

More signs of Israeli-US preparations for attacking Iran

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The visit by US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen to Israel yesterday is one more indication that the two countries are actively discussing a military strike on Iran. Mullen's trip followed news that the Israeli air force carried out a major exercise earlier this month involving 100 fighter jets, backed by midair fuel tankers and rescue helicopters, flying some 1,500 kilometres westward over the Mediterranean Sea—roughly the same distance as eastward from Israel to Iran's nuclear facilities.

Mullen's trip was only the second by a joint chiefs chairman to Israel in more than a decade. Last December Mullen also visited Israel in the wake of an unprovoked attack last September by Israeli warplanes on a building in northern Syria. In April, the Bush administration authorised a CIA briefing, which claimed, on the basis of limited evidence, that Syria had been constructing a nuclear reactor at the site with the assistance of North Korea.

Few details of Mullen's latest trip are available, but Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell did acknowledge that Iran was at the top of the agenda. "Obviously, when Chairman Mullen goes to Israel and speaks with the Israelis, they will no doubt discuss the threat posed by Iran, as we discuss it in this building, in other buildings in town," he said.

Two other top US military officers were also in Israel this week. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead met with his Israeli counterpart, as did General William Wallace, commander of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command. Roughead's presence is particularly significant, as the US navy would be central in countering any Iranian retaliation in the Persian Gulf following an Israeli strike.

The high-level visits follow a series of threats against Iran by senior Israeli figures, most explicitly by Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz. He told an Israeli newspaper on June 13 that "if Iran continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack it". The Israeli ambassador to the US, Sallai Meridor, told CBS News last week that time was "running out" for a diplomatic action to force Iran to shut down its nuclear programs. "We cannot take this

threat lightly and as our prime minister recently said Israel will not tolerate a nuclear Iran," he said.

Like the US, Israel claims, without any substantive evidence, that Iran has an active nuclear weapons program, which, according to Israeli intelligence, could manufacture a bomb as early as next year. Unlike Israel, Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its nuclear facilities are monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). A series of IAEA reports confirm that Iran is enriching uranium only to the low levels required to fuel its planned power reactors—as Tehran has insisted all along. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) by US intelligence agencies last December found that Iran had ended any weapons program by 2003.

Israel, however, is determined to maintain its military supremacy in the Middle East and to prevent any, even remote, possibility that Iran, or any other neighbour, will master nuclear technology that would in the future assist in the building of weapons. Hypocritically, both Israeli and US officials remain silent on what is an open secret—that Israel maintains its own substantial arsenal of atomic bombs. In order to retain its nuclear monopoly, the Israeli regime is prepared to risk plunging the entire region into a conflagration through an unprovoked and criminal attack on Iran.

The Bush administration, which regards Iran as an obstacle to US dominance in the oil-rich Middle East, is complicit in these plans. As a number of defence analysts have pointed out, the Israeli military does not have the capacity to carry out the type of sustained air war needed not only to strike Iranian nuclear facilities, but to level Iran's air defences and military capacity to retaliate. Moreover, any Israeli air strike on Iran is limited in its choice of routes—the most obvious one being over US-occupied Iraq. Whatever is the case, Israel needs the tacit political support, if not active military assistance, of the US.

Israeli impatience has nothing to do with Iran's alleged weapons program. If time is "running out", the main consideration is a political one—that the Bush administration

is due to leave office early next year. Analyst Michael Oren from the Jerusalem-based Shalem Centre told CBS News that Israel would not wait for a new US administration. “The Israelis have been assured by the Bush administration that the Bush administration will not allow Iran to nuclearise. The Israelis are uncertain about what would be the policies of the next administration vis-à-vis Iran,” he said.

Within the Israeli establishment, an attack on Iran is openly discussed. In a comment on Tuesday, provocatively entitled “...but someone has to do it”, the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* pointed out that the not-so-secret Israeli “dress rehearsal” over the Mediterranean was aimed to pressuring “the world”—particularly the US—into taking on the task. After discounting the possibility that Bush or either of the US presidential contenders would authorise a US attack on Iran, the article bitterly concluded that in the event that Israel had no partners in such an enterprise, at least the “Jews can lean on themselves”.

A second article in the *Jerusalem Post* the following day attacked a *New York Times* editorial that had argued against attacking Iran, not because of its criminal character, but because the consequences would be “disastrous”. The *Jerusalem Post* writer argued that there was little doubt that Iran would respond to a direct attack, or a blockade, “but its options, heated rhetoric notwithstanding, are actually limited”. Tacitly acknowledging that Iran posed no real threat to either Israel or the US, he commented: “Instead of unwarranted, self-deterring risk aversion, let us not forget who wields the incalculably greater ‘stick’: Iran certainly will not.”

Israel has been intensifying its propaganda against Iran. According to *Ha’aretz*, Foreign Ministry Director General Aaron Abramovich secretly visited IAEA headquarters in Vienna on Wednesday to demand that the body “act more quickly and efficiently to block Iranian nuclear ambitions”. Abramovich, the first senior Israeli official in several years to visit the IAEA, reportedly briefed a group of ambassadors on Israel’s belief that Iran has a secret military nuclear program.

Israeli officials are claiming that the purpose of Syria’s alleged nuclear reactor was to supply its ally Iran with plutonium for a nuclear weapon. An adviser to Israel’s national security council told the *Guardian* this week: “The Iranians were involved in the Syrian program. The idea was that the Syrians produce plutonium and the Iranians get their share.” Given that it is yet to be demonstrated that Syria was even building a nuclear reactor, the Iranian connection, for which no evidence has been offered, has been concocted to add further fuel to the scare campaign. IAEA inspectors this week visited the site of the bombed building in Syria and said it would be some time before any conclusions could be

reached.

Admiral Mullen’s visit this week makes clear that far from being left to its own devices, Israel enjoys collaborations with the highest levels of the US military. Moreover, discussion about a possible attack on Iran is taking place within the American political establishment and is not confined to the Bush administration or its extreme right-wing allies.

A statement released this month by the Presidential Task Force on the Future of US-Israeli Relations convened by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy focussed almost exclusively on the issue of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Its key recommendation called on the US president to initiate a dialogue with the Israeli prime minister using “the most trusted advisers” to consider “the costs and benefits” of “the entire range of policy” including diplomacy, “coercive options” including an embargo of Iranian oil, and “preventative military action”.

Ha’aretz noted this week with some satisfaction that the task force included prominent Democrats such as Susan Rice and Tony Lake, who are among Senator Barack Obama’s senior foreign policy advisers, as well as representatives from the camp of Senator John McCain, the Republican candidate. While it indicated that the statement was of course suitably nuanced, the article bluntly characterised the underlying message as follows: “If you want it in a journalistic headline format: Obama, McCain advisers agree: US-Israel should discuss preventative military action against Iran.”

Former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton, who openly advocates attacking Iran, suggested last week that Israel would most likely launch a strike after the US elections in November and prior to the inauguration of the next US president. However, an article in the *Jerusalem Post* on Thursday made clear that tactical considerations might dictate a far earlier date. It noted that Tehran is believed to have purchased the sophisticated Russian-made S-300 air defence missile system, which the Israeli military has warned “cannot be allowed to reach the region”.

After reviewing the implications of Bolton’s remarks, the article concluded: “There is no guarantee, however, that Israel can wait that long.”



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