

THE SAUDI AND KUWAITI ARMS DEALS: WHO IS THE MASOCHIST?

Last week Britain announced a huge arms sale to Saudi Arabia that may total up to \$30 billion over fifteen years. Through this commitment, called by experts the arms deal of the century, Britain in effect has supplanted the United States as Saudi Arabia's main source of arms. Under the terms of the agreement, the British will provide the Saudis with 48 *Tornado* fighter-bombers, 60 *Hawk* jet trainers, 80 helicopters, 6 minesweepers, millions of dollars of electronic gear, and two air bases.

The Saudis decided to seek British arms because past efforts to obtain American weapons have been denied, delayed, or reduced by the U.S. Congress. According to a Saudi official, "We would prefer to buy weapons from the United States. American technology is generally superior. But we are not going to pay billions of dollars to be insulted. We are not masochists." By this he meant that Riyadh was tired of the bruising political battles that Saudi Arabia was forced to fight against Israel's supporters in Congress to obtain the U.S. weapons. Even when the Saudis have won congressional approval for the purchase of American arms, such as F-15 jet fighters in 1978 and the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft in 1981, they have endured humiliating criticism and accepted congressionally imposed restrictions on the deployment and operation of U.S. weaponry.

Losing Leverage. The new Saudi-British deal reveals the U.S., not Saudi Arabia, as the masochist. In losing the largest arms sale in Middle Eastern — perhaps world — history, the U.S. has lost important benefits. Economically, the U.S. has been deprived of a major boost to its balance of trade and thousands of jobs. Militarily, the U.S. has lost an opportunity to increase the ability of American military forces to use Saudi logistical and maintenance support systems, or possibly even Saudi warplanes, in a crisis. Most important, the U.S. stands to lose political influence in Saudi Arabia and leverage over how Saudi military forces are deployed. The loosening of Saudi-American military ties may unravel the broader Saudi-American political relationship and lead other Arab states to question defense cooperation with Washington.

Israel too is a big loser in the British-Saudi arms deal. Not having to deal with the U.S. Congress, London will not attach the same conditions to the sale of its weapons that Washington does. For example: Saudi Arabia's U.S.-supplied F-15s are prohibited from being based at Tabuk, the Saudi air base located closest to Israel. There almost surely will be no similar ban on the British *Tornados*. And the *Tornado* fighter-bombers pose more of a threat to Israel than do the F-15s, which are primarily designed for an air superiority, not a ground attack,

role. Former Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Arens has called the *Tornado* "the best low level attack plane in the world." Ezer Weizman, a former commanding officer of the Israeli Air Force, already has suggested that Israel may have erred in opposing the sale of more U.S. F-15s to Saudi Arabia.

Standing Up to Iran. The U.S. Congress now can clarify whether the U.S. really is the masochist. Congress is mulling over another arms sale to another important Persian Gulf state — Kuwait. The Reagan Administration formally notified Congress on July 7 of its intention to sell Kuwait \$1.9 billion worth of U.S. weapons including 40 F-18 fighter-bombers, 300 *Maverick* air-to-ground missiles, 40 *Harpoon* anti-ship missiles, 400 laser-guided bombs, 200 radar-guided *Sparrow* air-to-air missiles, 120 heat-seeking *Sidewinder* air-to-air missiles, and 200 cluster munitions. Congressional opposition centers on the proposed sale of the *Maverick* missiles, similar to those denied to Saudi Arabia in October 1987.

Congress has 30 days starting from July 7 to consider the pros and cons of the Kuwaiti arms proposal. To block it, both houses must pass a resolution of disapproval with enough votes to override a presidential veto. When considering the proposal, Congress should remember that Kuwait is a beleaguered minstate that has stood firm against Iranian intimidation despite Iranian-supported terrorist bombings, Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti shipping, and Iranian air strikes, artillery bombardments, and missile attacks on Kuwaiti territory. For Congress to turn its back on Kuwait at this critical juncture would sour the ripening Kuwaiti-American relationship that could facilitate the Arab-Israeli peace process. Moreover, if Congress truly wants to lower the profile of U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf, it should help Kuwait obtain the means of defending itself without relying so heavily on U.S. forces.

"On Automatic Pilot." Kuwait, which will be preoccupied by the Iranian threat for the indefinite future, poses little threat to Israel. Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin was unperturbed by the proposed arms deal when he met with U.S. congressmen during his recent visit. Senior Israeli military officers have gone further, indicating that Israel would prefer the sale of U.S. warplanes to Gulf Arab states over the alternative: "If there is a need to sell weapons, we want weapons going there that have the most restraints and that means U.S. weapons."¹ Yet Congress often reflexively opposes arms sales to Arab states because of its simplistic view of Israeli security needs. Notes a Senate staffer about congressional opposition to the Kuwaiti arms deal: "Everyone is on automatic pilot." If Congress stays on this flight path then Israel could find itself surrounded by Arab states armed with Soviet and West European weapons, unconstrained by American strings and Washington's ability to control the flow of spare parts and logistical support.

The proposed Kuwaiti arms deal will buttress a pro-Western Arab state against Iranian aggression and help reduce the long-term burden of the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf. It will provide a \$1.9 billion boost to the U.S. balance of trade, lower the unit costs of future F-18 purchases by the U.S. armed forces, and generate an estimated 10,000 man-years of work for American workers. Politically, it could strengthen the foundation of U.S.-Kuwaiti relations. For Congress to veto the Administration's commitment to help Kuwait defend itself will erode Kuwait's perception of U.S. reliability. More ominously, it will seem to confirm Iran's publicly stated belief that the U.S. is growing "short of breath" in the Persian Gulf.

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1 *Middle East Policy Survey*, July 8, 1988, p. 4.