

Success of Attack on Iran's Nuclear Program Doubtful

By Jim Lobe

(Inter Press Service)

A military attack on Iran's major nuclear facilities by the United States or Israel would likely result only in a delay—and not a particularly significant one at that—in Tehran's ability to produce the fuel necessary to build a nuclear weapon, according to a report released on August 8 in Washington, DC by an influential think tank on nuclear proliferation issues.

The 15-page report by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) concludes that too much is unknown about Tehran's entire program for enriching uranium and how quickly it can be reconstituted if its major known facilities were destroyed in such an attack.

"Without such information, an attack is unlikely to significantly delay Iran's mastery of enrichment with gas centrifuges" that can eventually be used to produce a nuclear bomb, the report said. Iran has long denied that its nuclear program is designed for that purpose, insisting that it is aimed exclusively at producing nuclear power for civilian use.

"Iran's decision to disperse and keep secret several of its key sites further hinders the development of a full picture of its centrifuge complex," according to the report. "Considering the modular, replicable nature of centrifuge plants, we conclude that an attack on Iran's nuclear program is unlikely to significantly degrade Iran's ability to reconstitute its gas centrifuge program."

Moreover, according to the report, the downsides of such an attack—including the possibility that it would lead to a general war spilling beyond the borders of Iran itself—suggest that the military option should be taken off the table, particularly because the continuing threat of military action by the United States and Israel makes it less likely that Tehran will accept a more stringent inspection regime by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"An emphasis on military responses to this conflict ... has the effect of discouraging Iran from allowing more effective IAEA inspections, something necessary for the successful conclusion of a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program," according to the report. "Iran is understandably concerned that more transparency on its part could lead to the U.S. and Israeli militaries gaining better targeting information on its nuclear program."

"It is time to set aside the military option and concentrate instead on credible diplomatic approaches to end Iran's growing nuclear weapons capabilities," according to ISIS, which is headed by former IAEA weapons inspector David Albright, an influential authority on nuclear proliferation issues.

The report comes amid persistent speculation that the United States and Israel are considering attacking Iran's known nuclear sites—among them, the enrichment plants at Natanz and the Esfahan uranium conversion facility—before President George W. Bush leaves office next January.

The speculation has been largely driven by neoconservatives and hawks with close ties to the office of Vice President [Dick Cheney](#), along with a number of Israeli officials and opposition leaders who have publicly warned that if diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment program do not soon bear fruit, military action may be necessary to prevent Tehran from gaining a nuclear weapon.

These same voices cite Israel's strikes against Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and against an alleged clandestine nuclear reactor in Syria last September as precedents, although they concede that the challenge of destroying or at least significantly setting back Iran's nuclear program will be considerably more difficult.

On a late July visit to Washington, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak left a White House meeting with senior U.S. officials insisting that Washington is still mulling a possible attack. His visit immediately followed that of Israel's military chief, Gabi Ashkenazi, who reportedly argued that preventive military action would be preferable to permitting Iran to advance much further in its enrichment program.

The Pentagon is known to be strongly opposed to an attack, which in its view would further destabilize a region in which already over-stretched U.S. military forces are fighting two wars. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Michael Mullen, reportedly conveyed that message personally to Ashkenazi during a visit to Israel at the end of June and subsequently called publicly for Washington to engage in "dialogue" with Iran.

The Pentagon has been backed up by the State Department, which last month sent its number three official, Undersecretary for Policy William Burns, to take part in direct talks for the first time with Iran on a package of measures designed to induce Tehran to freeze its enrichment program. Burns was joined by his counterparts from the four other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—Britain, France, China, and Russia—plus Germany (the "Permanent Five Plus One," or P5+1).

The so-called "freeze for freeze" offer reportedly calls for Tehran to stop adding centrifuges to its enrichment operations in exchange for a commitment by the P5+1 not to pursue a new round of U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran

pending additional talks on a possible deal regarding Iran's nuclear-energy program.

To date, however, Iran's response to the proposal has been ambiguous at best, leading hawks to press for stronger action. The State Department has begun consultations about a new sanctions resolution at the Security Council, even while it is reportedly pushing the White House to establish an Interests Section in Tehran.

The ISIS study stresses that the analogy drawn between Israel's previous preemptive attacks on its neighbors' nuclear facilities is "grossly misleading" and that any effort to destroy Iran's nuclear program would require multiple strikes against many sites.

Due to the program's widely dispersed, relatively advanced, and hardened facilities, not only would the attacker lack the confidence that it had set back the program by at least several years, but such strikes also "could prompt Iran to hasten its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons [by] embarking on a crash program," to expel IAEA inspectors, and to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

"Iran could then build a small centrifuge plant at a secret location capable of producing weapons-grade uranium for one or two nuclear weapons per year," the report noted, adding that gas centrifuge plants could be hidden very effectively.

The new study is likely to bolster those in the Bush administration who favor diplomatic engagement with Iran. Those outside the administration—including, most recently, former national security advisors Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski—urged the administration to take the military option off the table and drop preconditions for direct talks with Tehran.

The ISIS study also comes on the heels of a much longer study for the Air Force by the RAND Corporation that concluded that U.S. military action against Iran was "likely to have negative effects for the United States," including the strengthening of hardline, anti-Western, forces within Iran that would favor retaliation.

Moreover, such an attack "would be unlikely to stop the Iranian nuclear program," according to the 150-page RAND report. While it might set back the economy in certain ways, the resulting increase in oil prices would enable the government "to finance the reconstruction of the facility and continue the current program without major budgetary consequences," it concluded.

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