Qatar lobbies on F-35 sale to rival UAE

by Julian Pecquet

December 8, 2020 5:10 pm

in Middle East, New in Lobbying, Regional conflicts

The Donald Trump's proposed sale of F-35 jets to the United Arab Emirates is taking flak from another close US ally in the Middle East.

Even as Israel now says that it's “very comfortable” with the proposed $10 billion sale of 50 of the advanced stealth fighters to the Gulf Arab state, UAE rival Qatar has been raising concerns behind the scenes. A new lobbying filing reveals that lobbyists with
South Carolina-based Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough reached out to four key House Democrats in September and October regarding the proposed sale.

The push follows years of rivalry between Qatar and the UAE, which joined with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in June 2017 in cutting diplomatic ties and blockading the country over its support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups in the region. Since then the two nations have spent millions of dollars lobbying against each other in Washington, with the UAE notably pressing the Trump administration to force regional media powerhouse Al Jazeera to register as a foreign agent of Doha.

The Senate is expected to vote on several resolutions opposing the sale this week. It’s not clear however if the House will have time to act before adjourning for the end of the year.

Nelson Mullins’ first contacts on the F-35 came in early September, when the firm reached out to the office of Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) around the time she penned an op-ed in the Miami Herald opposing the sale in part because of its potential to weaken Israel’s qualitative military edge in the region. Wasserman Schultz chairs the panel that controls spending on military construction and is the Chief Deputy Whip of the Democratic Caucus.

“In addition to the possibility that a future UAE government could be hostile to Israel, the UAE is the locus of thousands of regular Iranian travelers, including intelligence operatives, who will seek sensitive information about the F-35,” she wrote. “Clearly, a more militarized region is not safer for Israel or for US interests.”

The firm also disclosed phone calls with three other House members in October regarding the F-35 sale and a potential meeting with Ambassador Meshal bin Hama Al Thani: House Defense Appropriations subcommittee Chairman Pete Visclosky (D-Ind.); Appropriations Committee member David Price (D-N.C.); and Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff (D-Calif.).
Former Rep. **Jim Moran** (D-Va.) is leading Nelson Mullins’ lobbying on Qatar. He told *Foreign Lobby Report* that his discussions with lawmakers about the F-35 were aimed at gathering information about their position rather than lobbying them in any particular direction. Still, he made it clear that the Qatars share concerns expressed by some congressional members of both parties about the UAE’s military involvement in the conflicts in Yemen and Libya.

“It’s possible the Qatars would see the need to protect themselves if other neighbors got that kind of capability,” he said. “In a region where you’ve got some hot heads, they’re the responsible adult.”