



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



January 7, 2012

Sales and Strategy

In the closing days of last year, the Obama administration announced multibillion-dollar arms sales packages to Iraq and Saudi Arabia, including advanced fighter jets, tanks, helicopters and an array of smaller weapons.

A case can be made for these two packages. The Pentagon needs to strengthen strategic partnerships in the region and fortify allies — and oil producers — vulnerable to Iranian pressure. These sales help create jobs at home and offset the dollar drain from oil imports. Still, we are uneasy about the timing and the terms. In its haste to complete these deals, the White House may have forfeited leverage it needs to nudge both governments toward less destructive policies.

With United States troops now out of Iraq, Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki is spurning Washington's repeated pleas for national reconciliation and power sharing, endangering Iraq's democracy and stability. In his latest move, Mr. Maliki, a Shiite, has grabbed full control of the country's key security forces — and empowered Shiite militants — angering Iraq's Sunni Arabs and Kurds and moderate Shiites.

This seems an odd moment to sell him \$11 billion of American-made military equipment, including fighter jets, battle tanks, cannons and armored personnel carriers — the same kind of weapons that Saddam Hussein once used against Iraqi Kurds and Shiites. Before closing the deal, Washington should have sought firm guarantees that Mr. Maliki would do a lot more to share power and resources — and drop his threat to walk away from the American-brokered power-sharing arrangement with the more inclusive Iraqiya bloc, winner of the most seats in the 2010 elections.

Washington should also have bargained harder with the Saudis before signing off on \$30 billion of advanced F-15 jet fighters as part of a multiyear \$60 billion arms deal. The idea is to strengthen Saudi competence and confidence against Iran, which poses a serious threat to all of its neighbors. That threat is more likely to come from terrorism and subversion than from Iran's sanctions-weakened air force, and the best-known use of Saudi troops abroad recently was to help suppress democracy demonstrations in Bahrain.

There are ways to mitigate these dangers. The fighter jets and some of the other sophisticated weapons are not scheduled for delivery until several years from now. And the pilots flying them will require training in the United States. If it appears that American-made weapons are being misused against domestic political opponents, deliveries can and should be held up and training programs suspended.

That kind of leverage is available to the United States in all foreign military sales contracts, although Washington rarely applies it. But this country's strategic interests must trump any sales strategy.

Mr. Maliki's provocations are weakening Iraq and making it more vulnerable to Iranian arm-twisting. Saudi Arabia's royal rulers need to address domestic discontent with democratic reforms. They should remember the lesson of the former shah of Iran, who spent lavishly on American weapons but lost his throne to domestic revolution. So should Washington.