

F-35 Sale to UAE Advances U.S. Security Interests

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Executive Branch of the U.S. government has approved the sale of 50 F-35 Stealth fighters, MQ-9 armed drones, and advanced munitions to the United Arab Emirates.

The sale, opposed by some in Congress, followed the historic Abraham Accords that opened diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE.

The UAE is a close ally and currently possesses and guards some of America's most sophisticated and classified military technology.

The U.S. State Department notified Congress on November 10, 2020, that it had approved the sale of a \$23.4 billion defense package of F-35A Joint Strike Fighters, armed drones, munitions, and associated equipment to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Congress has 30 days from the date of notification to review the proposed sales and take action to block them under the terms of the Arms Export Control Act.

As it reviews the transaction, Congress should bear in mind that the UAE, which signed a peace agreement with Israel in September, is a long-standing U.S. ally that faces a growing threat from Iran. The defense sales would boost UAE defense capabilities, enhance the interoperability of UAE and U.S. armed forces, and help maintain a favorable balance of power in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf region as the U.S. draws down its forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Boosting Little Sparta

The UAE is a key security partner for the United States in regional counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and counter-piracy operations—and most importantly, in countering Iran. To address these threats, it is critical that the UAE develops modernized ground, air, and naval forces. The UAE signed a defense pact with the United States in 1994, permitting the Pentagon to base troops and equipment within its borders. Today, roughly 3,500 American military personnel are stationed or deployed to facilities inside the UAE.

Dubbed “Little Sparta,” the UAE has punched beyond its weight class in recent years. It has cooperated closely with the United States in strategic planning, joint exercises, logistical support, and combat operations. The cornerstone of strong bilateral security relations has been defense sales, which have enhanced the effectiveness of Emirati military forces and enabled them to work closely with U.S. and allied forces. Successive U.S. administrations have sold increasingly sophisticated weapons to the UAE since the 1980s, including F-16 fighter jets, Patriot air defense missile systems, and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile system.

The Proposed Sale

Following the September 15 signing of the historic Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced U.S. approval of defense sales to the UAE worth \$23.37 billion for up to 50 F-35 Lightning II aircraft, valued at \$10.4 billion; up to 18 MQ-9B Reaper Unmanned Aerial Systems, valued at \$2.97 billion; and a package of air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions, valued at \$10 billion. Pompeo noted that the sales will augment the UAE’s capacity to provide for its own self-defense and reinforce the U.S. military posture in the region to deter Iran.

The F-35 Lightning II is the world’s most dominant multi-role stealth fighter.¹ The proposed sale would strengthen the UAE’s defense capabilities and deterrence of Iran. Iran has built up its ballistic missile arsenal, drone fleet, and cruise missile capabilities while deploying advanced surface-to-air missile systems, including the Russian S-300 air defense system. Iran’s military buildup may accelerate even further after the U.N. arms embargo lapsed in October. In the event of a crisis, American F-35s could be deployed to the UAE and benefit from access to the UAE’s support infrastructure. Interoperability with UAE F-35s would be a force multiplier that would enhance future U.S. military capabilities in the Gulf region, not just the UAE.

Congressional Concerns

The proposed sale sparked limited opposition in the House and Senate. Congressional critics have cited several reasons for opposing the sales, including concerns about Israel's security, the security of the advanced technologies to be sold, alleged UAE human rights abuses against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and worries about triggering a regional arms race. Many of these concerns are overblown and can be mitigated or offset by attaching conditions to the package or addressing the concerns through other policies. To wit:

- **The UAE defense package will not blunt Israel's qualitative military edge.** Most congressional critics of the sale have focused on the need to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge, defined in a 2008 law as the ability to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state, possible coalition of states, or from nonstate actors, while sustaining minimal damages and casualties, through the use of superior military means. Israel is a regional superpower that already has purchased 50 F-35 aircraft, taken delivery of about half of them, and deployed them in combat operations. Israel's F-35Is, like the F-16Is before them, are modified in country to enhance their electronic combat capabilities—modifications that give them a significant advantage over those that the U.S. will sell to any other nation, including the UAE.

Moreover, the Trump Administration would not be going forward with the sale if it had not cleared it with Israeli leaders at the highest level. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz issued a joint statement on October 23, stating, "Since the U.S. is upgrading Israel's military capability and is maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge, Israel will not oppose the sale of these systems to the UAE."²

- **The sale of these systems will not jeopardize defense secrets.** The Administration also appears to be well-positioned to reassure Congress about the security of the advanced technology transferred to the UAE. The Emiratis already have received and protected advanced U.S. military technology such as the F-16E/F, the most advanced operational F-16 in the world. The UAE can be counted on to protect F-35 and Reaper drone technology to maintain their technological advantages and safeguard their own security.

- **The deal would have no impact on human rights.** Some critics of the deal have focused on allegations of human rights violations and excessive civilian casualties sustained by Yemenis in the course of the UAE's participation in the Saudi-led coalition that intervened in 2015 on behalf of the Yemeni government. But they neglect the fact that the UAE decided in July 2019 to withdraw most of its armed forces from Yemen, leaving only a small residual force to assist Yemenis in fighting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State to prevent the emergence of a terrorist sanctuary. UAE special forces in Yemen also work closely with those of the United States in fighting those terrorist groups.

Critics have ignored much more severe human rights violations inflicted on Yemenis by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who have detained, tortured, and murdered innocent Yemenis to the point where the Trump Administration currently is considering whether to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization. The Houthis also have launched ballistic missiles and drone attacks at civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is difficult to imagine how denying arms to the UAE would advance the human rights of Yemenis, particularly those that the UAE is helping to protect.

- **The deal would not start a new arms race, but would help boost the UAE in the ongoing arms race with Iran.** Critics should focus their arms race concerns on the U.N. Security Council, which allowed the U.N. arms embargo on Iran to lapse in October. Iran, which has been the prime driver of regional instability, now is free to import advanced arms from China, North Korea, and Russia. Those who are worried about halting the momentum of the ongoing arms race should actively support maintaining the strongest possible sanctions on Iran, the chief catalyst of that arms race.

Recommendations

It is highly unlikely that Congress will be able to block the UAE defense package. President Donald Trump is certain to veto any move to halt the sales, and a two-thirds majority in both houses would be required to override a presidential veto. As Congress weighs action on the sales, here are actions that can be taken.

- **The Executive Branch.** The Administration should not expect Congress to accept the deal at face value. It should proactively engage Congress on the strength of the U.S.–UAE alliance and what both the arms deal and the Abraham Accords will bring to the region.
- **Congress.** The House and Senate Armed Services Committees should brief their respective chambers on the security of classified weapons systems and the force-multiplying impact this deal would have to further the security of the region, as well as the strength of the U.S. military-industrial complex.
- **The Department of Defense.** The Defense Department should begin assessing the impact of adding another nation to the F-35 and MQ-9 operations and training pipelines that are conducted in the United States and begin planning to expand them accordingly.

Conclusion

Congress would be making a huge mistake if it denies the UAE a means of defending itself and deterring Iran. Such an irresponsible action risks damaging Washington’s reputation as a dependable ally, sabotaging the UAE–Israel peace agreement, and prompting the UAE and possibly other Arab allies to hedge their bets by seeking similar weapons from China and Russia. At a time when Washington is seeking to reduce its military footprint in the region to pivot to the Indo–Pacific theater and to focus on great-power military threats, the United States needs to strengthen allies to avoid creating a power vacuum that China, Iran, ISIS, Russia, or other hostile forces could fill.

In addition to making good strategic sense, the UAE defense package would have important economic benefits. The sales would strengthen the U.S. defense industrial base, help defray the overall costs of the weapons to the U.S. military, and support highly skilled jobs for American workers. The proposed sale would yield considerable strategic, foreign policy, and economic benefits for the United States.

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Endnotes

1. John Venable, "The F-35A Is the World's Most Dominant, Cost-Effective Fighter: The Air Force Needs to Accelerate Its Acquisition Now," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 5042, March 2, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-f-35a-the-worlds-most-dominant-cost-effective-fighter-the-air-force-needs-0>.
2. Dan Williams and Mike Stone, "Israel Will Not Oppose U.S. Sale of F-35s to UAE," Reuters, October 23, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-usa-arms-idUSKBN278297> (accessed December 4, 2020).