

Israeli hawks ready to fly on Iran

Contributed by Paul Sheehan, smh.com.au
Sunday, 23 November 2008

Prepare for war. Last week I met the Boogie Man, the former head of the Israeli Defence Forces, General Moshe "Boogie" Ya'alon, who is preparing the political groundwork for a military attack on Iran's key nuclear facilities. "We have to confront the Iranian revolution immediately," he told me. "There is no way to stabilise the Middle East today without defeating the Iranian regime. The Iranian nuclear program must be stopped."

Defeating the theocratic regime in Tehran could be economic or political or, as a last resort, military, he said. "All tools, all options, should be considered." He was speaking in the tranquillity of the Shalem Centre in Jerusalem, where he was, until last Thursday, one of Israel's plethora of warrior-scholars, though more influential than most.

Could "all options" include decapitating the Iranian leadership by military strikes, including on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called for Israel's destruction? "We have to consider killing him," Ya'alon replied. "All options must be considered."

That's why he's called Boogie. This is significant, for several reasons. Ya'alon has decided to enter what he called "the cold waters of Israeli politics". He will run for the conservative Likud party in the general election in Israel on February 10. Likud is leading the opinion polls. So I could have been speaking to Israel's next defence minister or, at least, an influential member of the next cabinet.

He is not known for making idle threats. Ya'alon is a former paratroop commander and was deputy leader of the Israel Defence Forces from 2000 to 2002, then chief of staff from 2002 to 2005, during the most recent Palestinian uprising, or intifada. He is credited with shutting it down.

Events are moving quickly. The Israeli Atomic Energy Commission has estimated that Iran will have produced enough highly enriched uranium by the end of next year to produce a nuclear bomb. Next year is widely regarded in Israel as year zero for the strategic decision about Iran's nuclear program.

"There is a growing sense of anxiety here, from the top levels down," said Eran Lerman, a former senior member of Israel's Directorate of Military Intelligence. "The anxiety is built on the knowledge that the Iranians are pressing ahead. The centrifuges are whirring away. Next year will be critical."

Boogie Ya'alon agrees. He has long regarded Iran as the main wellspring of instability and terrorism in the region.

"I was chief of staff during Operation Iraqi Freedom [the US invasion of Iraq in 2003] and I was surprised the US decided to go into Iraq instead of Iran … Unfortunately, the American public didn't have the political stomach to go into Iran."

Ya'alon does. "Military intervention would not be one strike. It needs to be a sustained operation … Any military strike in Iran will be quietly applauded by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf states. It is a misconception to think that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the most important in the Middle-East. The Shiite-Sunni schism is much bigger, the Persian-Arab divide is bigger, the struggle between national regimes and jihadism is much bigger. And I can't imagine the US will want to share power in the Middle East with a nuclear-armed Iran."

The Boogie doctrine is mainstream, not fringe, in the Israeli strategic debate. "We cannot accept a nuclear Iran, we cannot be reconciled to it," Major-General Amos Gilad, the head of the Defence Department's Diplomatic Security Bureau, told The Jerusalem Post last Thursday.

"Israel is preparing for an attack on the Iran nuclear facilities," Dr Jonathan Spyer, a senior research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs Centre, told me in Tel Aviv last week.

"Sanctions won't work against Iran. Only a military action against Iran will work," Professor Efraim Inbar said. "I know the Israeli military is preparing its capacity to destroy the Iranian nuclear threat."

Inbar is another of Israel's warrior-scholars, a former paratrooper who is professor in political studies at Bar-Ilan University and Director of the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies. He does not accept the argument, popular in America, that the Iranian nuclear facilities are already impregnable to attack. "I'm a paratrooper. If you are committed, if you are willing to pay the price, you can destroy the target."

Inbar also believes the Iranian regime, by spreading Persian and Shiite power, is widely unpopular in the Sunni Arab world.

In effect, Israel has already conducted a test run into an enemy country and been encouraged by the results. In September last year, Israeli Air Force jets destroyed a nuclear facility under construction in Syria. Israel never said a word. Syria never said a word. No government in the Middle East ever said a word.

"Israel's raid on Syria was greeted by a thunderous silence from the rest of the region," Eran Lerman said. "What that silence told us was that the rest of the region regard Syria as part of the Iranian problem. If Iran obtains the bomb, even if they don't use it or threaten to use it, they will have positioned themselves in a way that will transform this region into a much more dangerous place. Iran has influence on the Shiia communities, not just in Iraq and through Hezbollah in Lebanon but in Syria and the Gulf states. The position of the moderate states in the Gulf will have been rendered more fragile."

Lerman, too, believes next year will be year zero. "Unless the pace [of developing Iran's nuclear program] is slowed down, we will need to face some bitter decisions within a year. The sanctions have failed.

"The Iranian regime's need for a nuclear bomb is a reflection of the profound crisis in which it finds itself after almost 30 years in power. They promised the earth and the country is in disarray. The regime has failed to create or sustain stable social structures. So the last validated remnant of the Iranian revolution is to destroy Israel."

Israel is preparing accordingly. The message is now clear.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/11/23/1227375056994.html>