

Washington's invisible military "kill switch"

US weapons are only partially operational

by Kamran Yeganegi*



Kamran Yeganegi.
(Picture ma)

Arab states have spent billions on US weapons, only to discover that the decisive layer of military power was never included in the sale.

Arab governments may hold legal title to some of the world's most advanced weapons, yet ownership does not confer operational sovereignty. A fighter aircraft without approved munitions, spare parts, software updates, mission data, or specialist maintenance is an expensive object on a runway.

Washington does not need a secret button to switch off an ally's arsenal. Control over the system surrounding the weapon can produce the same result gradually, selectively, and under the cover of contracts, export rules, and routine technical support.

The arsenal behind the umbrella

According to SIPRI's 2021–25 data,¹ the US supplied 54 percent of all major arms imported by states in the "Middle East." Saudi Arabia alone accounted for 6.8 percent of global arms imports, while Qatar took 6.4 percent and Kuwait 2.8 percent.

These purchases include combat aircraft, air and missile defences, precision weapons, sensors, and command systems. Each platform also binds the buyer to the supplier's technical ecosystem for years to come.

That ecosystem now forms much of the Gulf's high-end defense architecture. *Saudi Arabia's US-supplied inventory*² includes F-15 fighters, Patriot air defences, attack helicopters, and precision munitions. The *UAE operates F-16E/F fighters, Patriot batteries, and THAAD*,³ while Qatar has



US weapons: \$400,000 for an F-35 pilot's helmet that is of no use because the necessary software is not being supplied? (Picture Rockwell Collins)

*built its air arm around F-15QA fighters and Patriot defences.*⁴

These systems are designed to function together through radar coverage, secure communications, identification systems, training, and US-compatible doctrine. Dependence therefore extends beyond individual weapons. Disrupting one support layer can reduce the effectiveness of several connected capabilities.

The dependency is visible in Washington's own rules. The *Defense Security Cooperation Agency* calls major Foreign Military Sales a "*Total Package Approach*",⁵ covering not only the platform but training, technical assistance, software, ammunition, follow-on support, and intelligence mission data.

Each element is also a potential point of control. A buyer can own the airframe while relying on the US for the data that defines threats, the software that integrates sensors, the missiles that arm it, and the expertise that returns it to service. This is the institutional foundation beneath the so-called *American protection umbrella*.⁶

No magic button required

Public debate often reduces this relationship to a literal remote "kill switch." The Pentagon's *F-35 Joint Program Office denied in 2025 that such a switch exists*,⁷ and that there is no verified public evidence that Washington can transmit a command that instantly grounds every exported US aircraft or disables every missile.

* Dr Kamran Yeganegi, is an assistant professor of industrial engineering and a senior researcher in energy diplomacy at the Center for Scientific Research and Strategic Studies of the Middle East, Tehran. His work focuses on energy geopolitics and infrastructure resilience in the Middle East. @DYeganegi

That denial addresses the narrowest version of the claim. It does not remove the deeper dependency. Modern weapons are sustained by software releases, cryptographic material, threat libraries, proprietary test equipment, source-controlled components, and supply chains that remain beyond the buyer's sovereign control.

The F-35 makes this structure unusually visible. Its *Autonomic Logistics Information System* (ALIS) is being replaced by the *Operational Data Integrated Network* (ODIN). The program office describes ALIS as the system that *turns aircraft maintenance data into decisions that keep jets flying*,⁸ while the US Government Accountability Office has documented the difficulties surrounding its replacement.

Foreign operators do not receive unrestricted control over the aircraft's core software. The US decided to *withhold the F-35 source code even from partner countries*.⁹ That does not mean a jet requires Washington's permission before every takeoff, but it places long-term modernization, fault diagnosis, mission-data support, and much of the sustainment chain inside a US-led system.

The limits of GPS control

The same distinction applies to satellite-guided weapons. *JDAM kits*, *Excalibur* artillery rounds, and other precision munitions use GPS alongside inertial navigation. Their reliance on a US-operated constellation creates an obvious strategic vulnerability, particularly where access to encrypted military signals, updates, or compatible mission-planning equipment is restricted.

But the claim that Washington can revive "Selective Availability" to degrade civilian or export GPS over one chosen country is inaccurate. The US government *ended Selective Availability in May 2000*¹⁰ and later removed the feature from new GPS satellites. The old mechanism also affected the constellation globally rather than creating a neat, country-sized exclusion zone.

The loss or denial of GPS would not necessarily turn every guided weapon into an unguided one. Systems combining satellite and inertial navigation can retain some capability, usually with degraded accuracy. Nor is there credible public evidence that *Excalibur* rounds or modern anti-tank missiles contain a remotely activated US software lock that makes a launcher reject them as "unverified."

Washington's real leverage lies elsewhere. It controls which munitions are exported, in what quantities, which upgrades and encryption standards are released, and whether depleted stocks are replenished during wartime. An arsenal can be neutralized without an invisible signal ever crossing the sky.

Saudi Arabia:

The aircraft stays, the mission changes

Saudi Arabia's F-15 fleet illustrates the distinction between possessing a platform and controlling its full combat potential. In February 2026, the US approved a possible *\$3-billion F-15 sustainment package*¹¹ covering spare and repair parts, classified and unclassified software, technical documentation, training, and US government and contractor support.

The package contains no new fighter fleet. Its value lies in keeping the existing one operational, exposing how a combat aircraft remains tied to decisions made long after the original sale.

This dependence became political leverage during the Yemen war. In February 2021, former US president Joe Biden declared: "We are ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales."

The *White House statement*¹² simultaneously promised continued support for Saudi territorial defense. Riyadh retained its aircraft and air defense systems, but Washington drew a line between the missions it would continue to enable and those it would restrict.

The *restrictions on certain offensive transfers were lifted in 2024*,¹³ confirming that the tap could be closed and reopened by political decision.

Iraq's F-16 fleet remains tied to US contractors

Iraq purchased 36 F-16s from the US, but the fleet's readiness remained heavily dependent on American technical personnel. In May 2021, Lockheed Martin withdrew its maintenance team from Balad Air Base after repeated attacks by resistance factions.

The decision was taken for security reasons, not as punishment by Washington. Its military effect was nevertheless revealing. Air & Space Forces Magazine *reported*¹⁴ that the withdrawal was likely to limit fleet operations.

The episode exposed the extent of Iraq's dependence. If the departure of contractors could

restrict fleet operations, Washington could exert similar pressure by suspending export licenses, contracts, or technical support. Iraq owned the jets but not the full chain needed to keep them flying.

The UAE negotiates the limits of sovereignty

The Emirati case shows that leverage can be exercised before a platform arrives. A proposed \$23 billion package included 50 F-35 fighters, up to 18 MQ-9 armed drones, and advanced munitions. Negotiations stalled amid US concerns about China's technological presence in the UAE and the conditions attached to operating the aircraft. Explaining Abu Dhabi's suspension of the talks in 2021, an Emirati official *cited*¹⁵ "technical requirements, sovereign operational restrictions, and cost/benefit analysis."

Those "sovereign operational restrictions" exposed the limits of the deal. Washington had no Emirati aircraft to disable; it used its grip over the technology to dictate the terms of access before a single jet was delivered. The kill switch came with the sale itself.

Washington pulls the plug on Turkiye

Turkiye provides the clearest regional case. It was not merely an F-35 customer but a NATO ally and manufacturing partner producing hundreds of components. Turkish firms had invested in the program, Ankara had paid roughly \$1.4 billion, and Turkish pilots had already begun training in the US.

After Ankara accepted Russia's S-400 air defense system, the Pentagon removed it from the F-35 program. A senior US defense official stated: "Turkey can choose to acquire the S-400 or the F-35. It cannot have both." The *Pentagon then began unwinding Turkiye's participation*,¹⁶ despite Ankara's investment, industrial role, and alliance status.

The episode is more concrete than claims that US software would stop a Turkish F-35 from targeting Greek forces. No credible public evidence shows that NATO identification-friend-or-foe coding automatically prevents weapons from locking onto allied aircraft and ships, or that Washington can remotely freeze a Turkish mission computer once a target is selected.

Washington's power was exercised long before the aircraft could take flight. It blocked delivery, expelled Turkish firms from the production chain, ended pilot training, and withheld ac-

cess to software and maintenance. The aircraft did not have to be remotely grounded because the US ensured that Turkiye never received it.

Ankara's response has been to place greater weight on the domestically developed KAAN fighter and to seek alternative procurement routes. Yet Turkiye has also continued to pursue a return to the F-35 program, with President *Recep Tayyip Erdogan* saying in 2025 that *technical-level talks had resumed*.¹⁷

An architecture of permission

None of these cases proves that Washington possesses a hidden code capable of remotely disabling every exported weapon. Nor does it need one. The real kill switch runs through ammunition approvals, spare parts, software, technical data, contractors, training, mission files, and upgrades.

Each pressure point can be presented as an ordinary administrative, legal, or contractual decision. Together, they define the boundaries of military autonomy and allow Washington to impose costs selectively without announcing that an ally's arsenal has been switched off.

Washington's leverage has limits. Arab states can turn to European or Chinese suppliers or develop weapons at home, while US pressure does not always force a change in policy. But replacing an established military system takes years, and combat readiness cannot wait.

Arab states own the hardware, while Washington retains considerable influence over the readiness of those weapons, the missions they can sustain, and the strategic choices they can support.

Source: <https://thecradle.co/articles/washingtons-invisible-military-kill-switch>, 12 September 2026

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² <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-saudi-arabia>

³ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-united-arab-emirates/>

⁴ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-qatar>

⁵ <https://samm.dsca.mil/chapter/chapter-4>

⁶ <https://thecradle.co/articles/us-bases-in-the-persian-gulf-security-shield-or-escalation-trigger>

⁷ <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/03/no-theres-no-kill-switch-pentagon-tries-to-reassure-international-f-35-partners/>

⁸ <https://www.jsf.mil/alis>

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us-to-withhold-f-35-fighter-software-code-idUSTRE5A001F/>

¹⁰ <https://www.gps.gov/selective-availability>

¹¹ <https://www.dsca.mil/Press-Media/Major-Arms-Sales/Article-Display/Article/4396586/kingdom-of-saudi-arabia-f-15-sustainment>

¹² <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-lift-ban-offensive-weapons-sales-saudi-arabia-sources-say-2024-08-09/>

¹⁴ <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/lockheed-personnel-leaving-iraqi-f-16-base-because-of-militia-threats/>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uae-will-suspend-talks-with-us-f-35-jets-says-official-2021-12-14/>

¹⁶ <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1908351/us-begins-process-of-unwinding-turkey-from-f-35-program-dod-officials-say/>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkey-hopes-progress-on-f-35-jets-after-trump-meeting-erdogan-says-2025-06-26/>