

Israel has plans for nuclear attack on Iran

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A report in yesterday's London-based *Sunday Times* revealed that the Israeli military has been training to use tactical nuclear weapons against Iran's uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and other nuclear facilities. Based on several Israeli military sources, the article said two air force squadrons were involved, with the preparations being overseen by air force commander Major General Eliezer Shkedi.

Israeli officials were quick to disparage the report. Foreign ministry spokesman Mark Regev "formally denied" the claim and restated the official stance that Israeli was committed to a diplomatic solution and supported last month's UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on Iran. Top government and military figures have repeatedly warned, however, that Israel would not allow Tehran to develop nuclear weapons.

Last month, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert pointedly included Israel among his list of responsible nuclear powers, in contrast to Iran. Previously Israel always refused to acknowledge its nuclear arsenal, which various analysts estimate at between 80 to 200 warheads. Olmert's comment was not so much "a slip" but a calculated warning to Iran in particular that Israel had nuclear weapons and was prepared to use them to maintain its military predominance in the Middle East.

The *Sunday Times* report indicated that military preparations are well advanced. "Under the plans, conventional laser-guided bombs would open 'tunnels' into the targets. 'Mini-nukes' would then immediately be fired into a plant at Natanz, exploding deep underground to reduce the risk of radioactive fallout," the newspaper stated. Several routes had been mapped out and in recent weeks pilots had flown to Gibraltar to train for the 3,200-kilometre round trip to Iranian targets.

"As soon as the green light is given, it will be one mission, one strike and the Iranian nuclear project will be demolished," one source told the *Sunday Times*. According to the newspaper, the targets include Iran's uranium conversion plant near Isfahan and its heavy water reactor under construction at Arak, both of which would be hit with conventional bombs. "There is no 99 percent success in this

mission. It must be 100 percent or better not at all," one of the pilots explained.

In making what was almost certainly a deliberate leak, the Israeli regime has a number of motives. Following the Israeli military's humiliating withdrawal from Lebanon last year, the Olmert government is determined to take a tough stance. The *Sunday Times* article is in part designed to send a message to the Middle East and the world that Israel is willing to use all means at its disposal to crush any potential rival in the region.

According to the *Sunday Times*, Israel justifies the choice of tactical nuclear weapons by the fact that Iran's uranium enrichment plant at Natanz are protected by an estimated 20 metres of rock and concrete. However, any use of atomic bombs—for the first time since the US incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945—would above all be a political, rather than a military, decision aimed at reasserting Israel's strategic superiority as the only nuclear-armed power in the Middle East.

Anyone who thinks that an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran is impossible needs to consider Israel's long record of carrying out the unthinkable. Over the past year, it has waged a criminal war of attrition against the population of the Palestinian territories. Last July, on the pretext of rescuing two captured soldiers, Israel launched a full-scale invasion of Lebanon, killing hundreds of civilians and reducing much of the country to rubble, as the first stage of an operation directed primarily at Iran and Syria. It should also be recalled that Israeli warplanes carried out an unprovoked attack on Iraq's small research reactor at Osirak in 1981.

Neither the Olmert government nor the Bush administration has offered any conclusive proof that Tehran has a nuclear weapons program. The Iranian regime has consistently maintained that it is entitled under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to engage in uranium enrichment and that its Natanz plant is to provide fuel for nuclear power reactors, the first of which is nearing completion at Bushehr. Israel has openly flouted the international non-proliferation efforts, refusing to sign the NPT or allow inspection of any of its nuclear facilities.

In this context, the openly anti-Semitic statements of

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who sponsored an international conference of Nazi Holocaust deniers in Tehran last month, have played directly into the hands of the most right-wing, militarist sections of the Israeli ruling elite. Israeli leaders have exploited Ahmadinejad's calls for the destruction of Israel to whip up fears of "a second holocaust" of Jews.

Last November, in an effort to shore up his government, Olmert brought Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the far-right Israel Beitenu (Israel is Our Home) party, into his cabinet as deputy prime minister. He was given the specially created post of minister of strategic affairs, dealing with threats against Israel, with a particular focus on Iran. Lieberman, a right-wing nationalist and racist, is notorious for his calls for the ethnic cleansing of Israeli Arabs, the bombing of Palestinian civilians and the targeting of Egypt's Aswan High Dam. In 2001, he openly advocated the use of nuclear weapons against Iran.

Last week, Lieberman called on the UN to expel Iran and for the major powers to act against Tehran. "The state of Israel can, and will, stand alone against Iran, but we should not be asked to," he said. "If allowed to achieve nuclear weapons, the entire free world will pay a heavy price—Israel will be the first and will pay the heaviest price, but Iranian aggressiveness will not stop there."

Lieberman is not alone in complaining that UN sanctions on Iran are inadequate. In its annual report released last week, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), an Israeli think-tank, ominously warned: "Despite the growing concern within the international community, the INSS questions whether effective sanctions will be imposed. Time is working in Iran's favour, and barring military action, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons is only a matter of time."

These comments point to another motive for the leak to the *Sunday Times*: to put pressure on the Bush administration to take action soon against Iran, or, at the very least, to give backing for Israel to do so. The newspaper cited the comments of Israeli deputy defence minister Ephraim Sneh last month, saying: "The time is approaching when Israel and the international community will have to decide whether to take military action against Iran." The *Times* also noted that Israeli and US officials had met several times to consider military options.

In an article in the *New Yorker* last April, veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh provided details of high-level planning in the White House and the Pentagon for a massive air assault on Iran, including but not limited to its nuclear facilities. The most chilling aspect of the revelations included a fierce debate over the use of tactical nuclear weapons against targets such as the Natanz enrichment plant.

Hersh's article quoted a former defence official who revealed that US warplanes, operating from aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea, had been "flying simulated nuclear-weapons delivery missions—rapid ascending manoeuvres known as 'over the shoulder' bombing—since last summer... within range of Iranian coastal radars".

The Bush administration has never ruled out a military attack on Iran and rejected the proposal made by the top-level Iraq Study Group for negotiations with Iran and Syria to help stabilise Iraq. The most militarist layer of the US ruling elite openly advocates war against Iran. In an article late last year laying out a strategy for neo-conservatives, Joshua Muravchik, from the American Enterprise Institute, candidly declared: "Make no mistake, President Bush will need to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities before leaving office."

Already there are indications that the Pentagon is preparing for just such an eventuality. Over the past few months, senior US officials have been travelling to the Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to discuss ways of strengthening defence ties and military capacities in those countries. One obvious reason for such discussions is the necessity of defending US military bases in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain from possible Iranian retaliation in the event of a US attack.

The US and Britain are also bolstering their naval strength in the region. A second US aircraft carrier group—the USS John C. Stennis and escort ships—is due to enter the Persian Gulf later this month. President Bush has also taken the unusual step of appointing an admiral—William Fallon—for the first time to take over as head of US Central Command which is responsible for Middle East operations including Iran and Iraq.

Retired Colonel Sam Gardiner told the *Sunday Times* that he believed that a US attack on Iran remained a possibility. He described the deployment of a second aircraft carrier strike force to the Gulf region, as well as British minesweepers, as a "huge deal". "It is only necessary to do that if you are planning to strike Iran and deal with the consequences," he said, which could include Iranian attempts to shut the Strait of Hormuz, the sea route for much of the world's oil.

Whatever the precise motives behind all these menacing threats, the US and Israel are recklessly plunging towards a new conflagration that includes the possible use of nuclear weapons.



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