

How to Compensate Israel for the Sale of F-35s to the United Arab Emirates

by Hugh Fitzgerald



It now seems certain that the United Arab Emirates will get its wish, and the American government will sell it the advanced F-35 Stealth fighter jet it has long craved, now that the Emirates has agreed to normalize relations with Israel. But what, in that case, can be done to preserve Israel's "qualitative military edge" (QME)? Benjamin Weil has some suggestions [here](#).

For more than 6 years, the UAE has been eyeing Lockheed Martin's F-35 Lightning. The US has been hesitant to sell the fighter jet to the Emiratis, in order to preserve Israel's air supremacy in the skies of the Middle East. But now that the Israelis and Emiratis have signed a peace agreement, the Emirati request will most likely be granted. Israel no longer has a leg to stand on, since the two countries are no longer considered enemies, and Israel will be pressured by the United State to withdraw its objection in order to let the sale go through.

If this ends up being the case, Israel has the ability to leverage the sale of the F-35 to the UAE. There are a number of areas in which Israel might want to ask for American assistance to compensate for the reduced air supremacy in the region. The Israeli argument will be, if you are increasing our national security risk in one area, help us reduce our national security risk in another – a fair request on Israel's behalf. I would like to outline a few potential requests that we can expect Israel to raise.

If Israel, whose military men strongly oppose the sale of the F-35 to the UAE as a potential threat to the Jewish state's security, fail to stop it, then at least Israel needs to be provided with other weapons – not necessarily planes – or with American policies that will enhance its security in other ways.

Israel has been interested in American bunker buster bombs. Bunker buster bombs, such as the MOAB (“Mother of All Bombs”), have a delayed fuse explosion, allowing them to penetrate deep bunkers – even those of Iran’s nuclear facilities. Following the normalization of relations with the UAE, Israel has a comfortable launching pad to execute any airstrike against Iranian facilities. If the US were to give Israel these bombs, there would be nothing standing in the way of Israel to act independently against the Iranian nuclear program – a concern shared by many US defense officials and policymakers.

These MOABs are exactly what Israel needs to destroy the Iranian nuclear facilities that are deep underground, and otherwise impervious to attack. The UAE should even be willing to give Israel use of bases in the Emirates from which its planes can take off for Iranian sites. Surely, since Israel's chief worry is how to destroy Iran's nuclear project, obtaining these MOAB bunker busters will be critical to that effort.

Another long-standing Israeli request is the F-22 Raptor. Unlike the F-35's single-engine, the F-22 is a twin-engine fighter jet, and is even known to be stealthier than the F-35. Adding the F-22 to the IDF's toolbox would upgrade its capabilities against anti-aircraft missile systems in Syria and Iran. It would also seem very reasonable for Israel to request this air force advantage in exchange for giving the UAE another stealth aircraft.

The main hurdle to overcome with this request lays [sic] on Capitol Hill. The 1998 Obey Amendment prevents the sale of the F-22 to any foreign government. Congressman Obey worried that foreign countries with the F-22 would be able to reverse engineer the jet's stealth technology, and maybe even sell the technology to a third country. It is reported that the Department of Defense is neutral on repealing the law. Considering the fact that a number of countries have already purchased the stealth F-35, I don't believe it would be unrealistic for this Israeli request to be granted.

The F-22 Raptor is even more important to Israel – because it is “stealthier” – than the F-35, and thus better able to avoid the anti-aircraft missiles in Syria and, especially, Iran, should those planes be sent on missions to destroy Iran's nuclear project. The Obey Amendment, which prevents the sale of the F-22 to any foreign government, is 22 years old. The worry in 1998 was that a foreign government might try to reverse-engineer the plane's stealth technology. But American stealth technology has already been allowed to spread, since the Obey Amendment was adopted, to a number of countries that have bought the F-35. The F-22 is an improvement on, but not a radical departure from, the stealth technology used in the F-35. Israel is our closest military ally; if allowed to purchase the F-22, it would certainly commit to not engaging in any reverse-engineering and to never selling the technology to a third country. The fact that the DoD is “neutral” – that is, it does not object to repeal of the Obey Amendment – suggests that sale of the F-22 to Israel, in exchange for Israel's commitment not to engage in reverse engineering, should go through to retain the Jewish state's QME even after the Emirates are allowed to buy the F-35.

A third possible request, one that perhaps has the biggest impact on the Middle East, is related to the Saudi nuclear agreement with China. The Saudis claim their nuclear cooperation with China is for civilian use only. However,

unlike the US, when the Chinese share nuclear knowledge, they make no requirement for the Saudis to limit its use at all, effectively allowing the Saudis to enrich uranium to a military grade. The Saudis already have a stockpile of Chinese missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads. This wouldn't be so troublesome for the Israelis had Saudi Crown Prince MBS not told "60 Minutes" that "if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible." Israeli officials have echoed their concerns regarding this nuclear arms race in general, and the Saudi nuclear project in particular. The Israelis would like the US to apply more pressure on Saudi Arabia and be more proactive on this matter before things get out of control or become irreversible.

Iran's development of a nuclear weapon has continually been set back by Israeli attacks, beginning with the Stuxnet cyberworm that in 2010 caused Iran's centrifuges to speed up uncontrollably, and thereby to self-destruct. Then there were the assassinations of four of Iran's most important nuclear scientists, the seizure of Iran's entire nuclear archive of 50,000 documents, and 134 tapes, and now that nuclear project has again been set back, by at least two years, thanks to the recent Israeli attack on the new centrifuge plant at Natanz. Since it is known that Israel has pledged "never" to allow Iran to attain its nuclear goal, there should be less worry about the Saudi Crown Prince's threat to "follow suit." In foiling Iran's nuclear project, Israel will make sure the Saudis will never have the need for such weapons themselves.

Lastly, there is Turkey. Turkey has been a bone in the throat for Israel and the Mediterranean countries. Turkey's maritime disputes with Cyprus and Greece might prevent Israel from building an under-sea pipeline to Europe. The development of Israel's energy sector has an immense economic and strategic value. Turkey has also been supporting Hamas in Gaza, and been linked to many terrorist activities against Israel. Israel would like to see the US take a stronger stance

against Turkey to prevent Turkey from becoming the next Iran.

Turkey has already been denounced by Israel, Cyprus and Greece for attempting to search for gas and oil in Greek and Cypriot territorial waters, for its attempts to chase away Greek and Israeli research vessels, and for its attempted interference with the building of the EastMed natural gas pipeline from Israel's Leviathan field and Cyprus' Aphrodite field, to customers in Europe. The UAE, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece and France have also denounced Turkey's "interference in Libya." Turkish troops in Libya have angered many Arabs, who see this invasion as an act of neo-Ottoman aggression. Erdogan's mention of "Libyan Turks" – a reference to a few hundred thousand Libyans of Turkish descent, most of them living in the city of Misrata, whose supposed need for protection helps to justify Erdogan's intervention in the Libyan civil war – has infuriated Arabs. Turkey has also established what appears to be a permanent military presence in Idlib Province in Syria, without the consent of either Assad's Arabs or of the Sunni Syrian Arabs opposed to Assad; Erdogan has said the Turks will remain "until Syria is free" – by which he meant "free from control by the Assad government." Since that government currently controls 70% of Syria, the Turks are likely to be there for a very long time. And in northern Iraq Turkish troops are determined to suppress Kurdish YPG fighters, and give no signs of leaving despite being asked to do so by Baghdad. Given such determination by Erdogan, nothing the U.S. threatens is likely to change his policies, including his steadfast antagonism toward Israel.

Given all those enemies whose protests Turkey has brushed off, would a "stronger stance" by the U.S. make much of a difference? The Americans could threaten an arms embargo, but wouldn't Turkey in that case turn to Russia, as it did for the S-400 anti-missile system, or even to China, as alternative suppliers? Turkey will change only when Erdogan is no longer in power, putting paid to his neo-Ottoman dreams on land

(Syria, Iraq, Libya) and sea (the eastern Mediterranean), that Erdogan treats as “mare nostrum” – “our [Turkish] sea.”

Israel might consider asking for either of the requests above, or for a combination of them. Whatever the case, Israel should ask for American commitments that will last long after the November elections in the US, and for ones that cannot be reversed.

Of the four suggestions the author makes, the most convincing to me are those about the MOAB bunker busters and the F-22 Raptor, the most advanced Stealth jets in the American armory. These are what are most necessary for Israel to now acquire: the Stealth planes can be used to avoid Iranian attack, and the bunker busters can destroy Iran’s underground nuclear sites. The Saudis suggest that they will engage in their own nuclear project only if Iran first attains nuclear weapons, but the Israeli military has assured the world that – whatever it takes – that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will never happen. If that is true, the Saudis will have no need for nuclear weapons of their own.

Finally, Turkey under Erdogan has made enemies of almost every one of its neighbors and, with Turkey’s economic collapse, his foreign adventures weigh every more heavily. It’s not American pressure, but Turkey’s economic debacle, that will make Erdogan change his policies – if anything will. Domestic politics will decide his fate; in 2019 his AKP party lost municipal elections in Turkey’s three biggest cities – Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. Erdogan and his AKP party have continued to lose support ever since the beginning of 2020. Key former allies, such as former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, have abandoned him, and the AKP, in order to form their own parties.

For Israel, it is more important right now to have the means to destroy Iran’s nuclear project than to have the U.S.

“applying pressure” on Saudi Arabia not to proceed with a nuclear project and trying to get Erdogan to change his spots. Better to assure Saudi Arabia that it will not have to worry about Iran’s nuclear project: Israel, with help from the Americans, will see to it that Iran will never be a nuclear power. As for Erdogan, his own collapsing economy, at a time of expensive overreach in Libya, Syria, and Iraq, will in the end force him to rethink his grand plans in the Eastern Mediterranean, where he has made so many enemies, and perhaps stop his incursions into the territorial waters of Greece and Cyprus, and his attempt to interfere with Israel’s EastMed gas pipeline, that will go from the Leviathan (Israel) and Aphrodite (Cyprus) gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe.

Israel’s toolbox to destroy Iran’s nuclear project should now include the F-22 Stealth fighter jets, and MOAB bunker busters to hit targets deep underground. It’s not much to ask. With them, Israel will do not only itself, but also its allies, including the U.S. and the UAE – a world of good.

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