

# Israeli minister threatens “destruction of the Iranian nation”

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9 April 2008

Amid a massive five-day civil defence drill, a senior Israeli cabinet minister has provocatively threatened Iran with complete destruction in retaliation for any attack. The chilling threat was made amid rising tensions with Syria and continuing hints of a preemptive Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Speaking at the newly-opened Government War Room Headquarters on Monday, National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer warned that the drill was not just “a meaningless spectacle or a fictional scenario. The future reality is likely to be a number of times harsher than that which we recognise now. We are confronted with a situation where the home front becomes the front line.”

Ben-Eliezer singled out Tehran, declaring: “An Iranian attack will lead to a harsh retaliation by Israel, which will lead to the destruction of the Iranian nation.” While saying that Iran “will not attack Israel so quickly because they understand the ramifications”, he added: “Nevertheless, the Iranians are provoking us through their allies Syria and Hezbollah, [providing] them with much weaponry, and with that we have to contend.”

Ben-Eliezer is a longstanding Labour Party figure, who previously served as defence minister and deputy prime minister. His remark about Iran “provoking us” is an ominous indication that Israel is preparing its justifications for a new preemptive attack. Last September, Israeli war planes carried out an unprovoked strike on a Syrian site, which, according to leaks in the British and US press, was allegedly a nuclear reactor under construction. The Israeli government provided no explanation and banned any media coverage. Its purpose, however, was clear. In the wake of the failure of its 2006 war against Hezbollah

militia in Lebanon, Israel was demonstrating—to Iran in particular—that it could strike anywhere in the region.

Tensions with Syria were heightened in mid-February by the murder of top Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed in Damascus by a car bomb blast. While Israeli officials denied any involvement, it is widely believed in the region that Israeli intelligence orchestrated the assassination to provoke a response from Hezbollah and set the stage for another war in the Lebanon. In late February, the Bush administration inflamed the situation by stationing the US navy’s Nassau battle group off the Lebanese coast in a show of support for the Lebanese regime of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

Israel’s civil defence mobilisation, dubbed “Turning Point 2”, took place in this context. It is the second such exercise since the 2006 invasion of Lebanon and the first under the National Emergency Authority established last September. The exercise began on Sunday, is running over five days and involves the entire security apparatus, from the cabinet security committee down.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was at pains to emphasise on Sunday that the mobilisation was “only a drill, with nothing behind it. We have no secret plans.” The scenario that his cabinet had to consider, however, was an air and missile assault from Lebanon and Syria on Israeli cities, involving the use of non-conventional weapons. An article in the *Jerusalem Post* explained that the exercise was not just “drawing from the lessons of the Second Lebanese war” but “in preparation for Iranian nuclear bombs as well as possible chemical and biological attacks”.

According to the newspaper, the country’s largest ever drill involves the Israel Police, the Israeli Defence Force Home Front Command, other military branches,

all the country's hospitals, the Fire and Rescue Services, and other emergency services. Rescue services are simulating mass evacuations from populated areas, and hospitals are practising treating thousands of casualties. Yesterday, an estimated 1.7 million schoolchildren were involved in an evacuation drill.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak bluntly explained that the exercise was directly linked to preparations for a new conflict. "The Second Lebanon War created a reality in which the home front is part of the front during a conflict and its resistance is a condition of victory," he said. The scale of the mobilisation indicates that the government and military are not simply planning for rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip or by the Hezbollah militia in southern Lebanon, but a full-scale war. The most obvious targets are Syria and Iran.

Ben-Eliezer's inflammatory remarks point to the latter. Olmert and other Israeli ministers have repeatedly said they will not tolerate Tehran having the capacity to build a bomb. Articles in the British press over the past year provided details of Israeli training for air strikes on Iran's enrichment plant at Natanz and other nuclear facilities.

The Israeli government was bitterly critical of the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released in December, which found that the Iranian regime had ended any nuclear weapons program in 2003. Defence Minister Barak rejected the assessment and called for action in the diplomatic sphere and "in other spheres as well". Last November, Barak told a Labour Party meeting that "we cannot take any option off the table [that is, including the military one] and we need to study operational aspects."

Any Israeli strike on Iran would require a green light from Washington. It is significant therefore that over the past month President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and CIA chief Michael Hayden have all rejected the NIE findings. Speaking to ABC News in Jerusalem last month during his Middle East tour, Cheney declared: "Obviously, they're [Iran] also heavily involved in trying to develop nuclear weapons enrichment, the enrichment of uranium to weapons grade levels."

Cheney's unsubstantiated remark is not supported by International Atomic Energy Agency inspections,

which have consistently found that the Natanz plant is only enriching uranium to the low levels required for nuclear fuel—as Tehran has always insisted. The lie does point, however, to the fact that significant sections of the Bush administration, together with bulk of the Israeli political establishment, are prepared to use any uranium enrichment capacity—even that permitted under the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty—as the pretext for an attack on Iran.

While the US vice-president was relatively cautious in his comments, his Israeli interlocutors were not. President Shimon Peres told the media that "Iran's only intentions in developing missiles with nuclear warheads are to destroy Israel and threaten the entire world". Opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu said he had told Cheney "about the need to remove the Iranian threat before [Tehran] arms itself with a nuclear bomb".

Ben-Eliezer's threat and the home front exercise are two more signs that Israel and the US are actively considering a war against Iran.



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