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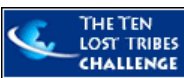
Barak to head to US for talks at the Pentagon

By YAAKOV KATZ AND HERB KEINON

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In a series of consultations apparently aimed at coordinating policies against the Iranian nuclear threat, Defense Minister Ehud Barak will head to the US on Monday for talks at the Pentagon, days after Mossad chief Meir Dagan was in Washington for meetings with key intelligence officials. Sources say Israel is urgently trying to convince the US that Iran is closer to passing the nuclear threshold than Washington believes.

Dagan's visit came as Iran held a second day of military maneuvers on Thursday and claimed to have test-fired more long-range missiles meant to show that the country can defend itself against any attack by the US or Israel.

Barak will spend three days in the US for talks with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Defense officials said he would likely also meet with President George W. Bush.

A week after Barak's visit, IDF Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi will head to Washington for his own round of talks with American defense chiefs, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen, who was in Israel two weeks ago.

Barak hinted at Israeli readiness to attack the Islamic Republic on Thursday.

"The Iranian issue is a challenge not just for Israel but for the entire world," Barak told a meeting of the Labor Party faction. "Israel is the strongest country in the region and we have proven in the past that we are not deterred from acting when our vital interests are at stake."

But he quickly noted that "the reactions of [Israel's] enemies need to be taken into consideration as well."

A senior government official said the Dagan, Barak, Ashkenazi visits to Washington were part of the "routine, close consultations" held between Israel and the US.

Another government source said it would be an exaggeration to imagine that the meetings had to do with drawing up operational plans for any type of military action against Iran. According to this source, no decision had been made on the matter, and Israel was extremely unlikely to take any unilateral action.

A senior US official recently said there was a discrepancy of six to 12 months between the time Israel believed Iran would pass the nuclear point of no return, and when the US felt Teheran will have mastered the nuclear cycle.

The source added that the visits of the Israeli officials came as an intense debate



Defense Minister Ehud Barak.
 Photo: Ariel Jerozolimski [file]

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continued to rage inside the US administration between those who favored military action, led by Cheney, and those opposed, led by Gates.

"Iran's response to Europe is not ambiguous," the official said. "Iran rejects the international demand to halt the enrichment of uranium and the world must respond accordingly - by increasing and intensifying the sanctions against Iran."

Also on Thursday, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told visiting Irish Foreign Minister Micheál Martin that Teheran posed not only a nuclear threat, but also a "comprehensive" threat because of its support for Hizbullah, Hamas and other extremist elements in the region.

Government officials, meanwhile, did not seem overly concerned about Iran's recent missile tests. One official said both sides were signaling the other that they could cause significant damage. The official put the missile tests in the same category as the reportedly large-scale IAF exercise in the eastern Mediterranean in the first week of June, and a well publicized visit Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made to Dimona on July 1.

In response to the missile tests, Olmert's spokesman Mark Regev said Israel "seeks neither conflict nor does it seek hostilities with Iran. Nevertheless, Iran's nuclear program together with their ballistic missile program should be a matter of grave concern for the entire family of nations."

In the second day of exercises in Iran, the Revolutionary Guards claimed to have tested new weapons with "special capabilities" that included missiles launched from naval ships in the Persian Gulf, along with torpedoes and surface-to-surface missiles. A brief video clip showed two missiles being fired simultaneously in the darkness, followed by red plumes of fire and smoke.

On Wednesday, Iran said it tested a new version of the Shihab-3 missile, which officials have said has a range of 2,000 km. and is armed with a 1-ton conventional warhead. That would put Israel, Turkey, the Arabian peninsula, Afghanistan and Pakistan all within striking distance.

In what could be interpreted as an Israeli response to the two-day Iranian exercise, Israel Aerospace Industries put on display for the press on Thursday the air force's most-sophisticated airborne early-warning and control plane, which would likely be used in any strike against Iranian nuclear installations.

The aircraft's sophisticated radar and intelligence-gathering technology as well as electronic warfare systems were developed by IAI's Eita Division and installed aboard a Gulfstream G550 business jet. The plane arrived in Israel in September 2006 and became operation this past February. The aircraft will also be shown at the Farnborough Air Show in England next week.

AP contributed to this report.

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75. Not In My Name

Your on your own - USA (07/14/2008 15:59)

74. Srolen land? Justs shows #63's ignorance

J Johnstone - USA (07/13/2008 04:23)

73. to #71 (Mary). EXCELLENT! we kill each other for HATRED and POWER.

LATIN LOVER. - NATIVE AMERICA (FREE LAND) (07/13/2008 04:21)

72. It's more like 'following' to the US, not heading.

Arthur Rosen - Canada (07/12/2008 23:08)

71. Why the need for war?

Mary - USA (07/12/2008 22:33)

70. Slowly, Ehud, slowly. Becore you commit I srael to carry through yet another Bush blunder, consider the consequences.

David Turner - (07/12/2008 22:16)

69. to #67 David). SURE! The white colonizers invaded and killed native populations

LATIN LOVER - NATIVE AMERICA (07/12/2008 18:49)

68. Reply to #57

proIsraelAmerica - USA (07/12/2008 17:51)

67. #63, Do you also blame the US for Texas, Calif (from Mexico), or all states of the Americas from the natives; or Australia, S. Africa...?

David Turner - (07/12/2008 16:08)

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