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Saudi and an American Dilemma

In childhood, the formula seems easy: whoever helps my friend, is my friend; whoever helps my enemy, is my enemy. The formula doesn't apply so neatly in the real adult world.

Take Saudi Arabia. Saudi is presumably an enemy of Israel. But Saudi is an important friend of the United States, and vice versa. And Israel is an important friend of the United States, and vice versa. So how do we work out that tangle? How, for example, do we look upon the sale of American arms to Saudi Arabia?

America is a key element in deterring Soviet imperialism from over-running Israel. Saudi is a key element in America's ability to deter Soviet imperialism from over-running Israel. Saudi needs arms from America in order to maintain itself as that key element. Saudi also expects to be able to purchase arms from America as an expression of America's friendship.

But Saudi has also said (King Khalid in 1976): "When we build our military strength we have no aims against anybody except those who took by force our land and our shrines in Jerusalem."

Therefore, it seems incumbent for friends of Israel to find the line between that American supply of arms to Saudi which is good for Israel (which Saudi needs for its own protection, plus some satisfaction of Saudi-American relations); and that American supply of arms which is a threat to Israel.

In other words, friends of Israel would not be serving Israel well to object automatically to every American sale of arms to Saudi, even though Saudi is Israel's enemy. It is necessary to make an independent assessment of each proposed sale.

It has been pointed out, most recently by Steven Rosen of Brandeis University, that the budget of the Saudi Armed Forces has increased in the last five years from about one billion to about 9 billion dollars annually. In other words, current Saudi defense expenditures are nearly equal to those of Britain, France and Germany. At what point in this development are the bounds of self-defense exceeded? At what point does the Saudi build-up almost mandate Saudi's full involvement in any next confrontation with Israel? And at what point does the build-up make another war more likely because it provides an alternative to peace for the Arabs?

It is especially not difficult to judge as excessive the potential American sale of advanced fighter aircraft to Saudi. The sixty F 15s, F 16s or F 18Ls proposed for sale of Saudi have a range of from 460 to 700 miles. From Tabuk, in Northwest Saudi, and from at least six other Saudi airbases, these aircraft would be able to range over most of Israel with their awesome armament. These aircraft would double or triple Saudi's ability to deliver destruction from the air in any single sortie.

As Rosen has pointed out: "The diplomatic position of the United States may make it impossible for the Carter administration not to push for the sale of the F 15s or F 16s to the Saudis. But in this instance, the Congress is in a position to serve the higher interests of the United States, and do for the Executive branch what it may be unable

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to do for itself: to stop an arms export agreement that can only lead to another escalation of tensions in the Middle East."

The decision is supposedly still a few months away, but the discussion is on. Some citizens are beginning to write, in order to point out the dangers to their U.S. Senators. They are probably more effective if they acknowledge the problem that America has, and the necessity for America to provide some arms to Saudi, while expressing deep concern about the excessive nature of this proposed sale.