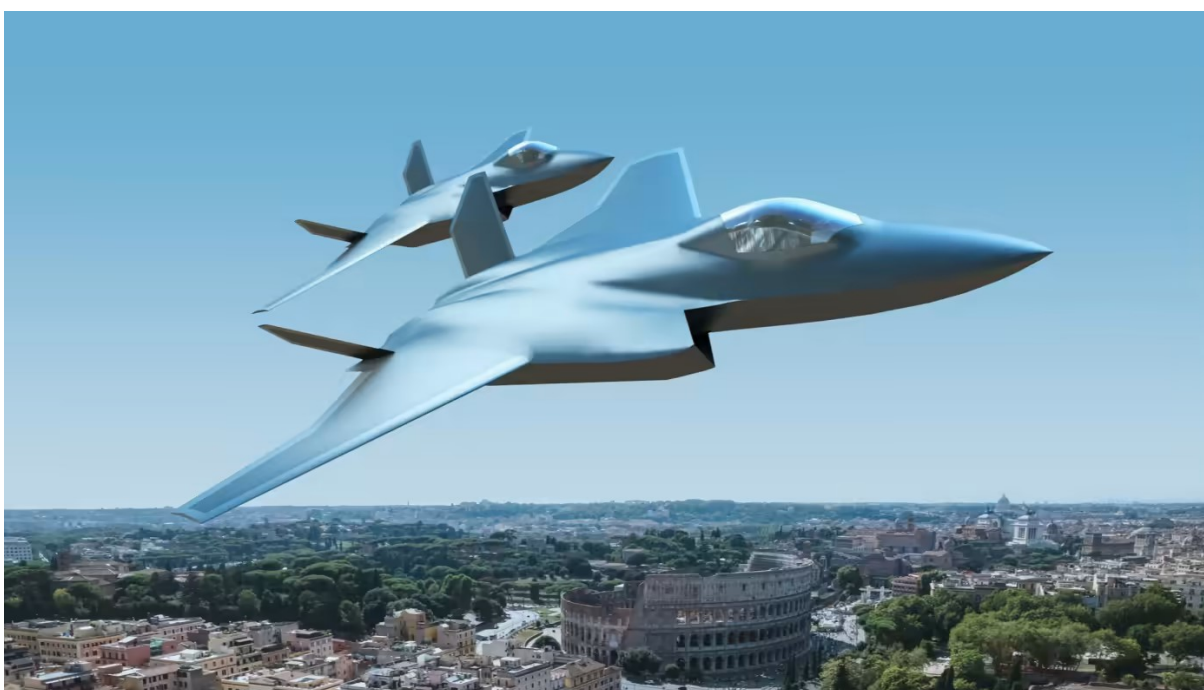


**Aerospace & Defence**

## Saudi Arabia pushes to join fighter jet project with UK, Italy and Japan

Request creates tension between partners in landmark three-way combat aircraft programme



An artist's impression of what the final design could look like for the next-generation of fighter jets developed under the Global Combat Air Programme, planned to take to the skies by 2035 and serve as a successor to the RAF Typhoon © PA

**Leo Lewis** and **Kana Inagaki** in Tokyo, **Sylvia Pfeifer** and **Andrew England** in London, **Giuliana Ricozzi** in Rome YESTERDAY

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Saudi Arabia is pushing the UK, Japan and Italy to allow it to become a full partner in the landmark next-generation fighter jet project that the three countries signed in December.

The request, confirmed by five senior officials in London, Tokyo and Rome, has already created strains within the tri-national alliance. While the UK and Italy are open to the idea of Saudi membership, Japan is firmly opposed and has made its position clear to the other two.

The [Global Combat Air Programme](#) (GCAP), which seeks to deliver a highly advanced and exportable combat aircraft by 2035, was a significant advance for all three signatories, particularly for Japan which had historically restricted defence exports and never collaborated on a programme of this scale and complexity.

Efforts by Saudi Arabia to join GCAP and expand the programme into a four-nation project have intensified significantly in recent weeks, according to officials in London and Tokyo. These efforts have included a direct request to the government of Japan in July when Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah.

The Saudi involvement would also involve a potentially significant financial contribution to a project whose costs are estimated in the tens of billions of dollars, said people briefed on the matter. While talks remained at an early stage, the Saudi proposal could include an offer to contribute engineering expertise at various stages of the project, they said.

A senior British [defence](#) source said: “The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the UK’s strategic partnerships and UK Defence is keen to deepen work on GCAP. We see Saudi Arabia as a key partner in the fighter programme and we are working to ensure strong progress as soon as possible.”

Japan overturned its decades-long ban on arms exports in 2014 and is debating relaxation of the restrictions to allow it to reach more foreign markets with GCAP. But Japanese officials say adding Saudi Arabia to the mix would further complicate discussions on which countries Tokyo can sell its arms to.

A fourth member would also complicate negotiations on a project that already faces a tight deadline. One person with knowledge of the talks said Japan was focused on having an aircraft delivered by 2035 and was concerned that involving the Saudis now would create delays.

Despite Italy and the UK’s tentative support for Saudi membership, people briefed on the matter said that it came with substantial caveats. Those include doubts over whether the new partner would have anything significant to offer on the technological side.

There are greater concerns about security, already a source of friction within the existing three-nation alliance because of the project’s reliance on sharing sensitive technology and information. Ahead of GCAP the UK pushed Japan to improve its cyber security and introduce a more stringent framework for security vetting of people involved in the project, said people familiar with negotiations that led to the deal.

For Saudi Arabia, its interest in GCAP follows delays in getting a second tranche of Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft from the UK.

The oil-rich kingdom is one of the world’s biggest spenders on weaponry, mostly from the US. But Riyadh is also spending billions of dollars to develop a domestic arms industry and is seeking partnerships with defence manufacturers as it looks to become a producer.

*Germany, one of four partner nations in the Eurofighter consortium, imposed a*

Germany, one of four partner nations in the Eurofighter consortium, imposed a weapons embargo against the kingdom in 2018 following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents and the country's involvement in the Yemen war. Berlin said last month it would not back the delivery of the Typhoon aircraft to Saudi any time soon.

Germany's stance threatens to stymie a follow-on order for more Typhoons promised under a memorandum of intent between the UK and Saudi Arabia in 2018. A large proportion of Eurofighter components are manufactured in the UK, but some come from the other partner nations, Germany, Italy and Spain, and the countries can veto exports of the planes to other nations.

The UK, which has longstanding historic ties with Saudi Arabia, launched a feasibility study with the kingdom earlier this year to explore future collaboration on combat air capabilities. At the time, however, the UK said the accord was distinct from GCAP.

The defence ministries of Japan and Italy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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