

Testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wilson, greetings from the great State of Texas. It is always a privilege to testify to your committee.

As I understand it, the subcommittee is trying to better understand the strategy behind foreign military sales to governments in the Middle East – and specifically to governments in and around the Arabian Peninsula. As a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Middle East Policy, and as someone who, in an earlier stint at the Pentagon, led a historical review of our efforts to build what we call “partner capacity” in the region, I will do my best to explain what we’ve been trying to do for the past several decades. If it’s alright with you, I will also do my best to abstain from either complimenting or criticizing the efforts of the current administration – mostly because I would be doing so from a position of ignorance. The only partisan thing I will say at this hearing is that my wife has insisted that we get a “Colin Allred for Congress” lawn sign for our yard here in Dallas, which I am sure all members of the subcommittee will appreciate.

I think it’s pretty safe to say, though, even though it may be surprising to many of you, that as a country, as both Republicans and Democrats, we’ve been mostly doing the same thing in the Middle East for the past three decades. Depending on your perspective, that will strike you as either encouraging or maddening. But despite all the partisan bickering over the region, successive administrations, from both parties, have more or less agreed on a common set of ends – if not ways and means – with respect to our policy in the Middle East. They have all agreed, for example, that we have three vital interests in the region: defending the state of Israel; ensuring the free flow of commerce in and around the Arabian Peninsula; and countering terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Equally, they have all seemed to agree that the United States dedicates way too many resources toward securing those interests, even if stated preferences have never quite matched up with revealed preferences in this regard: much to the annoyance of our strategists and our ambassadors to the countries neighboring China, the United States has poured an amazing amount of concrete and other resources into the Middle East, which housed roughly 59,000 troops at the time I left the Pentagon in 2017 – including 35,000 troops in the Gulf region alone. If you agree that we have finite resources, and that China and Russia are greater strategic threats to the United States than Iran or al-Qaeda, those numbers make little sense.

You cannot reduce those numbers, though, without assuming more risk – risk to the ability of the United States to respond to contingencies in the region. And although the past three presidents have each made noises about assuming more risk in the region, none yet have. One

question each administration asks itself, though, is why the United States continues to provide military capabilities to defend some of the wealthiest countries on Earth?

This question, in its essence, is the impetus behind the sale of military hardware to the countries in and around the Arabian Peninsula. Is there not some way, successive administrations have asked, for our Gulf partners to build capabilities that allow us to withdraw some of ours? And can we help them by giving them access to some of our top-of-the-line hardware? That would benefit Americans workers, the argument went, and would also drive down the costs of that hardware for us as well.

Several challenges, though, have stymied our efforts to build partner capacity in the region, and I should start by noting for the record that foreign military *sales* are not the same thing as foreign military *financing*. When you talk about our military aid to the governments of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, or Lebanon, for example, you're talking about foreign military financing: that's when we give a partner or ally funding to buy mostly American weapons and training they otherwise would not be able to purchase. When you talk about weapons sales to the Gulf, by contrast, you're talking about foreign military sales: that's when we allow other governments to buy advanced U.S. weapons with their own money. (I know everyone on the subcommittee understands the difference between the two things usually abbreviated to "FMF" and "FMS" in bureaucratic language, but I am operating under the assumption that less informed members of the public might also read this testimony when it is published.)

The first challenge with foreign military sales, in contrast to foreign military financing, is ... well, it's *their* money. They can spend it how they want to spend it. We, as a government, can strongly suggest that a country whose entire economy is built on the ability to move oil and gas to the market via sea lanes might want to spend some money building a navy, or at least on buying some minesweepers. But they might patiently (or impatiently) listen to our advice and decide to spend their money on a cool-looking air force instead. Many of our partners have elected to buy what I and others have called "prestige weapons" – very fancy aircraft, mostly, that sit on a tarmac – instead of weapons systems that might actually contribute to capabilities these countries would need to defend themselves if the United States magically went away for some reason. Often our partners buy expensive weapons systems without investing in all the other things – doctrine, training, maintenance – that create true capabilities.

The second challenge with we have with foreign military sales is that most of the military capabilities we want our partners to invest in are relatively unsexy. *Top Gun* is, we can all agree, a really fun movie. I remember when that movie came out in the 1980s, and everyone back home in Tennessee wanted to be a fighter pilot. By contrast, no popular movie, fun or otherwise, has ever been produced about integrated air and missile defenses. With apologies to air defense officers everywhere, very few kids grow up in either Tennessee or Abu Dhabi wanting to be air defense officers.

That leads to the third challenge, which is lack of cooperation, and which is not unique to foreign military sales but nonetheless harms our ability to build partner capacity. Let's talk

some more, briefly, about integrated air and missile defenses: My wife happens to be a Ph.D. engineer. I, by contrast, studied the classics and English literature. Knowing that about me, our newly confirmed chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, C.Q. Brown, explained integrated air and missile defense to me in the following, very simplified way when he was commanding our air forces in the Middle East: Imagine someone throws a ball. Is it easier to gauge the trajectory of that ball if it's thrown right at you, or if you watch it from the side? The latter, of course, is easier, and missile defenses work the same way: You need to have sensors and systems speaking to one another across a region, and that has been a challenge in a region where the countries all want to talk to the United States but often do not want to talk to one another. Our primary air base in the region, as a matter of fact, is in Qatar, so I can only imagine the frustration among national security officials in the Trump Administration when Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led an embargo of Qatar. I imagine that embargo – and the suspicions that led to it – severely hinder our efforts to promote cooperation among Gulf militaries.

The final two challenges I will highlight for the subcommittee are the challenges associated with success. Let's say you actually succeed and build independent military capabilities among our partners in the region. Our Emirati partners, to use one example, have actually done this: They have great air forces, and good special operations forces as well. They have partnered with our forces in Afghanistan and Yemen, and our troops respect them. One of the reasons our uniformed officers and our diplomats love the United Arab Emirates is because the crown prince, Mohamed bin Zayed, has shown more dedication toward transforming his military than any other regional leader.

But the first challenge associated with success is that if you help a partner build independent military capabilities, you have helped a partner build *independent* military capabilities. The whole thing about independent military capabilities is that you can use them independent of the United States – often in places, from Libya to Yemen, where we might prefer you not to use them.

The second challenge with helping our partners develop real and lasting military capabilities is that as important as it is that we reduce our commitment to the Gulf, we also cannot endanger the security of the State of Israel. This is not just some personal policy preference of mine – this is U.S. law, originally passed in 2008, prohibiting any U.S. administration from undermining the qualitative military edge the State of Israel enjoys over its potential adversaries.

So where do we go from here?

Well, for starters, and paradoxically, we could care a lot less. If we can all agree that we obsess over the Middle East in ways that are unhealthy and have led us to squander vast amounts of blood and treasure since the end of the Cold War, we can more easily assume strategic risk in the region. On a related note, we also need to care less when our partners accuse us of abandoning the region, something they have been accusing us of doing for the past two decades, at least. It's quite possible that one of the reasons our partners do this is because they

know, even if we do not, that our strategic interests lie elsewhere, and they are trying to scare us into staying.

And finally, we could care less when our partners threaten to buy non-American weapons systems. I flipped through the annual reports of the major U.S. defense contractors before appearing before this subcommittee, and I can assure you that none of them are going out of business anytime soon. If you hear threats to shut down this or that assembly line, which I used to hear from time to time when I was at the Pentagon, just know that will likely be to reduce costs in order to meet analyst and shareholder expectations, not to keep the company solvent.

Buying non-American weapons carries risk for our partners, too: It reduces, in cases, their ability to cooperate in coalitions with us, and in the case of Chinese or Russian weapons, it often means we have to reduce our footprint for reasons related to operational security. If our partners buy Chinese drones and house them on an air base with Chinese engineers in close proximity to U.S. F-16s, for example, it will not be long before those F-16s are no longer there.

More proactively, our national security officials can continue to beat the drum about the importance of our partners investing in all of the “soft” things – training, education, doctrine – that turn the hard things into real capabilities. We’ve all got to be on the same page here. For the most part, I have found our leading defense contractors to be constructive partners in this regard. But I worry about the message it sends when some of our uniformed officers responsible for the region go to work for these same contractors immediately after taking off their uniforms. I worry that dynamic creates the impression that deep down inside, we really don’t care about building partner capacity: We just care about selling weapons.

I don’t think that’s the case, but we are all going to have to work together to make sure it remains so.