

# International Arms Trade: A Barrier to Democracy and to Public Health

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A dramatic increase in arms trade occurred between 1969 and 1990, without much public awareness or alarm on the part of informed professionals. This has been described as an "orgy of arms buying" [1], leading many nations, even very poor agrarian states, to acquire major levels of military technology, including weapons of mass destruction. There are numerous dangers in the growth of this lethal market, which we describe in this essay. Foremost for physicians concerned with preservation of life and improvement of health is the increase in actual and potential morbidity and mortality due to war and, second, the impact of the war trade on the ability of nations to provide for the health and prosperity of their peoples, especially in the developing world. Third, we speculate that global arms sales distort democratic decision making in countries profiting from the sales and thwart the development of democracy in developing nations, many of them newly emerging in the wake of the cold war.

## RECENT HISTORY

In 1969, "the value of weapons supplied to the third world countries amounted to \$1.5 billion" [2]. By 1990, that total had risen to \$41.3 billion. Total Soviet arms sales to developing countries peaked at \$24.8 billion in 1986 and dropped to \$11.8 billion in 1990 and to \$5 billion in 1991. U.S. arms sales to

developing countries peaked at \$18.2 billion in 1990 (44.3% of the world's total) and dropped to \$14.2 billion in 1991 (57.4% of the total) [3]. Chinese and western European third world arms sales in 1990 were \$2.6 and \$7 billion, respectively [4]. However, "if arms transfer agreements reached with the third world in 1990 and 1991 are implemented, the value of arms deliveries will increase" [5]. The Bush administration recently announced sales of \$9 billion of F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia and \$5 billion of F-16 aircraft to Taiwan [6], likely harbingers of a resumed upward trend.

Most experts observe that the initial impetus and justification for arms sales by the superpowers to their largely third world "client" states were political and strategic, determined by the dynamics of the cold war. That is, it was thought that infusions of weapons could strengthen a government loyal to the U.S. (or the former U.S.S.R.), and similarly arms sold to insurgent groups could be justified if a government opposed to a given superpower was considered susceptible to internal upheaval and could be manipulated into a stance viewed to be more favorable in the global or regional balance. From the perspective of the United States then, the primary justification for exporting weapons since World War II has been the containment of communism [7].

For both geopolitical and economic reasons, the blossoming of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) created huge new weapons markets. In the 1970s, when the dramatic increase in weapons trade began [8], an additional geopolitical dynamic emerged: the need for control over sources of oil [9]. The Middle East became as important a strategic battleground for the superpowers as Europe had been until then. With the creation of OPEC, the countries that benefited from high oil

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prices could afford to buy enormous quantities of weapons from any seller, and they did. Thus, in addition to strategic motives, to some degree arms exports were also driven by economic gain. For both the strategic goals of the government and the economic benefit of the weapons industry, the United States used favorable arms export policies to court countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and the Soviet Union plied its client states, Syria and Afghanistan. The percentage of French weapons exports going to non-European countries increased from 42% in 1971, to 64% in 1974, and to 85% by 1991 [10]. "Of the nearly \$417 billion in arms received by the third world from 1978 to 1988, \$201 billion or 48% went to the Middle East, the most volatile region in the world. Noncommunist nations supplied \$114.9 billion . . . while communist nations delivered \$85.4 billion" [7].

The buildup of arms in the oil-rich Arab states, spurred by the willingness of the U.S., its allies, and the former Soviet Union to sell arms to these countries, was used by the Israeli government to embark upon its participation in buying and selling "conventional" weapons, its acquisition, manufacture, and preparation for use of 100 to 200 nuclear weapons [11], some of which may have been targeted on the former Soviet Union as well as on Israel's neighbors [12], and its support of the South African government's development of nuclear weapons and missiles in exchange for uranium [12].

#### ARMS TRADE LEADING TO THE GULF WAR

Regional political conflicts complicated the simple alignment of Middle East countries along the cold war axis. As a cold war ally of the Soviet Union and as an anti-Iran ally of the United States, Iraq purchased \$46.7 billion worth of arms from 1982 to 1989, largely from the Soviet Union, the United States, western Europe, and China. This was the largest accumulation ever of modern weapons by a third world country [13]. For its part, the United States 1) sold \$6.7 billion in weapons to Iran between 1974 and 1978 and 2) sold approximately \$10 to \$15 billion in weapons to Iraq between 1982 and 1989 [7].

Additionally, between 1985 and 1990, the U.S. government approved 771 licenses (68% of those requested) for \$1.5 billion of exports to Iraq, for such things as biological agents, electronic parts, and computer terminals [7]. Recently, evidence emerged

that much of Iraq's nuclear technology came from the U.S. between 1982 and 1989, against the advice of some State Department officials [14].

The Iraqi weapons systems were then used to invade Kuwait and to fight, however inadequately, those nations that had provided them in the first place. Further subsequent arms transfers induced nations to join in the coalition against Iraq and then afterwards rewarded them for having done so. In March 1991 the Pentagon announced the sale of F-16 fighters to Egypt. In order to be eligible for this sale, Egypt had to reduce its \$7 billion debt incurred in earlier arms purchases. The U.S. forgave the \$7 billion debt to clear the way for this sale, shifting the bill from Egypt to the American taxpayers [7]. Mr. Bush's hypocrisy is evident in his statement to Congress at the end of the Gulf war, "It would be tragic if the nations of the Middle East and Persian Gulf were now, in the wake of war, to embark on a new arms race" [15].

In light of the human, ecological, and economic costs of Desert Storm and the shifting allegiances of Iran and Iraq, the argument that arms trade enhances regional stability seems especially absurd.

#### THE SHIFT FROM ARMS SALES FOR STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE TO ARMS SALES TO IMPROVE BALANCE OF PAYMENTS

According to Husbands: "The market for arms in the 1990s will be even more competitive and unsettled than in the boom days of the 1970s and 1980s. For all arms suppliers, economics will be the driving force in the 1990s" [16]. Arms manufacturers, their capacities bloated by the inflationary defense spending of the past decade, will now be facing defense cutbacks.

Arms manufacturers in the United States and western Europe, facing reduced defense spending by their own governments, are pushing for even further increases in foreign sales, to increase their profits and supposedly to improve those nations' balance of payments. An industry official recently stated: "Exports are no longer just the icing on the cake. They are the cake" [17]. Ray Hartung believes that the real winners of the Gulf war are "Boeing, Lockheed, McDonnell Douglas, Grumman, LTV, Raytheon, GE, and Martin Marietta. . . . Far from having qualms about the role of their products in fueling increasing violent and destructive conflicts, U.S. arms companies seem to be moving full speed

ahead . . . in the mad rush to cash in on the Gulf war" [18].

Within little more than a decade, the French weapons industries have grown to take on a life of their own [10]. Leaders across the political spectrum within France now view the arms industry as a national economic asset, putting the Ministry of Defense in the critical position of determining priorities of the French economy.

The Warsaw Pact nations, as a result of their military dissolution and impoverishment, may now be more inclined than ever to sell weapons to the highest bidder with little regard for the political consequences.

The arms reduction treaties, in the wake of the end of the cold war, produce the prospect of enormous supplies of primarily European weapons, both nuclear and conventional, available in the open market. The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty of 1990 requires significant reductions in conventional weapons in the signatory countries but no guarantees that those weapons will not be sold to other countries. Countries under economic duress may attempt to sell these weapons rather than destroy them.

Czechoslovakia has listed for export more than 5,000 of its CFE Treaty-eliminated weapons systems. Among these are 300 Soviet-built tanks that are being sold to Syria [7]. Although nuclear weapons treaties generally provide safeguards for the prudent disposal of warheads and missiles, such safeguards may not always prove effective [19].

#### **THE EMERGENCE OF DEVELOPING NATIONS AS ARMS MERCHANTS**

Another emerging trend is that developing nations are increasingly producing arms for export, primarily for economic gain, either through their indigenous efforts or, for higher technology weapons, through licensing agreements with industrial nations. The number of nations exporting weapons has more than doubled over the past 20 years, from 21 in 1968 to 45 in 1988. Listed in decreasing order of volume of exports, the leading nations include India, Israel, South Africa, Brazil, Taiwan, North Korea, Argentina, South Korea, and Egypt [19].

According to Ross: "The process of developing a defense industry typically follows five stages. At first, prefabricated components are imported and simply assembled in the country. The second stage

involves actual production of weapon components under license agreements with foreign suppliers. In the third stage, complete foreign-designed weapons are produced under license. By the fourth stage, national defense industries are able to modify, redesign, and reproduce foreign weapons, and in the fifth stage, domestically designed arms are produced" [19].

A number of countries have progressed for some weapons systems through all five stages, including all of the above countries plus Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Mexico, Chile, and Peru. These countries are increasingly freeing themselves from the dependence and political constraints imposed by reliance on arms imports. This trend promises increased qualitative and quantitative competition in the global arms market, increased economic pressure for arms sales, decreased consideration of strategic consequences, and decreased international control over arms sales.

Israel and Brazil are among the most rapidly growing arms exporters, with exports of several hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Kolodziej asserts that "Israel has reached world stature as a supplier of quality lethal products" [10]. Another example, Brazil, is an attractive source of weapons for many nations because it does not have the political and strategic attachments represented by the U.S., the former U.S.S.R., or Israel. Brazil is expanding its markets in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, competing with France's prominence as a nonaligned supplier.

Unfortunately, the risks of worldwide arms trade are not limited to conventional weapons. The most advanced third world producers of conventional weapons—Argentina, Brazil, India, Israel, and Pakistan—have developed or are believed to be developing both nuclear warhead and missile delivery systems [19]. Because so much of this technology transfer is conducted in thinly veiled nonmilitary contexts, these capabilities are currently spreading to other third world countries besides Iraq. Controlling nuclear proliferation is thus linked to the need for much more explicit restraint on weapons technology transfers in general [18].

#### **THE IMPACT OF ARMS PURCHASES ON DEVELOPING NATIONS**

Armed conflict in the third world will likely erupt in internal civil wars or in struggles between me-

dium sized powers with hegemonic ambitions. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's 1989 Yearbook reported that 75% of the weapons transferred to the third world between 1984 and 1988 went to 14 nations [20]. Michael Klare has identified those among 18 militarized nations that 1) can wage medium-intensity warfare, 2) exist next to another militarized nation, and 3) have unresolved conflicts with neighboring nation(s) [1]. Grouped according to region, these heavily armed potential antagonists include Egypt, Israel, Iran, Libya, Syria, and Turkey in the Middle East; China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan in the Far East; Argentina and Brazil in Latin America; and Angola and South Africa. The damage these nations are capable of inflicting upon each other is illustrated by the Iran-Iraq War, in which an estimated 1,500,000 people died in an eight-year period [21]. The possession of major arms may, as in the case of the Gulf war, tempt a zealot leader in any of these countries to invite "apocalyptic" destruction by confronting a larger, industrial nation armed with very much more sophisticated weaponry.

Internal conflicts have also contributed significantly to the deaths of the 40 million people who have died in wars in developing countries since 1945 [15]. In 1990 there were 16 ongoing wars that had resulted in the deaths of 2,632,000 civilians and 300,000 to 650,000 soldiers [8]. Weapons trade often results in weapons use.

Rampantly expanding weapons purchases in developing countries also cause deaths without having to be used. Weapons are always purchased by developing nations (and even by developed nations) at the cost of social programs. It is not unusual for military expenditures to total four times the spending on health care and twice that on education [7]. Developing nations spent close to \$167.3 billion on military budgets in 1988, roughly \$38 billion of which was spent on arms purchases from other countries [8]. As in the industrialized nations, large militaries distort government priorities by promoting even more military spending. Were some fraction of this money to be spent to prevent or correct unsanitary water supplies and inadequate sewers, exposure to cold and infection, the lack of family planning measures, inadequate health care and illiteracy, these problems would be eliminated. Populations thus supported would be better equipped to improve

the futures of their children and to avoid rampant destruction of the environment in their pursuits of a better life. The United States has some culpability in these distorted priorities, as military assistance increased to over 40% of the "foreign aid" budget in the 1980s [7].

### THE IMPACT OF ARMS PURCHASES ON DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING NATIONS

Perhaps most importantly, a large military in an underdeveloped country may be the major force in the way of democracy, i.e., the people expressing themselves uncoerced, for or against those actually in power at any time.

Ruth Leger Sivard defines military-controlled governments as those in which there is 1) key political leadership by military officers, 2) the existence of a state of emergency or martial law, 3) extrajudicial authority exercised by security forces, 4) lack of central political control over armed forces, and 5) occupation by foreign military forces. Military-controlled governments tend to have larger armed forces, more official violence against the public, more years at war, and more death in wars [8].

Recent events in Haiti, Iraq, Somalia, Liberia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Indonesia, and (the former) Yugoslavia have made clear that those parties, nationalities, or factions with the most weapons gain control, at the cost of enormous human suffering and not necessarily in accordance with popular opinion. "All too often, security forces protect a politico-economic system in which state resources are a source of wealth for those in power rather than protecting the majority's right to seek reforms" [15].

Instead of protecting democracy, military power undermines it. Countries with weak or uninfluential militaries, or, as in the emerging former Soviet republics so far, with militaries unwilling to march against or fire on their own citizens, are freer to move in a democratic direction.

### THE IMPACT OF ARMS SALES ON THE DEVELOPED NATIONS

Notwithstanding the administration's and Congress's commitment of over \$274 billion to defense in 1992, some military experts argue that it would be possible to maintain adequate defenses and cut the defense budget in half in a few years [22]. As noted previously, defense contractors are already

stimulating arms sales in developing countries to replace those lost at home [19]. The military-industrial complex continues to promote its existence by pointing to its favorable effect on the balance of trade [10].

Initially it might appear advantageous to the American taxpayer to permit foreign taxpayers to foot the bill. In many instances, however, as noted earlier, through military aid, loans, and loan forgiveness, the "foreign" purchase of American arms is still paid for by the U.S. taxpayer. Additionally, scientists and workers in the defense industry and the capital provided to them do not contribute to the building of a strong economy based on productive industries. Enormous amounts of American tax dollars continue to flow to the war machines of many nations and out of the budgets for the impoverished, the homeless, health care reform, and rebuilding domestic infrastructures.

Moreover, as was evident in the recent war with Iraq, those very weapons provided with such generous credit terms by the U.S. may well be used against American troops at some time. Thus do arms sales threaten the lives of Americans and the health of the American economy.

#### THE IMPACT OF ARMS SALES ON DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPED NATIONS

U.S. arms sales also badly distort democratic decision-making processes at home. Congresspeople, the military-industrial complex, and the major media all equate military contracts with jobs. In fact, the opposite is true. If the equivalent amount of money were to be invested in the civilian economy, more jobs would be created. For each \$1 billion decrease in the military budget, 24,000 jobs on average are lost. *But* if that same amount is invested in the civilian economy, 31,000 jobs are created [23]. A military-to-civilian shift of \$150 billion would create an additional 1 million jobs. Most congressional districts send far more to the Pentagon than they receive. Unfortunately, most people in Congress fight for the Pentagon crumbs and, in the process, for the whole bloated Pentagon budget, make other government spending "the problem," and persuade a weary populace facing personal and national indebtedness to mistrust government programs for needed investments in education, housing, and the creation of jobs. As in developing nations, democratic processes are distorted.

#### SUMMARY

The epidemics of arms sales and militarism continue to prove deadly and prevent the widespread application of modern public health methods to improving health and survival. Militarism kills people both directly in war and indirectly through depriving them of essential social services. The direct deaths occur mostly in developing nations, with the killing done or financed by the developed nations. The indirect deaths occur everywhere.

Militarism also kills the spirits of nations. For developed nations this death takes the form of distorted or paralyzed government decision making, resting uneasily on distant victories and wasted expenditures that distract people from problems at home. For the developing countries, budding democracies are crushed. It might be hoped that the end of the cold war, which spawned this arms trade growth, might enable now its reversal. But the ending of the cold war paradoxically seems to have fueled this arms race, driven now by economic rather than strategic incentives.

Any hope of stopping the growth of this lethal market and reducing its impact on nations emerging from totalitarianism will require the leadership of the United States. First, U.S. administrations must do more than give lip service to the issue of arms trade. The United States must stop its short-sighted practice of rewarding today's allies with weapons that can be used against the U.S. tomorrow. Second, the U.S. must lend real support to United Nations efforts to restrict arms markets internationally.

Physicians for Social Responsibility and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War have special roles to play in pressuring nations to limit the arms trade. In their work at home and in their new north-south collaborations, members and affiliates can work to identify and reduce arms sales and purchases at both ends, redirect the money thus wasted, solve the social problems, and nourish democratic institutions. ■

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