

Israel's missile shield against Iran: Three Americans in a trailer

Contributed by Aluf Benn and Barak Ravid, Haaretz Correspondents
Sunday, 24 August 2008

commander and two operators monitor missile radars in an armored trailer somewhere in Europe. Inside, they use satellite technology to track the origin and trajectory of long-range missiles. In true American fashion, each shift begins with calisthenics, followed by an intelligence briefing.

That is the envisioned routine of the U.S. team that will be responsible for protecting Israel from surface-to-surface missiles launched from Iran or Syria.

Earlier this month the U.S. and Israel agreed on the deployment of a high-powered early-warning missile radar system in the Negev, to be staffed by U.S. military personnel. The station will receive information from the U.S. team in Europe that will aid it in its work.

The deployment of the Joint Tactical Ground Station (JTAGS) system, is widely seen as a kind of parting gift from Washington to Jerusalem as President George W. Bush prepares to leave office.

The system will protect Israel's skies from missile attacks, but the flip side of the deal is that Israel's freedom of action against Iran or Syria will be significantly curtailed.

Israel will be required to obtain U.S. permission for any such operation, since it would endanger the lives of the U.S. personnel operating the system. The ground station itself would likely become the target of any reprisal attack by Iran or Syria.

Senior defense officials view the radar system deployment as a signal of Washington's opposition to an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program.

Sources in Jerusalem said on Saturday that the Negev station would be operated by civilian firms contracted by the Pentagon, along with a small staff of liaison officers. The early warning station is expected to be transferred to Israeli operation at some point in the future.

The officials said the agreement does not stipulate the establishment of a permanent U.S. base in Israeli territory.

They said the warning station would significantly extend the response time to a missile attack and intercept those attacks from a far greater distance than had been previously possible.

Israel's current missile defense system depends on the identification of a single U.S. satellite, which can spot the missile itself but not its origin or path.

The new system is significantly more accurate than Israel's "Green Pine" radar system, which supports the Arrow anti-missile system.

JTAGS will cost between \$20 and \$30 million, the U.S. periodical Defense News reported last week.

The system is expected to be set up next year, but it could go on-line earlier, ahead of a large-scale U.S.-Israeli missile defense drill slated for this fall.

Israel asked for a similar system ten years ago, but encountered firm opposition from the Pentagon, which was opposed to divulging U.S. defense secrets.

Two years ago, U.S. Senator John McCain voiced support for the deal while visiting Israel.

Congressman Mark Kirk of Illinois also joined lobbying efforts for the agreement. Kirk is a former naval officer and is expected to be given a senior position in the Department of Defense if McCain is elected president.

On one of his own visits to Israel, Kirk heard a briefing on the Iran threat, after which he contacted Yoram Ben Ze'ev, then head of the Foreign Ministry's North America division, about setting up an early warning station in Israel.

Kirk suggested building a U.S. base in Israel which would enjoy extraterritorial status, like U.S. bases in South Korea.

Proponents of the plan in Jerusalem said that sealing the deal would "raise the price" of an Iranian strike on Israel, as such an attack would now be viewed as targeting the United States itself.

On the other hand, critics said the U.S. presence in Israel would tie Israel's hands in dealing with its adversaries, and subject any attack to prior U.S. approval.

Kirk also recruited Congresswoman Jane Harman of California to the cause.

On the eve of President Bush's May visit to Israel, some 70 members of Congress from both parties signed a petition calling for the missile defense system.

In July, after Iran tested its long-range Shihab-3 missile, Kirk and Harman wrote to Bush again, urging him to take action.

In the subsequent meetings between Israeli and American officials, the latter reiterated their opposition to a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran.

The deal was finally sealed in a meeting between Barak and his U.S. counterpart, Robert Gates, in July, and details were worked out by Lt. Gen. Henry Obering, the head of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency, earlier this month.

Related articles:

- Attack isn't the answer
- Daniel Levy / There are better options
- Diplomatic effort on Iran nukes jeopardized by U.S.-Russia crisis