

Making a Mess of the Middle East Stew

Administration Decision on Arms Sales to Arabs, Israelis Is Full of Flaws

BY HENRY A. WAXMAN

In defending last week's decision to sell 50 F-5E jet fighters to Egypt and 60 highly sophisticated F-15s to Saudi Arabia while supplying only half of Israel's current arms request, the Administration said its action would meet the legitimate defense needs of the three countries, maintain the military balance in the area and complement present peace efforts.

In making their case, the President and the secretary of state could not be more mistaken. In fact, their announcement could not have come at a worse time.

For months, members of Congress have urged the Administration to delay any arms sales to the Mideast, arguing that the introduction of new weapons could serve only to undermine the first face-to-face discussions between Israel and Egypt and to alter each side's incentive to see the talks through.

Yet Administration officials chose to announce their decision at a time when negotiations have bogged down, and when Washington and Jerusalem are having their most serious differences in years. With Israel deeply concerned about its security in Sinai—as shown by the agony over demands to give up settlements there—the prospect of Egypt receiving new warplanes can only make bridging this issue more difficult, if not flatly impossible. Circumstances demanded restraint, but the Administration has acted otherwise.

In a larger sense, the announcement also demonstrates that armaments still form the



"Now add one pair overalls . . ."

currency of U.S. diplomacy. This proposal makes a mockery of the President's commitment, so forcefully expressed in his campaign, to reduce American trafficking in arms. Indeed, if these weapons are actually delivered, total sales for the coming year will reach a record level of \$13 billion. This incredible figure should be seen as symptomatic of the Carter Administration's failure to resolve a chronic foreign-policy problem, for Carter is clearly continuing the old pattern of resorting to arms sales to meet the demands of oil politics.

In addition to these diplomatic concerns, there are extensive strategic objections to this proposal. Like the sale of aircraft and Hawk missile systems to Jordan in 1976, the arming of Egypt with American weapons again poses the dread prospect of U.S. material being used by opposing sides in a future battle.

The sale of F-15s to Saudi Arabia also bodes ill. For months that country has been upgrading the air base at Tabuk, less than 10 minutes' flying time from Israel's Negev Desert. The Saudis participated in the Yom Kippur War by sending weapons as well as troops to

Syria. Is there any doubt that in a future conflict the Saudis would hesitate to underscore the oil weapon with the use of F-15s?

While Egypt and Saudi Arabia argue that their needs are defensive, the tragic history of four wars in the Middle East—in which Israel had to defend itself against aggression—belies that claim. The fact is that the infusion of American weapons to the confrontation states would significantly reduce Israel's already marginal superiority in the area's military balance, and pave the way for even more Arab aggression. Worse yet, new Egyptian and Syrian warplanes (in conjunction with the Soviet Union's quiet but massive rearming of the Syrians to the point where they are stronger today than in 1973) would make the option of resorting to war an active one.

Beyond all this, the prospect of Saudi Arabia receiving F-15s raises a particularly troubling issue for Americans: the possible involvement of U.S. advisers in a Middle East war. Until now, the United States has been providing less-advanced—and therefore less-dangerous—weapons to the Persian Gulf states. But last week's proposal indicates that the policy has changed: It would grant the oil-rich countries easy access to our best weapons.

In the summer of 1976, a Senate subcommittee issued a report warning that the Saudis could not absorb the weapons already being delivered, and that American advisers—thousands of them—would be needed for years to train and maintain Saudi forces. With the delivery of F-15s, that need will grow even greater, conceivably putting the United States in the ludicrous position of not only providing weapons but also giving technical assistance to a country at war with our ally, Israel.

This April, Congress will review the Mideast arms package. But even if Congress vetoes it, as I believe we should, it can only be a flawed victory, for such a veto would upset the expectations of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, thus undermining the Administration's credibility. Nor would blocking the sale do much to repair the erosion of trust between the United States and Israel. On the other hand, if Congress does not veto the proposal, the Arabs will ultimately gain greater military power, and the Israelis, weighing the potential threat arrayed against them, will be further inhibited from making strategic concessions for intangible assurances.

All parties involved—the Administration, Congress and the three recipient countries—have thus been placed in the worst possible position by Carter's wrongheaded proposal, which he has handed down at the wrong time in Mideast peace maneuverings.

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