American and Russian Competition for Weapons Sales in the Middle East

Master’s Degree Thesis

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Executive Summary

High-end weapons sales, such as fighter aircraft, air defense systems, and attack helicopters, are a valuable tool for global powers to use in enhancing their national security and expanding their global influence. These exports can act as a force multiplier for the manufacturing country, as its clients enhance their military capabilities and align themselves closer to the international politics of the patron. By purchasing high-end systems, the client largely commits itself to the influence of the patron because of the significant, long-term investment that these systems demand, and the requirement for continued after-sales support from the patron. Arms sales can also build long-term people-to-people relationships that come through training and international exercises.

Russia has surprised many Middle East analysts with its recent successes in selling weapons to American partners and allies in the region. This paper explores the reasons behind those successes, and tests soft-power theory as a possible framework. Indeed, recent Russian soft-power gains in the Middle East have contributed to successful sales, but factors unique to each individual sale also had a role. In order to regain the initiative in selling weapons in this region, the United States should work with Israel in developing a more effective model for providing advanced military technology to Arab states. It should better leverage its superiority in weapons technology where it exists, and overhaul the Congressional review process to ensure that the legislative branch maintains its oversight role, but in a manner unaffected by domestic political pressures. America should be prepared to respond to the changing threats and opportunities brought by COVID-19. It should be ready to outspend Moscow in helping partners during any economic crises in order to regain its influence in this vital region.

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# Introduction

Weapons sales are an important and powerful tool in national security practice. Most obviously, they make a strong economic impact by creating high-tech jobs and producing cutting-edge research and development that can be applied in non-military sectors. More importantly, weapons sales are a strategic power projection tool that can make a larger impact on national security by fostering strong state-to-state relationships and building partner capabilities. Customer states have increasing freedom to choose their weapons suppliers, which is upsetting long-running patron-client relations in the international system. This trend, combined with increasing Russian soft power in the Middle East, makes the study of Russian weapons sales in that region a worthwhile research endeavor.

## *Conceptual Framework*

Soft power theory has been a useful conceptual framework for understanding great power competition for weapons sales in the Middle East. Joseph Nye coined the term ‘soft power’ in the 1980s to describe the increasing relevance of non-coercive power as embodied by culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, Soft Power). Certainly, these elements had a major role in shaping events surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, as populations looked westward for a better way of life. The popularity of American music and news broadcasts from Radio Free Europe behind the iron curtain during that era bear witness. Softpower30.com, a portal that tracks and compares current soft power strength among countries using selected indicators, describes soft power in the following manner:

In contrast to the coercive nature of hard power, soft power describes the use of positive attraction and persuasion to achieve foreign policy objectives. Soft power shuns the traditional foreign policy tools of carrot and stick, seeking instead to achieve influence by building networks, communicating compelling narratives, establishing international rules, and drawing on the resources that make a country naturally attractive to the world.

Soft power theory is not without its critics, perhaps most notably Niall Ferguson in the preface to *Colossus.* Nye himself acknowledged the skepticism his theories faced at the highest levels of the US Government, including from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (Nye, Soft Power). Some researchers have also warned that by focusing too much on hard and soft power analysis, there is a danger in underestimating the growth of sharp power influence wielded by autocracies (C. Walker). Nevertheless, several tactics employed by both the United States and Russia seem to derive from a soft power framework, so it is worth exploring this in depth and using it as a framework for understanding weapon sales in the Middle East.

## *Role of Weapons Sales in National Power and National Security*

The economic benefits to weapons sales are obvious and might easily distract the novice national security analyst away from the defense benefits. Certainly, the high-tech nature of today’s weapons and the size of the market ($67.9 billion in 2019 US sales - (Mehta)) is indicative of their economic importance. A 2017 sale of F-15 fighter aircraft to Qatar, for example, was reported to have created 60,000 American jobs (Boeing Wins $6.2 Billion Qatar Contract for 36 F-15s). Additionally, many important technologies in use outside of the military had their genesis in defense research and development. Further, many arms producers, such as aircraft builder Boeing, also produce similarly high-tech goods for the civilian market. For example, Boeing is also America’s top competitor for civil aviation sales, and no doubt its export of military aircraft helps its ability to offer the best products in overseas civil airliner competitions.

In addition to these economic benefits, weapons sales have an even greater impact on the defense pillar of national security, and thus offer a prime means of projecting and boosting national power. High-end weapons producers, such as the United States and Russia, are able to extend their military superiority to their security partners by exporting these advanced systems. As long as patron-client security interests remain aligned, these sales can act as a force multiplier for the producing country. For example, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates both employed their US-produced F-16s in combat operations over Libya and operations to defeat the so-called Islamic State, hitting targets assigned by the US-led planning teams. In addition to the diplomatic benefits of having these two Arab countries actively participating in coalition operations, this arrangement allowed the United States to achieve the same military effects as it would gain by employing more of its own aircraft and munitions.

Weapons sales to client states may also create a stronger dependence on the patron, ultimately increasing the patron’s influence over the client. The decision to buy a new fighter aircraft is a significant one, not least because of the cost of the aircraft themselves, but also the high financial cost of associated weaponry, training and infrastructure. Additionally, purchasing countries often must adapt their force structures to best absorb and operate these aircraft and their associated systems. These commitments bind the purchaser to the producer for decades of after-sales support, munitions replenishment, and upgrades to both training and the equipment itself. All US Government-managed weapons sales, known officially as Foreign Military Sales or, simply, “FMS,” are governed by contracts stipulating that the weapons will be used only in “legitimate” self-defense or in furtherance of UN-sanctioned military activity. Consequently, the United States has used the threat and actual withholding of follow-on support to apply political pressure on its weapons buyers. The success rate of such pressure tactics has been disputed (Rounds), but it remains an attractive reason to win a sale over other producers.

Weapons sales can also be leveraged to expose vast numbers of the buyer’s military personnel to the producer’s nationals, its own country, and its way of life. The United States methodically takes advantage of the resultant opportunities to wield soft power. The typical purchase of a new American fighter aircraft platform often involves the exchange of thousands of personnel throughout the lifetime of that aircraft, which can last for more than 40 years. This can include training hundreds of the buyer’s aircrews, maintenance, and support personnel. The US Defense Language Institute-English Language Center (DLI) at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, exists solely to teach foreign military members English in preparation for their technical training on US weapons systems or professional education at American military institutions. DLI deliberately maximizes these trainees’ exposure to American culture via field trips and the assignment of a sponsoring American family in order to foster a favorable attitude towards America and Americans (Warren).

Selling advanced weaponry also provides opportunities to reduce the unit cost for the producing country’s military. US law stipulates that original, non-recurring research and development costs for major weapons systems must be passed on to FMS buyers (Non-Recurring Costs and Waivers). Today, budgeting for the development of many new US weapons systems is accomplished with FMS in mind and the F-35 was planned from the beginning to be a multi-national effort, with costs spread to many buyers. Additionally, sales provide opportunities for the selling country to make improvements based on performance information gleaned from buyers’ employment of these systems in combat. For example, Israel employed the F-15 in combat extensively over Lebanon beginning in 1979, whereas the American F-15s would not fly combat missions until Desert Storm in 1991. It stands to reason that the United States would be able to leverage the Israelis’ combat experience in the F-15 in the interim.

## *American and Russian Arms Sales in the Middle East*

The United States and Russia are two primary arms suppliers in the Middle East. European, Chinese, and South American manufacturers also enjoy significant market share, but to study them would be beyond the scope of this research project. There are several reasons for this limitation. First, this project primarily explores the defense utility of weapons sales and not the economic benefits. Arguably, the United States gains much (but not all) of the military benefit of a sale when the buyer chooses a Western European competitor. The UK, Germany, and France, all NATO allies, are top arms exporters and most systems they sell would also orient the buyer towards NATO in a manner similar to the processes described above. If US operations in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria/Iraq are an indication, any new near-term US coalition activity would be associated with a NATO operation. Therefore, arms provided by NATO allies would enable nearly the same level of interoperability as that offered by US weapons.

Conversely, sales awarded to Russia are generally damaging to US national security. While the United States has made it known that it seeks to drawdown its presence from the Middle East, no doubt it wishes to maintain influence. Russian arms sales to the region displace that influence and can even upset the relationship. Moreover, purchases from Russia provide a benefit to the Russian arms industry that could affect NATO’s edge in the European theater. Finally, as the arms supplier of choice for Iran and Syria, Israel’s primary state-level threats, the Russian arms industry benefits at the expense of Israel’s national security. It is for these reasons that a study of American and Russian competition for arms sales in the Middle East is useful. COVID-19 is likely to have a lasting, historical impact on the strategic environment, so this issue will also be explored in depth.

## *Methodology*

This paper explores in depth weapons sales strategies for both countries. It examines similarities and differences in the purposes of each, weighing the relative degree of importance of both economic and geopolitical matters. It also explores the degree to which soft power theory is an effective framework to study Russian weapons sales strategies in the region. It has also been a worthwhile endeavor conducting case studies of recent successful Russian arms sales to Middle Eastern countries and analyzing the reasons behind their success. Notably, Russia sold advanced Su-35 fighter aircraft to Egypt in 2019 in spite of heavy pressure from the United States and threats of economic sanctions. Turkey is famously purchasing the S-400 anti-aircraft system from Russia in spite of threats of sanctions and expulsion from the exclusive F-35 membership club. Most recently, it appears that Iraq is on the cusp of purchasing an advanced Russian air defense system, such as the S-400. Finally, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two long-time, nearly exclusive buyers of Western military equipment, have flirted with the possibility of buying aircraft and air defense equipment from Russia. This project attempts to exhaustively examine the available evidence to determine why Russia has seemingly been successful. Ultimately, this research could help the United States better understand an apparent emerging trend of some Middle Eastern countries preferring Russian weapons over American arms. Further, I have developed recommendations that I hope are helpful for the United States to compete better against Russia in the Middle East weapons markets.

## *Research Questions*

Owing to the purposes described above, the research questions that have guided this study are as follows:

1. Is soft power theory useful in understanding Russian weapons sales strategies in the Middle East?
2. What factors are responsible for Russia’s seeming success against the United States in recent weapons sales competitions in the Middle East?
3. How can the United States better compete against Russia in Middle Eastern weapons sales?
4. What possible changes to the strategic environment might we expect from COVID-19 and how can the United States best prepare?

## *Sources*

I sought to leverage primary sources when at all possible and, when not available, to utilize secondary sources. There is abundant legislation governing American arms sales, which is all publicly available. Additionally, the United States Department of Defense publishes many of its FMS policies and procedures online. Speeches and Congressional testimony from key officials having knowledge about American weapons sales strategy has also been useful. Primary sources on internal deliberations in Russia have been surprisingly available, but not for the Middle Eastern countries. The Kremlin does periodically publish weapons export strategy information, which was examined closely. Additionally, some full-text media interviews with executives of Russia’s arms producers have been published and these were analyzed as well. Discussions and interviews with experts on the Middle East and Russia were useful in filling in gaps. For security reasons owing to my current military status and background, I did not request interviews with Russian or Middle Eastern officials.

## *Structure*

The structure of this research project is as follows. In the next chapter, I will present soft power theory as an overall theoretical framework and review existing literature on the subject. Next, I will compare the Russian and American weapons sales methodologies, followed by case studies of recent successful Russian sales in the Middle East. COVID-19 will certainly change American, Russian, and Middle Eastern approaches to security, so this very important historical issue will be explored in the penultimate chapter, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

# Chapter I – Russian Soft Power in the Middle East

There is debate about the extent to which Russia truly practices soft power, as the concept is envisioned by Joseph Nye, who coined the term in 1990 (Nye, Soft Power). Certainly, Russia has well-developed *sharp* power tools that it has applied to great effect in many global regions, including Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. It is also well established that Russia’s influence in the Middle East has grown substantially throughout the past decade. In this section, we will examine the results of Russia’s soft power overtures in the Middle East to form a basis to determine later whether successful Russian arms sales in the Middle East can be attributed to the accumulation of any Russian soft power in that region. We will start by reviewing the concept of soft power, then study its role in Russia’s overall foreign policy before analyzing the extent of Russia’s soft power in the Middle East.

## *Russia’s Use of Soft Power*

While Russia’s use of sharp power tools, such as disinformation and manipulation, is getting greater notice and has been documented extensively (Nye, What China and Russia don't Get about Soft Power), indeed Russia has made commitments to leverage true soft power and there have been tangible results. In a 2012 speech to the Russian foreign ministry, shortly after his successful reelection, President Putin extolled the virtues of soft power: “Let me remind you that the policy of ‘soft power’ provides for the promotion of their interests and approaches by persuading and attracting sympathy for their country, based on its achievements not only in material, but also in spiritual culture, and in the intellectual sphere” (Putin). Putin continues by lamenting that Russia’s “real” contribution to “world civilization, science, culture, and…international affairs” is not fully recognized, purportedly because Russia has not adequately applied soft power. He promises to bring to Russia the summits of several top-level multilateral organizations, including APEC, the G20, the G8, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and BRICS, which he hopes will not only strengthen Russia’s position on the world stage, but will also resolve various international conflicts. In the same speech, Putin also hints at a role for Russia in facilitating dialogue that will peacefully resolve various conflicts, including the situations in Syria and Afghanistan, and Iran and North Korea’s quests for nuclear weapons (Ibid). These ideas were further explained in *Moscow’s official Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, published in 2013. In it, soft power is described as “a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy” that is “becoming an indispensable component of modern international relations” (Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation).

Indeed, Russia has committed resources to achieving these objectives and there have been indisputable successes. The “Russian World” foundation, albeit established before the 2012 election, aims to consolidate Russia’s influence amongst Russian-language speakers outside its borders. The idea is to maintain soft-power strength in countries on Russia’s periphery (Kudors and Orttung). Russia has integrated its education system with the rest of Europe via the Bologna Process and increased the number of foreign students in Russian universities. Many leading Russian universities have established collaboration programs with partner universities in neighboring countries (Sergunin and Karabeshkin). The Russian Orthodox Church has also played a role in Moscow’s soft-power strategies by mediating between Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine during the conflicts between those respective states (Ibid). Putin has boosted his support for the church in order to curry favor with the large international membership that the church enjoys. In fact, analysts determine that he pardoned Israeli backpacker Naama Issachar in exchange for Russian sovereignty over the Alexander Courtyard in Jerusalem, which will increase his support among the church members globally. (Attias, Putin's Religious Soft Power Hits Jerusalem) Russia has spent tens of billions of dollars in hosting major, high-profile sports events and economic conferences, such as the 2012 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, the 2014 Winter Olympics, and the 2018 World Cup. However, the soft power gains from these investments have been elusive, not least because of the corruption scandals surrounding each one (Grix and Kramareva).

## *Russian Soft Power in the Middle East*

In the Middle East, Russia is seeing major successes in its soft-power strategies. Its high-stakes gamble in intervening militarily in Syria (an application of hard power) has paid off handsomely, as Russia has successfully established itself as a major player in any discussions on the future of Syria. In that role, it has sponsored multiple peace conferences in Astana and hosted delegations from the various warring factions in Sochi (Wintour). Separately, in a 2019 development that demonstrates the advancement of civil society in Russia’s soft power efforts, Moscow hosted the Taliban and representatives of various other Afghan groups for what was called “the most significant contact between senior Afghan politicians and the Taliban since the United States toppled the hard-line Islamist group from power at the end of 2001” (Higgins and Mashal). What was perhaps most remarkable about the event is that the talks were purportedly organized not by the Russian foreign ministry, but by a group called, “The Afghan Diaspora in Russia,” with the government providing only “technical support” (Attias, Russian Soft Power in the Middle East). As further evidence of Moscow’s successful soft-power initiatives, RT Arabic, Russia’s direct avenue to Arabic speakers in the Middle East and beyond, has a viewership of 6.3 million. A Russian diaspora agency, Rossotrudnichestvo, operates science and cultural centers in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Palestinian areas. **Perhaps most convincingly, though, two recent polls show that young Arabs increasingly view Russia as a reliable ally, and the United States as unreliable**. In 2018, 35 percent of those polled viewed the United States as an unreliable partner, down from 63 percent in 2016. At the same time, a full 20 percent of young Arabs saw Russia as the region’s best friend outside of the region (Ibid). Indeed, we will see later that America’s reliability has come into question and has had an adverse effect on its ability to sell weapons to long-time partners. We will also explore what factors other than Russia’s growing soft power have led to Russia’s success in selling weapons.

# Chapter II – American Approach to Weapons Sales

Information on American weapons export strategy is widely available in a variety of documents, such as the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the President’s Conventional Arms Transfer Policy. Arms exports are governed by legislation such as the Foreign Assistance Act and the Arms Export Control Act (AECA). Additional details on US policy can be gleaned from public testimony by Administration officials involved in weapons sales.

## *Executive Branch*

The National Security Strategy describes the importance of strengthening partnerships and alliances, but largely leaves it up to subordinate documents to determine how this will be accomplished. The National Defense Strategy provides requisite detail. It outlines three primary ‘lines of effort,’ for defending the United States:

* First, rebuilding military readiness as we build a more lethal Joint Force;
* Second, strengthening alliances as we attract new partners; and
* Third, reforming the Department’s business practices for greater performance and affordability. (Mattis)

The second line of effort, “strengthening alliances as we attract new partners,” is the area in which arms exports operates. In order to carry out this line of effort, the NDS prescribes activities such as encouraging “effective investment in modernizing [partners’] defense capabilities… greater defense cooperation,” and an emphasis on interoperability: “In consultation with Congress and the Department of State, the Department of Defense will prioritize requests for U.S. military equipment sales, accelerating foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with U.S. forces” (Mattis).

Administrations from both political parties have emphasized the important role played by weapons exports in national security by publishing Presidential policies on the subject. President Obama’s strategy was outlined in Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-27, published in 2014, while President Trump, in 2018, issued the “National Security Presidential Memorandum Regarding U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer Policy.” Both documents are remarkably similar, emphasizing the important role of arms sales in boosting US and partner national security, strengthening relationships, promoting interoperability, developing influence, creating access, and enabling burden sharing. The Trump Administration’s policy uniquely signals a role of weapons exports in great power competition: “In making arms transfer decisions, the executive branch shall account for…the likelihood of the transfer reducing ally and partner dependence on United States adversaries” (Trump). Both Administrations’ policies highlight the importance of exercising responsibility in weapons exports, describing the imperative of avoiding sales that may foster instability, enable transnational organized crime, endanger the compromise of sensitive US technology, risk proliferating weapons of mass destruction, or be used to violate universal human rights.

Additionally, the Trump Administration’s policy highlights the importance of selling weapons that enhance the partner’s ability to minimize civilian casualties: “With respect to arms transfers, it shall be the policy of the executive branch to…facilitate ally and partner efforts, through United States sales…to reduce the risk of national or coalition operations causing civilian harm” (Ibid). Such objectives can be accomplished via the sale of, for example, precision-guided munitions, which usually require less destructive power to neutralize an intended target and can have less collateral damage. While on the surface it may seem counterintuitive that an arms export could protect civilian lives, indeed, some sales can do exactly that. Certainly, the success of a coalition operation can rest on the ability of the United States and its partners to minimize civilian casualties. Consequently, it stands to reason that the United States would want its coalition partners to employ weapons that best avoid harm to civilians. Furthermore, it is in US interests for its partners to minimize civilian casualties in those conflicts in which the United States is not participating directly. For example, the United States has come under scrutiny for providing support, including via weapons sales, to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the conflict in Yemen. America has been blamed for the civilian casualties that its support has presumably enabled (Ward); therefore, indeed the United States would want its partners to be armed with weapons that best avoid harm to civilians.

The Congressional testimonies on June 15, 2017, of two senior national Administration officials who were both deeply involved in the US weapons exports arena provide rich additional insights. The first witness, Vice Admiral Joseph Rixey was serving as the director of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which establishes and leads the US Government in implementation of US weapons export policy. He was joined by Ambassador Tina Kaidanow, acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs in testimony before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, US House Foreign Affairs Committee. In his testimony, Admiral Rixey summarized US weapons sales strategy into three main objectives: the imperative of mutual benefit for the United States and importing country, the importance of safeguarding US sensitive technology, and the responsibility to avoid sales that could result in violation of human rights. Rixey explained the importance of the total package approach, a longstanding practice in US arms exports that ensures customers are provided not just the weapon systems, but also training, spares packages, maintenance, and logistics arrangements. Such procedures are in place to provide partners with long-term military capabilities, not just equipment that may not end up being used to its full potential.

Ambassador Kaidanow’s testimony primarily reinforced the objectives outlined in the Obama Administration’s PPD-27, which had not yet been superseded by the Trump Administration’s weapons export policy letter:

We…take into account foreign policy considerations as we contemplate each arms transfer or sale, including, specifically, the appropriateness of the transfer in responding to U.S. and recipient security needs, the degree to which the transfer supports U.S. strategic foreign policy and defense interests through increased access and influence, allied burden sharing and interoperability, consistency with U.S. interests regarding regional stability, the degree of protection afforded by the recipient company to our sensitive technology, the risk that significant change in the political or security situation of the recipient country could lead to inappropriate end use or transfer, and the likelihood that the recipient would use the arms to commit human rights abuses or serious violations of international humanitarian law or retransfer the arms to those who would commit such abuses.

Her mention of retransfer is significant. According to the AECA, importing countries must, as a condition of the sale, agree to establish an export control regime in order to protect US-origin military equipment from retransfer. Any request to transfer such equipment to a third party must be approved by the US Government and will be considered using the same criteria as an initial sale. Kaidanow also outlined the economic benefits of weapons exports. She explained that arms sales support the US defense industrial base and reduce the unit cost of procurement for the US military. Further, the US arms industry provides direct employment for over 1.7 million Americans, enabling the defense and aerospace sectors to maintain their edge.

An important concept that was not touched upon in the Rixey and Kaidanow testimonies, but is addressed in the AECA is that US weapons sales can neither create a profit for the United States Government, nor can they create a loss (Defense Security Cooperation Agency). The government merely facilitates the transactions between the importing countries and the American vendors. Consequently, the US Government has very limited ability to subsidize arms sales that are deemed critical to competition with its strategic rivals. Indeed, numerous US military aid programs exist, most notably “foreign military financing,” but only a small fraction of the funds are disbursed beyond a few major annual recipients, which remain generally consistent from year to year. Moreover, Congress must approve the Administration’s distribution of these packages, which further limits flexibility to shift funding within the fiscal year or even from one year to the next.

## *Role of Congress in Weapons Sales*

The Legislative Branch plays a key role in US weapons sales. The Arms Export Control Act (AECA) stipulates that the US executive branch must notify Congress of major proposed weapons exports, generally 30 days before the sale can be finalized. The AECA also provides Congress tools for expeditiously advancing legislation to formally block any proposed sale if there is sufficient opposition. However, a super-majority of votes must be available to override a presumed Presidential veto or the legislation will not be passed and the sale will be allowed to proceed. Such checks and balances are crucial in any healthy democracy, lest too much power be concentrated with the executive branch. Without Congress’ ability to block weapons sales, there would be few effective controls in place to prevent disregard of human rights concerns or other important elements of national security soft power. However, bills that attempt to block weapons sales are rare and still fewer are passed into law. Instead, disputes are resolved or tabled before the formal notification process begins. The executive branch and Congress follow an informal review process for major weapons sales that allows the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) to review proposed exports in advance of the statutory 30-day formal notification. In 2012, then-Assistant Secretary of State Andrew Shapiro from the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs described this informal review as a “new” process, which aimed to replace the “unstructured, unbounded process that could extend for months or in some cases years” (Shapiro). In her 2017 testimony, Ambassador Kaidanow called this process “Tiered Review” and explained that its purpose is to “provide Congress the opportunity to raise concerns, and have these concerns addressed, in a confidential process with the Administration, so that our bilateral relationship with the country in question is protected during this process” (Kaidanow). She goes on to convey that, “if, during the Tiered Review period, the Committee raises significant concerns about a sale or license, we will typically extend the review period until we can resolve those concerns” (Ibid).

Unfortunately, all indications over the past 8 years are that this new process unveiled in 2012 did not solve the need for swift reviews under a predictable timeline. Further, this informal review process spreads undue power to the HFAC and the SFRC, and members from both political parties have blocked or significantly delayed sales. For example, Senator Bob Corker, R-Tenn, then-Chairman of the SFRC, announced in June 2017 his intention to block all arms sales to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states until a resolution to the rift with Qatar could be achieved: “…before we provide any further clearances during the informal review period on sales of lethal military equipment to the GCC states, we need a better understanding of the path to resolve the current dispute and reunify the GCC” (Corker). Eventually, eight months later, Senator Corker agreed to lift his hold, citing the national security interests affected by the embargo of billions of dollars in US weapon systems. However, *Defense News* was right to highlight the damage to America’s reputation as a reliable security partner that these lengthy holds created and Russia’s ability to capitalize on them (Gould).

Just four months later, Senator Bob Menendez, D-NJ, the ranking minority member of the SFRC, announced his own holds on weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In a June 28, 2018 letter to the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, Senator Menendez explained his intention to indefinitely block sales of tens of thousands of precision-guided munitions kits to these two Persian Gulf states out of concern that US “policies are enabling perpetuation of a conflict that has resulted in [a]…humanitarian crisis,” in Yemen (Menendez). The hold was not resolved until nearly a year later when President Trump invoked a rarely used emergency authority in the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) to declare that the arms sales were needed in order to counter an Iranian threat. The response from Congress was swift and came in the form of binding joint resolutions to formally block the sales. This legislation received enough votes to advance to the White House, but it was unclear how much of that support came as a reaction to the Administration’s effort to sidestep Congress versus how many members were opposed to the sales themselves. Regardless, the resolutions were met with Presidential vetoes and the sales were able to proceed. However, America’s reputation as a credible security partner was apparently damaged significantly by these two lengthy holds. Since Senator Corker’s original block began in June 2017, Saudi Arabia signed an initial agreement to purchase Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles (Saudi Arabia agrees to buy Russian S-400 air defense system: Arabiya TV), the UAE has entered negotiations to co-develop the advanced Su-57 fighter (Trevithick, Russia Says UAE Could Help Build), and Qatar has signaled interest in purchasing Su-35 fighter aircraft (Arkin). No equipment has yet been delivered for any of these three agreements, so these overtures were likely made primarily to signal to the United States that they have other options and to test Washington’s reactions. However, further US withdraw from the region and absence of CAATSA sanction enforcement—discussed later—could change the calculus of many Gulf partners. There can be little doubt that other customers in the region have been influenced in their buying decisions by these blocks as well.

Another area in which Congress steers US weapons sales decisions is through its role in enforcing compliance with US commitments to protect the Israeli military’s “Qualitative Military Edge,” which is explored below. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate Israel’s influence in Congress and how that access has impacted weapons export decisions. However, it is useful to understand that the Congress wields significant power on this issue.

## *Israeli Influence on American Arms Exports to the Middle East*

The concept of “Qualitative Military Edge,” or, simply, “QME,” is well known in the arms sales industry. Essentially, the United States’ policy is to avoid selling weapons in the Middle East that might undermine Israel’s military edge against potential adversaries. Its roots go back to the era of President Lyndon B. Johnson, and all subsequent administrations have continued it (Wunderle and Briere), but not always enthusiastically. After Israel and its allies in Congress nearly blocked an $8.5 billion sale of airborne early warning and control (AWACS) aircraft to Saudi Arabia, President Reagan said in a 1981 press conference, “It is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy” (Weisman). Certainly, the stakes for this sale were very high. With the United States still stinging from the loss of Iran as a strategic partner in the Middle East, it could ill afford for Saudi Arabia to swing out of its sphere of influence. Reagan went on to say, “Saudi Arabia, we will not permit to be an Iran” (Ibid). In addition to damaging America’s strategic interests, ironically, QME activity seems to put Israel at increased security risk. Cordesman argues that QME-driven Congressional challenges to a mid-1980s Saudi request to upgrade its existing F-15 fleet led the Kingdom to turn to Great Britain for its increased fighter aircraft needs. Indeed, Britain was eager to make such a lucrative sale, and Saudi Arabia took delivery of 72 Tornado fighters between 1988 and 1990. Not only did the Kingdom obtain the advanced combat capabilities that it sought, but it got them sooner than if it had purchased from the United States and it was able to base the Tornados at its air base near Tabuk, the only Saudi air base within easy striking range of Israel; America prohibited the employment of US-origin fighters at Tabuk (Cordesman).

As Iran increased its malign activity in the region in the mid-2000s and intensified its efforts to build a nuclear capability, pressure again mounted from America’s Arab partners in the Persian Gulf for advanced military equipment. An emerging consensus began to form that Israel’s interests were aligning with those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Wunderle and Briere). A well-armed GCC, it was thought, would present a strong deterrent to Iran, which was consistent with Israel’s strategic interests. Against a backdrop of high oil prices, arms sales to the Arab states in the Persian Gulf region surged beginning in 2008, as the forces behind QME seemingly relaxed. Between 2008 and 2011, US arms exports to Saudi Arabia reached $44.90 billion and $14.10 billion for the UAE. More Gulf countries began bolstering their arsenals with US-origin weaponry between 2012 and 2015, in ways that QME concerns would not have permitted in the 1980s. Saudi Arabia purchased an additional $17 billion in American arms, the UAE $4.20 billion, Qatar $9.90 billion, and Kuwait $4.40 billion (Theohary).

However, the shared Iran threat did not mean that Israel completely gave up its concerns about arms build ups in the Arab states or lost its ability to influence arms sales deliberations within the US Government. Another major round of sales started in 2015, begun by President Obama’s May Camp David Summit with the leaders of the GCC states. One Gulf expert observed, “Almost all these more sophisticated American arms going to the Gulf are pre-negotiated with Israel. If AIPAC doesn’t like the deal, you can be sure that nobody’s seriously thinking about providing it” (Hudson). Israel’s concerns may have prevented at least one sale to Saudi Arabia from being approved and, consequently, caused President Obama to question whether concern for Israel’s QME should still be US policy (Goldberg). The Trump era has famously witnessed the signing of a $110 billion memorandum of intent covering a wide range of weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, but this is not an indicator that Israel’s influence has eroded. Prime Minister Netanyahu assured Israelis that QME would be maintained by an increase in US military aid to Israel (Ahren). Indeed, US military aid funds to Israel have been governed by 10-year memoranda of understanding (MOU) since 1999. The latest iteration of these documents, covering years 2019-2028, was signed in November 2016 (J. M. Sharp) and it is likely that the weapons covered in the May 2017 Saudi letter had been approved during the Obama Administration’s negotiations with Israel over that MOU. This most recent agreement between the United States and Israel is valued at $38 billion, up from the $30 billion MOU that covered years 2009 through 2018 (Ibid), lending credibility to Netanyahu’s implication that the MOU’s value was increased, at least in part, to account for Israel’s defense requirements related to QME issues. Still today, the United States restricts sales of some high-end weapons capabilities to its Arab partners, presumably because of Israeli influence. For example, despite years of Emirati requests for F-35s and armed UAVs, the United States withholds this technology from its critical GCC partner. Consequently, the UAE has purchased armed Chinese drones and signed a co-development agreement with Russia on a 5th-Generation fighter aircraft (Aitoro). Both of these actions are harmful to US strategic interests in the Persian Gulf region and are indicative of the price that America pays in maintaining its policy of upholding the Israeli military’s QME.

What governs QME and how does it play out in practice? Indeed, all US presidential administrations since Lyndon B. Johnson have taken into account Israel’s security concerns when selling weapons to its Arab neighbors. The challenges that Saudi Arabia faced in obtaining AWACS aircraft during the Reagan Administration, as described above, are illustrative. However, the US Government did not publish any definition on QME until 2008 when the Congress included language regarding the matter in the Naval Vessel Transfer Act. In 2012, with the passage of the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act, the United States again legally committed itself to the protection of Israel’s military QME. In 2014, the Congress included QME language in the United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act (J. M. Sharp). While much of QME determination is classified, there is credible information available publicly that indicates the process includes both findings within the US Government and bilateral discussions with the Israeli Government (Wunderle and Briere, Gross).

# Chapter III – Russian Approach

While there has been a significant amount written about Russia’s arms sales strategies and its procedures, details are scarce and reliability can vary. Concern for US and EU sanctions often push Russia and its customers to conduct their weapons deals more discretely. However, there are some think-tank analyses of Russian weapons exports and official statements that are helpful in reconstructing an overall framework. Additionally, much can be gleaned from public statements from the Kremlin and media interviews with officials and Russian arms industry executives. The material available indicates that the economic driver for arms sales is much stronger for Russia than the United States, but strategic factors still reign supreme. The United States and Russia compete primarily for the same markets—Asia-Pacific and the Middle East—with the former being slightly more lucrative than the latter. Clients turn to Russia to avoid the end-use constraints that come with buying American products. They also seek equipment at lower cost that is easier to maintain. While the United States bundles its equipment with training and logistics, Russia has recognized that its clients seek such support and have committed to developing the capability to provide it.

Like the United States, Russia also sees both geopolitical and economic benefits to weapons sales, though the economic advantages are relatively more significant to Russia than to the United States. Export of natural resources still figures heavily in the Russian economy, and defense equipment production is one of Russia’s few high-technology industries. It provides employment for 2.5 million people, which is 800,000 more than in the United States. While these numbers represent only 3% of the Russian workforce, they comprise one third of Russia’s manufacturing jobs. Historically, weapons exports have also kept production lines open when domestic demand slowed down (Connolly and Sendstad).

Arms exports have been an important element of Russian foreign policy since the Soviet era: “[p]olitical goals were the dominant factor when the decision to export conventional arms was taken” (Kirshin). Connolly and Sendstad cite Moscow’s aims today for its arms exports: “supporting its image as a global power, maintaining an independent foreign policy, expanding

its influence in the regions to which it is able to export arms, and initiating and strengthening

defence relations… in 2012, President Putin stated that arms exports were ‘an effective instrument for advancing [Russia’s] national interests, both political and economic’” (Connolly and Sendstad). In December 2013, Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister, went as far as to say that “Russia’s arms sales are the most important element of Moscow’s relations with other countries” (Borshchevskaya).

Although Moscow declares that its primary focus for arms exports is the CSTO and CIS states (Kremlin), Russia and the United States seem to compete for the same regional markets, primarily Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and India, as illustrated by Figures 1 and 2. SIPRI’s data show that India, China, Algeria, Egypt, Vietnam, and Iraq, in order, comprise Russia’s top six importers. Iraq, a major US ally in the region, should see its place rise in the years ahead as it increases its purchases of Russian weaponry. The first CSTO states are number seven Kazahkstan and number eight Belarus. Their total imports for years 2015 through 2019 are $1.37 billion and $818 million, respectively, which are both far below Russia’s top importer, India, which purchased over $7.53 billion in Russian weapons during these five years. Although the United States does not export weapons to China, its top eleven includes Australia, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, indicating its own strong focus in the Asia-Pacific region. India ranks number fourteen for America during this period, a position likely to improve significantly by recent arms sales announced during President Trump’s February 2020 visit, in which $3.5 billion in deals were signed (Roblin).

The data show that the Middle East has been a secondary arena of arms sales competition for the great powers, though that is changing as China’s defense industry becomes more self-sufficient and India increasingly turns away from Russia to the United States. In response, Russia looks to expand its sales in the Middle East. America’s top two importers in the region during the period 2015-2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, purchased equipment worth $13 billion and $3.37 billion, respectively. Qatar was number six globally and third in the region with $2.45 billion in sales. It is clear that Moscow is closely eyeing the lucrative Persian Gulf weapons market, but has thus far been unable to break in (Magen, Michlin-Shapir and Rakov). Turkey famously purchased S-400 anti-aircraft missiles at great expense to its relationship with the United States, including expulsion from the F-35 consortium. Nevertheless, this NATO ally remains America’s seventh largest arms importer. Competition in north Africa also remains tight. Long-time Russian partner Algeria purchased a total of $4.13 billion during this period. While Algeria has never been a major importer of American weaponry, Egypt seems to be reversing its post-1980s shift to the United States for its arms. During the period under study, it purchased $2.24 billion in Russian arms, a number that is expected to grow even faster as it takes deliveries of its $2 billion order of 26 Su-35 fighter jets. Egypt has seemingly remained undeterred by the threat of American “CAATSA” sanctions, an unnamed Egyptian official has announced. “Egypt is an independent state that does not take orders from any other countries with regard to its foreign and domestic policies” (Hassan). “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act,” or “CAATSA” was passed in the United States for the stated purpose of punishing Russia for its involvement in wars in the Ukraine and Syria and for its alleged interference with the 2016 US presidential election. The legislation imposes sanctions on countries that conduct business with Russia in a wide spectrum of industries, including defense. President Trump opted not to impose additional sanctions on Turkey for its S-400 purchase beyond withholding F-35s (Seligman). The S-400 sale is of great importance to Russia as it seeks to widen the gap between Ankara and NATO and the European Union.

Although some analysts posit that a Russian strategy is to sell to customers that the United States avoids (Connolly and Sendstad), the facts are more nuanced. Indeed, China is Russia’s number two customer, with $4.76 billion in sales between 2015 and 2019, and the United States does not sell to it. Neither did America have any sales to Belarus or Iran, which are both also in Russia’s top ten during the same five years, with $818 million and $428 million, respectively. However, sales to these three countries represent less than 20 percent of Russia’s total arms exports during this period, China comprising nearly 16 percent alone (SIPRI). The other importers likely look to Russia to diversify their arsenals or avoid the end-use restrictions that come with American arms. An executive of Rostec, a Russian government-owned corporation involved in the production and sales of defense equipment, stated in a November 2019 interview, “Many nations say: ‘We don’t want any foreign-made equipment to be placed on this platform.’ I ask them: ‘Why?’ They say: ‘Because we fear that at a certain stage some other countries will stop supplying, and then we’ll have problems’” (Martin and Insinna). Egypt’s choice of Russian MiG-29s and French Rafales in 2015 should have come as no surprise to the United States Government following the lengthy and frustrating US suspension of weapons sales to Egypt following the overthrow of President Morsi (Bayoumy). However, it was discovered that even the Rafales could not be delivered to Egypt without the concurrence of the United States, which produced key components (Tran). In February 2019, Saudi Arabia was similarly unable to take delivery of arms produced by the UK and France because of German embargoes against the Kingdom (Waterfield). Certainly, arms buyers are taking note of these difficulties and are consequently nudged towards Russia. The Rostec executive continued, “So our main advantage is we are a very reliable supplier. We never apply any political tags” (Martin and Insinna).

It is well supported that Russia offers weapons that aren’t always as sophisticated as American arms, but are cheaper and often require less support and maintenance. The Rostec executive, Victor Kladov, states, “if you compare Russian helicopters to Western helicopters, ours come at a cheaper price. They may be not so much sophisticated in terms of electronics, but then electronics fail, especially in harsh conditions. Ours are reliable” (Ibid). A Chatham House analyst agrees: “Russian weaponry is relatively inexpensive and, generally speaking, often more robust than comparable American systems” (Connolly and Sendstad).

While the United States has long touted its “Total Package Approach,” which bundles logistics, parts, and training into its weapons sales packages, Russia has signaled its intent to provide better after-sale support. The Rostec executive continued: “Another challenge is that nations want lifetime support plans. We have so much equipment scattered all over the world — both Soviet-made and Russian-made — and in many places it doesn’t work because we don’t have a technical service center. So we are creating a network of services and follow-up support” (Ibid). President Putin himself stated in a regular Kremlin meeting to discuss weapons exports: “In addition, timely maintenance and good repairs are among the key parameters of the competitiveness of military products. We never stop talking about this. We should stay close to the client and redouble efforts to increase the number of maintenance service centres in the clients’ countries” (Kremlin).

A key difference between Russian and American methodology is that while Russia seeks to expand its joint ventures with foreign weapons buyers, the United States Government tries to minimize these activities. Statements from both President Putin and Rostec’s Kladov indicate a growing willingness to co-produce weapons with Russia’s buyers. Says Putin: “Where this is in the mutual interest, continue the practice of joint development work and the transfer of Russian technology to customers” (Mikhailova). Given the high degree of the Russian economy’s reliance on its arms industry, as discussed above, perhaps Russia seeks to leverage these joint ventures for reciprocal technology gains. Certainly, Russia does not seek to give away its proprietary technology, but customers are increasingly demanding joint ventures in order to secure sales and Russia has agreed to such arrangements on a limited scale.

Figure 1

Figure 2

# Chapter IV – Egyptian Arms Purchases from Russia

Since 2009, Egypt has purchased S-300 surface to air missiles, attack and transport helicopters, MiG-29 fighter aircraft, T-90 tanks, and, most recently, Su-35 fighter aircraft, demonstrating a clear opening to Russia for high-end weapons purchases. Egypt continues to move forward on this last purchase in spite of ever-increasing warnings from the United States that such a deal will trigger sanctions. While Egyptian purchases of Russian equipment are certainly not new, many observers have been surprised at a seeming shift from decades of preference for American-made weaponry. In this chapter, we will review the dynamic history of Egypt’s military relationship with Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, we will explore what appears to be a broad opening of Egypt’s relationship with Russia and possible motivations, then we will examine the Su-35 sale and the possible implications for America’s military relationship with Egypt.

## *History*

Egypt’s ties with Russia are not new. President Nasser’s fervent anti-Israel policies made cooperation with the United States difficult, so Cairo turned to the Soviet Union for arms. A September 1955 deal with Moscow led to the Egyptian procurement of more than $250 million in modern weapons and was a major turning point in the Cold War. Relations continued to blossom through the 1950s and 1960s as the Soviet Union constructed the High Dam, helped modernize Egypt’s military, and provided other assistance in developing Egypt’s infrastructure (Farag). With Anwar Sadat’s ascendency, Egypt began to distance itself from the Soviet Union and to develop its relations with the United States. Sadat’s badly needed economic reforms saw Egypt shift toward the West as it adopted capitalist models in opening the economy to foreign capital investments (Masr). The realignment was punctuated with the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979 and concomitant US agreement to provide $1.3 billion in annual military aid. Sadat subsequently expelled the Soviet ambassador, his staff, and over a thousand Soviet technicians (Farrell).

The following thirty years were characterized by a strong US-Egypt defense relationship. Egypt built a modern, impressive military arsenal of which half was US-origin equipment financed by the annual military aid packages (J. Sharp). In return, the United States gained a key Arab partner in a volatile Middle East. Israel’s security—perhaps America’s top regional priority—has been sustained in large part by the comprehensive peace treaty with Egypt, which has survived four Egyptian presidents and two revolutions, including the Arab Spring and subsequent installment of an Islamist head of state. The biennial “Bright Star” major military exercise has also been a cornerstone of the bilateral military relationship. The United States armed forces receive prioritized access to the Suez Canal and overflight permissions that have been critical to the sustainment of its continuous military operations in the Middle East. Egypt has also been a key partner in America’s efforts to combat terrorism.

Major cracks in the relationship developed during the Arab Spring and the tumultuous period following the military takeover by current-President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. There is a broad perception in Egypt and the wider Middle East that America abandoned President Mubarak when he needed support the most. Since then, both the Obama and Trump Administrations have tried to leverage the withholding of military aid in attempts to encourage Egypt to improve its human rights record. These efforts have achieved very little success, which the Obama Administration acknowledged as it resumed military aid in order to “make sure Egypt is well equipped to deal with genuine threats to its security, and ours,” a senior administration official reported (Ryan). Obama’s embargo came at a profoundly difficult time for Egypt as it fought against a long-running insurgency in the Sinai and responded to threats on its lengthy border with Libya. It was a lesson that Cairo has not forgotten as it has made major weapons purchases in recent years.

## *Turn to Russia*

The arms deals with Russia do not represent a shift from one great power to another, but more of a diversification in Egypt’s strategic relationships. US arms sales to Egypt continue. With a few exceptions, the Trump Administration has successfully gained Congressional approval to provide the full $1.3 billion in annual assistance (Detsch), which must be spent on US-built weapons. In return, prioritized canal access and overflight permissions remain unchanged.

While this relationship with the United States continues, we are witnessing a concurrent, major expansion of Egyptian relations with Russia on a scope and scale that transcends the purchase of high-end weaponry. The overtures have included numerous economic initiatives, such as the creation of a Russian Industrial Zone, that have led to a 37-percent increase in bilateral trade. In a $25 billion deal, Russia agreed to build a nuclear energy plan at Dabaa. On the diplomatic front, the two co-chaired the Russia-Africa Economic Forum in Sochi this past October. They also met at the ministerial level to discuss the crises in Syria and Libya. Relations have even expanded into the cultural sphere as representatives from both countries met to discuss Islamic education at an international conference on Islam in Russia. (Ramani) And in the military field, the arms sales have been accompanied by joint military exercises and even use of Egyptian military bases (Farag).

Both Egypt and Russia are likely to benefit handsomely from these closer relations. Egypt shares a close foreign policy alignment with Russia on Libya, a top strategic priority for Cairo. In fact, reports (Egypt Sends More Arms to Libya's Haftar), (Burke and Wintour) suggest Egypt is supplying arms to Libyan General Khalifa Haftar against the UN-sponsored Government of National Accord. Its forces also held a major, well-publicized military exercise near its Libyan borders in January (Egyptian Army Flexes Muscle near Border with Libya). Egypt knows well from its long experience with the US foreign military sales programs that American weapons cannot be retransferred without US permission, nor can it use its US-supplied equipment in a conflict not sanctioned by the United States. Moreover, the United States could not allow its weapons to be transferred in violation of the UN arms embargo to Libya. Russian weapons come without such political strings attached. Consequently, having such diversity in its arms supply chains is crucial to Egypt’s ability to engage in its Libyan campaign. By buying from Russia, Egypt also gains leverage with Washington, which is no doubt alarmed by its long-time ally cozying up to Moscow. In return, Russia fares very well. It gains another market for its high-end weaponry, but, more importantly, gains another strategic foothold in the Middle East, eastern Mediterranean, and the African continent. Cooperation on Libya has already paid off for Moscow, which has been able to deploy its special forces and drones just 100 kilometers from the Egypt-Libya border (Stewart, Ali and Noueihed, Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role - Sources). Putin hopes that successes like the Russia-Africa summit will enable Russia to double its trade volume with Africa over the next four or five years, plus restore Russian influence, which “faded after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Samir).

## *Su-35s*

Will the latest manifestation of the improved relationship—the $2 billion sale of Su-35s—proceed in spite of objections from the United States? All indications are that it will. The US Government has sent Egypt increasingly serious warnings about the sale. Most recently, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said in a November 2019 letter that “Major new arms deals with Russia would—at a minimum—complicate future U.S. defense transactions with and security assistance to Egypt” (Salama). The sale could trigger sanctions under a US law called the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA. Such sanctions have not been applied evenly, and it is possible Egypt could move forward on its Su-35 purchase and still avoid the sanctions. The United States could hit Egypt’s frail economy hard, but it is unlikely to do so given Egypt’s importance to the United States. Egypt will continue to purchase American arms as long as the US military aid continues. Though the scale of its future military aid packages could be reevaluated as the United States copes with the very costly after-effects of COVID-19, it is unlikely that Egypt will be cut off completely anytime soon.

# Chapter V – Iraq’s Return to Russia

As if the United States could afford to lose another partner in the Middle East, the Iraqi parliament passed a non-binding resolution on January 5th to expel US troops from the country. While the pragmatic effects of this symbolic vote are yet to be seen, it was another negative development in the downward spiral of relations between the United States and Iraq—another indication that America’s intervention in Iraq, so costly in blood, treasure, and international standing, has been a failure. The vote was yet another development in the long-running shifts in Iraq’s relations towards Iran and Russia. Iraq has been expanding its relationship with Russia since it awarded the Russian company Lukoil a concession to develop the West Qurna-2 oilfield in 2009. In 2012, it announced the signing of $4.2 billion in arms deals for the purchase of Mi-28NE attack helicopters and the Pantsir-S1 air defense system, Russia’s third-largest weapons sale since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Astakhova). Since then, economic and military relations have only continued to grow. In this chapter, we will examine the history of the Iraq-Russia relationship, review recent developments, and closely analyze Iraq’s most recent weapons dealings with Russia.

## *History*

Like Egypt and some other Arab Middle Eastern states that have expanded their foreign relations with Russia in recent years, Iraq’s Cold War ties with the Soviet Union were strong. Diplomatic relations officially began in September 1944 but the relationship did not truly flourish until Iraq’s 1958 military coup overthrew its pro-Western monarchy and Iraq subsequently withdrew from the Baghdad Pact. The Kremlin was particularly interested in Iraq because of its oil wealth potential, large population base, and anti-imperialist leanings (Smolansky and Smolansky). Iraq was also home to a significant portion of the Kurdish population, a group in which the Soviet Union took special interest. Moscow also took notice of the Iraqi Communist Party, which was “one of the most effective and socially influential Marxist organizations in the region (Russian-Iraqi Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis). In 1967, Baghdad nationalized its oil industry and signed a wide-reaching agreement with Moscow for the exploration of its petroleum resources throughout the country (Smolansky and Smolansky). Soviet weapons sales to Iraq began after the 1958 coup and expanded in the late 1960s. In 1972, the two countries signed a fifteen-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which covered military, political, and economic coordination (Pajak). Between 1964 and 1978, the Soviet Union had sold over $4.3 billion in weapons to Iraq, which is more than any other Arab client during the same period (Smolansky and Smolansky). Much of the success of these deals can be attributed to Baghdad’s “unusually good repayment record,” made possible by its oil wealth (Pajak).

The Soviet Union was initially a neutral party in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. It had relations with both sides and Brezhnev emphasized that "We are in favor of Iran and Iraq settling their outstanding problems at the negotiating table” (Russian-Iraqi Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis). Moscow suspended arms sales to Iraq until the summer of 1982 when Iran made gains into Iraqi territory and Baghdad agreed to pull back to the international border. The partnership had taken on new importance to the Soviet Union, as Moscow had lost Egypt to the United States and Iran had become both anti-communist and anti-Soviet. Iraq was the destination for about half of Soviet exports to the region. By the eve of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, nearly 8,000 Soviet citizens were in Iraq. (Ibid) Arms sales to Iraq between 1979 and 1990 had totaled over $20 billion (SIPRI) and constituted most of Saddam Hussein’s vast arsenal.

Despite multiple attempts, the Soviet Union was unable to effectively shape the course or outcome of the US-led military efforts to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In fact, the extent of the Soviet Union’s loss of clout in the international community was largely apparent through its inability to influence these events or prevent the extremely painful sanctions on Iraq that followed. As Russia emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Union, its primary interests in Iraq were its vast oil resources and collection on the $8 billion in debt owed from the Iran-Iraq war—repayment of which was badly needed to alleviate Russia’s own economic troubles. In 1995, the two sides signed a $15 billion agreement on the West Qurna and North Rumaili oilfields (Russian-Iraqi Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis) though Russia was not able to benefit much from the deal because it was unwilling to openly violate the UN sanctions. In the late 1990s, Russia attempted, but largely failed, to shield its client from repeated, punishing American airstrikes, purportedly launched in retaliation for Iraq’s violation of the sanctions. There is even evidence to suggest that Russian intelligence helped Iraq misuse the “oil for food” program to evade sanctions (Earley). Relations between the two soured in 2003 as Saddam Hussein suspected Putin of bargaining with the US for post-invasion oil concessions in exchange for Russia’s vote on a potential UN Security Council Resolution that would specifically authorize the invasion (Katz). Famously, when the United States realized it would not be able to get such a resolution passed, it went to war using the original resolutions on Iraq. Probably in account of the deep popular opposition in Russia to the US-led invasion, Moscow continued to withhold its support for military action, even once it became clear that President Bush would go in regardless. Consequently, Russia was left out of reconstruction contracts.

## *Russia Returns*

Since 2009, as it regained capacity to make independent foreign policy, Iraq has drifted closer towards Russia. It started with the oil contracts that year, which Russia was well positioned to secure. Its relaxed transparency requirements and lower security concerns were more compatible with the existing environment in Iraq (Kadhim). Citing the lengthy historical relations between the two countries as background to its sale of T-90 tanks to Iraq, a Putin aide stated in 2018, “Iraq is our traditional partner, and it is boosting its potential by ordering our equipment. Currently we are equipping an entire armored brigade there” (Daly). Though the Iraqi T-72 tanks did not fare well in Desert Storm or the 2003 US-led invasion, there is a perception that Russian tanks performed well in Syria and better suit Iraq’s needs than the larger, US-made M-1 tanks. According to one observer: “Baghdad’s recent decision was undoubtedly influenced by the largely successful actions of Russian armored vehicles in Syria, with Moscow’s Syrian campaign providing demonstrations of Russian weaponry firepower” (Daly). Additionally, operating Russian tanks provides the Iraqi army flexibility to loan armor to its Iran-affiliated Popular Mobilization Units—a flexibility not available to the M1 fleet, as was highlighted after a 2015 video emerged of Kata’ib Hezbollah elements flying their flag on US-origin Iraqi M1 tanks (Rempfer).

## *Russian Air Defenses for Iraq?*

Information on a potential sale of a Russian air defense system to Iraq is conflicting and it is not even clear if the S-300 system or S-400 system is under consideration (Suchkov). No doubt the lack of information availability is at least partially rooted in Iraqi government sensitivity to the effects such a purchase would have on its relationship with the United States. Indeed, at least one attempt at an agreement was scuttled in order to avoid US sanctions (Ibid), and initial reports in 2014 drew continuous denials from senior Iraqi officials (Mamedov). Certainly, Russia is keen on making the sale, not just for the added influence that it will bring, but also in an attempt to stabilize this troubled region and protect its hefty investments in the Iraqi oil and other industries. Indeed, most of Russia’s concern in Iraq is on the commercial side, including $10 billion invested in the energy sector alone (Mironova and Hussein), but improved Iraqi air defenses could indeed provide some stability. In addition to the 2009 Lukoil deal of development of the West Qurna-2 field, Gazprom has invested $2.5 billion in developing energy resources in central and northern Iraq, and Stroytransgaz recently won a 34-year exploration contract in Anbar province. Russian company Rosneft also owns 60 percent of the Kurdistan Oil Pipeline, through which most Iraqi exports traverse. Rosneft recently announced an agreement to build a new gas pipeline that is expected to have a capacity of 30 billion cubic meters, which amounts to approximately 6 percent of Europe’s demand for gas. (Ibid) Purchasing advanced air defense systems would elevate the status of the military relationship, and would reflect a strategic step up from tanks and even attack helicopters.

Iran’s growing influence in Iraq and the joint Iranian-Russian interest to diminish and, ultimately, completely remove the US troop presence in Iraq could also play a role in shaping Iraq’s decision to buy a Russian air defense system. In recent years, both Israel and the United States have struck Iran-affiliated targets on Iraqi soil. These infringements on Iraqi sovereignty are highly embarrassing for all Iraqis, even (or perhaps especially) the remaining pro-US elements. A modern state must have adequate air and missile defenses to protect its airspace, which is especially true in Iraq’s dangerous neighborhood. A look for potential threats around Iraq’s borders indicates most are armed with modern US weaponry. While Israel may be the most obvious of these and has already demonstrated its ability and willingness to strike, Iraq must also be able to counter or at least deter threats from other US-supplied potential adversaries, such as Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and even Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In its quest for weaponry that would best meet that need, it stands to reason that Russian-made systems would be among the first considered.

How likely is the sale to proceed? Iraq has shown itself willing to make independent purchases of military equipment from multiple exporters. Though the recent downturn in the oil market might have an impact on timing, since late 2017 there is also the issue of possible CAATSA sanctions from the United States. Iraqi weapons imports from Russia would certainly meet US criteria for such punishment, though America’s record for following through is mixed. While individual members of Congress have threated to invoke such sanctions against Turkey, the Trump Administration has so far limited Ankara’s punishment to the (albeit very painful) expulsion from the F-35 club. The United States could hit Iraq hard. On just the military front since 2014, the Iraqi armed forces have received over $5.2 billion in military grant aid from the United States, imported $7.2 billion in direct commercial sales of American defense equipment, and opened nearly $20 billion in government to government weapons sales. The last category includes armed helicopters, pilot training for fixed-wing combat aircraft, and equipment for infantry brigades. (US Security Cooperation with Iraq) Not all of that equipment has been delivered and many US personnel in place on long-term contracts could be curtailed, which would severely limit the Iraqis’ ability to operate the equipment that has been delivered. So, the United States has considerable leverage over Iraq, but Baghdad may face insurmountable pressure from its Iranian-aligned elements and Moscow. For Russia, an American departure from yet another Middle Eastern country, would provide another valuable opportunity to fill the void left behind and solidify its regional influence. Perhaps the solution for Iraq lies in buying air defense equipment elsewhere. A Chinese system might provide the capability needed while avoiding CAATSA sanctions and an accompanying souring of relations with the United States, which many Iraqis want to maintain to some degree.

# Chapter VI – Turkey’s S-400 Purchase

In early August of 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his first trip abroad after a major failed coup attempt, which had occurred three weeks prior. The destination was Russia, a surprise given that less than nine months earlier, relations were at a low point following the November 2015 Turkish shoot down of a Russian fighter aircraft over Syria, which led to the deaths of one Russian pilot and a member of the rescue crew. President Putin had called Erdogan immediately after the July coup to offer his support (Walker and Rankin). It is thought that at this August 2016 meeting that Putin offered Erdogan the S-400 air and missile defense system. Turkey’s long search for modern air defenses is well known—a project delayed by multiple failed acquisition efforts. Erdogan’s decision on an advanced Russian system has shaken the NATO alliance and caused the United States to reexamine the basis for its bilateral relationship with Turkey. If Ankara was willing to accept expulsion from the F-35 club and possible CAATSA sanctions by the United States, what did this say about the state of the relationship? In this chapter, we will review Turkey’s search for a modern air defense system, its decision to purchase the S-400 from Russia, and examine the rationale.

## *History*

Turkey sits in a region surrounded by air and missile threats, yet its only indigenous long-range defense is the inventory of I-Hawk SAM batteries that it purchased second-hand from the US Army in the mid-2000s. Already 30 years old, the I-Hawks provided no defense against ballistic missiles. (Egeli) To fill the gap, Turkey has, on multiple occasions since Desert Storm, sought air defense assistance from its NATO allies. America again deployed its Patriot missile system in defense of Turkey during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. In 2013, as the conflict in Syria worsened, Turkey requested and received air defense deployments, including Patriots and SAMP/T from NATO members. In 2007, Iran’s drive to build nuclear weapons was likely the final impetus for Turkey to embark on the acquisition of its own system (Sieff). The Turkish defense procurement arm, SSM, issued a request for proposals for a long-range air and missile defense system and the project was named T-LORAMIDS. A US consortium bid its Patriot PAC-3 system and there were Chinese and Israeli competitors (Ibid). A top criterion in the evaluation of the bids was the extent to which they satisfied a 2003 AK Party defense policy to localize design and development of most categories of defense equipment (Egeli). After several years of negotiations and deliberations, in 2013 Turkey finally chose the Chinese competitor, purportedly because it offered the best pricing and co-production terms. The decision brought significant objection from NATO, which was concerned about the integration of a Chinese system into its existing air defense architecture. Additionally, giving the business and prestige to a Chinese product over NATO competitors certainly risked tainting the solidarity of the Alliance (Ibid). Eventually, Turkish negotiations with China on the terms of the localized production broke down. By November 2015, Ankara finally relented to US pressure and cancelled the project.

## *Turn to Russia*

America’s support for the YPG Kurdish rebels in Syria—a group associated with the PKK organization that the Turkish regime deems an existential threat—drove Ankara to reconsider its strategic threat calculations. It also considers Washington complicit for refusing to hand over Muhammed Fethullah Gülen, a US resident, whom Turkey blames for masterminding the 2016 coup attempt. To a lesser extent, the Pastor Brunson affair also served to heighten acrimony and mistrust between the US and Turkey. Ankara had detained Brunson, an American living in Turkey, for over two years on accusations of support for the PKK and the 2016 coup attempt. In the diplomatic row that followed, the United States imposed sanctions on Turkish individuals and imposed tariffs on Turkish products. Ankara retaliated by imposing tariffs of its own before the situation was resolved with Brunson’s release. However, there were practical reasons that led to the purchase as well. It stands to reason that an S-400 could better counter the threat posed by Turkey’s own US-supplied F-16s, and Ankara’s deployment of the initial delivery to Murted air base, just outside the capital (First Deployment of Turkey's S-400 Spotted, Satellite Images Purported to Show), seems to support the theory that Erdogan urgently wanted these missiles to protect against another coup attempt.

However, there are reasons beyond just the domestic and Syrian threat perceptions that led Turkey down this path. The speed with which the deal was closed indicates it was a top-down decision from Erdogan himself, in contrast to the very lengthy procurement and negotiation process involved in previous efforts to acquire an air defense system (Egeli). Moreover, Ankara was willing to sign the deal even though technology transfer was deferred until at least the second delivery. Technology transfer had been a top priority in other air defense acquisition efforts, in furtherance of Turkey’s new target of 75% defense procurement localization by 2023 (Sariibrahimoglu). Turkey straddles East and West—both geographically and politically. Erdogan has systematically dismantled Ataturk’s secular democratic model (Bay) and even signaled interest in full membership to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Gaspers). Ankara certainly recognizes the role that Russia could play in containing Kurdish rebels in northern Syria and seeks opportunities to continue restoring relations. Erdogan, no doubt feeling the deep humiliation of repeated rejection for European Union membership, might have perceived some benefit to showing his Western allies that he has other strategic options. He has demonstrated that he will pursue policies that put Turkey first above all others, even if it means undermining the integrity of the NATO Alliance. To overcome a trend of Turkish economic decline accompanied by decreasing political popularity at home, Erdogan has tapped into latent Turkish nationalistic currents (Pierini). He will push the boundaries of what is acceptable and take as much as he can get away with from NATO and the EU. We saw this with his holding NATO’s Poland and Baltics defense plan hostage (Emmott) and Turkey’s aggressive drilling operations off Cyprus under military protection. Perhaps he was not expecting the United States to so be so resolute in its withholding of Turkey's F-35s and broader participation in the program as leverage to encourage Erdogan to give up the S-400 deal. One analyst rightly attributed Erdogan's unwillingness to reverse course to his "own sense of pride" (Stewart, US Officials Wonder: Did Turkish Leader's Coup Memories Drive Russia Arms Deal?). Certainly, the precariousness of his own position, as shown by the 2016 coup attempt, and indications of a decline in popularity of the AK Party, is sensitive to any sign of weakness. Another analyst describes Erdogan's posture with the West as a "permanent use of acrimony" (Pierini).

## *The Way Ahead*

The totality of these factors explains Erdogan’s decision to purchase the S-400 and stubbornly resist US and NATO pressure to back down from the deal. Unfortunately, there is no resolution in sight. A face-saving opportunity for Erdogan to cancel the program presented itself in February when Syrian regime forces killed dozens of Turkish soldiers in the fighting around Idlib. The US position, as of December, was that Turkey would have to warehouse the S-400 in order to be brought back in to the F-35 program. However, a March 5th meeting between Erdogan and Putin in Moscow ended the crisis between the two and Erdogan’s remarks following the meeting cast doubt on the likelihood of that scenario: “We have it all now [the S-400 and components]. It will be active from April onwards.” (Firat) Most recently, Erdogan used the COVID-19 pandemic as a convenient way to buy additional time and he announced a delay in activating the S-400s. Certainly, the long-term economic effects of the pandemic are a concern for Erdogan, and he realizes that the S-400s might provide a valuable bargaining chip to use for economic aid from the United States. (Cupolo)

# Chapter VII – Effects of COVID-19

While much is still unknown about COVID-19, it has become clear that combating the virus will be a long struggle and it will have profound, historical effects on national security. Economies have suffered, military readiness has been affected, and incidents of social unrest have erupted. Populations have begun questioning government spending priorities that seem to have fully funded military hardware purchases, yet left their governments unprepared to protect them against a dangerous pandemic. World energy prices have fallen dramatically as a result of a steep drop in demand as airline travel and daily commuting have slowed down considerably in order to prevent spread of the virus. These impacts could have an effect on Russian and American weapons sales in the Middle East, but it is still far too early to understand how. Strategic outcomes will depend not only on how economies and militaries are affected, but how governments choose to respond to emerging threats and opportunities. In this chapter, we will examine some likely initial shifts and then explore what threats and opportunities might consequently be presented to the United States.

## *Next Developments*

*Defense budgets:* Many analysts are already predicting lower defense budgets in the months and years ahead as funds are diverted to COVID-19 relief measures and because of lost tax revenues resulting from depressed economies. Moreover, populations are likely to demand a shift in budgets from military expenditures to healthcare, pandemic preparedness, and social welfare. It is not lost on many that as of early May, more Americans had died from COVID-19 than were killed across multiple decades of the Vietnam War, so there could be major shifts in perceptions of national threats and ideas on where “defense” resources should be applied. Client militaries will probably have less funding for weaponry than they did during pre-COVID-19 years.

*Military aid packages*: The Trump Administration’s 2021 budget proposal already includes a cut of over 10 percent in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), from $6.16 billion in 2020 (Pompeo), though it is unclear which countries will face the biggest losses. FMF is America’s largest foreign military aid program, and it has historically provided approximately $1.3 billion to Egypt annually. Jordan and Israel also rely substantially on US aid to sustain their militaries. Though foreign aid programs represent a small fraction of the US federal budget, they are often some of the first to sustain cuts during periods of austerity. FMF has felt the impact of previous cutbacks in government spending, but this and other military aid programs are not likely to disappear completely in the aftermath of COVID-19.

*Slowed research and development:* Arms supplier countries sell export variants of their own weapons platforms. Lower defense budgets in these countries, such as the United States and Russia, will likely mean delays and cancellations for some planned programs in their own armed forces. Consequently, we could see a slow-down in new deals and suspension of ongoing discussions on new sales.

*Reduced readiness:* US military readiness has already taken a major hit from COVID-19-related health concerns, as seen in the sidelining of US Navy ships, suspension of US training activity in Iraq, and the cancellation of multiple exercises. Lower defense budgets will only exacerbate this problem in the long term, as less funding will be available for training, gear, and maintenance. Reduced readiness would mean difficult decisions for Pentagon leaders on which regular deployments to continue filling at normal strength, and where to absorb risk. Any reduction in Middle East deployments would likely draw concern from US partners in the region.

*Oil prices:* Disagreement between OPEC and Russia on oil production levels could not have come at a worse time for the industry. Stay-at-home orders and a near-halt to aviation have led to a steep drop in demand, which has compounded with a squabble among oil suppliers to create a global oil glut and even prices that dipped below zero. Demand may never fully recover. As the use of remote meeting technology has become much more common, teleworking and online education could see permanent increases, which could lead to a decline in business travel expenditures and less overall driving. Additionally, the visible benefits of cleaner air could bolster environmentalists’ quests for acceleration in shifting away from fossil fuels. Many Middle Eastern countries rely heavily on the petroleum industry to fund their governments and years of high oil prices are often associated with high spending on modern weapons. A sustained drop in oil prices could mean a slow-down in the Middle East arms market or a search for cheaper options. Iraqi could even face an existential crisis. Baghdad relies on oil revenues for approximately 90 percent of its government spending, which pays the salaries for more than 4 million government workers. It also supports pensioners and funds social safety-net programs. (Gladstone) While austerity in the near term could mean a closer review of weapons deals under discussion with Russia, a return to social upheaval would lead to considerable unpredictability.

*Increased availability of used equipment?* One American military aid program that might see expansion in the years ahead is called Excess Defense Articles (EDA). When equipment is no longer needed by US forces, it is sometimes offered up for sale to foreign partners. Though not free of charge, the equipment usually comes at costs that are a fraction the price of new weaponry. Since before the COVID-19 crisis, the Pentagon has been trying to divest itself of some legacy systems in order to free up funding for research and development on new technologies (Seck). Such moves require Congressional approval, which is often blocked by members trying to protect their districts. However, COVID-19 might provide the shake-up needed to win approval. Should the United States military see reductions in its end strength that lead to force consolidations, there could be even more used weaponry available via EDA. Such a scenario would give poorer countries, including those in the Middle East, the option to forego expensive new weaponry and buy cheaper used equipment that provides nearly the same capabilities. As Russia and China are embarked on long-term, large-scale military expansions, they would be less likely than the United States to shed high-end equipment.

## *Threats to US Weapons Sales*

The United States must watch the trends above and develop strategies for dealing with the possible threats that would emerge as these scenarios play out.

* Lower defense budgets among the client states could mean a preference for Russian systems, which are generally less expensive. This is especially true of the Middle East economies that rely heavily on petroleum exports. Even Egypt’s defense purchases could be affected by sustained low prices. Its oil export revenues are modest, but it benefits significantly from Suez Canal passage fees paid by oil tankers.
* Russia might seek to expand weapons sales in the region to make up for lost oil revenues.
* Sales could slow down because of US budget-related cancellation and delays in development of new weapons programs.
* Reduced US military aid packages could mean a shift to Russian equipment.
* Reduced US military readiness could mean fewer deployments to the Middle East, which might further concern Middle Eastern governments that the United States is shifting its strategic focus elsewhere. Even the Gulf Arab monarchies may look eastward for military partnerships, including weapons sales agreements.

## *Opportunities for the United States*

With global tremors in economics, politics and society on the magnitude of those created by the COVID-19 pandemic, new threats are often accompanied by new opportunities. The United States should continue monitoring the environment for emerging possibilities to make strategic gains. Some of these would require such a drastic reversal in policy that it might not be possible for the existing presidential administration to make the political course changes needed to take advantage of them. However, should a new US president be elected this November, the opportunities listed below might be within reach.

* If Russian defense budgets are constrained by lost oil revenues, there could be opportunities for the United States to increase its leverage in both Syria and Libya. Consequently, there could be opportunities for the US to reassert its will in the region and send a signal that the United States will continue to be a key player.
* Should US defense budget cuts lead to earlier-than-expected divestments of some of its legacy weapons systems, there could be a market for this equipment in the Middle East. Transfers under the EDA program or military leasing would likely be available at a fraction of the cost of even Russian weaponry. Such a scenario would not create much economic gain for the United States, but there would be significant strategic benefits to spreading US weaponry in the region, especially if it displaces demand for Russian equipment.
* COVID-19 is likely to hit the Turkish economy hard. Its foreign currency reserves were already low heading into the pandemic. The Turkish Lira has fallen 14 percent against the US dollar so far this year and there are other indications that Erdogan is managing the situation poorly (Erdemir and Lechner). A full-blown economic crisis in Turkey would not only put pressure on its ability to purchase a second S-400 system, but could also mean Turkey would be more responsive to American or European aid overtures. For the right “price,” perhaps Turkey could be convinced to purchase a western air defense system and warehouse the first S-400 system. Certainly, in order for this chain of events to play out, the United States and Europe would have to be ready to offer a recovery package large enough to relieve some of Turkey’s economic burden and cover the cost of the air defense system itself. As the United States and Europe offer competing systems, seamless coordination on this issue would take serious work. Moreover, the western countries will likely not be in a financial or political position to offer increased aid anytime soon. However, it is an opportunity that they cannot ignore.

# Chapter VII – Conclusions and Recommendations

This research is intended to explore trends in the current high-end weapons import market in the Middle East in order to help the United States understand Russian sales strategy, client interests, and how best to leverage American strengths to use weapons sales as a tool for enhancing US national security. The following findings and recommendations are hereby presented.

## *Finding #1*

In response to the first research question, “Is soft power theory useful in understanding Russian weapons sales strategies in the Middle East?” the answer is yes. Russian soft power gains in the Middle East have led to increased sales of Russian-made weaponry in the region. However, Russia has largely wielded weapons sales as a tool of hard power and sharp power and not soft power.

Moscow has shown, as described previously, that it understands soft power. Its attempts to apply genuine soft power in advancing its grand strategy have achieved modest results. So, does it view weapons sales in the Middle East as an instrument of hard power, soft power, or sharp power? The case studies on Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey, indicate that Russia has used them to apply hard power and sharp power. Russia certainly has strong economic motivations to sell weapons, and, for that reason, they are an instrument of hard power. Selling air defense systems to Iraq would also be a hard power application, as part of the intent would be to challenge America’s ability to exercise air superiority over that country. However, as discussed in the Iraq case study, there are other reasons for that sale, including the sharp power motivation of displacing US influence in Baghdad. There are similar sharp power interests involved in the S-400 sale to Turkey, as Russia seeks to leverage the deal to drive a wedge within NATO and the F-35 consortium. Indeed, soft power and weapons sales are also intertwined. As we saw in the Iraq case study, Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict has provided opportunities to showcase its weaponry, which led, in part, to an Iraqi purchase of T-90 tanks. There is also a growing consensus in the Middle East that Russian presence and influence will continue to expand as the United States draws down its footprint in the region. As revealed above, Russia’s reputation as a reliable ally is improving, while America is perceived to have turned its back on long-time regional partners and even suspended weapons transfers for political reasons. Such developments have led to Middle Eastern leaders choosing suppliers that acknowledge a growing and long-term Russian footprint in the region.

While these sales have succeeded because of Russian soft power gains, **Russia does not appear to deliberately use weapons sales as a soft power tool**. In President Putin’s 2012 address to members of the foreign ministry, detailed in a previous chapter, he accurately cites cultural and intellectual influences as key elements of soft power, but he does not mention weapons sales. In Moscow’s official foreign policy concept of 2013, the Kremlin reinforces the importance of soft power, but does not cite weapons sales as an element. There are published accounts of Putin making at least two more formal addresses at the foreign ministry, but in neither of these does he discuss arms sales. The Kremlin releases minutes of President Putin’s meetings with the Federal Service of Military-Technical Cooperation, and none of them have revealed discussions linking such cooperation to soft power.

## *Finding #2*

The second research question is, “What factors are responsible for Russia’s seeming success against the United States in recent weapons sales competitions in the Middle East?” Indeed, as described above, modest Russian soft power gains in the region have played a role, mostly in the form of Russia being perceived as a more reliable ally in the region. While each case under consideration demonstrated its own very unique reasons for buying from Russia, a perception that American end-use rules are too restrictive has also contributed in many cases. US policy on maintaining Israel’s “qualitative military edge,” or “QME,” may also play a role.

We have established that in the case of Egypt, America’s lengthy holds on military sales in the wake of Sisi’s ascension to power and the accompanying use of force in putting down demonstrations has had an impact on Cairo’s decision to look to Russia for some of its weapons needs. Moreover, as Egypt has increasingly postured itself to best shape the situation next door in Libya, it knows that US-origin weapons cannot be used to intervene or to arm proxies in violation of the UN arms embargo. Russian weapons come without such strings attached and so appear increasingly attractive to Egypt as it ponders how best to manage the Libyan instability that seems to have no end in sight. However, as discussed, Egypt and Russia are opening up strategic relations across multiple sectors and it stands to reason that increased military cooperation, including arms sales, would be a key pillar.

In Iraq, though there were many reasons to purchase Russian T-90 tanks, experts have hypothesized that a contributing factor was US restrictions on end-use, which was highlighted after the Iraqi Security Forces allowed up to nine of its M-1 Abrams tanks to be operated by Shia militias. It is thought that these groups used the tanks in battles against both ISIS and Iraqi Kurdish groups (Trevithick, Iraqi Armored Brigade Ditches U.S. M1 Abrams For Russian T-90 Tanks), prompting US restrictions on maintenance and support of the M-1s until the Iraqi government made a full accounting of the tanks. Iraq is now required to monitor the tanks more closely and report on their end use (Fine, Linick and Barr). End-use considerations were probably also taken into account in Iraq’s ultimate purchase of Russian Mi-28 attack helicopters over the competing US Apache (Iddon). Although not in the case studies, other Middle Eastern countries have been encumbered by Washington’s strict retransfer rules. For example, the UAE is accused of providing its US-origin armored vehicles to its proxies in Yemen, in violation of the terms of retransfer agreements with the United States (Elbagir, Abdelaziz and Abo El Gheit). As described earlier, it is thought that QME restrictions led to the UAE signing a co-development agreement with Russia on a 5th-Generation fighter (Aitoro).

In Turkey, US end-use restrictions do not appear to have been a factor in the decision to purchase S-400s, though the United States has restricted some sales even to this NATO ally. In response to Turkey’s 1974 invasion of Cyprus, the United States imposed a painful arms embargo that the Turks remember well today (Durmaz). It has also restricted sales of armed unmanned aircraft to Turkey and some precision weaponry (Turkey no longer Buying US Drones, will Rely on local Technology Instead). However, Egeli convincingly argues that Ankara falsely blamed the S-400 purchase on US unwillingness to sell Patriots to Turkey (Egeli). Indeed, talks to sell the Patriot began in 2009 and seemed to be slowed down by disagreements on technology transfer issues, yet the first shipment of S-400s comes without technology transfer (Akca and Sanders). As described above, the Turkish decision to buy Russian was made out of a strategic calculation that it needs to diversify its relations to the east as the world becomes increasingly multipolar. There was also the very real threat perception of the United States and US-made weaponry that was used in a coup attempt.

## *Finding #3*

These factors are important to consider in answering the third research question, “How can the United States better compete against Russia in Middle East weapons sales?” The point here is not trivial. As outlined above, weapons sales can be an effective tool in increasing national security for the selling country, so conversely, a continued trend of lost sales to Russia will likely mean decreased national security for the United States. However, there are some sales that the United States should not want. Making the wrong sales has a very real chance of depleting America’s soft power. Most end-use restrictions are in place for good reasons, and are becoming international norms. By relaxing human rights requirements, the United States stands to relinquish its moral leadership and, therefore, squander its reputation and soft power holdings. Without strict retransfer agreements in place, weapons could end up in the wrong hands, where they could be used against American or friendly forces or in a terrorist attack. The soft power losses of US-origin MANPADS used to shoot down a civilian airliner, for example, would be devastating. An alternative to relaxing the restrictions could be to make Russia “pay” when it does not act responsibly with its weapons sales. Indeed, greater effort could be taken by the United States and its partners to publicize Russia’s irresponsible sales and embarrass Moscow for them. Not only could such efforts prevent Russia from getting rewarded for supporting bad actors, but it could also keep advanced weapons out of the wrong hands. The United States could better leverage the information domain in other ways to compete better in weapons sales. It should closely examine areas that it has a relative advantage over Russia, such as after-sales support, and publicize truthful accounts of both Russian failures and American successes in relevant situations as they occur.

One possible area where US restrictions can be eased has to do with America’s QME policy. As outlined earlier, QME seems to be preventing the sale of F-35s to America’s closest partners in the Persian Gulf region. Consequently, some of these countries are in advanced talks with Moscow for acquisition of a Russian 5th-Generation fighter aircraft. It is a threat that cannot be ignored, even if the Arab states use it as leverage to get a favorable decision out of Washington. While Israel has legitimate security concerns about providing such advanced technology to a declared enemy, Iran poses a greater threat to both Israel and the Gulf states. Any flagrant and severe misuse of F-35s could be handled swiftly by a curtailment of US support that would lead to a near-term grounding of the fleet. However, a rogue Gulf state operating a Russian 5th-Generation fighter would be much more difficult to control. Moreover, the long-term implications of the wealthy Persian Gulf states drifting out of the US orbit would be difficult to bear in terms of reduced national security for both the United States and Israel. Therefore, these two allies should communicate better on QME and the United States should make the right decision on this and other QME-encumbered weapons sales in the region, even if it means some sacrifice to the relationship with Israel.

Finally, a Congressional review policy in the United States must be developed that does not so widely place veto power in the hands of several members of Congress and their staffs, who might use it as political leverage. As described above, the current review process in place has failed to prevent unreasonable delays. It has also allowed lengthy holds on sales to the Persian Gulf states that led to visible interest in Russian alternatives. Better communication between the Administration and Congress is needed so that a balance on competing national security priorities can be agreed upon, which will regain US partners’ confidence.

## *Finding #4*

COVID-19 could have a profound impact on global strategic threats and opportunities for the United States. America should seek to anticipate and leverage those opportunities while managing or avoiding threats. As petroleum prices drop and long-term partners seek cheaper alternatives to develop the capabilities they desire, Russian equipment might seem to be attractive options. The US should remain sensitive to signs that its partners are considering such choices and respond as necessary.

Washington should be ready to leverage its relative wealth to outspend Moscow in the Middle East, especially as Russia is hit by expected low petroleum revenues. Economic aid is difficult to justify in any American political environment, and will be especially hard in any downturn caused by COVID-19. However, a relatively small investment to help its traditional partners in the Middle East during the expected downturn could net significant gains. The United States should also closely observe spending and demand trends in its potential market and be ready to provide any used military hardware that might be divested earlier than originally anticipated.

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