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## Iran-Israel Linkage By Bush Seen As Threat

*Jewish leaders warn of backlash as president cites Jewish state as rationale for possible strikes.*

**James D. Besser And Larry Cohler-Esses**



President Bush is risking a backlash that could injure the Jewish community — and his own cause — by repeatedly citing Israel as his top rationale for possible U.S. military conflict with Iran, Jewish leaders and Middle East analysts warned this week.

Bush's repeated, sometimes exclusive, focus on Israel could spark public fury against the Jewish state and Jews if U.S. military action is accompanied by skyrocketing gas prices, terrorism at home or fallen G.I.'s who might be seen as dying for Israel, some said. Others feared it could fracture the shaky international coalition Bush is striving to assemble to oppose Iran's nuclear program by framing the threat as primarily to Israel rather than international stability.

Ambassador Edward Walker, a former U.S. envoy to Israel who now heads the Middle East Institute in Washington, termed Bush's Israel focus "a terrible idea."

"Just think about if gas prices go up to \$7 a gallon as a result, and everybody is saying it's because of Israel," he said.

"I don't believe it is in Israel's best interests to have the American people going into a major military action, which is what we're talking about in Iran, with significant implications on the home front in terms of terrorism and energy prices, and then having people blame Israel," said Walker.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said "The linkage to Israel is not a good idea, because then the Iranians say, you see, it's the Zionists driving this.

"As much as we appreciate it, the question is whether it's beneficial to tie this to Israel," said Hoenlein, whose organization functions as the Jewish community's official umbrella group for speaking out on foreign policy issues.

Hoenlein pointed out that Iran is tied to terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, which operates in Lebanon and other countries. It also exercises influence over militias accused of atrocities in Iraq and aims to spread its influence throughout the Muslim world.

The danger of a nuclear-armed Iran "is a much greater one than just Israel," said Hoenlein.

In recent days, there have been reports of extensive U.S. military planning, possibly for a bombing campaign against a variety of Iranian targets. The aim, say the reports, would be to halt or, at least set back,

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what Iran insists is a peaceful program to produce nuclear energy. The United States, Europe and other countries fear this merely masks a covert Iranian drive to develop nuclear weapons.

Faced with increasing public clamor about a possible military conflict, Bush has repeatedly taken note of the threat a nuclear Iran would pose to Israel. Indeed, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has repeatedly called for Israel's destruction, most recently this week. On some occasions, President Bush has offered this as his sole rationale for confronting Iran.

In a March 20 speech in Cleveland, for example, Bush replied to a question about the influence of apocalyptic Christian theology on his policies with a long, rambling answer in which he raised the threat he saw from Iran and said, "Now that I'm on Iran ... the threat from Iran is, of course, their stated objective to destroy our strong ally Israel. It's a threat to world peace; it's a threat, in essence, to a strong alliance. I made it clear, I'll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel."

Other administration leaders have brought Israel into center stage on Iran in a different way — suggesting strong U.S. action could be necessary to keep Israel from acting on its own.

"One of the concerns people have is that Israel might [attack Iran] without being asked," said Vice President Dick Cheney in a February 2005 radio interview, "that if, in fact, the Israelis became convinced the Iranians had significant nuclear capability, 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."

Asked why Bush has made Israel a focus, Walker said, "because he is not very attuned to the history of the situation and he has some really strange advisers who do not understand the broader implications of this, in terms of the vast majority of the American public."

Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-L.I./Queens), a frequent administration critic, said Bush's focus increases the likelihood of a backlash against Jews and Israel if a U.S.-led war on Iran turns sour.

"It's a horrible thing to do, it's dangerous," he said. "If something goes wrong, it's a setup to say we did it for Israel and not for America, and to blame the Jews."

Asked if he thought that was President Bush's intent, Ackerman said "I don't believe in accidents and coincidences in this business. They choose their words very carefully. This is not the first time the president has said this, but now it looks like it's their whole program."

Ironically, Middle East analysts say Israel's own public stand has, by and large, played down the threat that Bush is playing up.

"For past few years, the position of the Israeli government has been that Iran's nuclear program was not an Israeli issue," said Shai Feldman, director of Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East studies. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon from 2000, said Feldman, Israel stressed the problem was "an international issue, a challenge to international stability."

Israel may have felt comfortable stepping back because the European countries and even Russia and China have cooperated with the United States on the issue in ways they did not in the lead-up to the War in Iraq, Feldman conceded. This may have allowed Israel to de-emphasize itself, he said.

"In terms of maintaining this kind of international support, to say Israel is a primary concern is extremely counterproductive," Feldman said.

Furthermore, he explained, many—though not all—Israeli analysts do not see a nuclear Iran as the kind of "existential threat" that Bush depicts. For all its president's rhetoric, many Israeli analysts view

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Iran's record as "on the whole, quite risk averse" and see a rational actor that would remain very aware of Israel's second-strike capability, he said.

"It's not that the day after Iran gets the nuclear bomb they drop it on Tel-Aviv," said Feldman. It is rather, the many "general geopolitical implications" of a nuclear Iran that concern Israel, he said.

"One is that it would lead other countries [in the region] to follow suit" with their own nuclear arms programs, he said. "Two is that an Iran equipped with nuclear weapons would throw its weight around the region to a much greater extent than is currently the case."

Shoshana Bryen, special projects director for the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), agreed that the administration's strong focus on Israel could undermine its already shaky efforts to build a broad international coalition to pressure and possibly fight Iran.

"It's a perfectly reasonable response to the fact that Iran has threatened only two countries — the United States and Israel," said Bryen, whose group promotes strong ties between the U.S. and Israeli military. "The problem is that doing that gives countries that would like an excuse for not acting on Iran an out."

Ahmadinejad believes the more Washington focuses on Israel as a factor in the Iran debate, the more trouble it will have recruiting allies, she said.

David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, said he has already seen signs of a backlash against Jewish groups because of his group's support for a tough stand against Iran's nuclear program.

Harris' group recently published an ad in The New York Times and the Financial Times headlined "A Nuclear Iran Threatens Us All," showing a map with concentric rings delineating the current and projected ranges of Iranian missiles now deployed and under development.

"Our point is and remains that Iran is a global problem," he said. "Israel is one target, but not the only one."

But letters to the editor blasted the group and said the ad was proof of the destructive impact of the Jewish lobby, Harris said.

"So there is always the possibility of a backlash," said Harris.

Harris said his group "welcomes and appreciates the administration's expressed support for Israel. ... But we maintain this is a problem that goes far beyond Israel."

Some Jewish leaders seem conflicted — pleased that the president is actively concerned about Israel's security but uncertain about his motives.

"The fact that the president is saying, time and time again, that Israel is under our [defense] umbrella should be welcomed and encouraged," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. But Foxman said the president's exact motives in linking Israel so closely to U.S. Iran aims are unclear.

"Is this a security umbrella on behalf of Israel? Is it meant as a message to Israel? Or to Iran? At this point nobody really knows its significance."

Jewish leaders say that while many have pushed for a forceful U.S. stand against Iran, no one is actively promoting the military option. Even some hawkish groups caution that attacking Iran could have unintended and devastating consequences.

JINSA's Bryen, for example, that a military strike with civilian casualties will probably "strengthen the regime."

There are no simple options, she continued, “which may be why the president keeps raising the specter of Israel. Everybody is hoping for a magic bullet, whether it be an Israeli or a U.S. magic bullet.” n

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