

Saudi Saber Rattling

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

By deploying F-15 strike aircraft to a northwestern airbase in March 2003 and holding large combined-arms exercises near the Gulf of Aqaba in mid-October, Saudi Arabia has indicated its desire to act more freely in asserting its territorial sovereignty vis-à-vis Israel. These actions -- which Washington and Riyadh might previously have attempted to restrain -- are visible symptoms of the scaling back of U.S.-Saudi military-to-military ties. Although Riyadh's decision to alter longstanding tacit agreements regarding the posture of Saudi forces will not significantly affect the regional military balance, such a move may make Washington more reluctant to offer future arms sales and military support to the kingdom.

Background

In 1978, Carter administration plans to sell ninety-one F-15C/D strike aircraft to Saudi Arabia sparked a bitter debate. In May of that year, the sale was approved by Congress in a narrow 54-to-44 vote, and only after Riyadh accepted restrictions that limited its ability to deploy the aircraft against Israel. Specifically, the aircraft were not to be equipped with conformal fuel tanks (CFTs), preventing them from carrying extra fuel and a full weapons load simultaneously. Riyadh also agreed to refrain from basing the aircraft at the northwestern Tabuk airbase, some 150 kilometers from Israel. In 1992, sales of seventy-two even more advanced F-15S aircraft were placed under the same restrictions; in addition, the tactical early warning suite carried by these aircraft was downgraded to reduce its potential effectiveness against Israeli missiles.

The record of implementation for these restrictions, however, is poor. In 1981, the first shipment of F-15C/Ds to Saudi Arabia did in fact include a small number of CFTs. That same year witnessed the controversial sale of AWACS command and control aircraft to Riyadh, which Congress authorized by an even narrower 52-to-48 vote. In the mid-1990s, the Saudi F-15S fleet was further augmented by sales of special CFTs with weapons hardpoints, allowing the aircraft to carry more weapons at longer ranges. Therefore, when the kingdom deployed fifty F-15Ss to Tabuk airbase in March 2003, it neutralized the final safeguard of Israel's strategic depth and contravened a restriction that had been placed on F-15 sales since 1978.

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Ostensibly, the Saudi F-15s were moved to Tabuk in order to provide air cover for U.S. special forces being launched into Iraq's western desert from the northwestern corner of Saudi Arabia. Given its reliance on Saudi basing, U.S. Central Command agreed to a temporary move. Since the war, however, Riyadh has resisted both U.S. and Israeli pressure to remove the aircraft from Tabuk. In mid-October, the kingdom exacerbated the growing tension by undertaking a long-planned series of combined-arms exercises in the Red Sea near the Gulf of Aqaba.

Riyadh's decision to move the F-15s to Tabuk in the first place was a purely political gesture -- an expression of independence and reclamation of sovereign territory. Nevertheless, the aircraft are unlikely to remain at the airbase indefinitely. Although Tabuk has excellent wartime facilities, it is not a dedicated F-15 base in terms of hardened aircraft shelters, hangars, and other support infrastructure. Tabuk is also one of the least hospitable and most remote basing locations in the kingdom. Moreover, the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) has traditionally preferred to use Saudi Arabia's own strategic depth to protect its valuable F-15 fleet from the possibility of Israeli preemptive strikes. As a result, the F-15s will probably be moved back to their main operating bases at Dhahran, Khamis Mushayt, Riyadh, and Taif as soon as political attention to the issue recedes.

Saudi Military Weakness

In response to the Tabuk move, Israeli military officials cited the risk that an al-Qaeda operative or a rogue Saudi pilot might fly an F-15 into Israel on a September 11-style suicide mission. This complaint highlights how little concern there is that the kingdom might one day try to use its F-15s in a military strike role against Israel. Although the RSAF is equipped with all the trappings of a long-range strike force (e.g., extended-range F-15s, refueling tankers, combat search and rescue forces), it is not effectively configured for that role. The RSAF is short of F-15 aircrews, and its U.S.-supplied KC-3A refueling tankers are primarily used to keep its U.S.-built AWACS aircraft airborne as they watch the kingdom's borders and to allow its fighter aircraft to maintain patrols over the country's vast expanses. As Israeli director of planning Maj. Gen. Giora Eliand recently noted, the RSAF would have little chance of repeatedly penetrating Israeli airspace; any Saudi strike against Israel would likely be limited to the southern tip of the country.

Despite spending an annual average of \$21.2 billion on defense over the past five years, the Saudi military, including the RSAF, has been in decline since its peak effectiveness around 1993. Two factors have caused this decline. First, the kingdom has accumulated a massive, complex force structure, and sustaining it consumes the vast majority of Saudi defense expenditures. Defense spending is unlikely to rise sharply, particularly as internal security receives greater emphasis due to the demonstrated terrorist threat to the kingdom and the elimination of the external Iraqi threat. Moreover, the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and interior ministry security forces -- estimated by the International Institute for Strategic Studies to cost \$7 billion per year -- each have powerful sponsors (SANG commander Crown Prince Abdullah and Interior Minister Prince Nayef) who counter the influence of Defense Minister Prince Sultan.

The second cause of the kingdom's military decline is the slow collapse of U.S.-Saudi military-to-military ties. In the early 1990s, close cooperation between the two militaries seemed to offer a conduit for advanced defense planning and force-management support. Yet, as the decade wore on and faith in a NATO-style U.S.-Saudi relationship declined on both sides, Riyadh recognized that the burden of building and maintaining advanced conventional forces capable of deterring northern Gulf aggressors was simply too much for the kingdom's financial and manpower base to handle. Consequently, most of the projects outlined in the U.S.-Saudi Joint Security Review -- in which the ambitious Saudi defense policy of the early 1990s was conceived -- were never completed. For example, in the five-year plan for 1996-2000, the kingdom's defense budget was underfunded by an average of 13 percent each year.

Implications

At a recent meeting with U.S. deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, Maj. Gen. Amos Yaron, director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, raised concerns about the Tabuk deployment, and the issue will also likely be discussed during the upcoming session of the Joint U.S.-Israel Political Military Group, to be held in Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, the fallout from Riyadh's actions may be minimal in terms of Israeli security. It could have serious effects, however, on future U.S. sales of F-15 support equipment (and, perhaps, other defense-related items) to the Saudis. Riyadh's contravention of longstanding agreements could exacerbate anti-Saudi sentiments in the U.S. legislature and impede future Saudi access to U.S. arms. The House and Senate International Relations committees will no doubt note the kingdom's violation of the conditions of past F-15 sales, and could decide to limit future sales or even curtail support to the existing RSAF F-15 fleet. Over 1,000 Boeing contract employees are required to support this fleet, and more than \$2.6 billion has been spent on F-15 maintenance alone since 1993. The seventy-two F-15Ss currently flown by the RSAF represent the kingdom's airpower mainstay for the next twenty years. Without U.S. support, this high-maintenance fleet will quickly fall into disrepair, as the RSAF found out in 2001 when it sharply reduced its spending on contractor support. The longer Riyadh bases F-15 squadrons at Tabuk, the more difficult it will be to get future Saudi arms sales through Congress. Given that it is currently mulling U.S. avionics upgrades on the aging F-15C/D fleet purchased in 1981, Riyadh may not have long to wait before finding out the price it will pay for the rare privilege of thumbing its nose at Israel.

Michael Knights is the Mendelow defense fellow at The Washington Institute.

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