

One Israeli General Who is Unworried by the F-35 Sale to the UAE (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Maj.-Gen.(ret.) Giora Eiland is not worried about the F-35 sale to UAE, but he is worried about the ideas that such a sale will give other Arab states.

BUT WHATEVER Israel demands in return, it knows that the UAE might not be the only country in the region that ends up requesting that Washington sell it the advanced jet.

“We have to make a distinction between the UAE and other countries which may get similar weapons systems,” Eiland said.

A grave worry for Israel’s military is the possible request by other Arab states for the same F-35s that the UAE will likely acquire. What if Egypt were to ask the U.S. for such planes, possibly paid for by the Gulf Arab states? After all, Cairo can claim that not only is it not hostile to Israel, but for years has been collaborating with the Jewish state on fighting Jihadis in the Sinai. Could Israel risk damaging the relations with Egypt it has carefully cultivated by opposing such a sale? Yet Egypt has fought five wars with Israel, in 1948-1949, 1956 (the Sinai campaign), 1967, 1967-70 (the War of Attrition), and 1973. Should another Mohamed Morsi take power Egypt would overnight again be Israel’s enemy. Israel’s anxiety over such a sale – and how best to prevent it – would be well justified.

With a significant distance between the two countries, and a stable friendly regime in power, as well as the fact that the

main reason that it wants similar weapons is to deter Iran, in some ways it's good military news that Abu Dhabi will procure the F-35.

Maj-Gen. Giora Eiland's assumption is that the "stable friendly regime in power" in the UAE will always remain as such. But MENA (Middle East and North Africa) is the most unstable and violent area in the world. There have been palace coups, popular revolutions, political and intra-family assassinations in Libya (Qaddafi), Tunisia (Zinedine Ben Ali), Egypt (Sadat, Mohamed Morsi), Jordan (Wasfi al-Tal), Saudi Arabia (King Faisal), Iran (Mossadegh, Shah Reza Pahlevi), Oman (Sultan Said bin Taimu), Yemen (Ali Abdullah Saleh), Lebanon (Rafic Hariri, Dany Chamoun, Amin Gemayel, Pierre Gemayel). Given such a violent and volatile environment, why should Israel risk its security on the assumption that the UAE will always remain both "stable" and "friendly"?

Israel, Eiland said, has no say in deals between the US and Arab countries and "has been disappointed in the past when Washington made deals which were much more dangerous than this one."

For example, the US sold F-16s to Egypt in 1980, only a year after a peace deal was signed between Cairo and Jerusalem, and before it was implemented. While Cairo has since turned into a strategic partner, less than a decade before the sale, Egypt played a key role against Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Egypt also has more advanced Apache attack helicopters than Israel.

Washington also sold Saudi Arabia F-15s and AWACS early warning aircraft in the 1980s and recently signed a deal with Riyadh and Qatar for advanced F-15s. And what about Turkey? Until recently, Ankara was part of the F-35 project, before it was booted out by Washington after it bought advanced S-400 missile defense systems from Russia. Though a NATO

member, Turkey has been increasingly aggressive in the Mediterranean and pivoting away from the West.

The fact that Washington in the past sold F-16s to Egypt, and F-15s and AWACS to Saudi Arabia in the past, and has just signed a deal to sell advanced F-15s to both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, does not justify the sale of F-35s today – a much greater leap in fighter jet capability than anything that has come before – to the UAE. As for the abortive sale of the F-35s to Turkey, cancelled because Erdogan insisted on buying the Russian S-400 anti-missile system, that sale was always unwise, and should never have been agreed upon in the first place. Erdogan's Turkey should not be receiving any advanced American weaponry; in fact, Erdogan's remarks about creating a pan-Islamic army to destroy Israel, and warning of a future war "between the crescent and the cross" (with no doubt as to what side Turkey would be on), are reason enough to expel Turkey from NATO. Previous mistakes in American arms sales to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, do not justify what would be, many believe, an even greater mistake – the sale of the F-35s to the UAE.

Israel should anticipate similar requests from countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and other countries which may be more dangerous, Eiland said, "but it will take years."

While Egypt and Jordan have signed peace deals with Israel, perhaps the possibility of getting such jets will be that last push that Saudi Arabia and other Arab states need to sign similar normalization deals with the Jewish state.

Saudi Arabia has been unambiguous in its stated policy toward Israel. After the UAE announced its deal with Israel, one of Saudi Arabia's most powerful men, Prince Turki al-Faisal, announced that Saudi Arabia will not normalize relations with Israel until after Israel has been squeezed back within the 1949 armistice lines, with a nine-mile-wide waist from

Qalqilya to the sea, and the Palestinians have a state of their own, consisting of Gaza, the Golan Heights, and all of the West Bank. He didn't suggest that a supply of advanced American arms might convince his country to accept Israel in its current configuration, or something close to it.

And does Eiland think it a good idea to let "Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states" – Egypt? Qatar? Jordan? – to also have the F-35 planes? Apparently this possibility doesn't trouble him, as it does other Israeli generals who have spoken out about the F-35s. The F-35 sale to the UAE is dangerous in itself, and even more dangerous because of the precedent it will set for similar sales to other Arab states, less "stable and friendly," whom it will now be harder for Washington to turn down.

So "is the deal better than no deal?" Eiland asked. "At the end of the day, the answer is yes."

Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland is the only high-ranking (retired) Israeli general so far to endorse the sale of the F-35 to the UAE. If the sale is approved, his suggestions as to how the American government might preserve Israel's QME are useful, and the most effective weapon for preserving the QME is not another airplane, such as the F-22 Raptor, given that the most pressing threat is from Iran, but the bunker busters – either the GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrator or the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), which is considered the largest nonnuclear bomb in the USAF's inventory. Should Israel receive either or both – the MOP and the MOAB – these weapons will enable the Jewish state to deal with Iran's nuclear project, much of it deep underground. If that delivery of the most advanced and powerful bunker busters to Israel is accompanied by assurances that neither weapon will ever be supplied to any Arab state, then the normalization deal which enabled the UAE to acquire F-35 Stealth fighter jets would indeed be "better than no deal."

Details from Washington about arms sales to Israel in the near future – the very sales that will assure Israel’s QME – need not be spelled out, unless Israel thinks it would be useful for Iran to find out exactly what it is now up against. Something vaguer will suffice, such as Secretary Pompeo announcing that “we have come up with a plan that will ensure that Israel maintains its QME. This plan for supplying Israel with exactly the advanced armaments it has told us it most needs right now, weapons never before provided by us to any state, has met with the approval of Prime Minister Netanyahu, Deputy Minister Benny Gantz, and Defense Minister Gabi Ashkenazi.”

That should be enough to raise the level of anxiety in Tehran sky-high. And lower it in Jerusalem.

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