

# Olmert on Iran

By Peter Hirschberg

In the clearest indication yet that Israel now believes Iran's nuclear aspirations can be curbed through diplomatic measures, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said that efforts being undertaken by the "international community" will ensure that Tehran does not acquire nuclear capability.

In a series of interviews on the eve of the Passover holiday, Olmert repeated the message. "I want to tell the citizens of Israel: Iran will not have nuclear capability," he told the daily *Haaretz* newspaper in one of the interviews, stressing that this would be achieved by the international community.

"The international community is making an enormous effort—in which we have a part, but which is being led by the international community—so that Iran will not attain non-conventional capability. And I believe, and also know, that the bottom line of these efforts is that Iran will not be nuclear."

Until now, Israeli leaders have been far more equivocal when quizzed about Iran's nuclear program. A common reply has been that "all options" are on the table—a reference to the possibility that Israel might employ military means in trying to thwart Iran's nuclear drive.

Tehran insists its nuclear program is civilian in nature and is meant to generate power. But Israel believes Iran is bent on developing nuclear weapons. Threats by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to "wipe Israel off the map" have further heightened fears in the Jewish state.

In the past, some U.S. leaders have suggested that Israel might launch a strike against Iran in a bid to destroy or severely damage its nuclear facilities. "Given the fact that Iran has a stated policy that their objective is the destruction of Israel, the Israelis might well decide to act first, and let the rest of the world worry about cleaning up the diplomatic mess afterwards," U.S. Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) once cautioned.

Twenty-seven years ago, Israel did just that when its fighter jets bombed a nuclear reactor Saddam Hussein had built, wiping out the Iraqi leader's nuclear ambitions with a single pinpoint strike. A repeat performance in Iran would be much more complicated. Iran has learned from the Iraqi experience and has spread its nuclear facilities around the country, with some of them deep underground and behind thick shields of reinforced concrete.

With the Bush administration chastised by its experience in Iraq and having seemingly lost its appetite for another military escapade in the Middle East, efforts by the United States and Europe to deter Tehran from going nuclear are focused largely in the diplomatic realm.

Talks in China last week looked not just at sanctions against Iran, but also "incentives" aimed at persuading Tehran to curb its nuclear pursuit. U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said that officials from the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, China, and the European Union were looking "at the incentive side of the equation."

If Olmert now believes that the efforts of the international community will bear fruit, then his comments seem to reflect an Israeli conviction that diplomatic means will be central in stopping Iran from going nuclear.

In the Passover interviews, he also counseled behind-the-scenes action over the type of public breast-beating one of his ministers recently engaged in. If Iran attacked Israel, Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said, Israel would respond with such force that it would result in "the destruction of the Iranian nation."

"The less we talk, the better," Olmert told the daily *Ma'ariv*. "We mustn't issue threats, like the things I heard recently."

The prime minister also hammered home another message: Iran does not pose a threat to Israel alone. Ahmadinejad's threats against Israel and "his suggestions that we move to Alaska or Germany, constitute a direct threat," the Olmert said. "But this is not just a threat to us, but to all of Western civilization. To its values, its culture, its freedom."

The official Iranian news agency IRNA reported earlier this month that Iran had begun operating several hundred new uranium-enriching centrifuges at its main nuclear plant in Natanz. Ahmadinejad said Iran was working to install 6,000 more centrifuges in the plant, but did not say how many of them were operational.

Iran has already installed around 3,300 centrifuges at the Natanz plant, according to Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency. But ElBaradei also said that Iran's progress in uranium enrichment "has not been very fast."

Asked about the reports that Iran had begun operating new centrifuges, Olmert said he didn't want to "get into reports or argue over details."

"I say again, that on the basis of everything I know and read, Iran will not be nuclear," the prime minister emphasized. "We are doing everything possible,

along with the international community, at a level of intensity and scope that are beyond all imagination, to prevent the Iranian threat."

*Peter Hirschberg writes for the Inter Press Service.*