

---

# Sale of F-15 Aircraft to Saudi Arabia, Part I

By

Frank Wisner

Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs

[The following is a reprint of Mr Wisner's statement before the Subcommittees on Arms Control, International Security and Science, and on Europe and the Middle East of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, DC, September 23, 1992. The text was originally printed in the U.S. Department of State *Dispatch*, September 28, 1992, pp. 727-729.]

Mr. Chairman, we are here today to discuss with you the Administration's plan to sell F-15 fighter aircraft to Saudi Arabia, valued at \$9 billion. The sale will consist overall of 72 F-15XP aircraft. Twenty-four F-15s will be configured to perform defensive air-to-air combat missions. These aircraft are comparable to the F-15C and D models already sold to Saudi Arabia. The other 48 F-15s in this package will be configured to perform defensive air-to-ground interdiction missions against an aggressor, for example, Iraqi tanks or Iranian patrol boats menacing the Gulf sea lanes.

I will not get into the technical features of the F-15XP configuration, since (Principal Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs) Carl Ford will be addressing this in his remarks.

## SALE OF F-15s PROMOTES U.S. SECURITY INTERESTS

Instead, I would like to explain how this sale promotes vital U.S. foreign policy and security interests in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a watershed. We knew at the time, as we know now, that once the Iraqi army was compelled to withdraw from Kuwait, we and our friends in the region would have to take concrete steps to:

- Help build an increased capability to deter and defend against future aggression;
- Buy more time, in the event deterrence fails, for mobilization of support from friendly governments;
- Develop the interoperability that will allow the United States and other friendly forces to reinforce our friends in the region more effectively should that ever again be necessary; and
- Help contribute to stronger and more stable post-crisis security arrangements, regardless of the fate of Saddam Hussein.

In developing a plan to achieve these vital objectives, we also made clear what we did not want. We did not want the security of the Persian Gulf to depend on the long-term presence of U.S. combat forces, and we did not want to depend solely on a strategy of repeating Operation Desert Storm.

Neither the states in the region, nor we, think that they can build, by themselves, the full range of force that in itself can deter and defeat potential aggressor states—states which have a far

---

larger population base than our Desert Storm partners enjoy. In this context, and given our overall interests, the sale of additional F-15s will enable Saudi Arabia to play a larger role in defending itself, deterring aggression from Iraq and Iran, and promoting stability throughout the Persian Gulf region.

By increasing its defensive capability, Saudi Arabia will be able to confront and contain smaller contingencies on its own. That will reduce the likelihood that U.S. forces will have to be employed.

Moreover, in cases where it is necessary for U.S. forces to be introduced, an enhanced Saudi F-15 capability will increase their ability to operate jointly with U.S. forces, using Saudi infrastructure.

This sale will further strengthen U.S.-Saudi security relations and raise Saudi confidence, an important factor in Riyadh's long-term willingness to continue an active role in promoting regional peace between Israel and the Arab states and, eventually, to engage in regional arms control.

### **SALE IS CONSISTENT WITH U.S. POLICY**

The sale of F-15s is fully consistent with the President's Middle East Arms Control Initiative. You will recall that one aspect of that initiative calls upon the five largest exporters of arms to the region (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China) to establish a system of guidelines to:

- Prevent destabilizing transfers of conventional arms;
- Eliminate all transfers of weapons of mass destruction and their components and precursors;
- Bring transparency to the arms transfer process; and
- Foster responsible arms transfer behavior.

The five have agreed to observe these guidelines, although more work needs to be done to establish a mechanism by which the five consult before making arms transfers.

The emphasis of the President's arms control initiative is responsibility. The exporters have pledged that sales would be made on the basis of legitimate defensive needs and with a view toward promoting regional stability. The proposed sale of F-15s satisfies these requirements and, indeed, is a model of the kind of consideration that should go into any responsible arms sale decision.

The Royal Saudi Air Force has an exemplary record of using U.S. military equipment for purely defensive purposes. Take, for example, two previous sales which were controversial at the time—F-15C/D aircraft and the AWACS (airborne warning and control system) system. The Saudi Air Force has deployed these aircraft largely for the defense of the eastern province, site of the world's largest oil reserves.

A test of their deterrent value occurred during the 8-year war between Iraq and Iran. In June 1984, an Iranian intruder aircraft headed toward the vital coastal oil installations was shot down by a Saudi F-15C fighter vectored to its target by a Saudi-controlled U.S. AWACS.

---

The availability of these aircraft to the Saudi air force was one reason why U.S. forces were able to limit the scope of their own direct involvement in the defense of the Gulf oil resources and transit routes from Iranian domination.

## **F-15S WILL ENHANCE SAUDI DEFENSIVE CAPABILITIES**

We have worked closely with the government and armed forces of Saudi Arabia. We have a very clear understanding of their needs and military requirements. We support this sale because it provides a basic, defensive capability that can be absorbed by the Saudi air force.

I know that some of you will be concerned about the air-to-ground capabilities that some of the F-15s in this package will possess. I urge you not to draw hasty conclusions, equating this capability with providing Saudi Arabia with an offensive air force that can threaten neighboring states. If you will consider the overall force structure of Saudi Arabia and compare that to the size of its population and the vast extent of its borders, the defensive nature of the Saudi force is clear. Selling 48 F-15s with ground attack capabilities will not alter this essential fact. Rather, it will reinforce the defensive orientation of Saudi forces.

## **MAINTAINING U.S. AEROSPACE-INDUSTRIAL BASE**

I would also like you to consider the value this sale will have in helping us to maintain our aerospace-industrial base. As Under Secretary for International Security Affairs, I am constantly struck by the extent to which superior U.S. defense technologies contribute positively to the achievement of vital U.S. security goals.

Possession of the best weapons in the world enable us not only to deter or, if deterrence fails, to prevail over an aggressor, it also fosters a confidence in our friends and allies. That, in turn, enhances our influence and ability to pursue our interests. Our willingness to sell appropriately configured, top quality military capabilities enables us to respond meaningfully to legitimate defensive needs of our friends.

This is crucial to cementing the close ties that the United States can rely on in a crisis. The U.S.-Saudi security relationship is a case study on the validity of this, as was amply demonstrated during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and continues to be demonstrated in Operation Southern Watch.

Our ability to maintain this kind of industrial base through prudent arms sales enables us to continue producing the best defense items in the world, such as the F-15. It is of vital importance to U.S. security and foreign policy.

## **NEED TO MOVE FORWARD NOW**

Given the substantial benefits that will accrue to the United States by selling F-15s to Saudi Arabia, now is the time to move ahead with the sale.

Fighter aircraft sales involve long lead times. Even if the sale were approved today, the aircraft will only become fully operational in three phases-in 1996, 1997, and 1999. The threat to Saudi Arabia and other states in the region is real and mounting.

Saddam has pledged to rebuild his still formidable military force comprising over 400,000 men and 2,000 tanks. Iran is rebuilding its military at an unprecedented rate, emphasizing offensive capabilities. U.S. agreement to approve the sale now will send an important signal of commitment to Saudi Arabia and of warning to any potential aggressor.

---

## NO HARM TO ISRAEL'S SECURITY

Before concluding my remarks, let me say a few words about the impact of the sale of 72 F-15XP's on Israel's security. Put briefly: Israel's security will be unimpaired by this sale. I say this based on two sets of considerations.

First, the qualitative edge which has enabled Israel confidently to face any threat to its security in the region remains intact, and we are continuing to consult with Israel to ensure this qualitative edge is maintained. Israel will continue to enjoy clear air superiority over any combination of foes, based, first of all, on a fighter pilot force that has no rival in the region.

Israel's top-notch pilot cadre is coupled with an integrated defense system that brings to bear superior intelligence, command and control, tactics, doctrine, and maintenance in a way no other country in the area can hope to match now or in the foreseeable future.

But a second set of factors also needs to be considered when assessing the impact of this F-15 sale on Israel. The Middle East remains a dangerous neighborhood, as I have suggested earlier, but the dynamics of the region have changed radically in the past 2 years. The notion of a unified Arab camp motivated by its most radical elements to confront Israel militarily was dealt a serious blow by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and defeat in the Gulf war.

The Gulf war, in which American, other Western, and Arab troops fought together against a common aggressor, was a watershed. Realization of the importance of the event lay behind President Bush's and Mr. Baker's attempt last year to seize the window of opportunity created by the war to break down taboos which had existed for over 40 years and to substitute dialogue for confrontation between Israel and its neighbors. That initiative, as you know, led to the historic Madrid peace conference and the subsequent launching of serious, face-to-face discussions between Israel and its neighbors on bilateral issues, as well as to multilateral talks on issues of regional concern. Saudi Arabia has fully supported this process.

As a result of the war and the peace process which has followed it, the geostrategic picture in the Middle East today is vastly different from that in which the Carter Administration consulted with Congress on the first F-15 sales in 1978, or in which the Reagan Administration sought approval for AWACS sales in 1983.

Saudi Arabia has scrupulously observed the understandings on which those earlier sales were based. It has served as a reliable security partner with the United States in a variety of circumstances since, including Operation Southern Watch today; and it has played a critical role in the wake of the Gulf war, at the Madrid conference, and since in helping to forge what we hope will be a new, more constructive, and more secure Middle East reality for all our friends in the region.

A strong U.S.-Saudi security relationship is the best way to ensure there is no contradiction in the U.S. support for Saudi Arabia and Israel.