



PERSPECTIVES

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The Strategic Benefits to the US and Israel of Offering F-35s to the UAE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The official normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a rare victory for the United States' overall political and military strategy in the Middle East and has significant global implications. Should Israel elect to accept a measure of risk by supporting the sale of F-35 fighters to the UAE, both parties could see immediate as well as longer-term benefits.

For Israel, the new opening with Arab countries in the Persian Gulf offers unparalleled political, strategic, and financial opportunities. With the UAE case as a model, Israel has the opportunity not only to showcase its technological knowhow in safeguarding Gulf states from threats posed by Iran and other potential adversaries, but also to extend its own defensive measures further from its borders and closer to its most ardent adversary. Beyond security sector collaborations, numerous other Israeli firms—from desalinization plants to those producing safe nuclear energy—stand to expand their markets and accrue benefits, not only in economic terms but also in terms of public perception.

The UAE's bold move to formally normalize its relationship with Israel came with considerable risk. The calculations in Abu Dhabi hinged on security factors from threats emanating from Iran, the perceived unreliability of the US commitment to long-term security arrangements in the region, and the confrontational stances taken by Muslim Brotherhood-inspired governments in Qatar, Turkey, and Libya. The normalization process between Israel and the UAE, while ongoing for years, was formalized with the mediation of the US. That factor was part of Abu Dhabi's risk-benefit calculation: by smoothing relations with Israel, it is trying to further solidify its relationship with Washington.

Cooperation between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem on shared threats could have been enhanced without overt normalization, but a US-mediated opening of normalized relations suggested several key benefits that made it worthwhile to the UAE. The most immediate of these potential benefits is the sale to the Emirates of F-35s.

This issue has prompted much debate, mainly in Israel, revolving around the American commitment to maintain Jerusalem's qualitative military edge (QME) as mandated by Congress in 2008. That commitment assured Israel that it would continue to possess technological and other advantages that would enable it to deter larger enemy forces.

[Those in Israel who oppose](#) the sale of F-35s to the UAE point to the instability of the political order in the Middle East as reason enough to fear the sale's ultimate result. Others opposing the sale argue that should the UAE obtain the advanced stealth fighters, the US would find it very difficult to avoid selling them to Saudi Arabia as well, which would further erode Israel's QME in the region.

Both arguments have merit. However, Abu Dhabi took the step of normalizing relations with Jerusalem to safeguard its political system from both internal and external threats. If the first act of post-normalization is an Israeli campaign to persuade Congress or the Trump administration to rescind the F-35 sale to the UAE, trust in the budding relationship between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem, as well as between Abu Dhabi and Washington, will be damaged.

Unlike the peoples of Israel's neighbors Egypt and Jordan, with whom Jerusalem has had chilly peace agreements for many years, the people of the Emirates seem to be embracing their government's decision. The UAE government and its people now regard both Israel and the US as trusted partners. Building alliances based on trust and dependability would provide Israel with much greater defensive depth and would afford the US a chance to deny further access to Russia and China in the region—all while maintaining a lighter American footprint there.

As for the Saudis, as leaders of the Muslim world, they have thus far made the resolution of the Palestinian issue a prerequisite to normalization of relations with Israel. With ample reports of covert collaboration between Israel and Saudi Arabia, what message would it send to Riyadh should Jerusalem pressure Washington to withdraw the F35s from the table?

It is important to keep in mind that Israel's QME is not hinged on [aircraft only](#). Israel, through its relationship with the US and on its own, has qualitative

tactical military advantages over its potential adversaries, and these should be maintained. The overall strategy would be to change existing and potential enmities to acceptance, if not full normalization of relations, between Israel and states in the region. To achieve that, some minor risks will have to be taken by all parties involved.

Moreover, if the US does not offer F-35s to the UAE or potentially to Saudi Arabia, both US adversarial peer competitors and European allies can be expected to step in. Not only would they reap the economic and political advantages of such deals, but also, in the case of China and Russia, they would weaken both the US and Israel.

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