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SUBJECT: IRAN: CONGRESSMAN ACKERMAN'S JANUARY 5 MEETING AT THE ISRAELI ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Cretz. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In his January 5 discussion with Congressman Gary Ackerman on Iran's nuclear program, Israeli Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) Deputy Director General Ariel Levite said:

-- U.S.-Israel relations will remain high on any Israeli leader's agenda;



-- Israel is anxious about Iran's nuclear ambitions and wants the U.S. to lead the Europeans in their diplomatic engagement with Iran to forestall a crisis;

-- Israel believes time is running out and wants to see Iran referred to the UNSC as soon as possible. According to Israeli estimates, the Iranians could achieve a nuclear weapons capability within two to four years of resuming centrifuge cascade operations at Natanz;

-- Israel prefers and hopes for a diplomatic solution that curbs Iran's nuclear ambitions. Most Israelis do not believe a military solution is workable; and

-- Israel sees a growing consensus in support of sanctions against Iran if Iran continues to defy the international community. If sanctions were called for by the UNSC, they would probably find more support than if they were imposed outside the UN by individual countries. Israel is still not sure whether Russia is willing to even consider future economic sanctions, and intends to discuss the issue in January 17-18 talks in Moscow.

2. (C) Responding to the Congressman's questions on North Korea and Brazil, Levite said Israel has not been tracking North Korea's proliferation activities except when they concern the Middle East. He suggested that the U.S. and like-minded countries monitor Brazil closely. END SUMMARY.

ISRAEL STABLE, DESPITE PM SHARON'S ILLNESS

3. (C) Levite opened the discussion with a reference to PM Sharon's health, assuring the Congressman that the "levers of Israeli government are in good hands," and that U.S.-Israeli relations will remain high on any Israeli leader's agenda. Levite said that no matter who is elected prime minister in March, the U.S. can count on the fact that there will be no "America bashing" from Israel. On U.S.-Israel relations, Congressman Ackerman said he would push the U.S. Navy to continue port visits to Israel.

IRAN: ISRAEL WANTS DIPLOMATIC ACTION TAKEN QUICKLY

4. (C) Levite said that Israel is anxious about Iran and wants the U.S. to lead the Europeans, preferably towards a referral in the near future to the UNSC. The Israelis believe it took a while for the proponents of a diplomatic solution to understand that they need to stand up against Iran. He noted that the French foreign minister recently heard from representatives of the Persian Gulf countries and Egypt about the "international security implications" of a



nuclear-armed Iran. Levite noted with irony that President Ahmadinejad's statements on Israel and the Holocaust have helped in this regard. Levite acknowledged that there is a "chance" that a diplomatic solution may be found, especially as (a) the Europeans have explained the costs to Iran of its resumption of sensitive nuclear activity; and (b) President Bush has stated clearly that all options are still on the table. Levite stressed that Israel is concerned about what Iran will do in late January: If the Iranians escalate the situation, then Israel will urge the U.S. and the EU-3 proceed "full speed ahead" on referring Iran to the UNSC. If Iran decides to return to the negotiating table, then Israel, he said, will be in a difficult situation, because Iran will be able to proceed with its nuclear program while appearing conciliatory.

LEVITE DISCUSSES SANCTIONS, REFERRAL TO THE UNSC

5. (C) Levite said that Israel believes that some progress has been made in garnering support for sanctions against Iran both within and outside the UN system. The Israelis are not sure, however, that Russia is willing to even consider future economic sanctions to be imposed by the UN due to Russia's sensitive relationship with Iran. The Israelis believe that if sanctions were imposed outside the UN system, some Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries would not join, including Malaysia, South Africa and Brazil. Levite said that India prefers not to see Iran referred to the UNSC as India has its own nuclear energy ambitions. He allowed that India, if forced to make a choice, would probably support a referral to the UNSC, but that it would likely oppose sanctions. Levite added that if Iran were referred to the UNSC, the EU would probably unify in support of sanctions. If sanctions were pursued outside the UN, then the EU may not unify, as -- according to Levite -- Italy abhors sanctions. Levite stressed that sanctions need to focus on hitting Iranian pride (e.g., not allowing their soccer team to play in the World Cup), and recommended as a model the sanctions imposed on South Africa and Libya in the past. Levite also suggested hitting Iran's tourism industry, saying that Iran's mullahs own the insurance companies that own Iran's hotels: "If tourism declines, Iran's mullahs will scream." He said not allowing Iran's national airlines to fly to capitals would have an effect, as would denying Iranians entry into Paris and London.

6. (C) Levite said that Russia would probably abstain on any UNSC resolution on Iran's nuclear program. He explained that Russia and Iran have a delicate relationship. He noted Russia's significant commercial interests in Iran, and said this subjects Russia to what he termed blackmail. He also said that Iran has made it clear to Russia that Iran can "stir things up" in Chechnya at Russia's expense. Levite said the motives behind Russia's position on Iran are hard to decipher. He noted that Russia's assertiveness in the energy



market is growing. He also suggested that the Russians are worried that Iran might succumb to Western pressure and be lulled away from Russia like Ukraine and Georgia. He speculated that this might be behind Russian weapons sales and nuclear assistance to Iran. Levite noted as a good thing so far that Russia has not yet supplied nuclear fuel for Iran's Bushehr reactor. Israel, he said, remains concerned about Russia's position on Iran. He said PM Sharon had just instructed the IAEC to send its director, Gideon Frank, to Moscow on January 17-18 to discuss next steps on Iran with the Russians.

7. (C) Levite said China's position on Iran is "shifting in the right direction," and that the Chinese no longer appear to be comfortable to sit in the shadow of Russia on this issue. Levite said China would probably not join sanctions implemented outside the UN. He said that if the UN calls for sanctions, China may join. He warned that China is wary about Iran meddling in western China.

8. (C) Levite stressed that if Iran were to attain a nuclear weapons capability, it would have disastrous implications for the region and international security. He said that Israel believes that if Iran were to declare a nuclear weapons capability, such a declaration would encourage Egypt, South Africa, Brazil and possibly Turkey to energize efforts to acquire their own capabilities.

LEVITE NOTES MOST ISRAELIS RULE OUT MILITARY RESPONSE

9. (C) Levite said that most Israeli officials do not believe a military solution is possible. They believe Iran has learned from Israel's attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor, and has dispersed the components of its nuclear program throughout Iran, with some elements in places that Israel does not know about. Levite noted that the French had recently made it clear that they also do not believe there is a military solution, and would not cooperate if military action were taken.

LEVITE SAYS IRAN MAY ACQUIRE A WEAPON IN 2-4 YEARS

10. (C) On the timetable issue, Levite said that Iran may be two to four years away from having a nuclear weapon, although he acknowledged that there is some "imprecision" in the estimates. The timeline depends on whether Iran steps up its activity in its civilian centrifuge enrichment program and ignores protests from the international community, or whether it proceeds through its clandestine program, factoring in input from its civilian program. In the former case, Levite estimated that Iran could reach complete self-sufficiency



within one year of resuming centrifuge cascade operations at Natanz, which would allow Iran to overcome certain "knowledge gaps." Through its clandestine program, Levite suggested that Iran could create a weapon within three to four years. He acknowledged that this was based on certain unspecified assumptions, since Israel does not have a clear or precise understanding of Iran's clandestine program.

11. (C) Without citing sources, Levite noted that there are rumors that Iran has already obtained "some warheads" from Ukraine. He claimed that, "Israel knows that Iran has acquired cruise missiles from Ukraine."

LEVITE SAYS NUCLEAR ISSUE FUELS POWER STRUGGLE IN IRAN

12. (C) Levite said that Israel believes there is a power struggle going on in Iran, and that the nuclear issue is caught up in it. The Israelis believe President Ahmadinejad has managed successfully to discredit his predecessors for their cooperation with the West (i.e., they did what the West asked of them for three years, and Iran got nothing in return). The Israelis believe Ahmadinejad is now trying to show that he can get more for Iran by playing tough. Israel also believes that he cannot deliver on the economic platform on which he was elected, and thus is diverting the debate to the nuclear issue to avoid criticism.

13. (C) Levite noted that some criticism has been leveled against Ahmadinejad in the Iranian press. This has been accompanied by apologists who have sought to explain Ahmadinejad's statements on Israel and the Holocaust. While Levite said there is some disenchantment in small circles in Iran, he does not see any moves afoot to overthrow the current Iranian government. Levite said he has no high hopes for a peaceful uprising. He admitted that there could be a backlash from the leadership councils and noted that (a) Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has to approve every action that President Ahmadinejad takes, and (b) all government and parliamentary decisions are now being reviewed by Iran's Guardian Council. Levite observed that the ayatollahs, fearful of repercussions from the West, might start to play a moderating role in the Iranian government.

ISRAEL NOT ACTIVELY WATCHING NORTH KOREA

14. (C) Responding to Congressman Ackerman's question, Levite said Israel has tracked "North Korean mischief" only when it has been apparent in the Middle East region. Levite said North Korea has supplied missiles to Syria, Libya, Egypt and Iran. He said the degree to which the missiles are "purely" North Korean, or involve Russian or Chinese production, is



unclear. Levite noted that China seems willing to export technology acquired from Pakistan for uranium enrichment.

15. (C) Levite said he does not believe that sanctions will have any effect on North Korea for the following reasons: (a) China, South Korea and Japan will not take the next steps and impose sanctions; (b) North Korea's ruling regime is not sensitive to the suffering of the North Korean population; (c) South Korea does not want to see North Korea collapse, and would prefer to prop North Korea up and allow change to take place gradually.

16. (C) Levite said North Korea is clearly in the business of making money and remains willing to counterfeit and manipulate currency. He added that North Korea appears resistant to charges that it is violating human rights.

A.Q. KHAN NETWORK GONE, BUT LEGACY REMAINS

17. (C) Responding to the Congressman's question, Levite said it is clear that A.Q. Khan clearly does not play the role he played in the past in terms of proliferating. The network in its original form -- as a procurement network that also financed Pakistan's own nuclear program -- is no longer active, but Levite suggested that the world is still dealing with its legacy. He explained that the network once had subcontractors in over 20 locations in South Africa, Turkey and Malaysia, and admitted that he is not sure that all of the subcontractors have been shut down.

LEVITE SAYS WE NEED TO KEEP OUR EYES ON BRAZIL

18. (C) Levite expressed some concern that Brazil is becoming more radical on nuclear issues, and listed the following reasons for this concern: (a) President Lula's recent statements; (b) Brazil's creation of a new uranium enrichment facility; (c) Brazil's "playing games" with the IAEA to deprive the agency of access to commercial advantages; and (d) Brazil's statements in support of Iran at the IAEA. Levite acknowledged that Brazil's rhetoric on nuclear independence has gone down over the last few months, and suggested this might be the result of U.S., EU and Israeli engagement with Brazil. He said the U.S., Israel and others should not be too worried about Brazil, but should monitor it.

19. (U) Congressman Ackerman did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

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JONES

