

Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor

Saudi Arabia wields enormous influence in the West not only because of its oil power but also its ability to lavish billions of dollars or euros on sophisticated weapons systems, a bonanza of cash that has turned the head of French President Hollande, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Why did French President François Hollande fly into Riyadh this week to show support for Saudi Arabia's bloody attacks on South Yemen and to reassure King Salman that Paris will demand tough terms in any nuclear deal with Iran? It's the same reason Willy Sutton robbed banks: that's where the money is.

Last year Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates spent more than \$100 billion on weapons. That's real money, even to a country as big as France.

President Hollande visited Saudi Arabia just one day after attending the signing ceremony for a \$7 billion contract by France's Dassault Aviation to sell 24 Rafale fighter jets and air-to-air missiles to Qatar. That deal in turn followed a \$6 billion agreement in February with Egypt's military regime, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, for the sale of a frigate warship, missiles and another 24 Rafale fighters.

Announcing the contract with Egypt, Hollande hailed it as the long-awaited first export contract for the French-designed aircraft. Among major French political parties, most of which gushed over the deal, only the Green party condemned "the delivery of weapons of war to a military dictatorship whose violations against human rights are now legion."

Amnesty International also raised questions about the deal in light of the Egyptian regime's appalling human rights record, which includes the slaughter of 1,400 people and arrest of 22,000 following the overthrow of the elected government of President Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

Saudi Arabia is well aware that its arms purchases buy influence in Western capitals. Speaking to a reporter at the Gulf summit this week, Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said of France, "We have common views with regard to the challenges in the region today with Syria, Yemen, Iraq, terrorism — and of course Iran's nuclear program, and there are very large commercial and military ties between our two countries."

France's foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, in turn gushed about Saudi Arabia's warm reception to French commercial overtures in military, oil, transportation,

and nuclear energy markets. "We sense the new [Saudi] team's desire to move quickly," Fabius said at the start of the Gulf summit. "We're working on 20 projects, which may represent several billion euros."

Ignoring pleas from Human Rights Watch, Fabius said nothing, at least in public, about Saudi Arabia's use of cluster bombs in civilian areas of Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the United States are among the few nations that refused to sign a 2008 treaty against the use of cluster munitions.

Not surprisingly, news of French arms deals did not amuse leaders of Iran, Saudi Arabia's current *bête noire*. President Hassan Rouhani said in a speech, "Some American or European nation should not be proud of selling more weapons to this or that country. They create insecurity in the region and unjustly make regional countries scared of each other, preparing the ground for a weapons market. . . . Is this the way to create employment in Western countries? For someone to be employed in an arms factory while people are killed in Baghdad, Damascus or Sanaa?"

France, like the United States, Russia, Israel and other weapons producers, has a long history of pushing arms sales to "this or that country." The maker of the Rafale fighter jet, Dassault was notorious as the supplier to Argentina's military junta of the Exocet missile that sank the HMS Sheffield destroyer during the Falklands war in 1982. It also sold Exocet-equipped Mirage F-1 fighters to Saddam Hussein's military in the 1980s, equipping his regime to attack Iranian oil tankers.

In recent years France has been the world's fifth largest arms exporter, just behind China and Germany. (The United States and Russia rank number one and two.) In 2014, its foreign arms sales exceeded \$9 billion, augmented by \$3 billion in sales to Lebanon, funded by Saudi Arabia.

France's arms sales so far this year are already nearly double the 2014 total. They support 30,000 new jobs, according to France's Defense Ministry. Such employment is "vitally important" in a country that is "hit by unemployment and threatened with de-industrialization," said Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. Sales to the Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, France's largest arms buyers, have become all the more important since France held up the delivery of a Mistral-class warship to Russia during the Ukraine crisis.

The vast sums of money at stake in such arms deals inevitably breed corruption. The founder of Dassault Aviation, Marcel Dassault, was accused by his chief accountant in 1976 of bribing finance ministry officials to help him evade at least \$300 million in taxes.

His billionaire son and successor, Serge Dassault, is an outspokenly conservative senator and also owner of the country's main conservative newspaper, Le Figaro. He was convicted in 1998 along with a former secretary general of NATO and other Belgian political leaders for paying a bribe to win defense contracts. He was also indicted in April 2014 for making electoral payoffs.

Hollande's predecessor as president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, has also been dogged by allegations of corruption related to the arms trade. When the European Union ended sanctions against Libya in 2004, France lost no time selling military jets, bombs, rockets and missiles to the Gaddafi regime. One of Muammar Gaddafi's sons, supported by other sources, said that his father gave former French President Nicolas Sarkozy more than 50 million Euros to finance his first presidential campaign in 2006-7.

In return, Sarkozy hosted Gaddafi in December 2007 during an ostentatious state visit to Paris, complete with 400 servants, 30 female virgin bodyguards, and a heated tent across from the Elysée Palace. Sarkozy's government also permitted the sale of additional arms and surveillance equipment to the Libyan intelligence services.

In 2011, Sarkozy mysteriously turned on Gaddafi and led the NATO campaign to overthrow him. Some sources even credit a French secret service agent with assassinating Gaddafi on Sarkozy's orders during the fighting that ensued. As reported by Asia Times Online, Sarkozy's about-face began when Gaddafi's chief of protocol defected to Paris and reported that the dictator planned to move his financial reserves from French to Chinese banks.

In addition, Paris learned that Gaddafi planned to cut back on purchases of French fighter planes and to award major oil deals to Italian interests at France's expense. Conveniently, Sarkozy's turn against Gaddafi made the Libyan leader's bitter antagonists in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council extremely pleased, setting the stage for the surge in recent French arms deals.

In all of such dealings, France merely reflects, rather than creates, international norms. The United States, not France, leads the world in selling machines of death to the Middle East, with \$8.4 billion in arms sales to the region in 2014 alone.

As the New York Times noted recently, the F-15 and F-16 jets used by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to bomb Yemen are built by Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

"Last year," it added, "Qatar signed an \$11 billion deal with the Pentagon to

purchase Apache attack helicopters and Patriot and Javelin air-defense systems. Now the tiny nation is hoping to make a large purchase of Boeing F-15 fighters to replace its aging fleet of French Mirage jets. Qatari officials are expected to present the Obama administration with a wish list of advanced weapons before they come to Washington" in May for a summit of Gulf state leaders at Camp David.

American arms makers stand to make untold billions of dollars thanks to the clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The biggest prize of all will be sales of the new and hugely expensive F-35 fighter jet.

"This could be the precipitating event: the emerging Sunni-Shia civil war coupled with the sale of advanced Russian air defense systems to Iran," said one defense analyst. "If anything is going to result in F-35 clearance to the Gulf states, this is the combination of events."

U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia alone during the Obama years so far total \$46 billion, according to Bill Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy: "The volume of major deals concluded by the Obama administration in its first five years exceeds the amount approved by the Bush administration in its full eight years in office by nearly \$30 billion. That also means that the Obama administration has approved more arms sales than any U.S. administration since World War II."

Over and above any foreign policy considerations, Hartung added, American presidents simply look to favor politically influential defense contractors and boost the U.S. economy.

"Sometimes it is made quite explicit," he said. "When they sell to the Saudis, for example, the Pentagon points out it will create x number of jobs in the United States. So they're not shy about talking about the jobs aspect."

These considerations go a long way toward explaining the Obama administration's irresolute and self-defeating policies toward the Middle East over the past several years. Obama knows that supporting Syrian rebels will only lead to a victory by Islamist forces and further regional bloodshed, but dares not challenge Saudi Arabia in public.

Obama knows about but will not publicly condemn financial support from wealthy Saudis and other Gulf state princes for ISIS and other terrorist groups. He privately regrets the civilian carnage in Yemen but publicly allies himself with Saudi Arabia's illegal campaign of aggression. To his credit, he has risked Saudi Arabia's wrath by negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran.

In the Middle East, arms sales have replaced oil as the grand prize. But until

the United States and its European allies wean themselves from dependence on both, we will all remain hostage to the perverse policies of a few kingdoms that care nothing for democracy, human rights, or American strategic interests.

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