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**Delaying the Release of Fifth-Generation Fighter Planes  
to the Arab States**

**Shimon Arad**

Israel's aerial superiority remains a key component of its qualitative military edge in the region. Israel's airpower is central to its image and deterrent ability: it protects the country's airspace, provides the first and multi-arena response to both immediate and more distant threats, enables retaliation and retribution missions for attacks on Israel, and plays a central role in managing military operations on various fronts. However, Israel's aerial superiority has been eroded in recent years, due to a combination of two force buildup processes in Arab states – the improvement of their air defense systems and the massive acquisition of advanced fighter planes. For Israel to maintain aerial freedom of action in the next decade, it must have exclusive regional access to fifth-generation fighter planes, such as the F-35 (known in Israel as the "Adir").

The United States is currently Israel's principal address regarding efforts to prevent the transfer of fifth-generation technology to the Gulf states in the form of a possible sale of the F-35. True, Russia and China are developing fifth-generation fighter planes (SU-57 and J-20, respectively), and Russia has even deployed four SU-57 planes to Syria, but these planes are still being developed and tested and lack some of the advantages of the American F-35. In addition, the states now seeking to acquire fifth-generation fighter planes – the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia – will likely prefer the F-35, because acquiring Russian and/or Chinese planes will deny them one of the F35's main advantages, namely, its ability to operate in an integrative way with the existing Western fighter planes at their disposal, made in the United States and Europe.

Securing Israel's exclusive access to fifth-generation fighter planes will grant it a number of significant benefits against the improvements in the aerial systems of actively hostile countries, such as Iran and Syria, and also enable it to deal with the impressive aerial systems of pragmatic Arab countries, should they ever renew their hostility toward Israel.

*Improved ability to defend the country's airspace:* In the existing situation, the Israel Air Force (IAF) has two important advantages in defending the country's skies. First, the detection systems can effectively identify the approach of fourth-generation fighter planes towards Israel's air space. Second, the F-35 will provide clear benefits in the efforts to intercept these planes, as far from the borders as possible, even in the face of

the advanced long range air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles available to them. In contrast, the presence of fifth-generation fighter planes will complicate the IAF defense system and increase its vulnerability. Existing radars and sensors will have trouble identifying these planes as they approach Israel's air space and guiding the Israeli planes to intercept them. If these planes can approach Israel's air space they will be able to attack Israel's detection system kinetically, enabling fourth-generation fighter planes to integrate into the second wave of attacks on strategic targets.

*Long range aerial operational ability, including over transit countries:* With its high stealth ability, the F-35 should enable Israel to operate evasively against distant strategic targets, such as the Iranian nuclear program. This refers to both Iran's aerial detection and air-defense systems, and the detection systems of countries over which Israeli planes would have to fly.

*Ability to operate in areas with dense aerial defense systems:* In recent years, countries in the region have improved their air defenses, such as with the S-300 systems supplied to Iran and Egypt, and the SA-17 supplied to Syria. There are also reports that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are considering purchasing the S-400 from Russia. This trend of reinforcing defense systems designed to prevent access or penetration, what is known as Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), creates severe restrictions for an air force trying to penetrate or attack. The advanced stealth qualities of the F-35 plane should enable the IAF to operate under protection in areas saturated with advanced anti-aircraft systems.

### **The Trump Administration and Israel's Qualitative Edge**

Massive acquisition of advanced planes by Arab countries in recent years is a challenge to the IAF's future operational freedom. Assuming the full implementation of deals signed with the United States, Europe, and Russia, Sunni Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman) will soon have access to between 500 and 600 fighter jets that are more advanced than the IAF array of planes – except for the F-35. About half of these planes, and the most advanced of them, will be made in the United States. They will be equipped with advanced radar capabilities and some of the world's best air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles, and only the F-35 will afford Israel a qualitative edge. Israel did not object to these deals, given the assurances of the previous administration that Israel would enjoy a considerable period of regional monopoly of the F-35.

It now appears that the Trump administration is seriously considering selling the F-35 to the UAE. The administration is under pressure from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, two important regional allies for the promotion of regional American strategy, particularly against Iran, to supply them with F-35 planes. President Trump's "business-based"

approach and his desire that regional allies contribute to the United States economy, as well as pressure from Lockheed Martin, the aircraft manufacturer, could tilt the balance in favor of selling the planes to Arab countries. Tendentious leaks on this subject are meant to test the degree of expected opposition from Congress and from Israel.

An agreement by Washington to sell the F-35 to the UAE constitutes a dangerous precedent, which could lead to the supply of these planes to other Arab countries, and spur Russia and China to market their own products. The F-35's ability to record and send aerial pictures from and to other planes – a feature that creates integration, the capability for network-enabled warfare, and improved distribution of missions between planes □ also upgrades the attack and survival capabilities of older planes. Thus, releasing even a small number of F-35 planes to Arab states will facilitate improved operation of their extended range of fighter planes and pose a serious problem to the IAF, if it is ever called upon to fight against the Arab air forces.

Breaching Israel's exclusive access to the F-35 also contradicts American legislation from 2008 intended to maintain Israel's qualitative edge. According to this legislation, Israel must have a technological advantage over Arab countries with the American weapon systems at its disposal. However, in a divided Washington, there must be explicit and determined opposition from Israel to spur Israel's supporters in the administration and in Congress to take action against the possible sale of F-35 planes to Arab countries.

Israel's opposition to the sale of the F-35 to Gulf states is not expected to affect the growing closeness between the parties, based on converging interests with regard to important regional issues, led by the struggle against Iran, radical Islamic terrorism, and the Muslim Brotherhood. These countries are aware that Israel has in recent years chosen not to object to the sale of advanced American weapon systems, given its assumption that its qualitative edge would be maintained in the form of regional exclusivity regarding the F-35.

### **Recommendation**

It appears that it will not be possible to prevent the sale of fifth-generation fighter planes to Arab states forever, but it is certainly possible to delay this development by several years. The key is the United States, which is now considering the sale of F-35 planes to Gulf states. Therefore, the government of Israel must express its opposition to such sales to the American administration in a clear and determined fashion, while keeping this matter separate from other pending issues between Israel and the United States, principally Iran and the peace process with the Palestinians.