



No F-35s for UAE, Please

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The sale is likely to deepen existing conflicts and further enmesh the U.S. in the region.

The Biden administration told Congress on April 13 that it plans to proceed with a \$23 billion sale of advanced weaponry to the United Arab Emirates originally approved by the Trump team – including the F-35 advanced joint fighter aircraft. Biden has yet to provide a clear rationale for continuing the sale, but following the previous administration’s logic, advocates believe it will help curb Iran’s ambitions in the Middle East. The reality, however, is that these sales will further entangle the United States and amplify existing conflicts in the troubled region.

The first problem with the sale is that it will deepen the American commitment to Israel’s defense while simultaneously making that commitment more expensive. At present, Israel is the only country in the region with access to the high-tech F-35, which provides it a significant advantage in any potential conflict. Given this, one might imagine that Israel would oppose UAE’s purchase of F-35s.

On the contrary, however, though Israel has little love for the Emirates, the Israeli government has not opposed the sale because the United States agreed to “significantly upgrade Israel’s military capabilities” in return. Ensuring that Israel has enough firepower not to worry about F-35s in the neighborhood will be expensive indeed. Worse, however, is that the American *carte blanche* will give Israel the confidence to behave aggressively towards its neighbors, as its recent attack on Iran’s nuclear facility at Natanz indicates.

Selling the F-35 to the UAE also raises the risks of a regional arms race, as well as increased tensions between the United States and Russia. Russia is discussing selling its answer to the F-35, the S-400 anti-aircraft system, to Iran. The S-400 is designed to overcome the F-35’s stealth technology, and its potential deployment has produced concern in Israel because it would make future Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets much more dangerous.

The temptation in Jerusalem to carry out more attacks before Iran finishing installing the S-400 would be significant. What Iran might do in response is anyone’s guess. At a minimum, rather than deterring Iran, selling F-35s to the UAE is likely to spur more intense regional competition and violence and fuel increased tensions between Russia and the United States.

Finally, selling advanced aircraft to the UAE is likely to amplify existing conflicts. Until 2019, the UAE was a primary participant in the Saudis’ tragic and fruitless intervention in Yemen – itself part of the regional struggle between Iran and Iran’s adversaries. UAE and Saudi airstrikes have prolonged a deadly civil war and helped create one of the world’s worst humanitarian

situations. Were the UAE to use the F-35 in Yemen—or Libya where it is also active—its stealth and other high-tech capabilities would promise even more devastation.

Though the UAE pulled out of the Saudi coalition during 2019, there is little evidence that they intend to stop working to counter Iran in Yemen. American officials were horrified in 2020 by reports that American weapons sold to the UAE as part of a \$2.5 billion deal had been illegally funneled to militias and other non-governmental forces in Yemen. In June 2020, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs argued that the situation in the Middle East demanded a more “activist” foreign policy. Given this mindset, there is little reason to believe that the UAE will not use its most advanced weaponry to pursue its strategy.

The Biden administration’s decision to approve the sale of F-35s to the UAE is troubling, but it also raises more general concerns about Biden’s weapons transfer policy. On the one hand, Biden made the right decision to halt the sale of “offensive weapons” to Saudi Arabia in an effort to end American complicity with the war in Yemen. On the other hand, the Biden administration has approved billions of dollars in sales of major conventional weapons that to countries that pose great risks, such as Jordan, Egypt, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Chile, while also maintaining sales of any weapon that can be used for self-defense to Saudi Arabia.

In his statement about the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden noted that it is time to “end the forever wars.” But, if Biden truly wants the U.S. to reduce its footprint in the Middle East and peacefully end the war in Yemen, providing the F-35 to the UAE is a step in the wrong direction.

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