

Israel sounds alarm on Iran's nuclear efforts

The Jewish state warns of a second Holocaust if nations fail to prevent Tehran from acquiring the bomb.

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JERUSALEM — Israeli leaders rarely invoke the Holocaust in the face of enemies. The Jewish homeland founded after Adolf Hitler's genocide has, for the last generation, felt secure enough to fight its many battles with little or no help.

But the specter of a nuclear-armed Iran has rattled Israel's self-confidence. Its politicians and generals warn of a "second Holocaust" if, as in the 1930s, the world stands by while a heavily armed nation declares war against the Jews.

Spelling out that scenario, Israeli officials have begun an unusually open campaign to muster international political and economic pressures against Iran. They warn that time is growing short and hint that they will resort to force if those pressures fail to prevent Iran's development of an atomic weapon.

Israeli leaders fear that an Iranian bomb would undermine their nation's security even if Tehran never detonated it. That Israel has its own nuclear arsenal would not counteract the psychological and strategic blow, they believe.

Israel began secretly preparing in the early 1990s for a possible air raid on Iran's then-nascent nuclear facilities and has been making oblique public statements about such planning for three years.

What is new is Israel's abandonment of quiet diplomacy to rally others to its side. Until a few months ago, Israeli leaders worried that high-profile lobbying would backfire and provoke accusations that they were trying to drag the United States and its allies into a war.

Israel's new activism coincides with a recent drumbeat of U.S. threats against Iran, including President Bush's vow to "seek out and destroy" Iranian and Syrian networks he said were arming and training anti-American forces in Iraq, and his dispatch of a second aircraft carrier group to the Persian Gulf.

Several factors have contributed to Israel's more assertive campaign, Israeli officials and defense analysts said.

Israel's war against Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon last summer brought Tehran's hostility alarmingly close to home. At the same time, the war made relatively moderate Sunni-dominated Arab nations more wary of Shiite Iran, easing Israel's isolation and creating a de facto anti-Iran coalition.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly called for Israel's destruction. And while denying any plan to build an atomic weapon, Iran has continued to enrich uranium and acquire long-range missiles.

And Israeli leaders worry that the window is closing on any hope for decisive action by Bush, their most powerful supporter. The head of Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence agency, told parliament late last year that Iran would be able to produce a nuclear weapon as early as 2009, the year Bush is to leave office. Other analysts have predicted a longer timetable.

Since last summer, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has sounded an alarm against Iran in public and in meetings with the leaders of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, China, Egypt and Jordan. He has also met twice with Bush.

"The Jewish people, on whom the scars of the Holocaust are deeply etched, cannot allow itself to again face a threat against its very existence," Olmert said last month in a speech reviewing the diplomatic campaign. "In the past, the world remained silent and the results are known. Our role is to prevent the world from repeating this mistake."

Israel strongly prefers that the world keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons through crippling, dissuasive economic sanctions, Olmert said. But he added: "We have the right to full freedom of action in defense of our vital interests. We will not hesitate to use it."

'Force them to reconsider'

Olmert on Tuesday reiterated that economic pressure might be enough to halt Iran.

"I think there is a way to stop the Iranians from moving forward on their nuclear program without violent actions," the prime minister said in a speech to visiting American Jewish leaders.

If wide-ranging sanctions can "cause such damage to the Iranian economy — and we see some signs already — it will force them to reconsider," he said.

Israel's new stance was evident in December as its lobbying contributed to a United Nations Security Council decision to ban the sale to Iran of materials used in uranium enrichment, reprocessing and building ballistic missiles. Enriched uranium can be used to produce electricity or a nuclear bomb.

Despite misgivings about the risk of a backlash, Israel is helping the United States push broader voluntary sanctions to cut Iran's trade credits, oil investments and ties to foreign banks. In that effort, it is helping the U.S. Treasury Department monitor the activities of Iranian banks abroad.

"It might be bad for Israel and bad for American Jews for Israel to be seen as pushing for action on Iran," said Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Shalem Center, a research institute in Jerusalem. "But we don't have the luxury of time anymore."

Iran says it is seeking nuclear technology for civilian purposes. But because it kept its program secret for 18 years and has failed to comply with U.N. nuclear inspections, Iran is presumed by Israel and Western countries to be trying to acquire the technology to make a bomb.

If Iran achieves that threshold, it will radically alter the region, Israeli officials and analysts said.

Emboldened by the bomb, they said, Iran could provide Islamic militant movements Hezbollah and Hamas with longer-range and deadlier rockets to fire at Israel than the current stock of Katyushas and Kassams. It could also veto any Palestinian or other Arab effort to make peace with the Jewish state.

No longer a deterrent

Israel's possession of nuclear weapons since the late 1960s, though rarely acknowledged by its leaders, has worked as a deterrent until now.

"For decades, the Arab countries ... knew they couldn't beat Israel, so there was no coalition forming against us," said Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad, director of the Defense Ministry's Political-Military Bureau.

But soon, he said, "the Iranians could create a belief that they can beat us, and under their umbrella create an axis that will destabilize the Middle East."

Also, Sunni Arab countries — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan and Libya — could strive to build atomic weapons to compete with Shiite Iran, making any regional conflict a potential nuclear tinderbox, he said.

In such an environment, many Israelis might flee. A December poll in the newspaper Maariv found that 27% of Israelis would leave or consider leaving if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. Two-thirds of those surveyed said they believed Iran would drop a nuclear weapon on Israel.

Apocalyptic scenarios involving Iran dominated last month's annual Herzliya conference, Israel's premier gathering of foreign policy, defense and security specialists. Participants pressed several U.S. presidential hopefuls on how they planned to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"I see a syndrome of America acting late," Sami Friedrich, an Israeli management consultant, lectured Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who joined the conference by video hookup from Washington. "America came in late in the Second World War. Now America accepts the diagnosis that it failed to imagine the worst with Al Qaeda. America has this worrying pattern."

Despite the anxiety, Israeli officials at the conference said they were hopeful that sanctions would force Iran to suspend its enrichment program.

They were encouraged by Ahmadinejad's setback in recent local elections, rising unemployment and inflation in Iran, and reports that domestic criticism of the president was escalating.

Vice Premier Shimon Peres told students in Qatar last week that Israel's problem was with Ahmadinejad, not the Iranian people, and it did not "intend to use military action."

If Ahmadinejad were to fall, "someone else would come to power, someone less hostile, and the question of whether they have nuclear capability will be less important," said Uri Lubrani, a former Israeli ambassador to Iran who advises the Defense Ministry and opposes military action.

That, however, appears to be a minority view in the government and defense establishment. Other officials and analysts argue that voluntary sanctions are unlikely to win full support from European countries and in any case would be undermined by Russia, China and India. They say time is too short and the stakes too high to bet solely on a change in government.

"We cannot sit back and wait for a revolution," said Isaac Ben-Israel, a reserve air force major general who heads Tel Aviv University's Security Studies Program.

Ben-Israel helped plan the 1981 Israeli air raid that destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor. He said Israel had the capacity to set back Iran's atomic program by striking a few key targets, such as its uranium conversion facility at Esfahan, its enrichment facility at Natanz and its heavy-water reactor at Arak.

'A new front in Iran'

But Israel lacks the capability for a sustained offensive that might be needed to strike the bulk of Iran's facilities. Because of that, Ben-Israel and other officials say, Israel would prefer to join in an American-led attack on Iran — a scenario Bush has refused to rule out. But they worry that Bush has been so weakened at home by the Iraq war that "opening a new front in Iran may not be feasible for him," Ben-Israel said.

Israelis have been hinting strongly that they are prepared to act on their own. In an article in last week's issue of the New Republic, Halevi and Michael Oren, also a senior fellow at the Shalem Center, wrote that if Israel decided to strike, it would probably do so within 18 months.

Israel would wait long enough to give sanctions a chance to work, the authors predicted, but not so long that Iran's facilities would become radioactive, making the consequences of bombing them far more lethal.

Robert J. Einhorn, the assistant secretary of State for nonproliferation in the Clinton administration, said Israel's threats, coupled with the possibility of U.S. military action, could help bolster the push for sanctions.

"It's important that not only the Iranians believe the military option is credible," said Einhorn, who is a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. "The more the Europeans believe the use of military force is thinkable in Iran, the more they will be prepared to use economic leverage to avoid that possibility."

"Israel is sounding the alarm with lots of countries, urging them to do all sorts of things," he said. But if those efforts fail, "they are going to have to decide whether to act unilaterally and militarily. That will be a very hard decision."

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