

A Terrible Idea: Selling F-35s to Qatar

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The F-35 is an American Stealth fighter jet, considered to be top of the line, that has been sold only to close allies, including Israel. The United Arab Emirates has long desired to buy some F-35s; it began to express this desire six years ago, and now it looks as though the sale will at long last be approved. Many Israeli military men have objected to the sale; they claim that it would remove Israel's QME (Qualitative Military Edge), that the American government is legally required to guarantee. Others point out that the F-35s that would be sold to the Emirates could be configured so that for Israeli radar, the "stealth" features would not work. The story from Reuters is [here](#).

Qatar submitted a formal request in recent weeks to the United States to acquire Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets, reported Reuters on Wednesday [October 7], citing three

people familiar with the matter.

If completed, a deal could complicate or even strain U.S. ties with allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia....

Israel and its supporters have expressed objections to possible sales, saying such deals could undermine Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) in the region, which the United States is required by law to ensure—a concern likely to arise over a possible U.S.-Qatar arms sale.

However, "Qatar's letter of request for the jets, the first formal step in the legal process of foreign military sale, was not directly linked to its adoption of the Abraham Accord. Nor has Qatar shown any sign it will normalize ties with Israel," reported Reuters, citing one of its sources.

The sale of F-35s to the Emirates was promoted, over the objections of many in Washington, as a reward to the Arab state for normalizing relations with Israel. But Qatar has not only not normalized relations with Israel, but has indicated it has no intention of doing so. It doesn't even have diplomatic relations with Israel. What, then, makes Qatar worthy of acquiring the F-35s? There are many reasons to turn Qatar down. First, it is a friend to Iran, which is the main reason why the Gulf Sunni states – the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain – as well as Egypt, have for the past three years imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on Qatar. It is also close to Turkey, which under President Erdogan has been hostile to Israel; Erdogan has even published a proposal for creating a pan-Islamic military force capable of destroying the Jewish state.

Erdogan also has neo-Ottoman dreams of projecting Turkish power into former Ottoman lands, and has sent Turkish troops to Libya, Syria, and Iraq. In Libya Turkish troops (and Syrian mercenaries it has also brought in) have taken the side of the Government of National Accord (GNA); Erdogan has made clear

that in return for adding the GNA, he wants a permanent Turkish military presence, with Turkish use of the naval base at Misrata, and of an airbase at Al-Watiya. Turkish troops are in northern Syria, where they will stay, according to Erdogan, until “freedom” – i.e., an end to the Assad regime – is attained. That means those Turkish troops will remain in Syria for a long time. Turkish intervention in Arab states makes our Gulf Sunni allies – Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Bahrain – anxious. Nor are they pleased that Turkey now has a military base in Qatar; the UAE has demanded that Qatar close down that base which is “destabilizing” the region. Our Gulf Sunni allies would be most disturbed if Qatar, despite being an ally of Turkey and Iran, were to be allowed to acquire F-35 planes.

Another reason to turn down its request for F-35s is that Qatar is a chief supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which the terror group Hamas is the Palestinian branch. Qatar provides a home and a platform for Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born Islamic scholar with close ties to the Brotherhood, though he claims to no longer be a member. Al-Qaradawi – who has a worldwide audience of 60 to 80 million followers – can freely broadcast from Doha his venomous messages against Jews and other Infidels, including his praise of suicide bombers. The MB, to which he is allied, is regarded as a threat both by the regime of General El-Sisi in Egypt, and by the family monarchies in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. Qatar shows no signs of lessening its support for the Muslim Brotherhood or for Al-Qaradawi. Does the American government really want to supply F-35s to an Arab state that is a friend to Iran, to Turkey, and to the Muslim Brotherhood?

A fourth person told the outlet that Qatar's link to the U.S.-designated terrorist group Hamas has also stymied the idea of arms sales to Doha.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration has treated Qatar as an ally, especially against the Iranian threat.

How can Qatar be “treated as an ally, especially against the Iranian threat,” when it is, after Syria, the Arab state that is most closely allied with Iran? The Qataris refrain from criticizing Iran’s domestic or foreign policies. Qatar shares with Iran the world’s largest natural gas field; the two producers have perforce to get along. During the siege of Qatar by several of its Sunni neighbors, Iran has flown in daily supplies of food to break the siege. The leader of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, in 2018 stated that “Thanks to the integrity and solidarity of Qatari people and the cooperation and help of friend countries, especially Iran, we have overcome the issues of the unjust, cruel siege and we will never forget Iran’s stances in this regard.” Yet the Administration, mystifyingly, appears to believe it can turn Qatar away from Iran.

Qatar has a huge lobbying effort in the U.S.; Doha has made a special effort to woo Jewish leaders, some of whom who have been invited to Qatar to be sweet-talked by officials of the regime. Qatar’s leaders haven’t forgotten Muhammad’s claim that “War is deceit.”

In September, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani met in Washington as the United States intends to proceed with naming Qatar as a major non-NATO ally, which would allow it to have certain benefits in terms of military and security cooperation with the United States.

The same questions arise with declaring Qatar a “major non-NATO ally,” as with selling it F-35 planes. How can Qatar be considered a “major ally” of America when it is friendly with Iran, with Turkey, and with Hamas? This misdescription of Qatar makes no sense.

The Trump administration has unsuccessfully sought to end a three-year standoff pitting Qatar against Saudi Arabia, the

UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

F-35 sales usually take years to finalize and deliver, thereby allowing a new U.S. presidential administration sufficient time to halt such deals. Any sale would also require congressional approval.

Qatar has done nothing to deserve being allowed to buy F-35s. It continues its unswerving support of Hamas. It maintains its friendly ties to both Ankara and to Tehran.

Of course, the actual delivery of F-35s to Qatar (as to the Emirates) would not take place for several years. The Americans may be counting on Qatar, in that time, adopting different policies toward Hamas, Iran, and Turkey. But what if that doesn't happen? Would the Americans then cancel the sale to Qatar, or go through with it? And what if, as a friend of Iran, Qatar might eventually let Iranian aeronautical engineers study one of its F-35s? Does this possibility not pose a security threat both to the U.S. and to Israel? Why not stop the potential problem at its source, by denying Qatar's request for the F-35s?

And if Qatar is allowed, without normalizing relations with Israel, to acquire F-35s, on what basis could Washington then turn down a similar request for the planes from Saudi Arabia? Or from Egypt, which can at least claim to have signed a peace treaty with the Jewish state? If the American government raises expectations, with the precedent of a sale to Qatar, that it will sell F-35s even to Arab states that do not normalize relations with Israel, and then dashes those expectations, that will damage relations far more than if it had, at the outset, made clear that the plane was to be sold only to the Emirates, among the Arab states, in recognition of its trail-blazing "normalization" and "warm peace" with Israel. And even then, the F-35s will likely be sold to the Emirates only in a configuration that will degrade the

“Stealth” feature as far as Israel is concerned.

The Americans have the precedent of the modified F-16s sold to Pakistan. One defense report at thedrive.com states that “There have been rumors over the years that Pakistan’s F-16s have tracking devices hidden inside them, or within certain components, as well as additional systems that would allow American officials to remotely disable at least key capabilities on the jets, if necessary. These F-16s also already have certain systems with more limited functionality compared to their American counterparts. and the U.S. government has taken additional steps to prevent Pakistani personnel from servicing certain key elements independently.” Something of the sort may be possible with the F-35s sold to the Emirates. It is too late to refuse the UAE its F-35s. Fortunately, they won’t be delivered for several years, during which time the Emirates’ continuing commitment to a “warm peace” with Israel can be judged.

But a sale to Qatar is a bad idea. Qatar Is not our close friend, no matter how many Washington lobbyists insist otherwise. It is the friend of Iran, and of Turkey, and the unwavering supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas, which the American government has labelled a terror group. If even Qatar, despite this record, is allowed to buy F-35s, then why not Saudi Arabia, or Egypt, which may not always be in the reassuring hands of Muhammad bin Salman, or of General El-Sisi, respectively? No, upon reconsideration, such a sale to Qatar is not a “bad idea.” It’s a terrible idea.

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