

US fears Israeli strike against Iran over latest nuclear claim

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US fears Israeli strike against Iran over latest nuclear claim

Tom Baldwin in Washington, James Hider in Jerusalem and Francis Elliott, Deputy Political Editor
From The TimesOnline
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A claim by President Ahmadinejad that Iran has 3,000 working uranium-enriching centrifuges sent a tremor across the world yesterday amid fears that Israel would respond by bombing the country's nuclear facilities.

Military sources in Washington said that the existence of such a large number could be a "tipping point", triggering an Israeli air strike. The Pentagon is reluctant to take military action against Iran, but officials say that Israel is a "different matter". Amid the international uproar, British MPs who were to have toured the nuclear facility were backing out of their Iran trip.

Even before President Ahmadinejad's announcement, a US defence official told The Times yesterday: "Israel could do something when they get to around 3,000 working centrifuges. The Pentagon is minded to wait a little longer." US experts say 3,000 machines running for long periods could make enough enriched uranium for an atomic bomb within a year.

Israel responded by serving notice that it would not tolerate a nuclear Iran. "Talks never did, and never will, stop rockets," said Ehud Barak, the Defence Minister, after talks with the security cabinet.

The US and Western allies believe that Iran is using its civilian nuclear programme as a cover for weapon development. Tehran says that it merely wants to generate electricity.

Concern about Israel's intentions has been heightened by its recent air strike on a suspected nuclear plant in Syria. In 1981 Israel destroyed Saddam Hussein's Iraqi nuclear reactor, and as the sole undeclared nuclear power in the region, it now considers Iran the most serious threat to its security. Mr Ahmadinejad has called for Israel to be "wiped off the map".

Efraim Inbar, of the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv, said that the figure of 3,000 centrifuges would signal the ability of Israel's arch-foe to produce the nuclear material needed for a warhead. "I wouldn't be surprised if we do something if the international community leaves us alone," he said. "I think we [Israel] are preparing for it. For Israel this is a critical technological moment."

Tehran says it plans to expand its enrichment programme to up to 54,000 centrifuges at Natanz in central Iran, which would amount to industrial-scale uranium enrichment.

Mr Ahmadinejad, speaking yesterday at a rally, said that UN sanctions had failed to halt uranium enrichment. "The world must know that this nation will not give up one iota of its nuclear rights . . . if they think they can get concessions from this nation, they are badly mistaken," he said. He has in the past claimed that Iran succeeded in installing the 3,000 centrifuges at its uranium enrichment facility but yesterday's speech was the first time he had said all of them were now operational.

The International Atomic Energy Authority recently put the figure at closer to 2,000, with another 650 being tested. The IAEA said yesterday: "We will be publishing a report next week. We will not make any comment about this until then." Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief, is shortly to report on Iran's willingness to give up uranium enrichment in exchange for political and trade incentives.

In London, at least five members of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee were refusing to take part in the planned trip to Iran, arguing that it would hand the regime a propaganda coup. The visit, to begin on Sunday, would be the first by a select committee since 15 British Service personnel were held in March. That incident and evidence that the regime is supporting insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq and planning to build a nuclear bomb has strained relations with Britain.

About eight MPs, from all three main parties, are still planning to spend four days in Iran next week.

Eric Illsley, a Labour MP who is one of those to have pulled out, said: "I really don't fancy having pictures of me next to an Iranian nuclear facility beamed around the world."

— Intelligence agencies have begun to vet all foreign postgraduates applying to study sensitive scientific subjects in Britain. The aim is to prevent Iranian students getting expertise in fields related to producing weapons of mass destruction. Sixty Iranians have been refused university places this year.

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article2827787.ece

Israeli Raid on Suspected Syrian Nuclear Facility

{youtube}filChAHslos{/youtube}

Oil fuels Iran's confidence on nuclear ambitions

Bronwen Maddox: World Briefing
From The TimesOnline
November 8, 2007

Iran is giving not an inch in the stand-off over its nuclear ambitions. Two reports next week are likely to accuse it of breaking international agreements, but with oil at \$98 a barrel boosting its confidence, it is not showing any inclination to yield.

Yesterday President Ahmadinejad implied that Iran had 3,000 centrifuges enriching uranium. This is the most controversial work, because it can produce weapons grade material as well as low grade fuel for reactors.

His phrasing was imprecise on the crucial point of whether this tricky technology is actually working. "We have now reached 3,000 machines," he said, describing the enrichment project at the Natanz underground site.

He has used the 3,000 figure before, and it meant less than it might seem. In April, the first time that Iran claimed to have 3,000 centrifuges, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations watchdog, said that only 328 were up and running. At the end of the summer it said that nearly 2,000 were probably running but it was unsure that the efficiency was all that Iran claimed.

Its next report, expected next week, will give its new reckoning. A separate report, by Javier Solana, the European Union foreign policy chief, on his own negotiations with the Iranian nuclear team is due at about the same time.

It is not surprising that Iran has run into these technical problems. Mastering enrichment - specifically, getting a chain of centrifuges to spin extremely fast and feed increasingly enriched uranium gas through to each other - is the biggest hurdle between any country and nuclear self-sufficiency. It has given a cushion of comfort to those trying to stop Iran achieving this. But it is only a matter of time before Iran does.

The point of Ahmadinejad's noisy claims about its capability, it seems, is to force other countries to accept enrichment as a fact in any talks. So far, Britain, the US, France and Germany have insisted that any enrichment, even in a so-called pilot scheme, is unacceptable.

The next fortnight will show if this demanding goal is sustainable. A tough report from the IAEA, listing Iran's failures to comply with international obligations to be open about its work, plus a caustic account from Solana, will test whether China and Russia will back new sanctions, and whether Iran might then give way.

In the five years since Iran's 20-year hidden programme came to light, there have been endless rounds of IAEA reports, threats and unsatisfactory Iranian responses. It rises to a peak of tension, ebbs and then starts again.

But this round matters more. It will show whether getting rid of Iranian enrichment capability can still be a goal of the West's diplomatic efforts, or whether it is a lost cause. If that is the case, talks (if they continue) will switch to trying to set the terms for intrusive inspections by the IAEA, to give some comfort that Iran is not diverting enriched uranium to bombs. But that is a very different discussion and, for the West, would mark the failure of round one.

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/bronwen_maddox/article2827588.ece

From the Archives: London's The Sunday Times, TIMESONLINE

Revealed: Israel plans nuclear strike on Iran
Uzi Mahnaimi, New York and Sarah Baxter, Washington
From The Sunday Times January 7, 2007

ISRAEL has drawn up secret plans to destroy Iran's uranium enrichment facilities with tactical nuclear weapons.

Two Israeli air force squadrons are training to blow up an Iranian facility using low-yield nuclear "bunker-busters", according to several Israeli military sources.

The attack would be the first with nuclear weapons since 1945, when the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Israeli weapons would each have a force equivalent to one-fifteenth of the Hiroshima bomb.

Under the plans, conventional laser-guided bombs would open "tunnels" into the targets. "Mini-nukes" would then immediately be fired into a plant at Natanz, exploding deep underground to reduce the risk of radioactive fallout.

"As soon as the green light is given, it will be one mission, one strike and the Iranian nuclear project will be demolished," said one of the sources.

The plans, disclosed to The Sunday Times last week, have been prompted in part by the Israeli intelligence service Mossad's assessment that Iran is on the verge of producing enough enriched uranium to make nuclear weapons within two years.

Israeli military commanders believe conventional strikes may no longer be enough to annihilate increasingly well-defended enrichment facilities. Several have been built beneath at least 70ft of concrete and rock. However, the nuclear-tipped bunker-busters would be used only if a conventional attack was ruled out and if the United States declined to intervene, senior sources said.

Israeli and American officials have met several times to consider military action. Military analysts said the disclosure of the plans could be intended to put pressure on Tehran to halt enrichment, cajole America into action or soften up world opinion in advance of an Israeli attack.

Some analysts warned that Iranian retaliation for such a strike could range from disruption of oil supplies to the West to terrorist attacks against Jewish targets around the world.

Israel has identified three prime targets south of Tehran which are believed to be involved in Iran's nuclear programme:

Natanz, where thousands of centrifuges are being installed for uranium enrichment

A uranium conversion facility near Isfahan where, according to a statement by an Iranian vice-president last week, 250 tons of gas for the enrichment process have been stored in tunnels

A heavy water reactor at Arak, which may in future produce enough plutonium for a bomb

Israeli officials believe that destroying all three sites would delay Iran's nuclear programme indefinitely and prevent them from having to live in fear of a "second Holocaust".

The Israeli government has warned repeatedly that it will never allow nuclear weapons to be made in Iran, whose president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has declared that "Israel must be wiped off the map".

Robert Gates, the new US defence secretary, has described military action against Iran as a "last resort", leading Israeli officials to conclude that it will be left to them to strike.

Israeli pilots have flown to Gibraltar in recent weeks to train for the 2,000-mile round trip to the Iranian targets. Three possible routes have been mapped out, including one over Turkey.

Air force squadrons based at Hatzerim in the Negev desert and Tel Nof, south of Tel Aviv, have trained to use Israel's tactical nuclear weapons on the mission. The preparations have been overseen by Major General Eliezer Shkedi, commander of the Israeli air force.

Sources close to the Pentagon said the United States was highly unlikely to give approval for tactical nuclear weapons to be used. One source said Israel would have to seek approval "after the event", as it did when it crippled Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak with airstrikes in 1981.

Scientists have calculated that although contamination from the bunker-busters could be limited, tons of radioactive uranium compounds would be released.

The Israelis believe that Iran's retaliation would be constrained by fear of a second strike if it were to launch its Shehab-3 ballistic missiles at Israel.

However, American experts warned of repercussions, including widespread protests that could destabilise parts of the Islamic world friendly to the West.

Colonel Sam Gardiner, a Pentagon adviser, said Iran could try to close the Strait of Hormuz, the route for 20% of the world's oil.

Some sources in Washington said they doubted if Israel would have the nerve to attack Iran. However, Dr Ephraim Sneh, the deputy Israeli defence minister, said last month: "The time is approaching when Israel and the international community will have to decide whether to take military action against Iran."

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article1290331.ece>