

The following is a transcript of a phone-in interview that took place prior to Austere Challenge 12, on October 17th, 2012. The comments were made on-record to 73 journalists from the United States Pentagon press corps, international reporters stationed in Israel and a number of local reporters.

Begin: (16:17)

Lt Gen Franklin:

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Lt Gen Craig Franklin, Commander of Third Air Force, regional air defense commander for US European Command, and I'm calling in from Rammstein Air Base in Kaiserslautern, Germany. Welcome, and thank you for joining us today. I'd also like to thank General Nuriel, the lead Israeli planner for AC-12 for being here with me, and I'd like to thank the Israel Defense Forces for hosting this event.

The reason we're holding this call is to provide background information about the exercise, Austere Challenge 12, and to announce the arrival of U.S. military personnel and equipment into Israel for this exercise. For security reasons we won't go into specific dates or locations, but I can tell you that more than 1,000 U.S. military people have begun arriving in Israel for this exercise, and they will be at a variety of locations across the country for the next several weeks.

AC12 is designed to build upon the long-standing relationship between the U.S. military and the Israeli Defense Forces. This exercise will improve the cooperative missile defense of Israel, and will promote regional stability and help ensure our military edge. AC12 has been in planning for more than two years, and while the scenario is driven by the overall situation in the Middle East, AC12 is not related to any specific current events in the region.

U.S. European Command plans to deploy elements of Patriot air defense batteries, an Aegis ballistic missile defense ship, and related air defense systems. They will be integrated with other U.S. and Israeli assets as part of an overall comprehensive air missile defense network for the exercise.

This is the largest exercise in the history of the long-standing military relationship between the U.S. and Israel. In total, more than 3,500 U.S. military personnel will participate in AC12 from multiple locations across Europe, the Mediterranean, and in Israel.

Let me emphasize that this exercise is purely about improving on our combined U.S.-Israeli military capabilities — it's about military teamwork. AC12 is not related to election cycles, or any perceived tensions in the Middle East. We are military professionals coming together to train for a defensive mission. AC12 is another step as our continued military cooperation moves forward.

The exercise is part of a long-standing agreement between U.S. European Command and the Israeli Defense Forces to hold bilateral training exercises on a regular basis. Austere Challenge 12 is the sixth large-scale exercise our countries have held together throughout our partnership.

The United States' commitment to the security of Israel is unwavering. AC12 gives the U.S. and Israel the opportunity to continually improve our cooperation. We look forward to the exercise and to working with our Israeli partners once again. And now I'll hand it over to Brig. Gen Nuriel:

Brigadier General Nitzan Nuriel:

Good morning to the American Participants, and good afternoon to the Israelis. This is my 7th exercise which I'm running, and I can say that we have improved our cooperation, and I'm sure that through this exercise we can ensure the way we cooperate and the way we are dealing with threats. We made a lot of preparations for this exercise, and I am sure that we will be able to conduct it as it should be.

Gen. Franklin:

All right we're ready for your questions:

Q Associated Press: You mentioned that this is the largest overall joint cooperation between Israel and the US, but we understand that it was cut back a little bit. What modifications have been made, and why essentially was the number of people was cut back?

Gen. Franklin:

Overall the scale of the exercise and the number of forces participating has remained unchanged. Following the exercise postponed earlier, the US and the Israeli government agreed to reduce to modify AC12 not only in the schedule but also to include reduced US presence in Israel. The overall number of participants is the same, but there is a reduced US presence.

Gen. Nuriel: Without getting into details, the numbers have changed a little bit, mainly on logistics and other support teams; of troops on the grounds, there is no change. We are going to practice as planned.

Q NYT: What components will be in the field during the exercise? And which will remain after the exercise?

Gen. Franklin: Elements of Patriot missiles, and AEGIS ship, and other US capabilities. All US EUCOM soldiers are leaving upon completion of the exercise.

Q Fox: In the recent shoot down of the Hezbollah drone, Israel says it flew over US warships. Is that accurate?

Gen. Franklin: I don't know any details about that, I really can't comment on the accuracy of that.

Q How long are these war games going to last, and what is the mission of these war games? What are you hoping to get out of this?

Gen. Franklin: First of all, the exercise will be about three weeks long, it's really about improving our US-Israeli military capabilities and teamwork. As you know, technology changes over time, so we've held exercises in the past and every time you have a new exercise, you try and integrate the latest technology, so for example, the latest version of the Patriot missiles will be integrated into this exercise. So again, it's purely to provide defensive capabilities with Israel.

Q It was postponed by the Israelis in the spring, why did that happen, and why are you resuming that now?

Gen. Franklin: There are always a lot of reasons about why you would change the schedule, and I won't get into the details, but we all agreed it would be better in the fall, and we moved the exercise to the right, to the fall, and we're prepared to execute it.

Gen. Nuriel: With respect to the previous question, if the Iron Dome was part of the previous exercise, in this exercise you deploy a few batteries of the Iron Dome, and David's Sling will be part of the of the *next* exercise, hopefully we will deploy a few batteries of that as well. There is always improvement of the technology and the integration between the systems, from one exercise to another.

Q Bloomberg: Can you give us exactly when it will start, there is speculation that it would be on Oct. 21st.

Gen. Franklin: We won't get into exact dates, I can tell you that its late October, it's about 3 weeks. We'll stay away from the exact dates for operational security.

Q: A technical question: You will be using Arrow 3, Iron Dome, and AEGIS cruiser: what else?

Gen. Franklin: I won't give you the name of the AEGIS cruiser for security reasons, we had considered THAAD, it was on the table, but it is currently committed to other operational priorities, and will not be part of this exercise.

The AEGIS cruiser will be command and control?

Yes.

Q CBN NEWS: What are the major threats you perceive in the region.

Gen. Franklin: This exercise doesn't look at any particular threat, it look at a threat

scenario that is notional. This is a military exercise not tied to any particular recent world event, it's just a notional exercise.

Gen. Nuriel: The scenario will deal with threats from all the fronts, and our mission is to make sure we know together how to deal with potential threats coming from all fronts.

Q: Will there be any press access to interview US troops or commanders in the region.
Lt. Col. Avital Leibovich, IDF Spokeswoman: There will be some media events. We will invite the media separately.

CNN: Let me ask my question about media accessibility: Will there be a chance to work for a longer period, like 12 hours?

Lt. Col. Leibovich: We will distribute the media plan as the exercise will begin, so there is no point in discussing the exact locations, dates, and details, but we will have media events, we do have an interest in showing and exposing the great cooperation in this defense exercise.

Q "Inside the Air Force" : There were some budgetary concerns cited earlier in the year, what did you do to mitigate those concerns, have there been any changes at all, and has that had any impact on the training for the exercise?

Gen. Franklin: As you look at exercises, you're always concerned about expenditures and the level of forces available, and you work that into the schedule; the total cost of this exercise is about 30 million dollars, and with the forces available and this expenditure will allow us to achieve our full objectives with our Israeli counterparts.

PBS: Any other countries taking part in this exercise?

Gen. Franklin: No, this is a bilateral exercise between the US and the IDF.

NYT: Just wondering what the budget is for this, what is each government spending on this?

Gen. Franklin: As I mentioned, it's about 30 million for the US, and I don't know about the Israeli side:

Gen. Nuriel: Similar amount of money, but in shekels, not dollars.

Fox News: Is this going to demonstrate a level of whether Israel is going to attack Iran, and whether this would be done in cooperation with the US?

Are you going to adopt to the new threat posed by last week's drone?

Gen. Franklin: As I mentioned, this is not related to any particular recent world event, this is a long standing exercise relationship, and has been planned for over two years. It is a defensive exercise for missile defense in Israel.

Nuriel: as part of the scenario, our forces deal with this sort of threat as well, so it's part of the plan, so we did not need the real event in order to be prepared against it, it's part of the

exercise and I'm sure the forces will know how to handle it.

DPA: You said troops have been arriving, does that mean that all 1000 US troops are already here, or that some have arrived and others yet to come?

Gen. Franklin: Some have arrived, and other are yet to come, including myself, sometime next week. Somewhere around the 24th I'll be arriving.

Q Radio: The exercise has been planned for more than a couple of years...(missing)

Gen. Franklin: Well, I'll go back to my previous answer, this is just another exercise in a series of five previous, this is the sixth exercise, which we run every 2-3 years, the last one was in 2010 and was called Juniper Cobra. There is no particular message, its to prove the defensive capabilities for Israel.

Gen. Nuriel: Everybody can get any type of message he wants for this exercise, the fact that we are practicing together and working together is a strong message in itself, I'm sure that with the exercise we show that we can achieve more.

Q How will you measure success?

Gen. Nuriel. There are a few methods to success, one of them is that all the salvos shooting by will be intercepted successfully, to reduce the damage into the Israeli civilian infrastructure, and the daily life.

Q NBC: You mentioned that this is a defensive exercise, is there any outside component to this at all?

Gen. Franklin: No, it's strictly defensive.

Q: Can you walk us through the specific nations or actors that you are trying to defend against, the specific threats, without going into details?

Gen. Franklin: As Gen. Nuriel said, we're talking about all the various threats: they can be rockets, mortars, short and long range ballistic missiles, you're looking at the entire spectrum of threats and you try to coordinate against possible salvos of those threats.

Q Al Jazeera: Is this a question of dealing with an attack from one front, for multiple fronts? How far does the gaming of protecting against outside attacks go?

Gen. Nuriel: We are trying to have more than one front, and let them being multiple salvos per day, at a high tempo, in order to be prepared for such scenarios, should they come.

Gen. Franklin: No further comment on that.

ABC: How much are we talking about will be live fire, how much simulation, in an operational sense how do you actually launch these salvos? Are you using real live missiles, or a simulation... If you are dealing with long range missile salvos, how do you physically do that?

Gen. Franklin: We're talking simulations, you put the hardware there and then simulate its use. You can simulate incoming salvos through computer modeling. I won't get into any details of the exact networking, it is a combination of simulation and hardware.

Q: All simulation and no live fire?

Gen Nuriel: There is one part of the exercise with live fire to check some of the systems, but most of the exercise is based on simulation. There is one part when the troops will go and practice in the field. Therefore the exercise is about 3-4 weeks, and we will be able to practice on all levels.

Moderator, Capt. Eytan Buchman: Gen. Nuriel, any closing remarks?

Gen Nuriel: Yes, I wish good luck to the troops, I'm sure that they prepared themselves for this mission. We are going to arrange group events during this time so that they will be able to enjoy themselves staying here in Israel. Good luck to everyone, thanks to General Franklin for his courage and leadership, and I'm sure he will lead the missions successfully.

Moderator: Gen. Franklin, do you have anything to add?

Gen. Franklin: We have a great working relationship with our Israeli counterparts. This is a military exercise that will improve our defensive interoperability between our two nations, we have a great, strong relationship and I'm looking forward to a very successful exercise in Israel. I thank General Nuriel for being here with me today. Thank you all for calling in and for your great questions.