

Israel concerned over US "umbrella" on Iran

Contributed by MARK LAVIE (AP)
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U.S. providing an "umbrella" to defend its allies against an Iranian nuclear attack?

JERUSALEM — A series of failed tests of a joint U.S.-Israel anti-missile system raised new questions Thursday about the U.S. goal of providing an "umbrella" to defend its allies against an Iranian nuclear attack.

The technological setbacks also drew renewed attention to Israel's concerns about a nuclear-armed Iran and the possibility that it might lean further in the direction of a go-it alone strike against the country's atomic facilities.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's offer this week of a "defense umbrella" over its Gulf Arab allies to prevent Tehran from dominating the region "once they have a nuclear weapon" was widely seen in Israel as an acceptance of a nuclear-armed Iran. She later tried to dispel that view, but her comments sparked criticism by Israeli officials.

Israel considers Iran its most dangerous enemy because of its nuclear program, long-range missile development and repeated references by its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to Israel's destruction. Iran has insisted that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, but Israel and the U.S. reject that.

Adding to the urgency was word Wednesday from the head of the Russian nuclear agency that Iran's new atomic power plant will be switched on later this year.

For a decade, Israel has been presenting its "Arrow" anti-missile system, developed and jointly funded with the U.S., as an answer to medium-range Iranian missiles that might carry nuclear warheads. Tested repeatedly, the Arrow system has often succeeded in intercepting dummy incoming missiles, to great fanfare.

But just as Clinton worried Israelis by speaking of an umbrella over U.S. allies threatened by Iran, word came of three test failures in the Arrow system over the past week. The latest was in California, where a test was aborted before the Arrow missile could be launched because of a communications failure, according to Israeli defense officials speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to disclose details of the tests.

Experts played down the importance of the failures. "Arrow has had a pretty successful test program," said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org. "I wouldn't be overly concerned about a problem like this."

Uzi Rubin, former director of the Arrow project, agreed. "It's really not a very serious glitch in the system that would require going back to the drawing board," he said.

But the failures underlined the complexity of the whole anti-missile concept, which has been compared to throwing a rock in the air and trying to hit it with another rock. Israeli media personalities wondered if any system could protect Israel if multiple rockets were fired together.

If Clinton's "umbrella" offer, made in a television interview in Thailand, was meant to reassure nervous Israelis, it had the opposite effect.

Dan Meridor, Israel's minister of intelligence and atomic energy, was critical of Clinton's implications.

He said it appeared "as if they have already come to terms with a nuclear Iran. I think that's a mistake." He told Army Radio, "I think that at this time it is correct not to deal with the assumption that Iran will obtain nuclear capability, but to prevent that from happening."

Ever since President Barack Obama took office with a pledge to explore diplomatic contacts with Iran, Israeli officials have voiced concerns that talks would give Iran more time to develop nuclear weapons. Israelis have also suspected that the Obama administration was planning for a future Mideast that included a nuclear-armed Iran — something Israel would consider a threat to its existence.

Hours after Meridor spoke, Clinton clarified her remarks, saying she was "not suggesting any new policy" on Iran and continued to believe that "Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is unacceptable."

U.S. officials have not defined what Clinton meant by her original "umbrella" comment.

Analysts offered two contrasting explanations: a threat of retaliation for any Iranian nuclear strike, or supplying U.S. allies with defense systems aimed at preventing such an attack.

The umbrella formulation did not appear to include Israel, though about 150 American soldiers have been training with Israeli soldiers in the southern Negev desert for several months on advanced radar installations that could be used in missile defense, according to Israeli officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the project.

Israel has pointedly not taken the option of a military strike off the table, recalling Israel's lightning 1981 airstrike that destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor.

Experts doubt Israel has the capability of wiping out all of Iran's nuclear facilities, which are said to be scattered around the country, some of them hidden. But hitting well chosen targets could set back Iran's nuclear ambitions for years.

Political analyst Gerald Steinberg, a professor at Israel's Bar Ilan University, said a perception that the U.S. was backing away from preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons "could add to Israeli decision makers' concerns that the U.S. isn't going to take action, and so Israel should."

But Israel has not broadcast an urge to attack. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long urged concerted international action, including tougher sanctions, and hard-line Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has said that Israel would not attack Iran just to do the work of others.

Lieberman is visiting South America, and the Foreign Ministry spokesman in Jerusalem refused to comment on the issue of the "umbrella."

Associated Press writers Ian Deitch and Jen Thomas contributed to this report. Copyright © 2009 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.