

Israel Primed for Strike Against Iran

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

When the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) passed a resolution Sept. 17, setting a Nov. 25 deadline to resolve open issues about Iran's nuclear program, and calling for Iran to immediately halt all activities related to uranium enrichment, the Rubicon was crossed, at least for Tehran. Iran made known that it would not allow any foreign interference in its nuclear program, and pledged to proceed—with or without the IAEA. President Mohammad Khatami himself issued a statement, saying: "We will resist the exorbitant demands of the great powers. What has happened in the past few days on the nuclear issue is a sign of the moral decadence of the world and the pre-eminence of force and hypocrisy in international relations."

Khatami demanded that the international community "acknowledge our natural and legal right and open the path for understanding . . . so we can accept comprehensive international supervision and we can continue our path to acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. . . . Otherwise, we will continue on this path, even if the result is cutting off of international supervision."

Speaking later at a parade marking the beginning of Sacred Defense Week in Iran (on the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq war), Khatami said: "We have made our choice and it is now the turn of others to chose."

The same point was driven home by the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO), Gholamreza Aqazadeh, and by Hassan Rowhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Rowhani rejected as illegal the demand in the IAEA resolution. Iran could accept a suspension of uranium enrichment only "through negotiations," he said. Enrichment is permitted under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Rowhani said, and Iran has suspended the enrichment of uranium, but not all support activities, as a voluntary measure to build confidence with the IAEA.

The IAEA resolution showed "no clear distinction between voluntary and obligatory measures," Aqazadeh said. "In addition to that, calling upon a member state to suspend or stop activities, such as enrichment, uranium conversion, as well as the construction of a research reactor planned to produce radioisotopes for medical, agricultural, and industrial purposes, which are in no way prohibited in the agency's statute and NPT, will undermine the credibility of the IAEA."

Speaking on Sept. 21, from Vienna where the IAEA is based, Aqazadeh pledged that Iran would continue to cooper-

ate with the IAEA; but he emphasized that Iran, which has reached a certain level of expertise in nuclear technology, would not give it up. "Currently, the Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF) is on stream for injecting uranium gas into the centrifuges for enrichment. Iran completely possesses the technology to manufacture every part of the centrifuges in Natanz," he said.

Although the position of the Bush Administration, as represented in Vienna by Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton, has been uncompromising, in its hard-line demand that the Iran dossier should be referred to the UN Security Council, others in U.S. foreign policymaking circles urged caution. Robert Einhorn, a former assistant undersecretary of state for non-proliferation during the Clinton Administration, told Agence France Presse Sept. 21, "If the U.S. administration would show it was prepared to put carrots on the table and not only sticks," it would have a better chance of garnering support from Russia, China, and the European Union—which favor a dialogue approach—in the event Iran were to reject a reasonable offer.

Israeli Propaganda Gears Up

In Israel, meanwhile, preparations for a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities appeared to move into high gear. On Sept. 18, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that Mossad director Meir Dagan, a well known flunky of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, prepared the climate of opinion, by claiming that Iran could have nuclear weapons by 2005. It was the first time in 18 years, that a chief of the foreign intelligence agency, Mossad, had briefed the Knesset's Defense and Foreign Relations Committee. Dagan told the parliamentarians the Israeli argument that Iran's missile capability threatened Europe as well, and he asserted that Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant was "too large" for producing electricity, and was also being built to enrich uranium along with a project at Kashan. Such a project, Dagan claimed, could produce enough enriched uranium to produce ten bombs a year.

Plans for an Israeli strike against Bushehr have been aired in the public domain increasingly over the past year. One problem raised by military experts, has been that of precision targetting. As if on cue, that problem was solved when, on Sept. 21, the United States announced it would sell Israel 5,000 "smart bombs," with which it could target Iran. The bombs include those that have satellite guidance systems, allowing their release a good distance from the target. Among the bombs are 500 one-ton bunker busters that can penetrate 2 meter-thick cement walls—like those on a reactor's outer containment walls.

The sale, which carries a price tag of \$319 million, was made known to Congress a few weeks ago. The cost is to come out of U.S. military aid allocations to Israel. At the same time, Israel has been demanding delivery of two German submarines, class 212, capable of firing nuclear-tipped cruise missiles.

Ready, and armed, Israel could attack at any time.