

THE MIDEAST ARMS BAZAAR: TOP ARMS SUPPLIERS TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, 2015-2019

Arms & Security
Program

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Report cover image is a photo of a destroyed house in the south of Sanaa, Yemen from 2015 taken by Mr. Ibrahim Qasim. The image is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license](#).



INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been the site of multiple wars throughout this century. Current conflicts include the civil war in Syria, with outside intervention by Russia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States (U.S.); the conflict in Libya, with intervention by Russia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Egypt, and Turkey; the Saudi-led war in Yemen; Egypt's counterterror operations in the Northern Sinai; and a campaign of strikes and counter-strikes involving the U.S., Iran, and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq that has the potential to spiral into a larger conflict. The vast bulk of the weapons used in these wars are supplied by outside powers. This report documents top arms suppliers and recipients in the region between 2015 and 2019, based on data compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).¹

TOP SUPPLIERS AND RECIPIENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, 2015 TO 2019

As the world's leading arms exporter, the U.S. holds a dominating presence in the global arms market, at 36% of total arms deliveries worldwide.² This leading U.S. role is even more pronounced when it comes to the MENA region. The U.S. was far and away the largest arms supplier to the Middle East and North Africa for the period covered by this report, accounting for 48% of all deliveries of major weapons systems, nearly three times the share accounted for by the next largest supplier.³ The next four top suppliers were Russia (17%), France (11%), the United Kingdom (U.K.) (5%), and Germany (5%) (see Figure 1).⁴ Taken

1. For purposes of this report, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is defined as Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the UAE, and Yemen. This grouping follows the definition of the U.S. State Department with the addition of Turkey, which was included because it is a key political and military player in the region, as well as an arms supplier to several key conflicts; and with the addition of Palestine, which is not recognized by the U.S. State Department.

2. Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019," SIPRI Fact Sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019.pdf.

3. SIPRI figures track major conventional weapons systems – including combat aircraft, ships, tanks, armored vehicles, bombs, and missiles – but not small arms such as firearms, for example. SIPRI has its own system for valuing arms transfers, known as the Trend Indicator Value (TIV). It takes into account the age and performance characteristics of a weapon system in assigning a value to it, so figures expressed in Trend Indicator Values cannot be compared to other figures not so derived, such as dollar values of weapons derived from other sources, or to calculate values as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). A full explanation of SIPRI's methodology is available at <https://sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods>

4. Figures are rounded to the nearest percentage point. In some cases, this leads to nations with slightly different levels

together, the top five suppliers accounted for 85% of all arms deliveries to the region from 2015 to 2019. China, which has been discussed as a possible replacement supplier if the U.S. or other suppliers cut back their transfers to the region, accounted for less than 3% of the deliveries to the Middle East and North Africa for the period 2015 to 2019. The one area in which Chinese arms exports have had an impact in the region is in the sale of armed drones.⁵ See Appendix Table 1 for a list of the top 20 suppliers to the region over that time frame. The analysis covers a wide range of weapons systems, but does not include small arms and light weapons.⁶

The U.S. dominated arms transfers to the Gulf States. It was the top supplier to Saudi Arabia (74%); Kuwait (70%); the UAE (68%); Qatar (50%); and Bahrain (33%). The U.S. was also the top supplier to Morocco (91%); Israel (78%); Jordan (73%); and Lebanon (73%). In all, the U.S. was the top supplier to over two-thirds of the nations in the region – 13 of the 19. If the Trump administration goes ahead with a controversial plan to sell armed drones and F-35 combat aircraft to the UAE the U.S. share of arms exports to that nation could be even higher in the years to come.⁷

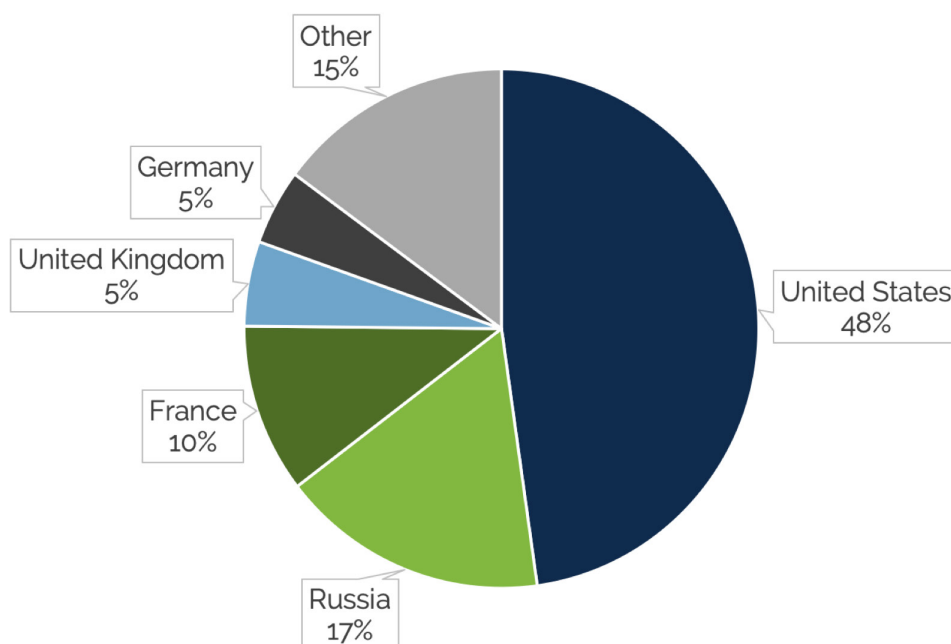
Other exporters that predominated in transfers to key regional states include France and Russia, who were the top suppliers to Egypt (supplying 35% and 34% of Egypt's arms imports, respectively). Russia was also the top supplier to Iran (98%) and Syria (95%). The Netherlands was essentially tied with the U.S. as the top supplier to Jordan, with each country providing 30% of Jordan's arms imports. The top suppliers to Iraq were the U.S. (45%) and Russia (34%).

of exports being listed at the same percentage. For example, the U.K. accounted for 5.3% of arms deliveries to the region from 2015 to 2019, while Germany accounted for 4.7%, both rounding to the same figure of 5%. In these cases, the country with the slightly higher fraction of a percentage point is ranked ahead of the other.

5. See section on drone exports.

6. The SIPRI database that is the basis of this report includes aircraft, air defense systems, artillery, armored vehicles, engines, sensors, missiles, precision-guided munitions, naval weapons, satellites, and ships, at http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php.

7. Matthew Lee, "Trump Weighs F-35 Jet Sales to UAE Over Israeli Objections," *Associated Press*, August 19, 2020, <https://apnews.com/e510c9e183b24299633b75d886f561b0>.

Figure 1: Top Five Arms Suppliers to the Middle East and North Africa, 2015-2019

The top five suppliers were heavily dependent on arms deliveries to the Middle East and North Africa for the period from 2015 to 2019. Regional deliveries accounted for one-third to over one-half of worldwide deliveries for each of the top five weapons providers. Specifically, from 2015 to 2019, arms exports to the MENA region accounted for 57.3% of the U.K.'s total arms exports, 54.0% of France's exports, 53.2% of the U.S.' arms exports, 33.0% of Russia's arms exports and 32.7% of Germany's arms exports.

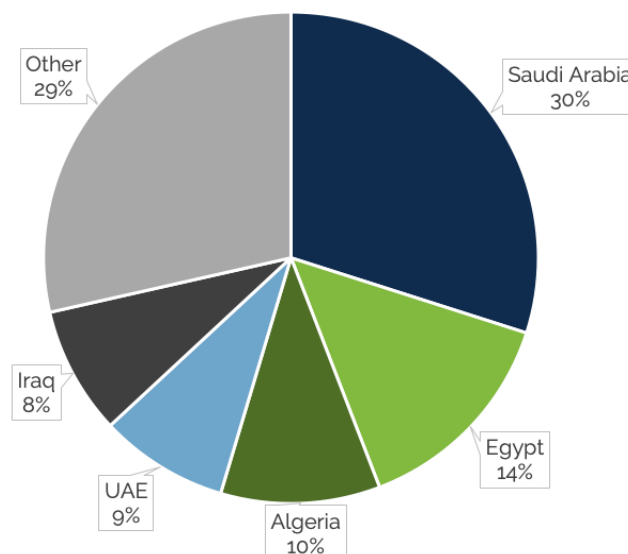
Top recipients of imported arms in the MENA region during 2015 to 2019 were Saudi Arabia (29.5% of total imports to the region), Egypt (14.2%), Algeria (10.4%), the UAE (8.5%), and Iraq (8.4%). This demonstrates how a handful of countries received the bulk of the volume of arms transfers into the area. Taken together, these five countries accounted for over two-thirds of all arms imported into the region between 2015 and 2019. See Appendix Table 2 for a list of the top ten arms recipients in the Middle East and North Africa.

CONSEQUENCES OF ARMS TRANSFERS TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Advocates of arms transfers to the MENA region often describe them as a force for stability, a way to cement alliances, a way to counter Iran, or, more generally, as a tool for creating a balance of power that makes conflict less likely. In a number of key conflicts in the Middle East this has clearly not been the case, as arms flows have exacerbated conflicts, facilitated

human rights abuses, led to countless civilian injuries and deaths, and enabled widespread devastation.

Figure 2: Top Five Arms Recipients in the Middle East and North Africa, 2015-2019



In Syria, arms flows from multiple suppliers have helped fuel a civil war that has driven 5 million Syrians from their home country and displaced 6 million more internally. Over 367,000 people have died in the conflict, including at least 120,000 civilians; and 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.⁸ Russia has been the major arms supplier to the Assad regime during this period, as well as sending its own troops, aircraft, and militias that have helped tip the balance of the war. The U.S. has spent over \$2.5 billion on training and equipping Syrian opposition forces since 2011, mostly for rifles, rocket launchers, machine guns, and other small arms.⁹ Regional players such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have been involved in funding or supplying their favored opposition groups as well, and in late 2019 Turkey invaded northern Syria to do battle with Syrian Kurdish militias that had been fighting ISIS forces in that area.

Multiple supplier nations have provided weaponry to the warring sides in Libya, with Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, France, and Jordan providing arms, political or military support to the forces of Gen. Khalifa Haftar, in violation of a United Nations arms embargo, and Turkey and Qatar supporting the internationally recognized government.¹⁰ Haftar's

8. "What's Happening in Syria?," BBC News, October 16, 2019.

9. Elias Yousif, "Security Assistance in Focus: Syria," Security Assistance Monitor, October 10, 2019.

10. Patrick Wintour, "Libya: Sanctions Threatened Against Countries Who Break Arms Embargo," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/19/libya-international-force-could-monitor-proposed-ceasefire>; and

forces have been implicated in serious human rights abuses, including an air strike on a civilian neighborhood in the city of Murzuq that killed 40 people and the bombing of civilian areas in the Libyan capital of Tripoli.¹¹ In early 2020 the UAE sponsored over 100 flights into Libya carrying 5,000 metric tons of cargo, possibly including items like artillery, small arms and ammunition.¹² And an investigation by the BBC found that the UAE carried out a January 2020 drone strike on a military academy in Tripoli that killed 26 unarmed cadets.¹³ According to Human Rights Watch, armed groups affiliated with both major players in the conflict—the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and Gen. Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) have “carried out extrajudicial executions and abducted, tortured, and disappeared people.”¹⁴ As noted in a report by the Small Arms Survey, individuals and factions in Libya have also received significant amounts of small arms through illicit channels, including online arms markets. Weapons from 26 different nations have been identified in an analysis of arms flows into the region, including handguns, variants of the AK-47 automatic weapon, and antitank missiles.¹⁵ A confidential UN report provided to the New York Times in September 2020 found that Russia and the UAE were continuing to ship large quantities of arms into Libya via flights that violated the United Nations embargo.¹⁶

In Yemen, a Saudi/UAE-led intervention that commenced in March 2015 has resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians through air strikes, put millions at risk of famine, and sparked the worst cholera outbreak in living memory.¹⁷ The war overall has cost over

Ramy Allahoum, “Libya’s War: Who Is Supporting Whom?,” January 9, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/libya-war-supporting-200104110325735.html>.

11. “Libya Tribes Sue Haftar at ICC Over Civilian Massacre,” *Middle East Eye*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200805-libya-tribes-sue-haftar-at-icc-over-civilian-massacre/>; and “At Least 30 Killed in Libya Military Academy Attack,” Reuters, January 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/many-killed-in-attack-on-military-camp-in-libyas-capital-minister-idUSKBN1Z30OT>.

12. Jason Burke and Patrick Wintour, “Suspected Military Supplies Pour Into Libya as UN Flounders,” *The Guardian*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/suspected-military-supplies-libya-un-cargo>.

13. “UAE Implicated in Lethal Drone Strike in Libya,” BBC, August 27, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53917791?utm_source=P%26S%3A+Drone+News+Roundup+%E2%80%94+All&utm_campaign=cc00c89f6e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_08_01_04_01_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_066db1cbcd-cc00c89f6e-391829397.

14. Human Rights Watch, Libya Country Report, accessed August 21, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/libya>.

15. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Libya Has Become a Hub for Online Arms Trading, Report Says,” *Washington Post*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/05/02/libya-has-become-a-hub-for-online-arms-trading-report-says/>.

16. Declan Walsh, “Waves of Russian and Emirati Flights Fuel Libyan War, UN Finds,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/world/middleeast/libya-russia-emirates-mercenaries.html>

17. On the humanitarian situation in Yemen, see the United Nations Office of the Commissioner of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Yemen Situation Report,” July 2, 2020, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/yemen>; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), “Over 100,000 Reported Killed in Yemen War,” October 31, 2019, <https://acleddata.com/2019/10/31/press-release-over-100000-reported-killed-in-yemen-war/#:-:text=ACLED%E2%80%99s%20Yemen%20data%20are%20collected%20in%20partnership%20with,it%20the%20second%20most%20lethal%20year%20after%202018>

100,000 lives. The U.S. and the U.K. have been the primary suppliers of the combat aircraft, bombs, attack helicopters, missiles, and armored vehicles used by the Saudi/UAE coalition in the war, transfers valued in the tens of billions of dollars.¹⁸ Iran is the principal external supplier of the Houthi opposition, but those transfers have been limited with most Houthi weapons obtained from former Yemen Army units that joined their coalition, captured items, or locally produced from a variety of illicit sources.¹⁹

There has been a sharp jump in overall arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the Yemen war in 2015. Total arms deliveries to the Kingdom increased by 129% between the 2010 to 2014 period and the period covering 2015 to 2019—with deliveries well more than doubling between the two time periods. The U.S. (74%) and the U.K. (13%) accounted for 87% of the deliveries to Saudi Arabia in the 2015 through 2019 time frame.

In Egypt, U.S.-supplied combat aircraft, tanks, and attack helicopters have been used in what is supposedly a counterterror operation in the Northern Sinai but in reality has become a general war against the civilian population of the region. For 2015 through 2019, U.S. arms offers to Egypt that were notified to Congress totaled \$2.3 billion, with billions more accounted for by deals made in prior years.²⁰ And in May 2020, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced an offer of Apache attack helicopters to Egypt worth up to \$2.3 billion.²¹

18. Due to delays in the Defense Security Cooperation Agency's annual report on U.S. arms transfers—the last of which covers only until the end of 2017—it's hard to generate a firm dollar estimate of new arms agreements and deliveries to Saudi Arabia and the UAE for the period from 2015 to 2019. In terms of arms sales offers notified to the U.S. Congress—not all of which come to fruition and result in final deliveries—U.S. deals with Saudi Arabia totaled \$53 billion from 2015 to 2019 and deals with the UAE totaled \$14 billion over the same time period. For details see William D. Hartung, "U.S. Arms Transfers to the United Arab Emirates and the War in Yemen," Center for International Policy, September 2017, at https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/488e54_f7ae98f85aa34ff0b31ce3fe78cd2f74.pdf; William D. Hartung, "U.S. Military Support for Saudi Arabia and the War in Yemen," Center for International Policy, November 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_5e9019d625e84087af647e6cb91ea3e2.pdf; William Hartung and Christina Arabia, "Trends in Major U.S. Arms Sales 2018: The Trump Record – Rhetoric Versus Reality," Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy, April 2019, https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_44475f2b94464e77b57c6d33953dc939.pdf; and William Hartung, Christina Arabia, and Elias Yousif, "The Trump Effect: Trends in Major U.S. Arms Sales 2019," Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy, May 2020, https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_768ab66d079849fd98eabc50ed60a723.pdf.

19. The volume of arms transfers from Iran to the Houthi coalition is hard to quantify, but SIPRI's database has recorded \$20 million in transfers during the 2015 to 2019, measured in Trend Indicator Values. The data base is at <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>.

20. See William D. Hartung and Seth Binder, "U.S. Security Assistance to Egypt: Examining the Return on Investment," Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Center for International Policy, May 2020, https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_f394aa90478b48ea8d5840fb7ff2aee7.pdf.

21. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Egypt – AH-64E Refurbished Apache Attack Helicopters and Related Equipment and Support," notification to Congress, May 7, 2020, <https://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/egypt-ah-64e-refurbished-apache-attack-helicopters-and-related-equipment-and>.

According to research conducted by Human Rights Watch, thousands of people have been arrested in Sinai over the past six years, hundreds have been disappeared, and tens of thousands have been forcibly evicted from their homes. The Egyptian military has also carried out “systematic and widespread arbitrary arrests—including of children—enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial killings, collective punishment, and forced eviction.”²² There is also evidence to suggest that Egyptian forces have engaged in illegal air and ground strikes that have killed substantial numbers of civilians.²³

In several conflicts, U.S. arms have ended up in the hands of both sides of the war. These are examples of how transfers justified on one basis can have dramatically different impacts than intended based on developments on the ground in recipient countries.

When Turkey invaded northeastern Syria in October 2019, it faced Kurdish-led Syrian militias that had received a portion of the \$2.5 billion in arms and training the U.S. supplied to Syrian opposition forces over the prior five years. Meanwhile, the entire Turkish inventory of combat aircraft consists of U.S.-supplied F-16s, and more than half of its armored vehicles are of U.S.-origin.²⁴

In Iraq, when ISIS forces swept through the country from the north in 2014, they captured billions of dollars-worth of U.S.-origin light weapons and armored vehicles from Iraqi security forces. U.S. arms have also been transferred from the Iraqi military to Iranian-backed militias operating alongside them in the fight against ISIS. And in Yemen, the U.S. has directly armed the Saudi/UAE coalition, and U.S. arms have ended up with the Houthi coalition, extremist militias and groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) both via transfers from former members of the U.S.-supplied Yemeni military and by way of UAE forces that have worked with a wide array of groups in the southern part of the country.²⁵

22. Human Rights Watch, “[If You Are Afraid for Your Lives, Leave Sinai: Egyptian Security Forces and ISIS Affiliate Abuses in North Sinai](#),” May 28, 2019.

23. Ibid.

24. William Hartung, “Turkey’s Invasion of Syria, Made in the U.S.A.,” *Forbes*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhartung/2019/10/10/turkeys-invasion-of-syria-made-in-the-usa/#2f9364125483>; and Elias Yousif, “Security Assistance in Focus: Syria,” Security Assistance Monitor, October 10, 2019.

25. Nima Elbagir, Salma Abdelaziz, Mohamed Abo El Gheit, and Laura Smith-Spark, “Sold to An Ally, Lost to An Enemy,” *CNN.com*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>.

DRONE EXPORTS TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Imported drones have become a regular feature of the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, used by one or both sides in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen. Yemen has been described by researchers from the Dutch research group PAX as “the test-bed of drone warfare.” Crude drones adapted from commercial models have been used for surveillance and attacks by the Houthi rebels, and the Saudi-led coalition has employed larger, Chinese-supplied drones to monitor and kill Houthi leaders.²⁶

A December 2018 report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has described the consequences of using imported or domestically-produced drones in Middle East conflicts, specifically noting that Iran, Turkey, and the UAE “have conducted extra-territorial strikes as part of covert and/or agency-led assassination missions, which are unlikely to have been considered acceptable in terms of political risk level if carried out with manned aircraft.”²⁷

As suggested above, China in particular has been a significant exporter of drones to the Middle East and North Africa, supplying armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Algeria (10), Egypt (60), Iraq (12), Jordan (6), Saudi Arabia (70), and the UAE (40).²⁸ In July 2020, the Trump administration announced that it was loosening restrictions on the export of armed U.S. drones, opening the door to selling them to Persian Gulf states and other interested parties in the region. The result could be an arms race in drone exports that would exacerbate the threats caused by proliferation of these systems.²⁹

PROSPECTS FOR RESTRAINT

Historically, there have been several efforts to limit global arms sales that would have had a particularly strong impact on transfers to the Middle East. Perhaps the most significant was the Conventional Arms Transfer (CAT) talks between the U.S. and the Soviet

26. James Reinl, “Cheap Drones Are Changing the Calculus of War in Yemen,” *Global Post*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-06-03/cheap-drones-are-changing-calculus-war-yemen>.

27. Bassiri Tabrizi and Justin Bronk, “Armed Drones in the Middle East: Proliferation and Norms in the Region,” Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), December 2018, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20181207_armed_drones_middle_east_web.pdf.

28. Chris Alden, Lukas Fiala, Eric Krol, and Robert Whittle, “Wings Along the BRI: Exporting Chinese UCAV’s and Security?” *LSE Ideas Strategic Update*, May 28, 2020, <https://medium.com/@lseideas/wings-along-the-bri-exporting-chinese-ucavs-and-security-a4bf7a3324df>.

29. On this point see Connor Akiyama, “Unmanned and Uncontrolled: The Future of Armed Drone Exports Shouldn’t Be Determined by Demand,” *Inkstick*, July 31, 2020, <https://inkstickmedia.com/unmanned-and-uncontrolled/>.

Union, which were initiated by the Carter administration. The first round of discussions occurred in December 1977. Arms analyst Andrew Pierre described the thrust of the talks in his 1982 book, *The Global Politics of Arms Sales*, noting that the goals were both “to include prohibitions on certain kinds of weapons such as long-range surface-to-surface missiles, naval mines, and arms of particular use to terrorists” as well as consideration of restraints in the volume of sales to particular regions.³⁰ The talks eventually fell apart due to disagreements over which regions to discuss first, internal disputes within the Carter administration over the value and wisdom of the negotiations, and a deterioration of U.S.-Soviet relations that culminated in the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.³¹

There was another wave of interest in limiting the arms trade in the wake of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when it emerged that dozens of nations—including the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the U.S., Russia, China, France, and the U.K.)—had helped build up Saddam Hussein’s war machine. Initiatives included the creation of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms—a voluntary reporting mechanism in which countries forwarded information about their major arms imports and exports each year—and the so-called P-5 talks among the U.S., Russia, China, France, and the U.K. over limiting arms exports to the Middle East. The P-5 talks collapsed after China offered mid-range ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia and the Clinton administration engaged in a surge of sales to the region as the talks were underway, sewing suspicion that the U.S. was trying to corner the market while other suppliers were distracted by the arms control discussions.³²

The failure of the CAT and P-5 talks—and the subsequent negative consequences of relatively unconstrained arms exports to the MENA region—underscores the need for a consistent commitment to arms transfer restraint that values long-term security gains over perceived short-term economic and security benefits.

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which entered into force in 2014 and has been joined by 110 countries, is another tool for curbing destabilizing arms transfers to the region.³³ But so far the ATT has had little impact on exports to the most intense conflicts in the region, including the wars in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. This is partly because key players—including the U.S., Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq—are not parties to the treaty; and also because there

30. Andrew Pierre, *The Global Politics of Arms Sales*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 285 to 290.

31. Barry M. Blechman and Janne E. Nolan, *The U.S.-Soviet Arms Transfer Negotiations*, FPI Case Studies number 3, Foreign Policy Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, January 1987.

32. Lee Feinstein, “‘Big Five’ Weapons Exporters: More Talks, More Sales,” *Arms Control Today*, November 1991; and William D. Hartung, “Curbing the Arms Trade: From Rhetoric to Restraint,” *World Policy Journal*, Spring 1992.

33. Details on the UN Arms Trade Treaty are available from the United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), <https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/arms-trade-treaty-2/#:~:text=The%20Arms%20Trade%20Treaty%20was%20approved%20by%20the,led%20to%20widespread%20availability%20and%20misuse%20of%20weapons.>

have been disputes about how to apply the treaty to sales to areas of conflict within nations that are part of the treaty, most notably in the U.K. It is worth noting that some key states in the region are adherents to the ATT: Lebanon and the State of Palestine are States Parties to the treaty, and Bahrain, the UAE, Turkey, Libya, Israel, and Djibouti are signatories.³⁴ An analysis of how to strengthen implementation of the ATT is beyond the scope of this report, but to the extent that it sets a global norm against transfers that enable major human rights abuses or escalate conflicts, it may help shift the debate over specific transfers. The ultimate responsibility for arms transfer decisions remains the province of individual governments.

A number of European countries have curbed arms sales to Saudi Arabia due to its actions in Yemen and its 2018 murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Germany has instituted an outright ban on arms licenses and deliveries to Riyadh, and Denmark, Norway, Finland, and the Netherlands have banned new licenses.³⁵ In February 2020, the southern Belgian region of Wallonia halted weapons sales to the Saudi Air Force and Defense Ministry in response to their actions in Yemen. And in August 2020, Belgium suspended arms transfers to the Saudi Arabian National Guard for its failure to meet its standard for “human rights in the end-user country.”³⁶

In the U.K., a court case brought by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade resulted in a temporary halt in new arms export licenses, but left deliveries against existing licenses, including maintenance and support of U.K.-supplied weapons in the Saudi arsenal, in place.³⁷ But the U.K.’s bar on new arms sales to Saudi Arabia was overturned in July 2020 when the U.K. government claimed that Saudi violations of International Humanitarian

34. A list of States Parties to the ATT is available at [https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/List%20of%20ATT%20States%20Parties%20\(alphabetical%20order\)\(07%20August%202020\)/List%20of%20ATT%20States%20Parties%20\(alphabetical%20order\)\(07%20August%202020\).pdf](https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/List%20of%20ATT%20States%20Parties%20(alphabetical%20order)(07%20August%202020)/List%20of%20ATT%20States%20Parties%20(alphabetical%20order)(07%20August%202020).pdf); and a list of signatories is available at [https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/List%20of%20ATT%20Signatory%20States%20\(07%20August%202020\)/List%20of%20ATT%20Signatory%20States%20\(07%20August%202020\).pdf](https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/List%20of%20ATT%20Signatory%20States%20(07%20August%202020)/List%20of%20ATT%20Signatory%20States%20(07%20August%202020).pdf).

35. For details on the policies of the countries mentioned see “German Arms Export Freeze on Saudi Arabia Extended,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 18, 2019; Stine Jacobsen, “Denmark Suspends Saudi Weapon Export Approvals Over Khashoggi, Yemen Concerns,” *Reuters*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-khashoggi-denmark/denmark-suspends-saudi-weapon-export-approvals-over-khashoggi-yemen-concerns-idUSKCN1NR0G6>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, “No Foundations For Arms Export Authorisation to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates,” November 22, 2018, [https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/ei-edellytyksia-uusille-asevientiluville-saudi-arabiaan-tai-arabiemiraatteihin?p_auth=P794L5sY&curAsset=0&stId=](https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/ei-edellytyksia-uusille-asevientiluville-saudi-arabiaan-tai-arabiemiraatteihin?p_auth=P794L5sY&curAsset=0&stId=;); and Jon Stone, “Germany, Denmark, Netherlands and Finland Stop Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia in Response to Yemen Famine,” *The Independent* (U.K.), November 23, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/saudi-arabia-arms-embargo-weapons-europe-germany-denmark-uk-yemen-war-famine-a8648611.html>.

36. “Belgium Suspends Arms Transfers to Saudi National Guard,” *Al Jazeera English*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/belgium-suspends-arms-exports-to-saudi-national-guard/ar-BB17GXbs>.

37. For details on the initial effect of the lawsuit with respect to U.K. arms sales to Saudi Arabia see Campaign Against the Arms Trade, “UK Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia,” accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.caat.org.uk/campaigns/stop-arming-saudi/uk-arms-sales>.

Law were “isolated incidents,” a claim that flies in the face of evidence of scores of Saudi strikes on civilian targets ranging from funerals, to weddings, to marketplaces, to civilian infrastructure, to a school bus.³⁸

Another route towards curbing arms transfers to conflicts in the MENA region is action on the part of specific countries. In June of 2019, the U.S. Congress took the unprecedented step of voting down the most important elements of an \$8.1 billion “emergency” package of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan, only to have its action vetoed by the Trump administration.³⁹ But greater pressure on Congress and the administration, or reforms in how arms transfer decisions are made that would strengthen the hand of Congress, could change this situation in the future. Among measures that should be considered are strengthening the ability of Congress to block an arms sale before it is delivered, not just on initial approval of a deal, and requiring Congress to actively approve all major arms sales rather than the current system of requiring a veto-proof vote to block potentially risky sales (see recommendations, below).⁴⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

Unrestrained arms trading to the MENA region has fueled conflicts and enabled human rights abuses. It’s time to change current policies, at both the level of individual nations and globally. The following recommendations relate primarily to proposed changes in U.S. policy, given that is the dominant supplier to the region. The recommendations suggest

38. For information on the U.K. government’s decision to resume new arms licenses to Saudi Arabia see Campaign Against the Arms Trade, “UK Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia: Immoral, Illegal, and Deadly,” July 13, 2020, <https://www.caat.org.uk/media/press-releases/2020-07-13>.

39. Ted Barrett and Zachary Cohen, “Senate Votes to Block Trump-Backed Saudi Arms Sales,” *CNN.com*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/20/politics/saudi-arm-sales-vote/index.html>; and Deb Riechmann, “Trump Vetoes Congressional Effort to Block Saudi Arms Sales,” *Associated Press*, July 25, 2019, <https://apnews.com/d3d146d8d7ae40749b16183e5fa87746>.

40. For additional, detailed recommendations on ways to reform the arms transfer decision making process, see Rachel Stohl, “Global Arms Trade: Setting an Example for Responsible Policy,” Stimson Center, November 7, 2019, <https://www.stimson.org/2019/global-arms-trade-setting-example-responsible-policy/>; Diana Ohlbaum, Friends Committee on National Legislation, presentation at Forum on the Arms Trade annual meeting, January 14, 2020, https://www.forumarmstrade.org/uploads/1/9/0/8/19082495/ohlbaum_talking_points_for_arms_trade_conference_1-14-20_1_.pdf; Scott Paul, “7 Ways to Sell U.S. Arms Abroad Without Losing Your Soul,” Oxfam America, November 7, 2019, <https://politicsofpoverty.oxfamamerica.org/2019/11/us-arms-sales-exports-guns-yemen/>; Jeff Abramson, “How Congress Can Exert Responsible Oversight on Trump’s Dangerous Approach to Arms Sales,” Issue Brief, Arms Control Association, January 15, 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2019-01/congress-exert-responsible-oversight-trumps-dangerous-approach-arms-sales>; and Colby Goodman, “Holes in the Net: U.S. Arms Export Control Gaps in Combatting Corruption,” Transparency International Defence and Security, January 14, 2020, <https://ti-defence.org/publications/united-states-arms-export-sales-corruption-fraud-risk/>.

ways changes in U.S policy might be building blocks towards global changes.

1. The Executive Branch—or a veto-proof majority in Congress—should end U.S. arms sales and military support for the Saudi/UAE coalition in Yemen, as a first step towards the U.S. initiating and leading cooperative talks among major suppliers towards doing the same;
2. With strong presidential support, the State Department should seek to convene talks among the top arms suppliers to the region aimed at strengthening and implementing strictures on sales that fuel conflict or enable human rights abuses in the region.
3. Congress should roll back the Trump administration’s decision to make it easier to export large armed drones by unilaterally reinterpreting the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). The revised policy should be in line with legislation sponsored by Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT). The Murphy legislation would prohibit the sale of large armed drones to all nations but close allies. And the next administration should reach out to other suppliers to seek restrictions on exports of all types of armed drones;⁴¹
4. Congress or the Executive Branch should reduce U.S. military aid to Egypt by at least \$300 million; condition the remaining sum on improvements in human rights and freedom of expression and an end to repression of civilians and attacks on civilian areas under the guise of fighting terrorism; and end sales of major systems like combat aircraft that are not relevant to an effective counter-terror program.⁴²
5. Congress should pass legislation that would flip the script on arms sales decisions by making major arms sales contingent on Congressional approval, rather than the current system in which Congress must respond to Executive Branch initiatives with a veto-proof majority;⁴³
6. Congress should pass legislation strengthening its ability to block problematic arms sales before the equipment is delivered, not just after the initial notification.

41. The Murphy legislation would amend the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) to prohibit the export, transfer, or trade of advanced drones with a range greater than 300km or a payload greater than 500kg, as defined by Category 1 of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). An exception is provided for NATO members, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan and Israel. An even better approach would include a presumption of denial of large drone exports to all nations, with the option of case-by-case exemptions for close allies. Co-sponsors of the Murphy bill include Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT), Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), and Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE). A summary and link to the Murphy proposal is here: <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/in-the-news/senators-introduce-bill-to-block-trump-armed-drone-sale-measure>

42. See Hartung and Binder, op. cit., note 11 for further details.

43. Diana Ohlbaum and Rachel Stohl, “Yes, Congress There Is Something You Can Do About Reckless Arms Sales,” Just Security, June 9, 2020, at <https://www.justsecurity.org/70652/yes-congress-there-is-something-you-can-do-about-reckless-arms-sales/>.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Top Arms Suppliers to the Middle East and North Africa by Country, 2015-2019

Recipient	Total arms imports (TIV)		Percent change from 2010-14 to 2015-19	Top suppliers by share of total imports, 2015-2019		
	2010-14	2015-19		1st	2nd	3rd
Algeria	3604	6155	70.78%	Russia (67%)	China (13%)	Germany (11%)
Bahrain	204	153	-25.00%	United States (33%)	Russia (20%)	United Kingdom (18%)
Egypt	2693	8400	211.92%	France (35%)	Russia (34%)	United States (15%)
Iran	271	437	61.25%	Russia (98%)	China (2%)	
Iraq	2503	4960	98.16%	United States (45%)	Russia (34%)	South Korea (9%)
Israel	1024	2876	180.86%	United States (78%)	Germany (16%)	Italy (6%)
Jordan	752	1155	53.59%	United States (30%)	Netherlands (30%)	Russia (10%)
Kuwait	995	778	-21.81%	United States (70%)	France (10%)	Switzerland (7%)
Lebanon	126	245	94.44%	United States (73%)	Brazil (13%)	France (5%)
Libya	227		-100.00%			
Libya GNC		20		Turkey (85%)	United States (10%)	UAE (5%)
Libya HoR	16	70	337.50%	Egypt (31%)	UAE (27%)	Belarus (20%)
Morocco	3243	1232	-62.01%	United States (91%)	France (9%)	United Kingdom (0.3%)
Oman	1378	1712	24.24%	United Kingdom (45%)	United States (13%)	Norway (12%)
Qatar	675	4944	632.44%	United States (50%)	France (34%)	Germany (9%)

Saudi Arabia	7696	17693	129.90%	United States (74%)	United Kingdom (13%)	France (4%)
Syria	1966	236	-88.00%	Russia (95%)	Iran (5%)	
Tunisia	96	320	233.33%	United States (48%)	Netherlands (42%)	Turkey (8%)
Turkey	5089	2624	-48.44%	United States (38%)	Italy (24%)	Spain (19%)
UAE	6114	4989	-18.40%	United States (68%)	France (11%)	Netherlands (3%)
Yemen	372	55	-85.22%	UAE (71%)	United States (20%)	Saudi Arabia (5%)
Houthi rebels (Yemen)		20		Iran (100%)		
MENA Region	39044	59074	51.30%	United States (48%)	Russia (17%)	France (11%)

Table 2: Top 10 Arms Suppliers to the Middle East and North Africa, 2015-2019

Supplier		Supplier share of Middle East market (%)	Share of supplier's total exports to MENA (%)
1	United States	47.77%	53.21%
2	Russia	16.82%	33.05%
3	France	10.55%	54.00%
4	United Kingdom	5.28%	57.27%
5	Germany	4.71%	32.70%
6	Italy	2.69%	50.72%
7	China	2.26%	16.53%
8	Spain	2.00%	25.97%
9	Netherlands	1.45%	31.78%
10	South Korea	0.88%	16.86%

Table 3: Top 10 Recipients of Imported Arms in the Middle East and North Africa, 2015-2019

Recipient		Total Arms Imports (Trend Indicator Value)	Share of MENA imports (%)
1	Saudi Arabia	17693	29.95%
2	Egypt	8400	14.22%
3	Algeria	6155	10.42%
4	UAE	4989	8.45%
5	Iraq	4960	8.40%
6	Qatar	4944	8.37%
7	Israel	2876	4.87%
8	Turkey	2624	4.44%
9	Oman	1712	2.90%
10	Morocco	1232	2.09%



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