

# Israel's Eroding Edge in the Middle East Military Balance

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Executive Summary

**T**he supply of sophisticated American weapons to Arab states -- particularly Jordan -- is more disturbing to Israel in 1985 than ever before. This is because Israel's edge in the military balance is steadily eroding.

\* The Arabs' quantitative advantage continues to grow as their armies garner strength while Israel's economic crisis forces the closing down of IDF operational units, including Air Force combat squadrons.

\* Israel's qualitative advantage is slipping because the Arabs are systematically acquiring top quality weapons while Israel can no longer afford many of the weapons it needs to stay ahead and is forced to sharply reduce the training hours for combat pilots and tank crews.

\* Israel's ability to deter Syria has been reduced because the Syrian army has expanded to eight highly mobile divisions and Damascus has acquired front-line Soviet equipment never before introduced into the Middle East (including 900 T-72 tanks, advanced MiG-23s and SU-22s, SA-5 long range anti-aircraft missiles, highly accurate SS-21 ground-to-ground missiles and long-range anti-ship missiles). Syria has also invested efforts in the development and production of a chemical warfare capability. In short, the Syrian army is reaching the point where it may well be Prepared to initiate hostilities.

In this context, Israel is particularly concerned about the growth in the offensive capabilities of the Jordanian armed forces. In the absence of peace with Jordan, Israeli military planners must assume that King Hussein will be unable to remain outside an Arab military coalition led by Syria.

In the event of a war on Israel's eastern front, the deployment of Jordanian F-16s in such close proximity to Israel's most vital centers will make it extremely difficult to prevent Jordanian penetrations. Thus the supply of F-16s will make an Israeli preemptive strike against Jordan all but inevitable in a crisis.

Moreover, the high density of Syria's anti-aircraft missile network makes it essential that the Israeli Air Force defend against the Syrian attack by striking at these missiles via northern Jordan. If the U.S. sells Jordan mobile I-Hawk anti-aircraft missiles and F-16s, the IAF will be unable to operate freely against the Syrian offensive. It will either have to bear the high cost of forgoing the Jordanian route or forfeit an appreciable part of its bombing potential.

In these circumstances, U.S. arms sales to the Middle East should be based on three principles:

\* Deterrence of Arab aggression by maintaining Israel's qualitative edge. This requires either the equipping of Israel

with weapons a generation ahead of those offered to the Arabs or endowing Israel with the knowledge to produce the systems herself (thereby reducing Arab demands on Washington to receive the same weapons as Israel).

\* Providing Jordan and Saudi Arabia only with weapons of a strictly defensive nature that will not boost their offensive capabilities.

\* Avoiding the sale of sophisticated weapons to countries contiguous with Israel that remain in a state of war. Jordan's procurement of such weapons will be more palatable to Israel -- as were Egypt's -- once King Hussein enters direct peace negotiations.

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