

US arms trade with Middle Eastern countries and the war in Yemen - ideology or pragmatism?

In March this year, it was six years since the outbreak of civil war in Yemen. This conflict has until recently been overshadowed by the more "visible" in the West civil wars in Syria and Libya, also being the late aftermath of the revolts and unrest of the so-called Arab Spring a decade ago. Now that the hostilities and the political situation in both Libya and Syria have relatively calmed down, the

situation in Yemen has naturally risen to the top of the news headlines. Moreover, strategic and military conditions have contributed to the emergence of a dramatic humanitarian situation in the country, in the form of the threat of mass starvation on a scale not seen in the world since the infamous "Holodomor" in Ukraine almost a century ago.

A new U.S. arms trade policy?

At the same time, in the last two years, information has appeared in the public space regarding a radical increase in the material involvement of the United States in supporting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – the main members of the Arab coalition fighting in Yemen. This support consists primarily of U.S. sales to the aforementioned countries of increasing quantities of technologically advanced weapons systems, military equipment, and ammunition, enabling them, among other things, to continue their military operations in Yemen. As a consequence of these findings, many expert centres and humanitarian organisations claim that Washington and its Western allies, especially Great Britain and Australia, are politically and morally responsible for the nightmare in Yemen. This, in turn, has somewhat naturally given rise to growing media and political pressure directed towards the US political establishment to halt (or at least severely restrict) the US arms trade with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Joe Biden, presidential candidate in the 2020 campaign on behalf of the Democratic Party, responded positively to these demands by including in his political program an announcement of a "far-reaching review" of the state of business relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf region in terms of arms and ammunition sales.

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After winning the election and becoming the President of the United States, Joe Biden kept his pre-election promise. One of the first important decisions made by his administration in the area of US foreign policy became the implementation in January this year of the so-called review of activities for the sale in 2019-2020 of American weapons and military equipment to the Saudi Kingdom and the Emirates. Another action of the White House in this matter was the announcement in February this year of "considering actions" for the temporary freezing of already concluded arms contracts between American companies and the authorities in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Representatives of the administration later said that they were considering suspending (or even cancelling) contracts for the supply of "offensive arms" to the two Arab states. However, it was not clarified what specific weapons systems were behind the term.

"Review" meant a temporary halt to the commercial contracts signed in 2019-2020, concluded by the US authorities with the governments in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. However, the decision of the current administration also concerned the initially agreed in January this year contracts for the sale to the Emirates of about 50 F-35 multi-role combat aircraft and 18 MQ-9B Reaper combat drones (along with all ground infrastructure). An agreement with Saudi Arabia to sell thousands of precision air-to-air munitions to its air force was also being processed as part of the same "pool" of deals. These agreements, worth a total of about \$35 billion, exist for now only as a political decision and have not yet been settled in formal commercial contracts. Therefore, their suspension has not led to any legal or business consequences, but it may certainly have a number of political and image (propaganda) effects, especially if it lasts longer. The modern weapon systems promised by Washington to the Emirates were a kind of American contribution to the process of normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel. It was also to emphasise the causal role of the U.S. in relation to the so-called Abrahamic Accords, i.e. the process of reconciliation of several Arab countries of the Middle East region with the Jewish state.

It is probably this fact that has prompted the current administration to make another U-turn on US arms contracts in the Middle East. In mid-April of this year, President J. Biden announced that he would give the "green light" to the UAE contract for the sale of F-35 aircraft and drones. The contracts with Saudi Arabia – concluded at the same time as the agreements with the Emirates – are still subject to "review" and for the time being it is unclear when they will gain Washington's approval. However, the situation became complicated again just days later, when a group of Democratic senators filed a bill in the U.S. Senate ordering the administration to accurately report to Congress on the status of the UAE agreements, with particular emphasis on "aspects of Israel's security and U.S. interests" in the region. If passed, this bill could again complicate the process of negotiating agreements with the Emirates. One can also be sure that this is not the last "twist" in the implementation of arms deals with Washington's Arab allies.

Temporarily halting the implementation of agreements on the sale of arms and military equipment – in order to "review" them – is not unusual after the change at the top of power in Washington. However, the unspecified plans announced by the White House to "freeze" (let alone cancel) contracts already signed and in force with certain countries – because of their participation in an "inhumane conflict" – are unprecedented.

There are many aspects at stake here, from the undermined political credibility of the U.S. to strictly business or formal-legal issues, e.g. in the form of possible billions in damages for American companies (which are the administration's contractors) due to the possible termination of lucrative contracts. The more so, as the "frozen" contracts include many large agreements, amounting in total to tens of billions of U.S. dollars, whose implementation is planned for at least the next few years. The most important of them include:

- an approximately \$8 billion May 2019 agreement to sell Riyadh and Abu Dhabi thousands of precision air bombs (including the Paveway IV type), reconnaissance drones, and thousands of tons of mortar and artillery munitions;
- the contract of May 2020 for the sale of SLAM-ER cruise missiles to the Saudi Arabian Air Force for almost USD 2 billion (the contractor – Boeing corporation);
- June 2020 contract worth approx. 2.3 billion to sell Riyadh two additional radars for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system purchased in 2017 by Saudi Arabia for \$15 billion (contractor – Raytheon Technologies);
- the contract with Riyadh concluded last November for modernization of the Saudi F-15 fighter fleet, amounting to approximately \$10 billion (the contractor - Boeing).

It is worth noting at this point that the May 2019 contract was concluded by then President D. Trump's administration in an emergency mode, circumventing the prerogatives of the US Congress to control US arms exports. This rarely used legislation allows the U.S. administration to contract for the sale of U.S.-manufactured armaments in the event of an urgent national interest and/or security emergency, without seeking congressional authorisation. In this case, the Trump administration cited the rapidly growing threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to the security of the Middle East region and U.S. interests there.

Are American weapons fueling the conflict?

In announcing a review of the previous administration's decisions on arms sales to the Middle East and in floating plans to limit them in the future on humanitarian grounds, the White House has reached for a whole arsenal of arguments that, from a formal point of view, seem legitimate. On closer examination, however, it turns out that the truth is more complicated. The fact is that the war in Yemen is already in its seventh year, and the military actions of the Saudi-Iraqi forces are more

than inept. It is this disastrous conduct of military operations in Yemen that makes the "Arab coalition" – despite having a crushing technological advantage – unable to prevail in the war against the irregular forces of the Yemeni Shiites of the Huthi Movement. Moreover, for the past three years or so, the war has taken on a largely positional character, with operations conducted mostly by coalition air power. The carelessness and mistakes of the coalition pilots and poor intelligence and reconnaissance mean that civilian targets are increasingly being attacked. At least several thousand people have already died as a result of such actions, and tens of thousands more have become indirect victims of military action as a result of hunger, disease and war-forced migration. The scale of these civilian casualties has led many Western human rights organisations (especially Human Rights Watch) to accuse Riyadh and Abu Dhabi of intentionally and knowingly attacking civilian targets as a method of warfare. Although irrational and without regard to the complex realities of asymmetric conflict, such claims effectively build a narrative in the media space about the "unjust war" being waged in Yemen by Riyadh and its regional Arab allies. They are also supposed to prove the American (or more broadly: Western) co-responsibility for its continuation, consisting not only in political support, but above all in material support, precisely in the form of arms and ammunition supplies.

Meanwhile, the truth is significantly different. The Arab coalition military operation in Yemen was undertaken in March 2015 at the formal request of the legally elected and internationally recognised authorities of that country (headed by President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi), which were overthrown by the Huthi Movement rebellion. The United States, as well as other Western countries (Great Britain, Australia, Italy, France, Canada), have provided political and material support to the government in Riyadh, motivated by alliance solidarity and the desire to prevent further destabilisation of Yemen, which would threaten the security of the entire region. The problem, therefore, is not the alleged illegality of the Yemeni operation, but only its disastrous implementation, full of mistakes and inept actions, generating unnecessary losses and suffering among the civilian population.

Another fact, cited as alleged proof of the current U.S. administration's rightness in significantly reducing U.S. arms sales to the Saudis and Emiratis, is the statistics themselves on the arms trade in the Middle East region. According to a recent SIPRI report from January this year, between 2010 and 2014 (and thus in the run-up to the Saudi military intervention in Yemen), the United States sold \$3 billion worth of weapons and military equipment to Riyadh. During the same period, the UAE bought \$6 billion worth of armaments from the United States. However, the following years – 2015-2020 – saw a spike in the volume of both countries' military purchases from America. In the case of Arabia, this totalled more than \$64 billion, while the UAE bought nearly \$40 billion. Abu Dhabi in 2020 alone purchased/ordered more than \$20 billion worth of weapons and equipment from the

US. Equally interesting is the structure of these Arab purchases made on the banks of the Potomac in the past six years. The specialised portal Defenseworld.net in its detailed analysis has shown that the vast majority of the arms expenditures Riyadh and Abu Dhabi made in the U.S. in 2015-2020 are the costs of purchasing additional combat aircraft (in 2015 "only" \$2.5 billion was allocated for this purpose, while in 2020 already more than \$22 billion) and aerial munitions (bombs, missiles, etc. – in 2015 such purchases cost both countries less than US\$4.5 billion, while in 2020 they will already exceed US\$11 billion). In the same period purchases of equipment for the Saudi-Emirati naval and land forces have decreased in relative terms.

The conclusion, put forward on the basis of these data by American (and not only) opponents of the arms trade with the Arabs from the Persian Gulf, seems to be seemingly logical and obvious: it is the weapons "made in USA" that fuel and ignite the conflict in Yemen. So if this access to arms were to be significantly reduced, the war in Yemen would have to end sooner or later. However, such a thesis seems to be completely wrong, confusing effect with cause – it is the prolonged war (due to the ineptitude of the Arab forces) that stimulates an increase in purchases of arms and ammunition in the U.S., and not the other way around. An additional factor stimulating increased arms spending by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries in recent years is their rapidly growing sense of threat from Iran. The Iranians are intensively expanding their offensive capabilities (missile forces, navy) and asymmetric measures (e.g. beyond their borders), while continuing to work on their highly ambiguous nuclear program. In addition, Tehran has been pursuing an increasingly assertive and aggressive policy in the region for several years, intensifying its engagement and direct action not only in Yemen but also in Syria, Iraq, Gaza and Lebanon. The fact that the conflict in Yemen has lasted so long is also (apart from the aforementioned ineptitude of the Arab armies) the result of Iran's growing support for its local Shiite allies from the Huthi movement. Finally, it is worth remembering that it is not only the United States that supplies weapons to the countries of the Middle East. Other Western countries (the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Spain and Italy), as well as China and Russia, and even North Korea (which supplies Iran with components and know-how necessary for the development of its missile program) have a large share.

Moreover, the same SIPRI compilation clearly shows that arms purchases increased throughout the Middle East between 2016 and 2020, not just in the two Arab states most involved in the Yemeni conflict. During this period, demand for arms in this part of the world was as much as a quarter higher than in 2011-2015. Apart from Saudi Arabia (which is also the world's largest arms importer) and the UAE, the main buyers of arms in the region were Egypt, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Iraq. On the other hand, the largest suppliers of arms and equipment to the region, apart from the United States, were Russia (13 percent share) and France (12 percent). So, as can be seen, the

reality of the arms and military equipment trade in the Middle East is much more complicated than a cursory glance suggests.

Conclusions and prospects

1. Joe Biden's noble but strongly idealistic intentions and plans to create an international reality in the Middle East by halting the U.S. arms trade with certain countries, come crashing down when confronted with the hard facts of governing a country with superpower status. As a presidential candidate and leader of the opposition, Joe Biden could postulate various radical measures in his campaign, which were in line with the broad spectrum of his political background, as a candidate also of progressive and pacifist currents in and around the Democratic Party. Now, however, these demands are becoming extremely difficult to implement from the position of president and head of the administration. As the resident of the White House, Biden now has to balance various interests and rationales, guided by motives not necessarily desired by a part of his political base. These objective interests include, among others, issues of international credibility of the country, its strategic interests and geopolitical goals in various parts of the world, as well as no less important (especially in the times of pandemic crisis) economic conditions. Billion-dollar arms contracts also mean billion-dollar revenues for U.S. companies, which pay taxes in the U.S. and provide jobs for hundreds of thousands of people - workers and contractors.

2. One of the important determinants of the decision-making process within the U.S. administration – also in the context of arms trade with the closest allies in the Middle East – is the problem of a rapidly deteriorating strategic situation in that part of the world, related to the Iranian issue and the growing involvement of Russia and China in the region. The global rivalry of the U.S. with these two superpowers is thus increasingly influencing the situation in the Middle East.

3. It seems that a much more effective way to end the Yemen conflict, than an arms embargo, would be to increase the involvement of the major powers (including the U.S.) in a diplomatic and political settlement of the root causes of the conflict. These, however, do not lie in Yemen itself, but in the strained relations between Riyadh and Tehran. The breakthrough in Israeli-Arab relations proves that "the impossible is possible".

4. Thus it is more than likely that the suspension of U.S. arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE will only be temporary and that these deals will eventually be implemented. Perhaps some of these plans (such as the purchase of the F-35 fighter jets) will be delayed or subject to additional regulations and reservations, but one should not expect them to be cancelled altogether.

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