

Implications of US-Saudi Arms Deal for Middle East Strategic Landscape

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Abstract

Over decades, the United States (U.S.) and Saudi Arabia are key strategic partner. Of late a series of letters of intent has been exchanged between the two countries for the arms deal totalling approximately \$ 110 billion immediately, and \$ 350 billion. This arms deal, is a move to combat and contest the influence of Iran in the region. The relationship between Iran and the allies of the United States waned, after the U.S. pressurised the countries to discontinue trading oil with Iran. It is anticipated that it could trigger an arm race in the region, and likely to escalate the tensions. Owing to the same, this paper aims to assesses the significance of the arms deal between the US and Saudi Arabia, and, moreover, its implications for Middle East strategic landscape. Concurrently, this paper discusses the U.S. President Trump's vision to links the economic security with national security in detail. On the backdrop of Saudi Arabia foreign policy goals, the paper also analyses the responses of Iran.

Keywords: US, Saudi Arabia, Arms Deal, Middle East.

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia has always been a key ally of the U.S. in the Gulf region. For decades there is a dependency of Saudi security forces on US equipment and military training, especially to combat the Iranian influence. Saudi Arabia was a recipient of nearly 10% of all US arms export from 2011 to 2015. President Obama's administration proposed a series of arms deals worth of \$ 115 billion, included warships, helicopters and military equipment in 2016. However, the Saudi airstrike on Yemen during a funeral killed almost 140 people, left the deal in tatters (Aftergood,2019). This incident vividly opened criticism on the U.S. by human rights activists and members of Congress for deal, given the track record of Saudi Arabia in human rights. Also concerns were also raised, that these weapons can fall in the wrong hands. Therefore, the Obama administration decided to review their military assistance to Saudi Arabia.

However, US president Donald Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz signed a series of letters of intent for future arms deals in May 2017, under these letters Saudi Arabia will purchase arms worth \$350 billion in the course of 10 years whereas, an immediate purchase of arms worth \$110 billion will be conducted. This deals included tanks, combat ships, missile defense system, radars, communications and cyber security technology. This deal is widely viewed as a counterbalance strategy of Saudi Arabia to face of Iran in the Middle Eastern region. Both Saudi Arabia and the US termed this arm deals as "significant" and "Historic" and an important measure in consolidating Saudi-US ties (Al Jazeera,2017). The ranking member of senate foreign relations committee Senator Bob Menendez shackled the sale of precision-guided munitions to United Arab Emirate and Saudi Arabia in 2018. He expressed concerns that such munitions could be used by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, a country facing worst humanitarian crisis due to Saudi-led actions against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels (US Senator Begins,2019).

It seems that Trump administration is adamant in courting close ties with Saudi Arabia despite objections from congress. The killing of Jamal Kashoggi in October 2018, a US based Saudi journalist, led to international outcry and severe criticism on Trump administration for making arms deals with Saudi Arabia. Khashoggi's assassination, along with civilian casualties resulting from Saudi-led operation against Houthi rebels in Yemen

prompted US lawmakers to obstruct about \$2 billion in arms sales to the Saudi Arabia. This blockage lasted for more than a year. In April 2019, Trump vetoed legislation for cancellation of US military assistance to Saudi Arabia. Trump administration is using “Arms Export Control Act” to face the ability of the Congress to say no to such kind of arms deals (Trump to Bypass Congress, 2019). This act contains an exemption to sell weapons to allies in case of an emergency. It was drafted in order to speed up the process of arm sales during crisis. President Trump used this exemption citing tension with Iran as a pretext, which allows Trump administration to clear \$8.1 billion in weapon sale for Saudi Arabia, Jordan and UAE. According to some analysts this move can trigger arm race in the region and could create problems for the US defense industry.

Recently, an escalation of tensions occurred between US and Iran in May 2019, when US exerted pressure on countries importing oil from Iran to stop buying oil by ending exemptions from sanctions (U.S. to End All Waivers, 2019). US intentions are to bring Iranian oil exports to zero which is a major source of revenue for Iran. This way US intends to curb Iranian influence in the region. President Donald Trump has also renewed sanctions on Iran last year by abandoning the historic nuclear deal that Iran signed with six countries including Germany (FE Online, 2019). Tensions have also begun rising in the Gulf region as well. Houthi Rebels targeted four oil pumping stations in Saudi Arabia which led to the temporary closure of a Saudi oil pipeline. Four oil tankers heading towards UAE were also targeted. Iran denied any involvement in these attacks but Director of US joint Staff Admiral Michael Gilday has accused Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ Corps (IRGC) of being directly involved in these attacks (Trump Approves \$8bn, 2019).

This study analyses all the developments and what will be their impact on Middle Eastern strategic landscape. Typically, US arm sales have been used as a bargaining tool to gain power and influence over clients. But Trump administration is seeking an increase in arm export to strengthen US economy which in turn will assure its national security, which is in fact vision of Trump that links economic security with national security. Further, Saudi Arabia foreign policy goals and response of its arch rival Iran will be covered. The another interesting aspect of this arm deals is militarization of the region which can escalate the crisis situation that’s prevailing in the

Middle East at this point of time in history. These developments need thorough analysis through facts and theoretical assumptions. What does the U.S. expect from the assistance they provide? How does this arm deals support Saudi Arabia and US' ability to achieve its Foreign policy goals? Does the US military assistance influence the foreign policy makers of Saudi Arabia? How will it impact the strategic stability of the Middle East?

2.Theoretical Framework

Theoretically speaking, there are three competing theories developed by Patricia L. Sullivan, Brock F. Tessman and Xiaojun li to explain the implications of arm sales onto the client country, which are (Patricia and et al,2011): Arms for Influence, The Lonely Super Power, and The Reverse Leverage. Arms for influence theory predicts that a client country's level of cooperation will increase many folds if arm sales and other military assistance are used as a leverage to buy its cooperation. If we apply this theory on US- policy of Arm sales, then it will help us to understand that how US arm deals impact foreign policy positions of client states. The US has always remained a dominant extra regional military power in the Middle East. It has networks of regional bases and many assets that help US to be deployed and hence influence Middle East on strategic and Political level. Sometimes Military assistance is the only way in order to gain influence, e.g., US was able to get specific benefits from Pakistan's cooperation on war on terror, although this cooperation had limited utility on overall US foreign policy goals.

The Lonely Super Power theory predicts that a client state becomes deviant if its dependence on arms of super power increases. This explains that why some countries despite receiving military assistance from US don't comply with US policies and leaders. There could be many factors that pull such deviant behavior off. One could be taking advantage of powerful state's reliance on client's state strategic position in the region. Such is the case of Middle Eastern countries' relations with US. The history of using military assistance to increase US influence in the Middle East region is not very encouraging. The client states in the Middle East give lip service to their increased cooperation with US but in reality they don't pay much heed to US requests of changing or altering their policies in exchange for military assistance. Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashogi assassination is one such example where Saudi government did not pay any heed to US plea of

transparent probe of assassination. Saudis also seldom care about US reservations over their horrendous human rights track record. Saudi led war in Yemen also indicate that arms sales or deals don't do much for US in terms of modifying clients states behavior or foreign policy goals.

Meanwhile, the Reverse Leverage suggests that a powerful country becomes dependent on their client states for achieving its foreign policy goals. Arm deals conducted with a foreign government indicates the level of US reliance on that states for logistic and material support. Reliance on things like oil, intelligence and military bases also come under this theoretical model. Such reliance rather than inducing compliance create strong clients who in turn influence US foreign policy goals. The inter-state relations are much more complicated than any theoretical model can explain. Each nation purchasing arms from US has its own unique type of relationship, which can change over time. These three theoretical models have capability to explain US arms deals with other nations and what can be its implication for regional and international political and strategic landscape. Sometimes such deals proved to be negatively correlated with the level of cooperation and in other case it extracts cooperation from client states. The Geo-political factors also determine whether arms sale and purchase is effective bargaining tool for foreign policy objectives or not.

3.Methodology

This study is based on the information collected from both the primary and secondary sources to evaluate the significance of the arms deal between the US and Saudi Arabia, and its implications for Middle East strategic landscape. While discussing the foreign policy maneuvering of the United States and Saudi Arabia in relation to the arms deal and Iran's responses to the same, news reports, academic articles, reports, statements have been examined. Theoretically speaking, the information gathered from the assorted sources have been studied from the lenses of Arms for Influence, Lonely Super Power, and The Reverse Leverage. The theme that arose from the reviews of the primary and secondary information has been thematically interpreted and analyzed.

4. Research Results

4-1. US-SAUDI Arms Deal and U.S. Expectations

After WW-II the US adopted the policy of training and equipping foreign militaries as a foreign policy tool. Both democrats and republicans relied on this formula to gain leverage over their regional and international rivals. Stabilizing weaker states through arm transfer became utmost part of their foreign policy. As of now, US is working with more than 100 countries for their security and military assistance (Mara Karlin and Mara Karlin, 2017). They are also running military programs in order to train and equip foreign militaries in countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq and Afghanistan. The rationale behind this foreign policy approach is simple. Weak allies thwart US interest in the region and elsewhere in the world. At the same time military interventions and invasions are costly and outdated concept. Therefore, by providing military umbrella to countries which lie in the strategically important geo-political, US can promote their own interests without invasion or shouldering the burden of governance. The US-Saudi relationship is based on exactly same lines. Their relationship had never been cultural or social but rather based on security arrangements, oil deals, protecting the trade routes surrounding the world's largest producer of crude oil, and sharing intelligence about terrorist elements which threaten security of both countries. In addition to this, securing Saudi energy supplies has always remained the fundamental foreign policy goal for both countries. In previous times, US wanted to ensure uninterrupted flow of oil to meet its energy need but in 21st century this seems to change as US acquired other means to fulfil its energy demands, but still US is dependent on Saudi Arabia for its strategic locations especially for overflight permissions to operate in and out of Afghanistan.

The second most important foreign policy goal for US in maintaining close relationship with Saudi Arabia is intelligence cooperation. They have been remained close allies in war against terrorism since 9/11. They have forged counter-terrorism partnership with each over the years as persistent threat of extremist organizations was greater than from Iran. For Trump administration the support for Saudi Arabia in military is to accentuate and contain the threat of Iran. Both countries consider Iran as common enemy in the region and this has been used as a pretext for carrying out billion dollars' arm deals. This deal is a strategic partnership based on simple give and take

premise. US provides Saudi Arabia with security arrangements with important equipment and training, while Saudi Arabia serves as a counter terrorism partner who is also a vital supplier of oil in global market. Arm sales are central to this partnership. Maintaining large Saudi army is a task that US has took upon itself in order to bolster its strategic interests in the region. At the same time such arm deals and security related services have also strengthened US defence industry and its overall economy.

Initially the relationship between US and Saudi Arabia was based on the expectations that US would cover Saudi Arabia under its security umbrella and provide it with all sort of protection from external threats. But these traditional security arrangements were replaced by a partner-based approach by President Obama administration (The Crisis of American Military,2018). They strengthen Kingdom's ability to provide security own their own. Saudis then started taking action on their own against their self-perceived security interests. War in Yemen is a culmination of this approach which has created worst human crisis in the history of Middle East. Not only Yemen, Saudi Arabia also began cracking down on dissent within their own country by assassinating and imprisoning dissents and opponents. The aggressive approach of Saudi Arabia has strengthened the sentiment within Congress that US should review its security cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Such sentiments heightened after the midterm election on November 6. There is also pressure on government to persuade parties involved in Yemen war to establish lasting ceasefire. Such views were expressed by secretary of state Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Jim Mattis in May 2019(Saudi Arabia Braces,2019). At the other side the US has been taking measures to boost arm sales to foreign countries. Since it is top on number in term of arms seller, the report by SIPRI one – third of international arms export originate from US (International Arms Transfers,2019). The expectation is that it will bolster economic growth of US to large extent. This foreign policy approach is given the name of “Arms Transfer Initiative” (US Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia,2019). This policy aimed is to expand the soup and opportunities for American defence industry and create jobs for American people. However, some economists are of the view that effectiveness of such approach is questionable since sectors like education, health and infrastructure create more jobs than military jobs approach.

4-2. Saudi Arabia and Arms Requirement

Saudi Arabia has been buying weapons in large amount since 2015 and has been ranked no 1 as a weapon importer in the world. According to media reports this gulf Kingdom buys more weapons from the U.S. than any other country. The report of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (STIRP) shows that of all Saudi Arabia weapon import of which One-Fifth Are American made and also 70% of Saudi arsenal comes from the US. Pentagon has even installed a team to manage and administer Saudi Arabian Foreign Military sales. This serves as a direct pipeline to move American made weapons to Saudi military (Saudi Arabia Is Buying,2019) When it comes to arm sales US-Saudi relation is not based on their traditional friendship but rather it's a pure business deal. Desperation for acquiring lethal weapons is apparent from the fact the Saudi Arabia has spent more than \$5.8 million on lobbying congress. Some reports even put the figures closer to \$ 9million. Saudi Arabia has hired veritable army of lobbyists and PR firms in order to promote their interests within congress and other decision making institutions of US (Lardner,2019).

This drain questions in mind that why Saudi Arabia does wants arms in such large quantity? The rationale behind acquiring great import of weapons is that Saudi Arabia is ambitious to promote and strengthen its influence in the region. Its ambitions have grown exceptionally over the years, dramatic increase in military arsenal indicates that Saudis want to counter Iranian influence at any cost; its example is on-going war in Yemen which Saudis are in no mood to end any time soon. According to STIRP, the US exports wide variety of sophisticated weapons to Saudi includes Combat aircraft, tanks and missiles, advanced sensors and intelligence gathering equipment, frigates and ships in the years to come which are used on planes for surveillance (International Arms Transfers,2019). Also US willing to supply Saudi Arabia with all kind of weapons it wants or desires. To this, some analysts express their concern over Saudi ambitions for weapons is that probably these weapons might end up in the wrong hands on the grounds that some reports show that some members of terrorist organizations operating in the region are spotted with these weapons. Further, the Saudis will use these weapons to fuel war and conflict throughout region (US Arms Sold to Saudi Arabia,2019). In response to this, there is no specific whitepaper issued by Saudi Arabia which could explain that why they want

to have all these arms. The only way to make a judgement about these large scale arm purchase is through analysing Saudi Arabia's behaviour and statement made by members of Saudi government. The Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's (MBS) statements and the steps, indicate that the motive behind such arm deals is to become a regional power. KSA considered its military might be as an important element to achieve this goal. It's also clear that Saudis see Iran as a regional competitor which they want to eliminate at any cost. The war in Yemen is an example where both regional rivals have accused each other of using lethal weapons. This explains that why there seems to be an arm race going on in the Middle Eastern region. There is high risk involved in such arm race.

4-3. A Response to Iranian Threat

Iran is home to the world's biggest Shi'a populace, which faces an extreme challenge in the fight for influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran are right now engaged in a power struggle, with each competing for power and influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is a prevalently Sunni Arab Muslims that draws a lot of its clout and authenticity from its job as watchman of The Two Holy Places: Mecca, the origination of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) established first Islamic State. Apart from this, Saudi Arabia is known for its affinity to utilize its check book and diplomacy to accomplish its strategic and foreign policy objectives. Iran then again, while additionally dedicated to financing its own foreign strategic objectives in the region, conduct this in a more decisive way than Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia's struggle to establish itself as a regional chief in the Middle East, it has seen Iran as an enemy and a considerable Kingdom's arrangements have been attached in its craving to counter Iranian influence. Two elements acting in Saudi Arabia's support are huge oil incomes and other one is that Saudi Arabia is an Arab Sunni state. It is generally well-off contrasted with Iran. At the other hand Iran is Shi state and also in under sanctions and its economy its enduring heavy loses.

Saudi Arab and the U.S. are consolidating their ties on the pretext to secure their interest from Iranian threat by conducting arms deals and other security agreements. It has sent shock wave across Iranian authorities who have blamed both of these regional allies of being aggressive in their foreign policy approach, which will escalate the tensions in the region. However,

the US has blamed Iran of conspiring against US and Saudi Arabia by conducting assaults through its proxies. Recently US has announced that it will send extra troops and twelve fighter planes to the Middle East to counter what the Pentagon has said is a heightening effort by Iran to plan assaults against the US and its interests in the Middle Eastern region. Saudi Arabia has also reacted on Iran's goals of achieving nuclear power, by acquiring nuclear energy (being supposed) peaceful purposes. But the Saudi authorities are as frightful of a nuclear outfitted and also United States and other Western forces are too. Saudi Arabia is in a troublesome position with respect to the Iranian atomic program. While they guarantee to be steady of tranquil nuclear advancement, they are additionally dreadful of Iran having refined nuclear energy program, as they are concerned their traditional enemy could utilize this program against them.

Another Saudi apprehension is that the Iranian nuclear ambitions could so outrage the United States that they resort to a military intervention to keep Iran from gaining atomic weapons. If this somehow managed to occur, the results would be wrecking for Saudi Arabia and Middle East at large. It's a justifiable inquiry. The Trump administration says that Iranian strike on Americans in the Middle East stays real and imminent and has reprimanded Tehran for assaults on oil tankers in a strategically important waterway. Iran, on the other hand, has advised its proxies to get ready for war and hinted it might quit abiding by the 2015 nuclear agreement within few days (however it hasn't said that it intends to seek after an atomic weapon). Those advancements, coupled with the ascent of Iran lobbyist in the US administration like National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have prompted widespread fear that some kind of contention among Washington and Tehran is inescapable. However, there is some uplifting news that it appears to be genuinely improbable that an all-out war is about to occur, generally on the grounds that President Donald Trump and American partners don't need one. Nor does Iran, it appears. Be that as it may, the circumstance is still exceptionally tense, and the space for blunder and error on the two sides stays high.

5. Discussion

Many governments from Middle Eastern countries have always put enormous emphasis on gaining military power in order to influence international strategic landscape and also to carry out their political plans to

further their agendas. Many Middle Eastern countries have indulged themselves in violent rivalry which assured their mutual destruction, hindered the economic progress and increased the level of political instability. Arms transfer in the form of military aid or arms sale have increased militarization in the region which has escalated the tensions between regional rivals. This militarization in the region can be observed by the fact that many Middle Eastern states in the past 10 years have increased their arm imports. If we look into recent history in 2017 alone 7 out of 10 nations in the world with most extravagant military expenditure are from Middle East (Is Big Saudi Arms Sale a Good Idea,2019). Saudi Arabia has become a central focus in the world due to such grand spending on military improvements and on arms purchase in recent years. This enormous expenditure has made it the nation that has extravagant defense budget. This kind of militarization will have long terms implications for Middle Eastern nations in terms of peace, security and financial development.

Saudi Arabia has been leading an alliance of countries against Houthi rebels in Yemen since 2015, when it decided to intervene militarily in the country in order to counter Iranian influence. This invasion has included airstrikes, ground military operations and an aeronautical and maritime bar of Yemen. Rather than a decisive victory or any resolution to the conflict, war has proceeded and the warring parties have been held responsible for creating humanitarian crisis over there which is unprecedented. United Nations bodies and non-governmental organization have blamed Saudi Arabia for indiscriminate attacks on non-military personnel targets. The war in Yemen has caused a huge number of civilian casualties and the circumstance there at present is viewed as the worst humanitarian crisis in the history of the Middle East. The battling—and the barricade specifically—has hampered the imports of food, fuel and medical facilities.

Apart from Yemen war Saudi Arabia has been engaged in many other regional conflicts as well. It has been providing support to militant groups in Syria since the civil war broke out there in 2011. They also provided military assistance to Lebanon in order to contain Iranian proxies over there. Not only in other Middle Eastern states have they been fighting Shiite groups which are in minority in its own eastern province. Saudi Arabia can afford to linger on its rivalry all due to Military assistance. There is also a possibility of direct military confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran

and among their allies. This kind of militarization requires analysis in order to understand that how Saudi Arabia can afford to get itself engaged in such elaborated conflicts and regional tensions.

In order to determine the reasons which led Saudi Arabia to go to great extent to acquire weapons, there has to be some transparency which is suspiciously missing especially in the military matters. It's difficult to determine that whether Saudi Arabia Arm imports are due to defensive or offensive purposes. Has it to do with consideration of prestige in the region or its just power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the recent developments show that Saudi Arabia is not just acquiring weapons to deter its enemies but actually using them in a large scale offensive operation in Yemen. One can expect that such arm procurement can lead Saudi Arabia to use arms elsewhere in the region to gain and sustain its influence.

There are two scenarios that could be emerged in such situation. Firstly, if Saudi Arabia fails to defeat Houthi rebels in Yemen it can perceive that this failure is due to its military weakness. Or on the other hand if it wins then it can attribute its success to grand military arsenals which they have acquired to enhance their reach. This in turn can strengthen Saudi Arabia's perception that military might is an effective tool to achieve not only its foreign policy goals but also to counter the threat of Iran, Qatar and dissidents. This could be disastrous for the region as it can lead to arm race and revenge based strategic agenda might prevail in the region. War in Yemen demonstrated that there are major security risks for national and international peace and political stability. Such violent means to achieve strategic and political goals have caused worst humanitarian crisis in the region and also it has hampered the economic progress. Saudi Arabia and other states should review their policy of arm transfer and they should conduct an in-depth analysis of the consequences such arm procurement can have in the region and also elsewhere in the world. The narrative of economic gain through arm sales should also be questioned that how it can sustain the economic gains they wish to achieve and also what role arm procurement can play to deter enemies from carrying out offensive.

6. Conclusion

The way US has been providing both Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern allies such as UAE with weapons and other military training

illustrates the fact that these Middle Eastern states are heavily reliant on the US in order to have an upper hand in the regional conflict and other military adventures in the Middle East. In case of Saudi Arabia this mirror the fact that Saudi Arabia is dependent on USA for military equipment and training. This dependence is likely to continue for decades to come. Saudi Arabia is dependent on USA for nearly two-thirds of its entire combat-ready fleet. The USA has almost earned \$1.29bn by selling bombs, warheads and laser-guided tail kits to Saudi Arabia. This happened because Saudi Arabia's chain of supplies got downsized. A huge amount of US made weapons also goes to UAE who is also reliant on USA for military training. Some analysts opine that if USA withdraws its military support to Saudi Arabia and its Middle Eastern allies then they will not be able to wage further war in Yemen. This will also significantly reduce airstrikes in Yemen which has allegedly killed thousands of civilians so far. The countries are responsible engaged in Yemen war which has caused humanitarian crisis. To some estimate almost more than 24 million people need assistance in terms of food, water supply and other basic necessities of life. Severe food shortage and famine gulped many innocent children, and reports shows that almost 67,000 civilians and fighters have been dead since the war had started. Are these arms deal strategically a good idea for the Saudi and United States other than human lives? The answer for this question has four dimensions. First of all, that arms sales make sense, if we look into U.S. oil interests, the U.S compulsion for an ally in the Middle East that can share the burden of providing military assistance, and also prove to counter-effective in stopping a nuclear arms race in the region. Secondly, if not from US the Saudis will buy arms from somewhere else if the United States refuses sell. Some analysts argue that this arm deal carefully cater Saudi requirements and those of other regional powers. Thirdly, even if the sale couldn't maintain the long-term stability in the region, there's likely to be some benefits in terms of foreign policy goals for the United States and for the Saudis too. Lastly, the arm race in the region can be tackled through massive arms deal between US and Saudi Arabia, especially, as counter move to face the Iranian threats of becoming as atomic country. It can be viewed as counter strategy to face Iran in the Middle Eastern Strategic Landscape.

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