

Israeli officials at odds over reasons for postponing joint drill

By Dave Bender

JERUSALEM, Jan. 18 (Xinhua) -- Israeli officials were at odds over the reasons for postponing the joint Israeli-U.S. missile defense exercise scheduled for April.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said Wednesday that he had already asked U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in December 2011 to put off the joint defense exercise scheduled to take place in spring, citing budget restrictions.

"This was not a last-minute announcement," Barak told Army Radio.

However, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren said Tuesday the recent decision of postponing a joint Israeli-U.S. missile defense exercise scheduled for April "stemmed solely from technical issues."

"Such postponements are routine and do not reflect political or strategic concerns," Oren said, adding that "the United States and Israel remain committed to holding the exercise -- code-named Austere Challenge 12 -- the largest and most robust one in their historic alliance."

[Emily Landau](#), a senior analyst at the [Institute for National Security Studies](#), told Xinhua that whatever the true rationale, "it's important that positions are seen as being coordinated," between both militaries.

The size and scope of Israel's defense ministry budget has been a political hot potato for months. Barak and Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz have traded accusations over "guns or butter" issues since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed last summer to implement a package of dramatic, across-the-board measures to lower the cost of living and housing for Israelis.

Steinitz wanted to slash three billion shekels (789 million U.S. dollars) from the 54.5 billion-shekel (14.3 billion dollars) 2011- 2012 defense budget to help fund the plan. Barak, however, wants between seven (about 1.8 billion dollars) to eight billion shekels (2.1 billion dollars) tacked on.

Officials of Israel Defense Forces have recently said that any cuts could imperil defenses against strategic threats, with one voice warning that they "feared for Israel's safety," according to the Ynet news site.

"This is not the time to cut the defense budget," they said, adding that "we don't want to find ourselves back in the days before the Second Lebanon War."

Barak categorically rejected the speculation by analysts on both sides of the Atlantic that the allies called for the time out in order not to aggravate an already tense situation with Iran over the Gulf and the threats to attack Israel.

"There were a number of reasons, but in the final analysis, we came to the conclusion that it would be best to reschedule the drill for the second half of the year," he said, adding that the request came more from him than Panetta. "This would allow preparations to continue longer, and be more comprehensive." Barak said.

Barak refused to be pinned down over whether Israel was planning a military strike on Iran's believed military nuclear facilities.

"I wouldn't want to provide any estimates. It's certainly not urgent. I don't want to relate to it as though tomorrow it will happen," according to the defense minister.

"Any and all of these aspects could be part of the decision," [Landau](#) said, hesitant to venture any conclusions about Barak's remarks.

When queried, however, she did allow that one idea that has been bruited about - that Israel and the United States might be exploiting the seeming discordance over timetables and technical issues as a pressure tactic against Tehran -- might have validity.

"One means of pressuring is not to have the other side know all the details of what you're planning, thinking and getting in place," [Landau](#) said, concluding that "all of the different explanations could be part of the dynamic," between Israel and the United States.

Iran has not yet made a final decision whether to build a nuclear bomb, according to an intelligence assessment which Israeli officials will present to the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey.

Dempsey will visit Israel on Thursday and meet with Barak, Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Benny Gantz and other officials.

"Even though it's not clear what the agenda is, it's clear that there will be discussion about Iran," [Landau](#) said.

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