

Last update - 11:20 11/03/2009

U.S. intel chief: Israel takes `worst-case` view of Iran nukes threat

By [Barak Ravid](#), Haaretz Correspondent, and News Agencies

A top U.S. intelligence official says Israel had adopted more of a "worst-case" interpretation in concluding that Iran was further along in nuclear weapon development, but this was based on the same facts as Washington was working with.

In testimony before Congress on Tuesday, the officials - Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair and Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen. Michael Maples - said Iran does not have any highly enriched uranium, the fuel used to power a nuclear warhead.

The officials also said recent Iranian missile tests were not directly related to its nuclear activities. They said the two programs were believed to be on separate development tracks.

Blair had been asked to clarify recent conflicting statements from defense officials on Iran's nuclear program.

U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen said in a televised interview last week that the U.S. believes Iran has obtained enough nuclear material to make a bomb.

But U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said hours later that Iran was in fact not close to having a nuclear weapon, which gives the United States and others time to try to persuade Tehran to abandon its suspected atomic arms program.

"They're not close to a stockpile, they're not close to a weapon at this point, and so there is some time," Gates said on NBC television's "Meet The Press."

"We assess now that Iran does not have any highly enriched uranium," Blair said. "We assess that Iran has not yet made that decision," to convert the low-enriched uranium it is making to the weapons-grade material.

Maples said Iran's launch in February of the Safir Space Launch Vehicle "shows progress" in technologies used to make intercontinental ballistic missiles.

But Blair said the nuclear and missile programs are "separate decisions," and both officials said they believed Iran had not yet made a decision on whether to proceed with its nuclear program.

A UN watchdog report last month said Iran had produced a stockpile of low-enriched uranium that may be big enough, analysts said, to make a nuclear bomb if it was converted into highly enriched uranium.

Making highly enriched uranium would require facilities Iran is not known to possess and there are other hurdles.

Maples said Iran's launch in February of the Safir Space Launch Vehicle "shows progress" in technologies used to make intercontinental ballistic missiles.

But Blair said the nuclear and missile programs are "separate decisions" and both officials said they believed Iran had not yet made a decision on whether to proceed with a military nuclear program.

Russia, whose help the United States would like to enlist to limit any Iranian nuclear weapons program, has reason to be concerned about a nuclear-armed Iran, Blair said. That would in turn give Russia a reason to cooperate with U.S. aims to deploy missile defenses in Europe.

But, Blair said, "they also have an incentive in limiting (missile defense) cooperation."

The Obama administration has said Russian help on Iran could limit the need for a missile defense. Russia opposes the missile defense system, seeing it is a threat rather than, as the United States says, a way to block strikes from states such as Iran.

The issue is at the center of a U.S. initiative to repair strained relations with Moscow. Blair said any negotiation on missile defenses would be "complex."

Military Intelligence chief Amos Yadlin said Sunday at the weekly cabinet meeting that "Iran has crossed the technological threshold" in its quest for nuclear arms.

"Arrival at military nuclear capability is a matter of strategy," Yadlin said. "Iran is accumulating hundreds of kilograms of enriched uranium at a low level and hopes to utilize the dialogue with the West in order to gain time, which is required in order to achieve the capability to manufacture a nuclear bomb."

Related articles:

- [MI chief: Iran has crossed 'technological threshold' in quest for nukes](#)
- [Is Israel assassinating Iran nuclear scientists?](#)
- [Israel worried by report Iran has tripled its missile arsenal](#)
- [Iran missile launch into space was 'publicity stunt,' Israeli experts say](#)
- [Q&A with Yossi Melman on Iran, intelligence and espionage](#)