

Israel admits that Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program

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Conflicting reports about the readiness of the US and Israel to attack Iran continue to flood the international media.

The report below suggests that the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, Martin Dempsey, has sent word to Israel to lower the volume of bellicosity in advance of his visit this week.

Following US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's candid statement to the effect that Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program, Israel Defense Minister also confirms that Iran does not constitute a nuclear threat. "The intelligence assessment Israeli officials will present later this week to Dempsey indicates that Iran has not yet decided whether to make a nuclear bomb."

Barak: Israel 'very far off' from decision on Iran attack

By Amos Harel and Reuters

Haaretz

Defense Minister Ehud Barak said on Wednesday that Israel was "very far off" from a decision about an attack on Iran over its nuclear program.

Barak was speaking on Israel's Army Radio ahead of a planned visit this week by U.S. armed forces chief General Martin Dempsey that has triggered speculation Washington would press Israel to delay any action against Tehran's nuclear program.

Asked whether the United States was asking Israel to let them know ahead of any assault against Iran, Barak replied:

"We haven't made any decision to do this," and added: "This entire thing is very far off."

Barak also suggested Israel was coordinating with Washington its plans about handling Tehran's nuclear project which Israel views as an existential threat.

"I don't think our ties with the United States are such that they have no idea what we are talking about," Barak said.

When pressed as to whether "very far off" meant weeks or months, Barak replied: "I

wouldn't want to provide any estimates. It's certainly not urgent. I don't want to relate to it as though tomorrow it will happen."

Dempsey will be arriving on his first visit here since being appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in September. He will meet with various senior defense officials, including Barak and Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Benny Gantz.

The intelligence assessment Israeli officials will present later this week to Dempsey indicates that Iran has not yet decided whether to make a nuclear bomb.

The Israeli view is that while Iran continues to improve its nuclear capabilities, it has not yet decided whether to translate these capabilities into a nuclear weapon – or, more specifically, a nuclear warhead mounted atop a missile. Nor is it clear when Iran might make such a decision.

Israel also believes the Iranian regime now faces an unprecedented threat to its stability, which for the first time combines both external and internal pressure: from abroad, increasingly harsh sanctions and threats of military action, and at home, economic distress and worries about the results of the parliamentary election scheduled for March.

Israeli intelligence sees signs that the regime in Tehran is genuinely worried about the possibility of an opposition victory in March. Should that happen, the regime will have to choose between conceding the loss or falsifying results – as it apparently did in the 2009 presidential election – which could incite anti-regime protests thanks to the tailwind provided by the Arab Spring, which toppled the regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

Moreover, the country's economic woes are already hitting ordinary Iranians in their pockets. Tighter sanctions have caused the Iranian currency to depreciate by dozens of percent; the regime is having trouble amassing as much foreign currency as it needs; and now, it faces the prospect of new sanctions by the United States and the European Union against its central bank and its oil industry.

The regime is also being confronted by two distinct ideological challenges. On one hand, a growing camp that includes supporters of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is challenging the authority of the ruling clerics, and especially that of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. On the other, the Iranian model of a strict Islamic regime run by clerics is being called into question by Islamist ruling parties in Turkey, Tunisia and perhaps also Egypt, which either are or will soon be offering more democratic, modern and moderate models of Islamic governance.

Lastly, Tehran's chief ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad, is in real danger of being toppled as well.

Altogether, therefore, "2011 was a very bad year for the regime in Tehran," a senior defense official told Haaretz. Israeli analysts believe 2012 will promise more of the same: more pressure, including the tougher public line now being taken by U.S. President Barack Obama, and also more uncertainty and instability, in both the region as a whole and Iran in particular.

All this makes it increasingly hard to predict what Iran will do. Recently, for instance, it threatened to shut down the Straits of Hormuz, and thereby choke off a major portion of the

world's oil supply. And under certain circumstances, it could also decide to make a sprint for a nuclear weapon.

The Iranian issue will presumably be the major focus of Dempsey's talks here. Over the weekend, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Obama administration recently warned Israel not to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, and Dempsey is apparently here in part to make sure that Israel has no such plans.

In addition, the U.S. State Department publicly criticized the assassination of a nuclear scientist in Tehran last week and denied any connection to it. Iran has blamed Israel for the attack, though it later accused the United States and Britain of being involved as well.

Israeli officials have made contradictory statements in recent days about the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed on Iran. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the sanctions in an interview with an Australian paper, but later told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that they were insufficient.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/barak-israel-very-far-off-from-decision-on-iran-attack-1.407953>

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