Assad preparing to use chemical arms, says Israel's military intel chief

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The head of Israel's military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, said on Thursday that Syrian President Bashar Assad is preparing to make use of his chemical weapons cache, although he has yet to give an order for them to be used.

"Syria is no longer a whole country," Kochavi, told the 13th Annual Herzliya Conference. Instead Syria should be seen as two countries, one belonging to Assad and the other to the rebels, he said, with the caveat that this was a slight exaggeration of the situation. Much of the country is now under rebel control, including areas on the outskirts of Aleppo, Kochavi added.

In fighting the Syrian opposition, the Assad regime has increased its use of advanced weaponry against civilians themselves. Signs of the uptick in violence include the Syrian military's use of Scud and M-600 missiles on populated areas of the country. To date, the number of such rockets fired on civilians stands at 70, Kochavi said.

Iran and Hezbollah's efforts to stabilize the country are also on the increase, according to the intelligence chief. Hundreds of fighters from a special Hezbollah unit are on Syrian soil today. Some have lost their lives in battles with the rebels. Those who perished have been buried in secret so that their identities would not become public, Kochavi told the conference.

Aside from these operatives, a Syrian "people's army" has been active in the country for the past six months. The group comprises some 50 thousand people, operates alongside the Syrian military, and is trained by Hezbollah operatives with Iranian funding.

Kochavi also addressed Iran's nuclear program. According to Israeli estimates, the regime has still not made a decision to produce a nuclear bomb. Although, Kochavi added, "that is
"Iran does not expect an assault by the international community on its nuclear facilities, not in the foreseeable future," Kochavi said. The main challenge to Tehran's nuclear program is the survival of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime.

The weight of sanctions against the country will become an increasingly decisive consideration in Iran's decision, he added, although, "so far it has not caused them to change their policies." As long as Iran does not see a high likelihood of attack against its nuclear facilities, "Iran under pressure will continue to advance its nuclear plans," Kochavi said.