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Time for Shopping: Qatar Boosts Air-Power

Qatar boosts its air-power. Doha has become the world's third biggest importer of arms: the Qatari import has risen by 282% between 2012-2016, with particular regard to the air force.

The Al-Thani's emirate cultivates a diversification of weapons providers: France, United Kingdom, Italy (Fincantieri), United States, Russia and China. Qatar's arms race has intensified in the second half of 2017.

On 7 December, Qatar and France signed a letter of intent: Doha decided to exercise an option for further 12 Rafale fighter jets, so enhancing its total acquisition to 36, on the basis of a contract signed last May.

Qatar and the UK finalized a four-parts deal in December: the Qatari emirate will buy 24 Typhoon fighter jets from London, with delivery expected since late 2022. The agreement encompasses also the creation of a QEAF/RAF joint operational squadron (for future joint operations), a modern electronic warfare system and a training package.

Besides the planned acquisition of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense system and the Patriot missile system, the United States' Department of Defense conferred to Boeing a contract regarding the F-15 Qatar program. Washington will procure 36 new F-15QA (an advanced version) for the Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF).

On October 2017, Qatar and Russia signed a military-technical cooperation agreement, plus a Memorandum of Understanding on air defence and military supplies. [Reuters, "Qatar, Russia sign agreements on air defense, supplies", October 26, 2017].

During the 2017 National Day Parade, held in Doha on 15 December, the Qatari army unveiled a new ballistic missile system, probably a modified China-made SY-400 short-range (400 km), whose sale was

not of public knowledge so far [Ankit Panda, “Qatar parades new Chinese short-range ballistic missile system”, The Diplomat, December 19, 2017].

Qatar has been investing in air power for two combined reasons. Given the fall of the so-called Caliphate as state entity, countries like the United States, the UK and France will likely reduce their presence at the Qatari Al-Udeid air base, so diminishing indirectly the external protection level of the emirate.

On the other hand, the GCC rift (Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates-Bahrain vs Qatar) remains open, with no political settlement in sight. Qatar perceives the need to develop consistent air capabilities, in terms of hardware equipment as well as technical and operative skills.

Recent Doha’s agreements for military procurement include support and training services, in order to build a national, Qatari expertise: training is also at the core of the recently established Turkish military base in the country. The building of local military know-how is a rising trend in all the Arab Gulf region; but Qatar lacks in skilled, national air manpower if compared, for instance, with Emirati and Omani pilots.

Surely, the arms race is evident not only between Iran and the Gulf monarchies but also within the same GCC.

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