

25.76x25.72	1	1	עמוד	haaretz-front	19/08/2020	74143618-4
עד - ראש המכון למדיניות ואסטרטגיה בהבית החומי הרצלי - 84260						

Sale of F-35s to UAE still on the U.S. agenda

Despite Netanyahu's claims; the fighter jets could degrade Israel's air superiority

Amos Harel

A number of complex considerations lay behind the United Arab Emirates' decision to break a long-standing taboo and reach a normalization agreement with Israel. One of them, presumably, is the UAE's hope that the agreement will create a breakthrough in its efforts to buy advanced American weaponry, first and foremost the F-35 fighter plane.

Sources involved in the discussions among the U.S., Israel and the UAE said intensive talks began a few months ago, in the wake of Washington's release in January of its Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. It may have been unintentional, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan to annex West Bank settlements became a bargaining chip with the UAE.

Based on preliminary understandings with the U.S. administration, Netanyahu sought to annex 30 percent of the West Bank. The Americans sought to reduce the annexed area to 10 percent, but offered compensation in the form of a nonbelligerency agreement with the UAE.

Netanyahu, however, insisted on full normalization.

And for that, he had to shelve annexation.

Initially, Israel agreed only to defer annexation for several months. The UAE wanted it permanently off the table. In the end, they apparently agreed on a number of years. After that? Only God knows.

For the Gulf sheikhs, there was another burning issue. With all due respect to advanced Israeli technology in areas such as desalina-

Gantz, he disregards you
Editorial, Page 5

tion and irrigation, this was available to them (along with border security technology and cybersecurity) even before the relationship was formalized. But Israeli objections prevented sales of sophisticated U.S. weaponry to the UAE and Saudi Arabia for several years.

Neither the Obama nor the Trump administrations had approved sales of the F-35 or of attack drones to Arab states. This was due to the reasoned objections

posed by Israeli defense officials, including former Israel Air Force commander Maj. Gen. (res.) Amir Eshel (today the Defense Ministry's director general) and Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilad, who at the time headed the Defense Ministry's political-military affairs bureau.

Analyst Nahum Barnea reported in Yedioth Ahronoth Tuesday that the Trump administration now plans to sell F-35s and advanced drones to the UAE. The agreement, he wrote, was essentially peace in exchange for advanced weaponry and canceling annexation.

Though he didn't say so explicitly, his implication was that Netanyahu had lifted Israel's objection to the sale. This was done behind the Israeli defense establishment's back, Barnea added.

On Monday, the Prime Minister's Office said in response to a question from Haaretz that Israel's objection to selling advanced arms to any Arab country remains in place. On Tuesday afternoon, it issued a detailed denial of Barnea's report. Netanyahu added his standard accusation that this was "fake news."

The statement said Netanyahu had routinely reiterated his objection to the

See JETS, Page 3

JETS

Continued from page 1

Americans, basing himself on an opinion submitted by the current air force chief, Maj. Gen. Amiram Norkin, in early July. Netanyahu voiced his objections to both U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman that same month, it said. And in late July, it added, he briefed Defense Minister Benny Gantz on this.

"The peace agreement with the UAE doesn't include any provisions on this

preserving its qualitative military edge (often referred to as QME) over Arab states. These understandings were anchored in Congressional legislation in 2008.

But Israel doesn't simply approve or reject American arms sales; QME decisions are sensitive. They are discussed at length behind the scenes and generally aren't publicized.

In other words, despite what Netanyahu said Tuesday, the administration may decide for its own reasons to sell the F-35 down the line. And the Israeli government will say "We tried to convince them, but we failed."

Trump attaches great importance to big contracts,



Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman dancing with swords in Riyadh in 2017.
Bandar Al-Jaloud / Saudi Royal Palace

subject," the statement concluded. "The United States made it clear to Israel that it will scrupulously preserve Israel's qualitative edge."

Incidentally, at about the same time that statement was released, one of Netanyahu's close associates, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, was interviewed by Kan public radio. Steinitz downplayed Barnea's report by saying that in any case, Israel is beyond the F-35's flight range from the UAE, so the sale wouldn't endanger Israel (even if the regime there changes in the future – a possibility Steinitz didn't comment on directly). Thus the government seems to be covering all its bases in its attempt to reject the report.

But while Netanyahu claimed this is fake news, what the statement didn't say is also interesting. Israel's right to object to U.S. arms sales comes from understandings forged with Washington years ago about

An end to Israel's edge?

As I've written before, there's also a problem with Netanyahu's extreme compartmentalization of both temporary political allies and senior defense officials. The prime minister is running Israel's foreign and defense policy as his private fief. Decisions are based almost exclusively on his own judgment, without informing, consulting or cooperating with anyone else.

If Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi didn't know about the agreement in the works, it will be hard to blame them for any problems that might emerge regarding the F-35. And if the two Kahol Lavan leaders were a little sharper politically, they would have exploited this issue to assail Netanyahu.

In the background, the stench of the corruption in Israel's purchase of submarines and gunships still lingers. Several close associates of Netanyahu are suspected of having profited from those deals.

And as if that weren't enough, it turned out – contrary to Netanyahu's repeated denials, until he backtracked somewhat – that senior defense officials weren't told that he apparently secretly gave Germany permission to sell advanced submarines to Egypt. In the wake of that grave development, even the shadow of a suspicion about F-35 sales to the UAE naturally raises questions.

If the UAE indeed now expects to be sold F-35s and attack drones, the Israeli news reports may well delay the signing of its agreements with Israel – which, contrary to Netanyahu's bureau, don't yet seem to be recorded in any official document.

There's also another potential problem. To date, only one other country in the region, Turkey, has received permission to buy F-35s. And even that deal was frozen after Ankara bought Russia's S-400 aerial defense system.

If the UAE does receive permission to buy the planes, the Saudis and Egyptians will quickly get in line. And even though both countries are friendly to Israel, that would put an end to Israel's qualitative military edge.