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A casually deployed radar system

 By [Aluf Benn](#)

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Significant strategic changes often occur surprisingly quietly, without drawing the deserved attention. A clear example of this is the agreement last month for the deployment of a U.S. radar system in the Negev, which will bolster Israel's defense against Iranian or Syrian surface-to-surface ballistic missiles.

The radar deployment will have historical significance: the first American base on Israeli territory. Israel has always had reservations about such a possibility and preferred to "defend itself by itself" and retain maximum freedom of action. This time the deployment will be for the long term. The radar will be operated by civilians employed by the company that builds the system, contracted by the Pentagon, and by two U.S. soldiers. Military sources say that in the future the system will be handed over to the Israel Defense Forces. Until then, if it happens, an American flag will fly in the Negev.

Anyone who tries to attack Israel with missiles will consider the radar a priority target. Anyone attempting such a strike will have to take into account the likelihood of harming the American crew, and the implications of such an action. This will increase Israel's deterrence, to a certain extent.

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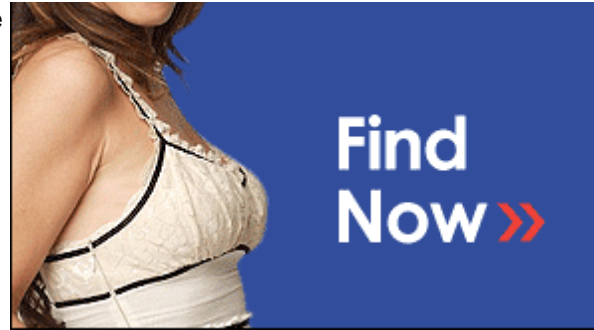
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Israel, too, will have to take into account the risk to the lives of the American radar operators, if it decides to strike the Iranian nuclear installations or strategic targets in Syria. Israel will not be able to take action without early and explicit approval from the White House. The minute the base in the Negev is set up, it will be like handcuffs on Israel's freedom of action.



In the current circumstances, the radar deployment, planned to take place in the coming months, has two possible meanings. One: a signal to Israel not to attack Iran. The prime minister and defense minister had asked U.S. President George W. Bush for an offensive means of attack and were turned down, getting the defensive system as a consolation prize. Israel will not be able to neutralize the threat against it, experts quipped, but at least it will be more aware of when it is being attacked.

The second meaning is less likely, but should not be ignored: The United States is planning to attack Iran, or to back an Israeli strike, and it is preparing Israel's defenses against a possible Iranian response. The radar deployment will make it easier to deploy American defensive missiles in Israel during an emergency, as the United States did in 1991 and 2003. Could the U.S.-Israel missile-defense exercise scheduled for the fall actually be a cover for a surprise attack against Iran's nuclear installations?

All these questions and their implications have not been discussed in the cabinet, security cabinet or Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and have received almost no mention in the media. Even the battle for political credit - who got the system for Israel, Ehud Barak or Ehud Olmert - was less intense than expected.

The decision to deploy the radar was unusual. It reminds one of "Charlie Wilson's War," a film about a congressman who funded the mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviets and equipped them with arms from Israel. It all began with the private initiative of Mark Kirk, a Republican congressman from Chicago and an ardent supporter of Israel, who spent time as a reservist in the

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U.S. Navy's command center during the Second Lebanon War, when Israel's performance caused him grave concern.

The defense establishment was not thrilled about the American radar and sidelined the idea. It was brought up again when officials in Jerusalem considered possible "parting gifts" from Bush. The Pentagon promised to bolster the radar's deterrent capabilities by linking it to a satellite system that Israel had been kept out of, and the Defense Ministry agreed.

Kirk, who is facing a major challenge in his run for a fifth term, followed the process and rallied for it in Washington. Kirk believes that if Israel attacks Iran, the U.S. must assist.

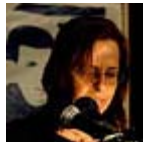
Once more, an important security-related decision was made in the most casual manner, without the necessary political and public oversight. The defense establishment considered the radar deployment a technical-operational issue, and the political aspects were discussed, in the best-case scenario, behind closed doors at the Defense Ministry. In-depth assessments and inter-ministerial preparations proposed by the Winograd Committee investigating the Second Lebanon War were absent in the decision making.

Now the discussion will move to a committee on planning and construction. The radar requires extensive and costly cement infrastructure, lots of electricity, is as loud as an industrial plant, and emits a great deal of radiation. It is possible to guess that its deployment will be approved, despite the environmental implications, and it will be set up and operated. Hopefully the operators will enjoy better conditions than what the American operators currently experience in Japan. In that case, it took more than a year before they received permanent showers and toilets.

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