

## The Gulf crisis

# The Middle East tinderbox

During the recent military build-up by the United States, Britain, France and Australia in the Persian Gulf, Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans described the highly militarized Middle East as a 'tinderbox'. For many of us, the Middle East and armed political conflict are inseparable. The seemingly endless news of war and destruction - the rubble of burnt out Beirut, the bloody repression of the Palestinian uprising, the futile Iran-Iraq War, and more recently, the Iraqi military invasion of Kuwait - seem to confirm this impression.

However, it is not widely understood that many of these conflicts have been fuelled and manipulated by outsiders, especially the superpowers and the international weapons dealers. To a large extent our own governments have been accomplices to the growing militarization of the Middle East, exchanging not development, but destruction, for the precious resources of this region.

It is time for the citizens of the superpower nations and their allies, such as Australia, to reverse the arms race in the Middle East. We must call on our governments to halt the flow of weapons into the Middle East before the 'tinderbox' explodes.

### Guns for oil

Over one quarter of the weapons produced in the world end up in the Middle East. Some of the world's most up-to-date and 'precise' conventional weapons such as the Exocet missile and the AWAC radar warplane are deployed in this region.

The superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, control over half of the arms market. This is due to the strong ties that both superpowers have attempted to foster with Middle Eastern regimes during a period of intense superpower rivalry, in order to dominate one of the most important strategic areas of the world. In exchange for oil and the protection of strategic areas, the superpowers have provided Middle Eastern regimes with 'state of the art' weaponry.

Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Jordan are the largest arms importers in the Middle East. During the early 1980s when the international arms market was experiencing a glut -- i.e. there were more weapons than customers -- some of these countries had enough wealth due to their oil income, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iraq, to continue purchasing weaponry. Others, especially Israel -- the largest recipient of US foreign aid -- receive military hardware from the United States due to their strategic value. Syria and Iraq have received the bulk of their military hardware from the Soviet Union even though they are engaged in a stand-off. In fact, approximately 90% of Soviet arms exports have gone to the Middle East.

The value of Middle Eastern arms imports



rose by a staggering 2762% between 1961 and 1980, due largely to oil price rises being exchanged for weapons. International arms dealers increasingly looked to the Middle East to promote ever more destructive hardware knowing that the oil wealth of these countries and the undemocratic nature of many of their regimes ensured that they would 'spend up big'. In addition to the United States and the Soviet Union, arms manufacturers from the western European countries, especially France, Britain, Italy and Sweden, flocked to the Middle East to grab their share of the arms market. France, for example, responded to the increased value of oil after the oil price rise of 1973 by allocating 90% of its arms exports to the Middle East. Increasing political tension and oil prices in the Middle East provided a boon for the arms profiteers. Needless to say the people of the Middle East have paid dearly.

### The Iran-Iraq War

In the late 1970s, the Persian Gulf underwent an unprecedented military buildup. In 1980 Iraq declared war on Iran.

During the Iran-Iraq War a United States embargo on arms supplies to Iran made it virtually impossible for Iran to obtain weapons other than

through clandestine networks, and this it did. The US secretly supplied missiles and spare parts ('contragate') and an Australian company, Evergreen International, acted as go-between for arms sales from the US and Britain, including British made Hawker-Hunter fighter planes and US made F5 fighter planes. The war pushed Iraq to become the foremost Middle Eastern arms importer. As a result of the Iran Iraq War, 300,000 Iranians and 100,000 Iraqis were killed and 600,000 people were wounded.

#### Some facts:

- \* the Iran-Iraq war boosted an ailing arms market;
- \* by the height of the conflict 29 countries were selling weapons to Iraq, 21 were selling to Iran and 10 countries were supplying both sides;
- \* Iraqi pilots were trained in Britain and France;
- \* France became the second major arms supplier to Iraq, after the Soviet Union. France is now present in the military blockade of the Gulf!
- \* despite its official neutral position on the Iran-Iraq war, in 1982 the US approved sales of aircraft and helicopters to Baghdad;
- \* arms supplies to Iraq spanned both east and west, including both Germanies, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Yugoslavia, the UK and North Korea.

### **Nuclear and chemical weapons**

Both Israel and Iraq possess nuclear weapons or have attempted to manufacture them. In 1988 an Israeli nuclear technician, Mordechai Vanunu, confirmed speculation that Israel had a secret stockpile of nuclear weapons. Vanunu was kidnapped from Rome by the Israeli secret service and sentenced, in a secret trial, to 18 years imprisonment, ostensibly for treason but, in reality, for the 'crime' of alerting the world to the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation.

Earlier this year the Iraqi government was implicated in a clandestine attempt to acquire nuclear weapons triggers from Britain. And, in 1981 Israel bombed Iraq's almost completed nuclear reactor in order to prevent it from matching Israel's nuclear weapons capability.

West Germany has supplied Libya with chemical weapons, and both Iraq and Israel possess them. Compared with nuclear weapons, they are cheap and easy to assemble, although they can inflict injury and suffering on a large scale. Iraq has used chemical weapons during its war with Iran and against its own minority Kurdish population. Although the United Nations has attempted to ban chemical weapons, many countries, including signatories to the 1925 Geneva Protocol, have used them or produce them. The Soviet Union was accused of using chemical weapons during its occupation of Afghanistan, and the United States continues to store them on Johnson Atoll in the Pacific. At the Paris Convention on chemical weapons in 1989, the US attempted to undermine efforts to enforce the Geneva Protocol.

Only a comprehensive ban on the export of

uranium and on the production of chemical weapons can ensure that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction does not result in tragedy.

### **The dealers in death**

Many well known corporations deal in military equipment sales to the Middle East. Some recognizable name include:

<u>Contractor/Exporter</u>	<u>Value of Sales (1982)</u>
McDonnell Douglas	\$1,211,480
Westinghouse	\$ 187,907
General Electric	\$ 174,542
Northrop Corp.	\$ 164,341
Lockheed Corp.	\$ 135,442
Chrysler Corp.	\$ 102,170
Ford Motor Co.	\$ 78,664
General Motors Corp.	\$ 64,334
Texas Instruments	\$ 47,007
Boeing Corp.	\$ 67,658
Singer	\$ 39,768

#### **Australian arms sales:**

<u>Country</u>	<u>Value</u>
Abu Dhabi 1968-84	\$2.7 million
Bahrain (small arms training aids)	
Iran (small arms training aids)	
Jordan 1968-84	\$10 million
Oman 1968-84	\$1.7 million
United Arab Emirates	\$ .53 million

## **HELL NO! WE WON'T GO**

### Conscientious objectors to the Gulf War

People around the world have responded to the US and allied nations' military build in the Gulf with the demand for a peaceful solution to the Gulf crisis. Many soldiers and sailors from the intervening countries, including the United States and Australia, have refused to participate in their nations' inflammatory actions or to threaten the lives of tens of thousands of innocent Middle Eastern people simply to defend western control of oil prices. In Hawaii the 22 year old marine, Corporal Jeff Patterson, has said, 'I cannot and will not be a pawn in America's power plays for profits and oil in the Middle East'. In Australia, a young Australian sailor, Terry Jones, has refused to fight a futile, unnecessary war in the Gulf. 'I am prepared to die to defend my country but not to protect United States oil lines...knowing that I might have killed innocent people for nothing.'

**These courageous young people need your support!**

#### **For more information**

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