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Closing the Circle

Four years ago the Saudis asked the US Government to tell the Israelis to stop their overflying surveillance of Saudi territory. The Saudis were then busy establishing an additional front against Israel. They were building, *inter alia*, the airbase at Tabuk near the Israel border. Nobody pretended that the Saudis needed a sophisticated airbase on Israel's doorstep for fighting the Soviet Union. The story then concocted by Washington was that it was needed for protecting the oilfields — at the other end of Saudi Arabia's vast expanse, and against attack from Iraq — 800 kilometres distant.

This fairytale was invoked by the State Department only after an earlier tale had been exposed: that Tabuk was an inoffensive civilian airfield. It was because he had been misled into disseminating this fib that a senior official at the White House, Mark Siegel, then resigned in angry public protest.

By then US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had unblushingly conveyed the Saudi request that Israel stop taking an interest in the preparations being made against her; and Prime Minister Begin granted this boon with his customary generosity.

Now the new US administration is closing the circle. The Saudis have insisted on being provided with AWACS planes. AWACS (Air-borne Warning and Control System) contains the most sophisticated instruments available. It would enable the Saudis to spy upon every movement in Israel 24 hours a day — and to do so from within their own borders.

Nothing that moves in Israel would be hidden from their view (and, consequently, from any of the other Arab states).

It has been painful to watch spokesmen of the administration outdoing their predecessors in their efforts to explain away the decision to grant the Saudi demand. The declared purpose in placing the AWACS in the hands of the Saudis — like the explanation for adding offensive equipment to F-15 planes — is to strengthen their capacity to defend themselves against the Soviet Union.

This is transparent nonsense. If Soviet forces were preparing to attack Saudi Arabia, nobody would depend on the Saudis for the defence of the area. Indeed, as US Senator Howell Heflin said recently: "In the final analysis, the Saudi Arabians cannot defend themselves against any credible threat, no matter how much equipment we provide them".

To the fierce Israeli — and American — objections to the AWACS deal, administration apologists have offered for publication an amusing, if frightening, variety of answers.

First (of course), the AWACS are not really a threat to Israel. But, we ask, if they are not a threat to Israel, how do you see them as a threat to the Soviet Union?

Well, comes an alternative explanation, they are in fact a threat to Israel; but then, after all, the Israeli Air Force could easily shoot them down.

But the immediate and dire danger of the AWACS is in their operation in time of "peace" from inside Saudi airspace. They would be recording every security secret in Israel and, in the words of the *Baltimore Sun*, they would be "taking from Israel much of the element of surprise that has enabled it to survive".

The Israeli Air Force should then in all logic and in desperate defence of Israel's basic security shoot down the AWACS planes inside Saudi territory as soon as they take to the air. Is *that* what the US wants?

Well, comes excuse number three, in the first period the planes will be operated by American pilots. But this only makes things worse. Israel's vital information will still be in the hands of the Saudis (and their allies); and Israeli pilots will be expected to shoot down American pilots. Is *this* what the US wants?

Now US Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker has made the proposal that the AWACS should not be equipped with the full range of material that makes them so dangerous. In that case, we ask, what do the Saudis need them for? How will they then "defend themselves against the Soviets"?

Senator Baker's suggestion has a familiar and sinister ring. In 1978, the Senate reluctantly approved the sale of F-15 planes to the Saudis — on the explicit undertaking that they would not be supplied with the additional lethal equipment. The Reagan administration now insists on giving them the equipment. Clear?

Finally, the administration has produced what it evidently believes to be an unanswerable justification of the AWACS deal. It claims it was the Carter administration that secretly promised the Saudis these weapons (together with the equipment "enhancing" the F-15 capacity).

Such a dishonourable undertaking could only have been given by the Carter administration on the understanding that it would be honoured if Carter were re-elected. It could not bind his successor. It violated the solemn, written, public undertaking to the Senate; and, for the second time, an equally solemn agreement with Israel. Is this the kind of "undertaking" the Reagan administration feels morally forced to implement?

The significance of this plea by the administration is far more disturbing than it appears on the surface. Assuming even that a promise to the Saudis had been made openly, why does the Reagan administration blandly assume — and expect everybody else to concur — that a promise to the Saudis automatically renders null and void the previous undertaking to Israel? This question touches the roots of the relations between the US and Israel.

The administration did indeed explain its intended violation of the undertaking to the Congress. In its first announcement of the proposed deal, the State Department said (on March 7):

"We are aware of the assurances the previous administration gave to the Congress in 1978 regarding these items. The critical fact today is that circumstances in the region have changed dramatically. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the turmoil of the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and the Soviet presence in South Yemen and Ethiopia underscore the instability in the region and the dangers of Soviet penetration and exploitation".

This is precisely where the process of obfuscation began. The changed circumstances are quite irrelevant to the sale of these weapons to Saudi Arabia. These weapons will not prevent or impede "Soviet penetration and exploitation". They will not be used to defend Saudi Arabia against the Soviets. These weapons, like all Saudi weapons, are intended for use against Israel. This has never been a secret. Indeed, the day after Secretary of State Haig's visit to Riyadh, a Saudi spokesman denied that his country was concerned primarily with a Soviet threat: "Israel is the enemy," he said. This is the unchanging policy of all the Moslem states; Israel must be eliminated. Nothing else matters.

We must face the fact, therefore, that at this moment, the Reagan administration is pressing — no less than the Carter administration — for the delivery to Saudi Arabia of highly lethal weapons knowing that they are intended for use against Israel.

Why? Why are they acceding to the most outrageous and dangerous demands of the Saudis? For years the myth was successfully disseminated that the US, and the West in general, must pursue policies congenial to Saudi Arabia or they will not be sold oil.

This myth however has long been exposed. Survey after published survey has shown that the Saudis need every cent they are getting for their oil in order to fund their gigantic and over-expanding development projects. They cannot afford to reduce their production; and their bluff can be called without difficulty.

No. The decisive element in U.S. policy in the Middle East is evidently still the tremendous profits of banks and businesses — including the oil firms — from the Saudi development projects.

It is, of course, these elements in the US economy that have disseminated the Arab myths on the “dispute” with Israel and on the “moderation” and progressive character of the Saudi state.

Promotion of the F-15 and AWACS deal is but one specially chilling expression of that collaboration. We, in Israel, and the large camp in the US who believed in the great and salutary change President Reagan was to bring into the conduct of American policy, should put it to him: *Et tu, Ronald?*