
Much-Heralded Jet Headed to Israel

By

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The largest defense deal in Israeli history, for the purchase of the F-35 stealth fighter aircraft, is advancing, slowly but surely. The rounds of talks among the defense establishment, the Pentagon, and manufacturer Lockheed Martin have significantly narrowed the gaps between the parties. The United States is scheduled to respond next week to Israel's express request for 25 of the jets.

Jerusalem is to reach a final decision by early 2010, and there is a good chance a deal will be signed by the middle of the year. Assuming Lockheed maintains its original production timetable, the first fighters will be delivered in 2014.

Two years later, Israel will have its first operational squadron of F-35s, consisting of 25 fighter aircraft representing the cutting edge of United States technology (Israel's too, it is hoped), capable of any mission, Iran too?

Ready for Iran, If They Stay Still

Of course, assuming that Iran's nuclear installations are still waiting there by the time Israel has the appropriate aircraft . . . is one of the main questions surrounding the deal. When discussions began on the procurement of the F-35, it was clear that it was necessary if Israel was to have a response to the Iranian threat. This is the main argument for buying the aircraft, especially in light of the fact that it now seems likely that Tehran will eventually (have) the S-300 advanced air defense system from Russia, making stealth capability all the more important for Israeli fighters.

In the meantime, however, the timetables have diverged. Unless stopped, Iran's nuclear program may reach maturation within two years; but the delivery date for the F-35 is still far away. Some senior Israeli army officers are citing this in their call to delay the purchase. They argue that it will use up most of the United States military aid to Israel [and will not be] on hand when needed. They say urgent projects for the land forces should be advanced instead, and the remaining funds invested in the navy and in refurbishing older aircraft.

The Americans, in their discussions, raised two problems with this option: A delay would prevent Israeli defense industries from getting involved in the project at an early stage and earning money from the sale of systems incorporated into the F-35. And, if Israel delays its order, then other countries will move up on the list for deliveries; and there will be no guarantee that it will receive delivery according to its timetable—even if that is in 2016. One concern is that by then other countries in the Middle East will also begin acquiring the aircraft.

Cutting the Specialized Israeli Suite

In the meantime, the Americans have eased their stance on Israel's request to include locally-made electronics systems. A major issue in this would be the cost of the specialized "suite" Israel would like to develop for its order of F-35s. This makes the aircraft more expensive, but much of the price also depends on the volume. For example, if the price of 25 aircraft, including many other

components, comes to \$130 million each, then an order of 75 may lower the per-unit price to \$100 million.

The head of the Planning Directorate of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Major General Amir Eshel, told Haaretz in September [2009] that in any event the cost of a single aircraft is expected to be much lower than \$130 million, which he described as “exaggerated.”

The decision on this acquisition is one of the most important for the budgets of both the state and the IDF, as well as the future shape of the military. As in the past, it will be made by a limited group of people, with limited transparency, little control by civilians, and without public debate. The government has not really dealt with the issue, and it is doubtful whether it will do so in the future.

These matters are usually agreed upon among the IDF Chief of Staff, the Israel Air Force Commander, the Defense Minister, and the Director General of the Defense Ministry.