in the air war (see below), Saudi Arabia has a substantial ground presence as well. IISS estimates the number of Saudi ground forces involved in the conflict as 750. Saudi forces have made extensive use of U.S.-supplied tanks, as evidenced by the fact that Saudi Arabia has had up to 60 tanks and other armored vehicles destroyed in the fighting. The Obama administration’s commitment to sell these vehicles gives reassurance to the Saudis that any tanks lost in the Yemen war will be replaced, thereby making it easier for Riyadh to sustain the current war effort. Information on the impact of Saudi tank warfare on civilians requires further investigation. Compiling this kind of information has been extremely difficult in the face of the dangers of the fighting, along with concerted efforts by the Saudis to prevent journalists or independent investigators from entering Yemen.

**Aircraft**

More than half of Saudi Arabia’s 325 combat capable aircraft have been supplied by the United States, including 151 F-15s; 5 E-3A airborne early warning and control aircraft; 7 KC-130 refueling tankers; and 30 C-130H Hercules transport planes. Of the 151 F-15s, 70 are F-15S fighter/ground attack aircraft. The F-15S’s have played a central role in the Saudi bombing campaign, along with 69 Tornado aircraft supplied by the United Kingdom and 53 Eurofighter Typhoons produced by a consortium of companies based in the U.K., Germany, Italy and Spain. There are 84 more F-15’s on the way as part of a deal that was announced to Congress in October 2010. According to the Pentagon’s official notification, the deal also includes an upgrade of 70 Royal Saudi Air Force F-15S fighters. As of this writing it is not clear how many of the 84 planes on offer have been delivered.

As noted above, the Saudi-led bombing campaign has also been bolstered by the provision of targeting information, logistical support, and daily refueling of coalition aircraft by U.S. personnel.
The Saudi armed forces also have 39 Apache attack helicopters, with 35 allotted to the Royal Saudi Land Forces and 4 allotted to the Saudi Arabian National Guard. There are 70 more Apaches – a near doubling of the current force – on the way as part of deals announced to Congress in October 2010. In addition to the Apaches, the U.S. has offered to sell Saudi Arabia 9 Black Hawk utility helicopters with related equipment and 20 C130J transport aircraft.

**Bombs and Missiles**

The International Institute for Strategic Studies lists JDAMs (Joint Direct Attack Munitions) and Paveway guided bombs as the main bombs in the Saudi arsenal, but their stockpile is much more diversified, and includes U.S.-supplied cluster bombs. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has reported deliveries of 1,900 JDAMS and 3,200 Paveway bombs from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia, but the figure is likely much higher. The November 2015 offer cited above included over 19,000 bombs.

**Other U.S.-Supplied Equipment**

As noted above, this issue brief focuses primarily on the role of U.S. weapons in Saudi air and ground forces, but there are two other connections worth noting. U.S.-supplied Patriot missile defense systems have been used, with some success, to shoot down Houthi missiles aimed at targets in Saudi Arabia. In September 2014 the Pentagon announced a $1.7 billion deal to provide Saudi Arabia with 202 Patriot Advance Capability (PAC-3) missiles with related equipment. At the time the Pentagon stated that “the proposed sale will help replenish Saudi’s current Patriot missiles which are becoming obsolete and difficult to sustain due to age and the limited availability of repair parts.”

A naval blockade of Yemeni ports has been an integral part of the Saudi-led coalition’s war in Yemen. In October 2015 the United States announced a $10 billion deal to supply Saudi Arabia with 4 Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships. The ships are an adaptation of the Freedom variant of the U.S. Navy’s Littoral Combat Ship. The Pentagon has stated that “this acquisition will enhance the stability and maritime security in the sea areas around the Arabian Peninsula and support strategic objectives of the United States.” Once it has been accomplished, the transfer will also enhance Saudi Navy’s ability to enforce a future blockade of the sort currently being imposed in Yemen.

Prior U.S. offers of naval equipment to Saudi Arabia have included 30 Mark V patrol boats, and the Phalanx Close-in-Weapons System for installation on Saudi Arabia’s fleet of Patrol Chaser Missile Ships (also of U.S. origin).

**The Corporate Connection**

The Saudi sales boom has provided billions in new business to key U.S. defense contractors, including General Dynamics, the producer of the M1A1/A2S tank; Boeing, the producer of the F-15S combat aircraft, the Apache helicopter, and the Joint Direct Attack Munition; Lockheed Martin, the prime contractor for the C-130J transport plane, the principal supplier of the Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) and a lead supplier of the PAC-3 missile defense system; and Raytheon, which is also a lead contractor on the PAC-3 as well as the prime contractor for the Phalanx Close-In Weapon System. Sikorsky, now a unit of Lockheed Martin, is the producer of the Black Hawk helicopter, which has also been offered to Saudi Arabia. These are just the main U.S. defense firms involved in some of the largest U.S. arms offers to Saudi Arabia. There are many others involved in the provision of bombs, air-to-ground missiles, armored vehicles, and other defense equipment to the kingdom.
The Pentagon’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) formally reported the proposed tank deal to Congress on August 8, 2016. The 153 tanks will be M1A2S models, an upgrade from the M1A2 models currently possessed by Saudi Arabia. The full details are contained on the DSCA web site: http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/kingdom-saudi-arabia-m1a2s-saudi-arns-rams-main-battle-tanks-and-m88ala2-heavy.

Details of the ammunition deal are here: http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/kingdom-saudi-arabia-ksa-ammunition-royal-saudi-land-forces-rslf The Pentagon’s official announcement of the deal to replenish ammunition for the Saudi land forces references the Yemen war, albeit in incomplete fashion: “The proposed sale will resupply the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) with the munitions it needs to continue to protect Saudi Arabia’s southern border from ongoing attacks by hostile Houthi militia and Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula forces.” The announcement fails to acknowledge that the Saudi-led intervention goes far beyond its border with Yemen and is not primarily concerned with fighting Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Details of the offer of bombs and air-to-ground missiles are here: http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/government-saudi-arabia-air-ground-munitions.

3. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “At the beginning of 2016, an estimated 14.4 million Yemenis were unable to meet their food needs (of whom 7.6 million were severely food insecure), 19.4 million lacked clean water and sanitation (of whom 9.8 million lost access to water due to conflict), 14.1 million did not have adequate healthcare, and at least two million had fled their homes within Yemen or to neighbouring countries.” The quote is from OCHA’s “Yemen Crisis Overview,” available at http://www.unocha.org/yemen/crisis-overview.
7. A reference to the cluster bomb vote and a link to the final vote is contained in Nelson, op. cit., note 8.
9. Of the more than $100 billion in offers reported to Congress, $57 billion have been translated into formal sales agreements. The U.S. has delivered $14 billion worth of weaponry to between 2009 and 2015. The gap between orders and deliveries reflects the fact that for deals involving major equipment like fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, armored vehicles and combat ships there can be a considerable lag time due to various factors, from protracted negotiations over price and technology transfer, to the time involved in building new systems If the equipment involved in the deal is not taken from existing U.S. stocks, to the level of available capacity to service foreign clients while maintaining production of the same systems for the U.S. military.
10. A full list of U.S. offers to Saudi Arabia can be accessed at the web site of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (see note 2).
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About Us

The Arms & Security Project

The Arms and Security Project engages in media outreach and public education aimed at promoting reforms in U.S. policies on nuclear weapons, military spending and the arms trade. It seeks to advance the notion that diplomacy and international cooperation are the most effective tools for protecting the United States. The use of military force is largely irrelevant in addressing many of the greatest dangers we face, from nuclear proliferation, to epidemics of disease, to climate change, to inequities of wealth and income. And the capacity to deal with genuine military threats can be maintained at lower levels of spending if U.S. strategy focuses on core security interests and the Pentagon does a better job of eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse. The allocation of budgetary resources needs to be changed to reflect this reality.

The Center for International Policy

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