

## Stifling Freedom

IRANIAN THEOCRACY DECLARES ITS OPPONENTS INELIGIBLE FOR ELECTIONS

Iran's powerful hard-line leaders are cracking down on political dissent in the Islamic Republic, barring huge numbers of politicians who had hoped to challenge the radical Islamists' grip on power in Tehran. The mullahs running the Iranian government and their Revolutionary Guard allies, led by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have barred more than 2,400 candidates planning to run in the country's March 14 parliamentary elections.

With the "reformist" movement in Iran devastated by previous political purges, now even the "pragmatic" forces in the radical camp, who had anticipated using the upcoming elections as a catalyst for challenging Ahmadinejad in the 2009 presidential elections, are facing authoritarian measures.

Candidates in the Iranian theocracy must meet a score of qualifications, including whether or not they are deemed sufficiently loyal to Iran's Islamic system. They must also be approved by the regime's hard-line unelected Guardians Council, which answers directly to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Supreme Leader has final say in all matters foreign and domestic.

The regime's banning of candidates is similar to a move undertaken before parliamentary elections in 2004, when more than 2,000 candidates were disqualified. Analysts credit that move with leading the way for radicals seizing control of parliament from reformists, and setting the stage for Ahmadinejad's election victory in 2005.

Suppression of individual rights is nothing new in Iran. The government directly controls all radio and television broadcasts, and journalists can be prosecuted for such vaguely worded offenses as "insulting Islam" and "damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic." •NER•

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# NEAR EAST

## Report

FEBRUARY 16-29, 2008

AIPAC'S BIWEEKLY ON AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY

### EDITOR'S COMMENTS

#### Arab Awakening

Arab rulers used to think that Hamas' reign in Gaza was just Israel's problem. That mistaken notion changed last month when Hamas blew up the border wall with Egypt, allowing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to swarm into the Sinai Peninsula.

Hamas is Egypt's problem too, and other Arab governments are equally concerned. Sheer self-interest should motivate them to get serious about reining in the terrorist group.

Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—the radical Islamic movement founded in Egypt 80 years ago and still Egypt's most formidable opposition. Yet until the border was breached last month, Egyptian officials maintained that Hamas could be contained in Gaza and posed no danger to the regime. When the border was suddenly blown open and Hamas operatives linked up with the Muslim Brothers—and were reportedly caught in Sinai carrying suicide bomb belts—Egypt woke up and remembered who Hamas really is.

Although Egypt has since revealed the border and warned Hamas not to breach it again, another breakthrough ...see *Editor's Comments cont'd on pg. 8*

## Aiding an Ally

PRESIDENT REQUESTS \$2.55 BILLION TO HELP ISRAEL COUNTER THREATS

Seeking a major increase in aid to Israel, the Bush administration has requested \$2.55 billion in security assistance for Israel as part of its fiscal year 2009 budget, submitted to Congress earlier this month. The significant boost in aid to Israel comes at the start of a landmark 10-year U.S.-Israel security agreement to help the Jewish state face increasing regional challenges.

The president's request is a tangible expression of the vital nature of the alliance between the two countries and underscores the importance of a safe and secure Israel to America's national security interests. The request also includes \$30 million to help



Photo by the Associated Press

**A nuclear-armed Iran with long-range missiles would pose a grave threat to the U.S. and Israel.**

Israel absorb refugees from the former Soviet Union and other countries.

The plan to help meet Israel's defense needs is a critical component of the long-standing U.S. commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge in a dynamic and increasingly challenging regional environment. The 10-year security agreement, whose funding remains subject to congressional approval, pledges \$30 billion in security assistance to Israel over the next decade, a 25 percent increase over current levels.

The historic Memorandum of Understanding, signed last August, comes as the first 10-year agreement, signed by President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1998, expires at ...see *Aiding an Ally cont'd on pg. 8*

# The Human Cost

## RESIDENTS OF THE ISRAELI TOWN OF SDEROT STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN A SENSE OF NORMALCY AMID CONSTANT ROCKET ATTACKS FROM THE HAMAS-CONTROLLED GAZA STRIP

Gaza-based Palestinian terrorists have fired more than 330 rockets at southern Israeli communities in the first five weeks of 2008. Just recently, two brothers were badly wounded in an attack. One lost a leg; the other remains in serious condition as of press time. The town of Sderot has for years been a prime target, and its residents struggle to cope with the increasing terror.

### Mother Needs Tranquilizers to Cope with Panic

Chava Gad is a 42-year-old mother of three whose nine-year-old son is so traumatized by the constant attacks that he refuses to sleep alone. “We are living in a war zone,” she said in a recent interview with Reuters.

The daily Qassam rocket fire has taken over Gad’s life. She says she used to be an efficient, upbeat person who managed a local office. But she hasn’t worked in two years and can’t concentrate long enough even to sort her laundry. Sitting in her small living room, she panics when an alarm signals an incoming rocket.

Chava rushes to the hallway at the back of the apartment and covers, her hands over her face. Her 16-year-old daughter puts her arm around her mother and tries to calm her down.

In less than a minute, the ordeal is over. The rocket has landed somewhere

else in town. Chava returns to the living room, opens her purse and swallows another valium.

“I’m shaking,” she says, adding that the tranquilizers are her only way of coping. Despite the daily terror, leaving Sderot is not an option for Gad. “If I leave, they win,” she says of Hamas.

### Grocery Owner Struggles for Business and Family Life

Daniel Dahan is the store manager and co-owner of Super Dahan, a small grocery that his father opened in Sderot 40 years ago.

“You might think we wouldn’t have losses because people always need food, but the losses come from the small things,” Dahan told the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*. “For example, I can’t put on music [because people fear it might keep them from hearing the warning sirens], which affects the employees’ morale and thus their level of service and revenues.”

And when the alert siren sounds, customers drop everything, including their unpaid groceries, in the aisles, costing Dahan more than \$100 per day.

With sadness, Dahan discussed the strain on families and the increase in divorce in Sderot. “What happens is that a business owner comes into work and finds it difficult to manage things because

of the pressures from home, concerns over the children and his workers,” Dahan explained. “The wife wants to leave and the husband does not want to because of the business, and the wife says, ‘If something happens to the kids it will be your fault.’”

### A Once-Serene Town Now Under Fire

A child of Sderot, Shula Sasson was born in the 1950s to Libyan-Jewish refugees. She fondly recalls the days of her youth when residents of Sderot lived with a sense of safety. That image was shattered four years ago when a rocket landed near her son, Raziel, then 9, inside a schoolyard and sent him into shock.

In an interview with the Associated Press, she says she hasn’t worked since the attack and her boy has never recovered. “My son goes to school, hears a siren, wets his pants and comes home. Is that a normal child?” Sasson asked. “What kind of life is this, when you can’t even make your home safe for your children?”

These are the questions that many parents in Sderot are forced to ask themselves daily. In the meantime, they struggle to find a way to give their children a sense of peace, despite knowing that the next rocket could strike at any second. •NER•

## HAMAS ROCKETS TERRORIZING SOUTHERN ISRAEL



### PALESTINIAN TERRORISTS BOMBARD CIVILIANS

Since 2005, Palestinian terrorists have fired more than 3,200 rockets and mortars at Israeli civilians, firing as many as 150 rockets in a single day.



### ONLY SECONDS TO SEEK SHELTER

Israel’s Red Dawn warning system alerts Sderot residents to incoming rockets, giving only about 15 seconds for them to seek shelter.



### HOMES DESTROYED

Qassam rockets have devastated the Israeli town of Sderot, destroying homes, schools and factories, and causing many residents to flee.



### CHILDREN LIVING IN FEAR

Qassam rocket fire has had a devastating effect on Israeli children. More than three-quarters of children in Sderot have shown signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.

# Nuclear Threat

ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS CLARIFY MEANING OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE ON IRAN, WARNING THAT THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM REMAINS A SERIOUS CONCERN

The recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear program warned of disturbing advances in Tehran's illicit nuclear program. But many who read the media coverage of the report may have reached the opposite conclusion—that Iran is no longer a threat. Concerned by this interpretation, key administration officials, including the report's authors, have in recent days sought to recast the report's conclusions, emphasizing the continued danger of Iran's nuclear program and the need to press for more stringent international sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

## Weapons Program May Have Been Restarted

During testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in early February, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, who oversaw the National Intelligence Estimate's preparation and its declassified publication, expressed regret over his staff's wording of the report and sought to reignite international urgency over Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.



Photo by the Associated Press  
**Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell** said the NIE on Iran should have been reworded.

"I think I would change the way that we described the Iranian nuclear program...so that the reader could quickly grasp that a portion of it—I would argue, maybe even the least significant portion—was halted, and there are other parts that continue," McConnell said. "We remain concerned about Iran as a potential



Photo by the Associated Press  
**Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte** warned that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons technology.

nuclear weapons threat."

McConnell warned that Iran's weapons design program, which he describes as the least sensitive element of Iran's nuclear program—and which the NIE assessed to have been halted in 2003—may have since been restarted.

"If Iran's nuclear weapons design program has already been reactivated or will be reactivated, it will be a closely guarded secret, in an attempt to keep us from being aware of its true status," McConnell said, adding that Iran could be technically capable of producing sufficient material for a nuclear weapon by late 2009.

## Sensitive Atomic Work Continues

Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, who just completed a stint as America's top intelligence official, echoed McConnell's assessment that Iran is pressing ahead with its illicit atomic work.

"Building a nuclear weapon involves three fairly discrete activities," Negroponte told the Council on Foreign Relations. "One is to acquire the fissile material, and as you know, that activity continues in Iran. They are continuing their work on enriching uranium. Another is to develop a delivery system, and of course the Iranians are working hard on the acquisition and development of missile technology, and they already have a lot of missiles."

Regarding the allegedly halted work on the design of a nuclear weapon, Negroponte offered a conclusion similar

to McConnell's. "It's only the work on the warhead that stopped, and we don't even have absolute certainty that activity has not resumed," he said. "The fact that work had stopped on the design of a warhead was construed to mean that they had stopped all activity that might be relevant to acquiring and developing a usable nuclear weapon. And that simply is not the case."

## More International Sanctions Needed Against Iran

Beyond its judgments on Iran's continued nuclear work, the NIE also concluded that increased economic, diplomatic and political pressure could affect Iran's decision-making. On this point, Nicholas Burns, the outgoing Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, told the Foreign Press Association in London that within two days of releasing the unclassified intelligence assessment, "all the Permanent Five members of the U.N. Security Council had reconfirmed their interest in sanctions and a third sanctions resolution."

The text of that third resolution has reportedly been agreed to by the Security



Photo by the Associated Press  
**Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns** said that stringent sanctions could affect Iranian behavior.

Council, though its passage by the world body has yet to occur.

The United States has also pursued sanctions of its own, and has encouraged allies overseas to do the same. Reports suggest that existing sanctions on Iran are hurting its economy and heightening domestic criticism of the regime. •NER•

cannot be ruled out. As the incident showed, Egyptian security forces are unwilling or unable to stop massive Palestinian surges across the border.

While Egypt is most affected by this new development, other Arab regimes are threatened as well. Unless they act to curb Hamas, their own regimes could be at risk. There are local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in virtually every Arab country. For now, they refrain from violence, but Hamas' influence could spark an increase in terrorist acts.

In a useful first step, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Abul Gheit publicly ridiculed Hamas' tactics by stating that poorly aimed Qassam rockets that become "lost in the sands of Israel" were simply giving Israel a chance to strike back at Gaza. But Egypt should do more against Hamas than issue strongly worded statements.

Cairo should make a 100 percent effort to stop the weapons smuggling to Hamas through the tunnels. In addition, the Arab world should help the Palestinian Authority in its struggle against Hamas, rather than try to mediate between the two rival factions. And finally, if Arab leaders are serious about creating a more peaceful Middle East, they will pressure Hamas to stop firing rockets, rather than constantly blame Israel for Palestinian suffering. If Arab nations don't take these steps, nobody should be surprised when Israel is forced to take more serious action in Gaza. •NER•

## In Memoriam: Chairman Tom Lantos

AIPAC MOURNS THE LOSS OF HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN TOM LANTOS, A STALWART DEFENDER OF HUMAN LIBERTY

AIPAC extends its deepest condolences to the family, friends and devoted staff of House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos (D-CA). We mourn the loss of one of Congress' most passionate and thoughtful leaders, and one of America's greatest statesmen.

The people of California's 12th Congressional District have lost a tireless worker on their behalf and all Americans have lost one of the true giants of our time.

Tom Lantos was the only Holocaust survivor to ever serve in Congress. Witness to a time in history when man's inhumanity was at its height, Rep. Lantos dedicated his life and career to ensuring that American leadership illuminated the dark places of our world. As a global leader for human rights and champion for the freedom of Soviet Jews, he left an indelible mark in service to his country and improved the lives of countless people throughout the United States and across the globe.

His experience during World War II

was a constant reminder to him of the need for a safe haven for the Jewish people. He understood the true meaning of the State of Israel. He knew in a way that few others could appreciate the simple fact that if there had been an Israel in the 1930s and 40s, six million souls would have been spared.

For the last three decades, Rep. Lantos was a champion for U.S. leadership around the world, serving as an advocate for those who stood against tyranny and injustice.

As part of his enduring legacy, Rep. Lantos was a steadfast proponent for a strong and secure Jewish state. Today, there is not a single issue impacting the U.S.-Israel relationship that does not carry his imprint or leadership.

All Americans, and especially those of us in the pro-Israel community, are deeply indebted to Rep. Lantos for his foresight, leadership and constant example. He will be deeply missed. All of us who felt the impact of his work must dedicate ourselves to continuing his legacy. •NER•

### Aiding an Ally...cont'd from pg. 5

the end of fiscal year 2008. Under the new agreement, Israel is slated to receive gradual increases in aid over the next four years—before leveling off at \$3.1 billion for the remaining six years.

Enacted during the height of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the 1990s, and before the extent of the Iranian nuclear program was known, the original 10-year plan

phased out economic aid to Israel while gradually increasing military aid.

Today, however, the United States and Israel face an unprecedented array of threats worse than those encountered a decade ago. Iran—whose leadership calls for Israel's destruction—is pressing ahead with its illicit nuclear program, while Syria, Hizballah and Hamas are amassing arms at an unprecedented rate. •NER•


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