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SECURITY AND DIPLOMACY

Drones Gain Ground After Cobra Helicopters Cut

The government has phased out one of its two types of U.S. attack helicopter in favor of using more drones, IDF officers have told Reuters, reflecting a need for lighter and cheaper air power to counter Islamist terrorists on its borders.

The officers said the last squadron of Cobras, built for tank-hunting and eluding surface-to-air missiles, was pulled from service late last year. The decision was previously kept under wraps but disclosed in an increasingly public feud between the Defense Ministry and Treasury over budget cuts.

The Israel Air Force began flying Cobras after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when its forces were battered by Egyptian and Syrian armor and air defense units.

The IAF retains two squadrons of Apache helicopters, which are bulkier than Cobras but equipped with a wide array of weaponry that lends versatility and range to counterterror operations. It also flies an undisclosed number of pilotless drones.

The Cobras were axed as part of budget cuts, a senior IDF officer said. "They were sort of stuck in the middle in terms of the role they could fulfill, so we decided to do without them," he told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

Israel had a fleet of approximately 33 AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters, according to the London-

based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

Locally made drones increasingly patrol combat zones such as the Gaza Strip. They can circle for long hours on propeller engines, beaming back video to mark ground targets or to guide troops.

Israel competes with the United States as a top global supplier of drones manufactured by Elbit Systems, Israel Aerospace Industries, and Aeronautics Defense Systems Ltd.

Ephraim Segoli, a retired IAF brigadier general with the Fisher Brothers Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies near Tel Aviv, said the Cobras were more expensive to maintain than drones and older than the Apaches.

He said Israel also saw a shift to drones as a means of reducing the danger posed by terrorists armed with shoulder-launched heat-seeking missiles. These have been fired at Israeli helicopters — so far unsuccessfully — from Gaza and the Egyptian Sinai.

"The more the technologies of the drones has improved, the more they have been able to take over close air-support roles," Segoli said, envisaging a time when piloted helicopters would be "niche" assets in a mostly remote-controlled fleet.

An IDF infantry officer said troops fighting terrorists in Gaza now routinely call in drones, rather than helicopters, for support.

Another officer said that the air force aimed to carry out strikes "within minutes" of receiving a request from ground troops — a timing that he said would likely be met by drones and helicopters rather than jets.