



The Fear of Missing Out – Reconsidering Assumptions in US Arms Transfers to the Middle East

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United States security sector assistance and arms transfers to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have a long history, spanning many different eras in geopolitics and epochs of American grand strategy. But in recent years, notable episodes of disagreement and interest misalignment between Washington and its MENA partners have had little impact on the flow of U.S. arms to the region, leading many to question the strategic value of the enterprise.

Accordingly, as advocates, lawmakers, and other stakeholders have sought to restrain U.S. arms transfer to the Middle East and right-size the role security cooperation¹ – a broad U.S. government term encompassing many elements of conventional defense partnerships – plays in the U.S. approach to the region, policymakers and opponents have argued that any such efforts would provide a dangerous opening for the likes of China or Russia to supplant the United States as the security partner of choice for these erstwhile allies, thereby drawing them into competing spheres of influence. Encapsulated by the familiar refrain “if we don’t sell them arms, someone else will,” the premise has proven remarkably effective in preventing a recalibration of U.S. security cooperation with the region.

The reality, however, is far more complex than the simple “if we don’t sell them arms” axiom implies. Decisions on the part of Middle Eastern partners to transition either in part or entirely to new suppliers carries many associated risks and costs that, while not entirely prohibitive, must be weighed against their potential benefits. At the same time, the oversimplified argument for maintaining the status quo reveals a number of paradoxes and problematic assumptions in the U.S. security cooperation relationship with the Middle East, which may warp thoughtful policy assessments or efforts to develop more effective approaches to the region.

Arms Dependency and the Middle East

The Middle East represents one of the most significant markets for arms in the world, and disproportionately so relative to their population². Deep-seated sentiments of insecurity, fractious intra, and inter-state politics, persistent episodes of conflict, and political elites focused on traditional understandings of “security” in military terms, have all driven substantial regional demand for conventional arms. For more than seven decades, the

¹ Defense Security Cooperation University. “Introduction to Security Cooperation”, Chapter 1. <https://www.dscu.edu/documents/publications/greenbook/01-Chapter.pdf>

² Congressional Research Service. “Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy”, November 23, 2020. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf>



United States has been the most important supplier satisfying those perceived needs, both through arms sales and military assistance packages³.

That trend has remained consistent even as Washington has sought to pivot its focus away from the region in recent years. Between 2000 and 2019, the United States alone was responsible for 44% of all arms transfers to the Middle East and North Africa, more than twice the total of the next largest supplier, Russia⁴.

In total, the MENA region accounted for over \$379 billion in U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements between 1950 and 2017, representing over 51.5% of all American government-to-government sales in that time⁵. In other words, the United States has been instrumental in the defense development and supply of the MENA region for nearly three-quarters of a century.

Such a prominent role in MENA defense sectors creates what is known in the international affairs literature as “arms transfer dependency,” wherein recipients become somewhat reliant on the United States for their defense needs. This reliance creates a series of costs for transitions to other suppliers that, while not always prohibitive, must be weighed against the benefits of continued security cooperation with Washington and the risks such a pivot may entail. And while many countries willingly incur those costs and derive benefits from seeking multiple suppliers for their defense needs, the Middle East has a particularly acute dependency that raises the practical, financial, and strategic costs of transitioning to alternative suppliers.

Firstly, for many decades, MENA governments have, to varying degrees, built entire defense sectors and security architectures based on arms relationships with the United States. From specific capabilities to military doctrines, to complex maintenance, logistics, and supply networks, the Middle East has invested heavily both in American arms and the infrastructure to support them. In many cases, these structures do not natively support alternative platforms, adding to the cost and complexities of attempting to integrate new capabilities from other sources. In the most extreme case, a wholesale transition from American to another arms supplier would require intensive re-development of the country’s defense infrastructure, creating logistical, doctrinal, financial, and readiness challenges that would not be easy to overcome.

Moreover, any dramatic transition away from the United States to another supplier could also jeopardize the essential sustainment and support relationship with Washington required to keep existing capabilities operational and in service. Even under an accelerated acquisition time frame importing and integrating new capabilities would be a long process, requiring that the U.S.-sourced platforms continue to be maintained as a matter of readiness. If a transition resulted in a broader diplomatic rupture, the United States could cease essential support services, thereby adding significant security costs to the transition.

For some MENA countries, a transition to a new supplier would be made even more costly by the dependence they’ve developed on U.S. military aid, especially defense financing. For many countries, including Jordan and Egypt, U.S. military assistance has defined decades of defense development and has been instrumental in building a security sector that may be beyond the independent financial means of these governments to sustain. Especially for

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*



countries that have grown accustomed to advanced and sophisticated platforms that are made financially possible only through the availability of security assistance, ruptures in the relationship with Washington come with an even higher price tag than simply finding alternative platforms. Other suppliers, even those who may be able to offer substitute capabilities, may not be able to offer the same degree of financing or grant assistance – something that seems likely given the uniquely generous amounts of U.S. military aid offered to the region.

Additionally, beyond the battlefield value of individual capabilities, MENA governments also seek defense relationships with the United States as a means of developing interoperability and signaling American commitments to their broader security interests. U.S. arms sales are seen as connoting American security assurances, something that is especially true in the MENA region. Accordingly, any significant transition away from the United States could jeopardize both the practical abilities of the U.S. to operate alongside its partners as well as the political credibility of its commitments to regional security.

Given the depth and breadth of U.S. arms transfers to the MENA region, the argument that countries can easily transition away from U.S. materiel supplies to an alternative seems exaggerated. Certainly, the option is available, and countries have, under particularly extreme circumstances, elected to either diversify or divest themselves of particular security partnerships. Many factors have contributed to those decisions, including political alignments within the international system, the degree of interest divergence between patron and recipient, and the scale of conditions or suspensions placed upon an importer. Nevertheless, such decisions come with substantial practical and strategic costs that, for the MENA region in particular, are very high.

What “If We Don’t Sell” Really Means for the Middle East.

At its core, the concern that is implicitly reflected in the “if we don’t sell” argument is about U.S. influence in the MENA region. If security cooperation with MENA partners is curtailed, so the argument goes, so too will the fundamental means of American influence, providing an opportunity for competing powers to draw the region into their orbits.

But the idea that arms provide a degree of leverage or influence in the Middle East contains certain assumptions that are at odds with the “if we don’t sell premise.” For arms to deliver meaningful influence or leverage requires some level of dependency on the part of the recipient. In other words, if importers can easily transition from one arms supplier to another, there would be little incentive to accept conditions or make concessions for the sake of preserving any particular defense partnership. Put simply, “if we don’t sell” arguments rest on assumptions that are contrary to those that support the notion that arms transfers are a useful mechanism for developing influence.

But more broadly, the “if we don’t sell” argument betrays a clear problem in the U.S. relationship with its MENA partners. If the imposition of curtailments or conditions on arms sales are all that is necessary to provide an opening for American adversaries to wean MENA governments from the U.S. sphere of influence, it suggests that the core partnerships are foundationally weak. Rather than relationships rooted in shared interests, values, or visions for the region, the “if we don’t sell” premise implies that these alliances are largely transactional.

The phenomenon helps explain the persistent fear among U.S. policymakers that MENA governments are so willing to look elsewhere for security patrons and illustrates one of the key pitfalls in the narrowly securitized engagement that has defined the American approach to the region for decades. In leaning so heavily on arms as the lifeblood of these partnerships, other tools of U.S. statecraft in the region have atrophied or have largely been written off both by the United States and by MENA governments. In this context, arms transfers are seen as the most meaningful bellwether of the U.S. commitment to the region, with any departure from the status quo interpreted as evidence of the lack of American reliability. Accordingly, the United States feels significant pressure to keep arms flowing to the region, even as the degree to which they contribute to regional defense capabilities, energy security, or other strategic priorities seems increasingly questionable.

Obscuring Opportunities for Progress

Twin concerns about the vulnerability of U.S. influence in the region and the risk that MENA partners will eagerly turn to competing powers for their security needs have increasingly defined the strategic purpose of U.S. arms sales to the Middle East. It has meant that, rather than being oriented towards a specific set of security objectives tied to broader strategic regional visions, arms transfers are simply aimed at satisfying local demand.

But these concerns may be warping perceptions of available U.S. policy options and skewing the perceived risks and rewards of recalibrating security cooperation with the Middle East. In the first place, the assessed value an adversary would gain through arms transfers to the region remains questionable. Given the known volatility the United States has experienced in its security partnerships with MENA governments, it seems strange to assume that competing powers would be so much more successful in translating their arms relationships into influence.

Secondly, little consideration is given to the potential benefits of curtailing or suspending arms transfers to MENA partners. Especially for partners engaged in behaviors that are either contrary to U.S. interests or anathema to professed American values, adjusting arms transfers accordingly may yield important dividends, including underscoring the credibility of the conditions placed on U.S. security cooperation or dissociating Washington from the abusive or predatory actions of its proxies.

Moreover, the inclination to respond to any particular regional development by scaling up or down security cooperation leaves open other avenues for U.S. adversaries to develop regional access and influence. The recent diplomatic breakthrough⁶ between Saudi Arabia and Iran, midwifed by China, illustrates how the narrowness of the U.S. approach to the region leaves open a myriad of other inroads for external powers to use and few avenues for the U.S. to respond. By pigeonholing itself in a singular dimension of engagement focused specifically on threats and regional encroachment, the United States has left itself without the diplomatic dexterity to pursue more nuanced approaches to the region.

⁶ New York Times. “Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S.,” 11 March 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html>



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Conclusion

The United States decade's long focus on security cooperation as the driving force behind its approach to the Middle East is long past due for a re-evaluation. Doing so will require, in some cases, more calibrated arms transfers and a willingness to decline certain requests or to impose credible conditions. And while such an evolution will have to overcome arguments embodied by “if we don’t sell”, there is evidence that the supposed risks are not as severe as the axiom suggests. Rightsizing the role arms sales play in Middle East policy may yet unlock new opportunities for positive regional progress and a more balanced approach for U.S. engagement.



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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.