

Israel's plan to attack Iran confirmed

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Last week, the *Guardian* newspaper confirmed that Israel was actively considering a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities last spring. It reported that when Israel's then prime minister, Ehud Olmert, raised this during US President George W. Bush's visit to Israel last May, Bush vetoed it.

The *Guardian's* veteran Middle East commentator, Jonathan Steele, cited senior diplomatic personnel working for a European head of government who met Olmert some time after Bush's visit.

According to the *Guardian's* sources, the talks were so sensitive that they were held in private, with no notetakers in attendance. They said that Olmert "took it [the refusal of a US green light] as where they were at the moment, and that the US position was unlikely to change as long as Bush was in office."

Bush's refusal to sanction an attack was apparently based on several factors. Firstly, the US was concerned that such an attack would provoke Iran to retaliate, which would probably include a wave of attacks on US military and contract personnel in Iraq, and Afghanistan and US shipping in the Gulf. Iraq's Shiite-dominated government, installed by the US, retains close ties with and is dependent upon Tehran.

Secondly, it was unlikely that an Israeli air raid—even with dozens of aircraft—would succeed in knocking out Iran's nuclear facilities, which are widely dispersed in fortified underground locations throughout the country.

Furthermore, the shortest route to Natanz, Iran's uranium enrichment plant, is more than 700 miles from Israel and would entail flying over Iraq's airspace, which is controlled by the US. So it would be impossible for Israel to launch such an attack without explicit US approval.

This would have left the US unable to officially deny knowledge of the attack. Iran would have every reason to assume that Bush had concurred with such an act of war, and to retaliate.

Iran has repeatedly said it would defend itself against any attacks on its nuclear facilities, which it maintains are

for civilian purposes only. An air strike would precipitate a full-scale war, going far beyond Iran, underlining Washington's increasing isolation in the region. It would precipitate attacks by Hezbollah on Israel and even terrorist attacks within the US itself.

One official said, "It is over 10 years since Hezbollah's last terror attack outside Israel, when it hit an Argentine-Israeli association building in Buenos Aires [killing 85 people]." "There is a large Lebanese diaspora in Canada which must include some Hezbollah supporters. They could slip in the US and take action," he continued.

Olmert's press spokesman, by denying that Bush had refused Israel a green light to attack Iran in "any working meeting," only served to confirm the *Guardian's* story.

US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe refused to comment on the content of a private conversation between Bush and Olmert, saying, "The president's position is that all options are on the table but diplomacy remains our first course of action."

While it appears that Bush vetoed Israel's plans to attack Iran in private, publicly he continued his bellicose attitude towards Iran and gave no hint that he had, for the time being at least, excluded the military option.

In his speech to the Knesset the following day, Bush told legislators, "America stands with you in firmly opposing Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. Permitting the world's leading sponsor of terror to possess the world's deadliest weapon would be an unforgivable betrayal of future generations. For the sake of peace, the world must not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon."

Israel's plans to attack Iran's nuclear facilities in fact continued, despite the fact that 16 US intelligence agencies had issued a long delayed National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) last December concluding that Tehran had ended any nuclear weapons program in 2003.

The Israeli political and military establishment, which regards Iran as its main rival in the region, rejected the NIE's assessment and has repeatedly sought assurances that the Bush administration would "deal with" Tehran before leaving office.

It is determined to maintain its military supremacy in the Middle East and to prevent the possibility that Iran or any of its neighbours will master nuclear technology that could assist in the building of weapons. It is an open secret that Israel itself has an arsenal of more than 200 nuclear missiles. In order to retain its nuclear monopoly, the Israeli ruling elite is fully prepared to plunge the entire region into war through an unprovoked and criminal attack on Iran.

Senior ministers, including Olmert himself last November, have warned that Israel would take military action of its own to disable the “threat” posed by Iran’s nuclear facilities. In September last year, Israel destroyed a deserted Syrian target that Washington and Tel Aviv claimed was a North Korean-built nuclear installation. This attack evoked no serious international condemnation and is viewed as a precursor to a future attack on Iran.

Last April, National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer threatened Iran with complete destruction should it attack in Israel. This threat was made amid a massive five-day civil defence drill and continuing hints of a pre-emptive Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Even after Bush’s apparent veto, verbal threats and speculation of imminent air strikes against Iran have continued. In June, Israel carried out a long-range exercise over the eastern Mediterranean involving more than 100 F-15 and F-16 fighter jets, refuelling planes and rescue helicopters. Citing unnamed sources, the *New York Times* reported that the operation was a dry run for an attack on Iran.

Shaul Mofaz, deputy prime minister and a former defence minister, warned a few weeks later that a unilateral attack against Iran was “unavoidable” as international sanctions had been ineffective.

The official position in Washington and Tel Aviv is that diplomacy is the preferred way of dealing with Iran. And these bellicose threats and war games are widely seen as part of an orchestrated pressure campaign against Iran to submit to US demands for the suspension of its nuclear enrichment programme. But since Israel does not have the capacity to carry out a successful attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities on its own, the ultimate purpose of such threats as far as influential figures in both Tel Aviv and Washington are concerned is to draw the US into such an attack.

There are without doubt elements within the Israeli and American ruling elite that are pressing for an escalation of militarism in the region, with the question of Iran one of

the most divisive issues in the US presidential election.

Israel recently signed a deal with Washington for the purchase of F-22 stealth bombers, which are ideally suited to the type of targeted bombing raids planned by an Israeli air force command. Israel’s existing fleet of F15 fighter jets could also be used to launch an attack on Iran.

The Israeli military has bought 90 F-161 fighter bombers that can reach Iran and will receive 11 more by the end of next year. It has also bought two new Dolphin-class submarines from Germany, in addition to the three it already has, that are reported to be capable of firing nuclear missiles.

Earlier this month, the US Defense Department told Congress it intended to sell Israel 1,000 smart bombs capable of penetrating 90cm of steel-reinforced concrete.

On Sunday, it was announced that the US had supplied Israel with an advanced radar system that will provide an early warning in the event of an Iranian missile attack. Known as FBX-T, it will be linked to the US military’s Joint Tactical Ground Station and will be run by 120 US military personnel. Israel’s Arrow II ballistic missile shield currently works with less advanced radar.

While Bush refused to give Israel the nod to attack Iran last May, judging that it would be too precipitous a step, the military build-up in the region makes clear that such an attack is far from being off the agenda permanently. Indeed, elements within the Bush administration might still contemplate an unprovoked attack on Iran before the presidential election in November.



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