



THE MIDEAST MILITARY BALANCE
AND THE
U.S. ARMS SALE PACKAGE

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The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) sponsored a seminar on "The Mideast Military Balance and the U.S. Arms Sale Package" on April 26. Coincidentally this date anticipated by two days the letter of formal notification by the Carter Administration to the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Speaker of the House of the intent to sell modern military aircraft to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Ray S. Cline, Executive Director of Studies at CSIS, chaired and moderated the seminar which he thankfully referred to as a "feast of reason, considering all the irrationalities that relate to these subjects".

The "package" proposed by the Administration ties together the sale of 15 F-15's and 75 F-16's to Israel; 60 F-15's to Saudi Arabia; and 50 F-5's to Egypt. The four panelists were: Robert Baraz, Director, Office of Political-Military Affairs, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; Steven Rosen, Assistant Professor of Politics, Brandeis University and Senior Research Fellow in International Relations, Australian National University; Les Janka, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Near Eastern, African and South Asian Affairs; and Israel Singer, Deputy Chairman, Department of Judaic Studies, Brooklyn College and Consultant to the World Jewish Congress.

The audience of representatives from the foreign policy and corporate communities, Capitol Hill and the press joined the panelists in comments and questions. Representatives from the three countries affected by the package were invited to speak, attend and participate in the discussions; however other urgent commitments prevented this invitation from being taken up by Saudi and Israeli representatives. The Egyptian Embassy was represented at the seminar by the Minister Counselor for Press and Information, Mohamed Hakki, and the Defense and Military Attache, Major General Abu-Ghazala.

THE MILITARY BALANCE

Baraz noted, in opening the discussion, that he was presenting his own views as a research analyst, not necessarily the views of the Secretary of State or the Carter Administration.

In the Middle East, Baraz maintained, traditional analytical measures of military balance are not as appropriate

as they are elsewhere. The "people problem" is the key to any discussion of the Mideast military balance -- such factors as skills of commanders, proficiency of operators of equipment, training and morale of troops, education levels, and so on. "Historical experience and judgment" become central to arriving at conclusions about the military balance in this region.

In the Mideast "human elements have been the make-weight between adverse force ratios and what the Israelis did in combat" and have a potential to do again. In very general terms, Baraz compared the men under arms in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia with men under arms in Israel and noted a five-to-one advantage of the five countries over Israel. The Arabs obviously outnumber the Israelis in men and in major items of equipment, Baraz pointed out. In a rough, impressionistic way, the Arabs had a 4.3 to 1 numerical advantage in military strength in the October War of 1973. Since then, however, the Arab numerical superiority has been diminishing; it is 3.6 to 1 today and in five years will probably be about 3.4 to 1. Baraz suggested that in view of this adverse force ratio, it is the human factor that causes nearly everyone to believe that "Israel would clearly win another war if it occurs".

Baraz postulated two main implications of a situation in which the military balance is so affected by human factors:

First, such a military balance is "not particularly equipment sensitive" in the short run. Human factors are not subject to quick change since they are partly the result of deeply ingrained cultural factors. Even taking the worst case of how the proposed Saudi F-15's might theoretically be used against Israel, there is still little likelihood, in Baraz's view, that the planes could affect the outcome of a war in the foreseeable future. As far as Egypt is concerned, the proposed Egyptian F-5's "probably won't bring Egypt back to 1973 strength".

Second, such a military balance is not unpredictable and not unstable. Only in a longer time frame -- a decade or 15 years -- might the military balance prove less stable. The Arabs surely will become more proficient in the use of modern equipment over the years. After this longer period, Israel clearly does have military balance problems to face -- problems which would seem to argue the urgency of finding an accommodation between the parties sooner rather than later.

Rosen indicated his agreement with Baraz that the present arms package will not in itself immediately upset the regional military balance. He noted that he would "have to agree with Bob Baraz that the human factor has been, up until now, the critical factor...However, the problem here is that, as Bob [has] said differences in human competence are inherently difficult to quantify and assertions that the Israeli advantage will persist for generations tend to be regarded as racist

assumptions by the Arabs themselves...The human factor and Israel's human advantage is gradually being erased...I see some very serious problems with the arms sale package in terms of its wider strategic implications, and also in terms of its narrower implications for the military balance," Rosen added.

Until now, Rosen continued, Arab military strength has been ground intensive. If the Arabs penetrate Israel's airforce shield, Israel could be in a difficult situation. Even a small change in the air balance could have a major impact. Rosen went on to suggest a kind of geometric increase in Arab military potential with the additional U.S. equipment and its concomitant U.S. advisers. "Most of the military build-up is being supported by U.S. activities, including extensive involvement of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers." Rosen noted the exponential leap from "Soviet(items of)equipment, which tend to emphasize brute force and quantity over quality, to Western equipment, which is in general at a higher level of technological sophistication". A marriage of "new advantage in quality to these existing advantages in quantity...will result in a more favorable net equation from the Arab point of view".

"Taking the worst case," Baraz countered, "I don't think one would say that the aircraft increments that are projected would affect one's estimate of the outcome of a war..." Baraz acknowledged, however, the "aircraft increments" might affect "how long the war lasts, or what casualties might be".

Singer protested against accepting all of the views of systems analysts. This package looks really good from a distance, Singer noted, if one does not look at each of the participants. "When you balance off the number of planes being given to each of the countries, in terms of what they have...how they have experienced what they have and how this will add to what they have had, the package looks very, very good, and it looks fair... Vance in [a] statement... [and the] President in [a] press conference...presented that and on the balance it looks fine. Why then are the Israelis uptight? If things are so good, why are they indeed so bad?"

The Israelis, Singer continued, "are...a very small minority in a certain part of the world that has experienced difficulties...in that part of the world...They sincerely see themselves in a hole".

Janka, whose topic was 'America's policy response to Arab security concerns', said he thought "peace in the Middle East...[is the Administration's] overriding concern", although the tactics were at issue, as well as the actual impact that the Administration package would have in the area. "Time is running against peace in the Middle East, and certainly time is running against Israel...Israel being at the top of the curve,

the time is now...the objective realities of the Arab-Israeli balance can only get worse as you extend (the curve)...out into the future."

Rosen countered that "it is true that we are at the top of some kind of curve from the Israeli point of view in terms of a comparison of Israeli and Arab inventories; however, I couldn't agree, based on present contracts and the expected delivery schedules of these contracts, that, projecting five years forward ... the ratios will be improved (in favor of Israel) as compared to 1973 -- or, for that matter, as compared to today."

Janka suggested, however, that it was very much in Israel's interests...to have United States influence preserved and enhanced with these moderate...(Arab) states."

ISRAEL'S "SECURITY BLANKET"

Singer, whose topic was 'Israeli security considerations and the arms package debate', noted that the obverse of the effect of enhancing U.S. influence with these Arab states through this arms package would be what amounts to an announcement to the Israelis marking the end of their "special relationship" with the U.S. -- that they are now equal with other countries in the area. "And this is absolutely frightening to a country that views the U.S. as its 'security blanket'." The problem is one of perception, according to Singer; the psychological impact of a package deal.

The panelists then spent some time discussing the scope of the problem. Singer suggested that the arms package is an inset of a larger problem of the Middle East peace situation. The time has come, Singer said, for more creative solutions to Israel's security needs. "An Administration that continues to espouse the need for giving Israel a security arrangement ought to think of one that's somewhat more creative" than doling out a few F-15's at a time.

The sale of F-5's to Egypt, Janka argued, must be seen in the context of the evolving U.S.-Egyptian relationship since the 1973 war. We are attempting to bolster moderate Arab leaders and give them the confidence in the U.S. that will facilitate their pursuing a peaceful course.

Singer suggested that the feeling of the security of U.S. backing is also important to the Israelis. Since 1948, Singer said, Israel has been existing in a hostile environment with a security blanket... Singer said that perceptions, which Janka noted were crucial in, for example, the Egyptian part of the equation, are also crucial in the Israeli view. "Perceptions can often be more a part of this problem than actual military considerations." Israel has had a security blanket from the

U.S. in the past -- psychologically, as well as militarily and politically. That special relationship was crucial to Israel for the perception of its security.

Counselor Hakki of the Egyptian Embassy countered: "We [Egyptians] have pitted our future on our relations with the U.S.... This security blanket has its limitations and it's only for the security and the prosperity and the existence and the peace of Israel as it existed before 1967, and not a blanket which... can extend to... include the rest of Jordan and... the attacks over Saudi Arabia."

Singer noted that at the very moment that Israelis are uncertain of the future of their special relationship with the U.S., they are being asked to take major territorial and political risks and to absorb a new American approach to arms for the Middle East region. The Israelis realize that they are actually being treated in what Singer suggested was euphemistically called a "quote, even-handed manner, unquote", which they translate as having their security blanket pulled out from under them.

Hakki agreed that the security blanket is "what it's all about". But he emphasized the "limits of this blanket". He suggested that it should not apply to occupied areas, but rather only to Israeli territory as agreed on when 'the final map' is drawn.

Janka noted that "we equally recognize in the Middle East context [that] no country wants to negotiate from weakness and that, responding to Egypt's legitimate security requirements, we would be enhancing a sense of Egyptian security; we would be strengthening President Sadat's political position as well as Egypt's general confidence during a tense negotiating period. In the case of Saudi Arabia... a U.S. contribution to Saudi defensive capability is purely in our mutual interest, given our dependence upon Saudi oil and U.S. broader strategic interests in the Persian Gulf. In effect, helping the Saudis defend their soil is in effect helping us defend our own oil, in an ultimate sense."

Singer observed that this view suggests to Israelis that "Jews are optional, while oil isn't", and noted that Israelis are "terribly frightened" by such implications. And, Singer continued, between 1967 and 1973, despite the fact that the Arabs... might have dealt with the Israelis if both sides had been more flexible... they would not go to the peace table, "undoubtedly (because of a sense) of shame after having lost the war in 1967."

Rosen added that "the theory that the wind of history is behind the Arab sail and that the Arabs are bound to catch up is a pervasive belief in the Arab world... That perception becomes a reality when we consider the possibility that introducing advanced equipment will create the temptation to a trial of arms... So many simultaneous revolutions in technologies and equipments have taken place," Rosen continued, "that

the lessons of 1973...1967 are no longer relevant...[the Arabs might feel that]the new military balance has to be tested...The sheer speed of technological innovation and the introduction of large quantities of equipment is, in itself... a destabilizing factor."

Singer suggested that the simultaneous loss of Israeli security in its relationship with the U.S., and the addition of advanced equipment to the Arab arsenal create an entire spectrum of problems multiplied by the feeling of loss of the special relationship.

Between 1967 and 1973, Singer continued, the Arabs were reluctant to negotiate, needing a "victory to gird the Arab peoples to go and do what Mr. Sadat did in his courageous move; and this is a basis without which he could never have gone to Jerusalem. We now find the Israelis, with their security blanket removed from them-- and one asks them to go to the peace tables."

The U.S., Singer concluded, is establishing a situation wherein Israel will be just "a client" instead of "our special client". The U.S. clearly has made promises to the Saudis which it views as in its national interests. And the U.S. sincerely does not believe Israel's security will be threatened, Singer said. That is the heart of the problem in Israel.

WHY A PACKAGE?

A journalist from the audience asked what justification there is for making the arms sales proposal a package. As the President acknowledged yesterday, there is no legal justification for tying these arms sales together; it is a wholly political decision.

Janka responded that the decision hinged on a "time problem": which would you send first, and how would you deal with the aspects of the package separately? "I tend to agree with Congress's problems with the principle of a package," Janka added, but the Middle East is probably a place where it does work. Since the Arab side of the package would be "difficult for the Congress to deal with", and since Israel's security would be tied in, Janka continued, then it would make it easier to get the Arab elements accepted.

Baraz noted that, from an analytical standpoint, this is a regional problem; therefore, it's logical to look at the whole thing.

Singer countered that an apparent logical approach, mentioned by Baraz, is part of a problem of the Carter Administration's attitude toward this particular issue. The Administration has been attempting to solve all problems

in a holistic manner, which, Singer observed, is good for solving engineering and technical problems. Political problems, however, are actually more difficult to solve this way, Singer continued; and this package has not simplified the problem, but instead offers a simplistic solution.

A questioner from the audience queried Janka on the consistency of what seems like a fitfully logical approach. "Since you were successful with the cargo planes for Egypt as a separate piece, why didn't that encourage you to... offer an expanded, separate unit for Egypt?"

Janka referred again to the problem of timing. The F-15 has greater combat capabilities and hence is more sensitive politically than the F-5.

Rosen countered, however, that "all three components could have been sent to Congress at the same time without being linked together in a package that the President would accept only as a package". And, referring to Baraz's regional approach, Rosen suggested this is not causal to the form of the package sent. In the legislative process, Rosen noted, there is often the attachment of irrelevant...and relevant riders to bills, and unpopular components on to popular bills: it is "difficult to believe that the Administration did not think that the chance for getting the Saudi F-15's through would be enhanced by attaching it to the Israeli side of the package". This was not, Rosen charged, totally a "logical requirement of a regional approach...{there were} political elements in the decision to handle the matter this way".

THE SAUDI AIRCRAFT COMPONENT OF THE PACKAGE

Janka pointed out that the Saudis are concerned about radical forces both to the north and south. The world is more threatening for the Saudis than before the British decision to withdraw east of Suez and before U.S. reluctance to be involved in regional conflicts in the wake of Vietnam. The F-15 best meets the Saudi requirement, Janka added, with its extensive radar coverage, all-weather day and night missile capabilities; it has two engines and is flown by a single pilot.

Rosen pointed out that "the U.S. has...kept classified the specifications of the particular aircraft that would be going to Saudi Arabia...{complicating any comparison between}... the Saudi F-15's with the Israeli F-15's, or any other aircraft."

Baraz suggested that Rosen was perhaps looking at the wrong aspect of the F-15 sale. "The Saudis want to buy these aircraft as replacements for older British jet aircraft which

they have for air defense...I am not inclined to discredit ... Saudi statements as to what they intend to do with these aircraft in the sense of using them for defense purposes... You believe a foreign government when they tell you things that are really in their interest.'

Major General Abu-Ghazala, from the Egyptian Embassy, maintained that there is "no evidence that the arms in the hands of the Saudis were ever used against Israel."

"That," Singer recalled in response to the General's assertion, "is basically what the President said in his press conference yesterday...It's to be understood as a given...that...nations that act in their own national interests can continue to be expected to act in this interest..." The Israelis themselves know, however, that weapons are not always used "in a manner that...is...precisely defined by the grantor of those weapons...When somebody says that they are not going to do something, we assume that generally they won't -- but they might (and the Israelis know that best)."

"President Carter asserted on February 17," Rosen added, "that Saudi Arabia has never been actively engaged in any aggression against Israel." On the contrary, they have provided forces for deployment with the Arab League commands on a number of occasions. "Saudi Arabia has been engaged in three past wars; as early as 1948," Rosen continued, Saudi Arabia "furnished a battalion of troops under Egyptian command for the Arab League invasions of Palestine; in 1967, as early as May 24th -- two weeks before the war began -- Saudi forces entered Jordan as part of the Arab mobilization against Israel. Again in 1973 there were 3000 Saudi troops on the ground in Syria; there were Saudi helicopters with Saudi pilots in Egypt...there were also 4000 Saudi men in Jordan." Saudi officials have said, Rosen recalled, that in the event of another Arab-Israeli war they would commit their forces. "King Khalid... said 'when we build up our military strength we have no aims against anybody except those who took by force our lands and our shrines in Jerusalem'."

Singer added that "King Khalid said in 1974, 'when weapons are given to Saudi Arabia, they are given to the entire Arab nation, and they will be used'. What I'd add to that," Singer continued, is that "reports have come out recently that F-5's that are already in the arsenals of the Saudis have been used in various other countries, have been found in various other countries in the Middle East -- have been reported to have been in other areas located in Syria, to be precise."

A member of the audience wondered what the threat was that necessitated enhanced defense for Saudi Arabia.

Janka answered that "relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia are not exactly cordial..." though these may not be an "exact threat now".

Rosen noted that there is a military installation in proximity to Iraq, but, he added, no history of fighting between Saudi Arabia and Iraq exists. However, Rosen noted that this is not an inconceivable threat, but pointed out that this has not heretofore alarmed American policymakers. Rosen volunteered that there could be a conceivable threat to Kuwait and Iran from Iraq, but "if we accept the putative Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia as the criterion for arms sales to (that country)... the sky's the limit; because the Iraqi preparation is clearly oriented to Israel in the first instance, and perhaps Syria and Iran in the second -- not primarily to Saudi Arabia... arms for Saudi Arabia and Iraq are more likely to result in actual combat with Israel than with each other".

Janka recapped his view that the U.S. sale of F-15's to Saudi Arabia is no threat to the arms balance in the Middle East, and no threat to Israel. The sale will help the Saudis defend themselves and enable the U.S. to exercise some control over their use, Janka stated. The Administration "recognized...that as we moved into a more extensive military relationship...Congress would not fully appreciate, as...the Executive Branch has over a longer period of time, the role of the Arabs in the peace process; and the role of the United States in the Middle East as a mediator...Congress will simply have to rise above its narrow constituent interests, recognizing the tragic implications of the delay or denial of the sale, and just simply bite the bullet."

THE TABUK AIRBASE IN SAUDI ARABIA

Rosen cautioned, however, against Janka's assertion that the F-15's are not threatening. The F-15 is capable of flying for a period of up to three weeks, Rosen quoted specialists at Wright-Patterson Airforce Base in Ohio as stating, and supplies can be flown in on small transport planes, including fuel and minimal AGE (aerospace - ground equipment) requirements. The F-15 in Europe, Rosen continued, is capable of flying from highways and from relatively unimproved airfields.

"We were told," Rosen continued, "that Tabuk" --an airfield in Saudi Arabia located 125 miles from the Israeli frontier -- "would not be used for F-5's." However, Rosen added, "F-5's have been operating out of Tabuk with some regularity". The base at Tabuk "includes a paratroop facility...Paratroops are by definition offensive forces that hardly fit within the description of Saudi Arabia's 'defensive requirements'". There are smaller bases to the northeast of Tabuk -- away from population centers and therefore obviously not for defense Rosen added -- sufficient to support the F-15. Take-off and landing requirements of the F-15 are 2500 feet; and the airfield of the Gurayat base is 4700 feet, and of Turayf is 6567 feet.

General Abu-Ghazala responded that Tabuk is far too vulnerable a location to serve as a base for the F-15's. The planes could not get off the ground, the General asserted, in the brief warning time before an Israeli raid.

Rosen argued, however, that Tabuk could easily serve as an advance base for Saudi F-15 assaults against Israel. The main "fear", Rosen continued, "is that the Saudis will feel compelled to demonstrate their solidarity (in some future Arab-Israeli military confrontation) and the Israelis may feel compelled to attack...We may be setting in motion a cycle of preparation and attack..."

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