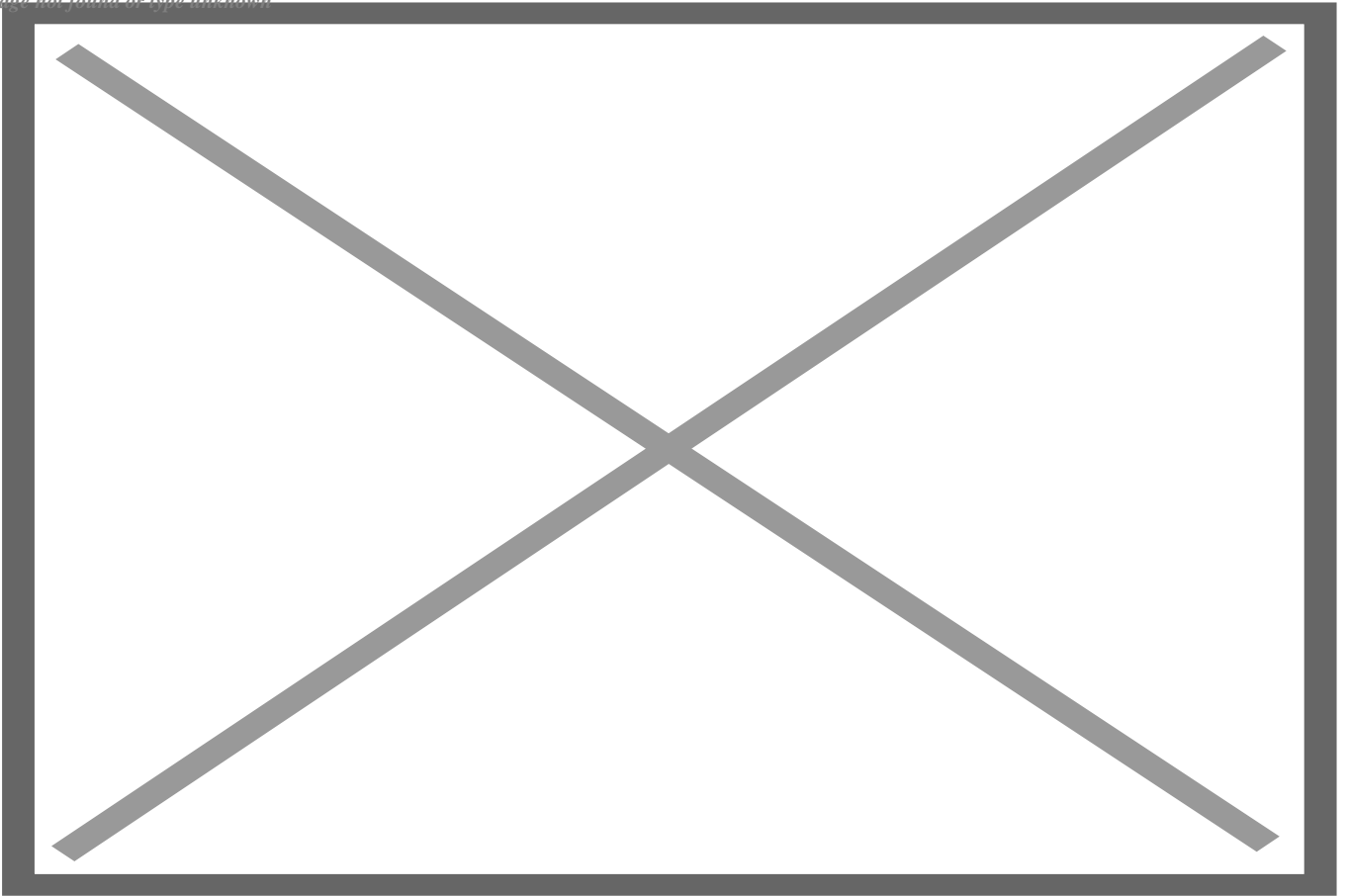


*Washington sends head of U.S. Central Command to Tel Aviv and moves warships into position to defend Israel and protect its forces in the Middle East*

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**Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, in black, meeting with Army Gen. Erik Kurilla, head of U.S. Central Command, at an air base in Israel. PHOTO: ARIEL HERMONI/ISRAEL MINISTRY OF DEFENSE/ZUMA PRESS**

Washington, April 13 (RHC)-- The Wall Street Journal is reporting the U.S. has moved warships into position to protect not only Israel but its own forces in the Middle East amid growing concern that Iran might launch a direct attack on Israel.

The U.S. moves included repositioning two destroyers, one of which was already in the region and another that was redirected there, U.S. officials said, adding that at least one of the vessels carried the Aegis missile-defense system.

At the same time, Washington has sent an important military delegation to Tel Aviv, led by U.S. Army General Erik Kurilla, the head of U.S. Central Command. The Pentagon official reportedly discussed a possible Iranian attack with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in Israel on Friday. "We are prepared to defend ourselves on the ground and in the air, in close cooperation with our partners, and we will know how to respond," Gallant said, according to Israel's Defense Ministry.

The newspaper claims that the moves "are part of an effort to avoid a wider conflict in the Middle East." But observers note that the move comes in response to concern that Iran will launch a retaliatory attack on Israel for Tel Aviv's attack on the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, the Syrian capital, last week.

The Wall Street Journal report quotes a person briefed by the Iranian leadership, saying that Tehran had yet to make a final decision on an attack.

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