



## Report Weighs Country Risks of Weapons Sales Potentially Arming U.S. Enemies

Bridget Johnson

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Past U.S. arms sales intended to strengthen the previous Afghan government and have since provided the Taliban with revenue and potentially could arm other terrorists underscore the risk of selling weapons to countries with weak governance, according to the [2022 Arms Sales Risk Index \(ASRI\)](#) released today by the Cato Institute.

The United States has delivered more than \$444 billion in arms sales to foreign countries since 2009; military aircraft and engines account for the largest category of arms sales, followed by ground vehicles and bombs/missiles.

The index, which was created by Cato in 2018, scores a country's risk of U.S. weapons being used against U.S. interests on a scale of 1 to 100. The risk score is determined by weighing a country's level of corruption that makes it "more likely that weapons will be stolen or sold to unintended customers," instability that "also correlates with a much higher likelihood of weapons being stolen or misused by governments and other groups," quality of domestic human rights as "states that have a poor record of human rights and/or regularly use violence against their citizens pose a greater risk of misusing weapons," and both internal and external conflict engagement as "states engaged in conflict are inherently riskier when it comes to factors such as dispersion, blowback, entanglement, and human rights abuses."

To assess the conflict score, the report relied on the Global Terrorism Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset.

"The Biden administration has not departed from the American tradition of selling arms to risky nations," wrote the authors, Cato Policy Analyst Jordan Cohen and Cato Senior Fellow A. Trevor Thrall. "That said, compared with the George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump presidencies, Biden's sales have been relatively low risk."

The countries with the highest risk scores are Syria, which scored 96 yet received no U.S. arms sales from 2009-2021; Afghanistan, with a score of 92, which received more than \$1.2 billion in

arms sales during that time period; and Somalia, which received \$19 million in arms sales and scored 91 on the risk index. Afghanistan's risk score increased six points from 2020 to 2021.

The lowest risk score — just 6 — was St. Kitts and Nevis, which received \$3 million in arms sales, followed by Luxembourg, which received \$132 million in arms sales and had a risk score of 9, and Tonga, which received \$2 million in arms sales and had a risk score of 11.

The five biggest arms customers of the U.S. have received an average of nearly \$14.3 billion in weapons since 2009, the report notes. Top among these is Saudi Arabia, which received nearly \$27 billion in U.S. arms sales from 2009-2021 and carries a risk score of 73, followed by Japan, which received nearly \$13 billion in arms sales but has a risk score of only 18. Australia received nearly \$11 billion in arms sales and has a risk score of 26, the United Arab Emirates received \$10.5 billion in arms sales and has a risk score of 57, and Iraq received more than \$10.4 billion in arms sales and carries a risk score of 75 — the highest risk score among the top 10 customers. Other high-risk, high-volume customers of the United States during the 2009-2021 period include Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan.

“Most of the top-10 buyers' risk scores have decreased,” Cohen and Thrall noted. “The top-25 buyers average risk score decreased by an average of three points over five years, bringing that average below the global average (43 compared to 45).”

“Weighting each customer's risk score by the monetary value of each sale allows us to calculate the average customer risk score for a given seller,” they added. “By restraining sales to Saudi Arabia earlier on and selling less to risky countries than previous administrations, the Biden administration has reduced risk in the U.S. weapons sales process.”

A case study in the report highlights the risk of loose weapons in Afghanistan, which were purchased and received over the past two decades to defeat the Taliban and are now “arming the group that they were sent to defeat.” In 2016, for example, U.S. arms deliveries to the country were more than \$322 million.

“The collapse of the Afghan government resulted in at least \$7.2 billion worth of American equipment falling into the hands of the Taliban,” the report states. “Initially, the Taliban government sold these weapons because they provided a source of revenue. Beyond that, the Taliban also gained political benefits by controlling who could access these weapons. More recently, Taliban leaders have used U.S. weapons to abuse human rights, ensuring women do not go to school, and held military showcases in cities as an attempt to convince people to obey them. Beyond using weapons to increase their own authoritarianism, the Taliban in the past have allowed U.S. weapons to disperse into the hands of terrorists who wish to do harm to the United States.”

Cohen and Thrall wrote that “these are just some of the consequences of sending lethal weapons by the billions of dollars into countries in conflict that have weak governance structures.”