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Air Force Says Mideast Bombing Worsens Maintenance-Staff Shortage

October 29, 2014 | *Wall Street Journal*

Related Expert: Natalya Anfilofyeva

The Air Force says the U.S. bombing campaign against Islamic extremists is exacerbating its shortage of plane-maintenance experts—a gap that is rekindling tensions with Congress about how to manage the nation’s combat aircraft.

To keep U.S. planes flying over Syria and Iraq, Air Force officials said they have had to deploy hundreds of midlevel maintenance personnel to the overseas missions.

The development has forced officials to block a planned transfer of maintenance staff from other aircraft to the military’s newest plane, the F-35, officials said. That means a possible delay in the deployment of the new-generation fighter jet so older planes can keep flying at a high tempo.

“We believed we were going to have a bit of a pause coming out of Afghanistan,” said Deborah Lee James, secretary of the Air Force. “Now we are flying the pants off those aircraft with no end in sight.”

The resulting pinch has exposed the strains resulting from budget squeezes and competing views of spending priorities.

The Air Force had planned to move a squadron of older F-15s to the Air National Guard, freeing up 350 maintenance experts to join the F-35 program.

But when the Obama administration expanded air policing operations in Europe earlier this year following Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Air Force was forced to hold on to the F-15 squadron and keep maintenance personnel in that program.

The deployment of additional F-16s to the Middle East has further pressured maintenance crews.

The Air Force has said it intends to declare the F-35 operational in 2016. But the shortage of maintenance experts could push back that target by two years or more, officials say.

The Air Force also must now devote a larger portion of its maintenance force to the older A-10 "Warthog" fleet. Officials had planned to retire the A-10s and retrain experienced maintenance staff to work on the F-35s. But Congress blocked retirement of the A-10 last year, and both the House and Senate have readied measures requiring the Air Force to keep flying the A-10s.

But, facing the shortage of maintenance personnel, Air Force officials have renewed their push to retire the A-10. But congressional defenders of the A-10 said the force is unnecessarily pitting aircraft types against each other.

"Suggesting that we must prematurely retire the A-10 to fulfill long-anticipated maintenance requirements for the F-35A is a false choice," said Sen. Kelly Ayotte (<http://topics.wsj.com/person/A/Kelly-Ayotte/6958>) (R., N.H.).

Congressional experts say it is a short-term problem because midlevel experts can be trained in a couple of years. The Air Force could step up recruiting while contractors are used to fill the gap. The Air Force says that solution is unworkable.

Other congressional staffers say the problems are in part the Air Force's own making, as it has cut its maintenance staff too deeply.

Air Force officials said in 1994 they had some 88,000 maintainers, down to 64,000 currently. Air Force officials said limited defense funding doesn't allow them to fly both the F-35 and the A-10.

"If you have to make choices, gradually retiring the A-10 is the right choice," Ms. James said. "We need the capability of the F-35."

Winslow Wheeler, a defense analyst with the liberal-leaning Project on Government Oversight, says the pitting the A-10 against the F-35 is a ploy by the service to rid itself of an older, unwanted plane.

The flip side is that the A-10 has proved its value supporting troops in combat more effectively than other aircraft, Mr. Wheeler said, and will be needed to combat Islamic State militants in the future.

Todd Harrison, a defense analyst with the centrist Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, says retiring the A-10 fleet makes financial sense. The Air Force has said retiring the plane will save \$4.2 billion over the next five years.

The aging plane will need to be retired in the years to come, anyway, Mr. Harrison said, and beginning the retirement now will free up money for other priorities.

"The Air Force is going to get smaller, if you have to get smaller the smart way to do it is retire an entire fleet," he said.

While Air Force officials say delaying procurement of the F-35 will increase costs, Mr. Harrison said it might not be so bad to delay deployment of the F-35. If the Air Force also chose to slow production of the plane, it could continue testing and work out design problems that will cost millions to fix later.

"It would be better to wait and not buy as many aircraft now until we have gotten further through the test program so we can be more confident the aircraft we are buying are not going to need expensive retrofits," he said.