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Focus: Mission Iran

Israel will not tolerate Iran going nuclear and military sources say it will use tactical strikes unless Iran abandons its programme. Is Israel bluffing or might it really push the button? Uzi Mahnaimi in New York and Sarah Baxter in Washington report

In an Israeli air force bunker in Tel Aviv, near the concert hall for the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, Major General Eliezer Shkedi might one day conduct operations of a perilous kind. Should the order come from the Israeli prime minister, it will be Shkedi's job as air force commander to orchestrate a tactical nuclear strike on Iran.

Two fast assault squadrons based in the Negev desert and in Tel Nof, south of Tel Aviv, are already training for the attack.

On a plasma screen, Shkedi will be able to see dozens of planes advance towards Iran, as well as the electronic warfare aircraft jamming the Iranian and Syrian air defences and the rescue choppers hovering near the border, ready to move in and pluck out the pilots should the mission go wrong.

Another screen will show live satellite images of the Iranian nuclear sites. The prime target will be Natanz, the deep and ferociously protected bunker south of Tehran where the Iranians are churning out enriched uranium in defiance of the United Nations security council.

If things go according to plan, a pilot will first launch a conventional laser-guided bomb to blow a shaft down through the layers of hardened concrete. Other pilots will then be ready to drop low-yield one kiloton nuclear weapons into the hole. The theory is that they will explode deep underground, both destroying the bunker and limiting the radioactive fallout.

The other potential targets are Iran's uranium conversion facility at Isfahan — uncomfortably near a metropolis of 4.5m people — and the heavy water power reactor at Arak, which might one day be able to produce enough plutonium to make a bomb. These will be hit with conventional bombs.

In recent weeks Israeli pilots have been flying long-haul as far as Gibraltar to simulate the 2,000-mile round trip to Natanz. "There is no 99% success in this mission. It must be a perfect 100% or better not at all," one of the pilots expected to fly on the mission told The Sunday Times.

The Israelis say they hope as fervently as the rest of the world that this attack will never take place. There is clearly an element of sabre-rattling in their letting it be known the plan exists and that the pilots are already in training. But in the deeply dangerous and volatile Middle East, contingency plans can become horrible reality.

NO nuclear weapon has been fired in anger since the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Should Israel take such a drastic step, it would inflame world opinion — particularly in Muslim states — and unleash retaliation from Iran and its allies. But Israelis have become increasingly convinced that a “second holocaust” of the Jews is brewing, stoked by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president and chief Holocaust denier, who has repeatedly called for Israel to be destroyed.

Western Europe and the United States have been trying to persuade Tehran to drop its nuclear ambitions, using the carrot of co-operation with a legitimate nuclear energy programme and the stick of UN sanctions. But they have had no effect.

As a result, Israel sees itself standing on its own and fighting for its very existence. It got a taste of what Iran was capable of during last summer’s war in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah, Tehran’s proxy troops fighting from bunkers secretly built by Iranian military engineers, humiliated the Israeli army and rained missiles into northern Israel.

Every Israeli government has vowed never to let Iran acquire nuclear weapons. Ariel Sharon, when he was prime minister, ordered the military to be ready for a conventional strike on Iran’s nuclear programme. Since then, however, the Iranians have strengthened their nuclear facilities and air defences, making a conventional strike less likely to succeed.

“There are 24 strong batteries around Natanz, making it one of the most protected sites on earth,” said an Israeli military source. Its centrifuge halls, where the uranium is enriched, are heavily protected at least 70ft underground.

Ehud Olmert, the prime minister, recently “let slip” the world’s worst-kept secret that Israel is a nuclear power; Israeli defence experts are now openly debating the use of nukes against Iran. Shlomo Mofaz, a reservist colonel in Israeli military intelligence, believes that tactical nuclear weapons will be required to penetrate the defences that Iran has built around its nuclear facilities.

Israel developed tactical nuclear weapons in the early 1970s for use on the battlefield. In an attack on Iran, its air force would be expected to use a low-yield nuclear device of 1 kiloton (equivalent to 1,000 tons of TNT), loaded on a bunker-buster missile.

“If the nuclear device explodes deep underground there will be no radioactive fallout,” said Dr Ephraim Asculai of the Tel Aviv Institute for Strategic Studies, who worked for the Israel Atomic Energy Commission for more than 40 years.

Professor Peter Zimmerman, a nuclear physicist at King’s College, London, was less sure. “The definition of low-yield nuclear weapons is not easy,” he said. “I assume that it includes any device which is less than 5 kilotons. If such a bunker-buster missile is exploded at 70ft below ground” — thought to be the minimum depth of the hidden centrifuges in Natanz — “some radioactive fallout is expected.”

Nonetheless, Professor Martin Van Creveld, an Israeli military expert, said last week that tactical nuclear weapons were “the only way, if there is a way at all, to destroy Iran’s nuclear sites”.

Some senior American defence analysts agree. One source with ties to the Pentagon said: “There is no way for Israel to engage effectively

in such a strike without using nuclear weapons." But, he asked: "Would the Israelis dare?"

For all their military preparations, not even the Israelis are sure of the answer. Their decision rests to a great extent on their assessment of two further questions. How close is Tehran to having a nuclear bomb? And what does Washington really intend to do about it?

The actions and rhetoric of Ahmadinejad have been deliberately provocative. Last week he boasted that the Iranians would not only continue their atomic programme but also give a "historic slap in the face" to nations that opposed it. He has vowed that America, Israel and Britain will disappear "like the pharaohs" of Egypt and he believes that oil-rich Iran is well on its way to becoming the regional superpower.

Next month, on the anniversary of the Islamic revolution, he intends to celebrate what he calls his country's mastery of nuclear technology. He promised that 3,000 centrifuges would be ready by the end of last year and that 60,000 would ultimately be in place. In the event, technical problems have slowed the programme. The Iranians are believed to have installed only 500 centrifuges at Natanz and they will reach 2,000 by spring at the earliest.

This is enough, however, to convince some Israelis that Iran is reaching the "point of no return" at which it has the technical know-how to build a nuclear bomb.

Ahmadinejad insists that Iran is developing only peaceful nuclear energy, but the development of long-range ballistic missiles such as the Shehab-3 suggests a different story. Israeli intelligence sources say Iran recently tested this missile with dummy nuclear weapons for its warheads.

"The Iranians are progressing quickly with their delivery platform for their future nuclear weapons," said a source. "With an approximate range of 1,000 miles, the Shehab-3 can reach all of Israel."

Meir Dagan, head of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, has told members of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, that his organisation assumes the Iranians will have a complete nuclear device by 2009.

In these circumstances, sabre-rattling by the Israelis has its uses. Whether or not Israel intends to go nuclear, it might be in its interest to spread the word that it will. "In the cold war, we made it clear to the Russians that it was a virtual certainty that nukes would fly and fly early," said an American defence source. "Israel may be adopting the same tactics: 'You produce a weapon; you die'."

Michael Rubin, an expert on Iran at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, believes it could be a dangerous ruse. "You never want to threaten something you don't follow through on," he said.

Rubin believes the Israeli debate about using tactical nuclear weapons is "much more likely to be about pressing the United States to do the job".

President George W Bush included Iran in his original "axis of evil". Bugged down now in Iraq, he has cooled on the idea of attacking Iran. At a private meeting in the Oval Office last autumn, he was openly sceptical that America possessed enough intelligence data to carry out the job thoroughly. Robert Gates, the new US defence

secretary, told Congress at his confirmation hearings last month that he would be willing to give the order for strikes on Iran only as an “absolute last resort”.

However, the Bush administration is still tempted to deliver a punishing blow to Iran for its regional meddling in Iraq and Lebanon. At the very least, it would like the swaggering regime in Tehran to believe that the United States might yet decide to cut it down to size. The nomination of Admiral William Fallon, a former navy fighter pilot, to command US military operations in the area is regarded as a sign of forward planning. Fallon does not have a reputation as a hawk, but in the words of a Pentagon source: “If you go after Iran, you have a naval war on your hands.”

Retired Colonel Sam Gardiner, a former National War College professor who has wargamed airstrikes on Iran, believes an American attack remains a possibility. The current deployment of a second US aircraft carrier strike force to the Gulf region, as well as British minesweepers, is a “huge deal”, he said. “It is only necessary to do that if you are planning to strike Iran and deal with the consequences” — including an attempt to shut the Strait of Hormuz, the sea route for much of the world’s oil from the Gulf states.

General John Abizaid, whom Fallon is due to replace, warned last year that an American attack on Iran could cripple oil supplies, unleash a “surrogate” terrorist army and provoke Iranian missile attacks on America’s Middle Eastern allies.

Should Israel launch a tactical nuclear strike, the consequences could be catastrophic. Gardiner believes that there would not only be “low DNA operations” — difficult to trace directly back to the Iranians — such as terrorist attacks, but the Muslim world would also be so inflamed that the stability of pro-western regimes would be threatened.

“It doesn’t take much imagination to see Pakistan (a nuclear power) falling to Islamic fundamentalists,” Gardiner said. “It could mean that in order to prevent Iran getting nuclear weapons, we could be handing them to a terrorist nation.”

According to a senior British defence official, an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran is simply unthinkable: “The damage to Israel to be the only state to use nuclear weapons in anger since 1945 is dangerous stuff. They cannot be seen to be taking the lead on this.”

Or can they? Ephraim Sneh, Israel’s deputy defence minister, said recently: “At the end of the day it is always down to the Jews to deal with the problem.”

US analysts concur that America would never give its consent for such an operation, but as in the attack on Iraq’s Osirak nuclear plant in 1981, it may not object all that vociferously after the event. Nor is it thought that Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt would mourn the humbling of Shi’ite Iran, their main regional rival.

Are Israel’s plans an elaborate bluff or not? In today’s dangerously volatile world, who will dare to make that call?

Strike one: Israel took out Saddam’s reactor in 1981

IF Israeli forces attack nuclear sites in Iran, it will not be their first pre-emptive strike against a perceived nuclear threat. In 1981 Israeli jets

bombed a reactor in Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein getting nuclear weapons.

The Iraqi dictator had built a 40-megawatt research reactor just south of Baghdad with the aid of France, which supplied technology, expertise and about 27lb of uranium-235.

Fearing this could be used in the long term to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons, Israel decided to destroy what became known as the Osirak reactor. Israel's first move was in 1980 when war broke out between Iraq and Iran: its chief of army intelligence urged Iran to bomb Osirak.

A pair of Iranian jets attacked the site, but damage was minor. So Israel decided to bomb it, secretly building a dummy site and carrying out full dress rehearsals. On June 7, 1981, Israel launched Operation Opera: six F-15I and eight F-16I jets flew over Jordanian and Saudi Arabian airspace and caught Iraqi defences by surprise.

The raid crippled the reactor. Many countries, including the United States, condemned the attack. Opposition parties in Israel claimed that it had been cynically timed to coincide with a looming election.

Some Iraqi scientists later said the attack spurred Saddam to redouble his efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction. Attempts were made to rebuild the Osirak facility. However, Saddam's nuclear ambitions were again halted when coalition forces bombed Osirak during the 1991 Gulf war.

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