

Arrival of F-35 fighter jets to Israel delayed by heavy fog

The stealth multirole fighter aircraft were scheduled to arrive around noon from Italy, where they landed for a stopover; 'the F-35 will constitute another component in maintaining our aerial superiority in the region,' Defense Minister Lieberman says.

Ynetnews

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The arrival of the two F-35 stealth multirole fighter aircraft to Israel was delayed on Monday morning because of heavy fog in Italy, where the planes landed for a stopover.

"Due to weather conditions that don't allow for the departure of planes from Italy, the planes' takeoff will be delayed for a short time," the IDF Spokesman's Office said.

"We will not endanger the American pilots. This isn't an operational flight," said IAF chief of staff Brig. Gen Tal Kalman.

The two aircraft's journey to Israel is being done in an administration mode, meaning the planes are unarmed and flying under strict security protocols.

The planes were scheduled to land at the Nevatim Air Base on Monday around noontime and be received in a ceremony at 2:30pm attended by hundreds of guests, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Reuven Rivlin, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his American counterpart, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, in addition to senior IDF officers, MKs, businessmen and other officials.

Because of the expected delay, a decision on whether to hold the ceremony on Monday or not will only be made at 4:30pm.

Earlier Monday, Carter was welcomed with a military honor guard at the Kirya IDF Headquarters in Tel Aviv.



The F-35 doing a test flight

"Today, we are receiving the F-35 plane that is joining our ranks and present another component in maintaining air superiority in our region," Lieberman said on Monday morning.

"A strong Air Force means a strong IDF, and a strong IDF means a strong State of Israel and a strong nation of Israel," the defense minister asserted.

"We also thank Defense Secretary Carter. It is only symbolic that his term ends close to the arrival of these planes to Israel because Carter, like the American people, is a great friend of Israel," Lieberman added.

Lt. Col. Yotam, 38, the commander of the Israel Air Force's first F-35 squadron, will be the first Israeli pilot to fly the American stealth jet. The squadron, named "Golden Eagle Squadron," will become operational in about a year.

Lt. Col. Yotam's first flight, which will be done over southern Israel, will be relatively short and without armament or any maneuvers. It will last for 40 minutes and is meant to give the pilot a "feel" of the plane and allow him to practice landing it.

"The American pilots who are bringing these two planes reported that everything was working according to plan and that the flight over has been smooth," said the squadron commander, who spent the last few days practicing many different scenarios ahead of his fight F-35 flight.



F-35 fighter jets (Photo: MCT)

Meanwhile, the deputy commander of the Nevatim Air Force base said the new fighters will give Israel an upper hand over its neighbors for years to come.

"We are going to be very strong for a long time, having these airplanes. And Israel has to be strong in this region for its existence," said Col. Asaf. "It's a message for everybody that Israel will keep on holding the high-end technology in this area."

The purchase of the F35 elevates the entire Israeli air force to a higher level, the colonel said, adding that four Israeli pilots have been trained to fly the F-35 and more pilots will be shown how to use the war system.

"This specific airplane is going to be a very good one for the next decades," he said, lauding the F-35's capabilities, including stealth and other high-tech technologies.

In November, a senior Israeli Air Force official described the arrival of the F-35 as a game-changer, citing its various cutting-edge systems, which would preserve Israel's ability to act freely in hostile airspace. He cited its long-range capability, its provision of critical data in real time and a stealth system that can evade or delay detection by the world's most sophisticated radar systems.

Speaking on condition of anonymity under military briefing guidelines, he said it would take "more than a few months" for the first planes to be operational.

Netanyahu's office announced last month that his Security Cabinet approved the purchase of 17 additional F-35s. In all, it said, the acquisition will bring the number of planes the air force will get to 50.

The F-35 is the Pentagon's most expensive weapons program, with an estimated cost of nearly \$400 billion. Israel is among a small number of allies to get the plane.

The F-35 program has been criticized by members of the US Congress over testing problems and cost. International buyers include Britain, South Korea, Israel, Italy, Australia, Canada, Turkey and Japan.

Problems with the fighter jet included issues with the radar software and increased risk of neck injury to lower-weight pilots when they ejected from the aircraft.

Industry and US defense officials say they are working hard to continue driving down the cost of the new warplanes to \$85 million per plane by 2019, as well as the cost of operating them.