



THE POLITICS OF SAUDI MISSILE DEFENCE DEALS

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October 24, 2017

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On October 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia. The MoU was signed on the sidelines of a visit by Saudi King Salman to Moscow on October 4-5. Saudi Arabia also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Russia to help the Kingdom in its efforts to develop its own military industries.

In an interesting move, on October 6, just a day after Russia agreed to sell air defence systems to Saudi Arabia, the US State Department also cleared a potential \$15 billion deal for Saudi Arabia to purchase the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system. The timing of the approval of THAAD systems by the US is of particular interest. Saudi Arabia has traditionally been closer to the US. This was the first time a Saudi King has ever visited Moscow. The US would not be happy that Russia is winning influence with its ally, as well as the fact that the two signed a defense deal worth \$3 billion.

Under the Saudi-Russia agreements, the former is set to buy S-400 air defense systems, Kornet anti-tank guided missile systems and multiple rocket launchers and automatic grenade launchers. The state-owned Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), said that these agreements are “expected to play a pivotal role in the growth and development of the military and military systems industry in Saudi Arabia.”¹ The MoU includes the transfer of technology for the local production of the Kornet systems, advanced multiple rocket launchers and automatic grenade launchers. The two countries

¹ "Saudi Arabia says to buy Russian S-400 air defense systems," *Arab News*, October 5, 2017.

will also cooperate in setting a plan to localise the manufacturing and sustainment of parts for the S-400 air defense system.²

The S-400 is a surface-to-air system which comprises a set of four missiles with varying ranges, and is designed to intercept aircraft, as well as other missiles. It can respond to threats up to 400km away, and it can engage 80 or more targets simultaneously.³

The US approval of the sale of the \$15 billion THAAD system is a core part of the \$110 billion weapons sale agreements between the US and Saudi Arabia during US President Donald Trump visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017. The sale of seven THAAD batteries include 44 THAAD launchers, 360 interceptors, 16 THAAD Fire Control and Communications Mobile Tactical Station Groups and seven AN/TPY-2 THAAD radars, along with associated support equipment and training. According to some reports, the estimated delivery time of the system is 2023-2026.⁴ The system shoots down short and medium-range ballistic missiles in the terminal phase using hit-to-kill technology and has a 200 km range.⁵ Prime contractors for the system are Lockheed Martin Space Systems Company and Raytheon.

The sale of the THAAD system would have dual benefits for the US. The multi-billion-dollar deal will help satisfy the Trump administration's desire to be seen to be protecting and increasing jobs at home. Secondly, it would help strengthen Saudi Arabia which sees Iran as the biggest threat in the region. The US and Saudi Arabia are in tune with their views on Iran as a threat. This is also the primary rationale behind this new Saudi arms spending spree. For the US, it would be advantageous to have a network of missile defense systems deployed around the world in countries that are allies. Earlier this year, the US helped deploy THAAD systems in South Korea against the threat of North Korean missiles.

On the other hand, the US would be unhappy with Saudi-Russian defence deal on two accounts. Saudi Arabia is looking to acquire weapon systems from Russia which implies that the former is looking to diversify its sources and building relations with Moscow that is a US rival. It also implies that US companies lost business to Russian companies. At the same time, it shows perhaps how Riyadh is hedging its bets, as US influence has been diminishing in the Middle East.

² "Saudi Arabia to buy Russian S-400 defence systems, other arms," *Dawn*, October 2017.

³ A regular S-400 battalion consists of at least eight launchers, each with 4 missiles, with a total of 32 missiles per battalion. One regiment contain 8 battalions which means it has of total of 256 missiles that can theoretically shoot a maximum of 256 targets.

⁴ Aaron Mehta, "US clears THAAD sale to Saudi Arabia," October 6, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/space/2017/10/06/us-clears-thaad-sale-to-saudi-arabia/>

⁵ "Thaad: US to sell \$15bn missile defence to Saudi Arabia," *BBC News*, October 6, 2017.