

POLITICS:

Israeli Realism on Iran Belies Threat Rhetoric

Analysis by Gareth Porter*

WASHINGTON, Jan 30 (IPS) - When Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared last week at the Herzliya conference that Israel could not risk another "existential threat" such as the Nazi holocaust, he was repeating what has become the dominant theme in Israel's campaign against Iran -- that it cannot tolerate an Iran with the technology that could be used to make nuclear weapons, because Iran is fanatically committed to the physical destruction of Israel.

The internal assessment by the Israeli national security apparatus of the Iranian threat, however, is more realistic than the government's public rhetoric would indicate.

Since Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in August 2005, Israel has effectively exploited his image as someone who is particularly fanatical about destroying Israel to develop the theme of Iran's threat of a "second holocaust" by using nuclear weapons.

But such alarmist statements do not accurately reflect the strategic thinking of the Israeli national security officials. In fact, Israelis began in the early 1990s to use the argument that Iran is irrational about

Israeli Defence Forces, wrote that Iran had to assume that any nuclear attack on Israel would result in very serious U.S. retaliation.

Therefore, even though he regarded a nuclear Iran as likely to be more aggressive, Kam concluded it is "doubtful whether Iran would actually exercise a nuclear bomb against Israel -- or any other country -- despite its basic rejection of Israel's existence."

Kam also pointed out that the election of a radical like Ahmadinejad would not change the fundamental Iranian policy toward Israel, because even the more moderate government of President Mohammad Khatami had already held the position that the solution to the Palestinian problem should be the establishment of a Palestinian state in place of the Zionist Israeli state. Furthermore, he wrote, Iran's basic motive for aspiring to nuclear weapons in the first place had not been to destroy Israel but to deter Saddam Hussein's Iraq and later to deter the United States and Israel.

Despite the existence of a more realistic appraisal of the actual power balance and its implications for Iranian behaviour, Israeli officials do not see it as in their interest to even hint at the possibility of deterring a nuclear Iran. "They don't talk about that," Meir Javedanfar, an Iranian-born analyst based in Tel Aviv, told IPS, "because they don't want to admit the possibility of defeat on Iran's nuclear programme. They want to stop it."

Occasionally, Israeli officials do let slip indications that their fears of Iran are less extreme than the "second holocaust" rhetoric would indicate. Last November, Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh explained candidly in an interview with the Jerusalem Post that the fear was not that such weapons would be launched against Israel but that the existence of nuclear capability would interfere with Israel's recruitment of new immigrants and cause more Israelis to emigrate to other countries.

Sneh declared that Ahmadinejad could "kill the Zionist dream without pushing a button. That's why we must prevent this regime from obtaining nuclear capability at all costs."

Israel's frequent threat to attack Iran's nuclear facilities is also at odds with its internal assessment of the feasibility and desirability of such an attack. It is well understood in Israel that the Iranian situation does not resemble that of Iraq's Osiris nuclear reactor, which Israeli planes bombed in 1981. Unlike Iraq's programme, which was focused on a single facility, the Iranian nuclear programme is dispersed; the two major facilities, Natanz and Arak, are hundreds of miles apart, making it very difficult to hit them simultaneously.

In mid-2005, Yossi Melman, who covers intelligence issues for the daily newspaper Haaretz, wrote, "According to military experts in Israel and elsewhere, the Israel Air Force does not have the strength that is needed to destroy the sites in Iran in a preemptive strike..." He added that that the awareness of that reality was "trickling down to the military-political establishment".

Javedanfar, Melman's co-author in the forthcoming book on Iran's nuclear programme, agrees. "There is no way the Israelis are going to do it on their own," he said.

That is also the conclusion reached by Francona and other Air Force analysts. Francona recalls that he and two retired U.S. Air Force generals on the trip to Israel told Israeli Air Force generals they believe Israel does not have the capability to destroy the Iranian nuclear targets, mainly because it would require aerial refueling in hostile airspace. "The Israeli officers recognised they have a shortfall in aerial refueling," Francona says.

In the end, the Israelis know they are dependent on the United States to carry out a strike against Iran. And the United States is the target of an apocalyptic Israeli portrayal of Iran that diverges from the internal Israeli assessment.

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