

US finalises arms deals with Israel, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates

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The United States is flooding the Middle East with armaments, a further sign that the ongoing preparations for military intervention against Syria have the ultimate aim of targeting Iran.

On Monday, US secretary of defence Chuck Hagel confirmed that arms deals worth US\$10 billion would be signed with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to bolster their forces for any future conflict with Iran—those are the same states now leading moves against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey is the other leading figure in the war preparations against Syria, Iran's major regional ally.

Earlier this month, during negotiations for a multibillion-dollar arms deal with Ankara, US firm Raytheon and Lockheed Martin championed their Patriot (PAC-3) air defence system against rival Russian, Chinese and Italian-French alternatives by ruling out any possibility of a US governmental or congressional blockade against delivery.

Washington's preparations for war against Iran are directed at increasing US control over the energy-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, adjacent to Iran. The buildup to war is publicly justified in terms of the supposed threat posed by "weapons of mass destruction," the same lies used to justify war against Iraq.

For nearly 20 years, the US and its allies, most notably Israel, have claimed that Iran's nuclear programme is directed at producing nuclear weapons, and that it is only a year or so away from being able to produce such a weapon. Iran has repeatedly denied the charge, insisting the programme is for energy and medical purposes.

Washington's aim in signing these weapons sales is to arm regional proxies for regime change in Iran, along the lines of its policy in relation to the Assad regime.

Sponsorship by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and others has resulted in multimillion-dollar funds to pay the salaries of the Syrian anti-government militias and provision of weapons and equipment, coordinated by the CIA.

The US has now agreed on an unprecedented package of advanced weaponry with Israel, including new missiles designed to destroy air defence radar systems, sophisticated radar for its own war planes, V-22 Osprey troop transport aircraft, which can take off vertically and which no other country apart from the US has, and the latest KC-135 refuelling tanker planes.

The refuelling aircraft, essential for long-range missions, would fill a gap in Israeli plans for air strikes against Iran, as Israel's current tanker planes are barely adequate for the long flight by its warplanes to Iranian targets.

Washington did not sell Israel its giant bunker-busting bomb, called a Massive Ordnance Penetrator. Weighing 30,000 pounds and designed to penetrate earth and reinforced concrete, it is the only weapon that could destroy Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment centre at Fordow, buried more than 200 feet under a mountain near Qum. But this is only because Israel has no aircraft capable of carrying it.

An Israeli official said the deal would be paid for by American military grants, of which Israel receives more than any other country. In 2007, the US agreed to military aid worth US\$30 billion over 10 years. The White House has proposed giving Israel US\$3.4 billion this year, the highest figure ever.

The deal has to receive congressional approval, and the weaponry is not expected to arrive in Israel for at least two years. Speaking at a press conference in Tel Aviv alongside Israel's minister of defence and former army chief of staff, Moshe Ya'alon, Hagel said that the

deals would send a “clear signal” to Iran. They would guarantee Israel’s “military superiority over any enemy state, non-state or coalition,” and expand its ability to operate far beyond its borders.

He insisted repeatedly that Israel had the right to defend itself, and that it could make the decision whether or not to strike Iran. “Israel is a sovereign nation,” he said. “Israel will make the decisions that Israel must make to protect itself and to defend itself.”

“Iran will not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. Period,” he said.

When asked by reporters about any differences between Washington and Tel Aviv over Iran, Hagel said that he did not think “there’s any daylight” between them on the issue. There were differences about the timing of any military action, “But, the bottom line is that Iran is a threat. It’s a real threat. And the United States’ policy has been very clear on this.”

Last week, he confirmed at a congressional subcommittee the Pentagon’s ability to support an Israeli military attack on Iran, if required to do so by President Barack Obama, while on the same day, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee endorsed a resolution backing Israeli military attacks on Iran.

Hagel’s Israel visit is the first stop on a tour that will take in Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. His visit follows three visits by Secretary of State John Kerry and Obama’s tour in March.

In Egypt yesterday, in part to firm up defence contracts, Hagel is expected to confirm later that the UAE will purchase 25 F-16 Fighting Falcon warplanes. The deal will include training for UAE fighter pilots in the US. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are expected to buy precision weapons with “standoff” capabilities that enable them to engage the enemy from a distance.

In 2010, the Pentagon agreed to sell Riyadh US\$30 billion worth of F-15 fighter jets, and in 2011, it signed a deal to sell US\$3.5 billion in missile defence systems to the UAE.

While Riyadh has long been a recipient of Western arms and a key prop of US imperialism in the Middle East, the UAE, whose constituent members merged their forces in 1996, now has one of the most advanced military forces in the world and is a significant producer of military equipment. In 2010, its military budget was US\$15.7 billion, the highest per capita in the world.

As well as F-16 fighter jets, the UAE is equipped with French Mirage jets, complete with laser-targeting pods, French Leclerc battle tanks, Turkish armoured personnel carriers, US and British attack helicopters, advanced weapons and integrated defence systems.

It admits to an armed force of 60,000, including a good number of mercenaries. The US-based military contractor Blackwater was reported in 2011 to be training a mercenary army of Colombian and South African veterans for the UAE.

The UAE is home to a French military base of 500 soldiers, and the US has stationed military and intelligence personnel at the Dhafrah airbase, known to have been used for drone missions to Afghanistan. Ports at Jebel Ali and Mina Zayed are used by the American navy and military contractors.

At US\$10 billion, the deals now being agreed on are more than Iran’s entire annual military expenditure, estimated at US\$7.31 billion in 2007 by London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies. At US\$102 per capita, this is lower than other Persian Gulf states and at 2.6 percent of GDP, lower than all the other Persian Gulf states.

By way of contrast, Israel’s defence budget, as estimated by *Ha’aretz*, was NIS 55.8 (US\$15.5) billion in 2012, more than the official figures that excluded a number of items. At 7 percent of GDP, Israel’s defence budget is one of the highest in the world.

Washington’s weapons deals are laying the basis for war in the region, against both Iran and Syria, that can provoke a wider conflagration, including bringing in Iran’s allies, China and Russia, with devastating consequences.



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