

US-Saudi arms deal in the making: Needs public scrutiny

From a social perspective, the multi-billion dollar arms purchases can easily be calculated to be a gigantic loss for the people living in Middle Eastern states pressurised to buy the foreign weaponry. With regard to maintaining regional "stability," there is not just reason for scepticism. History tells us there is reason for alarm.

PETER CUSTERS

THE deal urgently needs to be put to public scrutiny, for it is highly consequential. According to reports published mid-September, the US Congress is set to approve a new agreement for the sale of armament systems to oil giant Saudi Arabia. The deal ultimately will be worth a rosy \$60 billion. Though delivery of the weapons will be stretched over a period of 10 years, the prospective deal has already been termed one of the biggest ever in history.

Its principal components are 85 F-15 fighter planes, and the upgrading of 70 similar aircraft delivered to Saudi Arabia in the past. The F-15 is a relatively old model of military plane, but is known to be very effective as means of destruction in air combat. It is manufactured by Boeing Corporation, the Pentagon's second largest supplier of armament systems and one of the leading corporations in the globalised arms industry.

Boeing's managers and shareholders, along with those of United Technologies and other beneficiaries, will undoubtedly feel elated over the outcome of their

lobbying efforts towards Congress. Yet, how to assess the consequences of the deal for the Middle East, a region where many millions of human lives have been lost in wars fought during the last thirty years? How to scrutinise the arms deal on the basis of the experience with exports of Western armaments in the past?

First, it may be noted that Israel, the US's principal ally in the Middle East, is not objecting, but instead has given its "green light" to the US-Saudi deal. Apparently, a visit by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak to Washington was needed to smoothen out tensions over the planned deal. But Israeli fears that it would be at cross-purpose with its own strategic interests have apparently been allayed.

The explanation provided by analysts for this is the following. On the one hand, the F-15 fighter planes, according to the UK Guardian, will carry sensors with technology aimed at preventing their use against their Israeli equivalents. On the other hand, the sale of the F-15 will be paralleled by the sale of the US's newest military aircraft, Martin Lockheed's F-35, to Israel. This ensures that Israel will

continue to enjoy air superiority over any potential rivals in the Middle East.

The triangular diplomacy over the US-Saudi deal once again underlines the enormous influence which the Israeli lobby enjoys in Washington D.C. And the outcome, i.e. enhanced sales of F-35s, is another boon to US arms manufacturers, and to state economic policymakers. The sales strategy surrounding this plane, better known as "Joint Strike Fighter" (JSF), reveals -- perhaps more than any other single US arms system -- how the US government has been using its relations with the military sector towards stimulation of overall growth in the US economy.

Before elaborating on this last point, let's note how the US-Saudi arms deal is part of a continuum, with policymaking initiated in Washington in the seventies of the previous century. In reaction to the 1973 oil crisis, which was caused by the determination of Middle Eastern and other oil producers to raise the price of crude oil, US government officials devised a new trading mechanism. Rather than continuing to resist the oil producers' pressure, the US government henceforth tried to take advantage of the fact that governmental incomes of Middle Eastern oil giants rose.

It notably advised Saudi Arabia and Iran (!) to channel a major part of their additional financial resources towards purchases of Western armaments. This trading system is epitomised by the Al Yamamah deal, a barter agreement between Great Britain and Saudi Arabia, clinched in the 1980s. Under this deal, Great Britain supplied weaponry to Saudi



Arabia, directly exchanging arms against crude oil.

The present US-Saudi deal rivals the Al Yamamah precursor in size. And though there is no evidence that the deal is similarly being conceived as a barter agreement, there is no doubt that the Saudi government will finance its future arms purchases with the income the state reaps from its vast, the world's largest, oil wealth.

Yet, the deal also forms a continuum with another policy formulated by the US in the past. This is the strategy set into motion by the Clinton administration in the late 1990s. At the time, the Pentagon developed new ideas to re-enable the US government to rely on military allocations as primary leverage to stimulate the US business cycle.

Fearing that primary dependence on the US army's expenditures towards achieving overall economic growth might (once again) result in a recession, the Clinton government decided on a new variant of what, in theoretical terms, is designated as military Keynesianism. Instead of trying to achieve the aim of macro-economic growth through expansion of the military budget alone, the US government would henceforth try to achieve the same aim via additional reliance on the exportation of weaponry, foremost exports of the above mentioned JSF.

In the first round, from the late nineties through the first decade of the new millennium, the US government targeted the sale of JSFs and other US weaponry to European governments, and, secondarily, the rising powers in Asia, i.e. China

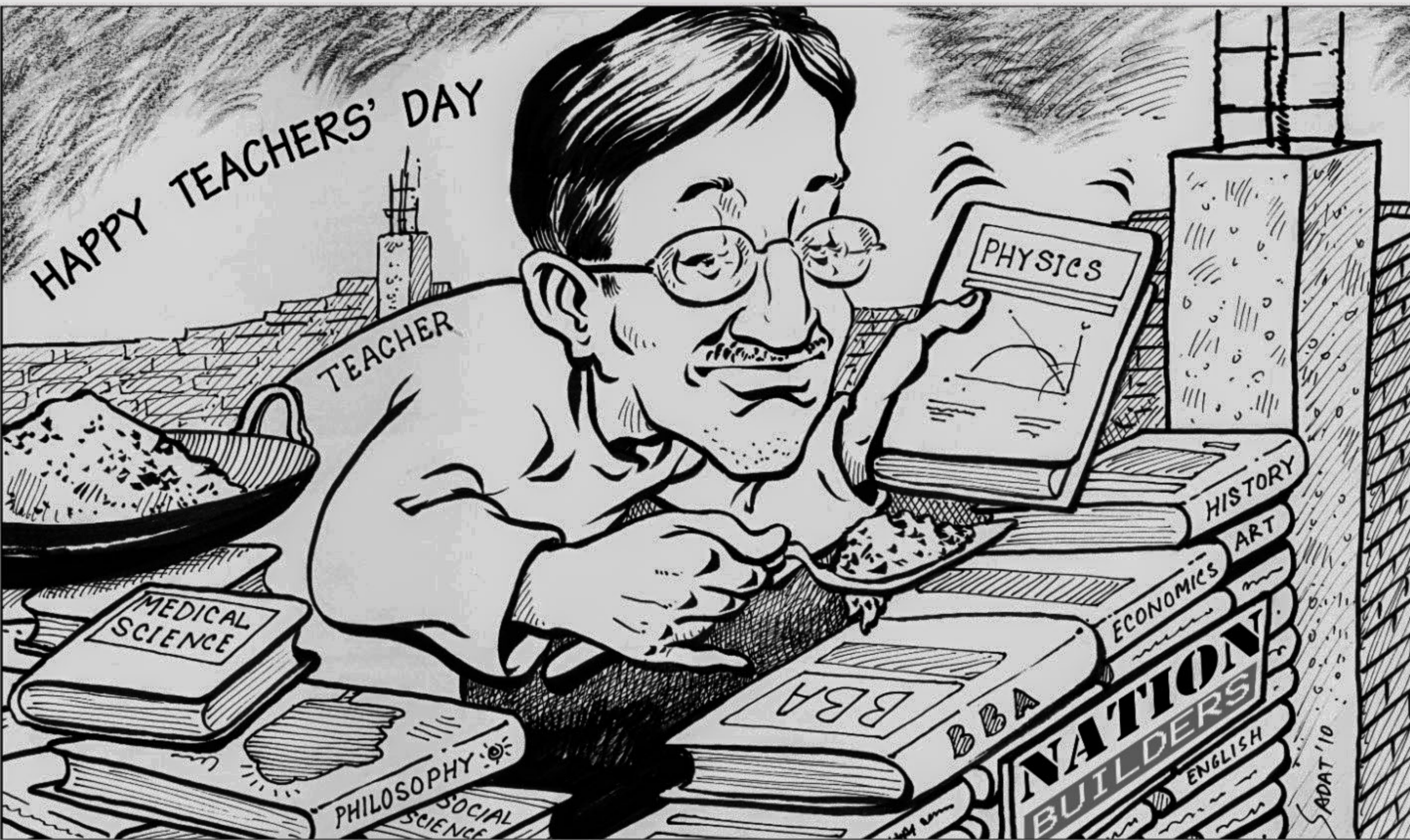
and India. Yet, it now appears that things have come full circle, and that arms exports to the Middle East are expected to provide an extra stimulus to the US economy.

Highly significant from this perspective is the parallel between the US-Saudi deal and the sales of US weaponry to the 600,000 strong Iraqi army. According to recent news Iraq, just like Saudi Arabia and Israel, has agreed to buy a large number of fighter planes along with other weaponry from the US, totalling \$16 billion.

The question is: how are these various parallel sales going to contribute to "stability" in the Middle East? US State Department officials profess that stability is the central aim of the US-Saudi deal. From a social perspective, the multi-billion dollar arms purchases can easily be calculated to be a gigantic loss for the people living in Middle Eastern states pressurised to buy the foreign weaponry.

With regard to maintaining regional "stability," there is not just reason for scepticism. History tells us there is reason for alarm. Surely, it would be wrong to argue that the three consecutive Gulf wars

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WORLD TEACHERS' DAY 2010

Teachers amid new expectations

Teachers continue to get deprived of due promotions. Amendments to their service conditions have also not been made. The government decision of 1994 to introduce service conditions for non-teaching employees is yet to be implemented.

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

TEACHERS world over have been celebrating World Teachers' Day on October 5 since 1994, in view of adoption of the Recommendations concerning the status of teachers by Unesco, which were later approved by ILO in 1966 and 1997 in two phases. The aim of observing the day is to mobilise support for teachers and ensure that the needs of future generations continue to be met by teachers.

Theme of the Day
The main theme of the Day this year is "Recovery Begins With Teachers." It has a background that refers to the appeal to U.S. President Barack Obama on June 21 this year by the presidents of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), two prominent teachers' organisations of the United States.

In the appeal, AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Dennis Van Roekel said inter alia: "We are taking this rather unusual action of sending you a joint letter because of our concern that premature reductions and, in some cases, drastic cuts in public expenditures for education are being made by governments around the globe. We request that you exercise your leadership role at these international meetings to impress upon fellow

world leaders that education must not be seen as an expensive drain on their economies, but as a high-return investment -- the heart and soul of recovery and new beginnings. It is clear that the way to rebuild our world economy is to increase funding for education, not cut it. Investing in education will spur innovation that will produce solutions to the many problems we confront."

This appeal was followed by a call to G20 to promote quality education with teachers by the presidents of Education International (EI) and the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) to support a new global partnership for teacher education and professional development.

EI President, Susan Hopgood, said: "We are to face a worldwide shortage of more than 10 million teachers over the next five years. Millions more need support to become qualified and develop their professional skills. Qualified teachers are the key to quality in education, and countries need an unprecedented global partnership to invest in education."

Supporting this call, the CTF President, Mary-Lou Donnelly, explained that Canadian teachers had worked for years to run in-service training programmes for their colleagues in developing countries with funding provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). "We are deeply committed to helping teachers, and Canada has tremendous

Recommendations

- Since education is a service of fundamental importance it should be recognised as a responsibility of the state;
- Teachers' organisations should be recognised as a force which can contribute greatly to educational advance and, therefore, should be associated with the determination of education policy;
- Teachers' salaries should reflect the importance of the teaching function and hence the importance of teachers as well as the responsibilities which fall upon them from the time of their entry;
- Teaching in higher education requires expert knowledge and specialised skills acquired and maintained through rigorous and lifelong study and research.

experience to offer a new global partnership," she said.

Relevance to Bangladesh context
Teachers and education employees of Bangladesh fully echo the contents and inherent emotions in the appeal and call as stated above. But the Bangladesh context is not entirely the same as world economic recession could not affect it to the extent it was apprehended. In the arena of education no major incidents of retrenchments so far have taken place. On other hand 32,750 new teachers have joined in primary schools.

Government subvention to teachers of non-government schools, colleges, and technical education institutions, which stopped during the 4-party alliance government, has also resumed. About 30,000 teachers in 1,600 insti-

tutions have been included for the first time in the monthly payroll from the government.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education has recommended inclusion of 1,500 more non-government educational institutions under the MPO. Already, the new National Education Policy has been approved by the government and a 32-member committee has been formed for its implementation and monitoring, with teachers' representative in it. 56% of the teachers and employees who lost their jobs during the past regime have also been reinstated.

Non-government teachers and education employees who receive government subvention have been included in the new national pay scale, and no action programme was needed for that this time though it was the practice of previous governments. Teachers and Employees Welfare Fund and Retirement Benefit Board have also been re-organised.

But, despite all these positive steps, teachers continue to get deprived of due promotions. Amendments to their service conditions have also not been made. The government decision of 1994 to introduce service conditions for non-teaching employees is yet to be implemented. Moreover, the controversial teachers' recruitment policy remains unchanged and the Public Service Commission for their recruitment has not been initiated as per commitment of the present government. It seems educators and the education staff shall have to get more organised for implementation of the Unesco-ILO Recommendations concerning their rights and status.

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The world's funniest airlines

A reader told me that a friend was traveling across Southeast Asia when a flight attendant made an announcement, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are about to land in Singapore. If you have any drugs, you will be executed. Thank you."

There was stunned silence. Then laughter. The really funny thing in my opinion is that it was not a joke. Life in Asia is strange: there's nothing really quite like it.

But sometimes airlines deliberately do make jokes. Readers last week proposed we claim the sky by putting a flag into orbit. Well, it turns out that Kulula Airlines of South Africa put out a press announcement that they had trademarked the sky "because it is our main base of operations."

It was all an elaborate joke, of course. Travelling for work is exhausting, so a bit of airborne wit is welcome. I heard about Kulula from reader Christian Fardel, an airport executive.

When passengers get on board, the flight attendant says, "Keep your seatbelts fastened low and tight around those gorgeous hips."

When crewmembers have to point to all the doors during the safety demonstration, the voice says, "There are eight emergency exits on the aircraft, and the crew will do the Macarena and point them out to you now."

They even joke about the crime rate, "Please check the overhead storage, the seat pocket in front of you as well as your neighbor's bag for all of your nice goodies."

But Kulula still lags behind Southwest Airlines of the US, traditionally the world's wittiest airline.

Most just frame the boring announcements they have to make with jokes.

Here are four typical lines:

- 1) "If you don't like our service, we have six emergency exits."
- 2) "Cabin crew is coming down the aisle to make sure that your seatbelts are on and your shoes match your outfit."
- 3) "To operate your seat belt, insert the metal tab into the buckle, and pull tight. If you don't know how to operate one, you probably shouldn't be out in public unsupervised."
- 4) "Make sure to take all your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed evenly among the flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses."

Sometimes the witty lines have a purpose. On Southwest, the flight attendants say, "The button over your head with the picture of a light bulb on it turns on your light. The button with the picture of the flight attendant does not turn on your flight attendant so 'don't push it.'"

But a flight attendant working in Asia told me that there was one Southwest line that she wished her bosses would allow her to copy. "This is a non-smoking, non-whining, non-complaining flight."

But let's finish with a story that takes us back to the cheery subject of Asian airlines and imminent death. Picture the scene. An Air Koryo jet is moving down the runway in Pyongyang, North Korea. Suddenly it stops and goes back to the gate. After a two-hour delay, it finally takes off. A passenger asks, "So, what was the problem?"

The steward replies, "The pilot was bothered by the fact that the engine didn't sound right. So we took immediate action. It took a couple of hours to replace the pilot."

Welcome to Asia. Now sit back and enjoy your flight.

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