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US Ospreys and air tankers put Iran in Israel's reach

By Oren Dorell

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The United States plans to give Israel weapons that would enable it to send ground forces against Iranian nuclear facilities that it can't penetrate from the air.

The deal includes air-refueling aircraft, advanced radars for F-15 fighter jets, and up to eight V-22 Ospreys, an aircraft that can land like a helicopter and carry two dozen special operations forces with their gear over long distances at aircraft speeds.

The Osprey "is the ideal platform for sending Israeli special forces into Iran," says Kenneth Pollack, a former CIA analyst now at the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

The aircraft could help solve Israel's inability to breach Iran's uranium enrichment facility buried under a granite mountain at Fordow. It might be impregnable to even the heaviest conventional bunker-busting munitions in the U.S. arsenal, Pollack said. Israeli military planners have been brainstorming how to conduct an effective operation, Pollack said, citing conversations with senior Israeli military officers.

"One of the possibilities is (Israel) would use special forces to assault the Fordow facility and blow it up," Pollack said.

The weapons deal would be part of a military aid package for Israel that includes \$1 billion for up to eight V-22 tilt-rotors; \$500 million to retrofit radars into F-15 fighters and another \$1 billion for a variety of air-to-ground weapons. Additional details about the U.S.-financed deal were revealed during a visit to Washington by Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon on June 15.

The State Department said discussions of the arms deal are ongoing.

Secretary of State John Kerry on Thursday had a working dinner with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem and will visit with Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian officials through Saturday, discussing broad regional issues and the peace process.

Jonathan Schanzer, executive director of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, said the arms package was part of an Israeli wish list including some items that were not discussed publicly to help it keep a military edge over other nations in the region and for possible operations against Iran.

Israel's air force would be hard-pressed to cause lasting damage to the Iranian nuclear program because it cannot sustain long-term bombardment and has limited bunker-busting capabilities and limited air-refueling capabilities, said Kenneth Katzman, who co-wrote the 2012 report "Israel: Possible military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities" for the Congressional Research Service.

When he first announced the deal during a visit to Israel in April, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the Ospreys would provide Israel with high-speed maritime search-and-rescue capabilities.

Yaalon said the arms sale would send a message to Israel's chief adversary in the region.

"Without a credible military option, there's no chance the Iranian regime will realize it has to stop the military nuclear project," Yaalon said.

Other parts of the arms package include Boeing's KC-135 "Stratotanker," which can refuel Ospreys and other aircraft while airborne and extend the tilt-rotor aircraft's 426-mile range almost indefinitely. The deal also includes anti-radiation missiles that are used to target air defense systems, and advanced radars for Israel's fleet of F-15 fighter jets, according to a Defense Department press release.

That equipment would increase Israel's capabilities against Iran, said Ely Karmon, a senior research scholar at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism at The Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel.

The refueling equipment would extend the reach of Israeli special forces, which could be used against Iran as they were in Israel's attack on a Syrian nuclear facility under construction in 2007, Karmon said.

In the 2007 attack, at least one Israeli team was on the ground to provide laser targeting of sophisticated air munitions, Karmon said. "The same would be done for Iranian sites."

The Osprey also could be used for search-and-rescue operations if Israeli aircraft involved in a complex air operation are shot down and pilots endangered, Karmon said.

Michael Rubin, an analyst for the American Enterprise Institute, said senior U.S. and Israeli bombers would do significant damage to Iran's hardened sites by targeting the entrances, and Israel could use the Ospreys for missions other than Iran's nuclear sites. Israel may want the ability to send troops to secure chemical facilities in remote regions of Syria or to block Iranian shipments bound for terrorists in the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula or Lebanon, Rubin said.

"Sudan and Eritrea are floating the idea of building an Iranian naval base or shipping Iranian missiles to the Gaza Strip," Rubin said, referring to the Palestinian territory controlled by the terrorist group Hamas. "If you wanted to disrupt such missiles in a convoy, you'd do it with an Osprey."

The arms deal also sends a message to Iran and reassurance to Israel that the United States is serious about standing by the Jewish state, Karmon said.

Katzman said he doesn't think the arms sale provides Israel with significant new capabilities that Israel did not already have. He said the overall defense package, which also includes advanced

F-16 fighter jets for the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Iran's chief rivals in the Persian Gulf, is more "a symbolic move to show (American) resolve to Iran," Katzman said.