

US intelligence report heightens danger of Israeli strike on Iran

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6 December 2007

The Israeli government has bluntly rejected the conclusion of the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), released on Monday, that Iran currently has no nuclear weapons programs. The NIE report directly contradicts previous Israeli claims that Tehran represents an imminent nuclear threat to Israel and the world. While government ministers continue to call publicly for greater diplomatic efforts, there are obvious signs that a discussion is underway in Israeli political and military circles about possible air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni set in motion a diplomatic counteroffensive with a briefing for Israeli ambassadors on Tuesday. Dismissing the NIE, she declared: "Iran's desire to gain nuclear weapons has been proven, and it is clear to all that it is continuing with its efforts to achieve the technology." Speaking yesterday in Slovenia, Livni called for "more effective sanctions" to force Iran to halt its uranium enrichment, adding: "Iran with a nuclear weapon is something that the world cannot afford."

Livni simply ignored that fact that the NIE added weight to Iran's repeated insistence that its uranium enrichment program is to provide fuel for its power reactors, not to manufacture an atomic bomb. While continuing to claim that Iran had previously had a weapons program, the NIE said it had been halted in 2003. Even if Iran decided to do so, the NIE concluded, the country was "very unlikely" to have the technical capacity to produce enough highly enriched uranium for one bomb before the timeframe 2010-2015.

Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak dismissed the NIE conclusions outright. While acknowledging for the first time that Iran had stopped its military nuclear program in 2003, he insisted that "in our estimation, since then it is apparently continuing with its program." Like Livni, Barak offered no evidence for his assertion. "It is our responsibility to ensure that the right steps are taken

against the Iranian regime. As is well known, words don't stop missiles," he told Israeli radio on Tuesday.

"Action is needed in the form of sanctions, in the diplomatic sphere," Barak said, adding ominously, "and in other spheres as well." A string of media reports over the past year have pointed to advanced Israeli preparations for air strikes on Iran. Just last month, Barak told a Labor Party meeting that a military operation was a viable option for dealing with Iran's nuclear facilities. "We cannot take any option off the table, and we need to study operational aspects. This is not for the coming months, but also for the coming two years," he said.

Speaking on Tuesday, Barak declared that intelligence estimates differed. "We cannot allow ourselves to rest just because of an intelligence report from the other side of the world, even if it is our greatest friend," he said. The Israeli intelligence organisation Mossad claimed earlier this year that Iran would have a fully functional nuclear weapon by 2009. But this estimate is almost certainly driven by Israeli concerns that Bush's replacement after next year's election may not as readily give the green light for an attack on Iran.

Strategic Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman, from the far-right Israel Beitenu (Israel is Our Home) party, sounded a similar note in comments on Tuesday. He declared that "the [NIE] report will not make any difference." Asked about the deadline to give up on economic sanctions and pursue a military strategy against Iran, Lieberman refused to answer directly, but said: "I hope the diplomatic effort works and prevents them from obtaining a nuclear bomb. [Such efforts] worked in Libya and North Korea, and we hope it works with Iran. If it doesn't, we will sit and discuss whatever we have to decide."

The very fact that Lieberman was brought into the cabinet by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert last year was calculated to inflame tensions with Tehran. 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. Olmert handed him the specially created post of strategic affairs minister, dealing with threats to Israel, with a particular focus on Iran. In 2001, Lieberman openly advocated the use of nuclear weapons against Iran.

The sharpest warning of Israel's preparedness to attack Iran was its air raid on a building in northern Syria on September 6. The exact nature of the target is still unknown. Israel imposed strict censorship on the entire operation. And while denying claims in the US media that Israel had destroyed a nuclear reactor under construction, Syria has also provided no details. The real purpose was to demonstrate Israel's ability and willingness to strike anywhere in the region. It was a warning to Iran, and also to Syria, if it maintained its alliance with Tehran.

Since then, the Bush administration and the Olmert government have both been intensifying the propaganda war against Iran. With the US presidential elections due in less than a year, the Bush administration's window of opportunity for military action against Iran is closing. Bush's insistence on Tuesday that the NIE report had changed nothing and that the military option remained on the table is another demonstration that the nuclear issue is simply a pretext.

Like the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the purpose of Washington's confrontation with Tehran is to establish US predominance over its European and Asian rivals in the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. For Israel, an attack on Iran is aimed at undermining or eliminating a regional rival for strategic and economic influence.

The US and Israeli regimes have clearly been coordinating their plans. Shaul Mofaz, Israel's transportation and former defence minister, visited Washington in June. According to the *New York Times*, he told US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice that diplomatic efforts to compel Iran to shut down its uranium enrichment program had until the end of the year. If not, he warned, Israel "would have to reassess where we are".

Far from ending the danger of war, the NIE is likely to prompt an intensification of preparations. Despite Bush's claim not to have known of the report's contents until this week, Israeli prime minister Olmert said that he, Barak and other Israeli officials were briefed in advance on the intelligence assessment last week when they visited Washington. Bush has just announced plans to visit Israel in early January for the first time in his presidency.

An editorial *Jerusalem* right-wing *Post* summed up the contempt in Israeli ruling circles for the NIE conclusions, and their determination to deal with Iran. "If one were looking for a new definition of chutzpa," the newspaper declared, "it would be hard to do better than the latest US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran. This document declares that Iran successfully hid its military nuclear program from the US for years, while claiming 'moderate confidence' that Iran is not hiding such a program now."

The editorial does put its finger on a contradiction in the NIE, but a more obvious explanation is that Iran had no nuclear weapons programs even prior to 2003. Certainly, inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over the past four years have produced scant evidence of any Iranian effort to manufacture nuclear weapons, despite being fed with information from US and Israeli intelligence.

The editorial concluded by declaring "some basic truths"—that Iran is "racing" to enrich uranium for a weapons program and "is a threat to the entire international order and economy". And finally, with the US military option off the table in practice, due to the NIE, it left "only an Israeli military option, sanctions or living with an Iranian bomb". The *Post* makes clear that it considers the first alternative to be the only viable one.

A "unilateral" Israeli strike on Iran has been canvassed in Washington for more than a year as one means for provoking Tehran and justifying massive American military retaliation. Now that the NIE has punched some large holes in the Bush administration's propaganda, the Israeli option will undoubtedly be the subject of intense discussion in the White House and when Bush visits Israel next month.



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