

Are Israelis gearing up to bomb Iran?

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?,
PALESTINE](#)

Editorial Note

Remember the Maine! – A second Tonkin?

With the US Navy involved in massive “war games” only twenty miles off the coast of Iran in what many international observers regard as a direct provocation to an attack, Israel is pushing for America to attack Iran. When Jim Baker attempted to intervene in the midterm campaign last month by releasing some of the findings of the Iraq Study Group, he urged direct negotiations between Washington and Tehran. His words of caution appear to have gone unheeded as Rumsfeld’s Pentagon is staying on course for a clash with Iran. In 1898, the US declared war on Spain after a mysterious explosion aboard the USS Maine then parked in Havana Harbor. Most historians now believe that the Maine’s explosion was a “false flag” attack engineered to provide the McKinley White House with a pretext for the Spanish-American War. In 1965, the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin was staged by the US military under orders from the National Security Council to stage an “incident” to legitimize an escalation of the Vietnam war. The same sort of device could be in the making today in the Persian Gulf.

Michael Carmichael,
Planetary Movement

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The appointment of Israel’s new deputy PM raises fears of a new catastrophe, says Robert Fox

The Middle East is abuzz with ugly rumours. One of them is so dire – and comes from sources in so many capital cities – that it has to be taken seriously.

The suggestion is that the Israeli government has served notice on the White House that it must take pre-emptive action against Iran’s sites of nuclear weapons development – or Israel will go it alone and do the job itself. Israel has apparently given Bush a deadline of six months.

The pressure on the Americans – if it is true – comes with the appointment of Avigdor Lieberman, one of the hardest of all hard-liners, as Israel's new Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Strategic Affairs, under the new coalition with his party, Yisrael Beytenu.

One reason why the rumour is being taken seriously is that it coincides with another strong rumour – that the Iranian regime of Mahmud Ahmadinejad has ordered Iran's nuclear programme to be accelerated. According to sources, the enrichment of uranium to weapons-grade material is galloping ahead, and Iran could have its own deployable nuclear warheads within four years.

Given Ahmadinejad's wild rhetoric about wiping Israel off the map (though the translation of these remarks is now acknowledged to be somewhat fuzzy), Israel's hawks argue there is no time to lose. Former Prime Minister, and Likud leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, for whom Lieberman once worked as chief of staff, has argued strenuously for a pre-emptive strike on Iran.

Lieberman, more hawkish than many hawks, was born in Moldova in 1958 and now leads a powerful group of Israeli immigrants from Russia and the former Soviet Union. He criticised Ariel Sharon when, during negotiations with the Palestinians, he ordered some settlements to close. He outraged moderate Jewish Israeli opinion this summer when he suggested that Arab Israelis elected to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, should be executed if they had held talks with Hamas members of the Palestinian authority.

Even the New York Times, known for its strong support for Israel, warned in an editorial a week ago that Lieberman was "the wrong partner" in an Israeli coalition. His inclusion, the paper argued, made any arrangement with the Palestinians difficult, if not impossible. "Creating new obstacles to peace with the Palestinians is the last thing Israel needs after the Lebanon fiasco."

Strategic analysts have noticed anti-Iran noises coming from the beleaguered White House, too. "It's the same sort of language we heard in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq," one Washington insider told me. A London correspondent favoured by the Bush-Blair circle said, "It's clear that Bush will not dream of leaving office under the suspicion that he allowed Iran to get nuclear weapons on his watch. He will act, and will feel uninhibited after the mid-term elections."

The practicalities of bombing Iran's nuclear installations are quite another thing, according to serious analysts. Israel lacks the capability to hit in one blow all the places where weaponry is being developed; planes would need mid-air refuelling that only the Americans could provide; and some centres of nuclear energy production – Bushir, Natanz and Tehran itself – are heavily populated. Civilian casualties would be high.

There is an even more compelling reason why realists like General John Abizaid, US commander for the region, and former Secretary of State James Baker are counselling the hawks in Israel as well as Washington to cool it.

Not only would a pre-emptive strike on Iran miss more than it hit – it would invite immediate and devastating retaliation. The Revolutionary Guards could launch a global terrorist campaign and the Iranian Air Force could bomb the offshore gas installations stretching along the Gulf from Qatar. That would knock out 15 per cent of the world's natural gas

supply at a stroke.

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