



JUN 18 1987

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

June 17, 1987

Dear Mr. Lagomarsino:

I am aware of your concern and that of your colleagues over the tragic attack on the USS Stark. This unfortunate incident and the death of 37 brave Americans highlights the volatile nature of the Iran-Iraq war and magnitude of human suffering caused by this senseless conflict. I would like to address one aspect of the attack which received widespread media coverage.

Saudi Arabia has been one of the regional states most affected by continuation of the war, and I found the inaccurate and misleading press accounts of Saudi actions during the attack on the USS Stark particularly disturbing. I welcome this opportunity to set the record straight before such disinformation damages our long-standing and important ties with this moderate Arab friend.

The facts of the matter are that two Saudi F-15 aircraft were scrambled routinely shortly after the USAF AWACS on station detected an Iraqi aircraft flying southeast near the coast of Saudi Arabia. Their mission was to ensure that the unidentified aircraft did not enter Saudi airspace and to protect the important oil installations of the Eastern Province from attack. Had it been necessary to intervene to protect the AWACS, the RSAF F-15s would have been in a position to do so, in accordance with a long-standing Saudi undertaking to the United States. The USS Stark was not a Saudi ship and we have no agreement with the Royal Saudi Air Force to protect American vessels in the Gulf.

I emphasize the Saudis, on their own initiative, launched their F-15s in part to protect our AWACS; they had no such responsibility for our Middle East Force ships in the Gulf. USAF controllers and the Saudi controller aboard our AWACS asked the Saudi ground controller for authority to commit Saudi F-15s to intercept the returning Iraqi aircraft and force it down in Saudi territory. Neither the Saudi controller nor USAF personnel aboard the AWACS were authorized to give such a command.

At no time was an official US Government request made to the Saudi Government. The Saudi chief controller on the ground rightfully responded that he also did not have the authority to

The Honorable
Robert Lagomarsino,
House of Representatives.

authorize such action and immediately sought approval from higher authority. This is standard procedure when dealing with questions which go beyond the range of the combat air patrol mission. In the meantime, the Iraqi aircraft was well on its way back to its base, and the Saudi F-15s were low on fuel and had to return to their base.

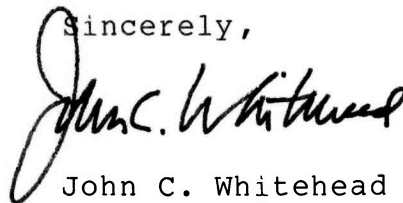
What this incident does illustrate, however, is the very strength and effectiveness of the Saudi Air Force's command and control system and its adherence to established rules of engagement.

There are no U.S. military commanders in Saudi Arabia with authority over Saudi armed forces. American military personnel assigned to the U.S. Military Training Mission are there solely to provide advice and assistance as part of our security assistance program. The ELF-1 command, which is responsible for AWACS operations, has no authority to direct any Saudi military force and has no offensive response capability at its disposal.

Also I want to highlight the positive role played by the Saudis in the USS Stark incident, for which the U.S. government is most grateful. Upon learning of the attack, the Saudi Ministry of Interior Civil Defense Force launched two of its helicopters to assist with search and rescue efforts in locating men overboard. In addition, a Royal Saudi Naval Forces patrol craft was sent alongside the USS Stark to render any possible assistance. The Saudi Ministry of Defense and Aviation placed their military hospital at Dhahran on disaster alert to assist in the treatment of U.S. military personnel injured in the attack.

In closing, I am confident that the above information will relieve your concerns about the strength and validity of US-Saudi relations and the support which they have given us in recent days. The spontaneous response to seek to assist us by both the Saudi Controller and the F-15 pilots is demonstrative proof of the good will which exists between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. I cannot stress enough the importance of maintaining the long-standing and mutually beneficial security relationship we enjoy with Saudi Arabia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John C. Whitehead", written in a cursive style.

John C. Whitehead
Acting Secretary