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# **The 1981 AWACS Deal: AIPAC and Israel Challenge Reagan**

Arnon Gutfeld



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 157

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ISSN 0793-1042

**November 2018**

Cover image: A USAF E-3 Sentry (an Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft) in flight, photo by US Air Force via Wikipedia

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# The 1981 AWACS Deal: AIPAC and Israel Challenge Reagan

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction .....	6
The Road to the AWACS Deal .....	8
The Battle Is Joined .....	12
Menachem Begin's US Visit .....	16
Reagan's Influence Campaign .....	17
The M-I Complex Rallies Behind the Deal .....	23
The Die Is Cast .....	25
Conclusion .....	27
Notes .....	29

# The 1981 AWACS Deal: AIPAC and Israel Challenge Israel

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1981, US President Ronald Reagan's decision to implement a large arms deal with Saudi Arabia involving aircraft, tanks, and Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) prompted a determined campaign against it spearheaded by the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). AIPAC and the Israeli government found the inclusion of the AWACS in the deal particularly troubling, as they threatened to speed up the regional arms race and erode Israel's technological edge. President Reagan was equally determined to see the deal go through, as failure to do so would have had a detrimental effect on his authority and international standing. In his first major policy challenge in the White House, Reagan led a no-holds-barred effort to convince Congress to approve the deal.

This conflict between a US president and Israel illustrates the peril into which a small state wades when it asserts its own perceived national interest at the expense of that of a far more powerful ally. This dynamic would come to the fore once again decades later, when Benjamin Netanyahu would openly resist the efforts of President Barack Obama to reach a nuclear accord with Iran.

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# The 1981 AWACS Deal: AIPAC and Israel Challenge Reagan

*Arnon Gutfeld*

## INTRODUCTION

On October 1, 1981, US President Ronald Reagan notified Congress of his intention to implement an \$8.5 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia that had been announced by President Carter toward the end of his tenure. The deal included 62 F-15 fighter aircraft, advanced tanks, and five Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS).

The Israeli government and its US supporters were alarmed by the deal, which they feared might accelerate the regional arms race and blunt Israel's technological edge. They were particularly concerned by the supply of the top of the line AWACS, which were being introduced into the US Air Force (but not yet to the British and French air forces) and which were capable of detecting low-flying enemy aircraft over a 500-km range through a highly advanced radar system. The sale's opponents argued that the system's outstanding intelligence-gathering capabilities, allegedly needed for Riyadh's surveillance activities in the Persian Gulf, would likely be used against Israel. It might also reach other Middle Eastern states that were hostile to Israel and/or the US, if not the Soviet Union, dubbed by Reagan the Evil Empire.<sup>1</sup>

At the forefront of the campaign against the deal stood the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Established by Isaiah Kenen in 1951, by the mid-1970s the organization had evolved into one of Washington's most influential advocacy groups, largely due to Israel's astounding victory in the June 1967 war, which transformed it overnight in the eyes of policymakers in Washington into a strategic asset and an important local ally.

Starting from the premise that “cooperation between the two countries is advantageous for both nations,” AIPAC defines its mission as designed “to strengthen, protect and promote the U.S.-Israel relationship in ways that enhance the security of the United States and Israel” and does so by “educat[ing] decision makers about the bonds that unite the United States and Israel and how it is in America’s best interest to help ensure that the Jewish state is safe, strong and secure.”<sup>2</sup> Having initially focused on Congress, AIPAC steadily expanded its activities to the executive branch and the media, maintaining and nurturing personal contacts with influential legislators, politicians, and policymakers (and their advisors and aides) as well as journalists, government officials, and bureaucrats.<sup>3</sup>

The organization scored its first major achievement in May 1975 when it played a key role in the publication of a letter by seventy-six senators to President Gerald Ford demanding the rescinding of the administration’s “reassessment” of US-Israeli relations, announced in response to the failure of Israeli-Egyptian talks on an interim agreement; yet three years later it failed to block the Carter administration’s planned sale of 60 F-15s to Saudi Arabia, which was approved by the Senate with a 54-44 majority.<sup>4</sup> When President Reagan announced his decision to implement an expanded version of the Saudi arms deal, AIPAC was yet again drawn into action in what quickly evolved into its fiercest and bitterest tussle with an incumbent administration up to that point.

This was Reagan’s foremost challenge in his first year in the White House. The president was determined to have the deal approved by the Senate, making this his top foreign policy goal in 1981 and unleashing a massive, no-hold barred campaign to defeat the opposition to the deal. While Reagan is widely considered among the friendliest of US presidents to Israel, the AWACS affair weighed heavily on the administration’s relations with the Jewish state in the political, economic, and security spheres, raising fundamental questions about the inherent limits, divergences, and difficulties in the Special Relationship. No less important, the confrontation between the Israeli government and its foremost US-based advocacy group placed the American-Jewish community between a rock and a hard place and generated a wave of all-too-familiar anti-Semitic slurs of Jewish control of the political, economic, and media arenas as well as charges of “dual loyalty.”

## THE ROAD TO THE AWACS DEAL

In March 1979, two months after Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran and an Islamist regime headed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was established in Tehran, three USAF AWACS aircraft and their crews were deployed in Saudi Arabia to help the kingdom defend its southern border against South Yemen military pressure and an American aircraft carrier entered the Persian Gulf in demonstration of support for Riyadh. A year-and-a-half later, following the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, Washington acquiesced to Riyadh's demand for the immediate dispatch of new US-operated AWACS jets to protect the Saudi oilfields, announcing on September 29, 1980 that four such planes with their crews would shortly be joining their three counterparts in the kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

By now, the Carter administration had quietly agreed to provide Riyadh with its own five AWACS jets – ahead of America's NATO allies – as part of a large arms deal that included, *inter alia*, scores of F-15 aircraft, Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, and seven Hercules planes for aerial refueling.<sup>6</sup> And while the administration kept its decision secret in the run-up to the November 1980 presidential elections due to fierce opposition to the deal, the momentous regional vicissitudes that underlay the deal (the Iranian revolution and attendant Iran-Iraq war, as well as the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) drove the incoming Reagan administration to direct its attention eastward, not least since the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace seemed to have eliminated the danger of an all-out Arab-Israeli conflagration.

Due to its geostrategic location, vast size, and immense oil reserves accounting for a quarter of the world's known reserves, Saudi Arabia was best suited to replace Iran as Washington's military-strategic anchor in the Persian Gulf. Hence the striving of the Reagan administration from its first days in office (in January 1981) to incorporate the kingdom, and the Gulf states more generally, into its wider effort to ensure the uninterrupted flow of oil to Europe and Japan and to prevent potential Soviet expansion in the direction of the Gulf.<sup>7</sup>

The intensification of military support to Riyadh in general, and the AWACS deal in particular, was also likely to strengthen Washington's

regional position, as the deal included the construction of military infrastructure and arms depots that would be available only to US forces. This would create a long-term Saudi logistical and maintenance dependence that would in turn allow Washington to partially oversee the use of these systems. Moreover, by providing Riyadh with advanced weapons systems the US hoped to lessen the need for direct intervention whenever the desert kingdom faced external threats.<sup>8</sup>

Economic considerations also played a central role in the struggle over the deal as the projected infusion of \$8.5 billion into the US economy, still reeling from the oil crises of the 1970s, was seen as a major boon. The Boeing Corporation announced that the deal would save 400 jobs in the immediate term with another 1,500 jobs due to be created. The anticipated indirect economic implications of the deal were more far-reaching: secret US-Saudi planning envisaged the substantial expansion of an American presence in the kingdom, including the construction of military bases, airfields, and other military infrastructure at the cost of \$150 billion to accommodate and sustain massive US military intervention should Saudi Arabia and/or the Gulf monarchies face existential danger. Small wonder that powerful elements in the US military-industrial complex, backed by a Pentagon headed by Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger (a former top executive in the Bechtel corporation, which was heavily invested in the Arab world and especially in Saudi Arabia), threw their weight behind the deal.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the strategic and economic considerations, the administration viewed the deal as having far-reaching political implications. At the international level, it was expected to boost US influence in Saudi Arabia, and by implication increase Riyadh's support for America's local allies (e.g., economic aid for Egypt, backing its peace agreement with Israel), whereas failure to implement the deal would undermine US-Saudi relations and tarnish Washington's regional reputation.<sup>10</sup> Domestically, the newly inaugurated Reagan believed that failure to have the deal approved would cast him as a weak and ineffective president whereas its implementation would send an unmistakable message to friends and foes alike of his unwavering determination to get things done.

What made this confrontation all the more regrettable is that, in contrast to Carter, Reagan had been one of the friendliest presidents towards Israel to date. Driven on the one hand by the conviction that the US had an enduring moral commitment to the Jewish state's continued survival, and on the other by admiration for its democratic tradition, national cohesion, and technological and military know-how, which made it a valuable strategic asset, he repeatedly lauded Israel after the fall of the shah as "perhaps the only remaining strategic asset in the region on which the United States could truly rely." As he put it retrospectively: "My dedication to the preservation of Israel was as strong when I left the White House as when I arrived there, even though this tiny ally, with whom we share democracy and many other values, was a great concern for me while I was president."<sup>11</sup>

This positive disposition helps explain the Israeli government's initial restrained response to the deal. In a Washington visit on February 24, Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir passed on a message from Prime Minister Menachem Begin voicing opposition to the buildup of Arab military capabilities but quietly agreeing to limit Israel's public criticism of the US administration over the deal. In return, Secretary of State Alexander Haig promised to supply Israel with an additional F-15 squadron, a \$600 million loan, and permission to export Israeli-made Kfir fighting aircraft to Latin American armies.<sup>12</sup>

Nor was the Israeli political-military establishment unified in opposition to the deal. On the contrary: quite a few security and foreign policy officials did not consider it a major threat to Israel's national security while others thought it impolitic to seek confrontation with an incumbent US president. "I did not believe that we could defeat a popular president like Reagan," recalled Israel's military attaché in Washington, Maj. Gen. Menachem Meron. "I thought that it would be better for Israel to avoid a needless confrontation with a president who expressed such warm feelings towards us." Washington Ambassador Efraim Evron shared this view. The two travelled to Israel to participate in a special cabinet meeting on the issue, where they heard senior commanders claim that the deal did not endanger the Israeli Air Force's superiority and suggest that Israel ask for a quid pro quo that would help neutralize the deal's adverse effects.<sup>13</sup>

It was thus AIPAC, headed from October 1980 by Tom Dine, which spearheaded the campaign against AWACS deal. As early as December 1980, a month before Reagan entered the White House, the advocacy group initiated a spirited public campaign urging leaders of local Jewish federations to inundate the White House and Congress with appeals to halt the deal. This effort seemed initially successful as most members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee wrote Reagan to protest his disregard for his predecessor's pledge to avoid selling offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia.

The administration remained unimpressed, however, and in February 1981 Undersecretary of State James Buckley told a closed session of the Foreign Relations Committee of its resolve to proceed with the deal. On March 6 the decision was made public and on April 1 Reagan approved the AWACS inclusion in the deal from his hospital bed, where he was recuperating from an attempt on his life a couple of days earlier. Secretary Haig, who opposed the AWACS' inclusion (against the view of Defense Secretary Weinberger and Lt. Gen. David Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), was sent to Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia (on April 4-8) to discuss the implications of the deal.<sup>14</sup>

Despite an urgent plea from Dine to follow in the footsteps of most US senators and oppose the deal,<sup>15</sup> Begin sought to maintain a congenial atmosphere with Haig, telling him that the deal would leave Israel "exposed militarily" yet avoiding threats of counteraction. Shamir was somewhat harsher, rebutting Haig's assertion that the deal would make Riyadh more amenable to peace with Israel and questioning its value for Washington's containment policy. In his view, the Saudis would not join the fight against Soviet expansionism whereas Israel had already proved its mettle in this respect on several occasions.<sup>16</sup> In his April 12 letter to Reagan thanking him for Haig's visit, Begin was careful to maintain a conciliatory tone and explained that it was "his sacred duty" to underscore the severe dangers posed by the deal to Israel's security.<sup>17</sup> It was only when the White House described (on April 23) the AWACS sale as a vital US interest that the Israeli government protested the administration's failure to provide advance warning on such a vital matter to its security and withdrew from the understandings reached during Shamir's visit to Washington.<sup>18</sup>

This protest notwithstanding, the Begin government refrained from any meaningful moves to block the sale. Douglas Bloomfield, a senior AIPAC executive, described the prime minister as “neutral” vis-à-vis the Saudi deal. Asked that Israel share with AIPAC relevant technical information about the AWACS, Begin instructed Evron, in Bloomfield’s presence, to do so. But the ambassador must have grasped the hidden subtext in the prime minister’s instruction for he acted in the opposite manner, limiting cooperation with AIPAC to a minimum lest this jeopardize US-Israeli relations and stir an anti-Semitic backlash inimical to American Jewry.<sup>19</sup>

Unbeknownst to Bloomfield and other members of the Israeli leadership, Begin’s restrained response might have also been motivated by his reluctance to risk open confrontation with the administration at a time when the IAF was gearing up for an attack on Iraq’s nuclear reactor, a momentous move that could trigger a regional conflagration in which Israel would need Washington’s unstinting support. At the same time, AIPAC’s forthright campaign and the widespread support it generated on Capitol Hill put pressure on Begin to respond more forcefully to the announced Saudi deal, not least since he could ill afford to appear weak and indecisive in the midst of one of Israel’s most ferocious elections campaigns.<sup>20</sup> The result was the hardening of Israel’s official rhetoric without corresponding acts on the ground, leaving AIPAC in the driver’s seat of the anti-AWACS campaign.

## **THE BATTLE IS JOINED**

On April 27, four days after the White House’s official announcement of its decision to include the AWACS within the Saudi arms deal, Congressmen Clearance Long (D-Maryland) and Norman Lent (R-New York) initiated a resolution rejecting the president’s request to approve the sale.<sup>21</sup> Shortly afterward, Senator Howard Baker (R-Tennessee, then Senate Majority Leader and future White House Chief of Staff [1987-88]), advised Secretary Haig to postpone the formal request for the deal’s approval until after the Israeli elections (to take place on June 30), which might substitute a more accommodating Labor-led government for the reigning Likud government. Were the administration to swiftly opt for congressional approval, he warned, it was likely to suffer an ignominious defeat.<sup>22</sup>

While the suggestion was probably based on wishful thinking, as a Labor government would have likely been no less opposed to the deal, the administration's compliance with Baker's advice gave it a much-needed respite to build congressional support. This respite proved particularly important given the sudden crisis in US-Israeli relations following the IAF's destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor on June 7. Angered by having been kept in the dark about the attack, the administration suspended the delivery of four F-16s to Israel and voted in favor of a UN Security Council resolution condemning (but not sanctioning) the attack. And while Reagan assured Evron that the suspension was temporary (it was lifted in mid-August) and Secretary Haig and senior USAF officers privately expressed admiration for the daring operation (with a senior State Department official telling an Israeli colleague that "President Reagan had to censure you but personally he thought that the operation was an excellent thing"), the attack rekindled the tussle over the deal.<sup>23</sup>

With Riyadh using the operation to underscore the importance of getting the AWACS as the Israeli aircraft had overflown its airspace on their way to Baghdad (though it could be argued that if the US-operated AWACS in the kingdom failed to detect the Israeli planes, Saudi-operated AWACS were even less likely to do so), AIPAC countered by amplifying its main arguments against the deal: that democratic Israel, rather than the unstable Arab dictatorships, was America's natural ally in containing Soviet expansionism; that the Saudi deal would trigger a regional arms race that would put heavy pressure on the Israeli economy; that the deal was useless for checking Soviet expansionism yet hazardous for Israeli security; that the poor level of the Saudi armed forces and security services could result in technological leaks to hostile states and entities, on the one hand, and might drag the US into undesirable intervention, on the other; and that the deal ran counter to the Carter administration's pledge not to upset the regional balance of forces to Israel's detriment.<sup>24</sup>

Whether or not most Congress members found these arguments persuasive (Rep. Dan Rostenkowski [D-Illinois], Chair of the House powerful Ways and Means Committee, claimed to have opposed the deal for fear of "Jewish wrath"),<sup>25</sup> on June 24 the president received a

letter signed by 54 senators (34 Democrats and 20 Republicans) stating their “strong belief that this sale is not in the best interests of the United States and therefore recommend that you refrain from sending this proposal to the Congress.” A week later, on July 1, Reagan received a similar letter signed by 224 representatives (170 Democrats and 54 Republicans) – six more than the number of votes required to veto the sale – who endorsed the Long-Lent legislation. According to Lent, another 75 representatives were also committed to vetoing the sale but preferred to keep their identities undisclosed for the time being.<sup>26</sup>

Given the bipartisan nature of the opposition and the Democrats’ control of the House (244 vs. 191), Reagan understood that his chances to thwart the Long-Lent legislation were practically nil. He decided to focus his efforts on the Senate, where the Republicans held the majority (53 vs. 46, with one independent). On August 5, he implored Majority Leader Baker and Minority Leader Robert Byrd (D-West Virginia) not to reject the Saudi deal before receiving the administration’s full explanation about its vital importance to US national interests.<sup>27</sup>

AIPAC’s response came a week later when, in a New York City Zionist convention attended by Mayor Ed Koch and 3,000 delegates, Senator Robert Packwood (R-Oregon), initiator of the senators’ letter to Reagan, attacked the deal as detrimental to US interests and pledged to do everything in his power to block it. Senators Al D’Amato (R-New York) and Paul Sarbanes (D-Maryland), who also spoke at the convention, were similarly harsh.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the administration, which believed that Israel would eventually resign itself to the deal, albeit “without great enthusiasm,” kept emphasizing its determination to implement the deal in its contacts with the Israelis while at the same time promising to uphold Israel’s military superiority should the deal materialize. Thus, for example, in a meeting with Yaacov Nehoshtan, deputy chief of mission at Israel’s Washington embassy, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Richard Burt suggested that Israel “retreat honorably and soften its opposition to the sale,” especially as far as public statements were concerned, since “you can bark but you cannot bite.”<sup>29</sup>

A similar message was passed to Nehoshtan by Woody Goldberg, Secretary Haig's personal secretary, who warned of the dire consequences of the AWACS controversy for US-Israeli relations. In his account, Haig was "very worried about the damage that this matter could cause if [Israel] continues its active opposition" and warned that failure to have the deal approved would seriously damage the president's prestige, and in consequence – the bilateral relationship. "Does Israel take this into account?" he wondered.<sup>30</sup> Less thinly veiled threats that continued opposition to the deal might trigger "an angry response by the president" and lead to cuts in US military assistance were passed to Israeli officials and diplomats.<sup>31</sup>

While Nehoshtan remained unfazed, the threats struck a responsive chord in the Israeli foreign ministry. Ambassador Evron, who, as noted above, strove to avoid direct confrontation with the administration, warned against Israeli officials giving evidence on the deal before congressional committees.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Deputy Foreign Office Director Hanan Bar-On proposed that Israel quietly approach Senate Majority Leader Baker, Reagan's close confidant, to explore the possibility of reaching a clandestine deal whereby Israel would soften its criticism "without relinquishing the principle of its right to oppose the deal" in return for Washington's pledge for increased military aid. By way of prodding the administration in this direction, he suggested that "our friends [in Congress and AIPAC] who conducted the campaign until now should continue with their opposition to the sale as long as the possible injury to Israel is not rectified."<sup>33</sup>

It is not clear whether and to what extent Bar-On's recommendations were acted upon, but on August 24 the administration announced its decision to go through with an \$8.5 billion deal that included five AWACS jets, 1,177 advanced air to air AIM-91 missiles, 101 refueling tanks, and six KC-707 refueling jets. The timing was hardly accidental. On September 7, Prime Minister Begin was scheduled to arrive for a 10-day visit during which he would meet President Reagan for the first time, and the administration wanted to send an unmistakable signal of where it stood in the hope that Begin would avoid using the visit as "a crusade against the deal."<sup>34</sup>

## **MENACHEM BEGIN'S US VISIT**

On the face of it, the administration's apprehensions about the visit were based on solid ground. As Begin was about to arrive in the US, AIPAC, the Israeli embassy, and sympathetic members of Congress organized a vigorous campaign against the deal with a string of ads placed in leading newspapers and position papers circulated among legislators, leading policymakers, and opinion shapers. On September 8, as Begin was getting ready to leave New York for Washington, a large rally took place in Brooklyn under the auspices and with the participation of Mayor Koch, with a number of senators speaking against the deal.

Begin nevertheless sought to maintain as non-confrontational approach as possible. In his meeting with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organization prior to his departure for Washington, he asserted that "the matter was an internal American decision," which was interpreted by participants as indicating his intention to avoid criticism of the deal while in the US.<sup>35</sup> He sustained this cooperative approach during his three White House meetings with Reagan (on September 9), who for his part reciprocated this affability.

This cordial atmosphere notwithstanding, the gap between the parties remained unbridgeable. Reagan's claim that Jerusalem had no reason to fear the deal given its purely defensive nature, the restrictions that would be placed on the use of the weapons systems, and Washington's unyielding commitment to preserving Israel's military superiority failed to convince Begin. Nor was he swayed by the warning that if the deal were to be aborted, Riyadh would opt for the British Nimrod system, which had a longer range than the AWACS. The Saudis were hardly the force for moderation the administration believed them to be, argued Begin. They rejected Israel's right to exist and were arming and funding the PLO and other states and organizations committed to Israel's destruction. While the meeting failed to produce the desired breakthrough in either direction, it ended on a positive note, as Begin promised not to campaign against the deal while in the US. Reagan felt that some of his guest's fears had been allayed.<sup>36</sup>

Within less than 24 hours, the president was informed by White House Chief of Staff James Baker that Begin had broken his pledge by telling the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee that the deal endangered Israeli security and canvassing congressional support against the deal. Yet this alleged affront,

which left Reagan with a lingering sense of betrayal,<sup>37</sup> was patently false. The prime minister did not broach the AWACS deal during his appearances before the houses of Congress, let alone canvass support for its obstruction, but rather voiced his opposition in response to a direct question on the issue. He went out of his way to do so in a conciliatory tone, avoiding criticism of the president and emphasizing that it was an internal American policy decision in which he had no intention of interfering: “We believe the deal endangers our security. The president heard us with respect and then expressed his opinion. The decision is yours. We shall not interfere. But since you asked I will reply in all honesty. I told the president that this is the manner in which I will present it to you. As a citizen of Israel I will not come between the executive and the legislative branches in your country.”<sup>38</sup>

Having ascertained the report’s falsehood Haig informed Reagan of his findings, only to be asked by the president to rush to Kennedy International Airport to demand an explanation from Begin before his departure for Israel. In his memoirs Haig recalls an uncharacteristically subdued Begin categorically denying having reneged on his promise to the president. Haig believed the explanation, but Reagan remained unmoved. And so the visit turned out to have the opposite effect of that intended by personalizing the battle over the deal. In the words of a White House official, “it attracted the President’s attention and therefore his personal involvement” at an earlier time than originally desired.<sup>40</sup>

## **REAGAN’S INFLUENCE CAMPAIGN**

Since under the law Congress had 30 days to stop the deal by majority votes in both houses,<sup>41</sup> Reagan used his first annual press conference on October 1, the same day he formally asked Congress to approve the deal, to explain why it constituted a vital US national security interest.

“This sale will significantly improve the capability of Saudi Arabia and the United States to defend the oil fields on which the security of the free world depends,” he argued, and will “greatly improve the chances of our working constructively with Saudi Arabia and other states of the Middle East toward our common goal – a just and lasting peace.” This in turn meant that the deal “poses no threat to Israel, now or in the future. Indeed, by contributing to the security and stability of the region, it serves Israel’s long-range interests.”

“As President, it’s my duty to define and defend our broad national security objectives,” Reagan continued, underscoring his determination to have the sale approved come what may. “And while we must always take into account the vital interests of our allies, American security interests must remain our internal responsibility. *It is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy.*”

“I don’t mean that in any deprecating way,” the president added, to somewhat soften his thinly veiled rebuke of Israel. “I say this as one who holds strongly the view that both a secure state of Israel and a stable Mideast peace are essential to our national interests... [but] I suppose what really is the most serious thing is the perception that other countries must not get, a perception that we are being unduly influenced one way or the other with regard to foreign policy.”<sup>42</sup>

Accompanied by numerous briefings in the same vein,<sup>43</sup> Reagan’s statement stirred anger and apprehension not only among American Jewish (and AIPAC) leaders but also among numerous members of Congress who were implicitly tainted by the president as laboring on behalf of a foreign power against US national interests.<sup>44</sup> In a phone conversation with Haig a few hours after the press conference, Evron lamented that Reagan’s remarks were “injurious, unjust and could stir [anti-Semitic] sentiments and actions that had better remain dormant” – at a time when Israel went out of its way to avoid confrontation.<sup>45</sup> Yet precisely because Reagan’s aggravated tone was believed to reflect his awareness of the deal’s slim chance of approval, the Israeli government and its US supporters sought to avoid upping the ante, ignoring numerous media quests for a response to the president’s remarks. When Senator David Durenberger (D-Minnesota) told AIPAC that he was exploring the possibility of placing criticism of the president’s remarks on the Senate’s agenda, he was advised to approach non-Jewish senators only.<sup>46</sup>

This recommendation reflected the growing awareness in Israel and among its US supporters that they had been boxed into a lose-lose situation: were the deal to be approved, Israel’s security would be adversely affected; were it to be rejected, it would be a Pyrrhic victory as the president’s humiliation would likely damage US-Israeli relations and generate an anti-Semitic backlash. In the words of a central AIPAC figure: “We did enough. If we lose [in this struggle] – we lose. If we win – we lose.”<sup>47</sup>

Keenly aware of the predicament into which he had placed his opponents, Reagan threw himself into battle. Since he knew the Democrat-led House would veto the sale, he focused on the Senate, holding no fewer than 49 meetings with individual senators and/or groups of senators between October 1 and October 28, when the Senate approved the deal by a 52-48 majority. In the week preceding the vote, the president made 22 phone calls to explain his position; between Monday morning and 2 pm on Wednesday, the day of the vote, he met 17 with senators.<sup>48</sup> In his memoirs, Reagan recalled the episode as one of the hardest-fought battles of his eight-year presidential tenure.<sup>49</sup>

As early as October 1, immediately after his press conference, Reagan met with five undecided senators who served on the Armed Services Committee: Gordon Humphrey (R-New Hampshire), Minority Leader Harry Byrd (D-Virginia), Dan Quayle (R-Indiana), Sam Nunn (D-Georgia) and James Exon (D-Nebraska). The next day he conferred with five members of the Foreign Affairs Committee – Larry Pressler (R-South Dakota), Samuel Hayakawa (R-California), Richard Lugar (R-Indiana), Paul Sarbanes (D-Maryland), and John Glenn (D-Ohio) – and on October 5 with four additional senators: Roger Jepsen (R-Iowa), Alan Simpson (R-Wyoming), Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), and Warren Rudman (R-New Hampshire); the first three were reported to have been persuaded to drop their opposition and vote for the deal.<sup>50</sup> On October 6, Reagan met with six Republican senators – Mark Andrews of North Dakota, Slade Gorton of Washington State, Robert Kawoulsten of Wisconsin, Mack Mattingly of Georgia, Frank Murkowski of Alaska, and Dan Quayle (for the second time in five days) – who demanded that the Saudi use of the AWACS jets be subjected to strict restrictions. The president promised to comply with this demand.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, when on October 7 Senators Nunn and Warner (R-Virginia) drafted Resolution 228, which sought to do precisely this, the White House quickly endorsed the resolution and invited all 52 Republican senators for a meeting with the president. At the meeting, which was attended by 43 senators, Reagan pleaded with his guests to stop undermining the foundations of US foreign policy as the entire world was watching and forming an opinion about the administration's ability to formulate and execute policies. "The failure of the deal will not only damage [US] policy in the Middle East but will also affect a series of other topics, including the president's efforts to rebuild America's power in the world," Reagan argued emphatically.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, the Long-Lent resolution opposing the sale was approved by the House of Representatives (on October 14) by an overwhelming majority of 301-101.<sup>53</sup> But the White House seemed oblivious to this development as its persuasion efforts in Senate seemed to be bearing fruit: On October 15, the Armed Services Committee voted 10-5 in favor of a report that lauded the Saudi deal as highly important to US national interests and claimed that it posed no threat to Israel. Seven Republican and three Democrat senators voted for the report while four Democrats and one Republican (Robert Cohen of Maine) voted nay. Senators Jepsen (R) and Exon (D) abstained.<sup>54</sup>

The approved report was swiftly relayed to the Foreign Affairs Committee as it was about to vote on Senator Packwood's proposal rejecting the sale, though it failed to sway the vote and the proposal was carried by a 9-8 majority. The seven Democrats on the committee and Republican senators Packwood and Rudy Boschwitz (Minnesota) voted yea, while the other Republicans, including Hayakawa and Pressler who had signed the 54 senators' June 24 anti-deal letter, voted nay. Hayakawa's vote was of particular importance as he represented California, the state with the second-largest number of Jewish voters after New York, thus indicating his readiness to risk reelection for (supposedly) the greater good.<sup>55</sup> Pressler's decision to support the deal was similarly important as he was the first Vietnam War veteran elected to the Senate and was widely considered a war hero and an expert on national security.

For his part, Vice President George H.W. Bush headed the task force for having the deal approved, working in close coordination with the Saudi embassy in Washington, which enlisted a vast army of advisors, assistants, public relations specialists, and lobbyists. Bush and his crew did not spare any effort to achieve their goal: "they threatened, cajoled and tempted the opponents of the deal and promised them and their voters money, tax breaks, building of federal installations and funds for infrastructure developments."<sup>56</sup>

The White House also succeeded in enlisting to its cause an impressive array of former politicians and officials, including Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter; Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and William Rogers; Secretaries of Defense Robert McNamara, Melvin Laird,

and James Schlesinger; National Security Advisors McGeorge Bundy, Walter Rostow, and Zbigniew Brzezinski; and Joint Chiefs of Staff Heads Lyman Lemnitzer, Maxwell Taylor, and Thomas Moorer.

Henry Kissinger, probably the most illustrious secretary of state of the post-WWII era and widely considered a good friend of Israel, published an article in which he claimed that the justified fears of the deal's adverse consequences were not on a par with the grave and perhaps irrevocable damage that would be wrought on the president's international stature and authority by its rejection. Former President Ford enthusiastically joined the campaign, angrily berating a senator opposing the deal: "Are we going to permit the Jewish Lobby to conduct American foreign policy?"<sup>57</sup>

Ford's immediate predecessor, Richard Nixon, took his criticism a big step further. "We know, the Saudis know, and everyone in the Middle East knows, that if it were not for the intense opposition by Begin and parts of the American Jewish community, the AWACS sale would go through," he claimed in a strongly worded three-page statement issued on October 4 (at Reagan's request). "This fact will greatly affect the consequences if the sale fails to go through." He did not clarify what he meant by this thinly veiled threat, but warned that "Israel's friends should not be under any illusion that they help Israel's cause by embarrassing and undermining the authority of... probably the strongest supporter of Israel to occupy the White House since Harry Truman."

Rejecting the equation of support for the Saudi deal with anti-Israel sentiments, Nixon stressed that he was speaking as the Jewish state's longtime friend who believed that "at this point approval is in the interest not only of the United States, but also of Israel itself." He further explained:

Because Reagan has laid his own prestige on the line, and will have paid a high political price for approval, if he wins the Saudis will owe him one. This is good for the United States, and good for Israel. If he loses, on the other hand, everyone loses: Reagan is embarrassed and undermined, the Saudis are humiliated and Begin will be in the unenviable position of having offended simultaneously both his most important supporter and his richest neighbor.<sup>58</sup>

The statement was deeply resented by Israel supporters and American Jewish leaders. “Singling American Jews out from the broad spectrum of opposition to the AWACS sale is at best mischievous, at worst mean-spirited,” retorted Nathan Perlmutter, national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith. “[Former Secretary of State] Cyrus Vance is not Jewish, [former CIA Director] Stansfield Turner is not Jewish.” A similar charge of putting the debate in a false and misleading framework was voiced by Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations Howard Squadron, while Henry Siegman, the executive director of the American Jewish Congress, was much more forthright: “Today the issue is not whether the Saudi princes will be embarrassed, or even whether President Reagan will be embarrassed. When such extraneous considerations [are brought] in to defend the AWACS sale, it should be clear to everyone that there is little to be said in support of it on the merits.”<sup>59</sup>

These reproaches notwithstanding, American-Jewish leaders, including AIPAC, understood full well that a frontal confrontation with the president, the ultimate symbol of American unity, would be highly counterproductive and shifted their efforts to the private level. Numerous Jewish leaders approached friends and political allies and voiced their frustration, while many leading Reagan supporters communicated to him their fears of a breach in US-Israel relations and a domestic backlash against US Jewry.

These efforts seemed to have a desirable effect. Without relenting in his drive for the sale, Reagan seemed increasingly aware of the anti-Semitic ricochets of his press conference and sought to calm things down. In a meeting with his longtime friend and supporter Al Spiegel on October 11, the president admitted to having been surprised by the extent of Jewish opposition to the deal, emphasizing that at no time did he accuse the Jewish community of acting against the US interest. He then accepted a request by AIPAC leadership for a reconciliation meeting, passed to him by Spiegel, and the two agreed that the meeting should take place after the subsidence of the controversy (the Senate vote on the sale was due in a couple of weeks).<sup>60</sup>

A similar conciliatory message was passed to a senior Israeli foreign ministry official by Reagan’s advisor on Jewish Affairs Jack Stein, who indicated the administration’s intention to make gestures to Israel and the American Jewish community after the Senate vote.<sup>61</sup> Stein then

proceeded to meet Begin in a last ditch attempt to reach an understanding before the vote, telling him that the president had already secured the support of 52 senators and imploring him “to resolve the problem in a friendly and quiet manner.” “The President asks you to understand the interests of the United States and thinks that you should lessen your opposition to the sale,” he said. “He is to offer additional important commitments for the security of Israel... this is your chance to work harmoniously with the President.” Begin remained unmoved, telling Stein that according to the information at his disposal a majority of senators still opposed the deal.<sup>62</sup>

### **THE M-I COMPLEX RALLIES BEHIND THE DEAL**

There is little doubt that economic considerations played a major role in both the original decision on the AWACS deal and the attempts to have it approved by the Senate.<sup>63</sup> The claim that the deal was not only a vital US security interest but also an economic interest of the highest order was made by Reagan at his October 1 press conference and amplified by numerous assertions in the following weeks. The administration also used top officials and confidants, notably Secretary of Defense Weinberger (Vice President of the Bechtel conglomerate, 1975-80) and soon-to-be-appointed Secretary of State George Shultz (Bechtel President, 1974-82), to rally the oil industry and the military-industrial complex behind approval of the deal.<sup>64</sup>

Not that these groups needed any encouragement. They had actively fought to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state at the time of the UN partition resolution of November 1947, and their business interests and investments in Saudi Arabia, and the Arab world more generally, had vastly expanded ever since, with an attendant expansion of lobbying activity. (In 2006, for example, Northrop Grumman alone spent seven times more than AIPAC on political lobbying while Lockheed Martin spent four times as much as AIPAC.)<sup>65</sup>

Now that this lucrative relationship seemed to be challenged, the oil companies and military-industrial complex rushed to the administration’s aid. Mobil Oil, for instance, spent over half a million dollars on a one-page ad that appeared in 26 of the most influential US dailies and

magazines, lauding the extensive and fast-growing US-Saudi economic partnership that had brought \$35 billion a year to the US economy and created hundreds of thousands of jobs for US citizens in more than 700 companies in 42 states.<sup>66</sup> The US Chamber of Commerce hosted the Saudi minister of commerce, who used the occasion to lobby on behalf of the AWACS deal. In its newsletter, the chamber warned its hundreds of thousands of subscribers of the grave consequences of the deal's rejection. A day before the Senate vote, the chamber's president, Richard Leshner, wrote all senators that during a recent trip to the Middle East, "everywhere he went he was urged to support the sale."<sup>67</sup>

The most extensive lobbying effort was conducted by the Boeing Corporation, the AWACS' main contractor, together with the United Technologies Corporation (UT), which were to earn some \$100 million from the sale. The Boeing and UT presidents sent more than 6,500 cables to subsidiary companies, salespersons, suppliers, subcontractors, and distributors throughout the US urging them to support the sale. When the spokesperson of UT was asked whether the Saudis had demanded the campaign, he replied: "They did not have to. It was a matter of pure economic self-interest."<sup>68</sup>

Heavy pressure was also applied by other large conglomerates (e.g., Bechtel, Mobil Oil, Pratt & Whitney), many of which contributed heavily to the election campaigns of many senators, especially to fresh senators in the southern states where defense and oil industries were very prominent. Numerous business leaders published opinion pieces that emphasized the importance of the Saudi market to the US economy, praised Saudi restraint in setting oil prices, and underscored Riyadh's multibillion-dollar acquisitions in the United States and the 250,000 jobs it had created.<sup>69</sup>

The struggle over the deal continued right up to the start of the vote. There is little doubt that it would not have been approved had numerous senators not succumbed to the massive pressure put on by the business community. As Senator Edward Zorinsky (D-Nebraska) explained his last-minute change of vote to AIPAC Director Dine: "I just discovered that all the street lamps in Saudi Arabia are manufactured in Nebraska." Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) said on the day of the vote that "in nineteen years here [in the Senate] I never saw such a 180 degree change [in the position] of so many senators."<sup>70</sup>

## THE DIE IS CAST

Though by mid-October the passing of the AWACS sale had become a distinct prospect, Reagan did not relent in his efforts. In an attempt to reduce Jewish opposition to the deal, he asked the (Jewish) ambassador to Italy, Max Raab, to explore, together with Senator Rudy Boschwitz (one of the deal's most vocal Republican opponents), whether AIPAC would be prepared to reach a compromise. On October 16, Boschwitz invited Nehoshtan and AIPAC leaders Dine, Bloomfield, and Gordie Wachs to a working lunch on Capitol Hill, telling them that the chances to block the deal were diminishing by the day and suggesting they opt for a compensation package for Israel comprising *inter alia* of satellite surveillance facilities and additional F-15s. Dine, Bloomfield, and Wachs opposed the idea; Nehoshtan was not enthusiastic either.<sup>71</sup>

Boschwitz knew what he was talking about. On October 13, Jewish Congressman Mickey Edward (R-Oklahoma) announced that he had decided to support the sale, and shortly afterward Senator David Boren (D-Oklahoma) wrote Reagan to express his support if there were sufficient guarantees that the AWACS would not be used against Israel. A similar letter was sent to the president on October 19 by Senator James Exon (D-Nebraska), a member of the Armed Services Committee and a signatory of the letter of the 54 senators. On October 26, Reagan replied to Exon accepting most of his suggested constraints on the deal.<sup>72</sup>

In a last ditch attempt to ensure a Senate majority, the president held private meetings with key senators in the final two days before the vote. On October 27, he met with ten senators, including Charles Grassley (R-Iowa, another signatory of the 54 senators' letter). Grassley would not commit himself to changing his vote, but indicated that he might do so if his Iowa Republican peer, Senator Roger Jepsen, could be persuaded. Reagan swiftly invited Jepsen to the White House and convinced him to change his vote, as he did with Senator John Glenn. Another important senator with whom Reagan met on that day (the 2nd) was Harrison Schmitt (R-New Mexico), who had also signed the letter of the 54. Schmitt asked to be joined by three leading leaders of the New Mexico Jewish community in order to lessen opposition by his Jewish voters to his changing his mind. Reagan agreed, and at the end of the meeting Schmitt announced that he would support the sale.<sup>73</sup>

Later that day, Reagan met Jewish Senator Edward Zorinsky (D-Nebraska) of the Armed Services Committee and persuaded him to support the sale, telling him the deal would not compromise Israel's security and would help bring the Saudis to the negotiations table. This was a particularly important gain for the president in view of Zorinsky's strong reputation on security issues, and his bipartisan (and Jewish) background could conceivably sway other undecided Democratic senators.<sup>74</sup>

A few hours before the vote, Reagan distributed a letter to all senators in which he detailed the security measures taken to prevent Saudi abuse of the deal and pledged to abolish the deal should Riyadh fail to comply with those restrictions. Emphasizing the president's commitment to safeguard Israel's security and maintain its strategic superiority through both increased arms supplies and close US-Israeli strategic-security cooperation, the letter concluded with a reassertion of the deal's vital contribution to US national and strategic interests. Copies of the letter reached the Washington media in no time, helping to convince the American public of the deal's indispensability and casting opposing senators as subordinating the national interest to their own ulterior motives.<sup>75</sup>

In this skillful turning of the tide, the president did not shy away from using any means at his disposal, from seduction to bribery to cajoling to coercion to sheer extortion. The ten freshman Republican senators who had swept into office on the crest of Reagan's popularity fell readily in line, as did those who were politically indebted to the president. Senators who proved less amenable were subjected to heavy pressure. In the words of Senator Dale Bumpers (D-Arkansas), who voted against the sale: "They [White House staff] do not have to make public promises. They know how things are done around here... if you wish to desperately get something for your state, they do not have to say a single word... you simply feel the pressure." Or, as explained by Senator Glenn: "When the President tells you 'I need your help' this is a mighty strong argument." In his view, there was a certain aura related "to sitting with the mightiest figure in the free world and possibly in the entire world." This, however, did not prevent Glenn from deploring the bribing of some of his colleagues as "abhorrent and awful." In one such case, a week before the vote Senator Slade Gorton (R-Washington) received \$26 million to renovate a Seattle public hospital. Likewise, Senator Grassley revealed that the White House was willing to

expedite his request for a meeting concerning his candidacy for the post of Iowa's attorney general. He altered his position and voted for the sale.<sup>76</sup>

The pressure on Jepsen was relentless. In the words of a senior White House official: "We placed him in front of an open grave and told him that he can jump in if he wishes." The senator also received numerous anti-Semitic phone calls accusing him of selling out to Jewish interests and reminding him that he had been elected because he was a conservative. Rudy Boschwitz, the only Republican to have voted against the deal in the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, was informed 15 minutes after the vote that a US Air Force base in the port city of Duluth would be closed.<sup>77</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is not without irony that, three decades after spearheading a frontal confrontation with an incumbent US president over the (perceived) adverse implications of his policy for Israeli security, longtime AIPAC Executive Director Tom Dine went out of his way to dissuade an Israeli government from what it considered a catastrophic presidential blunder. Not only did he join a group of Jewish-American leaders in a full-page *New York Times* ad urging Congress to support the July 2015 Iran nuclear agreement,<sup>78</sup> viewed by Benjamin Netanyahu as paving Tehran's road to the Bomb, but he published an article in the influential *Foreign Affairs* magazine warning of the grave consequences of the prime minister's spirited opposition to the deal for US-Israeli relations.<sup>79</sup>

Dine did not explain why supplying a second-rate military power with extended intelligence-gathering capabilities justified a head-on confrontation with the US administration, while preventing the foremost regional power, openly committed to Israel's destruction, from obtaining nuclear weapons that would endanger the Jewish state's very existence was not worthy of such a fight. Instead, he focused on the (alleged) costs of opposing the Iran deal, such as furthering schisms within American Jewry, which was deeply divided over the issue, and depriving Israel of the bipartisan support it had long enjoyed.

Yet whatever criticism can be leveled at Netanyahu's conduct, especially his March 2015 address of the two houses of Congress in defiance of President Obama (one need only recall Reagan's ire at Begin's restrained

appearance before Congress), both episodes underscore the constraints on the maneuverability of a small state in its bilateral relationship with a great power. For the great power, the relationship with the small state, however important it may at times be, is but one on a wide spectrum of interactions. For the latter it is of crucial, at times even existential, importance.<sup>80</sup> This is all the more pertinent to Israel's relationship with the US, its staunchest, indeed only, great-power ally (with the partial exception of the decade-long "honeymoon" with France in the mid-1950s to mid-1960s).

No less important, the AWACS and Iran crises raise the question whether, to what extent, and under what circumstances the smaller state can resist policies deemed detrimental to its national interest that its senior ally is bent on implementing. While there is no doubting the justifiability of such resistance, it has to be weighed against the overall balance of short- and long-term gains, losses, and opportunities. In American political culture, failure is considered an unforgivable sin. This means Israel and its local supporters must carefully choose the battles they pick with an incumbent president as every failure is bound to undermine the omnipotent image of the pro-Israel lobby and diminish its ability to win future battles.

In this respect, the AWACS deal seemed a battle worth fighting given its seemingly high chance of winning, in view of the near universal Jewish-American opposition to the sale; strong congressional opposition; and a friendlier president who could be expected to show greater understanding of Israel's needs and vulnerabilities. On the other hand, the Iran nuclear deal involved a potentially existential threat to Israel that overshadowed most political/foreign policy calculations and necessitated a higher risk-taking strategy. Indeed, a few years prior to the deal's signing, Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, his political nemesis then serving as his defense minister, had reportedly decided to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

While the Iran deal cast a shadow on Netanyahu's already turbulent relationship with Obama and put "daylight" between the Israeli government and the Democrats (to use Obama's term),<sup>81</sup> it did not undermine the US-Israel "special relationship" to the extent forecast by doom-mongers, with Netanyahu playing an important role in President Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal and to re-impose sanctions on Tehran. Whether or not this achievement will prove either lasting or beneficial over the long term remains to be seen.

## Notes

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