

Imperialism's Hold on West Asia: A Case of Defence Purchases

Numerous attempts have been made to understand the persistent turmoil in West Asia. Western scholars have frequently attributed it to the region's culture and religion.¹ This approach, however, is deeply flawed. Treating the people and the local ruling classes as completely independent actors in a region such as West Asia is not only misleading and ahistorical but also intellectually dishonest. It is pertinent, therefore, to reasonably explore the role of imperialism, foreign interventions, and the global political structure in shaping the events in the region and defining its fate.

The region's persistent turmoil is inextricably linked to the cycle of external interventions. While the direct old style colonial rule formally ended, most of the countries remained subject to geopolitical rivalries in the Cold War era, and the emergence of the United States (US) as a hegemonic power post 1990s entrenched a neocolonial dynamic.² The rent-seeking, overdependent ruling classes in the region heavily rely on external support for their political survival is well documented.³ The imperialist powers, recognising this peculiar political scenario, actively exploit it to deepen dependency, using them for geostrategic and geopolitical interests.

The dependency is most visibly knotted through defence cooperation. Most of the countries in the Arab region are heavily dependent, both directly and indirectly, on the military collaborations with the US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies. Such relationships, once established, are nearly impossible to end making it an effective tool for the US to influence the crucial political decisions as we see in the Gulf monarchies.

The Emergence and Consolidation of Neocolonialism in West Asia

For imperialism, having "friendly regimes" in the Arab region is a must due to its geostrategic location, rich deposit of natural resources such as oil, and to guard the key international trade routes. Additionally, it guarantees the existence of Israel, which serves as the only reliable outpost in the region for the empire.

Israel serves not only as an ideological implant, but also as the central tool in the imperial strategy for the region. It perpetuated insecurity among Arab republics in the Levant, which had socialist regimes after their independence from colonial powers in the post-war period and had close relationships with the Soviet Union.

Israel continued to receive heavy military hardware, funding, and technology from the US and other European allies, forcing other countries in the region to upgrade their weapon supplies through imports from the Soviet Union. This arms race and polarisation around ideological divides made sure that the region

embroiled in conflict throughout the Cold War period.

In the 1970s, Egypt joined the Gulf monarchies as ideological allies of the US. However, they gradually fell into a neocolonial relationship. Their existence was heavily dependent on maintaining good relations with the US, which was defined in terms of uninterrupted oil supplies to the West and security for Israel.

The US and its NATO allies exploited the Iranian revolution of 1979 to deepen the Gulf monarchies' threat perception, as they feared the rise of political Islam.⁴ This, along with the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) fuelled another round of arms race in the region, with the Persian Gulf countries emerging as the largest buyers of the US and European weapons further institutionalising their dependence on the US and NATO.

The fall of the USSR and the rise of the US as the sole superpower further cemented the dependence of the West Asian regimes on the US and its allies. The unlimited and mostly unrestricted capability of the US and its allies had a devastating impact on the already vulnerable Gulf monarchies. Thus began an era of uninterrupted exploitation of the region's vast natural resources, which also emerged as the main US military base following the first Gulf War.⁵

The Iraq war in 2003 erased all doubts about the US intentions in the region, if any. It wanted full and direct control. However, the resistance, both in Iraq and in the broader Arab world in the form of the popular movements for accountable governance forced the US to change its tactics. The US shifted its gear to try to exploit these popular uprisings to penetrate further into countries like Libya,⁶ Syria, and Yemen to gain a much better control hitherto resisting its interventions. Although it failed to establish a clear hold in these countries due to strong resistance, the interventions served as a warning to the monarchs in the region, further facilitating their submission to the US.

However, the rise of China as the world's second largest economy, its growing closeness with Russia, and its interventions through BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to create a multipolar world order has attracted the attention of a large number of countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two of the most important monarchies in the region. BRICS attempts to create a multipolar world order and challenge the neocolonial model has shaken the post-Cold War unipolar system. Due to the interventions of BRICS, a growing desire for autonomy and independence has emerged in the region.

China facilitated Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran, and Iran's subsequent joining of both BRICS and SCO created a challenge to the US's hegemonic presence in the region. The creation of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)+ mechanism and its role during the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards in determining the price of oil was an example of how exercising limited autonomy can harm the interest of the empire.⁷ This required an urgent reaction to save the empire and re-assert its authority in the region.

Recent developments underscore this urgency. Trump, after resuming office, unilaterally declared the death of BRICS, clearly warning countries like Saudi Arabia not to venture in that direction. The empire has realised that allowing the countries in the region to be independent, even symbolically, would be detrimental to its interests. The renewed emphasis on security and growing adoption of war rhetoric indicate a reversion to Cold War mentality and a desperation to prevent the course of history.

The empire's striking capabilities have been demonstrated in the regime change in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad, after surviving a war for over a decade, was forced to exile, surrendering the country to pro-Turkish, extremist groups. The ex-al-Qaeda leader heading the interim government in Syria is aware that he cannot practice what he really believes in and must submit to the US and Israel if he wants to retain power for long. This explains why he chose not to oppose Israel's invasion of Syrian territory immediately after the fall of al-Assad.

The example of Syria shows that an increasing number of political regimes in the region are threatened by the empire's age-old tactics of regime change, exacerbating frozen conflicts within or near their territories, and declaring direct or indirect threats of wars. Only the states that have established legitimacy by strengthening their domestic institutions and making the state responsive to the citizen's needs may still assert their independence and risk discussing autonomy. However, such regimes are still rare in the region. Iran, since the Islamic revolution in 1979, has been the sole representative to this camp. Those who still rely on their security apparatus to survive have no option but to fall in line, at least for the time being. The best way to stay out of trouble is to, at least, refrain from antagonising the empire.

The vulnerability of the Arab states explains why none of them dared to take any meaningful action in the Israel's genocide against Gaza, which has lasted over fifteen months. They convened the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meetings in Riyadh twice over the issue as a collective response, but that remained more as an attempt to pacify the domestic outrage.⁸ Instead, the Arab states took firm steps to repress all potential outbreaks of popular resentment at home, doing so with complete impunity and blessings of the empire. They even continue to entertain Donald Trump's fantasies of taking over Gaza, if needed by force, employing similar tactics of mild reactions to appease domestic outrage. None of these states have announced any programs to rebuild Gaza, perhaps in anticipation of Trump's plan.

Saudi Arabia's inability to accept the invitation to formally join BRICS grouping as a permanent member is another example.⁹ The delay indicates a re-evaluation of Saudi Arabia's interests following US pressure.

Weapons Trade as a Source of Neocolonial Control

Donald Trump's move to occupy Gaza might have seemed eccentric to many, but those familiar with the empire's influence in the region understand the severity of such a threat. In the Palestinian context, Trump's threat exposes the fact that most of the countries in the region are not sovereign, independent states.

This neocolonial relationship is rooted, among various other aspects, in the monarchies' need to remain in power, given the lack of democratic institutions in the region. A minimal share in the rent through basic services and fear of state force¹⁰ are the only two sources of stability for most of the Gulf monarchies. Even this stability is heavily reliant on the US and NATO in more than one way.

Short of outright military intervention, imperialism exerts its power through various means. We are not going to discuss all of them here except one; the discourses around security and defence and how it creates dependency. Apart from having an almost direct control over the defence in certain sub-regions in West Asia, for example Jordan, the empire has tremendous control over regional security apparatuses through arms trade and military contracts. It also becomes a constant source of extraction of surplus generated through oil and gas trade.

In 2024, the US had nineteen military bases in the region, eight of which were permanent. Over 40,000 military personnel were deployed, some stationed at bases and some more on warships around the region.¹¹ Qatar has the regional headquarters of US Central Command while Bahrain is home to the fifth fleet of the US Navy. No country, except Syria under the Ba'ath Party, had any objection to US military deployment on their soil.

In 2020, the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution demanding withdrawal of all foreign troops from their country, following the Trump administration's assassination of Iranian Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and deputy chief of the Iraqi militia Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike in Baghdad on January 3.¹² However, the resolution remains unimplemented, till date, due to lack of political will.

Iran has consistently demanded unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops deployed in the region. They have repeatedly accused the US troops in the region of supporting anti-Iranian forces and providing shelter to Israel's spy agencies to carry out cross-border attacks.

West Asia is the second-largest buyer of weapons in the world, after the Asia Pacific region. Countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Turkey allocate a significant portion of their national income annually to purchase weapons from the US and European countries such as France and Germany.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI),¹³ Europe, where Russia-Ukraine war is ongoing, observed a 94% increase in the annual arms imports in 2023. However, it still trailed the West Asian region in terms of total arms import that year.

Despite registering a 12% fall in overall arms imports between 2014-18 and 2019-23, West Asia remained the second largest importer of weapons during the same period purchasing more than 30% of all weapons traded globally and over 28% if one excludes Israel, says SIPRI report.

According to the SIPRI report, Saudi Arabia and Qatar collectively bought over 23% of all weapons exported by the US between 2019 and 2023. Most of the weapons supplied by the European countries were also destined to the West Asia buyers. The US, France, Italy and Germany collectively supplied over 81% of all the weapons purchased by the West Asian countries during the 2019-23 period.

The countries in the region spent collectively over \$220 billion on defence in 2024, accounting for 15.6% of the region's total budget and around 9.5% of all global defence expenditure. According to the World Bank, West Asia's total GDP was approximately \$4.3 trillion in 2024.¹⁴ If considered a single country, their defence expenditure would be close to China's (\$224 billion) and ranking third globally. We should not forget that China's GDP in 2023 was approximately \$18 trillion.

Saudi Arabia with a GDP of nearly \$1 trillion had a defence budget of over \$75 billion in 2024. This was as big as India which had a GDP of over \$4 trillion.¹⁵ Saudi Arabia was the second largest arms importer after India in 2023, with a global share of over 8.4%. Qatar recorded a substantial jump in arms imports to nearly 400% between 2019 and 2023, making it the third largest importer, with a global share of 7.6%, according to SIPRI.

Saudi Arabia was the world's largest weapons buyer between 2014 and 2019. It purchased approximately \$16 billion worth of arms from NATO countries during the same period. The West Asia region accounted for 35% of all the weapons sold across the world during that period, with 90% of those weapons imported from NATO countries.¹⁶

For most West Asian countries, the US and its NATO partners remain the primary arm suppliers, with over 80% of all weapons delivered to the region.

This trend is not new. Since the 1980s, the region has been the largest arm importer globally. Historically, both Saudi Arabia and Iran were significant buyers of American weapons. Other countries in the region purchased weapons from the Soviet Union and various European countries.

Between 1950 and 1975, Iran and Saudi Arabia were the largest buyers of US weapons. They together purchased more than half of all weapons exported by the US during the period.¹⁷ These purchases included technical support services, with hundreds of US technicians working in both countries.

According to the Pentagon's own estimates, cited by Klare (1976), approximately 350,000 US workers were involved in export production of the US defence industry in 1975. Between 1970 and 1975, the US sold arms worth \$23.4 billion, triple the total amount of all US arms exports worldwide between 1950 and 1965.¹⁸ In 1974-75, the Gulf kingdoms were the largest buyers of US weapons, which amounted to \$10.8 billion. The West Asian region alone accounted for almost 75% of all US arms sales to the Third World between 1977 and 1984, which was only a quarter of the total arms sales to the region during the said period.¹⁹

Political Economy of Arms Sales

There is a direct link between arms trade to the Arab region and perpetuation of human rights violations and war crimes in the region. The constant wars and conflicts in the region can easily be attributed to the unhindered supply of weapons and military support provided to most of the regimes in the region, including Israel, by the US and its NATO allies.²⁰

The so-called Congressional restrictions, often cited as examples of human rights concerns of the US and democratic control over the country's arms industry, are shams. These restrictions are frequently bypassed as per the convenience of a particular administration, through various tactics, as described by Paine long back.²¹ The wars in Afghanistan, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, have further exposed the truth of congressional control. Congressional restrictions have been repeatedly violated to supply weapons to Israel during the recent war on Gaza.²² In reality, Congressional restrictions on arms sales serve only as a public relations exercise. Their only utility has been to protect the security interests of Israel.

The arms sale is a money-making business, and nothing except the interests of Israel hinder the US arms sale to the West Asian countries. The economic reasons behind the US arms sales have been consistently confirmed by the high ranking US officials on various occasions.

In 1973, William P. Clements, then Deputy Secretary of Defense of the US, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that there were compelling reasons to sell American weapons to the third world: "[T]o help

reduce America's mounting balance-of-payments deficit, second, to ensure full production (and thus full employment) in the aerospace industry and third, to extend the production run of US weapons and thus to diminish the price the Pentagon for its own military hardware."²³

Clements opposed Congressional restrictions on the sale of weapons as it "decreases the potential contributions of sales to strengthening both free world security and the US economy and balance of payments position."²⁴

The American greed to monetise its weapons industry, even at the cost of fuelling an arms race in the third world and slashing social spending, is reflected in the FMS program constituted by Robert McNamara in the 1960s. "In order to ensure that even the poorest countries could participate in the FMS programme McNamara established an elaborate system of loans and credits to supplement the regular sales programme."²⁵

The extra petrodollars accumulated through the sale of oil and gas in the Arab world have been the primary target of an enhanced US arms trade in the region. "[S]ince most of the oil-producing countries are unable to invest these funds domestically, they are accumulating a huge reservoir of unallocated petrodollars."²⁶

The US authorities were well aware that a growing export of weapons to the underdeveloped nations will strengthen the rule of authoritarian, military regimes while diverting a significant part of their revenue away from social and economic development projects to unproductive activities, perhaps disrupting the central source of peace and stability in those poor countries.

Since the end of the Second World War, the weapons industry has been used by the capitalist economies in the West to expand their economies and exploit the developing countries. The growth in this industry creates domestic demands, builds supply units, and provides more employment at home just like any other industry.²⁷ It is an additional advantage for the arms supplier. The arms sales remain a primary foreign policy for the empire as it gives the empire tremendous power to control the defence and security apparatuses of the importer country.

The broader region relies heavily on the US for the supply of spare parts, technological assistance, and, sometimes, even the basic know-how to use those sophisticated weapons. Thousands of American engineers and armed forces have been deployed in the region throughout the year in order to provide training or other assistance to the local forces. This security assistance is part of the dependency apart from contributing to the overall economic stress, as these personnel are paid by the host. It becomes more crucial in maintaining the neocolonial relations, because deployment of troops and other staff provides justification for permanent bases as has happened in Iraq and in other Gulf countries.

The rulers in the host countries seem to enjoy the connections which their country's close defence relations create the opportunity for. They see it as a way to gain some influence in the West and therefore act as puppets in foreign policy domains. The reality of dependency and neocolonialism are brushed under the carpet of friendship and cooperation, providing much needed ego boost for the members of the ruling families.

Endnotes

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