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## **Moving Backwards On Middle East Arms Sales**

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The Trump administration is charting a new direction on arms sales. Unfortunately that direction is backward.

The administration recently notified Congress that it wants to sell a dozen attack aircraft to Nigeria, intends to sell 19 fighter jets to Bahrain, and will likely greenlight the sale of \$300 million worth of precision-guided munitions kits to Saudi Arabia. In each case the Trump administration is approving deals the Obama administration blocked based on human rights concerns.

The Trump administration's primary rationale for the deals is to step up the fight against terrorism in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the sales won't do much, if anything, to make Americans safer from terrorism. What selling arms will do is exacerbate existing problems, especially in the Middle East, and lead to unintended consequences down the road.

The Saudi deal, for example, is part of the United States' ongoing support of the Kingdom's bloody intervention in Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition has waged war for the past two years in support of the besieged government as it seeks to fight off the Houthi rebels. But an additional justification is that Yemen is home to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), an Al Qaeda affiliate that both the Saudis and the Americans have been trying to destroy since it first emerged in 2009.

The proposed \$350 million deal with Saudi Arabia involves 16,000 precision-guided munitions kits that would convert "dumb" bombs into "smart" bombs. In theory these kits will allow for

more accurate targeting, but as Obama administration officials remarked last December, in practice they probably won't. The proposed sale to Bahrain, a member of the Saudi coalition attacking Yemen, includes 19 F-16 fighter jets and improvements to Bahrain's existing air fleet that would translate directly into greater firepower in current and future air campaigns.

The sales will certainly enable the Saudi coalition to pursue its goals in Yemen more aggressively. The problem is that giving more firepower to the coalition will just pour gas on an already burning fire. The Saudi coalition's air campaign has already killed thousands of civilians and pushed the nation to the brink of famine. The war has killed more than 10,000 civilians, displaced over 3 million people, and left over 14 million civilians struggling with food insecurity. The outcry over Saudi Arabia's conduct of the war has become so loud that Britain's Scotland Yard is now investigating whether the Saudi-led coalition is guilty of war crimes. And right or wrong, there is little evidence that the campaign has brought the conflict nearer to an end. Nor is there any sign that the intervention has hurt Al Qaeda. AQAP is thriving on the chaos in Yemen and appears stronger than ever.

In the long run, however, even if the Trump administration is comfortable taking extreme steps to combat terror today, there is no way to ensure that U.S. weapons won't eventually be used in ways that are detrimental to American interests. A recent case in point is the Saudi's use in Yemen of British-manufactured cluster bombs purchased decades ago, which have since been banned under international humanitarian law. One can also look at ISIS to see dangerous downstream trends. Nearly 20 percent of ISIS' bullets can be tracked to batches manufactured in the U.S. from the 2000s.

Given how much is at stake, one might expect more debate in Washington about Trump's arms deals. Unfortunately, Trump is far from alone in his zeal. Despite a few qualms, the Obama administration approved \$278 billion in arms sales, the most of any administration since World War II, including \$115 billion to Saudi Arabia alone. And the closest Congress comes to debating arms sales is to call for more of them. Just this week a group of 20 members of Congress, many of whom serve on the House Armed Services Committee responsible for oversight on arms deals, called on Trump to repeal the decision not to sell MQ-9 Reaper drones to nations like Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

In the end, arms sales to the Middle East are a symptom of the deeper disease at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. The misguided belief that American intervention can create favorable political outcomes abroad has led to sixteen years of chaos and destruction, with no clear benefit to American security. In approving these deals the Trump administration will ensure that the United States remains firmly stuck in the quagmire.

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