



Many Arms and Little Influence in the Middle East

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Despite the Biden administration's relatively new Conventional Arms Transfer policy that seeks to include human rights in the arms sales process, the administration's actual sales profile suggests that it seeks little real change from decades of prior U.S. arms transfers.

Since 2009, the United States has delivered over \$444 billion in arms sales to 169 countries. A major justification that U.S. administrations have used to overlook the inherent risks of arms sales is that, despite no empirical evidence, weapons sales allow Washington to leverage recipient dependence on American-made arms to force policy changes in line with U.S. interests.

Nowhere are the shortcomings of the “arms for leverage” argument more glaring than in the Middle East. The massive and constant flow of arms to the Middle East is predicated on the false notion that such sales help American partners to stabilize the region while simultaneously increasing U.S. influence and leverage. The logic that “if we do not sell arms, someone else will” is now one of the most cited reasons for continued arms sales to America's Middle Eastern partners, lest they turn toward Russia or China.

Instead, our research shows that weapons transfers to the Middle East do the opposite: Such massive weapon flows to the Middle East fuel the root causes of instability and provide nefarious actors with the tools for their repressive and aggressive domestic and foreign policies.

There is thus little evidence to suggest that leverage exists in ways that U.S. policymakers suggest. Instead, recipient states are using “reverse leverage” to guarantee a continuous flow of American weapons, undermining Washington's foreign policy goals. Rather than doubling down

on this flawed reasoning, which is rooted in decades of misunderstandings of the benefits from arms sales and the Middle East, the Biden administration should change course and begin reevaluating their rationale for sending weapons that empower dictators who actively undermine U.S. interests.

Leveraging Perceptions of Leverage

The argument that nearly unlimited weapons sales provide Washington with leverage over recipients is premised on the belief that if recipient nations depend on continued American arms sales enough, they will comply with American demands at either the domestic or foreign policy level. Nonetheless, beyond a few small points of conjecture, no scholarly analysis has been conducted to test the validity of this claim.

To explore if these claims of leverage are accurate, scholars at the Cato Institute create a yearly Arms Sales Risk Index — of which one of us is a co-author — and now in its fifth edition have over five years of collected data about the risk in every U.S. arms sale. Each country is then given a risk score between 1-100. Given that it has five years of data, this year's edition of the Arms Sales Risk Index tests the leverage argument by examining if major recipients of U.S. weapons become less risky over time on four risk vectors. These vectors are a country's level of corruption, its level of instability, the freedom and security of its people, and its participation in conflict. These vectors correlate with the risk of U.S. weapons being used by actors aiming to harm U.S. interests, dispersion of weapons, and global human rights abuses.

Conflict is the only categorical variable in the dataset as states are either at war or not. Outside of that variable, which is overall stagnant as Kuwait is the only country that has left a war that it was participating in over the course of the five years presented in the dataset, three out of these four vectors show that the top three quintiles of U.S. purchasers got riskier over five years, with the top quintile of countries becoming more than 2 percentage points riskier over that time.

In other words, the United States is not leveraging its weapons sales to make recipients end conflict, become less corrupt and more stable, and become more democratic. Instead, the

opposite trend is occurring: Major recipients of U.S. weapons are becoming riskier while abusing human rights at home.

Thus, if anything, other countries are reversing leverage by utilizing Washington's obsession with balancing to guarantee a free flow of weapons, despite engaging in actions that could harm U.S. security interests.

One way that reverse leverage occurs is when arms sales create a perceived interdependence between the United States and an ally. Weapons transfers do not tend to occur in a vacuum, and frequently come alongside military training, weapons maintenance, and interoperability drills. These security relationships lead to a converging of interests: For the U.S. military to be secure, the recipient's military needs to be successful. The recipient country can use this convergence to request weapons systems and security cooperation more fruitfully, thereby creating a cycle where more weapons transfers lead to increased interdependence, which in turn leads to more arms sales.

The second way in which reverse leverage occurs is when U.S. recipients use their partnership with a different country — whether adversary or ally — and U.S. concerns over reputation to leverage Washington into sending more weapons. The recipient state's perceived strategic and geographic significance allows it to convince great-power patrons to acquiesce to policies that they would otherwise oppose.

Reverse Leverage and the Middle East

Reverse leverage encapsulates the current predicament that the United States is experiencing in the Middle East. The United States remains the dominant weapons merchant for the Middle East, and arms sales represent a central component of America's hegemonic presence in the region.

While initially a product of the Cold War, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the American unipolar era, the Middle East became "ground zero" for the new liberal hegemonic project pursued by Washington. Through two wars in Iraq (1991 and 2003) and the "global war on terror" following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States

achieved unparalleled military dominance in the region. Arms sales to partner states in the Middle East then increased exponentially.

Despite the past three U.S. administrations — under Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden — campaigning on promises to reassess America’s presence in the region and stop Washington’s “endless wars,” the flow of weaponry to the Middle East continued unabated, with larger quantities and more advanced technology flowing to regional partners under the assumption that such transfers were in U.S. national interests.

Instead of advancing U.S. interests or providing Washington with leverage, the unwavering provisioning of such weapons and support for these states has undermined American interests and values while implicating the United States in their destabilizing policies. Predicated on the false notion that these weapons sales provide Washington with leverage over recipient countries, these sales have the opposite effect, entrenching an artificial regional order that rests on fierce repression and exclusion, while not benefitting U.S. interests.

Recipients of U.S. arms in the Middle East are among the most repressive states in the world, and the steady stream of weaponry from the United States that is caused by reverse leverage provides the authoritarian regimes with the implements to crush dissent. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Israel and other recipients of U.S. arms are involved in exclusionary and repressive policies, fueling the domestic grievances that lead to unrest and instability. In the almost 13 years since the 2011 Arab uprisings, America’s regional partners have used U.S. weaponry to crush the democratic aspirations of millions across the Middle East and North Africa.

Many of these states are equally aggressive abroad, which risks dragging the United States directly into their conflicts. Most notably, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates continue to use U.S. weapons as part of their military campaign in Yemen that began in 2015 and has since claimed the lives of over 377,000 people and devolved into the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Some of these weapons were transferred by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to militants linked to al-Qaeda as part of the war effort.

U.S. arms sales to the Middle East have also helped to establish nonphysical methods of coercion, allowing these states to push their repressive and aggressive policies to the transnational level. Arms exports from the United States can include sophisticated surveillance technology. For example, the State Department and National Security Agency approved the contract allowing the U.S. company CyberPoint to work with the Emirati government and provide them with technology to help develop the surveillance powerhouse Project Raven, which is responsible for targeting activists, journalists, and government officials around the world.

Continued arms sales to Middle Eastern countries are now being justified by Washington as essential to combatting Russian and Chinese advances in the region. According to this line of thought, if the United States does not maintain these strong relationships, it would create a strategic vacuum to be filled by Russia or China, resulting in regional actors turning toward Moscow and Beijing as their “great-power guarantors.”

However, taking such arguments at face value neglects regional and international nuances. Neither Russia nor China is capable of assuming a hegemonic position in the Middle East, nor do they desire to. Moscow and Beijing are opportunists in the Middle East, and neither of them is able or willing to build a new political and security order in the region. States within the region are aware of the limitations facing Russia and China as well as the tremendous costs that would accompany attempting to shift wholesale to non-U.S. weapons systems. Therefore, regional actors have sought to manipulate great-power politics in order to best advance their interests in the short and long term.

In the short term, America’s regional partners have cultivated Washington’s anxiety about losing its position relative to Russia or China and are pressing for major policy concessions, such as access to weapons systems and nuclear technology that United States has traditionally been hesitant to provide. Ultimately, they seek to manipulate Washington’s anxiety into entrapping the United States as their continued security guarantor. In the long term, these actors are recognizing multipolarity as a reality and are positioning themselves accordingly to best advance their own interests. This includes, among other things, increasing arms purchases from Russia and China to cultivate a similar, albeit lesser, form of reverse leverage with Moscow and Beijing. Ultimately,

Washington should recognize how America's regional partners are using the return of great-power politics to pressure the United States into doubling down on insecure autocrats while sacrificing its own interests in the process.

Lessons for U.S. Arms Policy

U.S. arms sales to the Middle East are predicated on the false notion that such transfers provide Washington with leverage over recipient countries. But the opposite has proven to be true: U.S. arms policy in the Middle East has resulted in a vicious cycle whereby Washington is pressured into actively undermining its own interests through the continued provisioning of weaponry to nefarious regional actors.

Ultimately, such policies reinforce an unstable regional order, endanger the safety of American troops, jeopardize the security of U.S. weapons, and undermine the security of U.S. strategic partners outside of the Middle East, like Taiwan.

Rather than speeding up sales to these risky countries, U.S. policymakers should reevaluate American arms policy in the Middle East and how weapons sales to these actors endanger both American interests and regional stability. Otherwise, these Middle Eastern countries will continue to put a gun to the head of Washington's policymakers, even if that gun was supplied by the United States.

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