

# French Rafale fighter sales stoke arms race in Middle East, Asia

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As Washington escalates predatory wars in the Middle East and its “pivot to Asia” aimed at encircling China, French imperialism is pressing its inflammatory agenda in the Middle East.

Earlier this month, the French President François Hollande, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, and Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visited the oil-rich Middle East countries of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The French delegation met with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and signed an agreement to sell 24 Rafale fighter jets to Qatar for €6.3 billion (approximately US\$7 billion). According to the agreement, the French military will train 36 Qatari pilots, 100 mechanical engineers, and intelligence officers.

Hollande then participated in the summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Formed in 1981 in Abu Dhabi, the GCC brings together the Persian Gulf’s reactionary Sunni feudal monarchies including, beyond Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

After discussions with newly-installed Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Hollande told the media that France is discussing 20 projects worth tens of billions with Saudi Arabia. The deals will provide weapons and naval equipment, new contracts for French oil firm Total, transportation, and the solar and nuclear energy industries.

The Hollande government is stepping up its collaboration with the Sunni Saudi regime and other Sunni regimes of the GCC against pro-Iranian Shiite militias like the Houthis in war-torn Yemen. In Saudi Arabia, Hollande also met former Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri. The former Hadi government in Yemen collaborated with US drone strikes, killing over

1,000 people.

France is supporting Saudi Arabia as it bombs the Shiite Houthis who have taken control of large parts of Yemen, and whom the NATO powers accuse of having ties with Iran. Human rights organizations have accused Saudi-led coalition forces in Yemen of using cluster bombs, which were banned in a treaty signed by 116 countries, including France.

In Qatar, Hollande said, “We will be vigilant so that this accord truly guarantees that Iran does not get a nuclear weapon. For all these reasons I’ve been invited to the GCC summit. It’s a mark of confidence ... that France is there for its allies when it is called upon.”

As a major arms supplier to the GCC states and other Middle Eastern countries including Lebanon, French imperialism’s recent successes in selling the Rafale is turned it into a leading world supplier of fighter jets this year. The Hollande government is continuing talks on potential sales of the Rafale jet with the UAE, another GCC state, and Malaysia. Earlier this month, French Defence Minister Le Drian flew to Abu Dhabi and met Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to discuss the Rafale.

After the blood-soaked Egyptian régime of Abdel Fattah Sisi purchased 24 Rafale jets worth \$5.8 billion, the Hindu-chauvinist government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi bought 36 Rafale fighters for over \$10 billion at the end of April.

This is stoking another arms race, between India and its two main regional rivals, China and Pakistan, in the context of the US-led “pivot to Asia” designed to isolate China. Late last month, China agreed to supply Pakistan with 110 JF-17 fighter aircraft; Pakistan’s purchase is fully funded by the Chinese government. This follows a multi-billion-dollar investment deal between Pakistan and China for a China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor.

The Indian bourgeoisie, which is aligning itself ever more directly on the strategic orientation of the US “pivot” and European imperialist powers such as France, is denouncing these policies, while it furiously seeks to arm itself through ties with US and French weapons.

“China has gained a strategic beachhead in West Asia with its Iran connection. China is reaping the reward of standing by Iran. This will clearly put India on the back foot in a region which it has carefully nursed for a long time...it is the further deepening of the China-Pakistan connection that should be cause for graver concern, and Mr. Modi could seek from his Chinese host what exactly China’s intentions are. The \$46 billion promised by China for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which would link western China with the Gwadar port in Pakistan through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), by itself is worthy of India’s attention,” wrote *The Hindu* as Modi prepared to travel for talks in Beijing.

Such comments point to the escalating diplomatic and military tensions in the Middle East and Asia fueled by the “pivot,” which Paris is recklessly exacerbating with its sales of fighter jets across the region.

Already, the Middle East is engulfed in a sectarian bloodbath and violence due to wars launched by US imperialism and its European allies, such as in Syria. Under the situation, the old colonial powers such as France are pursuing an aggressive policy, despite the rising possibility of a region-wide or even global war. In Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen more than 1 million people have been killed and wounded, and millions more have fled as refugees around the world.

This is also a signal for an escalation of direct French military intervention in the region. France already inaugurated its first permanent military base, including air, navy and training camps, in Abu Dhabi—the capital of UAE—under the Sarkozy government in 2009. This base, cynically named “Camp Peace,” is expected to house 500 French troops. The air base in al-Dhafra houses the French Mirage and Rafale fighter jets, as well as refueling and patrol aircraft.

This base is strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, only 150 miles from the coast of Iran. Last March 26th, the French aircraft carrier Charles de

Gaulle and a French submarine stationed at Mina Zayed Port in Abu Dhabi conducted exercises code-named “Big Fox” with UAE forces.



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