

U.S. Arabs unite to counter opposition to jet sales

By Mark A. Bruzonsky in Washington

FOR the first time, a major lobbying effort for Congressional sentiment is being made by Arab Americans on a crucial aspect of U.S. Mid-east policy — the fighters sale package.

The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), which I wrote about in the *Saudi Gazette* some months ago, has publicly endorsed in an unprecedented policy statement sent to all members of Congress, the Carter Administration's arms package to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel.

NAAA has become the only organisation registered to officially engage in lobbying activities on behalf of Arab-American interests.

Increasingly the organisation is becoming the countervoice to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) which for years has monopolised opinion on Capitol Hill by bringing together nearly all important American Jewish organisations under one lobbying umbrella.

Achieving such unity for Arab Americans is proving considerably more difficult. Even when a group of Arab-American representatives met President Carter on December 15, NAAA leadership was not sufficient to achieve a unified policy statement.

Recent comparisons of the Arab lobby with the Jewish lobby on CBS Television News and in *Atlantic Monthly* magazine concluded the Arabs have yet to join the same league as their competitor. As *Atlantic* noted, AIPAC has only "an annual budget of \$700,000" but with it creates "an impact that others could not achieve with millions more."

NAAA's immediate goal, however, is not to directly challenge AIPAC's much-respected Capitol Hill authority. The initial goal, according to John Richardson, NAAA's Director of Public Affairs who is the organisation's only registered lobbyist, is "to build respect for Americans of Arab background" in much the same way that American Jewish groups such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee

have done for years.

NAAA is also plagued with a host of organisation and political difficulties as it makes the attempt to draw diverse sectors of the Arab American community together.

Never before has national political action been mobilised by the essentially local organisations to which most Arab Americans belong. What NAAA is now attempting the Jews did in the 1940s under the shock and impetus of Hitler and the creation of Israel.

Once NAAA can establish a base and a solid reputation, its next goal, Richardson adds, is to "become a source of credible information and a valid point of view."

Strategy

NAAA's endorsement of the arms sale package comes at a crucial time. Intense efforts are under way by Jewish organisations to defeat at least the Saudi part of the package. A grass-roots letter writing campaign is being mobilised. Already AIPAC has circulated an important memorandum declaring the sale a "threat to peace."

In an unprecedented exchange, the State Department has formally responded to this AIPAC memorandum with one of its own challenging AIPAC's facts and interpretations. In response AIPAC has issued a persuasive rebuttal to the department's rebuttal. And in response to all this,



JOHN Richardson, on President Carter's left, and Joseph Baroody, NAAA president, immediately across, with sideburns.

Vital test as campaign begins

Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations — Douglas Bennett, has sent members of Congress a reassuring letter.

Israel's strategy appears to be to first attempt to decouple the package — to make each country stand on its own. Israeli officials are known to be incensed not just at the sale to Saudi Arabia, but at the very idea that the U.S. military commitment to Israel could be made dependent on sales of weapons to the Arabs.

If this attempt at separating the package fails — and so far the administration has heatedly insisted that if any part of the package is disapproved the entire sale, including the planes to Israel, will be dropped — an attempt might then be made to so restrict the weaponry for the F-15s and the bases where the planes could be kept that the Saudi Government would reject the terms.

With 21 of 37 members of the House International Relations Committee already indicating their belief that the Administration should reconsider the sale to the Arabs, the odds of the package going through as now put together are probably less than even.

Both Houses of Congress must act by majority vote to disapprove the sale within 30 days of formal notification — which is expected early next month — otherwise the entire sale becomes approved.

NAAA's position paper which has been widely read by members of Congress makes the following major points:

1. "The proposed arms sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia should be interpreted politically, not militarily. They represent official acknowledgement of the growing political and economic bonds between America and the Arab World. It is inaccurate and misleading to characterise the arms for Egypt and Saudi Arabia as a security threat to Israel. They should, rather, be seen as indicative of changing American political relationships in the area in which Israel no longer plays the dominant role.

2. "NAAA has traditionally opposed all large-scale arms transfers to the Middle East.... NAAA still holds to that policy but is making an exception in the case of the proposed arms sale for a compelling reason: The political significance of the sale to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. NAAA does not support the proposed sale of additional aircraft to Israel but accepts it as part of the package concept."

3. "NAAA calls for the development of a regional approach to arms transfers to the Middle East which would take into account the principal actors and their legitimate defence needs....

4. Egypt. "The United States has

an interest in supporting the goals of President Sadat and should be responsive to his defence needs as well.... It is in the American interest to strengthen bilateral relations with Egypt."

5. Saudi Arabia. "The American national interest in Saudi Arabia is fast becoming one of this country's most important bilateral ties. The United States has a major interest in helping Saudi Arabia sustain orderly economic and social development... The proposed sale of F-15s to Saudi Arabia should be viewed primarily as political symbolism and affirmation of the American-Saudi relationship."

Security

6. "NAAA is of the opinion that much of the opposition to the Arab portion of the proposed arms sale is an attempt to thwart a shift in American political relationships in the region rather than fear for the military security of Israel."

7. "America can regain credibility and a moral position with regard to the Mid-East. We can protect Israel without subjecting the rest of the region to Israeli hegemony; Israeli security must not mean the utter insecurity of all its neighbours.

NAAA now holds a yearly conference which brings hundreds of Arab Americans together for policy and organisation discussions. This year's annual conference will be held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from May 4 to May 8. The *Saudi Gazette* will bring you reports on NAAA's growth and plans.