

Israel versus Iran: It's down to Dr Strangelove

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Rumours are rife that Israel wants to bomb Iran

The Israelis are in too much turmoil to go to war

Sorry to spoil the fun. I know it could have been a major production. I also realise that the rumour started here, with us, in Tel Aviv, and I even have a slight suspicion as to the source. But I believe the production Israel Crushes Iranian Bomb Factory is no more than spin. A trial balloon, a distraction from other adventures that have failed. In short: don't hold your breath.

For the sake of journalistic transparency, let it be said that I live with my two children in Tel Aviv, a three-minute walk from the non-secret bunker of the Israeli General Staff and the Air Force, which is located between the Modern Art Museum and some office blocks. And so I have good reason to fear an attack on Iran's uranium enrichment plants because any retaliation would likely land on my doorstep.



Head of Mossad intelligence Meir Dagan (above) is an aficionado of provocations and trickery

But aside from my geographical proximity to the focal point of decisions, it seems to me, from all that I witness and write about as an Israeli journalist, that the odds are zero that Israel will take upon itself the role of the bulldog of the weakened Bush and Blair.

The leadership trio in Israel that would take the decision to attack Iran (prime minister Ehud Olmert, defence minister Amir Peretz and chief of staff Dan Halutz) are also sorely wounded.

All of them are casualties of Lebanon War II, hammered by the fiasco in Beirut, and similarly battered by criminal and other investigations. All of them are waging desperate battles for political survival, in which they find it difficult to take decisions that are valid for more than a day. Their forte is sending up military and political trial balloons via the media.

The Lebanon War commissions are still investigating here. The odour of hasty decisions is still in the air. Former prime minister Ehud Barak is already openly tunnelling under the chair of Peretz, who isn't speaking to Olmert, who is suspicious of Halutz. It is hard to believe that a leadership shaking with Parkinsonian tremors will issue a dramatic decision on an operation the like of which has not been carried out since Hiroshima-Nagasaki, and in

which the danger to the dispatcher of the attack is a thousand times that to which the American dispatchers were exposed.

Moreover, the Lebanon War proved a fatal intelligence weakness. An Israel that found it hard to locate and destroy rocket launchers in the weak and transparent Lebanon will find it very much more difficult to locate all the hidden nuclear installations of the locked Iranian power.

Official Israel is now denying any such plan. Semi-official Israel is boasting as always of the ability to carry out the mission, but casting doubt on its existence.

The idea of Israeli fighter planes using tactical nuclear bunker-busters to attack the targets in Iran sounds to me like the joint hallucination of two top people here, who together make up a modern-day Dr



Strategic threat minister Avigdor Lieberman (above) and Meir Dagan make up a modern-day Dr Strangelove

Strangelove. They are the new minister in charge of strategic threats, Avigdor Lieberman, and the head of Mossad intelligence, Meir Dagan, an aficionado of provocations and trickery, who about a year ago lost his spiritual father and superior, Ariel Sharon.

This duo would gladly produce the bombing of Iran's underground plants, performed by the battered chief of staff, fighter pilot Dan Halutz. However, they are not in the top echelon of the government, and even if they were, it is doubtful that they would enjoy the broad, popular agreement that Menachem Begin enjoyed when he bombed Iraq's Osirak reactor back in 1981. Those were different times.

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