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Israel Air Force chief underscores "vital importance" of F-35 to Israel

JERUSALEM, May 26 (Xinhua) -- Israel needs the F-35 fighter jets more than ever before in light of the changes grasping the Middle East, said Maj. Gen. Ido Nechushtan, commander of the Israel Air Force (IAF).

"The day on which the first four F-15s arrived in Israel changed the skies over the Middle East. The F-35 is vital to our existence and will provide a dramatic leap in capabilities," Nechushtan said on Wednesday at a conference hosted by the Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies, north of Tel Aviv.

Nechushtan's remarks follow reports earlier this week that the United States is contemplating whether to shelve the F-35 program - - the costliest in the American military's history -- due to recent projections of massive cost overruns.

U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) officials last Thursday briefed the Senate's Armed Services Committee on the progress of the F-35 project. Committee chairman Carl Levin instructed the Pentagon to begin searching for alternatives to the F-35 after DoD representatives at the briefing said the jet's original price tag of 69 million U.S. dollars is expected to rise to 103 million U.S. dollars.

In October 2010, Israel's Defense Ministry placed a 2.75 billion U.S. dollar order for 20 F-35s with the Lockheed Martin Corporation, the jet's manufacturer, after years of hard bargaining.

The fifth-generation supersonic jet, whose forte lies in its stealth technology, is slated to ensure Israel's continued military edge over its enemies and bolster its regional deterrence.

But the deal was met with fierce objection from some Israeli lawmakers, who cited the immense costs as a risky financial undertaking.

"In terms of costs, we selected the best plane. The agreement (with Lockheed Martin) includes all parameters -- funding and technological features (integrated into the units built for the IAF)," Nechushtan told a crowd of local defense industries' executives and senior defense officials, among them General (ret.) Michael Moseley, former chief of the U.S. Air Force.

"The forecasted delay in the delivery of the F-35 to the IAF is less dramatic than what is being said. The development of new weapon systems entails ups and downs. In the end, this jet will arrive at the IAF. We do not want to think of a situation in which the IAF has jets that are inferior to what others have."

Addressing the turmoil currently sweeping through some Arab countries, Nechushtan said, "There's no doubt that we are in the midst of an earthquake in the region. It would be fair to say that the Middle East is engaged in an arms race."

"The security reality in the coming years will be significantly more complex and will pose much more challenges," Nechushtan said. "We would like a military that can operate on several levels: preserving its classic, conventional capabilities against militaries, as well as defending the home front."

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