

How the U.S. Used Arms Sales to Shift Saudi Behavior

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Articles & Testimony

Weapons bans have proven to be a fickle tool historically, so why did they work in Riyadh's case?

Within days of coming to power in 2021, the Biden administration [announced](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/) [\(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/) that it was ending “all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen,” and, in particular, halting the sale of offensive weaponry to Saudi Arabia. This ban followed similar [moves](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-03/news/europeans-cut-saudi-arms-sales) [\(https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-03/news/europeans-cut-saudi-arms-sales\)](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-03/news/europeans-cut-saudi-arms-sales) from other European countries, but notably did not ban the sale of defensive arms such as air-defense systems. Three years later, as the Biden administration prepares to lift the ban on offensive weapons, officials now [say](https://www.reuters.com/world/us-lift-ban-offensive-weapons-sales-saudi-arabia-sources-say-2024-08-09/) [\(https://www.reuters.com/world/us-lift-ban-offensive-weapons-sales-saudi-arabia-sources-say-2024-08-09/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/us-lift-ban-offensive-weapons-sales-saudi-arabia-sources-say-2024-08-09/), with justification, that “The Saudis have met their end of the deal, and we are prepared to meet ours.”

Arms sales are a fickle tool in the toolbox of American foreign policy. The results are almost always a mixed bag for Washington. One historical [study](https://www.jstor.org/stable/174334) [\(https://www.jstor.org/stable/174334\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/174334) of arms sales and the Cold War, for instance, found that efforts to use weapons transfers to influence other countries “succeeded slightly less than half of the time.” The U.S. has tried using this tactic on Saudi Arabia before: in 2016, the Obama administration [suspended](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-01/news/obama-acts-arms-exports) [\(https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-01/news/obama-acts-arms-exports\)](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-01/news/obama-acts-arms-exports) transfers of cluster

munitions, then precision-guided munitions, though the Trump administration [reinstated \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-looks-to-resume-saudi-arms-sale-criticized-as-endangering-civilians-in-yemen/2017/03/08/a259090a-040e-11e7-b1e9-a05d3c21f7cf_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-looks-to-resume-saudi-arms-sale-criticized-as-endangering-civilians-in-yemen/2017/03/08/a259090a-040e-11e7-b1e9-a05d3c21f7cf_story.html) the sales soon after taking office. It is worth considering, then, why the U.S. feels its embargo of offensive arms to Saudi Arabia worked now, especially during a tumultuous time in the region as Arab governments face mounting political pressure to be on the opposing side of the United States—and therefore potentially Israel—and what it means for the future of U.S. arms exports.

Why It Worked—This Time

The U.S. decision to lift the hold likely reflects Saudi progress on a few key issues. First, Riyadh renewed its commitment to adhere to the Law of Armed Conflict and put measures in place to prevent civilian harm in future conflicts. Second, it drastically decreased its role in the war in Yemen with a heavy focus on a UN-led peace process. And third, it pledged to work with the U.S. on improving training and awareness for the Saudi Armed Forces on the Law of Armed Conflict, civilian casualty avoidance, and human rights.

On the first, though nothing has been released publicly, it is clear that the Saudis have reassured Biden-administration officials enough to warrant a reversal of the policy. Saudi Arabia has all but halted its air campaign in Yemen since the April 2022 ceasefire, drastically reducing civilian casualties as it shifted its focus to achieving a diplomatic agreement to end the war. According to figures [derived \(https://acleddata.com/yemen-conflict-observatory/actor-profiles/saudi-led-coalition/\)](https://acleddata.com/yemen-conflict-observatory/actor-profiles/saudi-led-coalition/) from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data center, there have been about 41 civilian deaths due to foreign forces outside Yemen between July 2022 and July 2024, a decrease from the 100 deaths in the similar 2020-22 timeframe. Given the Biden administration's [briefings \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/22/politics/biden-saudi-arabia-yemen-weapons/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/22/politics/biden-saudi-arabia-yemen-weapons/index.html) to the Hill on the issue—and the subsequent lack of any public congressional backlash to the lifting of the ban—it is likely the justification put forward by Biden officials was enough to temper human-rights concerns.

On the second issue, Saudi Arabia has adhered to a March 2022 ceasefire put in place through the UN-led peace process—even though it formally [expired \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemen-truce-expires-un-keeps-pushing-broader-deal-2022-10-03/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemen-truce-expires-un-keeps-pushing-broader-deal-2022-10-03/) in October 2022. Despite [minor \(https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen\)](https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen) skirmishes, both sides appear to have refrained from escalatory actions, with Saudi and U.S. officials [reporting \(https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/25/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-yemen-houthis-gaza.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/25/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-yemen-houthis-gaza.html) that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has no desire to prolong the conflict with the Houthis. The Saudis have even refused to partake—at least publicly—in U.S.-led efforts to curb Houthi provocations in the Red Sea so that diplomatic channels could remain open. In a December [interview \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/saudi-foreign-minister-discusses-israel-hamas-war-and-wider-challenges-in-middle-east\)](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/saudi-foreign-minister-discusses-israel-hamas-war-and-wider-challenges-in-middle-east), Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said that despite the tension in the Red Sea with the Houthis, the kingdom was “committed to ending the war in Yemen...and committed to a permanent cease-fire that opens the door for a political process.”

The third point is consistent with the Biden administration's focus on upholding civilian harm reduction standards for the U.S. military, as well as partners and allies. In August 2022, the Defense Department [released \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3140007/civilian-harm-mitigation-and-response-action-plan-fact-sheet/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3140007/civilian-harm-mitigation-and-response-action-plan-fact-sheet/) its Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan, which laid out the path for the U.S. military to better protect civilians during its operations. Throughout the plan, considerations of working with allies and partners were woven into the new standards, including the creation of CHMR Baselines of Allies and Partners assessments. These baselines [establish \(https://media.defense.gov/2022/Aug/25/2003064740/-1/-1/1/CIVILIAN-HARM-MITIGATION-AND-RESPONSE-ACTION-PLAN.PDF\)](https://media.defense.gov/2022/Aug/25/2003064740/-1/-1/1/CIVILIAN-HARM-MITIGATION-AND-RESPONSE-ACTION-PLAN.PDF) a foundational assessment of partners' or allies'

efforts to prevent civilian harm before tailoring a security cooperation plan to help further reduce risk to civilians. While these baselines for Saudi Arabia have not been publicly released, Pentagon officials did **notify** (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/saudi-arabia-blanket-order-training-0>) Congress in December of a \$1 billion sale of training, largely for the Royal Saudi Air Force, that would include “such subjects as civilian casualty avoidance; the laws of armed conflicts; [and] human rights.”

Despite public U.S. pressure and some inflammatory campaign rhetoric, Saudi Arabia appears to have been willing and able to modify its conduct while maintaining a close relationship with Washington. Unlike others in the region, the Kingdom has not dramatically deepened defense ties with China or Russia and continues to see the United States as its primary security partner of choice. Riyadh also remains keenly interested in a normalization agreement with Israel that deepens security ties with the United States. These underscore the Kingdom’s willingness to maintain its strategic security orientation with the U.S., despite the offensive weapons ban. In this instance, the two deciding factors—the recipient country’s long-standing defense ties to the U.S. and its strategic alignment with the U.S.—allowed Washington to use its arms sales to change a partner’s behavior without damaging the overall relationship.

What This Means

The dynamic between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly unique. This dynamic gave the U.S. a higher likelihood that manipulating its arms transfers to the Kingdom would produce a positive change in behavior. A key factor is Saudi’s historical reliance on the U.S. for arms, logistics, and support. Many of Saudi Arabia’s most advanced military platforms are American, whether they are the F-15 fighter jets, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot air defense systems, or combat helicopters. These platforms have incredibly complex maintenance, sustainment, and training programs that rely on continued American support to keep them operational. Compounding this dilemma was the fact that other European countries—including **those** (<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/german-opposition-saudi-eurofighter-exports-real-problem-airbus-ceo-2023-10-17/>) who had also sold the Kingdom advanced capabilities such as fighter jets—joined the U.S. in banning arms sales. Riyadh’s options at the onset of the ban were, then, either to change its behavior and accommodate Washington or spend dramatically more on acquiring different capabilities from alternative suppliers that may or may not have been able to integrate with their current weaponry. In the face of such a choice, Riyadh clearly chose the former.

Further, Saudi Arabia’s strategic priorities tilted in Washington’s favor. The Kingdom is deeply invested in attaining a defense treaty with the United States as part of a broader U.S.-facilitated normalization agreement with Israel. This agreement, and the subsequent security guarantees from Washington, are a top priority for the Kingdom. It would see deepened cooperation between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia on a number of fronts outside of the security realm, including civilian nuclear technology and artificial intelligence. Indeed, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were reportedly **nearing** (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-says-historic-israel-saudi-normalization-deal-within-reach-but-israel-might-balk-89d16780>) a “semi-final” version of the accord back in May 2024. That Saudi leaders clearly prioritized a U.S.-facilitated normalization agreement with Israel increased the leverage Washington had with regard to its offensive weapons ban.

But the U.S. won’t always have the benefit of this dynamic. Other countries will be harder to influence through weapons sales, especially those with financial means, diverse weapons acquisitions relationships, and a strategic orientation more inclined to hedge their relationships with the U.S., China, and Russia. Further, third-party countries around the world will likely look at the closeness of the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the subsequent weapons ban and draw their own conclusions regarding the reliability of the U.S. as a provider of arms. At a time when China, in particular, is **eager** (<https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-speed-in-selling-arms-prompt-us->

[partners-to-buy-from-beijing-say-officials/7009288.html](#)) to export its weaponry and advance its security partnerships around the world, the U.S. can hardly afford to test each of its security partnerships with this type of turbulence.

Conclusion

Biden administration officials regularly point to the importance of empowering Saudi Arabia as a regional leader, both for what it means to the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship and because of what it can do for regional integration initiatives. Such a policy inherently requires Riyadh to have both the capabilities to demonstrate that leadership and the wisdom to do so responsibly. Ultimately, both the United States and Saudi Arabia made the determination that persevering through this turbulent period was well worth the rewards of achieving more sustainable progress in the strategic partnership. Specifically, the offensive weapons ban worked in this instance because it was targeted at altering a specific behavior—in this case, ending the war in Yemen and preventing further civilian casualties. The U.S. will likely find that in the future its ability to leverage arms transfers will be limited when these conditions are not replicated. But, in this instance, a ban on offensive arms sales appears to have worked in Washington's favor.

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