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Julia Schemel

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RONALD REAGAN AND THE AWACS SALE: A NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

BY
JULIA SCHEMEL

Julia Schemel is a junior and an American History major at the United States Military Academy. She wrote this paper in partial fulfillment of course requirements for a survey on the American political system.

For decades, American foreign policy and domestic policies have often been focused on and entangled in the Middle East, resulting in much tension and controversy. The reason for such political debate is the passionate interests of a select group of American citizens: the pro-Israel lobby. These interests lie deeply in the extensive history of warfare and tensions with the Arab nations, as Bradley Cohn discusses in this volume. Political scientists Michal Shamir and Jacob Shamir stated that “the Arab-Israeli conflict, the more than 100 years of conflict between Jews and Arabs . . . is one of the most intractable conflicts in the world today, at the center of international politics and media attention.”¹ Regardless of political affiliation, a diverse group of transnational advocates who support the interests of Israel will generally band together. Such has been the case since the founding of Israel and is very likely to continue well into the future. With the influence of such a powerful lobbying community, almost every American policy made with regard to the Middle East will thus often be tied to Israel.²

On October 1, 1981, when President Ronald Reagan formally announced his administration’s endorsement of the sale of the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia, interest groups from the pro-Israel lobby linked together in outrage and caused a huge political uproar in the nation’s capital.³ The AWACS technology is a type of aircraft that is capable of detecting the presence of other low-flying aircraft through radar detection systems to be used in the Persian Gulf.⁴ In what was perhaps the most intense and massive lobbying campaign ever to take place in the nation’s capital, Reagan eventually succeeded in obtaining Congressional approval for the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia. Reagan and his administration used ample political resources in order to get this policy

¹ Michal Shamir and Jacob Shamir, “The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Israeli Elections,” *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 4 (September 2007): 469.

² Nicholas Laham, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia: The Reagan Administration and the Balancing of America’s Competing Interests in the Middle East* (London: Praeger, 2002), x-xi.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

approved despite much controversy. He placed high priority in maintaining a balance of power in the Middle East while holding back Soviet influence, as well as securing the United States' vital national interests and economic stability. The vast majority of the opposition Reagan faced rested in domestic politics and the pro-Israel lobby, which he met head on and ultimately, through much lobbying by his administration, succeeded.

In August 1979, Reagan wrote that "stripped of rhetoric, the paramount American interest in the Middle East is to prevent the region from falling under the domination of the Soviet Union."⁵ Prior to his election the following year, president-elect Ronald Reagan was already a firm believer in focusing upon the Soviet Union as the highest priority. Following the foreign policy failures of the Carter administration, Reagan and his closest advisors set out to implement a policy that contained a strong anti-Soviet posture, as well as to have a rhetoric that included antiterrorist and antiradical measures. Committed to the restoration of United States' power and prestige worldwide, Reagan and his administration wished to once again regain the confidence of the nation's allies. This was to be achieved through clear, consistent, and realistic foreign policy goals.⁶

As a result of the actions taken by the Soviet Union just before Reagan took office, his administration put precedence on security issues, both regionally and globally. In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and a war broke out the following year between Iraq and Iran. Therefore, upon entering the White House, Reagan and his administration publicly announced that "their first priority would be to restore the West's strategic position against the Soviets in the Middle East." By essentially blocking Soviet influence in the Middle East, the United States would effectively be able to maintain and monitor the balance of power in this unstable region of the world. One of Reagan's first policy decisions was the announcement of his endorsement of selling five AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia, which he believed would strengthen the Arab nation.⁷ By equipping the Saudis with this new aircraft technology, they would have a greater stronghold in the Middle East, and thus could stand on their own against any potential Soviet aggression.

Americans have typically viewed Saudi Arabia as a more moderate, friendly nation in which the United States was able to form a more stable relationship. These ties were strained when the Soviet threat to this region appeared to be growing, given the aggressive actions taken in 1979.⁸ Although the entire Middle

⁵ Bernard Reich, *The United States and Israel: Influence in the Special Relationship* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷ Robert E. Looney, *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations: Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 412.

⁸ William B. Quandt, "Riyadh between the Superpowers," *Foreign Policy* 44 (Autumn 1981): 37.

East was always a topic of concern, there seemed to be an ever-increasing focus on the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia.⁹ In an interview early into his first term, Reagan discussed the importance of having a ground military presence of the United States in this region. Having this presence would ensure that these nations would be able to more effectively respond to a potential Soviet threat.¹⁰ A general belief was that the Soviet Union's aggressive policies thrived on exploiting weaker nations that had much instability and would encourage further disturbances through subversion. Given the common knowledge of the widespread instability throughout the Middle East, the Reagan administration felt it necessary to increase American presence and mobilize these nations.¹¹

Selling AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia fit the mold of Reagan's intended policies towards this region filled with turmoil. Should the Soviets successfully sell military equipment to the Saudis before the United States, they would have in a sense become dependent upon the Communist regime. Reagan and the American population did not want this to occur. Therefore, Reagan instead opted to sell goods to Saudi Arabia in order to keep the nation as an Arab ally in the Middle East. A member of Reagan's staff, White House Chief of Staff James Baker, III, once stated in reference to Reagan's policies that "events would prove that he had a better understanding of the realities of the Cold War than many of his critics."¹²

For Reagan, U.S. vital interests also served as a motive for gaining congressional approval for this sale. Being pragmatic, Reagan also placed the nation's security and national interests as a high priority in his presidency. Maintaining adequate measures to ensure the nation's security went hand-in-hand with the issues he faced with the Soviet threats and the Middle Eastern instabilities. By keeping a constant United States military presence in the Middle East, the Reagan administration believed that the nation would have the ability to respond immediately should a crisis occur. Reagan considered this to be a likely event considering the recent actions of the Soviet Union in the region.¹³ His plan for selling the AWACS planes to the Saudis provided a way in which the United States could maintain a presence in the Middle East despite nationalist sentiments that prohibited Arab governments from allowing foreign bases to be constructed.¹⁴ Furthermore, he believed that the United States would ultimately benefit from the shared intelligence as a result of selling the AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia and

⁹ Reich, *The United States and Israel*, 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹² James A. Baker III, "*Work Hard, Study . . . and Keep Out of Politics!*": *Adventures and Lessons from an Unexpected Public Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006), 287.

¹³ Rex B. Wingerter, "AWACS and US Strategy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1982), 190.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

the continued presence these planes would have in the area.¹⁵ In facing harsh opposition to this sale, Secretary of State Alexander Haig refuted the criticisms by stating that given concessions by the Saudis, all information derived from the planes would be shared with the United States and would not be shared “with any other parties without U.S. consent.”¹⁶ He further claimed that “only carefully- screened Saudi and U.S. nationals will be permitted to be involved with these aircraft.”¹⁷ However, in the event that the United States was unable to obtain Saudi Arabia’s cooperation in this matter, or was unable to get the sale past Congress, it would not be taken seriously as a credible economic, diplomatic, or military power.¹⁸ Losing credibility among nations, particularly those of the Middle Eastern region, would be a huge detriment to the national interests of the United States, as well as its security. Therefore, Reagan saw the sale of such technology to Saudi Arabia as imperative in his foreign policy goals.

Obtaining greater stability in the Middle East was also a concern of the Reagan administration. When Reagan took office in 1980, the Persian Gulf was in a severe state of chaos that was characterized by a series of unfortunate destabilizing events, such as the overthrow of the Iranian Shah and the hostage crisis in 1979, as well as the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran War in 1980. Naturally, upon entering into his first term, it became his mission to restore security to this area. In his effort to get the sale of AWACS approved, Reagan made it clear that this foreign policy was the cornerstone in his goal to further establish the United States’ power in the Persian Gulf, thus contributing to obtaining its stability.¹⁹ In an interview with *Time* magazine, Reagan stated: “the Saudis have made it very plain that they want to be cooperative. They want stability in the Middle East, and have shown that with their willingness to participate in bringing about the Lebanon cease-fire.”²⁰

Facing voices of opposition in Congressional meetings, Secretary of State Haig refuted the disputes by explaining that Saudi Arabia’s need for the AWACS was proven when an Iranian plane flew over the Persian Gulf and bombed an oil facility in Kuwait and the Saudi oil fields on the east coast of the peninsula. He referred to the raid as “a dramatic, and, I think, God-given warning” of the Saudi needs for obtaining AWACS.²¹ Reagan’s administration then argued to Congress that the AWACS would provide the Saudis with 24-hour radar coverage to threats,

¹⁵ Reich, *The United States and Israel*, 105.

¹⁶ Senate, *Congressional Quarterly*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 133.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Laham, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia*, xv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁰ George J. Church, “AWACS: He Does It Again,” *Time*, 9 November 1981, 15.

²¹ Senate, *Congressional Quarterly*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 133.

and would give them ample time to prepare and intercept any threats, thus adding a greater sense of stability and security.²²

Along with the goal of providing stability in the Persian Gulf, there were also economic motives for selling these aircraft. There was an intrinsic desire of the United States to remain allies with Saudi Arabia and to develop even closer ties, since it was the largest supplier of imported oil.²³ Losing friendly ties with such a large oil supplier would likely result in very detrimental effects to both the nation's economy, as well as the economy of all other nations in the world. Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia would essentially place the nation under the protective military umbrella of the United States. This sale would then guarantee to prevent Saudi Arabia and other oil producing nations from using an oil embargo. Since the Saudis controlled the vast majority of oil reserves in the Middle East, no other nation would be able to use an embargo on their own.²⁴ Furthermore, those in Congress in favor of the sale argued that the combination of AWACS and previously purchased American military goods would be a huge leap forward in defending oil fields in Saudi Arabia.²⁵

Removing Saudi Arabia as a possible hostile force through the sale of the AWACS gave Reagan additional time to work on his domestic policies with the pro-Israel lobby that was so intently opposed to the idea.²⁶ He was well aware of the great deal of political influence this lobby had in America, and thus did not want to lose such a group of people's support for his administration. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, was a large and well financed part of the pro-Israel lobby with the reputation of being an effective and influential advocacy group in Washington. Naturally, Reagan faced fierce opposition from AIPAC in regard to the AWACS debate.²⁷ In order to get his policy through Congress while maintaining friendly ties with this group and the rest of the pro-Israel lobby, Reagan had to be cognizant of their opposing arguments and be able to effectively reassure them. The most common argument among the pro-Israel community was that the AWACS planes would only serve to undermine Israeli security by increasing threats to the nation and by aggravating regional tensions. The basis of their argument was that they believed that the sale of weapons to the Saudis would force the Israelis to buy more arms as well. These weapons would then increase the regional tensions, thereby causing instabilities and threats to their national security. Opponents of the sale were also convinced that the Saudis would

²² *Ibid.*, 133.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁴ Nicholas Laham, *Crossing the Rubicon: Ronald Reagan and US Policy in the Middle East* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 2.

²⁵ Senate, *Congressional Quarterly*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 140.

²⁶ Laham, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 2-3.

²⁷ David Verbeeten, "How Important is the Israel Lobby?" *Middle East Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 37-44.

not come through with their promise to keep gathered intelligence a secret from certain nations.²⁸

American advocates were not the only ones adamantly against the proposed sale to Saudi Arabia. Israel, led by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, was also highly concerned about Reagan's policy for the same reasons. Israelis also believed that this sale would ultimately undermine their security. Prime Minister Begin publicly tried to assert his influence upon American foreign relations, which in turn clearly upset the president, who declared that "it is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy."²⁹ Reagan so strongly believed that this sale endorsement would ensure a balance of power, support vital national interests, and ensure economic benefits to the United States that he was willing to expend whatever political resource was necessary to convince Congress.³⁰

Reflecting upon Ronald Reagan as a president, James Baker stated in his memoirs that Reagan "had enough confidence in his own leadership to know that no one could hijack his own presidency . . . Reagan's open-mindedness reflected more than self-confidence. Contrary to public perception, he was much more a pragmatist than an ideologue."³¹ The AWACS debate proved to be a great example of this description of the president, which further revealed his stamina and determination in accomplishing domestic and foreign policy goals he believed were vital to the nation's security interests.³² His management techniques, which evidently worked to his benefit, have been applauded by his vice president, George H. W. Bush, who wrote that "the Reagan style of „collegial“ management encouraged outspokenness at Cabinet meetings, with the president listening to a spectrum of opinion, then bringing the discussion back to fundamental principles."³³ Reagan clearly had a strong focus upon the most important matters at hand, and was rarely swayed from his goals throughout his presidency.

Pro-Israel groups worked incredibly hard to prevent the Congressional approval of this sale. It then came down to the Reagan administration to fight back against their appeals through executive lobbying via briefings, testimonies, and public appearances. Secretary of State Haig was known to have made several testimonies before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to defend the AWACS sale where he emphasized the importance of maintaining friendly relations with Saudi Arabia, and countering the arguments of the opponents.³⁴ Reagan's administration worked diligently to ease the concerns of the pro-Israel lobby by

²⁸ Senate, *Congressional Quarterly*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 130.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁰ Laham, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia*, xv.

³¹ Baker, "Work Hard, Study . . . and Keep Out of Politics!" 124-125.

³² Laham, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia*, xv.

³³ George Bush and Victor Gold, *Looking Forward: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 231.

³⁴ Senate, *Congressional Quarterly*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 132.

stating that the aircraft would not actually disrupt Middle Eastern stability or put Israel in immediate danger. He also assured it that the AWACS planes would, in fact, not be misused or compromised by the Saudis.³⁵ In an interview, the president commented: “We will do our best to reassure them . . . when I discussed this whole arrangement with Prime Minister Menachem Begin when he was here, we had a very full discussion about the relationship between our two countries . . . he seemed very pleased with our understanding of what our mutual relationship was.”³⁶

After much debating and toiling over this matter, the Senate finally approved the sale of the AWACS technology to Saudi Arabia on the evening of October 28, 1981.³⁷ Although Reagan made just a subtle mark in the Middle Eastern world, he did have a large influence upon American foreign policy in this region. Despite the difficulties in negotiating with Israel and the transnational pro-Israel community, as a result of the AWACS sale, the United States remained a strong supporter of the Jewish state. This was accomplished through the protective military umbrella around the Persian Gulf, which successfully prevented Arab oil embargos.³⁸ The Saudis also came out of this sale positively, and considered the sale to be a great victory and an example of the success of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.³⁹ Additionally, Gallup poll records reveal an upward trend in the approval ratings of Reagan during his first administration into his second. A five percent increase from his first to his second term, giving him a 55.3% approval rating, signified that the public came to realize, in part, the success that Reagan had in his policies in the Middle East.⁴⁰

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁶ Church, “AWACS: He Does It Again,” 15.

³⁷ Senate, *Congressional Quarterly*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 138.

³⁸ Laham, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 144.

³⁹ Looney, *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations*, 412.

⁴⁰ “Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends,” January 1989.

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx> (accessed December 5, 2010).