War heads for Tehran?

By Amir Oren

SEVILLE, Spain - Nuclear weapons in Iran? Not such a bad idea, the U.S. military thought. Not recently, but in 1958, during the Eisenhower administration, when the army chief of staff, General Maxwell Taylor (later the chairman of the Joint Chiefs under the Kennedy administration), had a bright idea. Like his colleagues, Taylor was concerned that a weak Iran would not be able to repulse a Soviet invasion from the north. According to an internal - and previously top-secret - study carried out by the Pentagon's history department, Taylor suggested that Iran be supplied with a battalion of Honest John surface-to-surface missiles, which could carry nuclear munitions.

Under this proposal, the Americans would undertake to store the nuclear warheads outside Iran and supply them quickly in an emergency. In addition, the plan spoke of American engineering battalions that would activate atomic explosive devices in the event of a Soviet incursion of Iran. Taylor's superiors, including Eisenhower (who was the first supreme commander of NATO) and the defense secretary, Thomas Gates, did not accept the idea.

If they were living today, the cast of characters mentioned above would not believe their eyes. Here, in southern Spain, the defense ministers of the NATO member-states met with their Russian counterpart, Sergei Ivanov, against a backdrop of U.S. administration determination to confront Iran. The circumstances have changed and the roles have been reversed: The Iranians have become the rivals and the Russians partners, albeit only up to a point, not least because of anxiety in Europe about ensuring the continent's sources of energy.

As at the end of the Eisenhower presidency, now too the U.S. defense secretary is named Gates - Robert Gates, the successor to Donald Rumsfeld. Gates' style differs from that of his predecessor, but the content is identical, and anyone who expected Rumsfeld's militancy to be replaced by moderation has discovered that Gates did not join forces with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice but rather has been drawn into the milieu of Vice President Dick Cheney. One reason for this is that the supreme decision-maker, President George Bush, continues to act in the Cheney-Rumsfeld spirit.

Officially, the central item on the defense ministers' agenda is the performance of the NATO force in Afghanistan and the effort to upgrade the alliance's military posture. The American entanglement in Iraq is casting a shadow over the discussions, but the hot item is Iran, not least because of its involvement in the violence in Iraq and the attacks on U.S. troops there. But there is more. The Bush administration has a long list of complaints against the regime of the ayatollahs: its aid to Hezbollah and Hamas against Israel (and against the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas), the Iranian threat to

take control of the Persian Gulf, and of course the nuclear issue.

Accordingly, NATO is now cultivating its ties with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and the other Gulf states that are apprehensive about Iran. Relations with Israel are characterized by a little upgrading and a great deal of maintenance. Israel contributes to the war against terrorism from its experience, but its perpetual status resembles that of Agudat Yisrael in Israeli politics: support for the coalition from outside.

Where's Rumsfeld, where's Mofaz?

Last week, at a meeting in Brussels, NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer wanted to hear from Defense Minister Amir Peretz how concerned Israel really is about Iran. Peretz reiterated the familiar account according to which Iran is liable to go nuclear before the end of the present decade. American intelligence is not convinced that this gloomy forecast will be fulfilled. The talk in Washington is that the transformation of the fissionable material that will be accumulated in Iran in the years ahead into a nuclear warhead will not take place until the middle of the next decade.

These are assessments, not facts, and there are many unknowns in the equations. For example, the aid Iran is receiving from North Korea. Iranian experts were guests in the North Korean surface-to-surface missile program, but there is as yet no evidence that North Korea is taking part in Iran's nuclear project. The director of the CIA, Michael Hayden, last year promised the Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence that the mistake that underlay the evaluation of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction will not be repeated with regard to Iran. According to Hayden, at that time evaluation of intelligence was solely in the hands of CIA experts in military technology, and they were not familiar with the Middle East, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the culture of hyperbole and deception. The lesson has been learned, Hayden promised, and today nuclear information is passed through a filter of Iran experts. Above, at the highest levels of the U.S. intelligence community, S. Leslie Ireland, who is well known to her Israeli colleagues, has been appointed "mission manager" to coordinate the collection of intelligence on Iran.

Following his appointment as deputy defense minister, Labor MK Ephraim Sneh, a veteran Iranologist who is known for his no-nonsense warnings about hostile military developments, has joined the first line of those engaged with the subject in Tel Aviv. The appointment was also beneficial for the defense minister's adviser, Uri Lubrani, who has for some time been urging for the removal of the threat posed by fanatic Iran by encouraging the opponents of the regime. Israelis who belong to this school of thought note, among other points, that "Iranians" and "Persians" are not synonymous. According to data from the State Department in Washington, only two of every four citizens of Iran are ethnic Persians. The third is Azari and the fourth represents other minorities. The 15 million Azaris are the great hope of those who advocate agitating against the ayatollahs.

Peretz was invited to Seville, like Shaul Mofaz to Sicily a year ago, as a member of the club of seven countries that participate in the "Mediterranean" dialogue with NATO - Jordan, Egypt and four North African countries in addition to Israel. The lunch of the representatives of the seven with their 26 colleagues from NATO is of largely ceremonial importance, and its high point is the group photo. Greater usefulness lies in one-on-one fraternizing and in strengthening the network of ties. The benefit to the country is greater than the benefit to the minister: Where is Rumsfeld? Where is Mofaz?

In the conversation with De Hoop Scheffer, with the participation of ambassador Oded Eran, Israel's successful appointment to the NATO

institutions and the European Union, Peretz took pride in his decision to choose a rocket interception system. Peretz did not tell De Hoop Scheffer, or the citizens of Israel, that one of the critical though hidden considerations underlying his decision is that a foreign country, which is not located in the NATO continents of Europe or North America, is helping to fund the system. This week, after the decision was made public, two former commanders of the air force, David Ivry and Herzl Bodinger, were critical of one element of it: the refusal to deploy in the southern town of Sderot, which has been the target of Qassam rockets fired from Gaza, the laser-guided interceptor Nautilis within 18 months, a year before the rocket-interception system will be ready. Ivry and Bodinger, along with cabinet minister Rafi Eitan, are trying to persuade Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to revoke this part of Peretz's decision.

Admiral in Central Command

Another former air force major general, Giora Rom, has for two decades been friends with an American officer who has suddenly achieved greatness, Admiral Wlliam Fallon. Bush and Gates plucked Fallon from his post as head of Pacific Command and appointed him head of Central Command (CENTCOM), which includes Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Egypt. The 62-year-old Fallon is a more veteran and senior officer in terms of his promotion to four-star general than almost any other officer in his army. He and Rom became friends during his first visit to Israel, when they were both young colonels; since then he has returned to work and travel. Last year Fallon invited Rom to be his guest in his headquarters in Hawaii.

After years of commanders who were attentive to the needs of the Arabs, from Norman Schwarzkopf to Anthony Zinni and John Abizaid, CENTCOM is getting a commander who knows Israel and understands its concerns. When Defense Secretary Gates was asked to explain why the president had appointed, at his recommendation, an admiral, thus breaking the tradition that CENTCOM's commanders come from the land forces or the Marines, he said, in reference to the Middle East and Persian Gulf arenas, "There's a lot of water there."

Along with Fallon, and in theory below him, the new commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus, was also appointed. They are equal in rank, but Petraeus is the equivalent of the commander of the Judea and Samaria Division, who is subordinate to the "GOC Central Command" Fallon, who is responsible for other sectors as well. In practice, the division of labor is clear: Petraeus - Iraq; Fallon - Iran. Of the five brigades that will reinforce Petraeus's forces, four will be posted to Baghdad and one to the western district of Al Anbar. There, in the west of Iraq, the campaign is against Al-Qaida, which wants to establish a base for launching attacks against Jordan and Israel.

But NATO is not just the United States, which is trying to extricate itself from one whirlwind as another approaches. It is also complacent Europe, which is taking part unenthusiastically in the effort in Afghanistan but has not yet internalized the meaning of life with terrorism. In two flights of Iberia Airlines on Wednesday, from Israel to Madrid and from Madrid to Seville, the door of the cockpit was wide open, a pilot emerged from it on various matters two or three times, an attendant took coffee into the cockpit, another attendant stood in the entrance for two long minutes. But never mind: Who would want to hijack a plane, anyway, and what would they do with it if they succeeded?