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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

17 February 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Probable Consequences of US Actions with
Respect to Arms Shipments to Saudi Arabia

1. General Reaction in the Arab World. All Arab states (except possibly Iraq) will almost certainly react extremely adversely to action by the US in "temporarily suspending" the shipment of 18 light tanks to Saudi Arabia -- particularly in view of the widespread publicity given the action. To most Arabs, it will serve as dramatic confirmation of their already strong beliefs that basic US sympathy for Israel as against the Arabs is an overriding consideration in US policy toward the Middle East. It will probably also be interpreted as evidence that the US is at least covertly working with the UK in the latter's current disputes with the Saudis.

2. While certain Arab regimes, notably those in Iraq and Jordan, may derive a certain satisfaction from seeing Saudi Arabia deprived of these weapons, they will probably be careful to conceal it -- since Arab popular opinion will almost certainly condemn the move unanimously and vigorously.

3. The move is likely to cancel out much of whatever Arab good will the US has acquired in recent months by its refusal to ship arms to Israel. It will provide effective propaganda ammunition to those who are working against US

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DOCUMENT NO. 2
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CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S C
NEXT REVIEW DATE: _____
AUTH: HR 79-2

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(and Western) efforts to relieve area tensions, such as the Jordan Valley Development proposal and other US-UK endeavors to achieve a Palestine settlement. Finally, the action will strengthen elements in the Arab states who favor acceptance of Soviet Bloc arms assistance and political support against both Israel and manifestations of Western "imperialism."

4. Saudi Reaction. Saudi reaction to the move and the widespread publicity given it will be emotional in the extreme, but a rupture in US-Saudi relations is unlikely. Negotiations for renewal of the Dhahran air base concession (due for renegotiation before June) will almost certainly become considerably more difficult. There is at least an even chance that the Saudis will actually insist on termination of the air base agreement. Saudi relations with ARAMCO will probably worsen, although the Saudi government is not likely to attempt to cancel ARAMCO's concession. The Saudi government will attempt to step up in other Arab states its agitation against US-UK objectives in the Middle East, and will increase its efforts in the UN and elsewhere to secure support in its disputes with the UK.

5. If the Saudis estimate that the US decision presages a settled US policy, it is probable that they will turn to the Soviet Bloc for arms aid. The Saudis will also be increasingly receptive to standing offers of Bloc political support against both the UK and Israel.

6. Soviet Bloc Reaction. It is almost certain that the USSR will move quickly to exploit reactions to the US move. Its objectives will be to draw Saudi Arabia and other neutralist-inclined states closer to the Bloc, and to weaken the Western ties of others -- notably Iraqi association with the Baghdad Pact and Jordan's treaty relations with the UK.

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In its general propaganda, particularly to states receiving US military aid, the USSR can be expected to reemphasize that US aid programs carry with them subordination to the whims of US policy whereas Soviet arms are made available without prejudice to the independence of the recipient state. The Soviets will use the incident as evidence of US faithlessness in backing out of an agreement to provide weapons which were already paid for; and will suggest that Iraq, and any other Arab states which cooperate with the West, can expect similar treatment from the US whenever their interests clash with those of Israel or the UK.

7. Soviet offers of arms to Saudi Arabia will probably be renewed promptly, as will similar Bloc offers to other Arab states. These will probably be followed up with additional overtures, as for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Bloc and Saudi Arabia, and Bloc technical and economic assistance to the Saudis.

8. Israeli Reaction. Initially at least, the Israelis will regard the US move primarily as evidence that their influence with the US has not disappeared -- despite their own failure so far to obtain US arms. Depriving Saudi Arabia of 18 tanks will not, however, assuage growing Israeli fears of increasing Arab military strength, and Israel will continue its efforts to acquire US arms. Accordingly, if the current arms embargo continues to apply to the Arab States and Israel alike, Israel's sense of fear and frustration will be increased, and would be further heightened if Arab reaction to the US move resulted in the receipt of increased Bloc arms and political support.

9. Consequences of a Reversal of the US Decision. A US decision to release the tanks to Saudi Arabia would to some extent lessen the adverse effects created there and in the rest of the Arab world by events of yesterday. However, it is doubtful that such a reversal could offset the adverse propaganda

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which will almost certainly be employed by anti-Western Arabs and by the Soviet Bloc. If a reversal of the US decision were followed by a decision to extend arms to Israel as well, such a reversal would do virtually nothing to mollify the Arabs.

10. In Saudi Arabia itself, the effects of a US reversal would depend to some extent not only on how it was done, but also on what other US concessions were in prospect. As a matter of Saudi prestige, however, any reversal of the present US decision on the arms shipments would probably have to be as well publicized as the decision of 17 February if it were to have the desired effect.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES.

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SHERMAN KENT
Assistant Director
National Estimates

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