



Turkey (Türkiye): Possible U.S. F-16 Sale

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In February 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [publicly confirmed](#) that the Biden Administration supports a possible sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Turkey (Türkiye)—a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—and has engaged Congress on the issue. According to January 2023 [media reports](#) citing unnamed U.S. officials, the Biden Administration has provided [informal notification](#) to Congress about the possible sale. Issues potentially factoring into congressional review of a proposed sale include Turkey’s role regarding [the Russia-Ukraine war](#), [Sweden’s NATO membership application](#), [regional rivalry with Greece](#), and [Turkish domestic matters](#).

The January informal notification is [reportedly](#) for 40 new F-16s of the advanced [Block 70/72 Viper configuration](#) and Block 70/72 upgrade packages for 79 existing fighters (see **Figure 1**), [along with](#) 900 air-to-air missiles and 800 bombs, at an estimated total value of \$20 billion. The transaction could [modernize](#) and extend the service life of much of [Turkey’s fleet](#) while Turkey tries to acquire or design a [more advanced fighter](#). However, delivery of new F-16s might face a [production backlog](#).

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Figure 1. F-16 Block 70/72 Viper Configuration

Source: Lockheed Martin.

Some Members of Congress from both parties have [expressed reservations](#). Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Chairman Bob Menendez [was quoted in January as saying](#), “Until [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan (pronounced *air-doe-wan*) ceases his threats [against neighboring NATO allies], improves his human rights record at home ... and begins to act like a trusted ally should, I will not approve this sale.” Several other Senators, including [SFRC Ranking Member Jim Risch](#) and [the 29](#) who wrote a February letter to President Biden, have indicated they might only consider supporting the F-16 sale to Turkey if its parliament agrees to [both Sweden and Finland joining NATO](#). Turkey’s parliament approved Finland’s membership in March, and it joined the alliance in April.

As Turkey’s May 2023 election cycle has ended with President Erdogan’s reelection, congressional committee leaders’ concerns regarding a possible F-16 sale may have softened somewhat. A few days before the presidential run-off election, House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) Chairman Michael McCaul [was cited as saying](#) that he believes he, Menendez, Risch, and HFAC Ranking Member Gregory Meeks “will approve the transfer once Turkey ratifies Sweden’s membership in NATO.” In late May, Menendez [said](#) that Sweden might be the “whole equation” for some Members of Congress, but is only “part of the equation” for him. He also [suggested](#) that if Turkey approves Sweden’s NATO membership and ends “belligerence” toward Greece and perhaps other neighbors such as [Armenia](#), “there’s a path forward—at least for me.” President Erdogan [pledged in July](#) to take steps—[perhaps contingent](#) on additional promises or actions from Sweden—toward Turkish parliamentary ratification of Sweden’s NATO accession protocol. Also in July, Erdogan [said](#) that Turkish F-16s have never been used against Greece and “we do not plan on using them.”

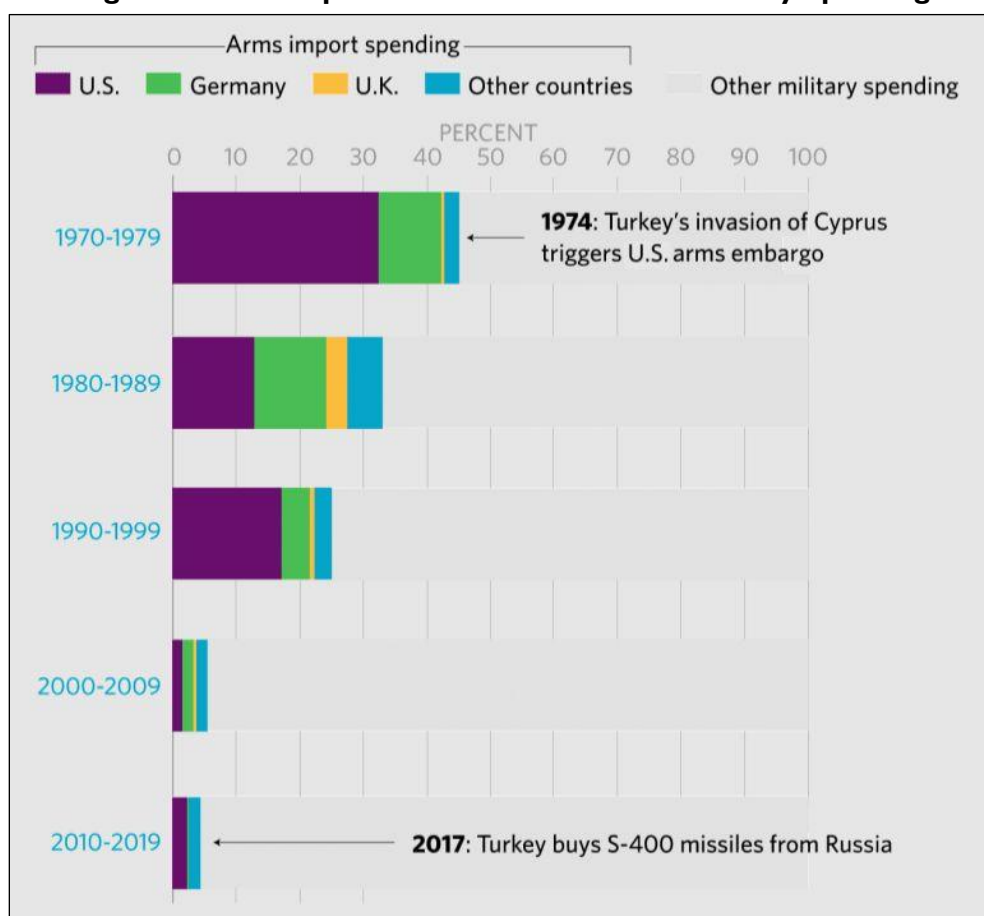
For most possible major arms sales requiring [congressional review](#), the State Department first provides informal notification to SFRC and HFAC, allowing for a confidential process in which the committees can raise and discuss concerns with the executive branch. [This process](#) usually lasts 20 to 40 days, followed by formal notification of the possible sale. However, if a [committee chair or ranking member](#)

places a “hold” on the proposed transaction, formal notification usually does not proceed, even though holds are not legally binding. Under the Arms Export Control Act (AECA, P.L. 90-629, 82 Stat. 1320), the Administration can proceed with a sale—if not **blocked by legislation**—15 days (for NATO allies like Turkey) after formal notification.

Congress and U.S.-Turkey Arms Transactions

Congressional legislation and oversight has helped shape U.S.-Turkey defense cooperation for decades. Congress placed an **arms embargo** on Turkey from 1975 to 1978, following the **1974 Cyprus conflict**. Since then, Turkey has focused more on developing its defense industry (see **Figure 2**), and as part of that goal, one objective of Turkish arms purchases from the United States and other foreign suppliers has been to **acquire technology** for future indigenous defense production.

Figure 2. Arms Imports as a Share of Turkish Military Spending



Sources: Stratfor, based on information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Traders Database, with some text modifications by CRS.

Over the past 15 years, a number of proposed U.S. arms transfers to Turkey either **have stalled** or **faced reported congressional holds**. After Turkey acquired an **S-400 surface-to-air defense system** from Russia, the Trump Administration removed Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program (**citing concerns** about possible Russian use of the S-400 to collect intelligence on F-35 stealth capabilities), and **imposed congressionally authorized sanctions** on Turkey. Section 1245 of the FY2020 National Defense

Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 116-92) prohibits funding the transfer of F-35s to Turkey unless Turkey no longer possesses the S-400.

Considerations for Congress

Several issues could have implications for congressional approaches to the possible sale, and vice versa. [Congressional committee leaders' concerns](#) regarding a possible F-16 sale—whether or not tied to [NATO accession for Sweden](#)—could conceivably persist. At some point, the Administration may face decisions regarding whether, when, and how to address congressional concerns, and/or move forward with a formal notification of the sale.

Shortly after **Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine**, a State Department letter to some Members of Congress [reportedly said](#) that there were “compelling long-term NATO alliance unity and capability interests, as well as U.S. national security, economic and commercial interests that are supported by appropriate U.S. defense trade ties with Turkey.” While Turkey has acted [more independently](#) of the West under Erdogan, it has [NATO's second-largest military](#), [hosts](#) allied military assets and personnel, and partners in other ways with the [United States](#) and [NATO](#)—including using F-16s in [occasional policing missions](#).

U.S. officials have [voiced appreciation](#) for Turkish actions that appear [favorable to Ukraine](#). Turkey has denounced Russia's invasion, [closed the Bosphorus \(alt. Bosphorus\) and Dardanelles Straits](#) to belligerent warships, [helped broker](#) efforts to export Ukrainian grain via the Black Sea, served as a [transit hub](#) for natural gas to Europe, and supplied Ukraine with [military equipment](#).

However, Turkey also has [boosted](#) various forms of economic and energy cooperation with **Russia**. During early 2023, U.S. officials [have warned](#) counterparts in [Turkey](#) (and some [non-NATO countries](#)) about possible penalties for businesses that continue trade potentially supplying Russia's defense industry. Reportedly, Turkey began in March 2023 to [enforce curbs](#) on goods that are subject to Western sanctions from transiting its territory to Russia. In April 2023, the Department of the Treasury [placed sanctions](#) on two Turkey-based companies and associated persons for assisting Russia or Russian entities.

Within a context of [strong congressional support](#) for **Swedish NATO accession**, some Members [have argued](#) that Turkish delays on the issue have threatened alliance unity. Sweden's application to join NATO remains pending as of August, with Turkey and Hungary the only alliance members not to have approved it. After President Erdogan's reelection, President Biden [said](#) in late May that Erdogan “wants to work on something on the F-16s. I told him we wanted a deal with Sweden, so let's get that done.”

President Erdogan [agreed in July](#) to send the NATO accession protocol for Sweden to Turkey's parliament and work closely with it to “ensure ratification,” but later [clarified](#) that Turkey's parliament might not consider Swedish accession until October (after its summer recess). Erdogan [also said](#) that he expected Sweden to provide a roadmap of steps it will take to implement a June 2022 [trilateral memorandum](#)—aimed at acting against those that Turkey considers terrorists—before sending the accession protocol to parliament.

Turkey-Greece regional disputes also are a factor for Congress. U.S. arms transfers could affect the [balance of power](#) between [Turkey](#) and [Greece](#). U.S.-Greece cooperation [has expanded](#), and reportedly the Administration informally notified Congress of a possible sale of up to [40 F-35s to Greece](#) at the same time as the Turkey/F-16 informal notification. Additionally, the [joint explanatory statement](#) accompanying the FY2023 NDAA (P.L. 117-263) cautioned NATO allies against “unauthorized territorial overflights of another NATO ally's airspace.”

Domestic developments in Turkey are another consideration. Many U.S. lawmakers **have alleged** that “gross violation of human rights and democratic backsliding” have occurred under the rule of President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party.

Congressional action on a possible F-16 sale **could influence** whether Turkey continues to use major U.S. weapons platforms, and other aspects of **U.S.-Turkey political-military ties**. Turkey is **reportedly exploring** Eurofighter Typhoons as a potential alternative to F-16s, but **it is unclear** if consortium partner Germany would approve such a sale. Additionally, Turkey’s air force **could face difficulties** adjusting to a non-F-16 platform, thus potentially complicating alternatives. Moreover, European arms transfers to Turkey could be subject to the congressional review process if such weapons were to include U.S.-origin defense articles meeting the **specified notification threshold**.

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