

Defense One

Yemen Shows Why US Needs to Change Its Arms Sales Policy

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A Senate resolution to reduce U.S. participation in Yemen's war failed, but policymakers seeking to reduce complicity in the humanitarian crisis have another option.

Congress voted Wednesday on a resolution offered to end U.S. complicity in the Saudi-led war on Yemen. The sponsors, including senators from opposite ends of the political spectrum—Sen. Bernie Sanders, Ind-Vt., Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., and Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah — called for the removal of American troops from hostilities in Yemen.

The **resolution was a failure**, but senators and policymakers seeking to make America less complicit in Yemen's humanitarian crisis still have another option: they can curtail the arms deals the U.S. makes with Saudi Arabia, starving the war machine currently ravaging Yemen and its people.

And it's not just about Yemen; lawmakers should reevaluate the overall practice of selling arms to foreign nations. In 2017 the Trump administration doubled down on arms sales, not only selling more arms abroad than any of his most recent predecessors, but also promising policy changes to enable a dramatic increase in the number of weapons sold abroad.

This approach to arms sales invites negative downstream consequences. Shockingly, in most recent military interventions, U.S. troops have faced adversaries **armed** with American-made weapons. Indeed, U.S. arms exports tend to fuel conflicts abroad. This is particularly true in the Middle East, where almost every nation has been directly involved in a conflict in the last five years, and whose nations account for **49 percent** of total American exports over that same period.

Yemen illustrates how arms sales can make a conflict worse. In 2015, the Obama administration made the decision to provide support to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen's civil war. The Saudis, backed by U.S. logistical aid, arms sales, and intelligence support, have **conducted** thousands of airstrikes against civilian targets including hospitals, schools, and food production facilities in violation of the rules of war. The war has also generated what United Nations agencies have called the world's **worst humanitarian crisis**, displacing more than two million Yemenis and killing more than 10,000.

Instead of working to convince the Saudis to end their horrific campaign, the administration has continued providing military support and expanded **arms sales** to Saudi Arabia despite several members of Congress raising **grave concerns**. Weapons sold to Saudi Arabia after the start of hostilities include \$500 million worth of **precision-guided munitions** used in the kingdom's air

campaign, along **with** aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and armored vehicles. Not only does this make the United States complicit in war crimes in Yemen, selling major conventional weapons to states actively engaged in a conflict **prolong** those conflicts.

Few nations have large enough arsenals to fight conflicts for extended periods of time without resupply. This is particularly true of nations without large domestic defense industries that rely heavily on arms imports to sustain combat operations. Saudi Arabia was the **second-largest** arms importer worldwide from 2013-17, and increased its imports 225 percent over the previous five years, partly in order to fight its war on Yemen.

Risks of entanglement and public opinion blowback on supplier countries have prompted serious debate among European countries about the wisdom of arms sales to the Middle East. In several cases, the debate led to a halt in sales to Saudi Arabia and its partners such as the United Arab Emirates.

The debate in Europe began soon after it became clear that the Saudis were targeting civilians in their air campaign. Opposed to the idea that European weapons would be used to carry out humanitarian abuses, the European Parliament passed a nonbinding resolution in February 2016 calling on EU member states to enforce an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners.

Soon thereafter, the Netherlands became the first state to take action, banning weapons sales to Saudi Arabia in March 2016. After a second EU parliament **resolution** in December 2017, Norway, Germany, and the Walloon region of Belgium banned arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Egypt.

Several other countries have had or continue to have significant debates over arms sales policy. **Sweden**, for example, is actively considering whether it should limit arms sales to democratic nations. Canada has also decided to rethink arms sales. After receiving criticism for agreeing to honor a contract with Saudi Arabia for the purchase of 16 armored vehicles, the Canadian government **announced** in February 2018 that moving forward it would halt sales of a weapon system “if there were a substantial risk that it could be used to commit human rights violations.”

Although advocates argue that the United States can exert greater leverage over the Middle East through arms sales, the evidence of arms for influence is **thin at best**. A better use of American resources would be to generate diplomatic momentum to resolve the conflict. Yemen’s instability and destruction is not in the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States. If nothing else, the past seventeen years of conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere should have proved that conflict often fuels downstream problems like terrorism. Arming an aggressor isn’t the best way to broker a peaceful solution.

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