

A YELLOW LIGHT FOR U.S. ARMS SALES TO THE SAUDIS

The Reagan Administration formally notified Congress on April 8 of its intention to sell Saudi Arabia a weapons package consisting of 671 AIM-9P4 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, 995 AIM-9L Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, 100 Harpoon air-to-sea missiles, 200 Stinger portable ground-to-air missile launchers and 800 Stinger missiles. Under law, Congress has a thirty-day period ending May 8 in which to enact a joint resolution prohibiting this \$354 million proposed sale. In the absence of such a resolution, the sale will proceed. Since the sale is an important matter, Congress and the public probably need more time to examine it. Rather than rush to meet a May 8 deadline, and rather than give the sale a red or green light, what is appropriate here is a yellow light for slowing down and caution.

In reality the Saudi missile deal is freighted with more political than military significance. The Administration sees the sale as a reaffirmation of U.S. resolve to back the Saudis and other "moderate" Persian Gulf states against the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran and pro-Soviet South Yemen. Iran's February 1986 invasion of southern Iraq threatens to spill over into Kuwait and ultimately into Saudi Arabia. The January 1986 coup by a radical pro-Soviet clique in South Yemen also potentially threatens Saudi Arabia, Oman, and North Yemen. The Administration does not expect Iran or South Yemen to be deterred solely by the missile sale, but contends that without the sale and its manifestation of American support, these states could be tempted to fish in troubled waters.

Opponents of the sale, however, also make a strong case. They seek to signal Arab states that if they want sophisticated American arms they will have to be more supportive of U.S. policy, including steps to negotiate a peace with Israel. While critics do not view the proposed missile sale as a major threat to the Arab-Israeli balance of power per se, they regard it as part of a disturbing long-term trend undermining Israel's qualitative margin of superiority.

Both the containment of revolutionary Iran and the encouragement of the Arab-Israeli peace process are important regional goals. Yet both are dwarfed by the global goal of containing Soviet expansion. Saudi Arabia plays an important role in resisting Soviet aggression in Afghanistan and facilitating the planning of the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force. In the event that the U.S. is called upon to respond to a Soviet incursion in the Persian Gulf, these missiles may become a prepositioned stockpile that could be used by American forces. The U.S. should have learned from the 1965 arms embargo of Pakistan and the 1975 arms embargo of Turkey that elevating regional goals over global containment goals can be an endeavor that only benefits Moscow and its clients.

Even so, the specific mix of weapons in the proposed sale remains troubling. The Stingers raise the most concerns. The weapon is a man-portable shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile for short-range tactical air defense. Because it is lightweight and easily transported, the Stinger would be an ideal terrorist weapon. The Saudis indirectly abet terrorism through their financial support of Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Israel found U.S.-supplied Saudi arms among PLO arms stores captured in Lebanon. Given their questionable commitment to the war on terrorism it would be a mistake to give them such weapons at a time when the U.S. is taking a determined stand against terrorism. The Stingers are relatively scarce weapons that would be put to better use in the hands of the Afghans, who directly resist Soviet aggression, rather than in the hands of those who indirectly support anti-Western terrorism. To reduce the chance of diversion from Afghanistan the missiles should be supplied directly to resistance groups inside Afghanistan, not to political leaders outside Afghan borders.

While the case for providing the Saudis with additional Sidewinder missiles is buttressed by past air battles with Iran, it is unclear that the Iranian Navy poses enough of a threat to warrant additional sales of Harpoon missiles.

The timing of the sale also poses problems. It would be inappropriate to reward the Saudis so soon after they joined the anti-American chorus of condemnation following the reprisal raid on Libya. Saudi Arabia could have remained silent. Instead it chose to condemn the U.S. The Saudi reaction to U.S. efforts to deter Libyan terrorism has complicated consideration of the Saudi missile sales package. The Administration should withdraw the offer of Stinger missiles or postpone the sale altogether to give Congress additional time to consider the sale.

James A. Phillips
Senior Policy Analyst