

The UAE and the F-35:

Frontline Defense for the UAE, US
and Partners



EMBASSY OF THE
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“The Emirati Air Force is the most combat-ready air component in the Middle East, with exceptional aircraft flown by combat-experienced pilots who maintain their skills together with US Air Force elements at Al Dhafra’s challenging Gulf Air Warfare Training Center. When I was the Commander of US Central Command, I assessed that, if necessary, the Emirati Air Force could more than take on the Iranian Air Force if augmented with AWACS and air refueling. I maintain that assessment, and the addition of F-35s will help the UAE maintain its capability relative to that of Iran. Given that, and given Israel’s support for Emirati acquisition of the F-35, US approval of that purchase is both advisable and timely.”

General David Petraeus

US Army (Ret.), former Commander of the Surge in Iraq, US Central Command, and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, and former Director of the CIA.

Executive Summary

The sale of the F-35 to the UAE is much more than selling military hardware to a partner. It is about advancing a more stable and secure Middle East. It enables the UAE to take on more of the burden for collective security from the United States.

The UAE requirement for the F-35 is the same as Israel's. The UAE needs a fifth-generation multi-role fighter to protect the nation and the shared security interests of the US and its friends in the region. With its stealth, standoff and sensor capabilities, the F-35 provides a critical advantage over increasingly sophisticated adversaries.

“The Prime Minister and the Defense Minister both agree that since the US 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.”

Joint Statement from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Benny Gantz (October 23, 2020)

The UAE priority is to encourage regional dialogue and the de-escalation of tensions. At the same time, the UAE must maintain a vigilant and capable defense against state-supported aggression and non-state extremist groups. These persistent and advanced threats include ballistic missiles, precision-guided rockets, and armed drones.

The F-35 will be an upgrade to the US-supplied F-16 that President Bill Clinton first approved for sale to the UAE in 2000. The UAE has deployed the F-16 in support of multiple US-led counter-terrorism,



After the signing of the Abraham Accords, the first ever Israeli commercial flight to the UAE lands in Abu Dhabi on August 31, 2020.

freedom of navigation, and stabilization missions in Afghanistan, Syria and around the Arabian Gulf and Peninsula.

The US sale of the F-35 to the UAE is completely consistent with the US National Defense Strategy that calls for enabling partners to take on more responsibility for their own and collective security in the Middle East.

With Israel's full acceptance of reassurances that the US will “maintain Israel's security superiority in the Middle East for decades to come,” the sale of the F-35 is also consistent with US policy and law to uphold Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME).

The UAE first expressed interest in acquiring the F-35 more than six years ago. The UAE has submitted its formal letter of request and will defer to the US Department of State to facilitate the review process with Congress.



For over a decade, the UAE military supported US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The UAE

A Positive Force for Change in a Difficult Region

The signing of the UAE-Israel Accord was a disruptive reminder that Emiratis and Israelis, and all the people of the Middle East are tired of conflict. The region wants positive change. The priority now is to continue to modernize and to stabilize the broader region.

The Accord was also a galvanizing moment for the aggressors and radicals of the region opposed to progress, modernization, tolerance and change. They form a violent and extreme axis of perpetual resistance. They want to restore old empires or obsess for a new Caliphate. They produce and thrive on conflict, disorder and instability. They bash the US, Israel and the UAE. They are well armed and dangerous.

The most formidable threat is Iran's proliferation of offensive ballistic missiles, precision rockets and armed drones. The US intelligence community estimates that Tehran's missiles are likely to keep growing in both power and technical sophistication, thus creating new strategic challenges for the UAE, the US, Israel and other partners.

“We take the American commitment to maintain Israel’s qualitative military edge very seriously. We believe, as both the Prime Minister and Defense Minister have said, that this prospective sale would not violate the US commitment to maintain Israel’s QME. And we are grateful we have partners in the region to confront common dangers.”

Ron Dermer

Ambassador of Israel to the United States



The UAE Air Force has operated the F-16 Block 60 for 15 years.

Deterring Aggression - Maintaining Stability

The UAE cannot rely on its missile defense capabilities alone to defend against this continuously evolving threat. Like the US and Israel, the UAE must depend on a strong and credible deterrence. It must sustain a layered defense augmented with extensive intelligence and offensive capabilities and a comprehensive and imposing force mix. Like its partners, the UAE's security interests are best served by doubling down on its qualitative edge over Iran's increasing capabilities. This superiority resides in the UAE's air force – now with the F-16 and in time with the F-35.

Practically, a more balanced and potent defense posture ultimately requires the UAE to retire its older F-16, fourth-generation warplanes and replace them with more capable aircraft that can more effectively meet present and future security threats. The F-35 is a versatile, multi-role fighter. With its stealth, standoff and sensor capabilities, it is ideal for deterrence.

“I have to say the United Arab Emirates is among our most credible and capable allies, especially in the Gulf region.”

General Martin Dempsey

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2011-2015)

Shared Interests - Shared Burden

The UAE has become America's most capable and dependable military partner in the Arab world. A Congressional Research Service report issued on October 26, 2020 notes that the capabilities of the UAE Armed Forces have been enhanced by over 20 years of defense cooperation with the United States. With decades of combined training, exercises and operations, the US Air Force has developed complete confidence in the UAE Air Force to conduct joint strike missions.

The UAE has deployed alongside the US in coalition counter-terrorism, stabilization and peacekeeping missions six times, more than any other Arab military.

Through its 10-year deployment in Afghanistan, the UAE was one of two non-NATO air forces certified and trusted to provide close air support to US and coalition ground forces. US commanders regularly called on UAE-piloted F-16s armed with precision munitions to suppress and defeat enemy attacks against US and coalition units.

When President Barack Obama initiated operations against ISIS in 2014 in Syria, UAE F-16s joined the US in flying the first strike. Interoperability with US systems along with combined training and exercises facilitated mission planning and success. The UAE squadron was commanded by Major Mariam al-Mansouri, the UAE's first woman fighter pilot.

Over the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, the UAE Air Force has flown thousands of air patrols on its own and with the US and other partners in freedom of navigation operations. With heavy dependence on the F-16, this combined mission has protected international shipping and US naval assets against Iranian aggression while freeing up US assets for other theaters and missions.

From the shared Al Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, the US Air Force has operated virtually every one of its aircraft types and platforms including the F-35 Lightning, F-16 Falcon, F-15 Strike Eagle, KC-10 Extender, U-2 Dragon Lady, RQ-4 Global Hawk, and E-3 Sentry (AWACS). Part of Central Command (CentCom), more than 1200 U.S. active duty military members are deployed with the US contingent at Al Dhafra. At the combined Air Warfare facility on the base, UAE and U.S. pilots have trained side-by-side for more than a decade to face a full spectrum of threats.

“The UAE is one of our most steadfast and capable partners. We value our strong relationship and...will work to expand our collaboration, specifically in the areas of security cooperation and foreign military sales.”

General Joseph Votel
Commander of US Central Command (2016-2019)

“The best and most experienced Emirati soldiers, officers, and units are excellent by regional standards and appear equivalent or possibly more capable than those of some NATO members.”

Kenneth M. Pollack
Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute



Officers of the UAE and US armed forces confer during “Iron Union 12,” a joint military exercise held annually in the UAE.

Interoperability

The Key to Effective Coalition Warfare

Training and deploying on the same US equipment and systems is critical to US security interests around the world. To put it simply, when the major weapons systems and aircrew preparation of allies and partners match those of the US military, the effectiveness and efficiency of US coalition warfare – which is the way of the future for US strategy, especially in the Middle East – dramatically increases.

As the United States fully transitions to the F-35 as its main aerial platform for multipurpose operations, the UAE wants to follow suit. The UAE’s prospective acquisition of the F-35 not only ensures interoperability with the US it also reduces the US burden of ensuring regional security and allows Washington to gradually and responsibly decrease its military footprint in less critical areas of the region.

“From the grand strategic to the more tactical immediate issues, the US and UAE share common ground. Our strategic relationship is very broad, very deep and very strong... our military-to-military ties are extraordinary.”

General James Mattis

US Secretary of Defense (2017-2019)



Emirati and American pilots regularly train together at Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE.

Al Dhafra Joint Air Warfare Center

The UAE's armed forces cooperate regularly with US counterparts on both training and operational missions to preserve security and stability in the Gulf. UAE Air Force pilots train regularly with their US counterparts at the Joint Warfare Center at Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE.

In March 2020, military personnel from both countries participated in the joint training exercise Native Fury, which aimed to strengthen strategic ties between the two militaries. The teams also exchanged skills and knowledge related to humanitarian missions. Another UAE-US exercise called Iron Union takes place annually in the Abu Dhabi desert.

In order to enhance combat readiness and communication with allies, UAE Air Force F-16 pilots regularly participate in the annual "Red Flag" aerial combat exercise hosted by the US Air Force at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada. Because this exercise is exceptionally challenging, pilots who participate in Red Flag must have superior training and skills.

Dependable Partners

US Standing in the Middle East

The UAE-Israel Accord signified both the importance of and the shift in the US' continuing role in the Middle East. It only could happen with the influence of American diplomacy and the reassurance of its security commitments. At the same time, the US gains by transferring more of the burden for regional stability to a stronger and more enabled team of dependable and willing partners.

The US is the UAE's partner of choice – in security, in trade and in outlook. And the US-supplied F-35 is the UAE's next generation fighter of choice. It delivers the full range of the UAE Air Force's needs including super-cruise, stealth, super-maneuverability, and advanced avionics.

The sale of the F-35 will be a closely-watched signal that the US remains committed to its partners in the region. It will provide additional confidence, incentives and capabilities to the UAE to support the US and other partners with access, overflight, training and basing facilities as well as in future joint operations against common threats.

Facing persistent threats, the UAE must continue to upgrade its defense capabilities. Without the F-35, the UAE must consider other, even less capable fifth-generation aircraft, from other suppliers. This second, but necessary, choice would have follow-on implications for long-term UAE-US security cooperation as the UAE came to depend less on the US for critical equipment and training.

A Long-term Commitment

Investment, Jobs, and the US Industrial Base

The prospective sale of the F-35 to the UAE would provide considerable economic benefits to the United States. It would strengthen the US defense industrial base and ensure its position among global competitors. It will sustain hundreds of thousands of jobs in the United States and generate sizeable and long-term savings for the US Government.

The UAE will purchase the jets using its own national funds. It will pay for training, maintenance, spare parts and other services over the decades-long life of the program. By increasing the scope and scale of the F-35 program, the UAE purchase will lower unit costs and spread out R&D costs resulting in future savings for the US. The UAE will also meet all of the research and development costs to adapt the aircraft for its specific needs.



F-35 production supports jobs in 45 US states and Puerto Rico.

Capable Partners

US Law and the Qualitative Military Edge

The US sale of the F-35 to the UAE is completely consistent with the US National Defense Strategy that calls for enabling partners to take on more responsibility for their own and collective security in the Middle East.

In October, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Israeli Minister of Defense Benjamin Gantz met to discuss the US's "long-standing and continuing commitment to maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME)." With Israel's full acceptance of reassurances that the US will "maintain Israel's security superiority in the Middle East for decades to come," on October 23, the Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister issued a joint statement noting that Israel will not oppose the sale of the F-35 to the UAE. On October 29, Prime Minister Netanyahu called the decision to sell F-35s to the UAE "an important achievement for the State of Israel."

The UAE's previous purchase of F-16s was accomplished under the same US policy and law to uphold the QME, and today Israel supplies key upgrades for the UAE aircraft. The UAE anticipates that Israel would provide enhancements as well on the UAE F-35s.

The UAE and Israel have never been in conflict and have long cooperated on security, though informally. With the recent historic normalization accord, security and defense cooperation will be formalized and accelerated.

The UAE and Israel have always had similar threat assessments: both see Iran and violent extremist groups as posing the biggest challenges to national security and the region more broadly.

The UAE is among the world's most stable



US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Israeli Minister of Defense Benjamin Gantz recently signed a declaration affirming the US commitment to maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge.

governments. Emirati leadership is forward-looking, constantly investing in the future across many sectors including technology, science, governance, entrepreneurship, and innovation. The UAE is anchored in a stable social contract with universal education and health care, world-class infrastructure and solid institutions, tolerance and diversity, backed with considerable financial resources.

“The United States continues to be committed to Israel’s security and its qualitative and technological advantage in the Middle East.”

Benjamin Gantz

Minister of Defense of the State of Israel

What the Experts Say

Michael Rubin, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

American Enterprise Institute: Would Trump sell the F-35 to UAE? A chat with Michael Rubin

“I have no problem with an F-35 sale. The UAE are allies and punch above their weight. They also face real threats.”

Dan Gouré, Vice President, Lexington Institute

Real Clear Defense: Is the F-35 in the UAE’s Future?

“...the threat posed by Iran to the Gulf, Israel, and indeed the entire region continues to grow. The F-35 is not a bargaining chip. However, it is a decisive military capability which, when operated by the US and its allies and friends, can create a regional and even global deterrent capability.”

Lt. Col. Christine McVann, Military Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Washington Institute for Near East Policy: How to Balance Competing Priorities with an F-35 Sale to the UAE

“The F-35 would significantly enhance the UAE Air Force’s capabilities and survivability on this front. Its stealth design features would allow Emirati pilots to penetrate Iranian defenses in response to hostile actions and execute precision strikes against threatening Iranian and proxy targets throughout the Persian Gulf region. This capability may therefore increase the UAE’s deterrence against Iranian military activity.”



A US crew surrounds an F-35 during a deployment to Al Dhafra Air Base, UAE in April 2019.

Kenneth M. Pollack, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

American Enterprise Institute: Sizing up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE military effectiveness

“In recent years, the armed forces of the United Arab Emirates have earned the reputation as the best in the Arab world...The UAE’s Joint Aviation Command possesses some of the most advanced American systems, and its pilots are impressive.”

What the Experts Say

General David Petraeus, US Army (Ret.), former Commander of the Surge in Iraq, US Central Command, and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, and former Director of the CIA.

“The Emirati Air Force is the most combat-ready air component in the Middle East, with exceptional aircraft flown by combat-experienced pilots who maintain their skills together with US Air Force elements at Al Dhafra’s challenging Gulf Air Warfare Training Center. When I was the Commander of US Central Command, I assessed that, if necessary, the Emirati Air Force could more than take on the Iranian Air Force if augmented with AWACS and air refueling. I maintain that assessment, and the addition of F-35s will help the UAE maintain its capability relative to that of Iran. Given that, and given Israel’s support for Emirati acquisition of the F-35, US approval of that purchase is both advisable and timely.”

Major (res.) Danny Citrinowicz, Israel Defense Intelligence

Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Israel and the UAE on Iran: Shared Foe, Different Perspectives

“...the question of whether to accept or clamor against what is likely to be a long period of negotiations on the F-35 should be reexamined by Israelis, especially as a stronger UAE would strengthen both countries regarding Iran. Aside from its role in the peace deal, Israelis should consider the benefits to a stronger UAE military along with its drawbacks.”

Efraim Inbar, President, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security

Salom: Prof. Inbar: We Will Not See a Peaceful Middle East

“People talk about F-35s that will be delivered to the UAE. But this is part of having peace. After we had peace with Egypt, the Egyptian army was American equipped. This is something to be expected.”

Shabtai Shavit, Former Mossad Director

Jewish Insider: The Mossad chief who oversaw peace with Jordan has some advice for the moment

“...we share, with the US on the one hand, and with all Gulf countries on the other hand, with Saudi Arabia included, the common threat of Iran.”

Omar Dostri, National Security Analyst, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security

JISS: Sale of F-35 to UAE: Opportunity alongside risk (Translated with Google Translate)

“Ultimately, it must be remembered that Israel and the United Arab Emirates have a common supreme interest: a fight against Iran's subversion and the development of its [nuclear capabilities.]”

Testimonials & Endorsements

US Officials

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

Jerusalem Post: Pompeo: We'll supply UAE with arms without hurting Israel's advantage

The US wants to "make sure we are delivering the equipment [the UAE] needs to defend themselves from the... threat of the Islamic Republic" of Iran.

Brian Hook, US Special Representative for Iran

Axios: Scoop: UAE cancels Israel meeting after Netanyahu opposes F-35 arms deal

"The UAE and Israel face the common enemy of Iran. We are going to continue enhancing UAE's defense posture in a way that preserves our security commitments to Israel."

David Friedman, US Ambassador to Israel

New York Times: Trump Administration Pushes Arms Sale to UAE Despite Israeli Worries

"Ultimately, under the right circumstances, both the US and Israel would benefit greatly from having a strong ally situated across the Strait of Hormuz from Iran."

Morgan Ortagus, Spokesperson, US Department of State

Times of Israel: US official: 'Incredibly positive conversations' held over selling F-35s to UAE

"With respect to the F-35 or any military hardware or infrastructure, I keep reminding people that it is important to know that the UAE and US's military and security relationship is robust and has been there for decades. Since the Gulf War, the United States had sold military aircraft and hardware, F-16s, and others to the UAE."

"This is not a new relationship; this is a sophisticated relationship that we have had for decades....There's various discussions about the hardware elements, and aircraft, and other things that are on the table."