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Superpower Arms Trade: Destabilizing the Middle East

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Introduction

Since September 11, 2001 the world’s attention has been focused on the Middle East. However, the U.S.’s association with the region has gone back farther. During the Cold War, the United States instituted a policy of containment to prevent the spread of communism. The United States’ interactions with the Middle East were an extension of that policy. The United States participated in arms trading with numerous Middle Eastern countries under the belief that it would prevent the spread of communism and stabilize the region. Was the United States able to fulfill its goal of stabilization of the region through arms trade? A look at the current affairs in the Middle East shows that it remains an unstable and dangerous region. Did the United States’ arms trading have an opposite effect and further destabilize the region or did the United States actually partially help to stabilize a volatile region? Though arms trading may have caused some immediate stability, in the long term it caused further destabilization in the Middle East.

The Cold War and the Middle East

The Cold War began in 1947 as a continuation of political tensions between the eastern world of the Soviet Union and the western world of the United States. Both countries engaged in rhetoric that the opposing political ideology (either communism or democracy) threatened the public’s way of life (Grossman, 2002). The Cold War was only cold in name. Despite the fact that there were no direct conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union, both countries engaged each other indirectly through regional conflicts. One of the regions that the Cold War affected was the Middle East (Laird, 1994).

In the time leading up to and preceding World War II, the political tensions that caused the Cold War began to escalate. The Eastern Bloc was set up after World War II by the Soviet
Union. The Soviet Union annexed several countries along its border and declared them Soviet Socialist Republics. The Soviet Union also created satellite states out of the Eastern European territories occupied by Soviet armed forces (Laird, 1994). The Eastern Bloc used Soviet command economies as well as methods used by Stalin and the Soviet Secret Police to suppress opposition.

The existence of the Eastern Bloc and the rejection of any assistance from the Marshall Plan in any of the Soviet controlled countries increased the divide between the United States and the Soviet Union (Grossman, 2002). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed in 1949 to combat the growing power of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. NATO’s founding members consisted of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Canada, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland (Grossman, 2002). The Korean War furthered established NATO by making it seem that all Communist countries were working together, which forced NATO’s members to start to develop concrete military plans (Grossman, 2002).

The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, also known as the Warsaw Pact, was established in 1955 after Stalin’s death. The Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact in response to NATO’s admission of Western Germany to their member states (Macgregor, 1986). The Warsaw Pact’s members consisted of the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Eastern Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. The Warsaw Pact was an international collective security organization, but its armed forces consisted of mostly Soviet forces (Macgregor, 1986). The Soviet Union’s intention was to ensure that there was not another invasion of Russian soil.
The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) was put in place to reduce the number of weapons in the world to the levels of the 1980s (Marullo, 1992). This was important because the Cold War caused a massive arms buildup in the Soviet Union and the United States. Though not intended as a measure to curb arms trade, START was designed to affect arms control, which could indirectly affect arms trade. START was first proposed to then President Ronald Reagan in 1982 (Marullo, 1992). Negotiations for START were delayed significantly as a result of disagreements between Reagan and the Soviet rulers, so during the 1980’s there was a significant build up of weapons despite the initial negotiations for START (Owens, 1996). In 1991, START was signed only five months before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The implementation of START was delayed as a result of the collapse. Former Soviet Republics, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan handed over their nuclear weapons to Russia to be disposed of (Owens, 1996). Both the United States and Russia reduced their capacities to 1,600 delivery vehicles and 6,000 warheads each (Owens, 1996). START was renewed in 2008.

Prior to the intervention during the Cold War of the United States and the Soviet Union, the Middle East already was involved in numerous regional conflicts. Several of these conflicts date back decades and some even hundreds of years. These conflicts were both religious as well as nationalistic in nature. Without the intervention of the Cold War, no one knows for how long these conflicts could have lasted. Despite the intervention, some of these conflicts are still ongoing.

United States Arms Trading

The U.S. arms trading with the Middle East and other countries continues to this today. Recently, past trades with Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have all been in the news, but when
did United States arms trading first begin? Arms trade has been a piece of the American identity since the Revolutionary War when the United States imported arms from France to combat the British army. In World War II, the United States was the largest donor of military equipment to its allies (Johnson, 1994). Though the United States made arms assistance available to other countries, after World War II the level of United States arms trade once again declined until the mid-80s. In 1985, the United States only accounted for nine percent of the world’s total arms trade. In comparison, in 1980 the Soviet Union accounted for thirty four percent of the world’s total arms trade (Laird, 1994).

International Arms Trading Pictogram (Shah, 2010)
The United States began its involvement in the Middle East prior to World War II but kept it limited. After World War II, the United States began to view the Middle East as a very important strategic region. The United States furthered its entanglement in the Middle East with its backing of the new state of Israel. Israel was a state created after World War II by European Jews who immigrated to Palestine. Jerusalem was then under the control of Britain under the British Mandate of Palestine. Once the British relinquished this territory, territorial disputes began between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The continual territorial battle between Israel and Palestine remains an area of much political activity in the Middle East.
From 1979 to 1982 the United States was only the prime supplier in armored personal carriers and armored cars (Laird, 1994). During the Cold War and after, the United States began to supply a greater amount of arms. By 1995, the US arms sales went from 9 percent of the world’s total arms exportation to 34 percent. Of the $42.8 billion in arms trade that the United States participated in during 1995, the majority went to the Middle East (State Department, 1996). Recently, the overall level of arms trading of the United States has been decreasing since 2008 as seen below. Arms trading has most likely begun to decrease because of the most recent economic downturn, however further studies are needed.

(Shah, 2010)

**Soviet Union Arms Trading**

Though the Soviet Union participated in extensive arms trading, the Russian government has not yet released their exact numbers, so all the numbers used in the following statistics are the best estimates by the U.S. State Department. From 1979-1982, the Soviet Union was the main supplier for Syria, Libya, Iraq, India, and Vietnam. These countries were five of the top arms importing countries (Laird, 1994). During that time frame, the Soviet Union was responsible for thirty-four percent of the world’s arms trade. The USSR was the primary
suppliers of tanks, self propelled guns, artillery, supersonic combat aircrafts, surface to air missiles, guided missile boats, subsonic aircrafts, and helicopters (Laird, 1994).

The Soviet Union provided arms assistance to countries that shared its ideology (Johnson 1994). This assistance was often provided by concessional grants on the side of the Soviet Union, though frankly the Soviet Union did not know how much it cost to manufacture the arms. At least $15 billion in arms trade would not have occurred had it not been for the assistance by the Soviet Union (Johnson, 1994). The Soviet Union did not trade exclusively with communist countries. In fact 70 percent of all Soviet arm sales to noncommunist countries went to the Middle East (Laird, 1994).

After the Cold War, the level of the former Soviet Union’s arms trading dropped off significantly. By 1995, Russia was only responsible for 9% of the world’s arms trade (State Department, 1995). Though Russia’s arms trade declined, Russia remained a prominent donor to the Middle East. Twenty-two percent of Russia’s $8 billion in arms trade in 1995 was to the Middle East (State Department, 1995). Currently, Russia’s arms trades have again increased to a little over $10 billion in 2009 as evidenced in the above graph. The total dollar amount still continues to fluctuate from year to year.

Arms Trading in the Middle East
The period between 1985 and 1995 is especially important because it sees the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of the United States as the sole superpower. That decade is the transition period away from the Cold War. Even prior to 1985, the Middle East has received more arms importation than anywhere else in the world. In 1995, the Middle East received $18 billion in arms imports which accounted for 43% of the world’s arms imports. (US State Department, 1995). As seen above, the overall arms trades in the Middle East have grown since 1985. Current arms importation in the Middle East is estimated to be $12 billion. The largest importer of arms in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia. The graph below shows the dominance that Saudi Arabia controls in arms importation in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been the largest importer since prior to 1995 and continues to be so to this day (Perlo-Freeman, 2009). The main countries who export to the Middle East are the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China respectively.
The two cases to be examined are Egypt and Afghanistan. The reason for using these cases is because they are both truly unique examples of superpower policy in the Middle East during the Cold War. One country had continually switching alliances with one of the superpowers. The other was barely involved in the superpower struggle until near the end of the Cold War. Egypt’s allegiance was essentially bought with a large amount of foreign aid from the United States. Afghanistan is considered one of the reasons behind the downfall of the Soviet Union. These two cases are both extremely important when looking at arms trading during the Cold War.

The Case of Egypt
During the Cold War, one of the most strategically important Middle Eastern countries was Egypt. Egypt began the Cold War as the Kingdom of Egypt which was a colony of the British, and thus was heavily influenced by the Western World. In 1952, the Kingdom of Egypt was dissolved by a military coup d’état and the Republic of Egypt was declared (Barak, 2004). The British presence in Egypt remained until 1954.

The British government maintained a military base in the Suez Canal region which was extremely important to Britain’s position in the Middle East. In 1956, the Egyptian government’s decision to nationalize the Suez Canal prompted attacks from Israel, Britain, and France, because nationalization of the canal threatened Anglo-French interests (Barak, 2004). Prior to this declaration in 1955, the Egyptian government negotiated an arms deal with Czechoslovakia. This deal ended Egyptian reliance on Western arms, which frustrated the British. This deal began the Republic of Egypt’s alignment with the Soviet Union, because all arms sales from the Eastern Bloc were authorized by the Soviet Union. After this, other countries within the Warsaw Pact began arms dealing to Egypt and Syria (Barak, 2004).

Egyptian tension with Israel did not end after the Suez Canal Crisis. During the Suez Crisis, Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula, but did not stay because the United Nations Emergency Force was stationed there (Barak, 2004). These tensions escalated into the 1967 Six Day War. The Six Day War resulted in the loss of the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. These areas became a point of contention between Israel and the rest of the Arab world.
Following the Six Day War, President Nasser died in 1970 and was succeeded by Anwar Sadat. In that same year, President Anwar Sadat switched Egypt’s loyalty from the Soviet Union to the United States. In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched the October War against Israel to win back the Sinai Peninsula (Safty, 1991). The October War, also known as the Yom Kippur War, received mixed reactions from the international community. During the October War, Israel received military supplies from the United States, despite Egypt’s allegiance with the United States. Egypt and Syria were receiving military aid from other Arab countries, the Soviet Union, and its allies (Safty, 1991).

Following the ceasefire in the October War, Egypt asked the Soviet Union to intervene because Israel continued to violate the terms of the ceasefire (Safty, 1991). The United States threatened to intervene on behalf of Israel if the Soviet forces stepped in, which could have
potentially caused a major war between the two most powerful countries in the world (Safty, 1991). After the United States’ threat to intervene, Egypt dropped its request.

The October War set the stage for better relations between Israel and Egypt. In September of 1978, Egypt and Israel were invited to attend the Camp David Accords by President Carter. These talks succeeded in negotiating peace between the two countries and they signed the Israel-Egyptian Peace Treaty in 1979 (Safty, 1991). The Camp David Accords succeeded by creating peace between Egypt and Israel which the United States essentially bought with US foreign aid to Egypt. In 1978, President Sadat became the first Arab leader to make a visit to Israel and in doing so implicitly recognized Israel as a country. Egypt’s recognition of Israel got it kicked out of the Arab League. In 1979, Egypt began to receive US foreign aid and has been the second largest recipient of US foreign aid ever since (Safty, 1991).

Until 2011, Egypt had been a relatively stable country. In January of 2011, Egypt underwent a series of protests that led to a full blown revolution. These protests marked the end of President Mubarak’s reign, who had been in power since 1981 (BBC, 2011). The US President publicly praised these protests however the United States has been supporting the Mubarak regime with US foreign aid since 1979. The military command in charge dissolved the Egyptian Constitution and the parliament. Whether the United States will continue its high level of foreign aid to Egypt and what will happen to the Egyptian government remains to be seen.

The Case of Afghanistan

Afghanistan was an extremely important country during the Cold War. The Soviet Union and the United States vied for influence by building vital infrastructures in Afghanistan. In 1973, Daoud Khan, head of the Communist Party in Afghanistan, launched a bloodless coup
while Zahir Shah, the King of Afghanistan, was on an official overseas visit (Harpviken, 1997). Daoud’s government allegedly killed a prominent member of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) which prompted members of PDPA to lead an uprising against the government. On April 28th, 1978, the PDPA took over the government of Afghanistan and established Communist rule (Harpviken, 1997). The PDPA government signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1978.

After the alliance was announced, President Jimmy Carter signed a directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul. In 1979, Afghanistan requested for Soviet troops repeatedly in summer and spring. Afghanistan needed Soviet assistance to help combat the mujahedeen rebels (Harpviken, 1997). On June 16th, the Soviet Union sent in a detachment of tanks, BMPS, and troops. Until December, Afghanistan continued to request more and more troops, however the Soviet Union was often slow to respond. On July 3rd, President Jimmy Carter authorized funding for anti-communist guerrilla operations in Afghanistan as part of the program, Operation Cyclone (Harpviken, 1997). This operation would go on to fund the massive arming of the mujahedeen.

In December of 1979, the Soviet Union began its invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union hoped that the presence of its troops would pacify the region; instead it led to an increase in the unrest and rebellion (Harpviken, 1997). The Soviet Union occupied the main cities while the mujahedeen engaged in guerilla warfare from the surrounding area as demonstrated below. During this time from 1980-1985, the majority of the country remained outside of governmental control (Harpviken, 1997). The pictograph below is a good visual of just how little the Soviet Union controlled the territory. The United States and the Soviet Union felt that this conflict was an integral part of the Cold War. The attacks continued throughout the 80’s until 1987, when the
Soviet Union announced that it would withdraw its troops. The final Soviet troops were withdrawn in 1989 (Harpviken, 1997). The Soviet Invasion was widely considered one of the reasons for the Soviet Union’s downfall. Many people believe that with this invasion the Soviet Union stretched itself too thin and it weakened their overall power.

Soviet Union Invasion (CGSC, 2011)

After the Soviet Union finally withdrew all its troops, the conflict continued within Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Civil War carried on the ongoing tension between the PDPA and the mujahedeen. US Intelligence Agencies only expected the PDPA regime to last another three to six months before it fell. The PDPA had a large amount of arms donated to them by the Soviet Union which enabled the PDPA to keep the mujahedeen at bay (Harpviken, 1997). The Soviet Union continued to support the PDPA even after it withdrew. The PDPA fell after the Soviet
Union collapsed and the Russian government refused to continue to send fuel systems (Harpviken, 1997).

The United States, under the supervision of NATO, is currently engaged in a military conflict in Afghanistan. The conflict began after the attacks on the World Trade Center which occurred on September 11, 2001. The attacks were perpetrated by Osama Bin Laden’s organization, Al Qaeda. The Taliban government refused to hand over Bin Laden to the United States government and refused to dismantle al-Qaeda bases within Afghanistan. The United States, along with the United Kingdom, and backed by the United Nations, responded by bombing al-Qaeda and Taliban targets within Afghanistan. The United States deposed the Taliban government and supported a new government, however US involvement under the lead of NATO in Afghanistan is still ongoing.

**Egypt versus Afghanistan**

Egypt and Afghanistan experienced very different situations during the Cold War though both were stages for superpower struggle during the Cold War. Egypt and Afghanistan had differing views on how to interact with superpowers. The Egyptian government began the Cold War aligned with the United States while it was a British colony but then switched its allegiance to the Soviet Union once it got its independence and later back to the United States again in the 1970’s after another regime change. Afghanistan began the Cold War aligned with both superpowers vying for its alliance. The impact of the involvement of the superpowers in each of these countries was extremely different. The Egyptian alliance with the United States was seen having a positive impact for the United States. The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan was seen as one of the major factors in the Soviet Union’s downfall. Immediately following the Cold
War, Egypt was relatively stable whereas Afghanistan has been in a series of wars since the Cold War. Both Afghanistan and Egypt experience political instability at this time. Both of these countries were used as arenas for the superpower conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War.

**Current Stability in the Middle East**

Perhaps the most convincing argument for the case that arms trades stabilize the Middle East is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia receives the largest amount of arms importation of any country in the Middle East and currently experiences relative stability in comparison to the region (Perlo-Freeman, 2009). The Saudi Arabian government currently experiences criticism for harboring the former leaders of other Middle Eastern countries currently experiencing political unrest such as Tunisian President Ben Ali. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has participated in few wars since arms trading with the United States began. The largest conflict Saudi Arabia has participated in since arms trading began was Operation Desert Storm in 1990 (Bahgat, 2006). During Operation Desert Storm, the Saudi Arabian government agreed to allow the United States troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia (Bahgat, 2006). This however is believed to have led to an increase in Islamic terrorism. However though the government has remained stable, terrorist activity within the country has increased. Saudi Arabia is arguably stable because even with terrorist attacks by Soviet nationals and are vulnerable to attack, the Saudi government has remained in control, has taken stringent action against terrorist attacks, and there is not widespread conflict within the region as of this time (Bahgat, 2006).

**Current Instability in the Middle East**
Afghanistan has remained one of the most influential warnings against arms trading in the Middle East. The United States financed, trained, and armed many of the mujahedeen forces during the Soviet War in Afghanistan (Harpviken, 1997). One of the fighters purported to receive United States’ arms was Osama Bin Laden. Though this claim is denied by the United States government, the United States had accidentally enlisted anti-American soldiers in its efforts to combat the Soviet Union (Jasper, 2007). Bin Laden could have possibly been one of the many fighters that the United States armed, thus making the current war in Afghanistan partially the United States’ fault.

The United States has been a long time supporter of Israel despite objections from many Middle Eastern countries. The United States was the first country to recognize the state of Israel in 1948. The United States began selling advanced defensive weapons to Israel in the 1960s (Barak, 2004). Since the 1970’s, Israel has been one of the largest recipients of US foreign aid (Safty, 1991). The popularity of US support of Israel also wavers in the public opinion of the citizens of the United States. Palestine and Israel have been in a near-constant state of conflict as a result of Israel’s expansion efforts into Palestinian territory.

Police Firing Shots at Tunisian Protesters (Radio Free, 2011)
Beginning in 2010, the Middle East has had a series of protests and demonstrations. The first protests occurred in Tunisia on December 18th, 2010 (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). Despite the many causes of the Egyptian Revolution, it was a single incident that sparked the revolution. The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi after he was refused an audience with the local government following an incident where a policewoman slapped and humiliated him caused public outrage which led to the protests. The protests eventually ousted President Ben Ali however political unrest in the country is still occurring (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). The current death toll from the protests in Tunisia is upwards of 220 people with at least 94 known injuries (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). Following the protests in Tunisia, other protests began to flare up all over the Middle East.

Photo of the Egyptian Revolution (Mayton, 2011)
One of the most publicly acknowledged protests of 2011 is the Egyptian Revolution. The protests began on January 25th, 2011 (BBC, 2011). The day of protests planned by the opposition groups coincided purposefully with the National Police Day. The purpose of the protests was originally to protest the abuses by the police. The protests' demands soon expanded from the restoration of minimum wage to the end of Egyptian emergency law. Currently at least 384 people have died in the Egyptian protests and over 3,000 people have been reported as injured (BBC, 2011). The Egyptian Revolution was able to oust President Mubarak who is currently in police custody (BBC, 2011).

Following the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan Civil War started. The US intervention in the Libyan Civil War demonstrates that though the United States has seen backlash from its arms trade, the United States is still a heavy participator in the Middle East. It originally began as a series of peaceful protests on February 15, 2011 against Libyan ruler Gaddafi. Gaddafi in an attempt to retain control fought back against these protests with military force and censorship measures (The Economist, 2011). This eventually escalated into full out
civil war between anti-Gaddafi forces and pro-Gaddafi forces. Gaddafi brought in foreign mercenaries when it became evident that some military personnel would not attack the civilian protesters.

On March 17th, 2011, the United Nations declared Libyan air space a no fly zone (BBC, 2011). On March 19th, U.S., French, and British forces came in to prevent attacks on rebel controlled cities. The U.S. and British forces fired 114 Tomahawk missiles on twenty Libyan defense systems. By March 25th, NATO announced that it would take command over the no fly zones operations (BBC, 2011). Everyday new information is coming out of Libya. The Libyan Civil War is ongoing and there have been anywhere from 1,000 to 10,000 casualties so far.

**Current Fighting in Libya (CNN, 2011)**

![Map of Libya with active fighting locations](image)

**Conclusion**

Arms trade has caused further destabilization to an already unstable region. Despite the U.S.’s attempts to stabilize the region, the U.S. military involvement and arms transfers in the
Middle East have had the opposite effect. Rather than having the weapons to protect themselves if need be, the countries have been using these weapons against other countries and sometimes even against their own citizens, such as what is occurring in the Libyan Civil War. With the most recent span of protests springing up all around the Middle East, an already volatile region is becoming even more unstable. The United States is currently in two wars within the Middle East while also trying to aid the Libyan rebels in the Libyan Civil War. The United States seems determined to aid the Middle East with military arms trading. With the current instability in the Middle East it seems most unlikely that the United States is going to stop its arms trading any time soon.
Bibliography


Images


