

Israel's War Deadline: Iran in the Crosshairs

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Never has an imminent war been so loudly and publicly advertised as Israel's forthcoming military attack against Iran. When the Israeli Military Chief of Staff, Daniel Halutz, was asked how far Israel was ready to go to stop Iran's nuclear energy program, he said "Two thousand kilometers" the distance of an air assault.

More specifically Israeli military sources reveal that Israel's current and probably next Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered Israel's armed forces to prepare for air strikes on uranium enrichment sites in Iran. According to the London *Times* the order to prepare for attack went through the Israeli defense ministry to the Chief of Staff. During the first week in December, "sources inside the special forces command confirmed that 'G' readiness the highest state for an operation was announced" (*Times*, December 11, 2005).

On December 9, Israeli Minister of Defense, Shaul Mofaz, affirmed that in view of Teheran's nuclear plans, Tel Aviv should "not count on diplomatic negotiations but prepare other solutions". In early December, Ahron Zoevi Farkash, the Israeli military intelligence chief told the Israeli parliament (Knesset) that "if by the end of March, the international community is unable to refer the Iranian issue to the United Nations Security Council, then we can say that the international effort has run its course".

In other words, if international diplomatic negotiations fail to comply with Israel's timetable, Israel will unilaterally, militarily attack Iran. Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the Likud Party and candidate for Prime Minister, stated that if Sharon did not act against Iran, "then when I form the new Israeli government (after the March 2006 elections) we'll do what we did in the past against Saddam's reactor." In June 1981 Israel bombed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq.

Even the pro-Labor newspaper, *Haaretz*, while disagreeing with the time and place of Netanyahu's pronouncements, agreed with its substance. *Haaretz* criticized "(those who) publicly recommend an Israeli military option" because it "presents Israel as pushing (via powerful pro-Israel organizations in the US) the United States into a major war." However, *Haaretz* adds "Israel must go about making its preparations quietly and securely not at election rallies." (*Haaretz*, December 6, 2005). *Haaretz's* position, like that of the Labor Party, is that Israel not advocate war against Iran before multi-lateral negotiations are over and the International Atomic Energy Agency makes a decision.

Israeli public opinion apparently does not share the political elite's plans for a military strike against Iran's nuclear program. A survey in the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, reported by Reuters (December 16, 2005) shows that 58 per cent of the Israelis polled believed the dispute over Iran's nuclear program should be handled diplomatically while only 36 per cent said its reactors should be destroyed in a military strike.

All top Israeli officials have pronounced the end of March, 2006, as the deadline for launching a military assault on Iran. The thinking behind this date is to heighten the pressure on the US to force the sanctions issue in the Security Council. The tactic is to blackmail Washington with the “war or else” threat, into pressuring Europe (namely Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia) into approving sanctions. Israel knows that its acts of war will endanger thousands of American soldiers in Iraq, and it knows that Washington (and Europe) cannot afford a third war at this time.

The end of March date also coincides with the IAEA report to the UN on Iran’s nuclear energy program. Israeli policymakers believe that their threats may influence the report, or at least force the kind of ambiguities, which can be exploited by its overseas supporters to promote Security Council sanctions or justify Israeli military action.

A March date also focusses the political activities of the pro-Israel organizations in the United States. The major pro-Israel lobbies have lined up a majority in the US Congress and Senate to push for the UN Security Council to implement economic sanctions against Iran or, failing that, endorse Israeli “defensive” action.

On the side of the Israeli war policy are practically all the major and most influential Jewish organizations, the pro-Israeli lobbies, their political action committees, a sector of the White House, a majority of subsidized Congressional representatives and state, local and party leaders. On the other side are sectors of the Pentagon, State Department, a minority of Congressional members, a majority of public opinion, a minority of American Jews and the majority of active and retired military commanders who have served or are serving in Iraq.

Most discussion in the US on Israel’s war agenda has been dominated by the pro-Israeli organizations that transmit the Israeli state positions. The Jewish weekly newspaper, *Forward*, has reported a number of Israeli attacks on the Bush Administration for not acting more aggressively on behalf of Israel’s policy. According to the *Forward*, “Jerusalem is increasingly concerned that the Bush Administration is not doing enough to block Teheran from acquiring nuclear weapons” (December 9, 2005).

Further stark differences occurred during the semi-annual strategic dialog between Israeli and US security officials, in which the Israelis opposed a US push for regime change in Syria, fearing a possible, more radical Islamic regime. Israeli officials also criticized the US for forcing Israel to agree to open the Rafah border crossing and upsetting their stranglehold on the economy in Gaza.

Predictably the biggest Jewish organization in the US, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations immediately echoed the Israeli state line. Malcolm Hoenlan, President of the Conference, lambasted Washington for a “failure of leadership on Iran” and “contracting the issue to Europe” (*Forward*, December 9, 2005). He went on to attack the Bush Administration for not following Israel’s demands by delaying referral of Iran to the UN Security Council for sanction. Hoenlan then turned on French, German and British negotiators accusing them of “appeasement and weakness”, and of not having a “game plan for decisive action” presumably for not following Israel’s ‘sanction or bomb them’ game plan.

The role of AIPAC, the Conference and other pro-Israeli organizations as transmission belts for Israel’s war plans was evident in their November 28, 2005 condemnation of the Bush

Administration agreement to give Russia a chance to negotiate a plan under which Iran would be allowed to enrich uranium for non-military purposes under international supervision. AIPAC's rejection of negotiations and demands for an immediate confrontation were based on the specious argument that it would "facilitate Iran's quest for nuclear weapons" an argument which flies in the face of all known intelligence data (including Israel's) which says Iran is at least 3 to 10 years away from even approaching nuclear weaponry.

AIPAC's unconditional and uncritical transmission of Israeli demands and criticism is usually clothed in the rhetoric of US interests or security in order to manipulate US policy. AIPAC chastised the Bush regime for endangering US security. By relying on negotiations, AIPAC accused the Bush Administration of "giving Iran yet another chance to manipulate (sic) the international community" and "pose a severe danger to the United States" (*Forward*, Dec. 9, 2005).

Leading US spokesmen for Israel opposed President Bush's instruction to his Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khaklilzad, to open a dialog with Iran's Ambassador to Iraq. In addition, Israel's official "restrained" reaction to Russia's sale to Teheran of more than a billion dollars worth of defensive anti-aircraft missiles, which might protect Iran from an Israeli air strike, was predictably echoed by the major Jewish organizations in the US.

Pushing the US into a confrontation with Iran, via economic sanctions and military attack has been a top priority for Israel and its supporters in the US for more than a decade (*Jewish Times/ Jewish Telegraph Agency*, Dec. 6, 2005). In line with its policy of forcing a US confrontation with Iran, AIPAC, the Israeli PACs (political action committees) and the Conference of Presidents have successfully lined up a majority of Congress people to challenge what they describe as the "appeasement" of Iran.

Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida), who has the dubious distinction of being a collaborator with Cuban exile terrorist groups and unconditional backer of Israel's war policy, is chairwoman of the US House of Representative Middle East subcommittee. From that platform she has denounced "European appeasement and arming the terrorist regime in Teheran". She boasted that her Iran sanctions bill has the support of 75 per cent of the members of Congress and that she is lining up additional so-sponsors.

Despite pro-Israeli attacks on US policy for its 'weakness' on Iran, Washington has moved as aggressively as circumstances permit. Facing European opposition to an immediate confrontation (as AIPAC and Israeli politicians demand) Washington supports European negotiations but imposes extremely limiting conditions, namely a rejection of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which allows uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes.

The European "compromise" of forcing Iran to turn over the enrichment process to a foreign country (Russia), is not only a violation of its sovereignty, but is a policy that no other country using nuclear energy practices. Given this transparently unacceptable "mandate", it is clear that Washington's 'support for negotiations' is a device to provoke an Iranian rejection, and a means of securing Europe's support for a Security Council referral for international sanctions.

Despite the near unanimous support and widespread influence of the major Jewish organizations, 20 per cent of American Jews do not support Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. Even more significantly, 61 per cent of Jews almost never talk about Israel or

defend Israel in conversation with non-Jews (Jerusalem Post, Dec 1, 2005). Only 29 per cent of Jews are active promoters of Israel. The Israel First crowd represents less than a third of the Jewish community. In fact, there is more opposition to Israel among Jews than there is in the US Congress. Having said that, however, most Jewish critics of Israel are not influential in the big Jewish organizations and the Israel lobby, excluded from the mass media and mostly intimidated from speaking out, especially on Israel's war preparations against Iran.

The Myth of the Iranian Nuclear Threat

The Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff, Daniel Halutz, has categorically denied that Iran represents an immediate nuclear threat to Israel, let along the United States. According to *Haaretz* (12/14/05), Halutz stated that it would take Iran time to be able to produce a nuclear bomb which he estimated might happen between 2008 and 2015.

Israel's Labor Party officials do not believe that Iran represents an immediate nuclear threat and that the Sharon government and the Likud war propaganda is an electoral ploy. According to *Haaretz*, "Labor Party officials accused Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and other defense officials of using the Iran issue in their election campaigns in an effort to divert public debate from social issues".

In a message directed at the Israeli Right but equally applicable to AIPAC and the Presidents of the Major Jewish Organizations in the US, Labor member of the Knesset, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer rejected electoral warmongering: "I hope the upcoming elections won't motivate the prime minister and defense minister to stray from government policy and place Israel on the frontlines of confrontation with Iran. The nuclear issue is an international issue and there is no reason for Israel to play a major role in it" (*Haaretz*, December 14, 2005).

Israeli intelligence has determined that Iran has neither the enriched uranium nor the capability to produce an atomic weapon now or in the immediate future, in contrast to the hysterical claims publicized by the US pro-Israel lobbies. Mohammed El Baradei, head of the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has inspected Iran for several years, has pointed out that the IAEA has found no proof that Iran is trying to construct nuclear weapons. He criticized Israeli and US war plans indirectly by warning that a "military solution would be completely un-productive".

More recently, Iran, in a clear move to clarify the issue of the future use of enriched uranium, "opened the door for US help in building a nuclear power plant". Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hamid Reza Asefi, stated "America can take part in the international bidding for the construction of Iran's nuclear power plant if they observe the basic standards and quality" (*USA Today*, Dec. 11, 2005).

Iran also plans to build several other nuclear power plants with foreign help. This Iranian call for foreign assistance is hardly the strategy of a country trying to conduct a covert atomic bomb program, especially one directed at involving one of its principal accusers.

The Iranians are at an elementary stage in the processing of uranium, not even reaching the point of uranium enrichment, which in turn will take still a number of years, and overcoming many complex technical problems before it can build a bomb. There is no factual basis for arguing that Iran represents a nuclear threat to Israel or to the US forces in the Middle East.

Scores of countries with nuclear reactors by necessity use enriched uranium. The Iranian

decision to advance to processing enriched uranium is its sovereign right as it is for all countries, which possess nuclear reactors in Europe, Asia and North America. Israel and AIPAC's resort to the vague formulation of Iran's potential nuclear capacity is so open-ended that it could apply to scores of countries with a minimum scientific infrastructure.

The European Quartet has raised a bogus issue by evading the issue of whether or not Iran has atomic weapons or is manufacturing them and focused on attacking Iran's capacity to produce nuclear energy namely the production of enriched uranium. The Quartet has conflated enriched uranium with a nuclear threat and nuclear potential with the danger of an imminent nuclear attack on Western countries, troops and Israel. The Europeans, especially Great Britain, have two options in mind: To impose an Iranian acceptance of limits on its sovereignty, more specifically on its energy policy; or to force Iran to reject the arbitrary addendum to the Non-Proliferation Agreement and then to propagandize the rejection as an indication of Iran's evil intention to create atomic bombs and target pro-Western countries.

The Western media would echo the US and European governments position that Iran was responsible for the breakdown of negotiations. The Europeans would then convince their public that since "reason" failed, the only recourse it to follow the US to take the issue to the Security Council and approve international sanctions against Iran.

The US then would attempt to pressure Russia and China to vote in favor of sanctions or to abstain. There is reason to doubt that either or both countries would agree, given the importance of the multi-billion dollar oil, arms, nuclear and trade deals between Iran and these two countries. Having tried and failed in the Security Council, the US and Israel would, on the scenario of the War Party, move toward a military attack. An air attack on suspected Iranian nuclear facilities would entail the bombing of heavily populated as well as remote regions leading to large-scale loss of life.

The principal result will be a huge escalation of war throughout the Middle East. Iran, a country of 70 million, with several times the military forces that Iraq possessed and with highly motivated and committed military and paramilitary forces could be expected to cross into Iraq. Iraqi Shiites sympathetic to or allied with Iran would most likely break their ties with Washington and go into combat. US military bases, troops and clients would be under fierce attack. US military casualties would multiply. All troop withdrawal plans would be disrupted. The 'Iraqization' strategy would disintegrate.

Most likely new terrorist incidents would occur in Western Europe, North America, and Australia and against US multinationals

Sanctions on Iran would not work, because oil is a scarce and essential commodity. China, India and other fast-growing Asian countries would balk at a boycott. Turkey and other Muslim countries would not cooperate. The sanction policy would be destined to failure; its only result to raise the price of oil even higher.

Here in the United States there are few if any influential organized lobbies challenging the pro-war Israel lobby either from the perspective of working for coexistence in the Middle East or even in defending US national interests when they diverge from Israel. Although numerous former diplomats, generals, intelligence officials, Reformed Jews, retired National Security advisers and State Department professionals have publicly denounced the Iran war agenda and even criticized the Israel First lobbies, their newspaper ads and media

interviews have not been backed by any national political organization that can compete for influence in the White House and Congress.

As we draw closer to a major confrontation with Iran and Israeli officials set short-term deadlines for igniting a Middle East conflagration, it seems that we are doomed to learn from future catastrophic losses that Americans must organize to defeat political lobbies based on overseas allegiances.

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