FINANCE COMMITTEE APPROVES BUDGET FOR PM'S PRIVATE PLANE

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$48 million project will equip passenger aircraft with defense, communications capabilities

A Knesset committee on Monday approved the purchase of a private jet for the prime minister to use when making trips abroad.

The NIS 183 million ($47.9 million) budget for the aircraft was approved by the Knesset Finance Committee with five votes in favor from coalition MKs to three votes against by opposition members

President Reuven Rivlin will also have use of the advanced jet, which is to be fitted with specialized equipment to give it a long range, various defensive capabilities, and the ability to maintain communications with Israel at all times.

Media reports in August said the plane, a used passenger jet, has already landed in Israel and is undergoing refurbishment. Full details of the plane are restricted from publication by the military censor.

The project was first approved in 2014 by the Goldberg Committee, which also approved the construction of a new residence and office for the prime minister.

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At the time, a report in The Marker financial daily indicated that Treasury officials believed the plane's purchase was not economically worthwhile but the committee declared that the decision was not to be based solely on financial considerations.

The decision also followed public outcry at the time after it was revealed that the government had spent NIS 450,000 ($127,000) outfitting an El Al plane with a bed for the prime minister during a five-hour flight to the UK.

Rivlin chooses to fly on regular commercial flights including, on occasion, flying coach class or even on economy airlines.

Until 2003, Israeli leaders flew on an Air Force Boeing 707 that served as a refueling plane when not carrying politicians. According to Channel 2, there were complaints from passengers that the aircraft was uncomfortable; in 1997 a window cracked on the plane while Netanyahu was on board, forcing the crew to fly at a low altitude.

Currently, a tender is issued to Israeli airlines when the prime minister travels. The system works well for mid-range destinations such as Europe, when all three Israeli airlines are able to compete, but for longer-range flights — such as to the US — only El Al has aircraft capable of nonstop flights.

According to a Channel 2 report in August, El Al took advantage of this monopoly, charging very high prices for such flights and on one occasion demanding $4,700 to place an oxygen tank on a flight for then-president Shimon Peres. Peres ended up flying Air Canada instead.

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