

How Much Are U.S. Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia? Donald Trump's Figures and Family Ties Challenged

By [Tom O'Connor](#)

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The relationship between major military allies the United States and Saudi Arabia has come under intense scrutiny as Turkey asserted that the kingdom was behind the disappearance of a prominent journalist last seen entering Riyadh's consulate in Istanbul.

The U.S. has long invested in Saudi Arabia, viewing the conservative Sunni Muslim monarchy as a stable partner in the Middle East, and President Donald Trump has only consolidated [his ties to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#), widely seen as the power broker at home. On Wednesday, Trump appeared to dismiss lawmakers' concerns about continuing to provide military assistance to Saudi Arabia, the leading international buyer for U.S. weapons, amid [mounting evidence](#) that media commentator and *Washington Post* contributor Jamal Khashoggi was killed within the consulate building.

Acknowledging that senators were "talking about different kinds of sanctions" against Riyadh, Trump defended his royal partner, saying Saudi Arabia was "spending \$110 billion on military equipment and on things that create jobs, like jobs and others for this country."

"I don't like the concept of stopping an investment of \$110 billion into the United States," Trump added, again citing a figure that experts argued did not reflect the reality of the situation.



President Donald Trump (right) holds a chart of military hardware sales as he meets with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (left) in the Oval Office at the White House on March 20. The \$110 billion figure includes U.S. weapons that Saudi Arabia would like to buy but has not signed any contracts for. Kevin Dietsch-Pool/Getty Images

During his visit to Riyadh in May 2017, Trump [proclaimed](#) "a landmark deal" that "includes the announcement of a \$110 billion Saudi-funded defense purchase." Shortly afterward, Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institute's Center for Middle East Policy labeled the deal "[fake news](#)," arguing that based on conversations with contacts in the defense industry and on Capitol Hill, the alleged deal was essentially "a bunch of letters of interest or intent, but not contracts."

Speaking to [The Washington Post](#) on Wednesday, Riedel said Trump's oft-repeated figure of \$110 billion was "still fake." The newspaper noted that the State Department had announced six deals worth a combined total of \$4 billion since Trump's 2017 trip to Saudi Arabia, and that many deals lacked delivery dates or had dates that were years away. Former President Barack Obama offered weapons sales [totaling \\$115 billion](#) to Riyadh, about half of which resulted in actual agreements, according to the article.

Still, Saudi Arabia leads the list for U.S. weapons exports and is itself the world's second-largest arms importer. Saudi Arabia received \$9 billion in weapons from the U.S. between 2013 and 2017, and last year alone garnered some \$3.4 billion, more than the next top five U.S. customers—Australia, the United Kingdom, Israel, Iraq

and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—combined, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

The Trump administration has [boosted sales to Saudi Arabia](#) despite criticism at home and abroad regarding the war in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition has been accused of war crimes as it struggles to defeat a Zaidi Shiite Muslim rebel group known as Ansar Allah, or the Houthis. The U.S., Saudi Arabia and their regional allies suspect that the group has ties to their mutual foe, Iran, but have failed to oust the insurgents from the capital city of Sanaa.

In August, the protracted conflict in Yemen—which the United Nations described as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis"—received rare prominence in Western headlines when a Saudi coalition air strike hit a school bus, killing about 54 people, most of them children, in the northern Houthi-held city of Saada. The bomb used in the attack, for which Saudi Arabia later apologized, was believed to have been [provided by the U.S.](#)

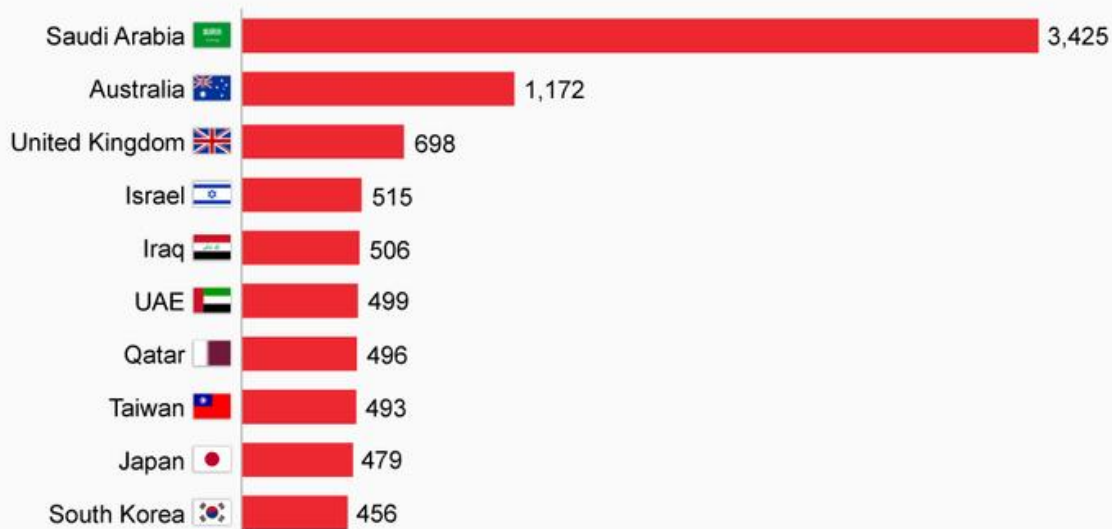
Such incidents, along with Saudi Arabia's potential role in the fate of Khashoggi and other dissenting voices in the kingdom, have compelled legislators to question continued U.S. assistance to Saudi Arabia. On Wednesday, a bipartisan group of senators wrote a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which they criticized the Trump administration for certifying Saudi Arabia and the UAE for weapons sales last month because "the Saudi coalition has failed to adopt some U.S. recommendations while civilian deaths and casualties due to coalition airstrikes have increased dramatically in recent months."

The graphic below by [Statista](#) shows the top recipients of U.S. arms in 2017.



The USA's Biggest Arms Export Partners

Value of arms imported from the United States in 2017, by country (in million TIV*)



* TIV (trend-indicator value) is based on the known unit production costs of weapons and represents the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer.



@StatistaCharts Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

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The Statistics Portal
www.statista.com

A chart shows the top recipients of U.S. arms in 2017. Saudi Arabia, the world's second-largest weapons importer, claimed more than the next five leading countries combined. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute/Statista/Newsweek

Others called for a closer look into the relationship between Trump's own family and the ruling monarchy in Riyadh. As Trump has failed to appoint or even nominate an ambassador to Saudi Arabia, he has [heavily relied on](#) Jared Kushner, his son-in-law and senior adviser, to deal with the Arabian Peninsula state, which was [one of the few countries](#) to support Trump's decision to [abandon a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran](#).

Kushner was reportedly instrumental in convincing U.S. defense companies to [give Saudi Arabia a cheaper deal](#) in 2017, and some claimed that Prince Mohammed himself bragged that the Kushner was "[in his pocket](#)." Earlier this year, six House Democrats appealed to the FBI to investigate Kushner over [allegedly leaking classified information](#) to Saudi Arabia. With Khashoggi's suspicious vanishing prompting a tepid response from the administration, calls for a review of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia alliance have amplified.

"The disappearance of this journalist is deeply disturbing, and Saudi Arabia must answer tough questions," Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the progressive Center for American Progress in Washington, said in a statement sent to *Newsweek*. "It risks rupturing its relationship with the United States. The Trump administration also must answer why it has so closely aligned America's policy in the Middle East with Saudi Arabia over the past year."

