

US to speed up stealth fighter delivery to Israel

Yaakov Katz , THE JERUSALEM POST

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In an effort to bolster the Israel Air Force in the face of Iran's race toward nuclear power, the Pentagon has agreed to move up delivery of its newest stealth fighter to Israel by two years, to as early as 2012, *The Jerusalem Post* has learned.

Last month, the IDF announced plans to purchase a squadron (at least 25 aircraft) of the fifth-generation Joint Strike Fighter. That delivery was expected to commence in 2014.

During meetings Defense Minister Ehud Barak held at the Pentagon last week, US defense officials agreed to allow Israel to begin receiving the aircraft as early as 2012, when delivery to the United States Air Force is set to begin.

Eight countries - including Britain, Turkey and Australia - are members of the Joint Strike Fighter project. Israel became a security cooperation participant after paying \$20 million in 2003 for access to information accumulated during the jet's development. The jet will be priced at between \$50m. and \$60m.

According to senior defense officials, Barak raised the issue with US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and asked that Israel begin receiving the stealth fighter as soon as it is operationally available.

"We asked that for every two jets manufactured for the US, one be manufactured for Israel," a senior defense official said, adding that acquisition of the aircraft would greatly increase Israel's deterrence as Iran races toward nuclear power.

"This plane can fly into downtown Teheran without anyone even knowing about it since it can't be detected on radar," the official said.

Barak also succeeded in convincing the Americans to allow Israel to install its own unique technology in the aircraft, until now a major point of contention between the Defense Ministry and the Pentagon, defense officials said. They said the Americans agreed - in principle - to allow Israel to integrate its own technology into the plane, as it had done with other fighter jets it has bought in the past from the US, such as the F-15 and F-16.

Also Wednesday, defense officials expressed concern regarding reports in the Russian media that China has signed a deal with Iran for the delivery of two squadrons of J-10 fighter jets, developed by Beijing and based on a model of the Israeli-made Lavi.

They said it was possible that Syria would also buy the aircraft, a move that would greatly enhance its capabilities. The J-10 is based on technology and components sold to China by Israel following the decision to stop development of the Lavi project in the 1980s.

According to the Russian *Kommersant* daily, representatives of the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company said China would deliver the jet by 2010. The contract's value was \$1 billion, the paper said.

According to the report, the J-10 can use detachable fuel tanks to fly to targets 2,940 kilometers away. If true, it could reach Israel and return to base. Until now, the Russian-made MiG-29 (Fulcrum) has been the Iranian fighter jet with the longest range, 2,100 km.



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