
Sale of F-15 Aircraft to Saudi Arabia, Part II

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Mr. Chairman, it is a pleasure to meet with you and your Committee to discuss the Administration's proposal to sell 72 F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia. This proposed sale is in our national interest; it supports our military strategy for the defense of vital American interests in the region, and it is consistent with Saudi Arabia's military strategy, one that is entirely defensive in orientation.

THREAT ENVIRONMENT

The Persian Gulf region continues to be fraught with the potential for unrest and instability, thus threatening vital American interests. Our friends in the region, on whom we must count to help protect those interests, are constantly threatened by an uncertain environment. Notwithstanding the success of operation DESERT STORM, the Kingdom faces potent regional adversaries—Iran and Iraq. An obvious unrepentant and possible revengeful Iraq publicly proclaims its intent to return its forces to pre-war dominance and influence. Despite DESERT STORM, Iraq's air force is still over 60 percent larger than Saudi Arabia's. Iran is embarked on a \$10 million military modernization program, unprecedented even by outlays during its war with Iraq. Especially worrisome is the emphasis on long-range strike weapons, including the SU-24 FENCER, and mobility—clear indicators of an emerging power projection capability and strategy.

We evaluated Saudi Arabia's request in light of these threats, the overall military situation in the region, and our close working relationship with the Saudis. Much has changed since the first sale of F-15s in 1978, especially the central role played by Saudi Arabia in maintaining peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. Without Saudi cooperation, the aggressive designs of Iraq and Iran would pose a much larger threat to our mutual interests.

U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY

The F-15XP sale is consistent with, and strongly complements, our military strategy for regional defense. Additional F-15s in the Saudi Air Force obviously contribute directly to the first tier of our strategy by improving the self-defense and deterrent capabilities of our largest Gulf partner. These aircraft serve to raise the threshold at which we might again be required to deploy our own forces to the Gulf.

The sale is particularly important to our national military interests because it ensures continued interoperability with our own forces, should they have to return to the region in a major crisis. It will enhance the ability of our forces to "fall in" in a broadened logistical base in Saudi Arabia that is fully capable of supporting sustained U.S. combat sortie rates. Our success in DESERT STORM depended heavily on the availability of a first-rate, American-designed

military infrastructure, particularly with the Saudi F-15 air bases that were constructed with such a contingency in mind. The availability of common spare parts, ordnance, service equipment, and refueling infrastructure were also crucial to the war's success.

Along with the advantage of interoperability of equipment, bases in Saudi Arabia designed to support a buildup of U.S. forces made the Persian Gulf reflagging operation and DESERT STORM more effective. These accomplishments also signal to a potential aggressor the futility of any resort to force in the future.

A renewed position of influence for the U.S. Air Force *vis-a-vis* the Saudis goes well beyond interoperability of communications or refueling systems, however. Through working together with our forces—from attending our schools and speaking our language—the two militaries share a common doctrine and tactics. Our two forces have also developed a mutual respect that has a synergistic effect on our combined ability to serve a common mission. That does not happen when the majority of aircraft, especially the most modern ones, are supplied by another country, and when Saudi pilots do not train in the United States.

At the same time, we hope to see the countries of the Gulf acquire a basic self defense capability and work together for their common defense. Such cooperation among the Gulf states will enhance their ability to deter aggression, provide for protection against lower levels of threat, and, in the event of conflict, delay an aggressor long enough for us and others to arrive on the scene. Not tending to the legitimate defense needs of our friends in the region only increases the instability and the chances that force will once again be necessary.

F-15XP CONFIGURATION

It is important to understand what the XP model of the F-15 is, and what it is not. It is a highly capable air superiority—air-to-air—fighter comparable to the F-15Cs and Ds that have been in the Saudi inventory since the early 1980s. Equipped with navigation and targeting pods, it can also be a dual role aircraft with an air-to-ground capability comparable to that already possessed by the Saudi Air Force.

It is not, however, the F-15E, Strike Eagle, flown only by the U.S. Air Force. Our most advanced air combat technologies have not been exported to anyone, and we are preserving that superiority in this sale. While the F-15XP will utilize the F-15E airframe, the operational capabilities of the plane are controlled through the type of hardware placed on the aircraft and software modifications. We are also not providing the most advanced munitions carried by the U.S. Air Force F-15Es.

When the Saudi Arabian government asked to buy additional air defense and interdiction F-15 aircraft last year, the question facing the Administration was not whether the Saudis would acquire such weapons systems, but from which country they would buy it, and which country would have a dominant position in the Saudi military planning for several decades. While we believe that American technology is superior, we do not have a monopoly on high technology. European and other aircraft manufacturers are eager to take our place as the principal supplier to the Saudi military, a position that has already been seriously eroded in the last decade.

The Saudis make it quite clear that, while they prefer American technology, they would, if necessary, meet their legitimate defense needs elsewhere. That, of course, is precisely what they did after 1985 when they began buying the Tornado air defense fighter from Britain and also began to acquire their existing ground attack capability.