

DAILY NEWS

Dragging the U.S. into the tarpits: America should not deepen its ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE

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Due to oil production capabilities and proximity to U.S. adversaries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have become key players in world politics. President Biden and the UAE are now discussing a “strategic security agreement” following disagreements over the war in Ukraine. Biden is also planning to meet with Saudi Arabia to reset a relationship that is currently frosty. In this meeting, Biden’s “significant agenda” likely includes deterring Iran from gaining nuclear weapons as well as raising oil production to help offset sanctions against Russia.

But any sort of reset or new agreement with the UAE or Saudi Arabia is a bad idea. It will risk entangling the U.S. in more wars, is almost impossible to leave once signed, and deepens Washington’s complicity in the war in Yemen. This war has killed hundreds of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of civilians — with an air campaign alone that’s responsible for 15,000 deaths. Furthermore, a government report from June 7, notes that the U.S. admits to not assessing the possibility of its weapons killing innocent civilians in Yemen.

A recent report details the exact level of U.S. commitment. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project data suggests that the U.S. has armed the Saudi coalition in Yemen since 2009 and shows no signs of leaving. The United States continues to train the Saudi coalition on how to use American weaponry. The U.S. has participated in joint exercises with at least 80% of Saudi air squadrons in Yemen. Making matters worse, at least four of these trainings took place on American soil.

Moreover, this support happened before and after the war began, despite civilian deaths. In 2010, the Obama administration sold fighter jets to the Saudis as part of a \$29 billion deal. These same F-15SA fighters conducted airstrikes in Yemen as early as 2018. Under Trump and Biden, there was at least \$2 million spent in F-15 trainings for Saudi pilots.

There are two primary reasons why the U.S. government says that it cannot stop sales to Saudi Arabia. First, it is too time-consuming for the State Department to check every weapons

recipient's human rights record. The report notes that the State Department already needs to check a weapons recipient's human rights record every five minutes. Thus, time is a clear limit on checking for human rights violations.

The second reason is that Saudi Arabia has been able to avoid scrutiny under the Leahy Laws. "Leahy vetting" is when the U.S. government examines if a recipient of security aid is violating human rights. The problem is that the U.S. interprets it to only vet units that receive *free* military aid from the United States. Because Saudi Arabia purchases U.S. weapons, they avoid this vetting process. Beyond that, the United States does not use section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act, which can force the State Department to provide human rights reports for Saudi Arabia.

Both of these problems are solvable. First, the U.S. should stop supplying human rights abusers with weapons and training that allows them to commit said human rights abuses. The Cato Institute's arms sales risk index is a yearly attempt to identify what countries pose the greatest risk to the U.S. after receiving weapons. It shows that Riyadh has received a higher monetary value of U.S. weapons than any other country since 2009 and is the 27th riskiest country in the world. The problem is that Washington currently discounts risk in arms sales. Incorporating risk is a good starting point for avoiding U.S.-made weapons causing human rights abuses.

The second way to fix the problem is by assessing human rights before selling weapons. One of the major problems with current Leahy vetting is the sheer number of cases. This combines with slow response times from weapons recipients and leads to a slow process. Adding arms sales will make the problem even worse by adding more vetting recipients. Nonetheless, if a country is going to buy U.S. weaponry, Washington should at least stop bad outcomes. The United States should do whatever is necessary to make this happen.

Scholars, analysts and reporters have been writing about war crimes committed by Saudi Arabia using U.S. weapons for years. It is beyond time for Washington to figure out a way to untangle itself from the conflict. Signing a security agreement does the opposite.

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