

November 11, 2013

EUROPE

Italian Sales Trip

The aircraft carrier Cavour will lead other Italian vessels to Mid-east and African ports to train and promote products. *Page 4*

4 **Turkey:** Why was corvette award killed?

NORTH AMERICA

Robo Bird

A lifelike, gliding robotic bird could one day become a surveillance tool. *Page 24*

ASIA & PACIFIC RIM

Scaring a Dictator

One factor in S. Korea's F-X III fighter competition is whether it strikes fear in the heart of North Korea's Kim Jong Un. *Page 3*

18 **Taiwan:** Aircraft deliveries finally begin.

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli Diplomatic War

Israeli leaders are bracing for potential conflict with the US administration over Iran, Palestine policies. *Page 20*

COMMENTARY

Gen. Sir Nick Houghton

Chief of the UK Defence Staff discusses the investments that will rebuild UK capabilities. *Page 29*

INTERVIEW

Adm. Robert Papp

The US Coast Guard commandant discusses the hard choices forced by budget cuts while the service attempts to bolster its ship and aircraft resources. *Page 30*



US Bid Delays Qatar Jet Competition

UAE Fighter Contest is Also Up for Grabs

By DEFENSE NEWS STAFF

DUBAI, WASHINGTON, LONDON and PARIS — Qatar's plans to select a fighter as the basis for a six-fold increase in its combat jet power have been delayed by a US request to extend the deadline for submission of request for proposals (RfP), according to executives familiar with the requirement.

Meanwhile, with politicians, senior military officers and industry leaders coming to the Dubai Airshow, which starts Nov. 17, speculation continues as to whether the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) procurement intentions will become clearer this month.

Bids to supply the Qatari Air Force with up to 72 jets were meant to be lodged with the De-



US AIR FORCE

F-15 Strike Eagle



AFF

F/A-18 Super Hornet



AFF

Rafale



AFF

Typhoon

fense Ministry in Doha in September. BAE Systems, offering its Typhoon, and Dassault Aviation, offering the Rafale, complied with

the bid schedule. The US, however, with a foreign military sales proposal involving the Boeing F/A-18 *See COMPETITIONS, Page 6*

Gulf Navies Seek Solutions to Iran Midget Sub Threat

By AWAD MUSTAFA

ABU DHABI — Iranian midget submarines are an imminent threat to maritime security in the Arabian Gulf, and regional naval leaders are looking for immediate options "within reach" to counter the threat.

That means acquiring anti-submarine weaponry in the short term and new submarines in the longer term, said Rear Adm. Ibrahim al Musharrakh, commander of United Arab Emirates (UAE) naval forces.

See IRANIAN SUBS, Page 20



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Gulf Menace: An Iranian Ghadir-class mini submarine moves into the Arabian Gulf from the southern port of Bandar Abbas last November. The head of the United Arab Emirates' Navy said Iran's mini subs pose an imminent threat to maritime security in the region.

Despite Tensions, US-GCC Military Relations Strong

By DEFENSE NEWS STAFF

DUBAI, PARIS and WASHINGTON — Despite frustration over US policies in Egypt, Syria and growing negotiations with Iran, military relations between the US and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) remain strong with nations poised to continue buying billions in hardware, officials and analysts said.

"No one in the region wants to have a bad relationship with the US; no one, and everything [American officials] want, we want," one Arabian Gulf source said. "But over and over again over the last two years [US officials] have promised too many people too many things and failed to deliver; that's the issue."

Relations have been strained this year after the US decided not to launch a punitive strike against the Syrian government, which the UN said used chemical weapons against civilians. GCC states had begun to line up behind the US for a military intervention. The US was ready to strike Syria, if not for an eleventh hour deal hashed out between Washington and Moscow to destroy Damascus' chemical weapons.

Washington's reaction to political instability in Egypt also irritated US allies in the region that supported the ouster of the Islamist Morsi government. The US has suspended some military aid and delivery of weapons to Cairo.

GCC countries also say Washington has failed to engage in a dialogue before launching diplomatic talks between the US and Iran that promise eased sanctions in exchange for Tehran renouncing nuclear weapons.

See US-GCC RELATIONS, Page 8

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COMPETITIONS

From Page 1

Super Hornet and the F-15 Strike Eagle sought, and were granted, a three-month extension.

The Pentagon is now expected to submit its offer in December after the sales effort had been slowed by what executives, who asked not to be named, said were procedural issues at the US State Department.

"It happens. I don't think it is anything suspicious; it's the Middle East; it's just US bureaucracy playing out," one executive said.

A spokeswoman for the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), the organization responsible for foreign military sales, declined to comment.

Qatar was hoping to decide on a winning contractor as soon as the end of the year, but with the process slowed by the US, naming a winning contractor has likely been delayed to at least the second quarter of 2014.

Qatar's request was for 36 jets plus 36 options to replace an aging fighter force of 12 Dassault Mirage 2000Ds and a handful of combat-capable Alpha Jet trainers.

Several industry executives said it's possible Qatar may opt to split the buy and take a similar route to Gulf Cooperation Council partners Saudi Arabia and UAE with part of the Air Force being supplied by the US and the other part by Europe.

"What I think they may well end up doing is buy 18 and 18 from two separate suppliers," one executive said. "You stand up two operational squadrons, get in the support and training infrastructure required and then exercise options to bring two further squadrons of similar aircraft."

Some executive see the procurement as part of a build up in the long-term hope of getting F-35 joint strike fighters cleared for sale to the Arabian Gulf nations.

But Richard Aboulafia, the senior aviation analyst at the Teal Group in the US, said the F-35 may not even be the right aircraft for gulf states.

"Your best use of F-35s is when you're in a serious [anti-access/area-denial] environment, and it's not really clear if that's the case with Iran. Qatar and other gulf countries are more likely to be playing a defensive game, blocking some kind of invasion, than having to penetrate airspace. In that case, you want something with heavy ordnance and good time to climb, which are not the specialties of the F-35," he said.

Aboulafia said the numbers being talked about represent an almost unprecedented expansion of air combat capabilities.

"They've got the cash and judging from their C-17 acquisition,



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

UAE Competition: Firms are bidding to sell fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates, which operates French-made Mirage 2000s and US-made F-16s.

they're starting to get very serious about high end airpower," he said. "So I wouldn't discount the prospect of a massive ramp up. The big challenges are infrastructure and pilot training," he said.

At one stage, the Qataris were looking at a much smaller procurement, but the numbers increased as the nation's ambitions to be a regional power player have soared.

One French source said he believed the weapons package being offered to Qatar on Rafale and Typhoon, particularly the MBDA Storm Shadow cruise missile, might give them the edge over their US rivals.

"One of the key factors in the competition is the weapon system," he said.

Another weapon possibly available to Qatar is the Meteor long-range air-to-air missile, boosting the European chances, he said.

The US has announced missile sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but it is far from certain, which means Qatar would get the cruise weapon.

Theodore Karasik, the director of research at the Institute of Gulf and Near East Military Analysis, said the gulf state may take a few years to decide where to put its fighter money.

"The Qataris have a number of issues. One is to wait and see what decision their Gulf Cooperation Council neighbors will take, another is the level of presence of Western air forces in the region," he said.

"Qatar has been reliant on the US presence in the region, and while there have been shifts in US military strategies in the area, there's been no real switch in presence," he said.

Qatar was once a French preserve when it came to defense equipment procurement, but Paris has lost some of its influence de-

spite continuing strong economic ties. Of late, the gulf nation has sought more diverse sources of supply.

The small but strategically important nation is in the midst of an unprecedented defense buying spree initiated prior to this year's ascension of British Army-trained Sheikh Tamin, following his father's abdication.

Karasik, though, said the leadership changeover will be unlikely to impact Qatari military procurement.

"The current emir was responsible for defense procurement for the past few years, and what we are realizing is his plan to develop the Qatari military," he said.

The gas-rich gulf nation is steadily building military capability and has recently acquired C-17 transporters from Boeing and Leopard 2 tanks and PzH 2000 howitzers from Germany's Krauss-Maffei Wegmann land systems.

Already this year, the DSCA has notified the US Congress of Qatar's intention to buy more than \$8 billion in weapons.

By contrast, the British, which are leading the Eurofighter Typhoon sales effort, have sold little military equipment to Qatar in recent years.

However, the relationship is warming, politically and economically.

Qatar has become a major investor in the UK economy and is a major energy supplier, having just inked a \$4.4 billion (US \$7 billion) gas deal with British Gas.

As for the fighter competition, Aboulafia said he had no sense of who the early favorite is, mainly because Qatar is new to fighter purchases.

"Their track record is buying European, but of course the situation has changed politically. It depends on whether they just want planes

or if they want a strategic relationship, which would definitely tip the balance towards US jets," he said.

With Qatar being the forward base for US Central Command and the Combined Air and Space Operations Center, the gulf state has pretty much relied on the US for its defense in the past.

UAE Competition

Much of the air power attention in the coming few days, though, will not be on Qatar but rather whether the UAE is ready to publicly move forward with its long running fighter procurement plans during the Dubai Airshow.

The same may also apply to a planned UAE-US government deal to sell up to 30 F-16s to add to the fleet of existing Block 60 variants already in service with the gulf state.

US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel discussed the F-16 sale during a visit to UAE in April, and industry sources said the two sides have finalized a letter of agreement, including an upgrade of the existing F-16 fleet.

There was hope of an announcement at the show, but a source said the signing is now likely to be pushed out a few months.

In response to questions, a Lockheed Martin spokesman said "Any announcement regarding purchases would be made by the government of the UAE."

The rival bidders for the UAE's new generation fighter requirement are not saying anything either, having learned the lessons of two years ago when the French tripped up after sending out signals that lengthy negotiations with the UAE to buy 60 Rafales looked like a done deal with an announcement in their favor at the show.

Dassault and the French government never got the summons from

the UAE. Two years on, the Rafale finds itself sharing the Dubai show airspace with its Typhoon and F/A-18 rivals.

The tide appears to have turned against Rafale and toward its European competitor the Typhoon, said Aleksandar Jovovic, senior associate at consulting firm Avascent, based in Washington.

The British effort is more than a simple sale of Typhoons, though. There are numerous moving parts to the negotiations that need to fall into place before any deal is concluded, several sources said.

These include work on a defense treaty, offset talks and an industrial collaboration pact that could include joint development of a medium-altitude, long-endurance UAV.

A spokesman for the government's Defence & Security Organisation export arm said he was "not prepared to comment at this stage" on the status of Britain's negotiations with the UAE.

Typhoon has already been purchased by Saudi Arabia and Oman. The Saudis are likely to buy another large batch of jets once financial and other issues with the first order for 72 aircraft are resolved.

The king of Bahrain announced during a trip to the UK this year that the island state also intends to buy the combat jet.

Kuwait is also holding a competition between the F/A-18, Rafale and Typhoon, but progress is slow.

Concerns over the US government's recent warming to Iran and inaction in Syria are seen as negative political factors that help a potential European sale into the gulf region, Jovovic said. □

Awad Mustafa in Dubai, **Aaron Mehta** in Washington, **Andrew Chuter** in London and **Pierre Tran** in Paris contributed to this report.