

BREAKING: Joint US-Israeli military drill cancelled due to ‘budgetary reasons’

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A large joint U.S.-Israeli military drill, scheduled to take place in the coming months, has been cancelled due to budgetary constraints, Israel Radio reported on Sunday afternoon.

It was unclear from the Israel Radio report which side cancelled the drill. The radio report said that the drill would likely be held toward the end of the year. Set to take place in May, the drill called “Austere Challenge 12” was supposed to be the largest ever held between the two countries, and was designed to improve defense systems and cooperation between the U.S. and Israeli military forces. Just on January 6th the IDF spokesperson, commenting on the future joint drill with the U.S., said thousands of U.S. and Israeli soldiers from different units would take part. He said the drill would test multiple Israeli and U.S. air defense systems against incoming missiles and rockets. Israel has deployed the “Arrow” system, jointly developed with, and funded by the U.S., designed to intercept Iranian missiles in the stratosphere, far from Israeli airspace.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta previewed the exercise in a speech last month, saying it would be an example of unprecedented levels of defense cooperation that the Obama administration has achieved “to back up our unshakable commitment to Israel’s security.” Panetta said the drills will enhance the ability of the two military forces to operate together and test new ballistic missile and rocket defenses.

Meanwhile, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey is expected to travel to Israel this week, where he is slated to discuss security issues, particularly the Iranian threat, with IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz and other top defense officials. The meeting comes against the backdrop of increasing U.S. concern over a possible Israeli strike against Iran and follows a Wall Street Journal report over the weekend that Washington has boosted “contingency planning” to safeguard U.S. military bases across the Middle East in the event of a military confrontation.

Several senior U.S. officials, including U.S. President Barack Obama and Panetta, have sent Jerusalem a series of private warnings about the severe consequences of a strike against Iran, the Wall Street Journal said on Saturday.

Panetta and other officials have sought promises from Israel in recent weeks that it won’t take military steps against Iran, but Israeli leaders have given ambiguous responses, U.S. officials said, according to The Wall Street Journal.

In what is being seen as the latest attempt to receive assurances from Israel, Dempsey will

visit Israel for the first time since taking office in September. "He is not delivering any specific message to the Israelis," Bloomberg quoted a Pentagon spokesman, Marine Col. David Lapan as saying.

However, the upcoming visit is being seen as part of ongoing efforts by the Obama administration to coordinate Iranian policy with Israel. Washington hopes to discourage Jerusalem from taking any military action against Tehran while reaffirming U.S. support for Israel, Bloomberg reported.

In a phone call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week, U.S. President Barack Obama discussed Iran and reiterated the "unshakable" U.S. commitment to Israel's security, a White House statement said.

Ahead of Dempsey's visit slated for Thursday, former Mossad chief Shabtai Shavit told Army Radio on Sunday that the West has not exhausted all of its diplomatic, non-military options yet regarding Iran. "We must fully use all other options against Iran before turning to military action," he said.

In a message to Iran, Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren said over the weekend that, "It is the policy of the Israeli government, and the Obama administration, that all options remain on the table. And it is crucial that the ayatollahs in Tehran take this policy seriously."

Washington is currently involved in an international lobbying effort to win support for new sanctions against Iran's oil industry, which would bar financial institutions from the U.S. market if they do business with Iran's central bank.

Iran has threatened to respond to sanctions by shutting the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic passageway through which about one-sixth of the world's oil passes. Earlier this month Tehran concluded 10 days of naval exercises in the waters off of the strait, and has announced that it plans to hold another set of sea drills in February.

According to a New York Times report published Friday quoting U.S. government officials, the U.S. is using a secret channel of communication to warn Iran that if it closes the strategic Strait of Hormuz it will be crossing a "red line" that will provoke a U.S. response.

The U.S. is preparing for a number of possible scenarios following an Israeli strike, including assaults by Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, U.S. officials said according to the Wall Street Journal report.

In a move aiming to deter Iran, the U.S. has sent a second aircraft carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf region, in addition to its 15,000 troops already stationed in Kuwait. Washington has also been pre-positioning aircrafts and other military crafts in the area, the officials said.

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