Since the Cold War, the United States has maintained a foreign policy that relies heavily on arms sales to allies and partners, even those governed by authoritarian regimes that hold values incongruent with its own. The justification behind these sales can be best summarized and explained by the Kirkpatrick Doctrine, an international relations theory developed by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick. The premise of this theory is that the United States ought to supply arms to "authoritarian friends" to prevent them from becoming "totalitarian enemies." Thus, by sharing weapons systems and dictating the terms of their use, the United States can theoretically influence its authoritarian allies to adhere to the laws of armed conflict and prevent them from adopting belligerent foreign policies.

However, developments throughout the Global War on Terrorism prompt questions regarding the ethics of U.S. arms sales policy. Specifically, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition’s intervention in the ongoing Yemeni Civil War displays how the U.S. has struggled to control how its friends employ U.S. exports. Multiple human rights organizations have accused the coalition of war crimes. This paper argues that the Kirkpatrick Doctrine’s presumption that the United States can significantly influence state behavior through arms sales is outdated.

Introduction

The Kirkpatrick Doctrine has embodied U.S. policy around arms sales since the Cold War. In her 1979 Commentary Magazine article, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” Jeane Kirkpatrick first explains the necessity for the United States to supply arms to regimes and groups, even when their values are incongruent with those of the United States, like democracy and individual liberty. The article caught the eye of then-California Governor Ronald Reagan, who, as U.S. President, adopted the doctrine as a central strategy to his foreign policy. Reagan oversaw landmark arms sales to dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia, Guatemala, the Philippines, and Iraq, as well as anti-communist paramilitary groups such as the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan Mujahideen.

Kirkpatrick asserts that an authoritarian regime is less ideological compared to a totalitarian one, and only seeks to control and regulate its society rather than influence its people’s thoughts and beliefs through active propaganda, espionage, and subversion. Therefore, the United States could 1) more effectively regulate and control authoritarian allies’ employment of U.S. military exports, compared to if these allies purchased arms from the Soviet Union or China, and 2) have an easier process of rehabilitating said authoritarian regimes into liberal democracies due to U.S. influence on recipient governments and their military structures. The doctrine, written in the context of the Cold War, has continued to be relevant even after the Soviet Union’s collapse. With the emergence of threats from non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as those from authoritarian states such as Iran, Russia, and China, the demand to maintain a balance of power through allied capacity building
became essential once more to enable U.S. foreign policy objectives abroad. Not only do these partnerships provide overseas U.S. military forces with staging grounds, logistical networks, and intelligence collection and sharing capabilities, but also the ability to deter without having to deploy boots on the ground.

The Kirkpatrick Doctrine hypothesizes that a democratic arms-selling state can influence how an authoritarian arms-buying state employs said arms to accord with conditions and the laws of armed conflict. Furthermore, the military and economic relationship between buyers and sellers could foster democratization among arms recipients, as they fulfill certain prerequisites to continue receiving exports. However, recent experiences in wars of the Post-9/11 era have demonstrated difficulties in ensuring that countries that receive U.S. security assistance act in congruence with their foreign policy ethics.

This paper analyzes U.S. arms sales to three separate authoritarian states with social and political values that differ from those of the United States: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt. These case studies demonstrate the United States’ varying degrees of effectiveness in influencing how buyers use its exports and keeping its buyers from turning to alternative sellers.

**Saudi Arabia and the UAE**

Saudi Arabia has been one of the largest recipients of U.S. military aid since the end of World War II, as well as an economically and militarily important ally, enabling the United States and NATO to project power in the Middle East. The United States has consistently supported Saudi Arabia’s national security through both arms sales and U.S. troop deployments. For example, when Saddam Hussein’s Iraq threatened Saudi Arabia in 1990, the United States commenced Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield to protect Saudi Arabia from invasion—its largest force mobilization since the Vietnam War.

Similarly, the UAE has become a major ally of the United States in the post-9/11 era. Heralded by senior U.S. military officials as “Little Sparta,” the UAE has enabled U.S. military operations in the Middle East with joint deployments throughout Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and Inherent Resolve, and served as a staging ground for resupply, support, and logistics.

Security partnership between Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the United States has strengthened in recent years due to growing political instability in neighboring Arab nations and the rise of Iran as a regional power. In 2015, a Middle East proxy war commenced with international intervention in the Yemeni Civil War. A Saudi-led coalition consisting of other U.S. allies such as Jordan, Qatar, and Kuwait entered the war on the side of the Hadi government. At the same time, Iran initiated funding and support for the Houthi rebel movement. Since then, security assistance to the Saudi-led coalition has continued to be vital in countering Iranian influence in the region to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East. The integration of US-produced systems in their arsenals enables greater interoperability between nations and provides allied forces with the technological superiority to deter and respond to belligerent activities and influence. Furthermore, providing U.S.
regional allies with the most advanced weapons systems in the global market allow them to defend their national interests without the commitment of significant U.S. troop deployments, putting servicemembers at risk of hostilities. However, Saudi and Emirati military operations have attracted scrutiny from some of the public and Members of Congress, both of whom have accused Saudi Arabia of not abiding by the laws of armed conflict. Since 1995, Saudi Arabia's military expenditure has almost quadrupled, increasing from $20 billion to a high of $80 billion in 2015, and leveling out at around $60 billion in 2020. Saudi Arabia is the world’s largest arms importer, accounting for 12 percent of all total activity in the sector. In 2020, 79 percent of Saudi Arabia’s arms imports came from the United States. U.S. arms exports also comprise 64 percent of UAE weapons imports.

The U.S. military command structures have significant authority and influence over how Saudi Arabia and the UAE conduct military operations. Under the advice of western military advisors and due to a lack of ground combat experience, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition has primarily relied on air assets to conduct its operations, while other coalition forces such as Sudan fulfill the demand for ground combat. Though U.S. arms sales have greatly enabled Saudi Arabia’s ability to project power, the Saudi military is still heavily reliant on certain U.S. military capabilities and infrastructure, such as Command and Control (C2), Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR), and logistics. This is known as remote warfare, as the bulk of combat troops are removed from direct fighting, delegating kinetic strikes to indirect fire and intelligence collection to unmanned ISTAR assets. Thus, operating under the scope of their remote warfare doctrine, the bulk of Saudi and Emirati military operations in Yemen have been conducted through the air and naval assets, striking targets using a combination of fighter aircraft, drones, cruise missiles, and ground and naval artillery.

This reliance on air power has led to staggering collateral damage. Based on the reporting from the Yemen Data Project, since March 2015, there have been a total of 24,025 coalition air raids, resulting in 8,796 dead and 9,865 injured. During that period, more than a quarter of the raids were on non-military targets, and approximately 40 percent were on unknown targets. This did not deter the United States from making additional sales, as exports steadily increased during that period. Civilian casualties continued to fluctuate as UN researchers did not find any change in attitude by coalition C2 in changing their strategies to prevent human suffering.

The Yemen Group of Eminent Experts concluded that "the parties to the conflict continue to show no regard for international law or the lives, dignity, and rights of people in Yemen, while third States have helped to perpetuate the conflict by continuing to supply the parties with weapons." The alleged human rights violations by Saudi Arabia and UAE have not gone unnoticed. In 2016, then-US President Barack Obama temporarily halted arms sales due to concerns over how US-made munitions were being employed, and senior U.S. lawmakers have also voiced their concerns in
congressional hearings and sessions. In 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken adjusted U.S. missile and air defense policy in Saudi Arabia, directly removing U.S. troops, advisors, and C2 elements from ISR and offensive operations.

This decision sheds light on the shortcomings that sellers have in effectively controlling how their buyers use their weapons systems. Amid discussions within the United States to prevent a $23 billion aid package that would include the UAE in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, both Arab states have begun talks with Russia and China regarding possible procurement opportunities. China also has a keen interest in supplying Saudi Arabia and increased its arms exports to the country by 40 percent from 2013 to 2019 to become Saudi Arabia's ninth large supplier. With Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland beginning to impose embargoes on their exports to Saudi Arabia, and a reduced U.S. commitment, Saudi Arabia may seek out alternative suppliers with less concern for the laws of armed conflict and how their arms will be used.

**Egypt’s About Face**

The Egypt case study indicates how a buyer state may react when it has ethical differences with its seller over foreign policy. The United States’ relationship with Egypt is complicated, albeit important to its geopolitical aims in the Middle East. Beginning in 1979, the United States began developing a military relationship with Egypt, and would eventually provide approximately $1 billion of military assistance—mainly tactical assets—to the country for decades to come. More recently, following the 2013 overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, relations between the two countries have strained. President Obama temporarily froze military assistance due to new Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s poor human rights record. This signaled to Egypt that the United States could not be trusted as its only arms seller, and thus Cairo began to look elsewhere. As U.S. defense policy expert Anthony Cordesman noted, “Egypt has been so dependent on the U.S. that it is beginning to try to find some kind of contingency arrangement so that it can’t be levered by Congressional pressure to change.”

From 2000 to 2009, 75 percent of Egypt’s military imports came from the United States. However, this share declined to 20 percent over the following decade. Egypt has replaced the bulk of its U.S. arms imports with Russian ones, which accounted for 41 percent of its imports between 2016-2020. Russia now represents Egypt’s largest arms supplier. Due to the influence of the military in Egyptian politics and government, Egypt’s human rights violations have long been associated with its armed forces. Its recent human rights record includes extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, jailing of political prisoners, violations of laws of armed conflict in its Sinai counterinsurgency operations, restrictions of movement using military forces, and uses of military courts to prosecute and trial civilians. President Biden has withheld $300 million of military aid and prevented the approval of a further $130 million assistance package in the current fiscal year.

Though not actively engaged in the same conflict intensity as Saudi Arabia and...
the UAE, the Egyptian military faces a growing counterinsurgency campaign in the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt’s position as a critical junction between unstable areas of the Middle East and Africa places a multitude of national security demands on the Egyptian military. To meet these challenges, Egypt has sought out a variety of weapon systems from Russia. These purchases include attack helicopters, fifth-generation fighter jets, and various types of guided and unguided munitions. Furthermore, Egypt's procurement of Russia's S-300 missile system also challenges Israel's qualitative military superiority in the region, a status quo that the United States would like to preserve.

US attempts to influence Egypt’s foreign and domestic policy have only pushed Egypt closer toward Russia, as they continue to negotiate new arms agreements and participate in joint military exercises, such as Moscow’s Black Sea Naval Drills. Congressional research analysts have assessed that further attempts by the U.S. administrations to withhold military aid will only encourage Egypt to partner with regimes with few concerns for human rights. Egypt is not alone in shifting its arms purchases away from the United States. The Philippines, a U.S. ally since the end of the Cold War, began to procure Russian MI-17 helicopters after completing a new arms deal with the United States to diversify the country's military portfolio. More countries have begun to realize the dangers of buying arms overwhelmingly from one seller, especially when those arms come with strings attached.

A Catch-22?

The Kirkpatrick Doctrine was born into a bipolar world during the Cold War when the dichotomy between allies and enemies was far more visceral than it is today. In many ways, global power came down to a zero-sum game between countries siding with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact or the United States and NATO. A different set of geopolitical realities in the twenty-first century highlights the shortcomings of the Kirkpatrick Doctrine.

First, the overwhelming number of systems purchased serves an offensive role in tactical and operational levels of warfare, mainly for air domains. This highlights the changing nature of modern warfare, as states begin to rely more on the effectiveness and relative safety of firepower as a means of power projection. Thus, the high demand for these weapons systems in a competitive defense market gives buyers abundant choices without having to consider factors such as the foreign policy ethics of their sellers. Furthermore, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen has shown that arms-selling states are often willing to continue to export arms and even augment C2 capabilities when their recipients share similar strategic-level interests. Sellers have minimal control over their recipients’ operations, as exemplified by the Saudi Air Force making minimal adjustments in its targeting procedures to better align with the laws of armed conflict. Similarly, consistent U.S. military assistance to Egypt has also not led to meaningful strides in Egypt’s human rights record.

Given arms sellers’ inability to alter buyers’ behavior, they should cease their exports to, at the very least, avoid complicity in human rights abuses and war crimes. The alternative, according to Kirkpatrick, would be a continuation of the status quo and possibly worse, as arms recipients can easily seek out new
exporters to fulfill their needs. By attaching strings to its arms exports, however, the United States risks aiding in the resurgence of Russian and Chinese weapons industries. This leaves democracies like the United States in a catch-22 scenario: remain complicit in the authoritarian regimes’ violations of human rights and the laws of armed conflict or allow even less concerned authoritarian states to export their weapons and exacerbate the status quo.

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