

The S-400 Transfer and the Erosion of American Leverage in the Gulf

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Hussein Mansour
Gemunder Center Fellow

On July 10, the pro-government Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* [reported](#) that Ankara was seeking to finalize the sale of its Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to a Persian Gulf country. While Qatar gets mentioned by some sources as a possible purchaser, the most frequently discussed candidate is the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.).

The news raises multiple questions. Turkey bought the S-400 in defiance of U.S. warnings about the harm it would cause the relationship and then withstood years of American pleading and sanctions, refusing to get rid of the problematic defense system. Why would it get rid of it now? What about the role of Russia? Did it consent to such a transfer and, if so, why?

Most important, however, is the question of why the U.A.E. would accept the S-400. After all, the S-400 has been a source of contention between the United States and one of its partners, signaling its lack of alignment with Washington and creating an obstacle to it acquiring F-35 jets. To transfer the S-400 from a problematic U.S. ally, Turkey, to a solid partner that has previously also sought to buy the F-35, the U.A.E., would seem merely to be passing the hot potato, repairing one relationship only to possibly taint another. Why, then, would the U.A.E. agree to take the S-400 off Turkey's hands?

If the transfer does go through, all the countries involved will likely have agreed to it for the same reasons: they all think they are going to get something from it. Turkey wants the F-35; Russia is looking for concessions from Turkey and to improve relations with the U.A.E.; and the U.A.E. may think the S-400 will help bolster its defenses against Iranian missiles.

None of these trades, however, will benefit the United States. Undoing damage that it did to its relationship with the United States is not the same as Turkey proving it can be trusted with the most advanced American jet. Further Russian inroads with Turkey and/or the Gulf will only weaken U.S. influence in the region. So, too, will incorporating more Russian defense systems into the Emirati military.

There are, however, ways for Turkey to get rid of the S-400 that would support U.S. interests. The U.A.E. could accept it, not to use but to study and provide its technical details to the U.S. military. Alternatively, India could represent a less problematic destination.

Why Would Turkey Transfer the S-400 Now?

Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 system has been a major irritant in the U.S.-Turkish relationship for almost a decade. It is also the source of U.S. sanctions on Turkey and a legal prohibition on selling F-35s to Ankara, as JINSA has previously [detailed](#).

The news that Turkey is finally looking to get rid of the S-400, after withstanding years of U.S. pressure and sanctions, is likely a result of Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, being convinced that he will get something in return from Washington. It followed immediately from the NATO summit in Ankara on

July 7–8, where President Donald Trump [told reporters](#) alongside Erdoğan that “we’re going to be taking the sanctions off” and that selling F-35s to Turkey is “certainly something we will consider,” though he added that he had not “fully decided.”

Would Russia Agree to the S-400 Transfer?

The transfer cannot proceed without Moscow’s approval. Russian arms exports operate as a state monopoly under [Federal Law No. 114-FZ](#) of July 19, 1998, which governs military-technical cooperation with foreign states. Under this framework, importing governments must furnish an end-user certificate undertaking not to resell, re-export, or retransfer the equipment to any third party without Moscow’s prior written consent, an obligation codified in [Government Enactment No. 604](#) of October 6, 2006, which defines “designated use” as use “solely for the purposes specified in the end-user certificate” and prohibits retransfer without Russian authorization.

Ankara confirmed it is bound by these provisions. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan traveled to Kazan in June for a [meeting](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin to lay the groundwork, and has publicly [acknowledged](#) that no solution can be implemented without Moscow’s consent. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has [emphasized](#) that the contractual obligations from the 2017 acquisition prohibit Turkey from reselling or relocating the system without formal authorization. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [called](#) the matter “extremely sensitive” and confirmed that contacts with Turkey would continue, and the Kremlin, via its spokesman, [stated](#) that Russia views the proposal favorably, though a decision by Putin is still required.

Why Would the U.A.E. Accept the S-400?

The simplest answer is that the U.A.E. is looking to bolster its air defenses. Operation Epic Fury’s impact on the U.A.E. was disproportionate. The Emirates absorbed more Iranian fire than any other Gulf state during the war. The U.A.E. [engaged](#) hundreds of ballistic missiles, over two thousand drones, and dozens of cruise missiles in the weeks following the February 28 strikes, triggering one of the country’s largest air defense operations. Iranian missiles and drones struck locations across the Emirates, including Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The existing THAAD and Patriot batteries performed their ballistic intercept function, but the volume and diversity of the fire pose a major challenge. The S-400 is capable of providing long-range protection against aircraft, cruise missiles, and certain ballistic threats at ranges and altitudes that complement rather than duplicate THAAD’s terminal-phase and Patriot’s medium-range coverage. *Hürriyet* noted explicitly that both the U.A.E. and Qatar began seeking alternative air defense systems as a direct consequence of the U.S.-Iran war.

Implications for the United States

Allowing Turkey to trade the S-400 for F-35s and ending up with the Russian system instead deployed in the U.A.E. would leave the United States worse off strategically than it is right now.

Turkey

[The transfer](#) of the S-400 would clear the legal obstacle to Ankara’s return to the F-35 program. But it would merely be removing one of many irritants in the relationship, not least of which are Erdoğan’s animosity toward Israel and support for Hamas. As [JINSA has argued previously](#), there is little reason to believe that Erdoğan is prepared to abandon years of foreign policy that not just have run counter to U.S. interests but at times directly threatened U.S. forces and partners and use the F-35 responsibly. Instead, providing him with this advanced weapon could further fuel Turkey’s expansionist regional ambitions.

Russia

Moscow’s willingness to consider the transfer is transactional. Russian and Turkish [sources stated](#) that negotiations over the resale to the U.A.E. have been continuing for months, and a Russian source de-

scribed Moscow's response as "why not?" while stipulating that Putin's personal decision remains the deciding factor. Three considerations appear to govern the Kremlin's calculus. First, Turkey's crucial gas deal with Russia has not been renewed, and Moscow could condition S-400 consent on energy concessions—the systems functioning as a bargaining chip in negotiations that matter more to the Kremlin than Gulf air defense. Second, Moscow armed Iran during the war while Iranian missiles struck the Emirates, and a European source [explained that](#) there are "underlying tensions" between Russia and the U.A.E. over this—consenting to the sale could function as a partial hedge against the damage that alignment with Tehran has inflicted on Russia's Gulf relationships.

U.A.E.

The U.A.E.'s decision to pursue the S-400 reflects, and could reinforce, a judgment that the Gulf state's security requires diversifying away from the United States. The Biden administration froze the [\\$23 billion F-35 sale](#) to Abu Dhabi in 2021. The Trump administration did not unfreeze it. The war came, the U.A.E. absorbed more Iranian fire than any other Gulf state, and afterward—when the operational case for arming Abu Dhabi was stronger than it had ever been—Washington still did not deliver. The U.A.E. already operates Russian-origin Pantsir systems and has been [diversifying](#) its weapons procurement across multiple suppliers for years. Under U.S. law, operating the S-400 is functionally incompatible with receiving the F-35: the same legal requirements that expelled Turkey from the program apply to any state that fields the Russian system. That the U.A.E. is proceeding regardless signals a strategic judgment that diverse air defense procurement from available suppliers has been prioritized over an American platform.

Moving the S-400 from Turkey to the U.A.E. does not remove Russian sensor capability from the region; it [relocates it](#) into direct proximity to American military infrastructure at Al Dhafra Air Base, the principal U.S. air operations hub in the Gulf. The S-400's radar systems are capable of detecting and tracking stealth aircraft operating within or adjacent to the host nation's airspace—the very concern that led to Turkey's expulsion from the F-35 program.

The deepest consequence is for American coercive leverage in the Gulf. During the [Project Freedom basing dispute](#), Washington threatened to withhold interceptor deliveries, and Riyadh reversed course within days. That leverage presupposes an American monopoly on the air defense systems Gulf states cannot do without. The S-400 transfer breaks the monopoly. It establishes a procurement channel that routes Russian-origin air defense to the Gulf through a Turkish intermediary, outside American sanctions exposure—since the transaction is Turkey-U.A.E. rather than Russia-U.A.E.—and with Washington's own cooperation in clearing the legal path.

The Abraham Accords promised that alignment with Israel would enhance Gulf security. The most committed Accords signatory has now concluded that diversification of their air defense beyond American platforms is in their best strategic interest. Every subsequent diversification of Gulf air defense procurement through non-American channels may end up reducing the marginal value of the American security guarantee and strengthening the Saudi case that sovereignty-centered arrangements deliver what the Accords could not. Confirmation of the buyer and the terms of the deal should be tracked as a leading indicator of which direction the Gulf's security architecture is moving.

What Else Can Be Done With Turkey's S-400?

Two better options exist rather than the U.A.E. receiving the S-400 for integration into its own air defenses. The first, which JINSA has previously called for, would see Turkey transfer the S-400 to India, not the U.A.E. New Delhi has already purchased five S-400 batteries from Russia and received a U.S. exemption 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. It is possible, thus,

that India would be an acceptable destination to Washington, Ankara, and Moscow alike for Turkey's S-400 system.

Alternatively, the transfer to the U.A.E. could proceed, but with the S-400 intended for technical study and training, not defensive use. There is precedent for such a move, with Cyprus getting rid of its Russian S-300 air defense batteries in 1998 in order to defuse tensions with, ironically, Turkey. It sent the system to Greece, which placed the system on Crete, where it has been used for training by air forces likely to confront the S-300 in combat, including Israel.

Either of these options, in addition to placing additional conditions on any F-35 sale to Turkey, would avoid undermining U.S. leverage in the Gulf and even strengthen its defense partnerships. Moreover, if such a transfer proceeds without U.S. influence on the outcome, this will further contribute to the sense of an eroding American security order in the Gulf.