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Reuters

## Iran to hit Israeli nuke sites if attacked: minister

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Iran would strike back at Israeli weapons manufacturing sites and nuclear installations if the Jewish state attacked the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities, Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi was quoted as saying Wednesday.

Israel has refused to rule out military action if diplomacy fails to resolve an international dispute over Iran's nuclear program, which the West suspects is aimed at making bombs.

Iran denies the charge and has often warned it would retaliate if attacked. The head of the elite Revolutionary Guards said earlier this year that Iranian missiles could reach Israeli nuclear sites, a warning underlined by Vahidi.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran's armed forces are fully prepared," Vahidi told reporters during a visit to Syria when asked about any possible Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear sites, the semi-official Mehr news agency reported.

If attacked by Israel, Iran's first response would target various weapons manufacturing sites, including "dirty weapons and other unconventional nuclear centres," Vahidi said.

Israel is believed to be the only nuclear-armed Middle East state.

Iran has often said it has missiles able to reach the Jewish state. Western defense analysts have questioned whether they could hit long-range targets accurately.

Vahidi said "recent threats" by Israeli officials were aimed partly at covering up their own problems and to gain approval for an increased military budget, Mehr reported.

"But at the same time the Zionists know that they are not able to carry out any of their threats against Iran and they are aware of Iran's firm response," Vahidi said.

Iran does not recognize Israel, which it refers to as the "Zionist" state.

Iran, the world's fifth largest oil exporter, says its nuclear work is aimed at generating electricity, not making bombs, but its failure to convince world powers about the peaceful nature of its work has led to U.N. and U.S. sanctions.

Tension increased further last month when Iran said it would build 10 new uranium enrichment sites, shortly after the 35-nation board of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency adopted a resolution rebuking Tehran for carrying out such work in secret.

Iran's hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said on Wednesday that last month's announcement was not made to retaliate for the U.N. agency's resolution, contradicting a statement by the head of Iran's atomic energy organization.

Ahmadinejad said Iran had started preparations several months ago for constructing new enrichment plants and the sites of five of them had been finalized, state broadcaster IRIB reported.

Enriched uranium can be used as fuel for nuclear power stations and, if refined much further, can provide material for bombs.