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# Iran and the Bomb

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On 7 June 1981, Israeli aircraft bombed and completely destroyed the Iraqi nuclear research reactor Osirak. The French government, which had sold the reactor to Iraq, protested. Bertrand Barre, its nuclear attaché in Washington, explained that the reactor posed no proliferation risk and that 'it was intended to be used . . . for testing or converting materials into isotopes, which have specialised uses in medicine.' The UN Security Council strongly condemned the attack as being 'in clear violation of the charter of the United Nations and the norms of international conduct'. The United States, however, objected to the imposing of any sanctions on Israel.

Was the Israeli attack on Osirak justified? Saddam Hussein certainly wanted to make nuclear weapons and in 1991 came dangerously close. But it is unlikely that he would have had much joy with Osirak, which relied on French technicians and was subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. Osirak used highly enriched uranium as fuel: 93 per cent uranium-235 (U-235), and 7 per cent U-238, so while the irradiated fuel rods could have been reprocessed to extract unused U-235, which is a fissile material suitable for weapons, there would have been little plutonium-239, which is obtained from the irradiation of U-238. Israel nevertheless claimed that Osirak was equipped to produce 'military-grade plutonium in significant quantities' and that they had to strike before the reactor went into operation. Iraq considered building a reactor to replace Osirak but settled instead for a clandestine uranium enrichment programme, which it didn't declare to the IAEA.

Twenty-five years later, the focus is not on Iraq, but on Iran, which itself unsuccessfully bombed Osirak in September 1980. Israel and the US now claim that Iran is on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons. The IAEA reported in November last year that a second cascade of 164 centrifuges has been installed at the Iranian uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, bringing the

total to 328. President Ahmadinejad has said that 3000 such machines are to be installed at Natanz. Taking him at his word, it would probably take two years to get them all running and another two years to enrich sufficient uranium to make a bomb. Iran has taken this course in spite of UN Security Council Resolution 1696, passed on 31 July 2006, which demanded that Iran suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities by 31 August. This was to be verified by the IAEA, but it reported instead that Iran had expanded its enrichment capability.

On 23 November, the IAEA technical cooperation committee considered a request from Iran for aid to enhance safety provision at the heavy water research reactor it is building at Arak, which Iranian officials say is designed to produce radioactive isotopes for medical use, just like Osirak. In the face of opposition from the US and European countries, no decision was taken. Ana Maria Cetto, the IAEA deputy director general for technical co-operation, told the committee that the IAEA secretariat believed that the project was not at odds with Resolution 1696 and that there was no legal basis for refusing Iran's request since the IAEA's statutes assert that 'the Agency shall not make assistance to members subject to any political, economic, military or other conditions incompatible' with its objectives, which are 'to meet the needs of research on, and development and practical application of, atomic energy for peaceful purposes'.

The Arak reactor is certainly more suitable for producing plutonium than Osirak would have been: it can run on natural uranium fuel (0.7 per cent U-235, 99.3 per cent U-238), so the irradiated fuel rods would be good sources of plutonium. Israel and India obtained plutonium for their weapons programmes from this type of reactor. Arak is not due to be finished until 2009 at the earliest and it will need to run for at least one year before its fuel rods can be withdrawn and plutonium extracted. Nevertheless, when constructed, the reactor is expected to be inspected regularly by the IAEA, specifically in order to detect any diversion of nuclear material for potential weapon use.

So, until or unless Iran withdraws from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the facilities at Natanz and Arak are safeguarded by the IAEA. Cameras are installed at Natanz (they function continuously), and there are monthly inspections. Similar arrangements will be made for Arak. Any enriched uranium or plutonium made will be under IAEA seal and will not be available for casting into the core of a weapon. There is no pressing nuclear threat from Iran at the moment; nor does there appear to be a tipping point in sight, beyond which it would be impossible to prevent the country from acquiring weapons.

Sources close to the US and Israeli governments nevertheless insist that Iran represents a significant threat, which needs to be dealt with without delay. They assert that Iran has a clandestine programme in addition to its declared programme, as Iraq had. Israeli intelligence claims that Iran is close to having an implosion capability, which it will need to make compact weapons. Yet according to Seymour Hersh, writing in the New Yorker in November, the CIA recently completed an assessment of the evidence for the existence of a secret Iranian nuclear weapons programme. The report, which was based on satellite and other data, concluded that there was no evidence of a secret programme. Nor can it be assumed that Iran could make weapons small enough to fit into missiles without testing: the dud North Korean test shows that even with testing success cannot be taken for granted.

A diplomatic solution is available, but the US and its EU allies do not want to consider it. It is the same deal I have mentioned in these pages before[\*], whereby Iran would be allowed limited enrichment rights (say, up to 5 per cent enrichment), together with security guarantees and technical help. Richard Haass, who was director of policy planning at the State Department until 2003, believes that 'Iran should be offered an array of economic, political and security incentives', including 'a highly limited uranium-enrichment pilot programme so long as it accepts highly intrusive inspections'.

The US says that it will talk to Iran only if it first suspends enrichment. Given Hizbullah's

success in Lebanon and Shia dominance in the new Iraq, Iran is unlikely to want to make concessions. Last February I said that I expected the US to attack Iranian nuclear facilities before the end of the year. [\*\*] That didn't happen, but well-informed commentators in Washington have been predicting action in 2007 or 2008. Hersh reports that despite the Congressional elections, Bush and Cheney are determined to deal with Iran before this administration ends and that 'White House hawks led by Vice President Dick Cheney were intent on attacking Iran with or without the approval of the US Congress.' John Pike of GlobalSecurity.org predicts US strikes this summer, safely distant from the presidential election next year. Bush has already shown his disdain for the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which advocated negotiations with Iran, and has ordered a second aircraft carrier and supporting ships to the Persian Gulf.

On 23 December, the Security Council finally agreed its response to Iranian non-compliance with Resolution 1696. Resolution 1737 laid the foundations for a US strike on Iran. It welcomes the commitment of China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, the US and the EU to a negotiated solution, then proceeds to render such a solution highly improbable by depriving Iran of its right to any nuclear capability other than the electricity-generating reactor at Bushehr which Russia is building. The resolution includes Iranian work on missiles in its list of activities requiring sanctions even though the IAEA has no competence in missiles.

The model used here is clearly that of Resolution 687 of 1991 following the first Gulf War, which deprived Iraq of its right to any nuclear or missile capability as part of the ceasefire arrangements. Iraq had been defeated in war and was in no condition to resist. Iran, on the contrary, is very much not defeated: it is determined to exercise what it sees as its 'inalienable right . . . to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination', as Article IV of the NPT puts it. Although it is conceivable that Iran will suspend its nuclear and missile work while proclaiming that it has already

successfully defied the United States by enriching uranium to 5 per cent, it is much more likely that it will continue these activities. The resolution, however, explicitly prohibits continuing enrichment activities at Natanz as well as further work on the heavy water reactor project at Arak and at the uranium conversion facilities at Esfahan. The missile production facilities in Tehran and Shiraz are also singled out. So it is likely, once there has been an appropriate period of discussion, consultation, interpretation and so on, with Russia and China insisting that the resolution gives no authority for military action, that Bush will order a strike on these facilities and say that it was ordered 'in support of the authority of the UN', thereby repeating one of the many justifications offered for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Last April, Hersh quoted a US air force analyst who had studied satellite photographs of the nuclear facilities and estimated that at least four hundred targets would have to be hit.

### ***Footnotes***

\* 17 October 2002.

\*\* 23 February 2006.

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