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Israel Navy eyes advanced US warship

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Yaakov Katz , THE JERUSALEM POST

Ahead of a decision on navy procurement plans, a number of top officers from the IDF sailed recently on Lockheed Martin's Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) in the United States.

In July, the IDF - seeking to upgrade its sea-based capabilities - received permission from the Pentagon to purchase the LCS, under development by Lockheed Martin Corp. and General Dynamics.

Designed for speed, maneuverability and amphibious operations, the LCS was built according to US Navy specifications and as a "brown water" ship meant to operate in shallow waters along coasts and in depths where there are combined threats from land and sea.

OC Navy Adm. Elazar Marom dispatched a number of officers to the United States two weeks ago to sail on the LCS and test its capabilities. The officers returned home and reported back to Marom ahead of an expected decision on the type of ship the navy plans to buy by the end of the year.

In addition to reviewing the LCS - whose price has soared over the past year and now reportedly reaches \$500 million - the navy is also considering downgrading its procurement plans and purchasing more Sa'ar 5-class missile ships.

Navy sources said the decision would be made in the coming weeks. After the decision is made, it will be presented for approval to the General Staff.

"There are a number of possibilities and they are under review," one source said. "There are other possibilities such as more Sa'ar 5s, an upgraded Sa'ar 5 that would be called Sa'ar 5.5, or to wait for the LCS's price to go down."

Israel currently operates three Sa'ar 5 corvettes - *Eilat*, *Hanit* and *Lahav* - which were built by General Dynamics in the early 1990s per Israeli specifications. The ships are equipped with three missile systems - Barak, Harpoon and Gabriel.

If acquired by the navy, the LCS would enhance Israel's long-arm capabilities and could be potentially used in a conflict with Iran. The ship, capable of carrying special forces and larger infantry units, can also carry midsize vehicles as well as two helicopters. The ship would also likely be outfitted with the Barak anti-missile defense system and would be able to intercept incoming missiles.

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