Why Saudi Arabia Is Too Important an Ally to Get 100 F-16s

by **Kenneth Pollack (/experts/kenneth-pollack)**

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Brief Analysis

Saudi Arabia has gotten a lot of negative attention in recent months. The Saudis have been blamed for failing to pay sufficient attention to homegrown dissidents, contributing to American deaths in terrorist attacks in Riyadh and Dhahran. King Fahd's stroke in late 1995 prompted speculation that a succession crisis loomed or that the Kingdom might be left rudderless for a time. In recent weeks, the FBI has chastised Riyadh for failing to make good on its promise to give the United States access into its investigation of the al-Khobar Towers bombing. It is no wonder that Riyadh may be trying to reassure Washington of Saudi Arabia's stability and commitment to the United States by purchasing billions of dollars of F-16s.

These U.S. pressures on Saudi Arabia, which supposedly produced the purported deal, point to more serious issues in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The Kingdom has undergone a sea-change in the last ten years: new economic and social difficulties mean it must be more frugal and more concerned with domestic problems than was previously the case. In the past, the Saudis were often subjected to misguided pressure from different quarters in the United States prompting them to take actions, like the F-16 deal, which in today's changed circumstances may prove harmful both to the Kingdom and the United States.

Militarily Unnecessary . . .

The F-16 purchase itself would only modestly improve Saudi Arabia's military position. The Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) is already the most potent of Riyadh's armed forces, and is also probably the finest indigenous air force in the Gulf. At least as individual pilots, the Saudis are highly capable far superior to their Iraqi counterparts, and almost certainly better than the Iranians as well. Saudi pilots have often had difficulty operating in formations, but adding 100 F-16s to their order of battle is not going to solve this problem. Neither do the Saudis necessarily need greater numbers of aircraft. In 1990, the RSAF boasted 80 F-15s, 72 Tornados, and 105 F-5s, for a total of 257 combat aircraft. The Saudis are already taking delivery of another 48 Tornados, 12 Apache helicopters, and 72 F-15S's (a slightly modified version of the F-15E). Thus even if the Saudis were to retire all of the F-5s without replacing them the ostensible purpose of the F-16s they would still have a force of 284 combat aircraft. Last, adding F-16s to the mix would not greatly improve the firepower of the RSAF. The strike-variant of the Tornado, of which the Saudis will eventually have 96, has a longer range and larger payload than the F-16 and is considered a very capable interdiction aircraft. Moreover, the F-15E is the most formidable multi-role warplane in the world. Consequently, the Saudis do

not have a pressing need for the less-capable F-16s.

There are other issues regarding the military utility of this sale. It is unclear how quickly the Saudis would be able to absorb these aircraft. Fully-trained Saudi pilots are usually quite good, but few make it to that level because the Kingdom has a shortage of technically-skilled personnel that makes it hard to find qualified candidates. Indeed, in the past, the Saudis have had to cull the best pilots from their F-5 squadrons to fill out new units of F-15s and Tornados. Finally, if there is one thing the United States can contribute quickly and efficiently to the defense of Saudi Arabia it is airpower.

. . . and Economically Unwise

Although an F-16 sale would give only a marginal boost to the Kingdom's already formidable air arm, it would come with a significant economic cost. Saudi Arabia is no longer the fount of petrodollars it once was. A long-term decline in oil prices, only moderately alleviated this past year, has seriously diminished Riyadh's income. Meanwhile, the Kingdom struggles to maintain the social benefits installed during the boom years of the 1970s in the face of a population that is growing at a blistering pace (nearly 3.7 percent annually). A further strain on the Saudi economy is an educational system which produces too few engineers, computer programmers, and plumbers. This shortfall contributes to widespread underemployment among Saudis and necessitates the import of numerous foreign workers. Although reports of popular unrest have probably been exaggerated in the West, there is no question that the Saudi populace is less content than in the past. The small, but growing, number of Shi'i and Sunni opposition groups cannot be dismissed lightly. Of even greater importance, many Saudis and particularly the powerful Hijazi merchant families are increasingly angered by corruption among the ever-growing ranks of Saudi junior princes. Finally, the Kingdom is facing not only a major downward shift in its economic fortunes, but a serious cultural dilemma as well. Although Westerners may make light of the issue, for Saudis, the clash of their traditional ways with the Western culture seeping into the Kingdom through every satellite dish and computer terminal is a source of real unease.

The $5-15 billion the Saudis are expected to spend on the F-16s would represent much of the windfall from this year's higher oil prices. Because of this unexpected rise in oil prices, short-term financial pressures on the Saudi budget have largely disappeared, making it easier for Riyadh to use its newfound budget surplus to pay for military hardware. However, the long-term structural problems in the Saudi economy remain. Therefore, rather than invest in 100 F-16s which are likely to bring only marginally greater security from external threats, the Kingdom's long-term security would be best served by investing these funds in reforming the Saudi financial, educational, and welfare systems.

Why Saudi Stability is More Important than Selling F-16s

Saudi Arabia is not in danger of imminent collapse. There are several reasons, however, why the Kingdom's internal problems should be of concern to the United States. In the near term, Saudi domestic troubles prevent Riyadh from acting more effectively in the international arena. Saudi Arabia is an important force for stability in the Middle East, but to the extent domestic problems absorb the time and resources of the Saudi government, they diminish its voice in diplomatic arenas. Similarly, internal unrest can cause the Saudis to alter their foreign policy. For example, Riyadh provided only half-hearted support for U.S. cruise missile strikes against Iraq last September, partly to avoid antagonizing the Saudi public, many of whom resent the U.S. military presence in the Kingdom. Similarly, domestic unrest has at times dampened the ability of the Kingdom to play a leadership role in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Looking past the immediate future, the United States needs to work with the Kingdom to ensure its stability and security beyond current circumstances. Today we are in an enviable position: we have large military forces based in the Gulf states and the threats from Iran and Iraq are slight. Neither of these factors is likely to hold in the future, as

Iraq and Iran continue to rebuild their militaries and Gulf populations become increasingly uncomfortable hosting U.S. military forces. Thus the United States should use this period of time to help strengthen our Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia in particular, and defuse threats both external and internal. This means not only helping Riyadh enhance its ability to withstand an attack by Iran or Iraq until U.S. forces can deploy to the region, but also helping the Saudis to reform their economy in order to alleviate financial pressures and internal opposition that could threaten the Kingdom from within.

Over the longer term, no one can rule out the possibility of a major regime shake-up, or even an outright revolution in Saudi Arabia. Any large-scale internal convulsions in the Kingdom could be a serious problem for the West. Consequently, even though this possibility may seem remote now, we must be careful not to take actions that would make it any more likely. The continued diversion of Saudi resources into extravagant military purchases often at U.S. urging is a pattern that must be changed.

Implications

In the past, Americans saw Saudi Arabia as a diffident ally and a cash-cow available to subsidize U.S. arms manufacturers and diplomatic projects. Consequently, we believed it appropriate and worthwhile to press the Saudis to buy American weapons. If this were ever appropriate, it certainly no longer is. Because of the change in international energy markets and Saudi fortunes, long-term U.S. interests would now be best served by promoting the economic and political well-being of the Kingdom even at the expense of short-term U.S. economic interests. Saudi Arabia is one of our most important allies in the world. Any threat to the Kingdom, and the free flow of Saudi oil, is a threat to the vital interests of the United States. In the interests of Saudi prosperity and domestic harmony, which ultimately redound to the long-term benefit of the United States, Washington would be better off discouraging the Saudis from the F-16 deal, or other major military purchases, in favor of investing the same funds in domestic development.

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