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Iraq War Note: Saudi Redeployment of the F-15 to Tabuk
By Anthony H. Cordesman
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These are remarkably tough times in the Middle East and it is easy to overreact to developments that might be quietly accepted in periods when Arab-Israeli tensions were not as high, and events like 9/11 had not created so many concerns regarding Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi decision this March to deploy F-15 aircraft to Tabuk, a base in Northwest Saudi Arabia some 150 kilometers from Israel is a case in point. So is the fact that Saudi Arabia held its first joint exercises near the Gulf of Aqaba in October, although these exercises were far smaller and less impressive than some critics seem to feel.

Critics of the moves make several points. Saudi Arabia did agree not to deploy the F-15s to Tabuk in 1992 as one of the conditions for the purchase of additional aircraft. The base is not yet properly equipped and structured to support the F-15, and the move was something of a political gesture -- although there are good military reasons for the change as well.

Several other factors need to be kept in mind. The first Saudi purchases of F-15s took place in 1978 -- some 25 years ago. Since that time, the balance of technology has changed immensely, Israel has vastly improved both its fighter and land-based air defenses, and Israel's advantages in electronic warfare and air control and warning have increased sharply over Saudi Arabia in spite of Saudi purchase and modernization of the E-3A.

It is also worth pointing out that Jordan now has a peace treaty with Israel, and this too affects the strategic equation. Furthermore, Saudi exercises in the Gulf area would have to take place at a time when the US has extensive air operations in supporting Iraq, and the Saudi border area with Yemen remains a sensitive area where military exercises might be seen as provocative and affect major Saudi-Yemeni progress in resolving border issues and territorial disputes that have been a source of tension for decades.

The Saudi Air Force has also reached something of a readiness crisis. While it still has some 370+ combat aircraft on paper, readiness and operational capability dropped badly between 1992 and 2001, and Saudi Arabia's F-5E/IIIs, and other F-5s virtually lost operational capability. Time marches on in air forces, just as it does in all other aspects of life. Some of Saudi Arabia's F-15s are 25 years old and it no longer has other combat aircraft suitable for deployment at Tabuk.

The aging of the F-5, and its loss of operational capability, mean the Saudis no longer have a "second tier" fighter suitable for deployment at Tabuk. They might use the Hawk trainer as a substitute, but it would be deployed more as a gesture than a war fighting capability. The air defense version of the Tornado, which Saudi Arabia purchased from Britain, has never been a particularly effective fighter, and the other Tornados are all dedicated strike/attack aircraft, which makes deploying them to Tabuk far more provocative than deploying the F-15.



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Moreover, it is far from clear that Saudi Arabia acted without first going to the US. The Saudis cooperated with the US during the Iraq War, and the US has long been aware of the problems in the Saudi Air Force and the need to change mix of aircraft types and deployments. It seems that the change in Saudi deployments came with US agreement, that Secretary Rumsfeld sent a letter to Congress, Under Secretary Doug Feith informed Israel about the changes in the restriction on Saudi deployments before it took place. (There are reports that the US implied to Israel that the change would be temporary, but it would seem that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was informed that the lifting of the restriction was permanent.)

There are other factors that affect any real or perceived threat to Israel. US combat forces may have departed from Saudi Arabia following the Iraq War, but Saudi Arabia also remains dependent on the US for training and technical services. It cannot sustain independent combat without US support, and it cannot use many of its air control and warning assets without US support. It also is still in the process of taking delivery on, and getting support in conversion to, some \$7.7 billion worth of US arms and military technology it purchased during 1996-2002, and any break with the US would virtually derail its modernization and sustainment efforts.

In a less trouble time, the Saudi redeployments would probably never have been an issue. The politics of the moment are less pleasant, but Saudi deployment of the F-15 to Tabuk is as much a reflection of the military weaknesses of its air force as its strengths, and is not a threat.