

# Turkey's F-16 Request May Not Stave Off the Inevitable

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Brief Analysis

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**Washington and Ankara have significant diplomatic and security incentives for considering the deal, while rejecting it outright would likely hasten Erdogan's drift into Putin's orbit.**

**E**arlier this month, Turkey submitted a request to purchase forty new F-16s from the United States, along with eighty modernization kits for its existing F-16 fleet. Estimated to cost around \$6 billion, the arms request is Ankara's most significant since Washington began the process of expelling it from the F-35 program in 2019 and imposed penalties on Turkish entities under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)—a move spurred by the NATO member's decision to accept delivery of Russian S-400 missile defense systems. The F-16 request is a gamble for Turkey: it needs the jets to cover gaps in its aging fleet, but Washington may deny the request given Ankara's apparent unwillingness to give up the S-400. U.S. policymakers must now decide whether the bilateral defense relationship is salvageable and, if so, whether approving this sale is the best way to start rebuilding ties.

## How Putin Widened Erdogan's Rift with Washington

**A**lthough Turkish-Russian ties have historically been hostile, a bond emerged between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in recent years. This trend began with the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, which Putin exploited to position himself as Erdogan's protector and gradually peel Ankara away from Washington. While

Erdogan waited in vain for President Obama and other NATO leaders to reach out to him during his darkest hour, Putin called him immediately during the coup, then invited him to Russia for consultation.

As a result, Erdogan's first trip overseas after the coup crisis was not to Washington or Brussels, but to Russia's imperial capital of St. Petersburg, where Putin welcomed [Turkey's sultan](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sultan-autumn-erdogan-faces-turkeys-uncontainable-forces) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sultan-autumn-erdogan-faces-turkeys-uncontainable-forces>) with regal fanfare at the tsarist-era Konstantinovsky Palace. In doing so, Putin signaled that he was willing to put the brakes on Russia's centuries-long policy of crushing Turkish goals, most recently in Syria.

This outreach was no doubt reassuring to Erdogan, but as is ever the case, Putin's platitudes did not come for free. In all likelihood, the St. Petersburg meeting is where Moscow first offered to sell Ankara the S-400, knowing full well that completing such a deal would fracture U.S.-Turkish ties. This strategy ultimately worked—delivery of the system was delayed for years, but once it arrived in Turkey, Washington nixed the F-35 deal and imposed sanctions.

## Turkey's Military Considerations

Turkey has been purchasing F-16s from the United States since the 1980s and currently owns one of the world's largest F-16 fleets. It uses these jets primarily for border security missions along the Syrian frontier and long-range bombing missions primarily against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) targets in northern Iraq. According to the International Institute for Security Studies, the Turkish Air Force has over 250 F-16s, primarily of the Block 50 and Block 30 variants. The [Block 50](https://www.f-16.net/f-16_versions_article9.html) ([https://www.f-16.net/f-16\\_versions\\_article9.html](https://www.f-16.net/f-16_versions_article9.html)) variant was first introduced in the early 1990s and the [Block 30](https://www.f-16.net/f-16_versions_article6.html) ([https://www.f-16.net/f-16\\_versions\\_article6.html](https://www.f-16.net/f-16_versions_article6.html)) in the late 1980s; both are gradually being phased out in favor of more advanced variants. Indeed, much of Turkey's fleet is reaching the end of its operational life, with some analysts estimating that most of it will have to be retired in ten to fifteen years. Earlier this year, Turkish officials announced a plan to delay this retirement by refurbishing large portions of the fleet, which could extend the lifespan of its F-16s from the standard 8,000 hours to 12,000 hours.

Previously, Ankara had expected to replace some of these F-16s with an order of 100 F-35s, so its removal from that program sent military planners back to the drawing board. One alternative already in motion was the development of Turkey's own multirole air superiority fighter, the TF-X. Yet even under the most optimistic timeline, this aircraft is not expected to come online until the 2030s. Thus, if Washington rejects the new F-16 request, Turkish officials will have very few options for covering the gap in air capabilities between now and potential delivery of the TF-X. They could try to stretch the lifespan of their current F-16s by refurbishing airframes and reducing the amount of hours pilots spend in the air, but this would obviously diminish the air force's operational capabilities. They could also purchase new fighters from someone else, but if they choose a party like Russia (as Turkish officials have threatened recently), they would further antagonize the United States.

Further complicating the new request is the financing angle. Turkish officials want to use the money they put toward the F-35 program for purchasing new F-16s. On October 12, Erdogan's foreign policy advisor, Ibrahim Kalin, told a Turkish outlet that these funds total around \$1.4 billion, and that Ankara should be able to transfer them to the F-16 request. Whether this option is truly feasible or not will have to be ironed out in the ensuing negotiations.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

The largest obstacle to the deal remains the U.S. Congress, which instituted a de facto ban on all arms sales to Turkey after the S-400 debacle and has shown little appetite for lifting it. At last month's Senate hearing to approve Jeff Flake's nomination as the next ambassador to Turkey, Foreign Relations Committee chair Robert Menendez (D-NJ) noted, "I see no arm sales going to Turkey unless there is a dramatic change-around on the S-400." The previous chair, Sen. Jim Risch (R-ID), echoed this sentiment last year in comments to *Defense News*: "Until the issues surrounding [the S-400] purchase are resolved I cannot and will not support weapon sales to Turkey."

Congress will therefore be wary of green-lighting the F-16 request, mainly for fear of the signal it might send to other partners contemplating significant military purchases from U.S. competitors.

In addition to the strategic implications, U.S. concerns are compounded by the fact that the sale could put sensitive information and technology at risk. Turkey was kicked out of the F-35 program in large part because the security of the jet's stealth system and other capabilities could be jeopardized if it was co-located with the S-400 or even operated in the vicinity of the Russian system. The new F-16's radar, per its [manufacturer \(https://www.lockheedmartin.com/content/dam/lockheed-martin/aero/documents/F-16/F-16\\_Block\\_70-72\\_Product\\_Card\\_August\\_2021.pdf\)](https://www.lockheedmartin.com/content/dam/lockheed-martin/aero/documents/F-16/F-16_Block_70-72_Product_Card_August_2021.pdf), is intended to use technology similar to that of the F-35. Although the F-16 is an older platform that is already quite familiar to U.S. adversaries, the new Block 70/72 variant is intended to feature more advanced capabilities that policymakers may be loath to sell to a country with Russian air defense systems in theater.

At the same time, rejecting the sale may be the final straw in the bilateral defense relationship. As analyst Aaron Stein put it, the F-16 request represents the relationship's final "defense decoupling" stage—after years of buying largely from U.S. companies, Turkey increasingly looks to its own domestic arms industry and certain other countries to meet its military needs.

Ironically, U.S. arms sales elsewhere in the neighborhood have given Turkey extra motivation to rapidly address its air capability gap. Greece recently received approval from Washington for a \$270 million sale to support F-16 modernization (in addition to buying twenty-four Rafale multirole fighters from France). Athens also agreed to deepen bilateral coordination by amending the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement, and Greek officials have publicly declared their desire to purchase F-35s as well. Meanwhile, Israel retains the region's most capable air force with multiple F-35 squadrons, and the United Arab Emirates [may yet receive this system \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/want-sell-f-35s-uae-time-address-china-factor\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/want-sell-f-35s-uae-time-address-china-factor) per the terms of its normalization deal with Jerusalem.

## Conclusion

The F-16 request may turn out to be Erdogan's way of testing Washington, perhaps in order to expose the United States as an "insincere defense partner" in the eyes of the Turkish public. Yet a smaller faction of pro-Atlanticists in Ankara are intent on not letting bilateral defense ties collapse completely—they strongly support the request as a means of preserving those ties while also addressing a very real capability crisis. If Washington denies the F-16 sale, Turkey will likely continue drifting further into Russia's orbit under Erdogan. Accordingly, the Biden administration and Congress should note that the wording and delivery of their response to the request will carry weight in the debate over the future of Turkey's relations with the West, even if a gradual decline in those relations proves inevitable.

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