

How to Balance Competing Priorities with an F-35 Sale to the UAE

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Brief Analysis

The sale offers strategic opportunities at a time of pivoting U.S. policy, and the concerns raised in Washington and abroad can be addressed through deliberate technical limitations, financing restrictions, offsetting benefits for Israel, and other measures.

Since the announcement of its [historic normalization agreement](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-abraham-accords-look-forward-not-back) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-abraham-accords-look-forward-not-back>) in August, and in response to U.S. and Israeli press leaks, the United Arab Emirates has confirmed that it expects U.S. officials to grant its longstanding arms requests as part of the deal. At the [top of this list](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-f-35-triangle-america-israel-the-united-arab-emirates) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-f-35-triangle-america-israel-the-united-arab-emirates>) is the F-35 Lightning II.

Allowing Abu Dhabi to purchase the F-35—an aircraft that could significantly alter the military balance of power in the Middle East—may have been a nonstarter prior to the Israel-UAE treaty. Yet this momentous shift in their relationship provides an opportunity to rethink U.S. policy and reconsider the Emirati request.

In doing so, U.S. decisionmakers will have to take into account a complex set of issues. They must reassure Israel regarding its qualitative military edge (QME), fulfill agreements made to the UAE, and show other Arab partners how peace can benefit both regional security and their relations with the United States. At the same time, Washington must figure out how to handle F-35 requests from additional partners who may be more politically problematic than the UAE, in part by assessing the potential rise of hostile geopolitical realignments that might threaten American interests and Israeli security in the future. Fortunately, there are a number of ways to mitigate these concerns,

reassure Israel, and advance long-term U.S. interests.

THE F-35 AS A GAME-CHANGER

The F-35 is the most-advanced multirole fifth-generation fighter currently on the market, and acquiring it would significantly increase the UAE's defensive capabilities. This boost may prove crucial at a time when the United States is reducing its Middle East footprint and Iran continues to upgrade its military arsenal.

Indeed, Tehran has spent the past decade building up (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-flaunts-new-missile-and-jet-engine-technology>) its ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and cruise missiles. In addition, it possesses advanced surface-to-air missile systems (including the Russian S-300) and has deployed robust and redundant SAM coverage over the Strait of Hormuz. Currently, this situation would allow Iranian forces to detect and defend against any retaliatory military activity from the UAE, while leaving the Emiratis with only a limited ability to defend against Iranian provocations.

The F-35 would significantly enhance the UAE Air Force's capabilities and survivability on this front. Its stealth design features would allow Emirati pilots to penetrate Iranian defenses in response to hostile actions and execute precision strikes against threatening Iranian and proxy targets throughout the Persian Gulf region. This capability may therefore increase the UAE's deterrence against Iranian military activity.

ISRAELI QME CONCERNS

The sale's most prominent political complication is ensuring that Israel maintains its QME. Per U.S. legislation (<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hres729/text>) enacted in 2008, this means guaranteeing that Israeli forces possess superior military systems capable of countering and defeating any credible conventional threat from any state, coalition, or nonstate actor in the Middle East.

The United States has several ways to fulfill this provision while still proceeding with F-35 transfers to the Emiratis. First, it could sell them an export variant of the jet with less-capable sensors and weapons. For example, when Washington agreed to sell F-15S Strike Eagles to Saudi Arabia in 1992, they were initially required to be delivered with lesser radars and without advanced weapons such as the AIM-120 missile. (These restrictions were lifted in 2000, and the first AIM-120s were delivered in 2003.)

Second, the United States can provide Israel with other systems to preserve its QME. For instance, a year-and-a-half after selling the F-15S to Riyadh, Congress agreed to give Israel F-15I jets with greater capabilities than the Saudi model. Similarly, the Obama administration offset the Saudi purchase of an even more advanced variant, the F-15SA, by selling F-35s to Israel and guaranteeing that it would receive the same version delivered to NATO partners. Most recently, the same day the Abraham Accords were signed last week, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reportedly asked President Trump for a new weapons package worth over \$8 billion, including more F-35s, V-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft, and early delivery of KC-46 Pegasus refueling tankers, according to *Breaking Defense*.

Third, U.S. officials could offer to streamline Israel's requests for platform upgrades or even increase its industrial share in the F-35 program's development. Jerusalem already has agreements to integrate its electronic and weapon suites into its variant (the F-35I Adir), and obtaining U.S. approval for these modifications was a complicated process.

Fourth, Washington could limit the UAE's purchase of follow-on capabilities for the F-35. For example, without external fuel tanks, the jet's range is less than 2,200 kilometers and its combat radius 1,093 kilometers. Israel is around 2,500 kilometers from the UAE, so Emirati F-35s would be unable to reach it without resorting to aerial refueling or currently available non-stealthy tanks. These options would either compromise operational security (in the case of aerial refueling) or neuter the jet's stealth capabilities (adding extra tanks would make it almost as

detectable as the UAE's current fourth-plus-generation F-16 Desert Falcons). Lockheed Martin is developing conformal fuel tanks with stealth shaping for the F-35, but the U.S. government can limit their sale to the UAE.

GEOPOLITICAL RISKS

Concerns about potentially abrupt geopolitical changes in the volatile Middle East are another key consideration. For instance, Iran and Turkey were once close Israeli partners, but Tehran is now Jerusalem's primary adversary, while Ankara has become increasingly hostile since the 2008 war in Gaza. The F-35's lifespan could be up to forty years, leaving ample time for possible shifts in the UAE's relations with either Israel or the United States.

Yet the jet's sophistication would likely mitigate the impact of any such shift. The F-35 requires substantial maintenance and expertise, most of it necessarily provided through Lockheed Martin. According to aviation analysts and the F-35's documentation, the stealth capability alone involves 5,000 parts that need meticulous maintenance. Routine depot work is also required for as many as 774 of the jet's components (from avionics and ejection seats to fuel, mechanical, and hydraulic systems), while its computer systems have more than eight million lines of software code. In other words, the capabilities that make this aircraft so extraordinary would rapidly degrade without intensive assistance from the contractor.

AVOIDING ARMS-SALES CASCADES

Another concern is the potential rise of F-35 requests from other Arab states, which could put Israel's QME at further risk. One way to limit this cascade effect is to prohibit the use of U.S. Foreign Military Financing for F-35 sales. The three other nations that have peace treaties or normalization agreements with Israel—Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan—are all FMF recipients who use U.S. grants through the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act to finance a significant amount of their military purchases. By contrast, the wealthy UAE pays for such purchases outright.

The only other regional states that could contemplate such a large purchase without aid are Qatar and Saudi Arabia. So far, neither nation has fulfilled the unofficial prerequisite of signing a normalization agreement with Israel; both explicitly ruled this out in the absence of a prospective solution to the Palestinian issue

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/normalization-can-inject-new-life-into-the-arab-peace-initiative>). Furthermore, both countries are still awaiting full delivery of their recently signed deals for advanced F-15 jets (the F-15SA for Riyadh and F-15QA for Doha). Even so, Saudi Arabia expressed interest in purchasing the F-35 as early as 2017, according to defense analyst Joseph Trevithick. Refusing this request would become increasingly difficult if Riyadh reaches a deal with Israel in the future.

SEIZING STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

Complexities aside, selling F-35s to the UAE could serve U.S. national interests in several ways. As the U.S. government pivots to the Indo-Pacific theater, approving an F-35 sale can show the Emiratis that the United States is still committed to their defense. If troops, aircraft, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets continue to be pulled out of the Middle East, including from al-Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, the F-35's capabilities could fill some of this void.

For one, the jet's advanced fusion avionics suite collects an incredible amount of electronic intelligence during each flight, and this information could be shared with the United States. Additionally, if the UAE has F-35s, its interoperability with U.S. forces would be greatly enhanced in the event Washington is compelled to redeploy to the Gulf during a crisis (e.g., if tensions escalate with Iran, Abu Dhabi could give U.S. jets access to its prospective F-35 infrastructure and stockpile of spare equipment). The sale might also impede China and Russia from taking steps to fill the void of U.S. withdrawal (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-moscow-is-quiet-on-the-israel-uae-peace-deal>), such as selling their own fifth-generation aircraft to Gulf customers.

Although U.S. policymakers will need to strike a delicate balance between these opportunities and risks, this is not the first time that the sale of a top-shelf U.S. system has evoked such concerns. The F-35 may involve higher stakes than past transfers, but with forethought and planning, Washington can make it a much safer bet for all parties.

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