

Politics and Defence

DEFENCE DECISIONS

The news of Saudi Arabia's four billion dollar arms deal with Britain, under which the kingdom is to buy 72 high performance Tornado strike aircraft and 30 Hawk jet training planes, together with missiles, radar, spares and supporting equipment, has been received with low-key equanimity in Washington, made the subject of only modest rejoicing in London, and given the most meagre coverage in Riyadh.

"Not Surprised"

Some official reticence is naturally to be expected where major defence matters are at issue, and it comes easiest to the buyers and the sellers in such transactions. No such sheltered position was available to the United States, and its manifold and manifest defence links with the kingdom guaranteed that Washington would have to comment on the Tornado purchase. The Reagan Administration did the best it could in the circumstances and a State Department spokesman said, "Since we have not made a decision to make available additional F-15 aircraft, in which Saudi Arabia has been interested, we are not surprised that Saudi Arabia, in the light of the escalating hostilities in the Gulf, would meet its defence needs from other Western sources". Since it would have scarcely have bolstered his statement, the spokesman carefully did not point out that the first Tornado will not reach the kingdom for about eighteen months - hardly in time to affect much the 'escalating hostilities'. However, the US spokesman went on to say that the US expected to continue its longstanding security co-operation with the kingdom, 'in the light of our important interests there and in the Gulf'.

Prime Reasons

Almost, but not quite, the State Department spokesman spelled out the prime reasons which caused Saudi Arabia to make such a substantial shift from their principal arms supplier in a key

area of defence. The official 'We have not made a decision' was simply another way of saying the White House did not think it could get the sale past Congress and did not, anyway, have much stomach for the political fight it would entail with the pro-Israel lobby or, for that matter, with the Israeli government. What the spokesman did not say, or even infer, was another and more compelling motive for the US' thumbs down on a sale of more F-15s to Saudi Arabia.

No Conditions

That omission is to be found, however, in the fine print of the joint Saudi-US Air Defense Enhancement Package agreement, which related to the purchase of the AWAC surveillance aircraft and their function within the overall Saudi air defence system. Essentially, the package ensured that about two-thirds of Saudi spending on its air defences would be on bases and systems to cover the Gulf oilfields and the Red Sea area, but which did not (and does not) pose a direct military threat to Israel. Saudi Arabia's existing 62 F-15s and 65 F-5Es are all stationed in the eastern and southern regions of the country. The kingdom had sought to buy two more squadrons of F-15s, which were to be based at Tabuk in north-west Saudi Arabia, some 100 miles from Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat. It is understood that there are no restrictions or conditions in the Tornado sale regarding the basing of aircraft or their tactical deployment and employment. Which is why, almost certainly, Israel was quick to condemn the sale and announce its forthcoming protests to Britain.

Green Light

There were reports in the American press that the Saudis had sought President Reagan's 'green light' before concluding the Tornado deal, but it is highly improbable that the kingdom would feel it necessary - or even politic - to seek American permission for its arms purchases. Asked how Mr. Reagan felt about the Tornado purchase, White House spokesman Larry Speakes

said, "The President certainly recognizes the defence needs of the Saudis and others in the region, and we have always worked carefully with them. But their decision as to who to purchase arms from, military equipment from, is theirs". The comment from Speakes would find a ready endorsement in Riyadh.

European Involvement

Behind these political politenesses there remains the substantive change in the pattern of Saudi Arabaian defence purchases. The Tornado aircraft is built by a joint partnership of British, West German and Italian aerospace contractors, and these three leading European countries are now closely involved - for many years to come - with Saudi Arabian defence matters. The near exclusivity of the US in the Saudi air defence field is now irreparably breached, and the kingdom may feel just a little more comfortable for that circumstance. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's voice in Europe must be strengthened by the deal and that aspect, too, will not displease Riyadh. The aircraft itself (see front page) is designed as the key aircraft for NATO's counter-attack forces until well into the next century, with a total of over 800 of the two versions of Tornado being built for the three European countries. Saudi Arabia is taking the interdiction strike version (IDS), capable of short and medium battlefield support tasks as well as long range interdiction. The Saudi decision to buy Tornado looks to have been based on sound military sense as well as an acute awareness of some useful political factors involved.

In Brief

⊕ THE ARAB RECONCILIATION COMMITTEE, formed by the Arab League Casablanca summit meeting to end differences between Syria and Iraq, and Syria and Jordan, has made better progress than many observers had expected. Headed by Crown

Prince Abdullah, and with Tunisian Premier Mohammad Mzali and Arab League Secretary General Chadli Klibi, the Committee brought together the Jordanian and Syrian Prime Ministers for talks in Jeddah under the personal auspices of Prince Abdullah. After a preliminary meeting, attended also by Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal, the Jordanian Court Minister and the Syrian Foreign Minister, the two Prime Ministers met in private session. The local 'Arab News' quoted a high level source as saying that Prince Abdullah would only intervene if the two Premiers, Zeid Rifa'i of Jordan and Abdul Rauf Kasm of Syria, reached a position of deadlock.

An immediate result has been the resumption of contacts between Syria and Jordan on economic and trade matters. A Jordanian economic delegation has been in Damascus discussing the activities of joint companies, and other delegations are being exchanged to revive trade, scientific, technical and educational agreements between the two countries, frozen since the deterioration in bilateral relations in late 1980.

⊕ THE GCC'S JOINT MILITARY FORCE will, when the representative forces of the six member states are stationed together at King Khalid Military City, consist of approximately two divisions. The Force, titled Peninsula Shield and under the command of a Saudi Arabian general, is due to be operational next October. The SR18bn King Khalid Military City, one of the largest military complexes in the world, covers an area of some 4000 square kilometres, and can house 70,000 military personnel and their families. The City, in the Hafr al Batin area, is 120 kilometres from Kuwait and 1200 km from Jordan. It houses command headquarters for Saudi land, naval and airforce units plus lavish service and residential facilities.

⊕ THE PRODUCTION LINE FOR THE US AWAC RADAR PLANE, THE E-3A, will shut down in March 1987, after Saudi Arabia receives the last one