

Flight Risk: Turkey and the F-35





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I. Executive Summary

After Turkey's decision to acquire the Russian S-400 air and missile defense system, despite repeated warnings from U.S. officials, the United States was forced in 2019 to block Turkey from procuring and producing the American F-35 fifth-generation fighter.¹ Now, Turkey is asking to be let back into the F-35 program.² The United States must carefully consider whether Turkey, a rising, and potentially threatening, regional power led by the authoritarian, pro-Hamas, neo-Ottoman President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, can be trusted with this advanced jet.

We fear that it cannot. Repeatedly, Turkish policy and U.S. interests have diverged. Too often has Ankara threatened to use force against U.S. partners—not to mention, on occasion, U.S. troops.³ Most recently, Erdoğan has called for Israel's destruction while championing Hamas.⁴ Though we would prefer a genuine partnership with Turkey, providing Ankara with the most sophisticated fighter in the world while concerns abound about how, where, and against whom Turkey would use it, is not the way to achieve it. Turkey getting the F-35 should be the result of, not the means for, rebuilding trust.

Yet, it appears the Trump administration is favorably disposed to grant Turkey's request. If it insists on doing so, we recommend that it only offer Turkey re-entry into the F-35 program under very strict conditions. To wit, Turkey must:

- meet U.S. legal requirements to get rid of the S-400;
- restore normal diplomatic and economic relations with Israel;
- end all forms of support for Hamas, including allowing Hamas to raise funds on Turkish territory;
- enter into a serious, preferably U.S.-led deconfliction mechanism with Israel over Syria; and
- respect Greek and Cypriot air and sea territorial boundaries as well as their exclusive economic zones (EEZ).

If Turkey cannot agree to these terms, it should not be granted access to this advanced American weapon.

Regardless of whether Turkey gets the F-35, however, we also recommend that Congress consider requiring that at least high-end U.S. weapons sales to Turkey be legally required to meet the standard of not adversely impacting Israel's qualitative military edge (QME).

A. Background

Turkey joined the F-35 program in 2002, both purchasing the fighter and participating in its development and production.⁵ However, Turkey also acquired the S-400 in the turbulent aftermath of the failed July 2016 coup.⁶ Repeated warnings from U.S. officials that these two systems could not coexist and repeated U.S. efforts to resolve the impasse, including offers to sell Turkey the Patriot air and missile defense system if it canceled its S-400 purchase, came to naught.⁷

As a result, in addition to being blocked from taking delivery of the F-35s it had purchased and removed from the production and supply chain of F-35 components, Turkey's defense industry was sanctioned under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2020.⁸ Congress took further action to block any future sale of F-35s to Turkey unless it relinquished its S-400 system and pledged never again to buy Russian air and missile defense systems.⁹ Turkey has not deployed its S-400s, but it retains possession of them and thus has not met the congressional condition for eligibility to acquire F-35s.¹⁰

B. Better Safe than Sorry

Turkey's now two-decades-long history of not working in concert with U.S. interests—most glaringly in the case of the F-35 itself but also regarding Russia, Israel, Syria, and the Eastern Mediterranean—leads us to be dubious of the wisdom of granting Turkey's request to be let back into the F-35 program. Erdoğan's Islamist, anti-Western worldview, his desire to pursue an autonomous foreign policy, and his growing authoritarianism at home have led to a divergence between Ankara and Washington in interests and values alike.¹¹ This trend has only been accentuated by recent threats against Israel and the arrest of a political rival.¹² Selling Turkey the F-35 now would reward and reinforce these problematic behaviors.

These are all good reasons to believe that, as Turkey becomes stronger, it will be likely to pursue a foreign policy that is more independent and divergent from U.S. interests, not less so. Armed with the F-35, Turkey is likely to feel empowered to act even more assertively in the skies and waters of Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Nor is the concern the F-35 alone. The fifth-generation fighter's advanced stealth, radar, and communication systems make other air assets more capable as well as expand the effectiveness of ground power. Meanwhile, even if Turkey got rid of the S-400, its willingness to work with U.S. competitors like Russia and China means that there would be real risks of the F-35's proprietary technology being stolen.¹³

We also remain unswayed by the argument that Turkey will be able to acquire F-35-equivalent fighters regardless, so the United States is better off selling them the jet rather than risk losing influence in Ankara. The F-35 is peerless now and will remain so, even if Turkey develops its own jet fighter, the TF-X KAAN.¹⁴

i. Don't Grant Access to the F-35...

That is why we ultimately recommend that the United States not let Turkey back into the F-35 program at this time.

ii. ...But Offer Alternatives

Yet, the United States should at the same time make clear to Turkey that it is interested in both supporting its legitimate security needs while rebuilding trust. That process of repairing relations should proceed slowly, with small steps, not grand gestures. To that end, the United States should

offer Turkey other, less potentially problematic but nevertheless useful weapons systems. For example, this could include expanding the number of new F-16s that Turkey can purchase or, if it removes the S-400, once again offering Turkey the Patriot missile defense system.

C. If Proceeding, Tread Carefully

Despite this, it remains true that Turkey's interests align with the United States in a number of important areas. When acting in its national interest, Ankara plays a critical role as a bulwark against American adversaries Russia and Iran.¹⁵ In the long-term, and in the face of increasing coordination between Russia, Iran, and China, having a strong Turkey as a cooperative and trustworthy partner would be highly beneficial to the United States. As such, finding ways to improve the bilateral relationship with, and increase American leverage on, Turkey long-term should be an important priority for the United States.

If Washington and Ankara find a way to allow Turkey back into the F-35 program, this could play an important role in beginning to improve U.S. relations with Turkey by removing a key irritant in the relationship and allowing the two to find areas of cooperation. Similarly, refusing Turkey the F-35 would risk exacerbating Turkey's worst tendencies to align against the United States. It is possible that such considerations are behind the Trump administration's reasoning in its reported willingness to consider Turkey's request.¹⁶

Still, Turkey put itself in this position by purchasing the Russian S-400 system and has to meet Washington more than halfway in order for the United States to take such a step. Recent Turkish foreign policy, particularly with regard to Israel, suggests the United States should be exceedingly cautious in contemplating letting Turkey back into the F-35 program. It should do so only if Ankara first agrees convincingly to conditions that might build some confidence in its intentions for the platform and help bring at least the most salient aspects of its foreign policy into closer proximity to U.S. interests. These conditions should include:

i. Remove S-400, per U.S. law

The Trump administration should demand that Turkey live up to the letter of the law requiring it to get rid of the S-400 in its entirety; Ankara has shown no signs of good faith that would warrant waiving or diluting it. To meet this requirement, Turkey could sell its S-400 batteries to a third country. The challenge will be to find a suitable destination; India might be acceptable to Washington, Ankara, and Moscow alike.

ii. Offer Patriots, if Used Safely

If Turkey does agree to get rid of the S-400, the United States should re-extend its offer for the Patriot missile defense system. This offer, however, should require Turkey to agree to only deploy the system on its own territory—not in Syria, where it could compromise Israel's freedom of action.

iii. Restore Relations with Israel, Cut Support to Hamas

Before it is allowed back into the F-35 program, the United States should require that Turkey end support for Hamas. This should mean not just breaking off official relations with the group, but also

imposing controls to make sure Turkey’s financial system is not being used to move money to the terrorist group and that its territory is not being used for Hamas fund-raising or other forms of support.¹⁷ The United States should also publicly call for Turkey to normalize diplomatic and economic relations with Israel while privately urging Erdoğan to tone down his wildly harsh anti-Israel rhetoric.

iv. Deconflict with Israel Over Syria

To manage growing Turkish-Israeli tensions, and as a condition of the F-35 sale, the United States should take the lead in a robust deconfliction mechanism—not just the hotline that has already been discussed—between the Turkish and Israeli air forces to make sure that they stay out of each other’s way in the skies over Syria.¹⁸ Ideally, this would take the form of U.S., Turkish, and Israeli personnel being co-located in a U.S. facility. It would be a show of good faith if Turkey agreed to host such a mechanism at its Incirlik airbase, where the United States has already deployed forces. The necessity of working together in Syria could start the long process of rebuilding confidence between the two powers.

v. Respect Greek and Cypriot Territory

To minimize the potential for future friction over the Eastern Mediterranean, especially once both Greece and Turkey are flying the F-35, the United States should urge Turkey to abstain from violating internationally recognized Greek airspace and from harassing operations related to the Euro-Asia Interconnector and natural gas exploration, extraction, and liquefaction within the territorial waters and EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus.¹⁹ This could be done through private undertakings.

D. Ensure Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge

Regardless of whether Turkey is admitted into the F-35 program at this time, its request for this weapon while seeking an expanded military presence in Syria and making threats against Israel reveals that the United States must seriously consider the possibility of greater friction between these two partners. For that reason, we recommend that U.S. lawmakers consider passing a version of a current provision of the Arms Export Control Act that requires a determination that arms sales to Middle Eastern countries do not adversely affect Israel’s QME.²⁰ As applied to Turkey, such legislation should be applicable to at least some high-end weapons sales to Ankara.

II. Background

A. Turkey’s Role in the F-35 Program

The F-35 is a fifth-generation, single-seat, multi-role fighter aircraft that incorporates stealth capabilities, advanced sensor integration, and networked operations. Developed under the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program—a multinational effort led by the United States to create a family of next-generation combat aircraft—Lockheed Martin produces the F-35 in three variants tailored to the needs of the U.S. Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, and allied partner forces.

July 2002	Turkey joins F-35 JSF development program.
September 2009	Turkey starts talks with U.S. on procuring Patriot systems.
January 2012	Turkey purchases first two F-35s.
September 2013	Turkey selects China’s FD-2000 system over Patriot system.
November 2015	Turkey cancels FD-2000 purchase after NATO backlash.
July 2017	Putin offers Turkey S-400 system.
September 2017	Erdoğan announces S-400 deal with Russia.
November 2017	U.S. warns S-400 not compatible with NATO.
June 2018	Turkey symbolically “receives” its first F-35s in Texas ceremony.
June 2018	Senate moves to block F-35 sale over S-400.
August 2018	First Turkish test flight occurs at Luke Air Force Base.
October 2018	U.S. warns Turkey S-400 purchase may trigger CAATSA.
November 2018	Pentagon warns Turkey of possible F-35 removal over S-400s.
December 2018	U.S. offers \$3.5B Patriot sale to sway Turkey.
January 2019	FM Çavuşoğlu: S-400 deal is final.
March 2019	First Turkish F-35 pilots graduate flight training.
March 2019	Congress moves to block F-35 transfer.
April 2019	Turkey proposes U.S. working group on S-400.
June 2019	U.S. halts Turkish pilot training.
July 2019	Turkey receives its first S-400 components.
July 2019	U.S. officially removes Turkey from F-35 program.
December 2019	FY2020 NDAA bars F-35 transfer (Sec. 1245).
December 2020	FY2021 NDAA requires imposition of CAATSA sanctions (Sec. 1241).
December 2020	U.S. sanctions Turkey’s defense agency under CAATSA.

Turkey began negotiating with the United States in 1999 and officially joined the JSF program in 2002 as one of the original eight partners in the multinational development effort. Ankara entered as a Level III participant—the same tier as Canada, Norway, Denmark, and Australia. Although Level III partners had less influence over design and requirements than higher-tier contributors, their financial investment secured a role in shaping aspects of the aircraft’s development and guaranteed a share of its production base.²¹ Turkey’s initial financial contribution of \$175 million supported the System Development and Demonstration (SDD) phase, which ran from 2001 to 2018 and included software development, flight testing, and systems integration.²² Over time, Ankara’s investment reportedly reached \$1.4 billion, with plans to purchase 116 F-35s throughout the program’s lifetime.²³

Turkish industry became deeply integrated into the F-35's global supply chain, manufacturing approximately 1,000 aircraft components.²⁴ Major contributors included Turkish Aerospace Industries (center fuselages, composite structures), Alp Aviation (engine components, titanium integrated blade rotors), AYESAŞ (panoramic cockpit display), along with Havelsan, Kale Aerospace, Fokker Elmo Turkey, and Roketsan, which provided various subsystems.²⁵ The participation represented a significant technological leap for Turkey's defense industrial base and aligned with Ankara's strategic goal of increasing domestic production capabilities.

On June 21, 2018, Turkey took symbolic delivery of its first two F-35A aircraft during a ceremony at Lockheed Martin's Fort Worth facility.²⁶ The jets remained under U.S. custodianship at Luke Air Force Base, where Turkish pilots began training.²⁷ The first Turkish test flight occurred in August 2018, and by March 2019, a full training cohort had graduated, setting the stage for Turkey to begin building a cadre of operational personnel.²⁸

Turkish Manufacturers in F-35 Supply Chain		JINSA
Manufacturer	Key Contributions	
Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Center fuselages, composite skins, weapon bay doors, inlet ducts, air-to-ground pylons 	
Alp Aviation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airframe parts, landing gear, F135 engine components 	
Ayesas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Missile interface unit, cockpit display 	
Fokker Elmo Turkey (GKN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40% of Electrical Wiring & Interconnection System (EWIS), center wiring, F135 EWIS 	
Havelsan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training systems, pilot/maintenance centers 	
Kale Aerospace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airframe parts, sole supplier of landing gear uplocks (all variants), F135 engine hardware 	
ROKETSAN and TÜBİTAK SAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SOM-J missile for internal carriage 	

Source: Focus International²⁹

B. Turkey's S-400 Acquisition: Strategic Choice with Consequences

While advancing its role in the F-35 program, Turkey simultaneously pursued solutions to address perceived gaps in its air and missile defense capabilities. Since the early 1990s, Turkish officials had expressed concerns about the country's vulnerability to missile threats from neighboring states.³⁰ Late in the first decade of the 2000s, Ankara formally initiated a competitive procurement process for a long-range surface-to-air missile system, soliciting proposals from the United States (Patriot PAC-3), Europe (EUROSAM SAMP/T), Russia (S-300 family), and China (FD-2000).³¹

Turkish officials insisted that any acquisition include provisions for co-production and technology transfer—terms essential to Ankara’s broader strategy of defense industrialization.³² When the United States offered the Patriot system primarily as an off-the-shelf purchase with limited technology sharing, Turkey surprised its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies by selecting China’s HQ-9 system (export variant FD-2000) in 2013.³³ Although the decision raised alarms due to the risks of integrating Chinese systems into NATO infrastructure, Ankara seemed primarily to use the selection as a negotiating tactic to pressure the United States into offering more favorable terms.³⁴ Turkey ultimately canceled the deal with China in 2014 as NATO pressure mounted.

By mid-2014, Turkey appeared to favor the European SAMP/T option and entered discussions with France about joint production arrangements.³⁵ Parallel negotiations with the Obama administration stalled over technology transfer issues, with Turkish officials later claiming U.S. offers were insufficient.³⁶ U.S. reluctance to finalize a Patriot deal was also influenced by growing tensions over the Syrian civil war, as Washington grew increasingly wary of Ankara’s approach to the conflict, including its unwillingness to prioritize the fight against jihadist groups and its strong opposition to U.S. cooperation with Kurdish forces—factors that eroded trust and complicated defense negotiations during this period.³⁷ This procurement limbo created an opening for Russia to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO.

Meanwhile, in 2016, tensions mounted between Erdoğan’s government and its erstwhile ally, the Fethullah Gülen movement. Then led by a self-exiled preacher living in a compound in the Poconos mountains in Pennsylvania, the Gülen movement espouses a modernist form of Islam, married to modern science and education.³⁸ It had long been known to spread its influence over Turkish state institutions, particularly the judiciary and police. Erdoğan allied with Gülen in order to achieve and consolidate power in the 2000s, but the two fell out beginning in 2010.³⁹ The relationship grew more acrimonious as Erdoğan moved to purge thousands of Gülen supporters from state institutions.⁴⁰

On July 15, 2016, a faction within the Turkish military that appeared to be led by Gülen supporters attempted a coup against Erdoğan, including an attempt on his life and the bombing of the Turkish parliament.⁴¹ Because of Gülen’s residence in the United States, many Turks had long suspected the movement of links with American intelligence services, although no substantive evidence for such a link has ever been produced.⁴² Following the coup attempt, and the Obama administration’s failure to rapidly condemn it, the Erdoğan government and much of Turkish society concluded the coup had been planned or at the very least condoned by the United States.⁴³ Given that the coup-makers had been particularly strong in the Turkish Air Force, and that S-400 systems (which could not be integrated with the rest of Turkey’s defense systems) were to be based at an Ankara air base, many thought Erdoğan sought the S-400 systems instead of American or European air defenses in order to protect his own presidential palace from further coup attempts coming from inside or from his allies.⁴⁴

In July 2017, following his strong support for Erdoğan in the wake of the coup attempt, Russian President Vladimir Putin offered Turkey the S-400 Triumf air defense system. By September, Ankara had agreed to purchase four batteries for approximately \$2.5 billion.⁴⁵ The deal included partial

Russian financing and was framed by Turkish officials as an assertion of sovereign defense decision-making. The first S-400 components began arriving in Turkey in July 2019.⁴⁶

This procurement represented a critical inflection point in Turkey's relationship with NATO and the United States. American officials warned repeatedly that the Russian system posed significant security risks, particularly its potential to compromise the F-35's stealth capabilities and electronic signature.⁴⁷ The Pentagon's primary concern was that operating both systems in proximity would allow Russia to "train" its radar systems on the F-35 platform, potentially eroding its survivability against Russian air defenses globally.⁴⁸ Consequently, the United States threatened to exclude Turkey from the F-35 program if it proceeded with the S-400 acquisition.⁴⁹

C. Turkey's Ejection from the F-35 Program

Despite escalating tensions over the S-400, the United States made a last-ditch effort to accommodate Turkey's air defense requirements while preserving its F-35 partnership. In December 2018, the State Department approved a \$3.5 billion Foreign Military Sale for Patriot PAC-3 batteries with expedited delivery provisions.⁵⁰ This offer came with an explicit condition: Turkey would need to cancel its S-400 purchase. U.S. officials established a clear deadline linked to the anticipated S-400 delivery in mid-2019, with Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan directly informing his Turkish counterpart that "Turkey will not receive the F-35 if Turkey takes delivery of the S-400."⁵¹ Meanwhile, congressional leadership undertook a pre-emptive effort to approve the Patriot sale, if Turkey canceled the S-400 deal, to allay expressed Turkish concerns that it might be left without either system.

Comments from senior Turkish officials accentuated the daylight between Washington and Ankara on the S-400 issue. In January 2019, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared: "The S-400 agreement is already a finished deal. We can deal with the United States for the Patriot, but if it's about the S-400, no."⁵² Erdoğan reinforced this position later in March, stating, "There is no question of [Turkey] taking a step back from the S-400 purchase. That is a done deal."⁵³ As the deadline approached, Erdoğan further claimed the United States had not presented "an offer as good as the S-400s."⁵⁴

The Pentagon acted decisively. In July 2019—coinciding with the first S-400 deliveries to Turkey—the Department of Defense formally removed Turkey from the F-35 program.⁵⁵ The White House statement was unambiguous in sharing its rationale for Turkey's ejection: "Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems renders its continued involvement with the F-35 impossible," adding that "The F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities."⁵⁶

This decision had significant industrial implications. The Pentagon initiated the process of removing Turkish manufacturers from the F-35's global supply chain while allowing them to continue production through Lot 14 (deliveries into 2022) to minimize disruption.⁵⁷ The Pentagon also set aside around \$500 million to help revamp the F-35 industrial base following Turkey's ouster.⁵⁸

D. Congressional Roadblocks to Turkey’s F-35 Return

The executive branch’s removal of Turkey from the F-35 program was reinforced by congressional action that placed the suspension on firm legal grounds. Two complementary statutes—one pre-dating the S-400 acquisition and the other passed in direct response—formalized Ankara’s exclusion from the program.

Passed in August 2017, the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) was primarily designed to punish Russia for its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁵⁹ However, the legislation’s scope extended to third-party states purchasing significant Russian defense equipment. Section 231 of the law mandated sanctions on any foreign government that engaged in a “significant transaction” with Russia’s defense or intelligence sectors.⁶⁰

CAATSA Sanctions on Turkey		JINSA
Entity or Individual	Sanctions	
Presidency of Defense Industries (<i>Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı</i> – SSB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Export Ban: No U.S. export licenses (DDTC, BIS, DOE) • Credit Restriction: No U.S. loans/credits >\$10M annually • Ex-Im Bank Ban: No U.S. Export-Import Bank support • IFIs Opposition: U.S. must oppose international loans to SSB 	
Dr. Ismail Demir, <i>president of SSB</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset Freeze: U.S. assets blocked; 50%+ owned entities also blocked • Transaction Ban: U.S. persons prohibited from dealings • Visa Ban: Travel to U.S. restricted 	
Faruk Yigit, <i>vice president of SSB</i>		
Serhat Gencoglu, <i>Head, SSB Air Defense & Space</i>		
Mustafa Alper Deniz, <i>Program Manager, SSB Regional Air Defense</i>		

Source: U.S. Department of State⁶¹

Despite the mandatory nature of CAATSA’s provisions, the Trump administration initially delayed enforcement against Turkey, hoping diplomatic pressure might persuade Ankara to reverse its S-400 decision. However, bipartisan congressional pressure mounted as Turkey proceeded with the acquisition. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021 included language under Section 1241 instructing the president to impose CAATSA sanctions against Turkey within 30 days.⁶² In December 2020—more than a year after the initial S-400 deliveries—then-Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo finally announced CAATSA sanctions on Turkey’s Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB), the state institution responsible for military procurement.⁶³ The sanctions package included:

- A ban on all U.S. export licenses and authorizations to SSB;
- Asset freezes on key SSB officials, including its president, İsmail Demir;
- Visa restrictions on senior personnel; and
- Prohibition of U.S. loans or credits exceeding \$10 million to SSB.

While CAATSA imposed targeted sanctions on Turkey’s procurement bureaucracy, Section 1245 of the FY20 NDAA established a more comprehensive prohibition on F-35 transfers to Turkey. The provision, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in December 2019, codified the Pentagon’s administrative suspension as binding law:

None of the funds authorized to be appropriated or otherwise made available for the Department of Defense may be used to—

1. Transfer, facilitate the transfer of, or authorize the transfer of any F-35 aircraft or related support equipment or parts to Turkey;
2. Transfer intellectual property, technical data, or material support necessary for the maintenance or support of the F-35;
3. Construct a storage facility for, or otherwise facilitate the storage in Turkey of, any F-35 aircraft transferred to Turkey.⁶⁴

The legislation established specific conditions under which this prohibition could be lifted. The Secretaries of State and Defense, acting jointly, could waive the restriction only if they certified to Congress that:

- Turkey no longer possessed the S-400 system or associated personnel and equipment;
- Turkey had provided “credible assurances” that it would not re-engage with Russia for similar acquisitions; and
- Turkey had not, since July 2019, accepted other Russian defense hardware that might compromise the F-35’s systems.⁶⁵

E. Turkey’s Ongoing Quest to Rejoin the JSF Program

Despite its exclusion from the F-35 program, Turkey has made several attempts to negotiate its way back without abandoning the S-400 system. In February 2021, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar proposed a “Crete model” compromise—referring to Cyprus’s sale of its S-300 system to Greece, which it keeps in storage on the island of Crete. Akar stated: “Whatever the model used for the S-300 on Crete, we’re open to negotiating [on the S-400].”⁶⁶ The United States, however, rejected this overture.⁶⁷

As negotiations failed to take off on the Crete model, Turkey pivoted to securing F-16 upgrades. In October 2021, Ankara requested 40 new F-16 Block 70 fighters and 79 modernization kits at an estimated cost of \$6 billion.⁶⁸ By July 2023, following Turkey’s approval of Sweden’s NATO bid,

President Joe Biden endorsed the F-16 sale, though officials maintained that the F-35 prohibition would remain in place.

In August 2024, Turkey renewed efforts to rejoin the F-35 program. According to Turkey's *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, Ankara proposed purchasing approximately 24 F-35A/B aircraft while keeping the S-400 system "boxed" and subject to American inspection.⁶⁹ The timing coincided with Greece moving forward with its own F-35 acquisition program.⁷⁰ In November 2024, Defense Minister Yasar Guler confirmed during a parliamentary hearing that Turkey had formally resubmitted a request to purchase F-35 fighters.⁷¹

With President Donald Trump beginning his second term in 2025, discussions between Washington and Ankara recommenced. President Erdoğan directly appealed to Trump to readmit Turkey into the F-35 program and remove all CAATSA sanctions during a March 2025 phone call.⁷² Following their call, sources indicated Trump was open to reinstating Turkey, provided the United States and Turkey could reach an agreement on rendering the S-400 system inoperable.⁷³ However, bipartisan congressional resistance to this potential arrangement remains strong. Representative Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) warned that "Turkey's involvement in the F-35 program presents a conflict of interests, not to mention U.S. law, that could jeopardize both the program's success and the broader security of NATO nations." Similarly, Representative Chris Pappas (D-NH) asserted that unless Turkey disposes of the S-400 completely, "there is no circumstance under which the U.S. should consider readmitting them or lifting the CAATSA sanctions rightfully placed on them."⁷⁴

F. Turkey's Pursuit of F-35 Alternatives

Turkish officials have made clear that if Ankara is unable to purchase U.S.-made F-16s or rejoin the F-35 program, it will explore alternative fighter jet options—including the Eurofighter Typhoon, Russian and Chinese platforms, and the indigenously produced KAAAN.

i. Foreign-Sourced Fighters

In September 2022, Erdoğan told reporters as talks of F-16 sales stalled: "The US is not the only one selling war planes in the world. The U.K., France and Russia sell them as well."⁷⁵ Days later, Turkey's then-presidential spokesperson, İbrahim Kalın, told a Turkish TV station: "We have negotiations with Europe regarding Eurofighter ... Turkey will never be without alternatives."⁷⁶ In a November 2023 parliamentary hearing, Defense Minister Yaşar Güler said, "We want to purchase the Eurofighter, it is a very effective aircraft."⁷⁷ However, as Turkish frustration grew when procurement of the Eurofighter subsequently stalled, Erdoğan said: "If [the Europeans] give us these planes, they give them. If not, do we lack doors to knock on? No, we have many... we are taking steps to permanently meet our needs."⁷⁸

In the absence of Western options, Turkish officials have signaled interest in non-Western suppliers. In 2019, Erdoğan attended the Russian MAKS air show alongside Vladimir Putin and toured the Su-57 stealth fighter, fueling speculation about potential Russian procurement. Erdoğan, when asked if the Su-57 could be an alternative to the F-35, said: "Why not? We did not travel to Moscow for nothing."⁷⁹ Additionally, one of Erdoğan's senior security advisors, Çağrı Erhan, stated in early 2023 that "Turkey should immediately make a decision to change its decision from F-16 to some other. For instance, F-35

was on the table. Turkey was expecting from the program [to get F-35]. Now we have other options like the Chinese jet, which was sold to Pakistan, Russian jets and also Eurofighter jet.”⁸⁰

ii. Turkey’s KAAN Fighter

Turkey is actively developing its own fifth-generation fighter jet, the KAAN, as part of a broader strategy to achieve defense self-sufficiency. The KAAN program, which Turkey initiated in 2011, is led by Turkish Aerospace Industries and the United Kingdom’s BAE Systems, as part of a \$125 million deal signed in 2017.⁸¹ The KAAN program achieved a major milestone with its maiden flight in February 2024 and is projected to enter service by 2030.⁸² Turkish Aerospace Industries plans to deliver 20 aircraft by 2028 and as many as 250 units by 2040.⁸³ Turkey’s aim is for production to be entirely self-sufficient, with Turkish Aerospace Industries currently developing an indigenous engine system. However, the aircraft’s prototypes are currently using the American-manufactured F-110 engines, and the Turkish government has asked the United States for permission to co-produce the engines for the initial batch of deliveries.⁸⁴

The KAAN is reportedly designed as a twin-engine, stealth-enabled aircraft with a maximum airspeed of Mach 1.8, a service ceiling of 55,000 feet, and a payload capacity of up to 10 tons.⁸⁵ By comparison, the F-35 is a single-engine platform with a maximum airspeed of approximately Mach 1.6, a service ceiling of 50,000 feet, and a payload capacity of 9 tons.⁸⁶ While Turkey has promoted the KAAN as a competitor to the F-35, skepticism remains as its capabilities remain unproven, particularly in replicating the F-35’s seamless integration of advanced avionics, sensor fusion, and low-observable technologies. Many of KAAN’s most critical subsystems, including radar, mission software, and electronic warfare components, remain under development or rely on foreign suppliers, raising questions about the program’s ability to deliver a true fifth-generation platform with independent, end-to-end capability.⁸⁷

III. Recommendations

Should Turkey be stronger? That has been a central question for U.S. policy in the more than seven decades of the post-World War II U.S.-Turkish alliance. Quite often during the Cold War struggle against global Communism, the answer for Washington was “yes,” even when Ankara was reluctant to seek a bigger role on the world stage.

In the last two decades, however, the tables have turned. Since coming to power, Erdoğan has aspired to make Turkey into a regional power, pursuing an activist and muscular foreign policy. More often than not, this has not been a welcome development for the United States. Too frequently, when Erdoğan’s Turkey has acted, it has acted contrary to U.S. interests and preferences.⁸⁸

But while Washington might now prefer a quietist Turkey, it must accept that it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Having backed the forces that overthrew Bashar al-Assad, Ankara now has more influence than anyone else in Syria. Influence that it is already seeking to translate into an expanded military footprint. Combined with Turkey’s increased relevance and presence everywhere from the Black Sea and the Caucasus to the Gulf and Horn of Africa and Central Asia, not to mention its growing

defense industrial base, Turkish leaders have ample reason to believe that they are finally making good on their vision of Turkey as a regional, or even global, power. Nor is this Erdoğan's vision alone; polling suggests that a majority of Turks want their country to be a more prominent international actor.⁸⁹

Faced with this reality, the question confronting the United States is not whether Turkey should be strong but whether that strength can be aligned with, or will be directed against, U.S. interests and partners. It is in this light that U.S. policymakers should evaluate Turkey's request for re-entry into the F-35 program: Turkey will be a major regional actor with or without the F-35, but, by providing Ankara with access to the advanced jet, can Washington have some impact on how it acts?

A. Better Safe Than Sorry

There are many good reasons to be dubious of the wisdom of granting Turkey's request. Most obviously, Turkey's history with the F-35. This F-35 saga is but one example of Turkey not working in concert with U.S. interests over many years. Recent history is replete with others—particularly regarding Russia, Israel, Syria, and the Eastern Mediterranean—that demonstrate that Erdoğan's Islamist, anti-Western worldview and his desire to pursue an unaligned foreign policy put him frequently at odds with U.S. policy. One such example is his recent prayer that “Allah...destroy and devastate Zionist Israel.”⁹⁰ This divergence in interests and values alike is further highlighted by Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism, as recently manifested in the arrest of a likely political rival, Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.⁹¹

Nor can these divergences be attributed solely, as Turkish officials often do, to American refusals to accommodate Turkish interests. If the rift in U.S.-Turkish relations was only a matter of broken trust, if it needed only Washington to make an opening show of good faith to repair, then surely the Biden administration's 2023 agreement to sell Turkey upgraded and new F-16s should have paved the way to mended ties and Turkish reciprocity. Instead, Erdoğan pocketed that U.S. concession and immediately escalated his rhetoric and actions against Israel—including cutting off trade, ending diplomatic relations, and calling for Israel's destruction.⁹²

Rather than bringing Turkish behavior closer into line with U.S. interests, selling Turkey the F-35 now would reward and reinforce these problematic behaviors. As Turkey becomes stronger, it will be likely to pursue a foreign policy that is more independent and divergent from U.S. interests, not less so. Already, Turkey's regional power is growing as it has capitalized on Israel's weakening of Iran's regional terror network to back its Islamist proxies in their bid for power in Damascus. Now, in return for its support, Ankara reportedly seeks from the new Syrian regime basing rights, a defense pact, and recognition of its maritime claims.⁹³

This not only sets up Turkey to fill the regional vacuum filled by Iran's collapsing “ring of fire” but creates an increased risk that Turkey's exercise of its new-found power will bring it into friction with U.S. partners in the skies and waters of Syria (Israel and the Syrian Democratic Forces) and the Eastern Mediterranean (Greece and Cyprus). Armed with the F-35, Turkey is likely to feel empowered to act

even more assertively in these arenas. And with Israel already flying the F-35 and Greece soon to get it, any clash between them and Turkey could be all the more deadly and costly.

Nor, once Turkey has the F-35, would that jet be the only weapons system that the United States and its other partners would have to be concerned about. As one senior commander of an air force that flies the F-35 told us, the F-35 is a “system of systems” that integrates with and amplifies the ability of other platforms. As Israel demonstrated over the last 18 months, and in particular defending against Iran’s drone, cruise missile, and ballistic missile attack on the night of April 13, 2024, the F-35’s advanced stealth, radar, and communication systems make other air assets, like the F-16, more capable as well as expanding the effectiveness of ground power.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, even if Turkey got rid of the S-400, its willingness to work with U.S. competitors like Russia and China means that there would be real risks of the F-35’s proprietary technology being stolen or compromised. It is these same concerns over the possibility of intellectual property theft due to Chinese military presence and relations that led the Biden administration to freeze the sale of 50 F-35s to the United Arab Emirates, despite the U.S. pledge in the Abraham Accords not to oppose the sale of “specific U.S.-made weapon systems” to the Gulf state.⁹⁵

We also remain unswayed by arguments that Turkey will be able to acquire F-35-equivalent fighters if not from the United States then from elsewhere—Europe, Russia, China, or even by building one itself. Nor do we find the corollary convincing, that, therefore, the United States is better off selling Turkey the F-35 because otherwise, it risks losing influence in Ankara yet dealing with a Turkey with the same advanced capabilities regardless. There simply is no other jet currently in production that compares to the F-35. Nor is it likely that Turkey will be able to develop one indigenously. Its KAAN fighter depends on American engines and is highly unlikely to come close to the advanced sensors and other technologies aboard the F-35.

i. Don’t Grant Access to the F-35...

That is why we ultimately recommend that the United States not let Turkey back into the F-35 program at this time.

ii. ...But Offer Alternatives

Yet, the United States should at the same time make clear to Turkey that it is interested in both supporting its legitimate security needs while rebuilding trust. That process of repairing relations should proceed slowly, with small steps, not grand gestures. To that end, the United States should offer Turkey other, less potentially problematic but equally useful, weapons systems. For example, this could include expanding the number of new F-16s that Turkey can purchase or, if it removes the S-400, once again offering Turkey the Patriot missile defense system.

B. Grant F-35 Re-Entry, With Strict Conditions

Despite the concerns about Ankara’s behavior, it remains true that Turkish and American interests align in a number of important areas. In the long-term, and in the face of growing coordination between Russia, Iran, and China, having a strong Turkey as a cooperative and trustworthy partner

would be highly beneficial to the United States. As such, finding ways to improve the bilateral relationship with Turkey and increase American leverage on Turkey long-term should be an important priority for the United States.

Turkey's support for Ukraine—while maintaining economic relations with Russia—has been crucial for Ukraine's war effort. Ukraine credits Turkey's closure of the Turkish straits to Russian warships in the Mediterranean in 2022 with saving the Ukrainian cities of Odesa and Mykolaiv from Russian attacks.⁹⁶ In the early phases of the war, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) purchased from Turkey played a critical role in Ukraine's war effort.⁹⁷ Subsequently, Ukraine has procured infantry fighting vehicles and ADA-class corvettes equipped with advanced anti-aircraft systems from Turkey.⁹⁸ Since President Trump embarked on his effort to end the Russia-Ukraine war, Turkey has stepped up its diplomatic support for Ukraine: it has emphasized the imperative of returning to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders; doubled down on its endorsement of Ukrainian NATO membership; and offered to provide security guarantees in case of a peace deal.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Turkey has turned increasingly against Iran. The two countries have fought a proxy war in Syria for most of the past decade, one that ended to Turkey's advantage in no small part thanks to Israel's decimation of Iran's proxy Hezbollah.¹⁰⁰ This proxy war extended to the South Caucasus, where Turkey actively helped its ally, Azerbaijan, restore control over territory occupied for three decades by Iranian-backed Armenia; Turkey also held large military exercises on the Azerbaijan-Iran border in response to Iranian threats to its ally.¹⁰¹ While Turkish officials have tended to downplay public enmity with Iran, more recently Turkish leaders have been more outspoken in warning Iran against supporting Kurdish insurgents in Turkey.¹⁰²

Finally, Turkey has actively worked to balance Russia both in Central Asia and Africa. In Central Asia, Turkey has shown its willingness to develop military and intelligence cooperation with these critical states stuck between Russia and China.¹⁰³ Turkish engagement in Africa is less pronounced, but it is providing an alternative to Russia's Wagner group for embattled African governments fighting jihadist insurgencies.¹⁰⁴ These Turkish activities are in line with American priorities and could be even more effective with improved coordination.

If Washington and Ankara find a way to allow Turkey back into the F-35 program, this could play an important role in beginning to improve U.S. relations with Turkey by removing a key irritant in the relationship and allowing the two to find areas of cooperation. Similarly, refusing Turkey the F-35 would risk exacerbating its worst tendencies to align against the United States. Realistically, the best chance that the United States has of trying to influence Turkey to act, at least in select instances, cooperatively, is to use what leverage it has with Ankara rather than ignoring or abandoning the partnership altogether. It is possible that such considerations are behind the Trump administration's reasoning in its reported willingness to consider Turkey's request.

Still, Turkey put itself in this position by purchasing the Russian S-400 system and has to meet Washington more than halfway in order for the United States to take such a step. Recent Turkish foreign policy, particularly with regard to Israel, suggests the United States should be exceedingly

cautious in contemplating letting Turkey back into the F-35 program. It should do so only if Ankara first agrees convincingly to conditions that might build some confidence in its intentions for the platform and help bring at least the most salient aspects of its foreign policy into closer proximity to U.S. interests. These conditions should include:

i. Require Turkey to Remove S-400s

The United States is legally prevented from allowing Turkey into the F-35 program until it “no longer possesses” the S-400 and “has provided credible assurances” that it will not buy it again in the future. The Trump administration should demand that Turkey live up to the letter of this law; Ankara has shown no signs of good faith that would warrant waiving or diluting it.

This means that the proposals that Turkey has recently floated for resolving the S-400 issue—removing components so as to make the system inoperable but leaving it in Turkey—should be non-starters. That being said, U.S. negotiators should also seek a solution that allows Turkey to not appear to have merely conceded to U.S. demands and possibly even recoup some of the system’s purchase price.

The best way to accomplish this remains the “Crete model.” Cyprus’s purchase of the Russian S-300 air defense system in 1997 sparked Turkish threats to attack if it were put into operation. To de-escalate the crisis, Cyprus sold the system to Greece, which in turn installed it on Crete where it has been used in drills.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, to address U.S. concerns, Turkey could now sell its S-400 batteries to a third country. This would fulfill the U.S. legal requirement that Turkey “no longer possesses” the Russian system.

The challenge will be to find a suitable destination for the S-400. An obvious candidate would be Ukraine, where advanced air and missile defense capabilities would greatly assist the country as it faces increased Russian aerial attacks. This, however, will likely be a non-starter for Turkey, which maintains cordial relations with Moscow. Another option that American negotiators should explore is India. The country already purchased five S-400 batteries from Russia, three of which have been delivered.¹⁰⁶ Unlike Turkey, however, the United States exempted India from sanctions for this purchase out of the understanding that it would use the Russian-made system against a U.S. competitor—China—without compromising the security of U.S. weapons systems.¹⁰⁷ It is possible, thus, that India would be an acceptable destination to Washington, Ankara, and Moscow alike for Turkey’s S-400 system.

ii. Offer Patriots, If Used Safely

If Turkey does agree to get rid of the S-400, the United States should re-extend its offer for the Patriot missile defense system. In doing so, Washington would demonstrate both its appreciation for Turkey’s continued air defense needs and its commitment to providing Ankara with American weapons. The terms of this offer should remain similar to what was proposed in 2019.

This offer, however, should require Turkey to agree to only deploy the system on its own territory. Recent reporting of Turkey’s desire to gain access to bases in Syria and forward deploy its air defenses there, coupled with rising tensions between Turkey and Israel, raises the dangerous possibility of

Turkish Patriots being used to target Israeli F-35s.¹⁰⁸ To avoid this, and the resulting impingement on Israel's freedom of action, the United States should make clear to Turkey that any Patriot batteries that it acquires could not be sent to Syria and must instead remain within Turkey.

iii. Restore Relations with Israel, Cut Support to Hamas

No issues more clearly demonstrate the wide divergence between U.S. and Turkish foreign policy—and the possible damage that an F-35-armed Turkey could do—than Erdoğan's increasingly bellicose rhetoric against Israel and long history of supporting Hamas. Turkey needs to resolve these concerns before getting the F-35.

Erdoğan's recent threats against Israel are nothing new. Although there have been periods where he has pragmatically toned down his animosity towards the Jewish state, particularly when hoping to curry favor or elicit concessions from the United States, for his more than two decades in power Erdoğan has routinely stirred antisemitic fervor at home while providing Hamas with political and financial support.

However, following Hamas's October 7 attack, and once the United States approved the F-16 sale, he became more outspoken and active against Israel than ever before. He announced Turkey would cut off trade and diplomatic ties with Israel and urged other Muslim countries to do the same.¹⁰⁹ He called Hamas a "liberation movement," suggested that Turkey might "enter" Israel, as it had Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, and prayed that Allah "destroy and devastate Zionist Israel."¹¹⁰

But this is not mere rhetoric. Under Erdoğan, Hamas has mostly been welcome in Turkey.¹¹¹ Whether through official visits of Hamas leadership or the presence of Hamas operatives moving money through the Turkish financial system, the terrorist group has a troubling presence in the country. The U.S. Treasury Department has issued sanctions in recent years against Hamas financiers operating inside of Turkey or using its financial system.¹¹²

Still, Turkey has not been impervious to pressure from Israel and the United States. In 2022, as Ankara and Jerusalem worked to mend relations, Turkey expelled a number of Hamas operatives from its territory.¹¹³ Again in October 2023, following the Hamas atrocities in Israel, Ankara quietly asked Ismail Haniyeh and other top Hamas officials to leave Turkey.¹¹⁴ It is also known that Turkish and Israeli intelligence services have maintained channels of communication throughout.

As Israel and the United States work to end Hamas's control of Gaza, financial and other forms of support flowing to the group from Turkey could undermine that goal and contribute to increased violence in the West Bank. Meanwhile, if it continues unchecked, Erdoğan's rhetoric could bring these two U.S. partners into greater tension.

Before it is allowed back into the F-35 program, therefore, the United States should require that Turkey end support for Hamas. This should mean not just breaking off any official relations with the group, but also imposing controls to make sure its financial system is not being used to move money to the terrorist group and that its territory is not being used for Hamas fund-raising or other forms of

support. The United States should also publicly call for Turkey to normalize diplomatic and economic relations with Israel while privately urging Erdoğan to tone down his rhetoric.

iv. Deconflict with Israel over Syria

Near collisions and accidental shootdowns have been a regular occurrence in Syria's contested airspace for the last fifteen years. Today, despite the end of Syria's civil war, its skies remain congested, and the potential for mistakes is high, particularly between Turkey and Israel. A robust deconfliction mechanism is needed to mitigate the potential for any collision between these American partners, especially if both will be flying the F-35.

Ankara seeks to translate its support for the opposition forces that now rule in Damascus into lasting influence in Syria and the ability to project power even further. To this end, it has reportedly sought to take control of the T4 airbase near Palmyra, with plans to deploy first air defense batteries and eventually surveillance and armed drones.¹¹⁵

Israel, meanwhile, has been conducting frequent strikes in Syria ever since the Turkish-backed offensive began. By seeking out and destroying Syrian military capabilities—including ground, air, and air defense assets as well as reported chemical weapons facilities—Israel is both trying to deprive the new Syrian regime of the means to threaten the Jewish state and clear the airspace between it and Iran's nuclear facilities.¹¹⁶

Turkish and Israeli forces operating in close proximity already by itself raises the potential for accidents. The long-simmering and now growing tensions between the two nations only make the situation more combustible. In recognition of this, on April 9, Turkish and Israeli officials began preliminary discussions mediated by Azerbaijan on deconfliction in Syria. Both countries have confirmed that the meetings, held in Baku, focus on establishing mechanisms to prevent inadvertent clashes between their respective forces operating in northern and western Syria.¹¹⁷ While the talks have not yet resulted in a formal agreement, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan indicated the idea is to have a deconfliction mechanism with Israel similar to the one Turkey has with the United States and Russia.¹¹⁸ Israeli officials have emphasized that any coordination will be contingent on maintaining Israel's red lines in Syria, particularly opposing Turkish establishment of bases in the Tadmor area.¹¹⁹ The Turkish Foreign Ministry indicated the talks are not “a step toward normalization,” but Fidan has indicated Turkey has “no intention of conflict in Syria...with Israel.”¹²⁰

These talks represent significant progress toward managing possible tensions over Syria. But, ideally, there should be a more fulsome mechanism for doing so than a mere hotline, which is what was used between adversaries and competitors in Syria. Indeed, the necessity of working together in Syria could start the long process of rebuilding confidence between the two powers.

As a condition of the F-35 sale, therefore, the United States should take the lead in establishing a robust deconfliction mechanism between the Turkish and Israeli air forces to make sure that they stay out of each other's way over Syria. Because both countries are U.S. partners, Washington should encourage them to participate in an arrangement that is more robust than the hotline that has been

discussed in the Azerbaijan-mediated talks. While unlikely and unnecessary that either would ever share a full common air picture with each other, the United States already has the experience and capabilities that would allow it to receive and share securely relevant data for aircraft operating over Syria. Access to this data and deconfliction of planned operations or any incidents that do occur would be further enabled by U.S., Turkish, and Israeli personnel being co-located in a U.S. facility. It would be a show of good faith if Turkey agreed to host such a mechanism at its Incirlik airbase, where the United States has already deployed forces.

v. Respect Greek and Cypriot Territory

In addition to its condemnations of Israel, Erdoğan's Turkey has had a troubling history of incursions into Greek and Cypriot airspace and territorial waters. In part, these actions are driven by disagreements about where, exactly, in the air and water of the Eastern Mediterranean the various territorial boundaries of these countries lie. However, Turkey has already shown a willingness to reduce tensions with its Mediterranean neighbors, particularly when the United States insists on it. Washington should urge further progress on this front as a condition for letting Turkey back into the F-35 program.

Following then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken's public confirmation that the Biden administration supported a possible sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Turkey, congressional concerns emerged about Turkish overflights of Greek territory. In July 2022, the House passed a version of the FY2023 NDAA that included a provision (Section 1271) that would have conditioned F-16-related transfers on a presidential certification detailing U.S. efforts to prevent Turkey's "repeated unauthorized territorial overflights of Greece."¹²¹ This provision, however, was not included in the final version of the NDAA enacted in December 2022.¹²² While the joint explanatory statement accompanying the final law reaffirmed that "NATO allies should not conduct unauthorized territorial overflights of another NATO ally's airspace," the absence of binding language meant no formal restriction on Turkish overflights was enacted into law.¹²³

Turkey got the message, however. It has continued incursions into Greek airspace since December 2022, albeit at a reduced scale. Greece reported that Turkey violated its airspace more than 10,000 times in 2022 alone.¹²⁴ According to the Greek newspaper *eKathimerini*, Turkish violations decreased over the past 18 months, coinciding with a diplomatic rapprochement between the two countries.¹²⁵ However, in January 2025, a Turkish F-16 violated Greek airspace, marking the first fighter jet incursion since 2023, as other recent violations had been conducted primarily by propeller-driven reconnaissance aircraft.¹²⁶ Days later, on February 4, a Turkish CN-235 allegedly violated Greek airspace on two occasions.¹²⁷

To minimize the potential for future friction and drive down already decreasing Turkish incursions, the United States should urge Turkey to abstain from violating internationally recognized Greek airspace and from harassing operations related to the Euro-Asia Interconnector and natural gas exploration, extraction, and liquefaction within the territorial waters and EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus. This could be done through private undertakings.

C. Ensure Israel's Qualitative Military Edge

Regardless of whether Turkey is admitted into the F-35 program at this time, its request for this weapon while seeking an expanded military presence in Syria and making threats against Israel reveals that the United States must seriously consider the possibility of greater friction between these two partners. For that reason, we recommend that U.S. lawmakers consider requiring that at least some high-end weapons sales to Turkey do not erode Israel's QME.

The United States already maintains a statutory obligation to preserve QME with regard to Middle Eastern countries. Codified in the Naval Vessel Transfer Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-429) and strengthened through amendments to the Arms Export Control Act, QME is defined as Israel's ability "to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat while sustaining minimal damages and casualties."¹²⁸ This requirement mandates a quadrennial QME assessment and requires the administration to certify to Congress, before finalizing major arms sales to any Middle Eastern state, that such transfers will not adversely impact Israel's security position. In practice, the policy has resulted in providing Israel early access to advanced U.S. systems, offering Israel customized variants of platforms with enhanced capabilities, and balancing sales to Arab states with offsetting military aid to Israel. QME determinations occur through a classified interagency process between the State Department and the Department of Defense. However, because in both the State and Defense Departments' bureaucratic division of the globe Turkey is considered a European country, as well as its historic good relations with Israel, the QME requirement does not currently apply to Turkey.

With the regional situation evolving, Congress should consider passing a version of a current provision of the Arms Export Control Act that would be applicable to at least some high-end weapons sales to Ankara and require an Executive Branch determination that they not adversely affect Israel's qualitative military edge.

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