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Israel Tests a Long-Range Missile

By ISABEL KERSHNER

JERUSALEM — Israel tested what experts said was a long-range ballistic missile on Wednesday morning, firing it out to sea from an Air Force base just south of Tel Aviv and causing jittery Israelis who saw the launch on their way to work to jam emergency lines.

The test came after nearly a week of feverish reports and speculation in the Israeli news media about whether the country's prime minister and defense minister have already decided to attack Iran's nuclear complexes. Israel views a nuclear Iran as a potentially existential threat and officials here are eagerly awaiting an International Atomic Energy Agency report scheduled to be released on Tuesday that they say will likely address Iran's military nuclear weapons program.

The Ministry of Defense would not specify what kind of missile was being tested. It issued a laconic statement saying only that Israel had test fired a rocket propulsion system, and that the test had been planned "a long time ago and was carried out as scheduled."

Defense Minister Ehud Barak congratulated the Israeli security establishment and military industries for what he called "an impressive technological achievement and an important step in Israel's advancement in the field of missiles and space."

Yiftah Shapir, an expert in non-conventional weapons at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, said he believed that Israel had most probably test-fired a new satellite launcher, which would basically employ the same technology as a ballistic missile with a range of thousands of miles.

The flurry of speculation about possible plans to attack Iran began with a column by one of Israel's most prominent journalists, Nahum Barnea, that was prominently displayed on the front page of the popular Yediot Aharonot newspaper on Friday. Mr. Barnea posed the question of whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mr. Barak had privately

decided on a military strike, a question that Mr. Barnea said was preoccupying many in the Israeli government and the security establishment, as well as foreign governments.

As the highly competitive Israeli news media began trying to outdo each other with Iran-related articles, all based on anonymous sources, a fierce debate arose over the merits and dangers of a public airing of such a sensitive matter of state security.

Mr. Barak told Israel Radio this week that no decision had been made and that “one did not have to be a great genius to understand that such a decision would not be taken by only two people.”

Reiterating a long-held position, Mr. Barak also told the Israeli Parliament this week that “no options should be taken off the table.”

The Haaretz newspaper reported on Wednesday that Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Barak were trying to muster a majority in the cabinet in favor of military action against Iran, and that they had recently persuaded the foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, to support such a move, though he previously objected to it.

Mr. Lieberman told Israel Radio on Wednesday that the public discourse on the issue had caused enormous damage and that 99 percent of the recent chatter about Iran in the Israeli media had no basis in reality.