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## Trump's No Good Very Bad Arms Deal

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Congress may soon vote on resolutions of disapproval in response to Trump's recent arms deal with Saudi Arabia. If passed, Senate Resolution 42 and House Resolution 102 would effectively block the sale of precision guided munitions kits, which the Saudis want in order to upgrade their "dumb bombs" to "smart bombs." A similar effort was defeated last year in the Senate. How should we feel about this vote?

Before the ink was dry President Trump was busy bragging about his arms deal with Saudi Arabia, a deal that he claimed would reach \$350 billion and would create "hundreds of thousands of jobs." The sale bore all the hallmarks of Trump's operating style. It was huge. It was a family deal—brokered by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. It was signed with pomp and circumstance during the president's first international trip. But most importantly, as with so many of his deals, the deal was all sizzle and no Trump Steak.<sup>TM</sup>

Trump's arms deal with the Saudis is in fact a terrible deal for the United States. It might generate or sustain some jobs in the U.S. It will certainly help the bottom line of a handful of defense companies. But from a foreign policy and national security perspective, the case against selling weapons to Saudi Arabia is a powerful one for many reasons.

1. The deal will deepen U.S. complicity in Saudi Arabia's inhumane war in Yemen.

In an almost three-year long intervention into the Yemeni civil war to defeat the Houthi rebels and to destroy the local Al Qaeda franchise (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—AQAP), the Saudis have demolished much of Yemen with little concern about the consequences. NGOs have documented case after case of the Saudis attacking civilian targets—the United Nations estimates over 10,000 civilians have died to date—and millions of Yemenis now suffer at the brink of starvation under increasingly desperate and unhealthy conditions. Tragically, the Saudis now seek American firepower to help them break the stalemate that has emerged on the ground in Yemen.

2. The deal will not help the United States "defeat" AQAP.

As the United States should have learned by now, military intervention is a blunt tool ill-suited to counterterrorism. Airstrikes are wonderful for destroying buildings and military equipment, but

of much less value for killing terrorists. And they are less than worthless for confronting the political motivations that actually drive groups to conduct terrorism in the first place. America's track record in the Middle East since 2001 shows that despite having killed thousands of terrorists, U.S. military intervention has actually caused chaos, resentment, and terrorism to spread. Instead of defeating Al Qaeda, sixteen years of constant military pressure has helped spawn dozens of new terrorist groups and tens of thousands of new jihadist fighters. And in Yemen, where AQAP thrives despite years of U.S. drone strikes and special forces missions, there are signs that the Saudis are partnering with AQAP in the fight against the Houthis. In short, American-fueled escalation by the Saudis is only likely to help AQAP further enhance its position, while adding to the anti-U.S. sentiment in Yemen brought about by the devastation U.S. munitions have wrought.

3. The deal pushes the United States down the slippery slope in the Middle East.

Picking sides in the broader struggles between Saudi Arabia and Iran, between Sunni and Shia, and among the array of other groups seeking power and dominance in the Middle East can only cause trouble. The idea that through arms sales the United States can “project stability” or dictate geopolitical outcomes in the Middle East is dangerous folly. The more likely outcomes of the Saudi arms deal are increased tensions with Israel and a costly and dangerous arms race with Iran. Even worse, picking sides increases the risk that the U.S. will wind up getting dragged deeper into future conflicts as it seeks to make sure “its side” maintains the advantage. Given that Saudi Arabia lobbied for Western intervention in Libya and Syria, and has intervened itself to varying degrees in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, and Bahrain since 2011, this risk is non-trivial.

The reality is that this self-imposed entanglement does nothing to advance American security or other national interests. Neither vague concerns about regional stability nor the modest risk posed by terrorism warrant such large-scale arms deals. Though the Trump administration worries about Iran's influence, it makes no sense to worry more about Iran—who opposes Al Qaeda and ISIS—than about the other autocratic states in the region. Why, for example, does it make sense for the United States to double down on a partnership with Saudi Arabia, the very country most responsible for the spread of Wahhabism—the hard line version of Islam embraced by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State? Why does it make sense to continue pouring weapons into a region already fragile, already tense, already in conflict? As civil wars across the region should illustrate, external intervention, whether in the form of troops or weapons, simply amplifies existing conflicts.

4. The Saudi arms deal will privilege military solutions at the expense of diplomacy.

When countries believe they have the ability to impose their will by military force, their desire to negotiate dwindles. By selling the Saudis weapons, the United States will embolden Saudi hawks to continue pressing for a military approach, not only in the short run in Yemen, but in other conflict areas as well. Likewise, when Israel or Iran's national security team meets, the U.S. weapons sale to the Saudis will give those hawks the upper hand in their discussions. This problem will be further multiplied by every other instance where the United States is selling

weapons in the Middle East. The dynamic will, in turn, encourage arms racing, inflame tensions, will very likely amplify existing violence, and in short will make it much more difficult for leaders of all nations in the region to work toward diplomatic solutions.

Beyond their impact on the recipients' interest in diplomacy, U.S. reliance on arms sales also destroys America's moral authority and reduces its diplomatic flexibility. By arming oppressive governments throughout the Middle East without regard for the consequences, not only does the United States risk the resentment of Arab populations and the wrath of terrorist groups, it also loses the ability to call out autocratic behavior, to inspire political change, and to speak credibly to democratic movements. By using weapons sales to take sides in various sectarian and regional disputes, the United States loses the ability to serve as a convener of stakeholders and a mediator of peace agreements. This, in turn, leaves the United States even more reliant on military tools.

In the end, the most tragic outcome of Trump's arms deal may be to prolong the period of conflict, terrorism, and war through which the people of the Middle East must suffer before diplomacy is finally able to take root.

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