

## Preparing for War with Iran. The \$60 billion U.S. arms deal with Saudi Arabia is directed against Iran

By [Dov Zakheim](#)

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It is [widely believed](#) that the massive \$60 billion U.S. arms deal with Saudi Arabia is directed against Iran. After all, Israel did not object to the deal. As [one analyst](#) told China's *Xinhua News Agency*, Jerusalem, of all places, was simply adhering to the ancient principle of: "My enemy's enemy is my friend."

It is indeed possible that the deal — which includes up to 84 new F-15s, upgrading of Riyadh's current force of 70 F-15s, and up to 1,000 so-called "bunker buster" bombs — is meant to enhance the Saudi deterrent against Iran. But that presupposes that Iran will still be moving ahead with its nuclear weapons program in 2015, when the first new F-15s will be delivered to the desert kingdom, but will not yet have actually fielded the bomb. Should Iran already have acquired nuclear weapons together with viable systems for delivering them prior to that date, it is difficult to see how the Saudi purchases would effectively deter Tehran from anything other than a conventional attack on the Saudi Kingdom. On the other hand, should Iran have dropped its nuclear program — whether as a result of either international pressure or an internal upheaval — the Saudi purchase would appear to be somewhat beside the point.

A look at the remainder of the Saudi deal indicates that Riyadh has other concerns in mind. The Saudis are also acquiring 190 helicopters. These include 70 Apache Longbows, an upgraded version of the U.S. Army's highly successful attack helicopter which carries, among other weapons, a powerful 30 MM gun and anti-tank missiles. Riyadh is also purchasing 36 AH-6i "Little Bird" light helicopters, which are often used by Special Forces. Finally, the Saudis are buying 72 UH-60 Blackhawks, which are ideal for moving troops into and around combat zones.

Acquisition of these helicopters makes the most sense in the context of a need to prevent incursions from Yemen or to support the Sana'a government's operations against rebellious tribes, such as those that have been directed against the Houthis (who are Zaidis, a branch of Shiite Islam) since 2004. Indeed, so do the F-15s, and were the Houthis or other rebels to operate from underground shelters, so would the bunker busters as well. Finally the Saudi naval modernization program is as much geared to preventing piracy in the Red Sea and seaborne attacks on oil facilities in the Eastern Province as on deterring the Iranian Navy or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's naval forces.

Why would Israel not object to the Saudi purchase of attack systems that could in theory be deployed from Tabuk against the Jewish state? In part because the Israelis do not expect such an attack; in part because they will be receiving the more advanced F-35 the same

year that the Saudis begin to take ownership of the F-15s; in part because the Israelis own, and are therefore familiar with, not only F-15s, but most of the systems the Saudis are purchasing. Presumably, the Israel Defense Forces have devised defenses against them, whether through electronic warfare or kinetic means. In addition, however, it is in Israel's interest that the conservative Saudi regime prevent radicals such as the Houthis — who among their other acts have terrorized Yemen's ancient Jewish community to the point that most of it has now emigrated — from ever gaining power on the Arabian Peninsula.

Moreover, even if the Israelis do not expect the F-15s to be relevant in terms of stopping the Iranian nuclear program, Israel believes that Tehran does not need five years to build the bomb — they recognize the psychological impact on the Ayatollahs of their tacit support of the Saudi purchase. The Israelis would be delighted if Tehran's paranoid leaders were to conclude from Jerusalem's passivity in the face of the Saudi deal that Israel and Riyadh are in cahoots against them and that Israel has made a secret arrangement to overfly Saudi airspace in an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

There is yet one more reason for Israeli acquiescence to the sale. For more than twenty years — since Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir quashed American Jewish opposition to the 1988 sale of F-18s to Kuwait — Israel has been relatively silent in the face of arms sales to the Gulf Arabs. At the time, Shamir concluded that the sale posed no threat to Israel, and his attaché in Washington informed a number of vocal Congressional opponents of the deal that they should reserve their vitriol for other issues. Since then, the Israeli assessment of the impact of such sales on its security has not changed, while its desire to win over the Gulf States has increased over time. Israel wants to establish decent, if not official, relations with the southern Gulf regimes not only to forge a united front against Iran, but also to encourage those states to play a more positive role in the peace process and to increase their financial support of the Palestinian Authority. While Israel has had on-and-off economic relations with several of the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Saudi Arabia has not been one of them. Riyadh is the biggest prize and the Israelis are ready to go to great lengths to win it over — and if that means silence in the face of a massive purchase of American arms, so be it.

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