Trapani-Birgi: International F-35 Training Center and NATO Hub

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Trapani-Birgi is preparing to become a key piece of the F-35 architecture in Europe. With an authorized allocation of **112.6 million euros** over several years, the Ministry of Defense is launching the **first phase** of the **Lightning Training Center (LTC)**: a hub aimed at bringing to the Mediterranean the advanced training logic typical of large U.S. centers. The strategic message is clear: not just a base hosting aircraft, but an **international training center** for pilots and technicians, designed to operate within a **NATO** perimeter and connectable to the Joint Strike Fighter training network.

The green light comes from a **Determination to Contract** by the Directorate of Aeronautical Armaments and Airworthiness (DAAA), which unlocks resources and the technical-administrative path. With this move, Trapani joins the two bases already central to the JSF in Italy — **Amendola** and **Ghedi** — completing an operational-training triangle capable of covering national and coalition needs. The declared goal is not just "putting the F-35s at Birgi," but

building an ecosystem where the national component, international training dimension, and the LTC as the engine of the entire system coexist.

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Four pillars in the first phase: SAPF and full mission simulators

The funded package aims to create the infrastructural and technological foundations of the center. The cornerstones are four: **building for ground training** (classrooms, briefing/debriefing, support), a **SAPF – Special Access Program Facility** with very high security requirements, **two Full Mission Simulators (FMS)** with high fidelity prepared for network connection, and the **provision for future Pilot Training Devices (PTD)**, useful for expanding training volumes and scenarios.

The real breakthrough is the **SAPF**: without a facility of this level, training related to the most sensitive components of the program (tactics, procedures, management of classified data and packages) would be severely limited. It is the enabling condition for “complete” training on the fifth generation. At the center of the LTC, however, will be the **FMS**: simulators capable of reproducing not only the cockpit but also sensors, dynamic threats, electronic warfare, and the use of weapon systems in complex scenarios. The direction is the one already followed by modern programs: increasing the share of training in simulation to contain costs and wear of the fleet, while maintaining high tactical standards.

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Industry, timing, and geography: Leonardo–Lockheed, roadmap 2028/2029 and the value of the Mediterranean

On the industrial level, the project revolves around a grouping with **Leonardo** and **Lockheed Martin**: a combination consistent with the F-35 supply chain, where Lockheed is a reference for training architecture and simulators, while Leonardo represents the national capacity for integration and management of components and sensitive data, in addition to the broader role

in the Italian program supply chain. The timeline is tight: an **initial training capability by December 2028** and **completion by July 1, 2029**. The time horizon is not a detail: Trapani's credibility as a hub depends on the ability to meet deadlines and certifications in a context where training demand grows with the increase of European fleets.

The choice of Birgi also has a geographical logic. The 37th Wing oversees a quadrant that looks to the **Tyrrhenian and Sicilian Channel**, with a natural projection towards the wider Mediterranean scenario. Placing an F-35 capability here, and especially a training hub, means more closely linking operations and training in an area of high strategic sensitivity. In the national framework, the axis is completed: **Amendola** as a consolidated reference (with experience also in the STOVL dimension and integration), **Ghedi** as the operational base of the F-35A and the fulcrum of the department transition, **Trapani** as the international training leg.

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An “Italy system” that closes: training pipeline, Cameri, impacts, and NATO interoperability

The LTC is not born in a vacuum: in recent years, Italy has structured a training path that from advanced training aims at specialization on fifth-generation platforms. In this logic, Trapani becomes the natural outlet for those who complete the advanced phase and must move to the next level: operating with an aircraft where the difference is made by data fusion, shared tactics, and interoperability. Here the industrial lever is also inserted: the national base linked to the production and support of the F-35 — with the technological and logistical backbone headed by **Cameri** — strengthens Italy's profile not only as a user but as a provider of capabilities and services in the program, making the ambition of a European training hub more credible.

The expected impacts are both operational and territorial: infrastructural works, orders on **specialized construction, secure IT, networks, maintenance**, and the arrival of qualified personnel (instructors, technicians, support) with related induced effects. But the more “strategic” value is the allied effect: standardizing training means creating human capital that speaks the same operational language within NATO, making integration in composite missions smoother. In this framework, the choice to focus on simulation also has an economic and environmental aspect: more hours in the simulator, fewer hours needed in real flight for some

phases, with benefits on costs, fleet availability, and indirect impacts. If times and objectives are met, Birgi can become one of the places where the operational readiness of the fifth generation in Europe is built.

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