

Booming business

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

No military contractor in America delivers more bang for less buck than the Boeing Co. weapons plant in St. Charles, Mo. For a mere \$20,000, Boeing's thrifty workers will provide you with an easy-to-assemble tail fin kit and a global positioning system guidance system that will turn your 2,000-pound dumb bomb into a "Joint Direct Attack Munition" that can land within 4 feet of where you aim it.

No more messy carpet-bombing. Assuming you've picked the right target, much less messy collateral damage, too. No more sending your planes on low-level bombing runs through flak- and SAM-filled skies. Boeing's JDAMs have proved their value time and again against targets in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But now the question is whether the United States should sell hundreds of JDAM kits along with bombs to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other countries in the Middle East. Israel, too, has expressed an interest in acquiring up to 10,000 JDAM kits, raising the specter of the next Middle East war being waged with precision munitions assembled in St. Charles, Mo., USA.

The invaluable Walter Pincus of The Washington Post reported this week that President George W. Bush discussed a \$20 billion arms package with Arab leaders during his recent trip to the Middle East. Before the deal can go through, however, Congress must be notified; last week, Bush sent a message to Congress proposing to sell the Saudis 900 JDAM kits with bombs of various sizes, including some with penetrating warheads. The UAE is authorized to buy 200 JDAM kits and more than 700 big bombs. In October, 188 House members signed a letter to Bush asking for a guarantee that JDAM sales to Saudi Arabia would not harm U.S. interests in the region or "undercut Israel's qualitative military advantage." Under the Arms Control Act, Congress' options in trying to block such a sale are limited. Opponents would have to mount a hurry-up effort to pass a resolution against it and then be prepared to override any presidential veto.

The concern in Congress is about the stability of Middle East regimes and about what would happen if more radical elements gained control of those countries' militaries.

The JDAM kits are just the latest proposed weapons sales to the Middle East. The administration previously notified Congress that it was contemplating selling helicopters to Bahrain; Patriot missiles and maintenance service for F/A-18 attack fighters to Kuwait; armored personnel carriers, Humvees and airborne surveillance systems to Saudi Arabia; and Hellfire missiles, Patriot missile systems, laser-guided bombs and used Hawkeye surveillance planes to the United Arab Emirates.

No doubt, the sales would lessen the United States' trade deficit; some of the money we ship overseas to pay for oil would come back. And no doubt the business would be good for Boeing and the St. Charles economy. But whether these sales are in the long-term strategic interests of this nation is a matter that deserves considerably more discussion.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch â€œ CNS.

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