

The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

[An Investigation by the Washington Post Reveals that Hundreds of Retired U.S. Military and Security Officials Have Taken Lucrative Jobs Working for Foreign Governments Including Repressive Gulf Autocrats Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates](#)

According to recent reports by The Washington Post and the Project on Government Oversight, a government watchdog, about 450 U.S. military veterans have taken jobs working closely with foreign entities since 2015, mostly in North Africa and the Middle East. The United Arab Emirates alone has poached 280 former U.S. service members to improve their military via training, mechanical work, or other means. What is troubling about these contracts is the blatant lack of basic human rights in many of the countries in which U.S. veterans are being employed. In the UAE, the government maintains a tight grip on media coverage and there are no free elections. Saudi Arabia, another nation that has employed many Americans after service, has many of the same policies and has also garnered considerable and growing concerns regarding its relations with the U.S. in recent years due to actions such as the assassination of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi and a recent OPEC+ decision to cut oil production to increase profits, among other troubling behavior.

It is the promise of incredibly high salaries and the glitzy lifestyle of the oil rich Middle East that attracts American defense contractors. Although information regarding how much the most senior of officers have been offered was removed from the documents given to the Washington Post, the papers revealed that at least four lower-level officials made between \$200,000 and \$300,000 annually by working with the Saudi Defense Ministry headed by often-criticized Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In the UAE, a former Navy SEAL took a job for \$348,000 plus benefits, and a former Army colonel signed on for \$324,000. Even those who come on to work as pilots or mechanics make \$200,000 and \$120,000, respectively.

Although the salaries being offered to the highest ranking of officials – such as generals and admirals – were redacted, their names remained. One name that sticks out is General Jim Mattis. Having retired a few years earlier, Mattis became Secretary of Defense under former President Trump. However, the report indicated that after retirement and before becoming defense secretary, Mattis worked as a military advisor for the UAE, raising serious questions about where his loyalties rested as Secretary. Another recognizable figure is Army General Keith Alexander, who ran the National Security Agency under Bush and Obama and was hired by the Saudis. Other noteworthy names include Marine General James L. Jones, whose two firms have made millions from contracting with the Saudis, and Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, who made close to half a million dollars from Russia without U.S. consent.

Regarding the legality of such actions, the answer is a complicated one. The Constitution states that ex-military are forbidden from joining the armed forces of another country in uniform. However, in 1977, Congress not only handed responsibility of the issue to the State Department, but also authorized the waiving of the rule as long as contractors were working as civilians and not in direct opposition of U.S. security interests. The Post discovered that in 95% of cases, requests are simply approved with little to no oversight after the fact. Moreover, the definition of what is contracting versus what is employment with a foreign government is often unclear. Some officers even choose to work for contractors that are based in the U.S., but majority-owned by foreign actors. In most cases, it is plain to see that contractors need to at least be granted permission to do their contracting work. However, the Post discovered that many do not ask permission at all. Frequently, there is very little punishment even for those who are caught. Lieutenant General Flynn, for example, was required to forfeit the money the Russian government gave him for travel, but none of the salary that he earned.



Legality aside, this behavior from these former officers is highly concerning. Yes, the fact that former men and women in U.S. uniform are aiding and abetting countries that terrorize their own people is horrible, but the problem runs far deeper as well. These contractors present a serious national security threat. It is difficult to imagine that knowledge of such lucrative jobs abroad available to them after retirement does not impact the way that our most esteemed military officials conduct their work. Evidence has shown that some officers even begin to negotiate their positions while they are still on active duty. Such relationships should also call into question how much we trust the word of such officers in their TV and other public appearances. It is also important to remember that retired four-star generals, for example, are still making \$200,000 plus benefits yearly from U.S. taxes on top of the salaries they're being offered by these various foreign countries.

The final and perhaps most disturbing aspect of the Washington Post's discovery is the U.S. government's attempts to conceal the information from the public. To get the documents in the first place, the Washington Post had to sue the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the State Department under the Freedom of Information Act. The lawsuit took two years, and the version that was delivered to the Post was still missing key details such as the salaries of generals and other top officials, which the government has said were redacted due to privacy concerns. The Post is still pursuing legal action to acquire the missing elements of the documents.