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A Critical Decision

This is a critical moment for American policy in the Middle East, turning around the proposed sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia. The proposed sale of advanced equipment for Saudi F-15s was, and remains, foolish and dangerous--but not as *critical* as the sale of AWACS.

To begin with, the equipment is of a qualitatively different order. The AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) refers to a special kind of aircraft, potent not because of its firepower, but because of its intelligence power. It is notable not for its guns, but for its sophisticated radar dome, computers, identification and communication equipment.

This plane, at a cost of about half a billion dollars apiece, is the most effective observation post ever devised. At standard altitudes, it has a detection range of over 250 miles. It can stay in Saudi air space and see everything that moves in all of Israel. It can detect up to 600 targets at a time and compute size, identity, speed and direction. It is also a military command post which can relay that information instantaneously.

The effect is dramatic. It will, of course, increase the general offensive capacity of other Saudi aircraft by perhaps six times. But, more than that, it will rob Israel of any surprise capacity--a mortal loss for an Israel surrounded by giant enemies. Entebbe would not have been possible, nor Israel's defensive victory in 1967.

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The weapons systems which this administration proposes to sell to Saudi to increase the range and firepower of their F-15s is bad enough. However, the U.S. also intends to provide *Israel* with additional F-15 equipment to offset that threat. That "balance" is a kind of game, which involves an unconscionable escalation of the arms race, an additional strain on Israel, and all to no purpose except to stroke Saudi's national ego.

However, there is no way to provide even a theoretical "balance" for selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia. Israel has no such equipment, but even if it did, the damage would have been done. There is no way to make up for the breach in the secrecy of Israel's military operations. Any Goliath can beat any David whose every move can be anticipated.

But that is only half the story. Because of the special nature of AWACS, handing it to Saudi Arabia would be the definitive test of America's supine posture before the Saudis. We will have publicly abandoned the possibility of applying any pressure to Saudi. We will be saying, in effect, that we will give the Saudis everything they want in the dim hope that they will be nice to us someday. That is willing compliance with blackmail, and it never works. There is already a clear record that it hasn't worked.

The Saudis have broken every agreement on oil they have entered for the past decade. In 1974, the U.S. promised to guarantee Saudi security, and the Saudis agreed to produce oil at their current capacity. They never did. Twice in 1974, the Saudis promised Kissinger that they would cut prices. They never did. In 1978, the U.S. promised the Saudis not to fill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and the Saudis agreed to keep production at

about 10 billion barrels a day. After 7 weeks, the Saudis slashed oil production by 2 billion barrels, thus multiplying the price of oil and world inflation.

In return for our favors, Saudi Arabia has done nothing for us. They have always adjusted oil prices and production for their own purposes, without consideration for us. They have refused to become a moderate force in Middle East politics, and to support American foreign policy in that area.

This administration partly took office on the promise that it would no longer allow the U.S. to be a door-mat for nations that would trample on us. But to sell AWACS to Saudi Arabia now would establish us as the champion door-mat of the world. We will have altered Teddy Roosevelt's slogan to read: "Speak strongly, but give away the store."

The sale of the AWACS, particularly, would not only bring the Middle East closer to war, but would put American foreign policy in the Middle East squarely on the road to capitulation. No Congressman, however friendly should fail to hear from all constituents in the coming week, with copies to the President.