

Sikorsky plans Middle East expansion

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If its latest plans come to fruition, Sikorsky Aircraft could open a maintenance, design and customer service center in the Middle East.

The Stratford-based helicopter maker on Monday announced it and Gulf Helicopters — owned by the government of Qatar — have a deal to explore the possibility of opening an Aviation Center of Excellence in the region.

The memorandum of understanding reported Monday is only the first step, according to a company spokeswoman, so no specific information about timing, costs and staffing is available.

The understanding is "in anticipation of increased demand for Sikorsky helicopters in the region," Stephen B. Estill — Sikorsky's vice president and chief marketing officer — said in an e-mailed statement.

"Helicopters in the region should be serviced, to [an] extent economically feasible, at a local facility. The Gulf States region is a new market for Sikorsky, thus we are seeking a solution for local servicing."

According to the statement, the business organization has not yet been decided, and is subject to review under the memo.

Ray Jaworowski, a senior aerospace analyst with Newtown-based Forecast International, hadn't seen the announcement, but said Sikorsky's expansion of its after-market business and its global expansion generally play into the plan.

"The Middle East is an important market for helicopter manufacturers," Jaworowski said. "We expect to see growth in both military helicopter sales and civilian helicopter sales in the Middle East" in the next few years. Jaworowski said there's not one specific reason for this expectation; instead, there are a variety of economic and political factors that figure into the future growth.

Sikorsky, which sells the S-76 and the S-92 civilian helicopters, has made great strides in expanding its civilian offerings in the last few years, he said, but still lags behind Eurocopter and Bell in its product range.

But on the other side, Jaworowski said, "Worldwide, we expect them to be pretty much the number one producer of military helicopters" over the next 10 years.

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