

Beat: Business

Qatar Defense programs: new priorities for exiting crisis

Doha is back on the armament market

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USPA NEWS - After the mid-decade financial crisis rocked the Qatari boat, causing it to mothball several military projects, Doha is back on the armament market, now that the future is somewhat stabilizing and the political instability in the region is causing its powerful neighbors to beef up their armies. But how will it stay competitive facing regional armies several times its size?

The 2010s have not been uneventful for the Persian Gulf. In a long string of disruptions which seemed to start with the Iraqi US invasion in 2003 (1), the Gulf has been punched left and right with various factors of instability. The Arab Spring revolutions (2) set the region ablaze, opening the way to the rise of ISIS (3), followed by the Yemeni crisis in 2011 (4) before the massive and long-lasting drop in oil prices (5) threatened to bleed the monarchies dry. This amounts to conflicting implications, as increased instability enhances the potential need for high-performance military, while at the same time making resources to upgrade armies scarcer. With the relative stabilization of the economic situation, Gulf countries are re-opening armament purchase programs which had been put on hold. This faces Qatar with the necessity to upgrade even more than its neighbors, lest it be overshadowed and swallowed up.

Due to how unpredictable the location of the next hotspot will be, Qatar needs to be able to move fast, hard and far. This means 4th-generation fighters for the Qatari air force, which has been turning to European and American platforms. Armament specialist Gareth Jennings reported last month (6) that "The LOI, which was signed during a meeting in Qatar between defence secretaries Michael Fallon and Khalid bin Mohammed al Attiyah, is for the proposed purchase of 24 Typhoons [...] Qatar's LOI comes three months after the Gulf state signed an agreement with the United States for the procurement of 36 Boeing F-15QA (Qatar Advanced)-variant Eagles, which itself came two years after it ordered 24 Dassault Rafale from France. The Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF) is known to have a requirement for 72 new combat aircraft to replace its ageing 12 Dassault Mirage 2000-5 fighters. If the Typhoon and Eagle orders are fulfilled in full, the QEAF will field a fighter force of 84 platforms across three different types."

With near 5000 kilometers of newly-acquired range, Qatar will be able to intervene rapidly in remote regions as far as Chad, if need be, although they will probably be needed closer to home.

The same quest for range was pursued through missile acquisition from MBDA, which signed the contract for new-generation missile supply at the end of last year. These vectors will mainly be used in coastal defense and reduce Qatar's response time (7) to threats at its borders. Pasquale Di Bartolomeo, Executive Group Director Strategy of MBDA, said "This innovative coastal missile system will deploy two different munitions, Marte ER (the Extended Range version of the Marte missile) and Exocet MM40 Block 3, and it will be able to work in autonomous mode with its own radar, or alternatively by data-linking to a higher level within a wider coastal surveillance network. The supply of these coastal missile systems will allow the QENF to prevent hostile ships from reaching and threatening their territorial waters."

Coastal defense will be additionally reinforced for Qatar, whose waters join 7 different countries (some quite unstable), with last year's 6-billion-dollar investment in modernized naval vessels, bought from the Italian firm Fincantieri. Middle East Eye reported (8) that "Currently Qatar's navy is made up of 20-year-old patrol vessels and unlike regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia, it lacks full-sized modern warships [...] Even with the order of the ships Qatar's naval forces will still be smaller than the naval forces of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain. Qatar's fleet, though, will be more modern and boast a new amphibious land capability.". Here again, Doha is counting on the quality of its numbers, and not their quantity - which would be an unrealistic objective, given the country's size.

Armor is also getting a hefty upgrade: Doha already acquired over 60 new Leopard 2 main battle tanks last year, giving it a surge in its operational capacities. The Quwa Defence News and Analysis Group reported (9) that "In comparison to the legacy AMX, the Leopard 2A7+ is a vastly more robust platform, one benefitting from recent advances in composite armour technology, automation (e.g. via the FLW 200 remote-controlled weapon station), and protection from a diverse set of threats, including improvised explosive devices and mines.". The heavy armour will also be completed with new generation Infantry Fighting Vehicles. A LOI (Letter of Intention) has been signed for the acquisition of French VBCI, from French defense contractor Nexter. Fay Abuelgasim reported for the Washington Post: "France and Qatar also agreed that Qatar would purchase 490 VBCI armored vehicles from French firm Nexter, and signed a transportation deal with France's national rail authority to manage and maintain Doha's planned metro, as well as a light rail system north of Doha."

The choice regarding the type of armament fitted onto the IFVs has not been definitively made, but it will likely be Nexter's T40 turret, toting the new CTA 40 (10) gun. The new caliber enables a large increase in power in range, in comparison to 30-mm or traditional 40-mm guns, while maintaining mass and size to the minimum. It was recently presented (11) to Defence Minister Khalid bin Mohamed al-Attiya, and would provide domination over the hordes of BMP-3 based IFVs in the region. "The gun has been adopted by the British Army for installation on two types of armored vehicles and the French are also planning on using it in one of their armored vehicles. Apparently, the gun is a success and will probably find additional application", analyzed Chuck Hill (12) on his blog, a year ago.

Like many modern armies in the West, Qatar has few options but to compensate their relatively small size with high added-value weapon systems. Except for 5th generation fighters, which no one has aside from the Americans, Doha will soon be at the highest level of military readiness and operational capacity if all programs are carried out. German tanks and new-generation IFVs and turrets will give Qatar tactical superiority both with heavy and light armor; new coastal defenses linked to radar networks will secure the peninsula, while its new jets will give intervention capacity in the extended region. Which will probably lead the United-States to rely more on its ally in the years to come.

- 1) <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/war-in-iraq-begins>
- 2) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12813859>
- 3) <http://time.com/4030714/isis-timeline-islamic-state/>
- 4) <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/yemen4.htm>
- 5) <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/030315/why-did-oil-prices-drop-so-much-2014.asp>
- 6) <http://www.janes.com/article/74142/qatar-to-buy-eurofighter-typhoons>
- 7) <http://www.mbda-systems.com/press-releases/mbda-signs-contract-to-supply-a-coastal-missile-system-to-qatar/>
- 8) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-seals-6bn-navy-vessels-deal-italy-1730990541>
- 9) <http://quwa.org/2016/10/28/kmw-delivers-batch-new-leopard-2a7-mbts-qatar/>
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- 11) <http://defence-blog.com/army/vbci-with-40mm-caliber-cannon-testing-in-qatar.html>
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