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Ashkenazi holds secret talks in France

By YAAKOV KATZ

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Article's topics: Gabi Ashkenazi, France, Michael Mullen, Iran, Iranian Nuclear Threat

IDF Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi flew secretly to France on Sunday for meetings with Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. Jean-Louis Georgelin, the chief of the French Defense Staff.

Ashkenazi left Israel early on Sunday morning and flew to Normandy, where he met with Mullen. The two have developed a close relationship since Ashkenazi was appointed chief of General Staff in 2007 and they reportedly speak at least once a week by phone.

Ashkenazi's trip to France came amid continued warnings that senior IDF officers could be arrested in Europe for their involvement in Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009. Last week, a Palestinian group petitioned a court in London to issue an arrest warrant for Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who was visiting the British capital.

The meeting in Normandy focused on assessments regarding Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and the joint Israeli-US Juniper Cobra missile defense exercise that is scheduled to start later this month. The exercise will include the Israeli Arrow missile defense system as well as three American systems - the THAAD, Aegis and PAC3 - that will all be deployed in Israel for the duration of the exercise.

In the evening, Ashkenazi flew to Paris, where he met with the local Israeli Defense Ministry mission as well as with Georgelin. The two generals discussed Israeli-French cooperation, and particularly the situation in Lebanon. France is a major force contributor to UNIFIL.



IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi. Photo: AP [file]

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and Geogelin said discussed developments in Iran, the French general said that military intervention was not a viable option to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear capability. He said that a military strike was too risky.

Geogelin said it would be difficult to plan an operation in Iran, because there's no guarantee that one shot would solve the problem. And "if you fail in one shot, it is a catastrophe," he said.

In his most recent public remarks on Iran, Ashkenazi said in a radio interview last month that "the best way to deal with [the Iranian nuclear threat] is with sanctions, but if [these don't work], Israel has the right to defend itself, and all means can be used to achieve this."

Ashkenazi said a nuclear-armed Iran would be a "threat to the whole world."

When asked what his recommendation would be if the political echelon asked to consult him on a military strike, Ashkenazi declined to answer.

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