

US military chief to Israel as Iran tension grows

AP Associated Press By ARON HELLER | Associated Press – 1 hr 49 mins ago

JERUSALEM (AP) — The top U.S. military commander is scheduled for talks in [Israel](#) this week, Israel said Sunday, at a time when the U.S. is concerned that Israel might be preparing to attack [Iran](#) over its [nuclear program](#).

The Israeli Defense Ministry confirmed the planned visit Thursday by Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the [U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff](#). It did not give his agenda for talks with Israelis — but Iran is expected to be at the top.

Israel considers a nuclear-armed Iran to be an existential threat because of its nuclear program, missile capabilities, support for anti-Israel militants in Lebanon and Gaza and frequent references by its president to the [destruction of Israel](#).

Israel has repeatedly hinted it might take military action if international sanctions fail to stop Iran's nuclear development.

The U.S., Israel and other Western nations believe Iran is developing atomic weapons. Tehran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.

Dempsey's visit will be his first official trip to Israel since he assumed command of the joint chiefs on Sept. 30. His predecessor, Adm. Mike Mullen, made several visits to Israel during his four-year term.

On Thursday President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed the Iran situation in a telephone conversation.

The Obama administration is concerned that Iran's recent claim that it is expanding nuclear operations with more advanced equipment may push Israel closer to a strike.

The U.S. still hopes that international pressure will persuade Iran to back down, but the Islamic regime shows no sign it would willingly give up a project that has become a point of national pride.

The U.S. has led a series of economic sanctions against the regime. On Sunday, Israeli Cabinet Minister Moshe Yaalon said he was disappointed that the U.S. has not expanded the measures to further damage Iran's central bank and its energy industry.

Last week, an Iranian nuclear scientist was killed in a car bombing in Tehran. There has been no claim of responsibility, but Iran has accused the U.S., Israel and Britain of being behind the killing. Several leading Iranian nuclear scientists have been killed in recent years.

Israel has not commented publicly on the scientist's death.

The killing in Tehran came a day after Israeli military chief Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz was quoted as telling a parliamentary panel that 2012 would be a "critical year" for Iran — in part because of "things that happen to it unnaturally."

Gantz is also headed this week to Brussels for talks with NATO officials that are expected to focus on Iran.

The U.S. and its allies are pressuring Iran to halt uranium enrichment, but Iran appears to be attempting to expand operations.

The U.S. is also angered by an Iranian court's death sentence of a U.S. citizen and its threats to block the strategic Strait of

Hormuz, the passage for one-sixth of the world's oil.

Copyright 2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Copyright © 2012 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved. | Yahoo! - ABC News Network | /