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Arms for Diplomacy in the Middle East

By Dr. John Duke Anthony

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SUSRIS Editor's Note:

National Public Radio's *To the Point* – An Interview with Dr. John Duke Anthony on the Bush Administration's Proposal to Sell Additional Arms to Saudi Arabia and Other GCC Countries [Originally aired July 31, 2007]

Interviewer, Host, and Producer Warren Olney

The interview was conducted live with Mr. Stephen Schwartz, of the Center for Islamic Pluralism; Mr. Warren Boese, Researcher at the Arms Control Association; and Mr. Yossi Melman, Reporter for Ha'aretz, Israel's largest daily newspaper. Following is an edited transcript of Dr. Anthony's response to the questions put to him by Mr. Olney.

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WO: John Duke Anthony is a longtime consultant to the State and Defense Departments. He's President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Council on US-Arab Relations. Dr. Anthony, welcome to you.

JDA: Good to be here.

WO: You are in favor, as I understand it, of weaponry to the Saudis as the Bush Administration is now engaged in negotiating. How concerned are you about the Wahabbi clerics, about Saudi Arabia's role in Iraq supporting not just terrorism but also what's referred to as the insurgency there?

JDA: Well, not nearly as concerned as your previous speaker [Mr. Stephen Schwartz] about the ideological leanings and theological orientations of Saudi Arabia's religious establishment, and certainly not anymore than Saudi Arabians are concerned about the ideological orientation and religious direction of some of the Bush administration's political base in this country, which is on display in our country every day and especially on various Sunday satellite television and political talk shows viewed by many millions of Americans.

As to the legitimacy of the request for additional defense assistance, it's important to underscore the fact that Saudi Arabia and the United States are involved in this together. One can hardly deny that Saudi Arabia is situated in a dangerous neighborhood. Indeed, this is the one area of the planet to which our country has mobilized and deployed more of its people, and expended more of its troops and treasure, in the last twenty years than any place else on earth. For us not to do the necessary, not to enhance our and Saudi Arabia and its fellow GCC countries' deterrence and defense capabilities would be more than reckless. Doing so would send a dangerously irresponsible message not only to the neighborhood in which Saudi Arabia and other important Gulf countries are situated, but also to our friends, partners, and allies further afield who expect us to do the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way for our interests and for theirs as well.

WO: Both the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times have reported quite recently that officials within the administration have told them that something like half the foreign fighters in Iraq are Saudis and that they are thought to have carried out more suicide bombings than people from other nationalities, killing some 4,000 Iraqis in the past six months. Does that concern you, and should there be some sort of condition

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put on the Saudis that they be more cooperative with American efforts in Iraq if they are to get what I understand are to be very sophisticated weapons?

JDA: It's right to highlight and be concerned about this; however, what's lacking is background, context, and perspective with regard, for example, to the following points. One is that it's natural for any people to be sympathetic and supportive of their relatives and members of one's tribes, especially when they are, as in this case, next door. What's missing in much of what has been reported thus far is that many Saudi Arabians have relatives and fellow tribal members in Iraq who they perceive, rightly, to be besieged. A second point is that most of the tinier than minuscule number of Saudi Arabians fighting in Iraq arrived there by way of Syria, not Saudi Arabia. In that context, most if not all are not unlike Latin Americans from Bolivia, Colombia, and El Salvador who entered the United States not directly but, rather, from Mexico or Canada, which is something the United States has hardly been effective in preventing from happening. A third and even more important point is that the Saudi Arabian government could hardly be more cooperative with us in trying to ensure that this does not occur. Saudi Arabia cooperates with us closely in the regard. It does so not only because it's in its own national interest. It does so also because of the lessons that they and we alike learned in the course of routing the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in the late 1980s. That is, Saudi Arabia has no interest in sending its youth abroad to fight in another country's insurgency again, which is what we and many other Western countries previously urged it to do, especially if doing so in this instance would be to risk, as happened before, these young people returning to do the same thing once they're back home. The last point is that, lest anyone has failed to notice, it's hard to imagine how Saudi Arabia could have been more cooperative with us in going after Al Qaeda inside Saudi Arabia itself.

WO: What about oil?

JDA: What do you mean, "What about it?"

WO: How important is that to the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia and in general to its involvement in the Middle East?

JDA: It's of immense importance. In the view of some, on the economic and material wellbeing front, it's of overarching importance. That is to say Saudi Arabia has ten times the amount of oil reserves as the United States. Should anyone happen to have overlooked it, it's a fact that we're the world's single largest consumers of this

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commodity, the single largest importers of it, and the single biggest wasters of it as well. After air, after water, after food that one drinks and eats to remain alive, one would be hard-pressed to name a fourth natural resource that is more vital to all of humanity other than energy. Indeed, energy is crucial to the production, cooling, and warming of the food and the water and the air that we eat, drink, and breathe. So to protect something, to strengthen the defense of what is vital not just for Saudi Arabians, Americans, and everybody else in the region, but indeed for global economic growth and humanity's wellbeing, ought not to require apologies.

[Station break]

WO: John Duke Anthony back to you, again, at the National Council on US-Arab Relations and advisor to the State and Defense Departments. What about [Arms Control Association Researcher] Wade Boese's point that Saudi Arabia has, from various sources, purchased 117 billion dollars of weapons in recent years and is point that these weapons have not made a difference with regard to the region's stability? And what about diplomacy, that, if you continue to supply arms to this very unstable region, you'll make everybody less safe rather than more safe?

JDA: Those are good questions. With regard to Wade's comments, it's inaccurate to say that the previous American arms sales, training, and provision of defense systems and equipment to this region have not made a defining difference. On the contrary, they helped immensely to end the eight-year (1980-88) Iran-Iraq War. They helped prevent the Iranian revolution from expanding to the Western side of the Gulf – to Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries. They were essential to the joint collaboration between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan that resulted in bringing the Red Army to its knees in Afghanistan, itself a catalyst that helped bring about the subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union. These were three massive strategic victories. All three were directly linked to the close cooperation between us on the defense front. With regard to the view that if we, the United States do not sell arms to Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries at this time, others will, that's a valid point. Indeed, were the United States not to give serious and favorable consideration to a legitimate defense request coming from one of our long-term strategic partners would be like Hertz Rent-A-Car leaving the automotive business to Avis, National, Budget, and Alamo – it would be stupid and dangerous beyond belief. It would also not be symptomatic of an ally, a friend, and a strategic partner – which we are to Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries – that could be trusted.

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[Station break]

WO: Let me go back to John Duke Anthony. You're a minority on this program when it comes to arming the Saudis, it would appear. How do you respond to what we've heard from [Israeli Ha'aretz reporter] Yossi Melman that the House of Saud would become the House of Bin Laden? Where would they be then if Saudi Arabia had these vary precise precision-targeted weapons?

JDA: I would respond as follows. He made a broad charge about Saudi Arabia being one of the most unstable and dangerous countries in the region. As far as stable countries, governments, and political systems go, Saudi Arabia has had the same government and political system for forty years longer than the United States and Canada have been independent countries. If one looks at this in terms of sheer longevity and continuity, the governments and political systems of the United States and Canada don't even come close in that regard.

With regard to Mr. Melman's allegations that Saudi Arabia is "dangerous," one could pause and consider the fact that it occupies no one's country, and no one's territory or natural resources, but it's own. Regarding the country in which Mr. Melman is located, it's of more than passing interest that he cannot say the same thing.

As to my being in the minority [among those on this program] in supporting the proposed sales, this is not unusual. What's important in this matter is, first, that we not walk away from our special relationship with Saudi Arabia, from which millions of Americans have derived untold benefits from what is going on seventy years. If we were to do so, the results would not be cost-free. That is, it would not take a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor more than a nanosecond to indicate how quickly we would be replaced by other countries that would long to be able to derive the kinds of benefits from Saudi Arabia that have accrued to the United States and many millions of Americans. Second, were we not to aid a friend and try to strengthen a partner in the course of protecting our own interests, how might that be read in Tehran? How might it be read in Baghdad? How might it be read in Moscow or Beijing? If one does not do whatever is necessary to protect one's legitimate interests, one has oneself to blame if one ends up being intimidated or attacked.

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WO: Let me bring it back to John Duke Anthony – you’re satisfied that Saudi Arabia is safe from having the same kind of thing happen there [as happened when the monarchy in Iran was overthrown] because it’s been a stable government for so long?

JDA: What I said about Saudi Arabia having been stable for such an exceptionally long period of time – nearly five times as long as the immediate past monarchy in Iran – is simply a fact. But beyond the longevity of its system of government and politics, there are additional reasons why it has been stable for so long in comparison with Iran. One is that the number of its citizens are only one sixth that of Iran. Another is that, in comparison to Iran, it has long had more financial wherewithal to provide for its citizens’ material well-being in terms of schools, hospitals, and clinics. A third is that there’s no personal income tax. A fourth is that it is also, largely, a very safe country in the sense that, among its citizens, crimes of passion and physical violence – in comparison to the United States or for that matter Iran – are very few. Indeed, for as long as statistics have been maintained, Saudi Arabia has ranked among the most peaceful countries on the planet. Fifth, its stability also has a lot to do with its role as custodian of the two holiest places in Islam, Mecca and Medina. In contrast, Iran has no such remotely comparable position and role; indeed, most of the Shi’a holy sites and shrines are in Iraq, not Iran. Indeed, comparing what happened in Iran to what may happen in Saudi Arabia in the future is almost like comparing apples and oranges: they’re not the same, nor for that matter, are they anywhere near as similar as many seem to think.