

II. Arms transfers to the Middle East and North Africa, and the military intervention in Yemen

PIETER D. WEZEMAN

States in the Middle East accounted for 25 per cent of global imports in 2011–15, making it the second largest importing region for that period. The combined total volume of arms transfers to the Middle East and North Africa accounted for 30 per cent of global arms transfers in 2011–15.¹ The largest arms importers in the Middle East and North Africa in that period were Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which, respectively, were the second and fourth largest arms importers globally. Together, they accounted for 38 per cent of arms imports to the Middle East and North Africa in 2011–15. No state in the Middle East and North Africa has so far developed an indigenous arms industry that can fulfil the national arms procurement programmes in those regions. Therefore, all the states in the Middle East and North Africa are heavily dependent on arms imports.

It is difficult to determine the underlying motives for the high level of major arms imports to the Middle East and North Africa due to the general lack of transparency with regard to military matters in the majority of states in those regions. This, in turn, makes it very challenging to assess the potential impact of the imported weapons.² However, almost all states in the Middle East and North Africa were involved in violent conflict on their own territory or in other states in the regions in 2011–15. These violent conflicts included actions in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Turkey, Palestine and Yemen. Several of these conflicts have been enflamed by tensions between Iran and certain other Arab states. For example, Iran has been supporting the Syrian Government and the Houthi rebels in the respective conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which were ongoing in 2015, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have been supporting the opposing sides. Thus, it can reasonably be assumed that an important driver for arms acquisitions by states in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011–15 was the use of the weapons in ongoing regional conflicts or the preparation for the use of such weapons in future conflicts.

This section focuses on (a) how arms imports have enabled a coalition of regional states to take the lead in a large-scale military intervention in Yemen; and (b) the questions this raises about the possible future use of force by regional coalitions in the Middle East and North Africa.

¹ For further details of SIPRI's regional coverage see p. xxix and <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/regional_coverage>.

² See e.g. the country studies in the Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index, Transparency International Defence and Security, <<http://government.defenceindex.org>>.

The intervention in Yemen

Violence has long been a feature of politics in Yemen. A new wave of violence broke out in 2009–10 caused by fighting between the Yemeni Government and Houthi rebels, which are part of a Shia sect with traditional strongholds in northern Yemen. The violence included attacks by Houthi rebels on targets in Saudi Arabia, which responded with a series of air strikes, providing a test of some of its key military equipment.³ Iran became involved in the conflict in Yemen in around 2009 and began to provide arms and other support to the Houthi rebels.⁴ The actual extent of this support remains unclear. After a short period of relative stability, during which time Yemen's long-standing president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, formally ceded power following months of civil protest, widespread violence flared again in Yemen in 2014. The situation deteriorated rapidly in 2014–15 when forces loyal to former President Saleh formed an alliance with the Houthi rebels and took control of large parts of the country, including the capital Sana'a.⁵

In reaction to the rebel advances and suspicions that the Saleh–Houthi alliance was being supported by Iran, Saudi Arabia organized a coalition of Arab states from the Middle East and North Africa to launch a full-scale military operation in support of the official Government of Yemen.⁶ The two main contributors to the coalition were Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and Sudan each contributed with smaller numbers of troops and equipment. The intervention started in March 2015 with air attacks and a naval blockade. Later in the year the coalition sent ground troops into Yemen. By the end of 2015, the fighting continued with no solution having been reached.

Regional military cooperation

The intervention in Yemen was the largest military operation on foreign soil initiated and led by Arab states since the 1973 war, which pitted a coalition of Arab states against Israel. Unlike other large military operations involving Arab states—such as in Iraq in 1991, Libya in 2011 and against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria in 2015—the operation in Yemen involved a full military intervention without the leadership of the United States or Western European countries. The joint military operation by several Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to support the regime in Bahrain in 2011 was much

³ Sergie, M. A., Said, S. and Coker, M., 'Saudi Forces bomb Yemeni rebels on Southern border', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 Nov. 2009.

⁴ For further details on Iran's involvement in Yemen, see chapter 2, section V, in this volume.

⁵ For an overview of the conflict see United Nations, Security Council, Final report of the panel of experts on Yemen established pursuant to Resolution 2140 (2014), S/2016/73, 22 Jan. 2016.

⁶ United Nations S/2016/73 (note 5), p. 11.

more limited in terms of troops and weapons deployed and in the level of force used.⁷

In 2015 Arab states also examined options to create a limited military alliance. The Arab League approved in April 2015 the concept of a Joint Arab Force ‘to confront the challenges to the security and safety of any member state that would pose a direct threat to Arab national security, including terrorist organisations’.⁸ The Arab League’s members aimed to develop this plan during 2015. However, due to disagreement about the objectives and guiding principles of the Joint Arab Force, the Arab League’s members halted discussions in August 2015.⁹ In a separate initiative, 34 members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation decided in December 2015 to form a military alliance, which will be led by Saudi Arabia. The alliance aims to coordinate and support military operations to fight terrorism.¹⁰

Arms supplies to states involved in the intervention in Yemen

Table 15.5 shows that all but one of the members of the coalition intervening in Yemen (i.e. Bahrain) increased their arms imports in 2011–15 compared with 2006–10. The increasing flow of weapons has significantly improved the military capability of the recipients in numerous areas, particularly in terms of their capacity to undertake the combined air, land and sea operations that have taken place in Yemen. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it seems likely that its arms procurement orders in 2011–15 were at least partly based on the experience gained from its air strikes in Yemen in 2009–10.

Various major weapons imported in 2006–15 have reportedly been used in the conflict in Yemen. Examples include (a) AH-64 combat helicopters and M-1 tanks from the USA, and Typhoon combat aircraft and Paveway guided bombs from the United Kingdom supplied to Saudi Arabia; (b) Bell-407 armed helicopters and Patriot air and missile defence systems from the USA, and Leclerc tanks and Mirage-2000-9 combat aircraft from France supplied to the UAE; (c) guided bombs and M-ATV armoured vehicles from the USA supplied to Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and (d) F-16 combat aircraft from the USA supplied to Egypt and Morocco.¹¹

⁷ Kermali, S., ‘The GCC is expanding its army, but for what?’, Al Jazeera, 2 July 2011.

⁸ Egyptian State Information Service, ‘Arab summit concludes activities in Sharm’, 30 Mar. 2015.

⁹ Gaub, F., ‘Stuck in the barracks: the Joint Arab Force’, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Issue brief no. 31, Oct. 2015.

¹⁰ Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Joint statement on formation of Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism’, 15 Dec. 2015.

¹¹ A detailed assessment of the exact weapons used in the conflict is difficult due to secrecy surrounding operations. The cases mentioned here are illustrative and based on reports and imagery from a variety of sources.

Table 15.5. Transfers of major weapons to members of the coalition involved in the intervention in Yemen, 2011–15

Recipient	Share of total arms imports by coalition members, (%)	Change in vol. since 2006–10, (%)	Main suppliers (share of recipient's imports, %)		
			1	2	3
Saudi Arabia	37	275	USA (46)	UK (30)	Spain (5.9)
UAE	24	35	USA (65)	France (8.3)	Italy (5.9)
Egypt	13	37	USA (48)	France (22)	Russia (18)
Morocco	11	528	France (45)	USA (34)	NLD (16)
Qatar	4.8	279	USA (73)	France (6.8)	CHE (6.8)
Kuwait	4.7	233	USA (91)	Russia (5.1)	Italy (2.1)
Jordan	3.4	30	NLD (37)	USA (26)	Belgium (11)
Sudan	2.1	16	Russia (37)	China (23)	Ukraine (23)
Bahrain	0.4	-46	USA (65)	Turkey (31)	France (3.5)

CHE = Switzerland; NLD = Netherlands; UAE = United Arab Emirates; vol. = volume.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>>.

The main drivers for arms suppliers

Table 15.5 shows that the USA, the UK and France were the main arms suppliers to the countries in the coalition.

The USA has strong foreign and security policy motivations for its arms transfers to the coalition members as many of them are involved in actions against al-Qaeda, IS and other armed groups in the Middle East and North Africa. The USA voiced strong support for the military intervention in Yemen.¹² Prior to 2015 the USA had provided military aid to the Yemeni Government to assist it in its fight against the Houthi rebels and al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula.¹³ During 2015 it backed the coalition intervention in Yemen directly with intelligence, targeting assistance, logistical support and aerial refuelling.¹⁴

The US Government issued a statement in September 2015 that it would continue to support the Arab states of the Gulf to build up their military capacity to help counter the growing perceived threat from Iran.¹⁵ The statement was issued during the negotiations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme, which eventually led to an agreement to lift international economic sanctions against Iran. The USA's partners in the Middle East perceived that the JCPOA deal would increase

¹² White House, 'Statement by NSC spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the situation in Yemen', Press release, 25 Mar. 2015.

¹³ Sharp, J. M., *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress RL34170 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 11 Feb. 2015), p. 27.

¹⁴ White House (note 12); and Sengupta, S., 'Pressure mounting on Saudis' coalition in Yemen', *New York Times*, 30 June 2015.

¹⁵ United States Institute of Peace, 'The final pitch: new appeal to Congress', Iran Primer, 2 Sep. 2015.

Iran's capability to destabilize the region through support of groups and regimes to which the USA and its partners are opposed.¹⁶ The September 2015 statement appears to have been issued partly to assuage these fears, and reaffirmed the USA's commitment to arming Arab states of the Gulf and to fast-tracking arms transfers to the GCC's member states.¹⁷

The USA's national demand for arms is sufficient to maintain a large and advanced arms industry. Therefore, economic and industrial factors are not the main drivers for US arms exports. However, such drivers should not be ignored. Arms exports to Saudi Arabia and the UAE together accounted for 19 per cent of US arms exports in 2011–15.¹⁸ Deliveries of the first set of 154 F-15SA combat aircraft to Saudi Arabia began in 2015 under a \$29.4 billion deal signed in 2011. When announcing the deal in 2011 the US Government underlined the perceived benefits for the arms industry and the US economy, and the number of new jobs it would create in the USA.¹⁹

Although it stressed that the solution to the Yemen crisis would require a political settlement, the UK also affirmed its support for the military intervention in Yemen.²⁰ It is worth noting that arms exports to the Middle East are of particular importance to the British arms industry. Saudi Arabia accounted for 46 per cent of the UK's arms exports in 2011–15. In 2015 around 21 per cent of the revenue of BAE Systems, the principal British arms-producing company, came from sales to Saudi Arabia.²¹

France also expressed full support for the coalition's military intervention.²² The coalition states are important clients for the French arms industry, accounting for 40 per cent of French arms exports in 2011–15. The French arms industry in tandem with the French Government aggressively pursued further arms sales to the Middle East during that period. The French Government signed arms export contracts worth a total of €16 billion in 2015, of which about €13 billion will come from states in the Middle East.²³ The French Government emphasized the economic benefits of these contracts.

¹⁶ Morris, L. and Naylor, H., 'Arab states fear nuclear deal will give Iran a bigger regional role', *Washington Post*, 14 July 2015. For further details see chapter 17, section I, in this volume.

¹⁷ White House, 'Annex to U.S.–Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David joint statement', Press release, 14 May 2015.

¹⁸ These arms exports involved almost only newly produced weapons. Arms exports to some other coalition states involved a mix of new and surplus arms.

¹⁹ White House, 'Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Joshua Earnest on U.S. sale of defense equipment to Saudi Arabia', 29 Dec. 2011.

²⁰ Lyall Grant, M., British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'A political solution in Yemen remains the best way to counter the growing threat from terrorist groups', Speech at United Nations, Security Council, 14 Apr. 2015.

²¹ BAE Systems, *Annual Report 2015* (BAE Systems: London, 2016), p. iii.

²² 'France voices support for Saudi campaign in Yemen', *France 24*, 12 Apr. 2015.

²³ Cabirol, M., 'Armement: Dassault, MBDA et DCNS, le tiercé gagnant de l'export en 2015' [Armaments: Dassault, MBDA and DCNS, the top three exporters in 2015], *La Tribune*, 18 Jan. 2016; and French Ministry of Defence (MOD), *Rapport au Parlement 2015 sur les Exportations d'Armement de la France* [Report to Parliament on France's arms exports, 2015] (MOD: June 2015).

The reactions to concerns about exported arms used in Yemen

During the course of 2015 the military intervention was increasingly called into question. For example, in separate reports, two high-profile non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—namely Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch—and a United Nations appointed panel of experts stated that there was strong evidence that a significant number of air strikes in Yemen by coalition members caused civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects in 2015.²⁴ Each concluded that such attacks were in violation of international humanitarian and human rights laws as they (a) were indiscriminate; (b) had deliberately targeted civilian objects; (c) had harmed civilians and civilian objects in a way that was disproportionate to the expected military gain; or (d) had failed to appropriately distinguish between civilian objects and military objects.²⁵ In its report, the UN panel of experts specifically noted that the naval blockade by the coalition contributed to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen.²⁶ Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called for restrictions on exports to the coalition members of the types of arms used in the alleged human rights violations. Such calls were echoed by civil society and politicians in many European Union (EU) states.

The broad support for restrictions on arms transfers was reflected in a February 2016 resolution by the European Parliament, which was adopted by a large majority. The resolution requested that the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy launch an initiative aimed at imposing an EU arms embargo against Saudi Arabia, given the serious allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia in Yemen.²⁷ However, as of early 2016, neither the EU nor any EU member state had announced a formal arms embargo. The most far-reaching restrictions were announced by the Government of the Netherlands in January 2016. The Netherlands will issue licences for export of arms to Saudi Arabia only if it is beyond doubt that the weapons cannot be used in the fighting in Yemen.²⁸

Despite the increased scrutiny, deals for arms supplies to coalition states continued to be negotiated, signed or implemented throughout 2015 by a wide range of states. For example, Saudi Arabia signed contracts for 22 trainer/

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'What military target was in my brother's house', 26 Nov. 2015; Amnesty International, *Bombs Fall From the Sky Day and Night: Civilians Under Fire in Northern Yemen* (Amnesty International: London, Oct. 2015); and United Nations S/2016/73 (note 5), Annex.

²⁵ Amnesty International (note 24), p. 6; Human Rights Watch (note 23), Summary; United Nations Annex to S/2016/73 (note 24), p. 35–36.

²⁶ United Nations S/2016/73 (note 5), Annex, p. 3.

²⁷ European Parliament resolution of 25 Feb. 2016 on the humanitarian situation in Yemen (2016/2515(RSP)).

²⁸ House of Representatives of the Netherlands, 'Status toezeggingen t.b.v. algemeen overleg Wapenexportbeleid' [Status of commitments for the general consultation on arms export policy], 13 Jan. 2016.

combat aircraft from the UK, while the USA agreed to a Saudi request for the supply of 8120 guided bombs to rebuild war reserves.²⁹ The UAE ordered 12 multiple rocket launchers, including 124 ballistic missiles, from the USA, 2 airborne surveillance systems from Sweden and 40 armoured vehicles from Finland. The USA agreed to a request from the UAE for 6600 guided bombs, pointing to the UAE's participation in 'the Saudi-led coalition to restore the legitimate government in Yemen' and the need to act against 'Houthi aggression'.³⁰ Kuwait negotiated the procurement of 28 combat aircraft from Italy, and Qatar and Egypt each ordered 24 combat aircraft from France. Egypt will significantly enhance its capability to support operations such as the intervention in Yemen with 2 amphibious assault ships ordered from France in 2015 (see section I).

Conclusions

The military intervention in Yemen is the most significant demonstration so far of the greater willingness and ability of Arab states to organize a regional military coalition without external leadership and to use their large quantities of imported advanced military equipment beyond their own borders. However, the states intervening in Yemen are generally very secretive about their military operations. It is unclear, therefore, whether—and to what extent—the intervention operations in Yemen are being conducted independently or whether the coalition members remain reliant on operational maintenance and logistical support from abroad, including in the form of support from foreign personnel based in these states.

The large rise in arms imports to many Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa over the past five years raises the question of how these weapons will impact on regional security in the future. Moreover, the use of these weapons in complex military operations in Yemen also raises the question as to whether Arab states will now be emboldened to use force, whether alone or in a coalition, as an increasingly important part of their policies towards other perceived threats, including in proxy wars with Iran or even directly against Iran. This is particularly salient considering the growing asymmetry in military capabilities between the increasingly advanced arsenals of states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the generally outdated arsenal of Iran. Due to economic sanctions (which have mainly been lifted following the conclusion of the JCPOA) and the UN arms embargo imposed on Iran

²⁹ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 'The Government of Saudi Arabia: air-to-ground munitions', News Release 15-57, 16 Nov. 2015.

³⁰ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 'United Arab Emirates (UAE): guided bomb units (GBU-31s and GBU-12s)', News Release 15-14, 29 May 2015; and Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 'United Arab Emirates (UAE): joint direct attack munitions (JDAM), sustainment and support', News Release 15-51, 5 Nov. 2015.

in 2010, Iran's arms imports have been very low in comparison with neighbouring states. For example, in 2006–15 the volume of Iran's arms imports was just 5 per cent of the combined volume imported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in that period.

Despite such questions and the fact that allegations of serious violations of international law by members of the coalition intervening in Yemen were raised in exporting states in 2015, the flow of weapons continued unchecked. Indeed, exporting states agreed many new deals in 2015 to supply large numbers of advanced arms to members of the coalition. These actions were driven by the perceived need to bolster the military capabilities of the recipients to enforce regional security, and by the anticipated gains for the exporting states' arms industries and economies generated by the arms exports. Some governments justified the exports and new deals by pointing to the benefits they would bring to their economies and, in particular, their arms industries, which, in many cases, have been affected by the long-term decline in demand for arms in the major arms-producing countries.