

Still Not Bomb-Proof

Feb 26, 1996



Articles & Testimony

Five years after Operation Desert Storm, Iraq once again may not be far from producing an atomic bomb. With its known nuclear infrastructure largely dismantled, restrictive sanctions greatly complicating the acquisition of sensitive technology abroad and scores of UN weapons inspectors combing the countryside, how can this be?

The fact is that the experience of the past five years shows that none of these factors would pose insurmountable obstacles to Iraqi efforts to build a bomb if Iraq were able to acquire fissile material (bomb grade plutonium or uranium) on the black market from the former Soviet Union or elsewhere. If it could do so, it would bypass the most difficult step in bomb-making and could then focus on weaponizing the material (that is, making a deliverable weapon from it)—normally the final phase of bomb-making. And the odds are Iraq would succeed. Here's why:

First, Iraq retains the most important assets required to restart its nuclear effort: a cadre of experienced scientists and technicians, a relatively advanced military-industrial base and a viable nuclear weapon design.

Second, Iraq has kept many of its bomb-design teams together. Although they are ostensibly not engaged in weapons research, there can be little doubt that when the UN inspectors are not around they talk shop—and perhaps more. UN inspectors concede that they can do nothing to prevent Iraqi nuclear scientists from continuing with theoretical work—paper and computer studies involving calculations, simulations and weapon design—when they are absent. That being the case, it is prudent to assume, in light of a pervasive pattern of cheating, that the Iraqis continue to work on their bomb. Why else keep the bomb design teams together?

Third, Iraq still has thousands of sophisticated machine tools at various civilian and military industrial facilities around the country. With a little ingenuity, its nuclear scientists probably could create the infrastructure to build a bomb from purloined fissile material. (And the Iraqis have boasted to inspectors that they could build whatever equipment they might now lack for such an effort.)

Fourth, a revived nuclear-weapons program would be almost impossible to detect. It would be designed to be invisible to outsiders, and the Iraqis would bring to this effort a detailed understanding of the shortcomings of the UN monitoring regime and foreign intelligence services—gained through five years of cat and mouse. Moreover, the manpower base and infrastructure required for weaponization is quite small and thus potentially difficult to detect. Large, conspicuous and sophisticated labs are not needed. Weapons development and testing could be carried out at temporary or makeshift facilities (such as open-pit mines or construction sites) and small and inconspicuous permanent facilities (such as private homes or mosques). And facilities handling weapons-grade uranium or plutonium can easily be shielded to prevent the escape of telltale radiation.

In the near term, Iraq's ability to build a bomb will hinge on whether it succeeds in acquiring fissile material on the black market. However, the possibility of its acquiring such material from the former Soviet Union can no longer be deemed a long shot. Late last year, Iraq succeeded in illegally acquiring sophisticated gyroscopes that came from long-range missiles that Russia had destroyed in accordance with various arms-control treaties with the United States. Export of components from these missiles is forbidden; nonetheless, the gyroscopes found their way to

Baghdad.

This incident—which should set red lights flashing in capitals around the world—confirmed many people's worst fears: that there are people in the Russian government who will sell weapons materials for the right price. This incident also confirmed what many people already knew: that Iraq continues to work on its weapons of mass destruction in violation of a stack of UN resolutions.

The diversion problem in the former Soviet Union is approaching crisis proportions; our basic assumptions concerning the scope and nature of the problem and the effort required to deal with it must be revised upward, and the problem must be addressed with renewed urgency by the president and his advisers. Moreover, Iraq's weapons-design teams must be dispersed in such a way as to make it difficult for them to continue with clandestine weapons work (and not just in the nuclear realm, but in other critical areas as well—such as biological warfare). This demand will be resisted by the Iraqis, but the United States must stand firm on this issue.

For as long as Saddam Hussein remains in power, the United States faces a potential nuclear threat. Now, more than ever, the United States needs to take whatever steps are necessary to get rid of this man and his regime before they once again become a menace to world peace.

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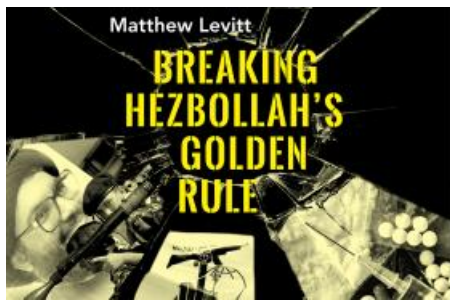
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