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(My note: soon.....it will happen soon.....please pray for Israel in the trying days ahead)

Israel Wants West to Deal More Urgently With Iran

By STEVEN ERLANGER

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TEL AVIV, Jan. 12 - With Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map," Israeli officials have special reasons for concern now that Iran has defied the West and said it will resume enriching uranium.

The Israelis are engaged in a careful effort to press the United States and the Europeans to deal more urgently with Iran. Israel has no intention for now of trying to deal with Iran alone or through military means, officials say.

But Israeli officials are worried that politicians in the United States and Europe are focusing on estimates of when Iran might actually have a bomb - rather than concentrating on the "point of no return," perhaps within the next year, when they argue Iran may gain enough technical knowledge to make the fissile material needed for a weapon. After that point, in the Israeli view, it is simply a matter of time until Iran is nuclear-armed.

Maj. Gen. Aharon Zeev-Farkash, who retired Jan. 5 as Israel's director of military intelligence, said Israel believed that the moment was no more than a year away, although estimates differ among governments, based on different views of how advanced Iranian technology has become. Once Iran starts enriching uranium, the general said, it will need just six months to a year to achieve the ability to produce fissile materials.

In a report released Thursday, David Albright and Corey Hinderstein of the Institute for Science and International Security described a number of technical problems Iran had to solve before it could begin testing its enrichment technology.

"Absent major problems," they wrote, "Iran will need roughly six months to one year to demonstrate successful operation of its pilot operation. "Iran could have its first nuclear weapon in 2009," they went on to say, though they noted that that estimate "reflects a worst case assessment, and thus is highly uncertain."

General Farkash had a similar estimate, saying that within another two and a half to three years, Iran will have enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb, if it is able to construct and run 2,000 to 4,000 centrifuges, the machines that enrich uranium.

"We have a crucial six months to a year to do something," he said, adding that "unfortunately when I say this to our friends and allies, they like to focus on the third step," the production of the bomb, "rather than the first step."

"The first step is the most crucial, when Iran will achieve independent research and development capacity to enrich uranium - we all agree," the general said. "Then it's not an intelligence problem, but a political decision."

Iran's announcement has sent governments scurrying to come up with estimates about how much time they have left until Iran can produce its first nuclear weapon. The Israelis say they think that Iran can produce its first bomb within four to five years. European officials estimate a weapon will take five years, and American officials have offered estimates of 6 to 10 years.

Gary Milhollin, director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control in Washington, is skeptical about the American estimate.

He said that "what's important is the ability to build a successful centrifuge and get it to work in a cascade," a series of 164 centrifuges, and then tie a series of cascades together.

"People feel the Iranians can do that now," he said. "But whether they've done it or not is less clear." He said his own sources thought that the Iranians could solve the various technical problems.

"How long will it take? No one really knows," Mr. Milhollin said. "But I think that if the Iranians decide to go all out, they could make a bomb's worth of material a year with 2,000 centrifuges running."

He viewed Israel's estimates as a sophisticated form of lobbying, but said he thought that the Israeli estimates were not out of line. "I'd be surprised if the Iranians don't make it in five years with one, two or three bombs," he said.

The problem for intelligence agencies, General Farkash said, is that "while we have hard evidence about a lot of things" supporting Iran's intention to make nuclear weapons, "we don't have the smoking gun" proving that Iran is violating its pledge to enrich for civilian use only.

He said: "So I told my people, we have to bring for the States and everyone the smoking gun. And then they have to face it and decide what to do."

Intelligence assumptions are not enough these days, the general said. "We as intelligence chiefs need to bring a smoking gun if we want to influence policy makers, especially after Iraq," he said, alluding to the fact that assertions that Saddam Hussein possessed an active program to make nuclear and other prohibited weapons, used to justify the invasion of Iraq, proved to be wrong.

Meir Dagan, the chief of Israel's espionage service, Mossad, recently testified before the Israeli Parliament's foreign affairs and defense committee in similar terms. He said that Iran would attain technological independence in producing fissile material in "a matter of months" and that subsequent development of a nuclear bomb would be only a matter of time and the number of centrifuges Iran could operate.

He emphasized Israel's view that "there exists a strategic Iranian decision to reach nuclear independence and the capability to produce bombs," no matter what the Iranians say, and that Iran will produce a number of them.

General Farkash, Mr. Dagan and Israeli policy makers all agree that a military option against Iran's nuclear facilities cannot be ruled out. Lt. Gen Dan Halutz, the Israeli chief of staff, said recently that the West had the ability to destroy the main elements of Iran's nuclear program.

But Israel believes that diplomatic efforts at preventing or at least delaying Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons should continue with more intensity - at the United Nations Security Council, through economic sanctions, because of Iran's heavy reliance on imported parts, but also through an oil embargo or other means to affect the Iranian government and population.

"Economic sanctions take too long, but we can blockade oil and use Western strategic reserves," said Efraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University. "Let the Iranians and the government feel some heat. Right now they don't feel any heat. Oil is just money, so let the Americans put their money where their mouth is."

The diplomatic process has already delayed Iran's program by some two years, the Israelis believe.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, speaking on Jan. 3, in his last interview before his stroke, made the same case as General Farkash and Mr. Dagan. "In any event, time is not working in favor of anyone who wants to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear," he said. Israel, Mr. Sharon said, "is not the spearhead, but we are working together when it comes to intelligence and evaluation with the United States, together with European countries."

Israel is also being careful not to react too strongly to the violently anti-Semitic comments of the Iranian president, Mr. Ahmadinejad.

David Menashri, the director of the Center of Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University, said: "The less Israelis speak about Iran the better. Ahmadinejad is trying to turn the Iranian nuclear issue into the problem of Israel, and by responding to his statements we just play into his hands."