

Arms Sales Boom Amid Iran, Saudi Arabia Proxy Wars

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Nations in the Middle East are buying more weapons and ammunition as war plagues the region – especially Saudi Arabia, whose arms purchases skyrocketed during recent years amid an escalation of its [rivalry with Iran](#), according to new studies.

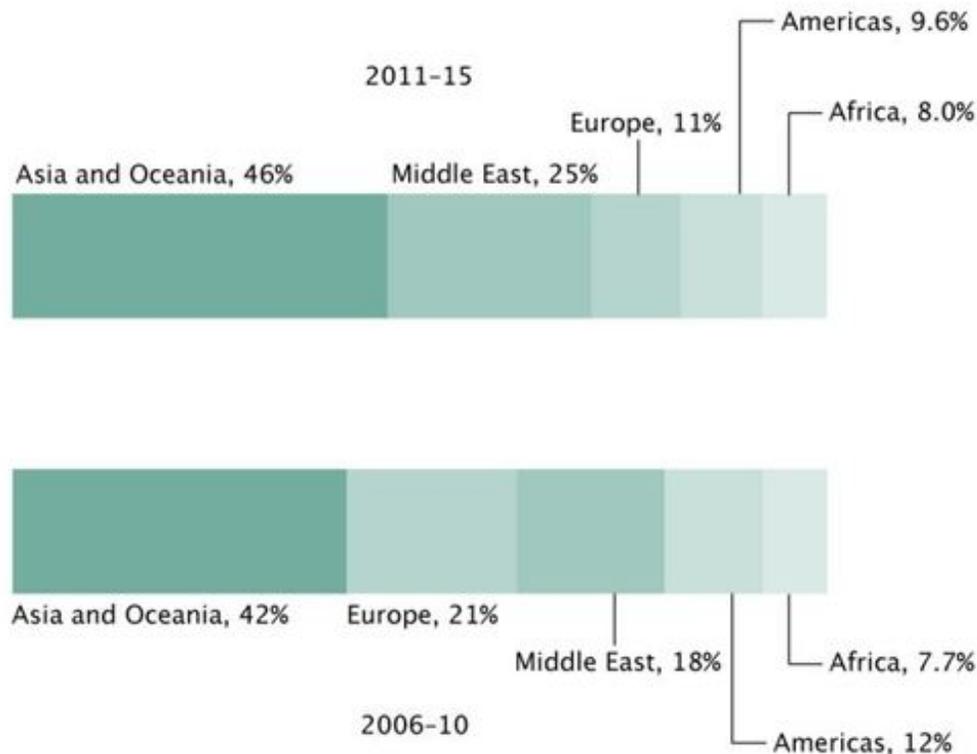
A report published on Monday by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows Saudi Arabia is now the world's second-largest weapons importer, based on data that showed the kingdom increasing its purchases from 2011 through last year by 275 percent compared with sales between 2006 and 2010.

[READ: [Here's What Would Happen if Saudi Arabia Deployed Troops to Syria](#)]

India remains the world's largest importer of weapons, but the report also notes that arms purchases since 2011 have increased in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. This [rise in weapons imports](#) by Saudi Arabia and its allies is attributable in part to their efforts to fight Houthi rebel forces in Yemen, Pieter Wezeman, a senior researcher with the SIPRI Arms and Military Expenditure Program, said in a press release.

"A coalition of Arab states is putting mainly U.S.- and European-sourced advanced arms into use in Yemen," Wezeman said. "Despite low oil prices, large deliveries of arms to the Middle East are scheduled to continue as part of contracts signed in the past five years."

The importers of major weapons, by region, 2006–10 and 2011–15, per cent of global share



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Arms purchases by nations in the Middle East increased during the past decade and accounted for 25 percent of global weapons sales between 2011 and 2015, up from 18 percent between 2006 and 2010, according to SIPRI.

Escalating conflicts driving Middle Eastern nations to buy more weapons include conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, along with violence in Egypt and Turkey, says Ken Pollack, a senior fellow researching the Middle East at the Brookings Institution.

“We are seeing a region on fire,” Pollack says. “A lot of countries feel the need to increase their military capabilities to intervene in those conflicts or to fend off rivals.”

Pollack says the top rivalry in the region "consuming ammunition" is between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their allies, especially in Yemen where Tehran is backing the Houthi opposition to the Saudi-supported government. Iran is also supporting embattled Syrian President Bashar Assad while Saudi Arabia is sending

weapons to groups opposing his government, but Pollack says the two nations appear to be vying for influence through other proxy wars in the region.

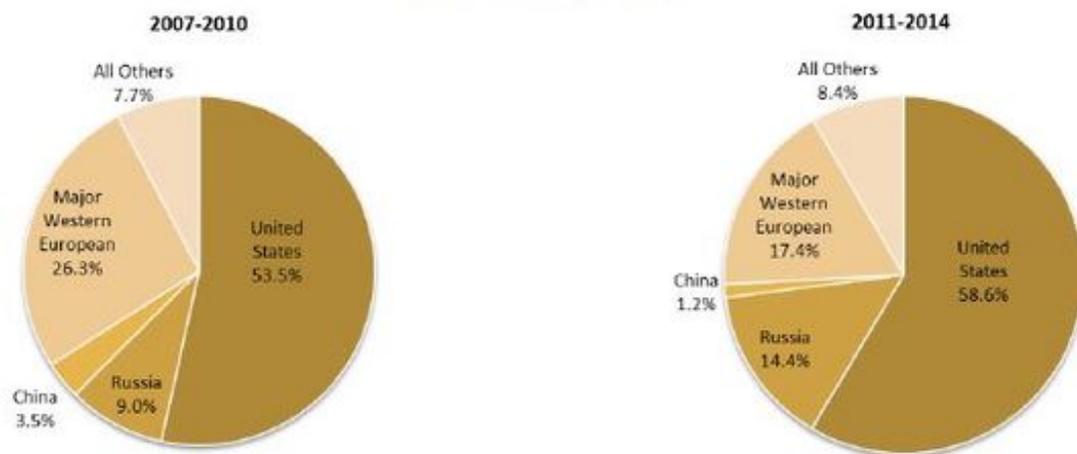
“Iran is supplying considerable arms to Shia forces in Iraq, and it seems likely that Saudi forces would be involved with groups in that country somehow,” he says. “The Saudis have clearly provided weapons to groups in Libya. Given past Iranian involvement in Libya, I wouldn’t count them out of being involved in that country.”

Arms purchases from great powers like Russia, the U.S. and China are another means for Middle Eastern nations to exert their influence, Pollack says.

The U.S. remains the dominant exporter of arms to the Middle East region, but Russia has become a bigger weapons dealer during the past decade, due in large part to its support of Assad, according to a recent study [published by the Congressional Research Service](#).

Russia exported 14 percent of weapons sold to nations in that region between 2011 and 2014, up from 9 percent between 2007 and 2010, according to the congressional study, while the U.S. also sold more weapons to those nations while competing with Chinese and European exporters.

Figure 5. Arms Transfer Agreements with Developing Nations in the Near East
(supplier percentage of value)



Source: U.S. government.

The U.S. and Russia are selling tanks, aircraft and self-propelled guns to Middle East nations, while China’s arms sales to the region since 2011 have mainly consisted of artillery and surface-to-air-missiles, according to the congressional report.

Saudi Arabia is buying more weapons from the U.S. in particular to ensure that those weapons will be interoperable with any military support from Washington, says Anthony Cordesman, a senior defense expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Purchases of high-tech weaponry like aircraft are key to the Saudi coalition’s strategy against opposition forces in Yemen, says Cordesman, who formerly served as director of intelligence assessment in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The kingdom is also modernizing its military to become less dependent on its allies, he adds.

“If you are a Saudi, you are looking at how Egypt and Pakistan have their own problems to deal with,” Cordesman says. “The Saudi military partnership with the U.S. is working well, but there is less trust in the White House to act decisively.”