

Israel seeks all clear for Iran air strike

By Con Coughlin in Tel Aviv

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Israel is negotiating with the United States for permission to fly over Iraq as part of a plan to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, The Daily Telegraph can reveal.

To conduct surgical air strikes against Iran's nuclear programme, Israeli war planes would need to fly across Iraq. But to do so the Israeli military authorities in Tel Aviv need permission from the Pentagon.

advertisement A senior Israeli defence official said negotiations were now underway between the two countries for the US-led coalition in Iraq to provide an "air corridor" in the event of the Israeli government deciding on unilateral military action to prevent Teheran developing nuclear weapons.

"We are planning for every eventuality, and sorting out issues such as these are crucially important," said the official, who asked not to be named.

"The only way to do this is to fly through US-controlled air space. If we don't sort these issues out now we could have a situation where American and Israeli war planes start shooting at each other."

As Iran continues to defy UN demands to stop producing material which could be used to build a nuclear bomb, Israel's military establishment is moving on to a war footing, with preparations now well under way for the Jewish state to launch air strikes against Teheran if diplomatic efforts fail to resolve the crisis.

The pace of military planning in Israel has accelerated markedly since the start of this year after Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, provided a stark intelligence assessment that Iran, given the current rate of progress being made on its uranium enrichment programme, could have enough fissile material for a nuclear warhead by 2009.

Last week Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, announced that he had persuaded Meir Dagan, the head of Mossad for the past six years and one of Israel's leading experts on Iran's nuclear programme, to defer his retirement until at least the end of next year.

Mr Olmert has also given overall control of the military aspects of the Iran issue to Eliezer Shkedi, the head of the Israeli Air Force and a former F-16 fighter pilot.

The international community will increase the pressure on Iran when senior officials from the five permanent of the United Nations Security Council and Germany meet at an emergency summit to be held in London on Monday.

Iran ignored a UN deadline of last Wednesday to halt uranium enrichment. Officials will discuss arms controls and whether to cut back on the \$25 billion-worth of export credits which are used by European companies to trade with Iran.

A high-ranking British source said: "There is a debate within the six countries on sanctions and economic measures."

British officials insist that this "incremental" approach of tightening the pressure on Iran is starting to turn opinion within Iran. One source said: "We are on the right track. There is time for diplomacy to take effect."

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