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Tehran and Assad slide past US and Israeli red lines – nuclear and chemical

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US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was hardly out of Israel's door Tuesday, April 23, when a spate of awkward data came spilling out in Tel Aviv.

Iran has crossed the last red line Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu laid down before the UN Assembly last September, said the well-informed former military intelligence chief Amos Yadlin. None of the measures for halting Iran's race for a nuclear bomb have worked, he said. For a while, Tehran was impressed by the

Israeli prime minister's warning, but then went back to uranium enrichment at top speed. By now, Iran has certainly gone past the limit set by Netanyahu.

Likud lawmaker Tzahi Hanegbi said Israel has no more than a month or two for stopping a nuclear Iran.

Ron Dermer, a senior Netanyahu adviser and Israel's next ambassador to Washington, told a group of American Jewish leaders Sunday that the time for action against Iran's capacity to build a bomb – which he termed an existential threat to Israel - must be counted in months.

Piling on the gloom, Brig. Gen Itay Brun reported that the Syrian army had started using chemical weapons against rebel forces, including Sarin and other paralyzing substances, without the world lifting a finger to stop it.

All the red lines had suddenly been knocked over by Iran's rapid progress toward a nuclear weapon and by Bashar Assad who, backed by Tehran, mocked US President Barack Obama's warning just a month ago that "proof of chemical weapons use would be a game changer."

Responding to the Syrian development, Pentagon spokesman George Little, who arrived in Amman Tuesday with the US Defense Secretary, commented: "The Pentagon is continuing to assess reports on the matter and the use of such weapons would be entirely unacceptable."

For some months, debkafile has been reporting that Iran had trampled over Netanyahu's red lines for its nuclear program and moved on. On March 19th debkafile's sources confirmed the finding of concrete evidence that the Syrian army had launched chemical warfare against rebel forces.

It is hard to believe that the Israeli chorus on these matters was spontaneous. Assuming that the various knowledgeable spokesmen shared the same choir master, they must be assumed to have been delivering the same message. It came in three parts:

1. The Israel's military and defense leaders were not overly impressed by the \$10 billion arms package the defense secretary delivered this week. The items listed are useful but don't top their list of priorities. This coolness was reflected in comments by Israeli military chiefs this week, which underlined the IDF's ability to deal with Iran's nuclear facilities on its own and even handle the fallout of this attack coming in the form of joint retaliation by Iran, Syria and Hizballah.

2. The dissonance between Washington and Jerusalem on the issue of a nuclear Iran was present in Hagel's talks in Israel. President Obama tried telling Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE - recipients of the new US arms package - that his pledge to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear bomb means he is willing to wait until Tehran has assembled all the components for a weapon.

Israel refuses to wait for Iran to reach that threshold and insists that the moment to strike is now.

3. The revelation that Bashar Assad has flouted the US president's warning against chemical warfare was intended to push Washington into military action against Syria which may unfold at some point into a strike against Iran.

The Obama administration's first response to the revelations by Israeli spokesmen came from Secretary of State John Kerry in Brussels.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could not confirm comments by the Israeli military's top intelligence analyst that Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons, he said Tuesday.

"I talked to Prime Minister Netanyahu this morning. I think it is fair for me to say that he was not in a position to confirm that in the conversation that I had," Kerry told a news conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels. "I don't know yet what the facts are."

Kerry had been asked about comments by Brigadier-General Itai Brun, an Israeli intelligence analyst, at a Tel Aviv security conference that Syrian forces had used chemical weapons, probably nerve gas, in their fight against rebels.

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