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Security and Defense: The sky's the limit

Yaakov Katz, THE JERUSALEM POST Apr. 19, 2007

They are called the pilots of the Israel Air Force's "International Squadron" - not due to their diverse backgrounds, but to their having crisscrossed the globe and flown missions to more than 100 different countries.

They flew prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's armored limousine to Morocco in 1993; airlifted 5,000 of the 15,000 Ethiopian Jews brought to Israel during Operation Solomon in 1991; and transported ammunition from the United States - and a chemical agent from France for fire extinguishing - during the Second Lebanon War last summer.

Alongside these missions however, the International Squadron, also known as Squadron 120, is mainly responsible for the midair refueling of the IAF's wide array of F-15 and F-16 fighter jets. With Iran racing toward nuclear power and estimations that a military strike is a possible option to stop its nuclear program, this capability is turning into a strategic asset.

"While the fighter jets do the work, it is up to the fuel tankers to get them to where they need to go," Lt.-Col. A. told *The Jerusalem Post* during a recent visit to squadron headquarters near Tel Aviv.

Established in 1963 by then-OC air force Ezer Weizman, the IAF's aerial refueling squadron has participated in some of the most fascinating and sensitive operations in the country's history, some of them still classified. Its first aircraft were Hercules and Dakotas but in 1972, the IAF received its current fleet of Boeing 707s, called Re'em (antelope) in Hebrew. The fleet also consists of a number of KC-130 tankers.

In recent years, due to developments in the region, the squadron has increased its training regimen, A. revealed. Last September, *Time* magazine reported that IAF fighters were conducting "a lot of refueling training." Over the last year, the squadron's pilots have clocked in more than 1,000 flight hours.

"We are prepared for every mission at any possible range and we are essentially the IAF's long arm," A. explained, without mentioning Iran. "Our business is aerial refueling at any altitude, in any weather, at night and during the day."

He said the squadron has trained and drawn up plans for a wide range of missions, including those requiring midair refueling on the way to the target and again on return. In such missions, the tankers - large planes that make easy targets for enemy anti-aircraft missiles - would deploy at a standoff point outside range.

"We are prepared to refuel planes any place in the world," A. said. "Our preference always is to get the plane the closest we can to its target."

While Israel is still far away from deciding to launch a strike against Iran, according to Brig.-Gen.

(ret.) Shlomo Brom, a senior researcher with the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, the IAF's tankers would play a crucial role in any such operation.

IAF fighters have carried out long-range missions, some with refueling support and some without. In 1981, F-16s bombed the Osirak reactor near Baghdad and returned on their last drops of fuel and, without midair refueling. In 1985, however, Squadron 120 was activated for the IAF's longest-range air strike, when fighters flew more than 2,000 kilometers to bomb PLO headquarters in Tunis.

WHETHER TANKERS would be used during a hypothetical strike on Iran would depend on the route used by the air force. The quickest and most convenient route would be over Jordan and Iraq, although it would not be simple. According to Brom, the IAF would be best off flying the longer route over the Indian Ocean, with minimal penetration of any other state's air space.

"Flying through Jordan without the explicit or implicit permission of the Jordanians would hurt relations with a friendly Arab state," Brom wrote in a recent article in the book *Getting Ready for a Nuclear Iran*. "Flying over Iraq without coordination with the United States would lead to a clash with US interceptors."

According to Brom, the jets would need to fly low to avoid radar detection, and as a result they would burn more fuel. "It means that the attack aircraft would need to be refueled at least twice, on their way to the targets and from the targets," he wrote.

Squadron 120 saw action in Lebanon last summer, when its pilots clocked in 400 flying hours, refueling fighters that were hunting for Katyusha rocket launchers.

Tragedy has also struck the squadron. In September 1971, an airplane was hit by an Egyptian SA-2 anti-aircraft missile and exploded. Seven airmen were killed and one survived, after he quickly put on a parachute and jumped to safety.

THE PRIMARY plane used by the squadron - the Boeing 707 - weighs 151 tons, can carry 87 tons of fuel and has a range of 5,000 km., with flight capability at altitudes from 300 feet-4,200 feet. Inside the 707, the cargo hold is lined with fuel tanks, all connected with metal pipes that lead to the back of the plane where the "gas hose" extends and connects to the "client" - the plane receiving the fuel.

The system used to refuel planes was developed by Israel Aerospace Industries. The airman who operates the refueling system is called a "boomer" - the name given to the 40-foot gas tailpipe hose that connects to the top of fighters.

The boomer, wearing specially designed 3D glasses, sits in the back of the plane in front of a computer console, and with a joystick moves the pipe into the receiving plane. The bottom of the fuel tanker is lined with a traffic light-like system that assists the plane receiving the fuel in lining up behind the tanker.

With an eye to the future, A. is waiting anxiously for 2020, the year he believes unmanned aerial vehicles will operate as refueling tankers. The air force is also considering modernizing its refueling fleet and converting US-manufactured executive jets, such as the Gulfstream G550, into tankers.

"If you have fuel, you can reach distant targets, better utilize your assets and carry larger amounts of weapons," IAF Brig.-Gen. Yohanon Loker said in a conference on aerial refueling several months ago.

The advantage of unmanned refueling tankers is that they would minimize the risk to pilots and would be harder for enemy radar to spot because they are relatively small. They would also be able to spend extended periods in the air - some can stay airborne for 24 hours - without the need to refuel or land to switch pilots.

But until the refueling UAVs come into service, Lt.-Col. A. and his men plan to continue taking to the skies to support IAF warplanes and transport aircraft, as they head out for missions around the world while chanting their motto: "Any place, any time and in any weather."

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