



Rethinking Arms Transfers: Navigating the Complexities of U.S. Military Aid to the Middle East and Its Implications for Regional Stability and Human Rights

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The Middle East holds strategic significance for the United States (U.S.), where U.S. arms transfers profoundly shape the region's political and security dynamics. While such transfers are often justified as means to strengthen strategic allies and promote stability, providing military aid and selling arms to authoritarian regimes that lack democratic safeguards can inadvertently exacerbate conflict and undermine human rights.

This memo examines the consequences of U.S. arms transfers to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, focusing on Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. It argues that such transfers undermine regional stability and security particularly without measures of accountability and democratic norms. In this respect, there is an urgent need for alternative approaches that move beyond an excessive reliance on militarism as a tool for U.S. foreign policy.

The crux of the argument presented here is that the U.S. cannot selectively reform or revisit its policies toward one country in the region without considering an overhaul of its broader strategy toward the region. The case presented about Egypt (along with its relation with Israel and Saudi Arabia) underscores the inconsistency and detrimental effects of selective U.S. policies toward the region, especially in matters relating to arms transfers, human rights, and democracy. Additionally, it highlights the impracticality of such selectivity, given the complex interrelations, mutual support among strongmen in the region, and their involvement in corrupt arms deals. Albeit necessary, calls to stop arms sales as a punitive act, such as with Saudi Arabia—where calls to halt arms transfers emerge when the country pursues policies contrary to U.S. interests—reinforce the notion of arms playing a central role in U.S. foreign policy. In other words, whether you provide arms as a reward or halt it as a punishment, in both cases you emphasize militarism and arms as an effective tool of U.S. foreign policy. The examples set here aim to demonstrate how over-reliance on arms transfers neither leads to stability nor advances U.S. interests, and it certainly does not benefit the people living under corrupt and authoritarian regimes.

The cases presented here posit that supplying arms to authoritarian regimes intensifies conflict and hampers stability. By exploring the cases of Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, this memo advocates for a more responsible U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East—one that upholds human rights and democratic values. It calls for a comprehensive reevaluation of U.S. arms transfers, instead of the transactional approach the U.S. has been adopting towards the region. This requires a comprehensive strategy, with an emphasis on prioritizing long-term stability and security in the region.



The Impact of Arms Trade in the Middle East

The case of Egypt

Egypt, under the leadership of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, represents a prime example of the negative repercussions of arms transfers to Middle Eastern regimes characterized by authoritarianism, corruption, and opaqueness. Despite Egypt's alarming record of human rights violations, curtailed civil liberties, and economic struggles, key allies such as the United States and Israel continue to support the regime through augmented arms sales.

Just in the first two months of 2023, arms transactions included a contract awarded to U.S.-based Swiftships in January, providing seven additional 28m Coastal Patrol Crafts (CPC) to supplement the six CPCs supplied in 2022¹. Moreover, Boeing secured a \$1.9 billion contract to remanufacture an unspecified number of AH-64E Apache attack helicopters for the Egyptian Air Force², part of a broader effort approved by the U.S. State Department in 2020 to upgrade Egypt's AH-64D Apache fleet to the more advanced E standard. These hefty arms deals are occurring at a time where Egypt is suffering unprecedented economic decline, which are the product of the flawed economic policies under al-Sisi's governance. In addition to the arms deals in the absence of oversight, the prioritization of costly mega-projects—such as the \$58 billion new administrative capital and the \$8 billion Suez Canal expansion—over critical socioeconomic needs have led to an annual headline inflation of 31.9 percent³, a poverty rate close to 30 percent⁴, and a government gross debt, that is projected to reach 92.9 percent of GDP in 2023⁵.

When economic and governance struggles arise, authoritarian regimes often resort to repression and reliance on security apparatuses to maintain control. The al-Sisi regime exemplifies this approach, targeting political opponents, activists, journalists, and civil society organizations. Enforced disappearances are widespread, and death sentences and executions remain alarmingly high. Legislation such as the NGO law restricts freedom of expression and dissent. While Egypt recently had an approval of a three billion dollars loan from the International Monetary Fund aiming to address economic challenges, the military's growing economic role and lack of public engagement cast doubt on genuine reform.

1 Swiftships to provide 7 additional Coastal Patrol Crafts to Egypt. (2023, March 24). Naval News. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/03/swiftships-to-provide-7-additional-coastal-patrol-crafts-to-egypt/>

2 Boeing Secures \$1.9B US Army Deal for 184 AH-64E Apache Helicopters. (2023, March 20). The Defense Post. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/03/20/boeing-us-army-apache/>

3 Mandour, Maged (2023, April 11). Monetary policy is not enough to solve Egypt's inflation crisis, and fundamental reform is needed. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/89499>

4 <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/2/477989/Egypt/Society/Egypt's-poverty-rate-dropped-to--in--CAPMAS.aspx>

5 Moneim, D. A. (2023, April 12). Egypt's gross debt to reach 92.9% of GDP in 2023, highest record in five years: IMF. Ahram Online. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/495669.aspx>



Israel's Support for Egypt's Military Regime and Erosion of Democratic Foundations

Ironically, Israel, the largest recipient of U.S. military aid, is a staunch supporter of al-Sisi's regime. Since 2013, Israel has heavily lobbied the U.S., urging continued military aid to Egypt and endorsing the coup that ousted President Morsi. A decade later, Israel's advocacy for al-Sisi continues, as evidenced by its recent lobbying of the Biden administration to approve the sale of F-15 fighter jets to Egypt—and ensuring the U.S. relations with the al-Sisi regime remains positive⁶.

Israel's support of al-Sisi's regime is not without controversy, given their history of war and the animosity that the Egyptian people hold against Israel due to the atrocities it commits against the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, Israel itself is grappling with an erosion of its “democratic foundations”. In addition to its oppressive treatment of Palestinians, Israel has seen alarming authoritarian trends, including crackdowns on NGOs—especially those critical of the government or advocating for Palestinian rights. Furthermore, corruption scandals have plagued Israel's political landscape, with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu facing multiple charges. Corruption also extends to international arms sales, with high-profile cases such as the Israeli-German submarine deal (Case 3000)⁷ and Israeli arms exporters' links to Myanmar's military junta⁸.

The rise of the extreme right in Israel has emboldened ultra-nationalist and anti-democratic sentiments, with far-right political figures advocating discriminatory policies. A recently proposed judicial overhaul has ignited mass protests and strikes, which have persisted for 18 weeks as of May 8th, 2023⁹. Critics contend that these changes pose a threat to Israeli democracy and the rule of law.

So here we have a dynamic, with two corrupt and authoritarian rulers supported by the U.S. (as the biggest recipients of Military aid in the region), and also supportive of each other and their arms imports, while internally acting against the will of their own people. Both regimes use the specter of terrorism as a justification for repressive policies and used terror charges to suppress their critics and stifle civil society. Benjamin Netanyahu's support for Egypt's military regime of al-Sisi, alongside their own internal challenges, underscores the complexities of arms transfers to Middle Eastern regimes. Both cases highlight the need for a more responsible foreign policy approach—one that balances strategic interests with upholding human rights and democratic values. Furthermore, it demonstrates why it is not possible to change U.S. foreign policies towards one country and not the other, or towards the regime as a whole.

6 Ravid, B. (2022, March 23). Israel urges Biden administration to sell F-15 fighter jets to Egypt. Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/23/israel-urges-biden-administration-sell-f-15-egypt>

7 Israel signs scandal-ridden €3 billion deal with Germany to buy new submarines. (2022, January 20) The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-signs-scandal-ridden-e3-billion-deal-with-germany-to-buy-new-submarines/>

8 Yaron, Odded. (2023 March 28) U.S. Sanctions Dealer for Israeli Arms Makers in Myanmar. Haaretz. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2022-10-27/ty-article/.premium/broker-for-israeli-arms-to-myanmar-arrested-in-thailand-for-drug-dealing-money-laundering/0000184-1052-d19c-ade5-335628680000>

9 'If we blink even for a moment, they will take advantage,' says former justice minister as judicial reform protests hit week 18. (2023, May 7). All Israel News. <https://allisrael.com/18th-week-of-protests-as-judicial-reform-negotiations-set-to-resume>



The relation with Saudi Arabia and U.S. Involvement

Saudi Arabia, a significant recipient of U.S. arms sales, further exemplifies the complexities of arms transfers in the Middle East. Despite ongoing human rights abuses, including the war in Yemen and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the U.S. has continued to sell arms to Saudi Arabia. This support has had substantial implications for regional stability, with the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen contributing to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's support for Egypt's military regime exemplifies the interplay among regional actors. Furthermore, following the Abraham Accords with two Gulf Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain), Israel has been eyeing the Saudi market with an interest in selling its air defense systems to Saudi Arabia, as it did with the UAE¹⁰, adding another layer to this complex dynamic. Israel's air defense sale deal to Saudi Arabia was close to being sealed in 2022 but was interrupted by the U.S., after Saudi Arabia decided to lower the oil production, which affected the U.S. negatively.

Clearly, the U.S. is not merely an honest bystander in this intricate interplay. It plays a central role in arms trade in the region, providing weapons and military aid to authoritarian regimes, including Saudi Arabia, without adequate democratic safeguards. A recent report by The Washington Post revealed how retired U.S. generals have been using connections to secure lucrative jobs at Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while the U.S. fought to keep these hirings secret¹¹. This not only undermines trust in the U.S. but also exacerbates deep-seated issues of bad governance, corruption, and conflict in the region.

Main Arguments

The negative impact of arms sales on regional stability and security cannot be ignored. The cases of Egypt and its relations with Israel, and Saudi Arabia demonstrate the negative consequences of the increasing arms transfers by the U.S. to the region, especially to authoritarian regimes without sufficient democratic safeguards. Such practices fuel conflict, erode democratic values and human rights, and contribute to regional instability.

To address these challenges, there is a need for a more comprehensive evaluation of arms transfers, considering the potential implications for regional stability, human rights, and the rule of law.

To promote peace and stability in the Middle East, the U.S. must consider the broader implications for the region's people and the values of democracy, human rights, and sustainable development. As the U.S. navigates its foreign policy in the region, it must recognize that turning a blind eye to abuses and corruption or maintaining transactional relationships with authoritarian regimes is neither sustainable nor conducive to long-term stability.

10 Cornwell, Alexander. (2022, September 23). Exclusive: Israel to sell air defence system to United Arab Emirates. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-israel-sell-air-defence-system-united-arab-emirates-sources-say-2022-09-22/>

11 Whitlock, Craig and Jones, Nate. (2022, October 18). RETIRED U.S. GENERALS, ADMIRALS TAKE TOP JOBS WITH SAUDI CROWN PRINCE. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/veterans-us-foreign-jobs-saudi-arabia/>



The cases described here reveal that the negative impact of arms transfers is not limited to the recipient countries; it extends to regional dynamics and alliances. The examples of the interplay between Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are characterized by mutual support for authoritarian governance and a shared interest in arms trade. The reinforcement of authoritarian regimes through arms sales serves to undermine democratic development, marginalize civil society, and entrench repressive practices.

The U.S. cannot continue the same old policies of unconditionally providing military assistance to regimes with records of human rights abuses, lack of transparency, and widespread corruption. As the international community continues to grapple with the complexities of the Middle East, it is essential to consider the broader implications of arms sales and military support for governments that are engaging in repressive practices and mismanaging their economies. The U.S. must be held accountable for the impact of its increasing arms sales to the Middle East region. Providing military assistance to such regimes may inadvertently contribute to the entrenchment of these negative trends, ultimately undermining regional stability and security.

The dynamics among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, as presented in this text, merely serve as examples that are not isolated or confined to these countries alone. Similar and related dynamics involve others, such as the UAE, Qatar, Turkey, and additional regional players, as well as non-state actors. However, a comprehensive discussion of these countries is beyond the limited scope of this memo.

Conclusion

The path forward demands a comprehensive reassessment of U.S. policy—one that transcends an over-reliance on arms sales, acknowledges regional interconnectedness, rejects selective engagement and impunity, and elevates the principles of human rights and accountability. The U.S. must recognize that relying on militarism and maintaining unconditional military assistance to authoritarian regimes are not viable strategies for achieving its strategic goals or contributing to a secure and just future for the Middle East. The U.S. must navigate the evolving landscape of the Middle East with a clear understanding of the interconnected nature of the challenges it faces. The long-standing conflicts in the region, the intricate web of alliances, and the evolving geopolitical dynamics necessitate a policy approach that is thoughtful, holistic, and value-driven. Short-term transactional thinking, selective engagement, and reliance on military power as the primary instrument of influence have proven to be ineffective and, at times, counterproductive.

In addressing the multifaceted challenges of the Middle East, the United States must adopt a coherent and comprehensive policy approach—one that eschews transactional and selective measures that prioritize arms as the linchpin of foreign policy. Such an approach, while expedient, falls short of addressing the region's complexities and risks fueling existing conflicts. Instead, the U.S. must chart a strategic course centered on the well-being of the region's diverse populations, adherence to human rights norms, and the cultivation of sustainable partnerships. By embracing this holistic vision, the U.S. positions itself as a transformative actor—capable of fostering stability, prosperity, and progress in the Middle East, all while advancing its own long-term interests. This is no longer a matter of choice, the nature of our shared global threats requires close global collaboration to address issues of climate change, food scarcity and pandemics, without reform and accountability such



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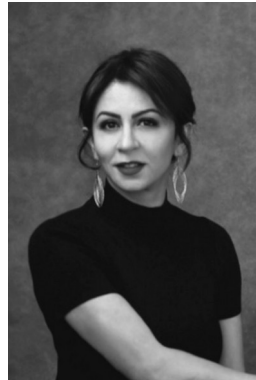
collaboration would be futile at best, if not further damaging by emboldening those regimes.

By prioritizing the well-being and rights of the people living in the Middle East, and by aligning policies with the values of democracy and justice, the international community can contribute to the creation of a more secure, stable, and prosperous future for the region.



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Nancy Okail

Nancy Okail is President and CEO of the Center for International Policy. Dr. Okail is a leading scholar, policy analyst, and advocate with more than 20 years of experience working on issues of human rights, democracy, and security in the Middle East and North Africa region.

In 2020, Okail was appointed as a visiting scholar at the Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University, focusing on accountability and the intersection of human rights and technology. Prior to joining Stanford, she served as Executive Director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), which under her leadership became an internationally renowned policy research organization.

Before coming to the United States, Okail worked on, managed, and evaluated foreign aid programs for several international organizations, including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. In her subsequent role as Director of Freedom House's Egypt program, Okail was one of the 43 nongovernmental organization workers convicted and sentenced to prison in a widely publicized 2012 case for allegedly using foreign funds to foment unrest in Egypt. She was then exonerated by a court ruling in December of 2018.

Okail holds a Ph.D. from the University of Sussex in the UK. Her policy analysis and political commentary have been featured in top outlets including the Washington Post, New York Times, Foreign Affairs, and Lawfare. She has been interviewed or quoted by The Guardian, BBC World News, MSNBC, and Al Jazeera, and she regularly speaks on current affairs panels at world fora and academic institutions.



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PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.