

More US, Israeli threats against Iran

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Strident remarks by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on Tuesday once again raised the prospect of a military attack on Iran before the end of the Bush administration.

Olmert, who met with President Bush yesterday, bluntly told the pro-Israeli lobby group: “Israel will not tolerate the possibility of a nuclear Iran, and neither should any country in the free world.” Dismissive of current international sanctions against Iran’s nuclear programs, Olmert called for their dramatic increase but then left no doubt that military strikes had to be put on the agenda.

“The Iranian threat must be stopped by all possible means. International economic and political sanctions on Iran, as crucial as they may be, are only an initial step and must be dramatically increased,” Olmert said. “The international community has a duty and responsibility to clarify to Iran, through drastic measures, that the repercussions of their continued pursuit of nuclear weapons will be devastating.”

Like Bush, Olmert has repeatedly declared that the military option is on the table in dealing with Iran. Leaks in the British press over the past two years have pointed to advanced Israeli military preparations for air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, including its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. Last September Israeli warplanes carried out an unprovoked attack on a building in Syria’s eastern desert that the Bush administration claimed in April had been a nuclear reactor under construction.

Iran has repeatedly denied that it has a nuclear weapons program and insisted that it has every right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium to provide fuel for power reactors. The Bush administration and its allies have seized on the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report to back allegations that Iran is planning to build a nuclear bomb. Nothing in the report, however, indicates that Tehran has any current nuclear weapons program. Moreover, the report verified that the Natanz plant is enriching uranium to the low levels required for fuel, not the high levels needed for a bomb.

What is driving the Olmert’s threats of military action is his government’s determination to maintain Israel’s military superiority over any potential rival and to undercut Iranian influence in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region. While warning of the menace of a “nuclear Iran”, Olmert maintained the official silence on Israel’s own considerable nuclear arsenal—recently put at more than 150 weapons by former US President Jimmy Carter. As for the Bush administration, the campaign against Tehran is part of broader ambitions to establish US dominance throughout the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia.

In remarks prior to talks with Olmert yesterday, Bush confirmed that Iran was at the top of their agenda. “We’re going to be spending a lot of time talking about Iran. Iran is an existential threat to peace and [it is] very important for the world to take the Iranian threat seriously,” he said. Olmert echoed the US president, declaring that “the main threat to all of us... is Iran”.

With less than a year left of Bush’s second term, the Israeli government is pressing for tougher US action against Iran. In a front-page story yesterday, the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Achronot*, citing sources close to Olmert, reported that the prime minister would tell Bush that “time is running out” on efforts to curb Iran’s nuclear programs by sanctions. According to *Yediot Achronot*, Olmert intended to say that the US should therefore attack Iran.

When Bush visited Israel last month, the *Jerusalem Post*, citing a senior Israeli official, reported that the president and Vice President Dick Cheney told a meeting that “military action [against Iran] was called for”. The article blamed the hesitancy of US Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Rice for delaying a decision on an attack. While the White House abruptly dismissed the report, there has been a steady drumbeat from Israeli and US officials, including Rice, setting the stage for more aggressive action against Iran.

In her speech to AIPAC on Tuesday, Rice repeated Bush’s comment to the Israeli parliament last month: “For the sake of peace, the world must not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon.” She criticised Tehran for refusing to cooperate with the IAEA, accused Iranian agents in Iraq of “attacking our troops” and branded Iran as “an extremist and dangerous state”. In particular, Rice sought to pressure the European powers to take tougher action, declaring: “Our partners in Europe and beyond need to exploit Iran’s vulnerabilities more vigorously and impose greater costs on the regime—economically, financially, politically and diplomatically.”

Rice stopped short of explicitly raising the “military option” but, as the *New York Times* noted, the tenor of her speech was “unusually sharp”. She acknowledged that “there is a serious debate right now, both in our country and in Israel, about how to address the threat posed by the Iranian regime.” In introducing her, AIPAC chairman Howard Friedman pointed to the character of the debate by imploring Rice “to use your remaining time in office to ensure that Iran does not get a nuclear weapon”.

AIPAC is a notorious for its connections to the most militarist sections of the political establishment both in Israel and the US. Its close connections with the neo-conservatives in the Pentagon were exposed in 2005 when Defence Department analyst Lawrence Franklin was charged with providing classified information to two

AIPAC officials—Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman—who in turn passed on the material to the Israeli state. Franklin, who worked for undersecretary for policy Douglas Feith, himself a prominent neo-conservative, was the Pentagon's top specialist on Iran and well-known for his hard-line views. Most of the 83 classified documents concerned US policy toward Iran.

The comments of Olmert and Rice come in the midst of a meeting of the IAEA board of governors in Vienna that is being exploited by the US and its allies to intensify the pressure on Iran. US envoy to the IAEA, Gregory Schulte, provocatively declared yesterday: "Iran continues this work [uranium enrichment] apace, while it stalls the IAEA with non-answers and obfuscation. Every passing day leads Iran closer to mastering the technology it needs to build a weapon."

Slovenian and European Union (EU) representative Bojan Bertonec also expressed "serious concern" that the IAEA had been unable to determine the full nature of Iran's nuclear program. Referring to 18 documents provided by the US and other intelligence agencies to the IAEA, he declared: "A simple rejection by Iran of this information as not authentic, forged or fabricated is neither credible nor acceptable, given the quality and quantity of the documents." The three major EU powers—Britain, France and Germany—described the issue as "a long and slow crisis, but a grave crisis," saying Iran was expanding its enrichment capacity, while appearing to cover up its past activity.

All these comments involve deliberate deception. None of the documents have been publicly released, but as listed in the IAEA report, all are at least three years old. In particular, as several commentators have noted, this latest intelligence does not contradict a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) last December, which concluded that Iran had ended any program related to nuclear weapons in 2003. As the IAEA report noted, the nuclear body is yet to assess Iran's response to a series of questions sent to Tehran based on the documents.

The Bush administration and the Israeli government have made no secret of their hostility to the NIE and have sought to systematically undermine its conclusions. Many of the 18 documents had previously been provided to the IAEA, but they were only formally released to the body in February to help create the climate to push through a new set of UN sanctions against Iran. The IAEA is still prevented from showing some of the documents to Iranian officials, making any response from Tehran problematic.

While the international media routinely dismisses Iranian suggestions that the documents are fabricated, the US and Israel have a long history of employing such methods. On the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, documents emerged purporting to demonstrate that the Baghdad regime was importing uranium ore from Niger. The papers were quickly exposed as forgeries but that did not stop the US and Britain from continuing to circulate the lie. It is certainly not far-fetched that Israeli or American agencies would concoct evidence to provide the pretext for a new war of aggression against Iran.

Opening the Vienna meeting on Monday, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei noted that Iran's alleged nuclear studies remained "a matter of serious concern" and pressed Tehran to provide access to documents and individuals that would clarify

the nature of Iran's past and present nuclear program. But he added: "To put things in their perspective, let me emphasise that the Agency has no information—apart from the uranium metal document—on the actual design or manufacture by Iran of nuclear material components, or of other key components, of a nuclear weapon. Likewise, the Agency has not seen indications of the actual use of nuclear material in connection with the alleged studies."

While ElBaradei is engaged in a cautious balancing act, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was more emphatic in an interview in *Le Monde* last weekend. Asked if Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons, he declared: "I don't believe so. Nothing indicates it." Pointing out that Iran's activities were not in breach of international law, Putin said: "I am serious. On a legal level, Iran has infringed nothing at the moment. They have the same right to enrichment [as other countries]. The paperwork says so. Iran is accused of not displaying all its programs to the IAEA. This point remains to be resolved."

All of this evokes a sense of déjà vu. Just as before the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration and its allies are again concocting a pretext for war based on half-truths, distortions and outright lies. The efforts of the IAEA over the past six months to clarify all outstanding questions concerning Iran's nuclear programs have been constantly criticised and belittled. When the UN body began resolving outstanding issues, new doubts and documents were released to ensure the process was not concluded.

The most ominous development is the increasingly intimate collaboration between the US and Israeli governments amid growing signs of a debate in both countries over when and how, rather than if, to launch a new military adventure against Iran.



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