Cautious neutrality: Kuwait modernises its defence capabilities while staying impartial

While it remains on good terms with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, Kuwait is continuing to update its armed forces to face regional threats. Beth Stevenson reports

Amid the tensions of the Gulf Kuwait remains a relatively impartial state. A lack of demonstrable hostility towards Iran distinguishes it from other Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) members and it has refrained from the US-Saudi rhetoric against Iran.

Until the ongoing war in Yemen, in which Kuwait participates under Saudi Arabia's lead, the 1990–91 Gulf War was the last large-scale conflict in which the country's military was directly involved. Kuwait has also maintained civil relations with Europe and the United States, the latter deeming it a friendly country helping generate political stability in the Middle East.

US soldiers watch reload crews as they practise Patriot SAM system reloading procedures in Kuwait in March 2016. The US had deployed Patriot systems to Kuwait to respond to the perceived threat from Iran, but has since redeployed those batteries to respond to apparent threats from China and Russia. (US Army/Sgt David Beckstrom)
Despite this relative neutrality, however, Kuwait has continued to invest in modernising its defence capabilities across all forces. As well as tirelessly ensuring its systems are technologically current, it is procuring capabilities that are interoperable with the US, NATO, and regional allies.

**Fixed-wing aircraft**

Kuwait has paid special attention to the air domain, bolstering fighter, ISR and rotary-wing aircraft fleets, as well as relevant weapon inventories.

An April 2016 contract award revealed that Kuwait had purchased a 28-strong fleet of Eurofighter Typhoons, ensuring interoperability with regional partners Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar. The order also resulted in Kuwait becoming the launch customer for the Captor-E active electronically scanned-array (AESA) radar that is being developed for the type.

Existing Eurofighter countries have not yet chosen to acquire the Captor-E, which is being developed by Leonardo based on the company’s experience with e-scan fire control radars for aircraft such as the Saab Gripen E. Instead, the countries have funded the radar’s development programme, leaving Kuwait to become the first country to operate it.

The radar is being tested under an ongoing evaluation campaign, during which it is receiving software updates, and the programme is on schedule for first deliveries in 2020, Leonardo told *Jane’s*. Testing and evaluation of the radar has continued under several phases, the first of which was completed in 2017.

Flight trials in 2018 and this year included incremental software updates to facilitate the required P3E standard for the radar, which will be made available for the first deliveries to the Kuwait Air Force (KAF). Leonardo takes the lead on the aircraft’s delivery for Kuwait, as Italy is the government partner within Eurofighter responsible for the sale.

Although the aircraft were originally touted for delivery this year, a Leonardo spokesman told *Jane’s* that development of the Captor-E for Kuwait will result in the aircraft being handed over to the country from 2020, with deliveries completed by 2023.

KAF training on the Typhoon is currently taking place at the Italian Air Force’s Grosseto base in Tuscany, the spokesman added. Final assembly of the first four aircraft is under way at the Turin-Caselle plant of Leonardo’s aircraft division, where all the fleet will be assembled.

“Kuwait’s 28 Eurofighter Typhoons will be the most advanced of the type produced so far,” the company said. “This multirole fighter aircraft will have a package of capabilities on top of the previous Typhoon’s enhancement programmes, such as the Captor-E radar and several novelties in the weapon system that will bring the Kuwait Air Force to the front line of fighter technology.”

The Typhoon is not the only fighter being acquired by Kuwait. In June 2018 the US Navy awarded Boeing a USD1.5 billion contract to deliver 28 F/A-18E/F Super Hornets to the country. Split into an
order of 22 F/A-18E fighters and six F/A-18F trainers, the contract will result in Kuwait building on its experience as a Hornet operator. The country has been flying the F/A-18C/D variants of the aircraft since the early 1990s and the Super Hornets, alongside the Typhoons, are set to replace the ageing F/A-18C/D fleet.

Another Boeing type operated by the KAF is the C-17 Globemaster III airlifter, two of which are in service and complement the KAF’s fleet of Lockheed Martin KC-130J Hercules tanker/transport aircraft, three of which are operated by the country.

Kuwait also operates the BAE Systems Hawk trainer: an aircraft that is operational with all GCC members or has been selected for delivery by them. Although Kuwait is a seasoned operator of this type, having ordered it back in the early 1980s, negotiations for potential follow-on orders of the newest advanced variant have seemingly come to a halt.

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