

IDF to show US nuclear data on Iran

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Disappointed after failing to make their case on Iran and influence the outcome of the United States's National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released this week, Military Intelligence will present its hard core evidence on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program on Sunday to the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff during a rare visit he will be making to Israel.

Admiral Michael Mullen will land in Israel Sunday morning for a 24-hour visit that will include a one-on-one meeting with IDF Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, as well as with Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

According to a Time magazine article published Wednesday, Mullen is a member of the Pentagon's "anti-war [with Iran] group" that includes Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Admiral William Fallon, current commander of the US Central Command.

In a recent press briefing in Washington, however, Mullen took a hard-line approach, refusing to rule out the possibility that military force will be used to stop Iran's race towards nuclear power.

"I would never take the military option off the table," Mullen told reporters, although he stressed that his remark did not mean that force would be used. Diplomacy, he added, was very important.

Mullen's visit to Israel will be exactly a week after the publication of the NIE report that claimed Iran had frozen its nuclear military program in 2003 and has yet to restart it. During his visit, Military Intelligence plans to present him with Israel's evidence that Iran is in fact developing nuclear weapons.

"The report clearly shows that we did not succeed in making our case over the past year in the run-up to this report," a defense official said Thursday. "Mullen's visit is an opportunity to try and fix that."

In addition to Iran, Ashkenazi and his staff will also discuss with Mullen America's commitment for Israel to retain its qualitative edge in the face of the sale of advanced JDAM missiles to Saudi Arabia.

In the past, Israel had asked the Pentagon to permit the sale of the F-22 fifth-generation stealth fighter jet - also known as the Raptor - but the request was rejected.

Mullen will be met by an honor guard at the Kirya Military Headquarters in Tel Aviv and will sit through a day of presentations by IDF generals, including Military Intelligence chief Maj.-Gen. Amos Yadlin and OC IDF Planning Maj.-Gen. Ido Nehushtan.

Sunday night he will be honored at a festive dinner hosted by Ashkenazi and will leave Israel Monday morning.

The presentations that Mullen will hear will be on a wide range of topics - including the Hamas buildup in the Gaza Strip, Egypt's failure to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, Hizbullah activities in Lebanon, Syria and Iran.

Israel plans to take advantage of Mullen's visit to Israel to reinforce the already strong ties the IDF has with the Pentagon and the US armed forces. Appreciation for the IDF has increased within the Pentagon in recent months following the Israeli air strike on the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor.

Mullen's visit will be the first time a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has visited Israel in the past decade. Mullen was in Israel with his wife two years ago when he was the commander of the Navy.

He met Ashkenazi at the NATO military commander conference in Brussels last month, and the two have already established an effective work relationship, defense officials said.

Also Thursday, China's government said it was studying the US intelligence review and remained steadfast in its opinion that talks were the way to end the standoff with Iran.

"We will earnestly study the report and make communications with relevant parties," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang told reporters at a regular briefing. "China's position on the Iranian nuclear issue is that we support

the international nuclear nonproliferation regime, and oppose proliferation of nuclear weapons, and we uphold a peaceful and stable Middle East," Qin said.

Earlier this week, China's ambassador to the United Nations said the report raised concerns about new sanctions.

"I think the council members will have to consider that, because I think we all start from the presumption that now things have changed," Chinese UN Ambassador Wang Guangya said Tuesday when asked whether the release of the intelligence estimate made the prospect of new UN sanctions less likely.

The New York Times reported Thursday that the change in the US's intelligence assessment vis-à-vis Iran was based mainly on notes acquired last summer from discussions between Iranian military officials. The notes reportedly detailed conversations in which certain army officials complained about Iranian leaders' 2003 decision to shut down efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

The notes gave no clue as to why Iran had decided to stop weapons development. The information contained in the notes was supported by other intelligence, including conversations between Iranian officials which had been intercepted in recent months, the paper reported.

Meanwhile, US Vice President Dick Cheney on Thursday said he had no reason to doubt the intelligence assessment.

"There's always the possibility that circumstances will change. But I think they've done the best job they can with the intelligence that's available," Cheney told Politico.com.

The vice president stressed that the administration would not change its policy towards Iran. "We still think there's a need to continue the course we've been on to persuade the Iranians not to enrich uranium," he said.

AP contributed to the report.

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U.S. Joint Chiefs head to visit Israel
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The chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff will visit Israel next week to discuss Iran.

Adm. Michael Mullen will make a 24-hour visit to Israel early next week as a guest of his Israeli counterpart, Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, Yediot Achronot reported Thursday.

Mullen will be briefed about Israel's intelligence estimates regarding the Iranian nuclear program, a response to a U.S. report that this week said Iran shelved its quest for an atomic bomb in 2003.

Israel is keen to preserve Western pressure on Tehran in the wake of the National Intelligence Estimate report. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni plans to discuss the matter with the foreign ministers of NATO countries when they convene Friday at the alliance's Brussels headquarters.

Mullen's visit to Israel will be the first by a Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman in nearly a decade.

<http://www.jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/breaking/105734.html>