

WORLD

France to Sell Jet Fighters to U.A.E. as Gulf Nation Awaits U.S. Purchase

United Arab Emirates' deal for American military aircraft has been held up over the country's cooperation with Beijing



French President Emmanuel Macron spoke on Friday with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the U.A.E.'s de facto ruler.

PHOTO: THOMAS SAMSON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By [Brett Forrest](#)

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France agreed to sell \$19 billion of military aircraft to the United Arab Emirates, including jet fighters, while the U.S. Gulf ally's burgeoning security ties with China impede its purchase of advanced American combat jets.

The deal, for 80 French-made Rafale F4 jet fighters and 12 Airbus Caracal combat helicopters, was unveiled on Friday during French President Emmanuel Macron's visit with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the U.A.E.'s de facto ruler. The fighters incorporate advanced radar, targeting and weapons systems.

"These contracts are important for the economy and create jobs in France," Mr.

Macron told reporters. “What is good for French men and women, I defend ardently.”

The U.A.E.’s state news agency confirmed the deal. The U.A.E. Embassy in Washington didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Emirati forces have operated in recent years in combat against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, and in Libya, along with France, in support of warlord Khalifa Haftar’s struggle against the internationally recognized Tripoli government.



A French Rafale jet fighter

PHOTO: STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In addition to the advanced planes purchased from France, the U.A.E. hopes eventually to augment its fleet with a \$23 billion purchase of roughly 50 F-35 jet fighters and more than a dozen Reaper drones from the U.S. That deal has been held up in Washington amid concern about the U.A.E.’s expanding security cooperation with China, U.S. officials have said. The U.A.E. is a major Persian Gulf ally of the U.S., but Washington remains concerned about Abu Dhabi’s commitment to securing transfers of sensitive U.S. defense technology, U.S. officials said.

The Biden administration “remains committed to the proposed sales of F-35 aircraft and munitions even as we continue consultations to ensure that we have a clear, mutual understanding of Emirati obligations and actions before, during, and after delivery,” a State Department spokesman said Friday.

The deal with France is the NATO ally's largest-ever combat airplane export contract. It wouldn't necessarily preclude the completion of the U.A.E.'s F-35 purchase, as some Gulf countries have lately taken to diversifying their fleets of combat aircraft.

"This Rafale contract consolidates the strategic relationship that binds our two countries," Éric Trappier, chairman and CEO of Dassault Aviation, which manufactures the Rafale jets, said in a statement.

Egypt and Qatar also previously signed deals for the Rafale F4.

The agreement helps the French defense industry rebound from the loss of a \$66 billion contract to sell 12 diesel-electric submarines to Australia, which opted instead to buy nuclear-powered subs from the U.S. and United Kingdom.

Demonstrating the drawn-out course of defense deals, Abu Dhabi began fighter-jet procurement discussions with international defense firms, including Dassault, as early as 2008, according to defense analysts. Deliveries are forecast to begin in 2027.

"It will be interesting to see where this deal takes the F-35," said Charles Forrester, a lead analyst for Janes, a defense industry publication. "The two aircraft have some complementary capabilities, but remain different enough for the F-35 to still potentially be on the table for the U.A.E. as a key strategic force multiplier."

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