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### Arabian Nights in Washington

Not the least regrettable feature of the ongoing debate over the AWACS planes is the ridiculous posture into which the Reagan Administration has maneuvered itself.

True, it inherited from its predecessors an absurdly obsequious attitude to Saudi Arabia, but it has embraced its inheritance eagerly and has proceeded to embellish its absurdity still further.

The previous administrations indulged in incredible flights of fancy — in praise of the desert kingdom as a progressive, liberal, nearly democratic modern state — in order to justify the sale of gigantic quantities of sophisticated arms which far outrun the Saudis' capacity to employ them. These fancies are now being perpetuated and even improved upon.

Now, threatened by the possibility of defeat in both houses of Congress on its proposal to sell the Saudis AWACS planes and enhanced equipment for their F-15 planes, the administration is casting about in apparent desperation for arguments to justify the deal, regardless of logic, of rationality — or of truth.

One crucial question that has been asked in the past is why the Saudis need such large quantities of arms. Washington's answer has been that Saudi Arabia has to be prepared to defend itself against potential Soviet aggression.

There is nobody in Washington, however ignorant, who believes that the Saudis could or would stand up to Soviet forces. The rational defence of Saudi Arabia, as a vital source of oil for the West, requires an American force on Saudi territory. This the Saudis refuse to countenance; and now they are refusing to allow US joint control over the AWACS they have ordered — an arrangement which many opponents of the deal believe would provide all of Saudi Arabia's necessary security requirements while ensuring that the planes would not leave Saudi hands.

This seems rational; but the Saudis, after all, can do no wrong. The administration then, hard put to explain the Saudi refusal, has dug up a brand new argument. In an ABC television interview last month, Secretary of State Alexander Haig said:

“After all, Saudi Arabia is a country that has experienced the vicissitudes of colonialism, and like so many other... countries in the region... they are very, very opposed to the establishment of American bases or pervasive American influence in their country, and I understand that, and I think we Americans have learned that lesson”.

This is pure fantasy. Saudi Arabia is a country that has definitely *not* experienced the vicissitudes of colonialism. It has been a self-governing kingdom for over 200 years. Indeed, the shoe of “colonialism” is very much on the other foot. A more predatory acquisitive country it would be hard to find; it attained its present borders by a long series of aggressions against its neighbours— including the Hashemites of Hejaz.

In their refusal, however, the Saudis are surely justified. For their specific requirement of “policing” the Gulf zone, the four AWACS already operating on their soil are adequate. These are owned and operated by the Americans, and it is the Saudis who invited them to come.

When the Iran-Iraq war broke out and there was some likelihood of danger, the Saudis forgot that their national honour does not sit well with American forces on their soil.

The AWACS they are now asking for are needed for their own central purpose — to spy on Israel. For this purpose, the last thing they need is American pilots sharing operational control of the planes.

As for the danger to Israel, the US Administration has not, it seems, succeeded in convincing critical senators that the AWACS have the Jekyll and Hyde quality of being vitally important to Saudi security in the east, and becoming emasculated when they reach the Israeli front.

Senator Henry Jackson is said to have commented that according to the administration, the AWACS plane is no more than junk; and an unnamed Saudi official is said to have been so impressed with the planes’ alleged inadequacies that he proposed cancelling the order.

The administration has, however, produced a new argument: the sale is needed for the peace-making process. This comes straight out of Alice in Wonderland.

The Saudis have, it is true, participated in all the wars against Israel, though in a minor role, because they regard a Jewish state as an offence to Islam. The only rational relationship between a peace-making process and the Saudis’ desire for the AWACS and the enhanced capacity of the F-15s is that these weapons would enable them to inflict considerable damage on Israel and thus hasten the peace-without-Israel process, of which the Arab leaders dream.

When all other pleas denying the danger to Israel have failed, administration spokesmen have come up with the news of a truly effective antidote. Thus Richard V. Allen, the president’s adviser on national security, wrote in an article issued by the White House on September 19:

“We repeat: the president is irrevocably committed to protecting Israel’s security and to preserving Israel’s ability to defeat any combination of potentially hostile forces in the region”.

This promise requires particular attention. Nowhere throughout the long statements by the administration is there the hint of a mention that the proposed package constitutes a breach of undertaking to Israel, and to the US Congress.

In 1975, Israel succumbed to Ford Administration pressure and withdrew from the vital Mitla and Gidi passes and the Abu Rudeis oil wells. The sacrifice was recognized by Washington as a serious contribution to US political plans in the region. To offset in part the advantages this conceded to the Arabs, Israel was promised F-15 planes.

In 1978, the Carter Administration reneged on this undertaking. A new condition was attached. Unless Congress agreed to the sale of F-15s to Saudi Arabia as well, and to the sale of F-5 planes to Egypt, Israel would not get her planes.

There was a strong opposition in Congress to this “deal,” which was finally approved only after a written undertaking by President Carter that the F-15 planes to Saudi Arabia would not be equipped with the additional fuel tanks and missile equipment which the Saudis were already then asking for. These were recognized as adding a new and grave direction to the potential danger to Israel.

Now, the Reagan Administration is backing out of this undertaking as well. Moreover, the supply of AWACS undermines the qualitative superiority hitherto enjoyed by Israel and “guaranteed” by Washington against the considerable quantitative superiority of Arab arms.

This regrettably is the factual context of Allen’s tranquillizing statement. The danger and the antidote are equally clear. For the Saudis — AWACS planes and enhanced equipment for their F-15s. For Israel — the expression of good intentions of an administration busily engaged in tearing up previous solemn undertakings.

Quaintly enough in this context, another argument advanced for the deal is that US credibility is at stake. President Carter, in spite of his undertakings in 1978 to Congress and to Israel, secretly (and of course illegitimately) promised the Saudis that they would nevertheless get the forbidden arms and equipment if *he* were re-elected. How — the administration spokesmen ask — could President Reagan fail to honour such a solemn undertaking?

The narrative, necessarily abridged, would not nevertheless be complete without reference to its humorous touches.

One relates to Lebanon. When the Israeli bombing of PLO installations had brought the terrorist organization to a state of near-collapse, Yasser Arafat appealed urgently to King Khaled to exert his influence with the Americans to press the Israelis to stop their attacks. The Saudis at once demanded American intervention to save their protege. Washington accordingly pressed Israel, and Israel agreed to a cease-fire. Saudi Arabia then achieved Arafat’s agreement to a cease-fire (and to being given the opportunity to rebuild his forces).

Now Washington cites as another reason for giving the package to the Saudis their wise and benevolent behaviour in providing their “good offices” in achieving the cease-fire in Lebanon. No less funny is the reiterated suggestion emanating from Washington that the existence of a majority in the House and in the Senate against the deal in spite of the flood of administration briefings, is the fault of Israel.

What can Israel be offering these legislators to unsettle their perceptions and their judgment of American interests? Israel has no oil, nor petrodollars, nor has she big contracts for their constituents. What mystic Israeli commodity has beguiled so many American legislators? The turn the debate in Washington has taken would indeed be humorous if it were not so ominous.