

Trump Faces Pressure Over Turkey's Return to the F-35 Program

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains confident that Turkey will soon reclaim its place in the U.S. F-35 fighter jet program, even as critics in Washington raise alarms about the risks. Speaking to journalists after a trip to Azerbaijan, Erdogan said he believed President Donald Trump would honor their past agreement and begin delivering the advanced aircraft in stages during his second term.

The optimism comes despite a troubled history. Back in 2019, Turkey decided to buy the Russian-made S-400 air defense system, ignoring repeated warnings from the United States. As a result, Washington suspended Turkey's participation in the F-35 program and imposed sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act

(CAATSA). Turkey, which had already paid \$1.4 billion for more than 100 jets, has since demanded a refund or the delivery of the aircraft.

Erdogan insists the F-35 is crucial for Turkey's security and its role as a NATO member. But many American officials, defense experts, and lawmakers remain opposed to lifting the ban. They argue that operating both the S-400 system and the F-35 could allow Russia to collect sensitive data on the stealth fighter, potentially compromising American and allied pilots in future conflicts.

Beyond the technical risks, critics point to Turkey's strained relations with Israel and support for Palestinian groups such as Hamas as reasons to reconsider any new arms deals. Some in Congress believe Turkey's recent policies resemble those of an adversary more than an ally.

Although the Biden administration approved a separate sale of F-16 jets to Turkey, the F-35 issue has proven more sensitive. Under current U.S. law, any transfer of F-35s requires proof that Turkey has removed or deactivated the S-400 systems. Ankara, however, maintains that it will keep them in place.

As Erdogan looks to Trump for a breakthrough, he faces strong headwinds. Influential members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, have warned that any attempt to bring Turkey back into the F-35 program will meet serious resistance.

For now, Turkey's hopes rest on a complex mix of diplomacy, congressional politics, and shifting alliances. Whether Erdogan can persuade Washington to trust Ankara again remains to be seen.

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