

## 'Israel trying to block U.S.-Saudi Arabia defense contract'

**Defense source says deal includes purchase of scores of new F-15 fighter jets and the upgrading of the 150 F-15s already in the Saudi air force.**

By Barak Ravid

Israel is trying to prevent a big defense contract between the United States and Saudi Arabia from going through, a senior defense source told Haaretz. The deal includes the purchase of scores of new F-15 fighter jets and the upgrading of the 150 F-15s already in the Saudi air force.

The source said Israel expressed a number of reservations to the Americans over the past month, and the issue is expected to come up in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meetings in Washington on Tuesday.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak raised the deal in meetings with U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and National Security Advisor General Jim Jones two weeks ago in Washington. Israel also made its reservations clear at a meeting in Tel Aviv between top Israeli defense officials and a delegation led by U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy.

The aircraft deal was also raised in talks between Saudi King Abdullah and U.S. President Barack Obama last week. The defense source told Haaretz the Americans are interested in building up the Saudi air force vis-a-vis Iran, which would help deter the Islamic Republic.

Israel, however, hopes that if the deal goes forward, Saudi Arabia will receive fewer advanced versions of the F-15 than those possessed by Israel, which seeks to maintain its air force's superiority. "Today these planes are against Iran, tomorrow they might turn against us," the source said.

Israel and the United States held a number of meetings over the past 18 months on Israel's superiority. The two sides agreed that neither would surprise the other by agreeing a military deal with a third party. A senior source in the U.S. administration told Haaretz the United States has promised Israel it would have priority access to any new weapons system and, in some cases, exclusive rights to buy new weapons systems, as opposed to Arab states.

"The administration is conducting open and completely transparent talks with Israel on the matter, and we are updating Israel on any planned deal to hear its reservations," the official said. "We believe that there are many cases in which the Iranian threat commits us to strengthen the ability of states in the region to defend themselves."