

Iraq's Nuclear Program:

The Key Questions

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Brief Analysis

President Bush and other senior administration officials have focused attention on the threat posed by a nuclear Iraq to America's interests in the Middle East. It is generally agreed that Iraq can develop a sizeable nuclear military capability within the next decade. But the significance of this program in both the near and long term is not entirely clear. The key questions which must be addressed include the following:

- What are current Iraqi nuclear capabilities and how long will it take Iraq to develop a nuclear weapon?
- If Iraq does build a nuclear weapon within the next few months, what does this mean in the context of the current crisis?
- Is Iraq more likely than other nuclear powers to use nuclear weapons?
- What will the impact of a major Iraqi nuclear program be on the U.S. ability to protect its interests in the Middle East?

Iraqi Capabilities

No one outside of the Iraqi leadership knows with certainty the exact state of Iraq's nuclear capabilities. It is clear that Iraq has not tested a nuclear device, a critical step in the development of any nuclear weapons program. Iraq also appears not to have developed the warheads that would provide for ease of delivery of nuclear weapons. No Western analyst publicly claims that Iraq has nuclear weapons today, although the November 28 Washington Times reports that a Special National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's nuclear programs cites Israeli intelligence to the effect that Iraq already has assembled a basic nuclear weapon. The most trustworthy estimates are that Iraq could use the enriched uranium it obtained from France to build a primitive nuclear device deliverable by a truck within a few months and that Iraq is still several years away from a sophisticated military capability.

The problem with any estimate is that the United States does not know the full extent of Iraqi achievements in its nuclear program. Iraq certainly has been trying to acquire additional enriched uranium and the Special National Intelligence Estimate reportedly concluded that Iraq may have succeeded. Michael Eisenstadt's "The Sword of the Arabs: Iraq's Strategic Weapons" discusses several Iraqi attempts in this regard nearly a decade ago. While Western analysts have some indication of the extent of such Iraqi activity in Europe and the United States, many questions such as those raised by William Safire in today's New York Times about Iraqi acquisition of key elements like machinery to fabricate samariumcobalt magnets or computerized lathes to produce centrifuges remain open. Moreover, Western analysts have virtually no information about the possibility of Iraqi cooperation with countries like China and Pakistan. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan acquired much of its nuclear-related technology in the West. Is it not possible that Pakistan procured technology and components for Iraq at the same time?

What is known is that Iraq has concentrated on developing nuclear weapons for a long time, and that in other areas -

- such as chemical weapons and missile technologies -- Iraq has surprised Western experts. Thus, it would be dangerous to underestimate Iraqi capabilities.

Relevance to the Gulf

Crisis If Iraq already has or will soon have a crude nuclear device, it is not likely to be decisive in the current crisis. Today Iraq faces a number of nuclear powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, and Israel), each of which probably has the capability to destroy Iraq should it use nuclear weapons while Iraq has no assured retaliatory capability. The most likely use Iraq could make of nuclear weapons in the current crisis would be to intimidate Arab foes like Saudi Arabia. For example, Saddam could threaten to bomb the Saudi oil fields in the event that the coalition was on the verge of conquering Baghdad. By brandishing nuclear weapons, Saddam could act the part of the biblical Samson -- if he is not to survive, his opponents will not enjoy the fruits of their victory. The problem for Saddam is that even raising such a prospect could lead to a preemptive strike by his opponents.

Likelihood of Iraqi Use of Nuclear Weapons

A central argument of those who want to eliminate Iraq's nuclear capability is that over time Saddam Hussein is more likely to use such weapons than the leaders of other states such as China, Pakistan, or Israel. This argument is plausible. In its confrontation with Iran during the course of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq used every type of weapon in its arsenal and very well might have used nuclear weapons (at least on Iraqi territory) if it had been in possession of such weapons and if the military situation had deteriorated further. In five or ten years, if Iraq has such weapons and its opponents do not, it would be entirely in keeping with the Iraqi approach to war to use them.

Although one can only hope that nuclear weapons are always self-deterring (as Richard Rhodes argues), unfortunately this may not be the case for Iraq. Unlike others, Iraq has threatened to use its unconventional weapons -- for example, threatening to incinerate half of Israel earlier this year. Rather than trying to work out red lines and improved communications with opponents like Iran and Israel, Iraq too often has chosen the course of threats, terrorism, and war. The international community has ample reason to focus more attention on the Iraqi nuclear threat than on similar capabilities in countries which have behaved more cautiously.

Meaning for the United States

An Iraqi nuclear capability may affect America's willingness to protect its interests in the Middle East. Even if the United States could eradicate Iraq, America might judge the prospective costs of any military conflict to be too great. If the U.S. is wary of war with Iraq today, how much more wary will it be when the costs might be much greater? Moreover, a nuclear Iraq will undoubtedly affect the perceptions of local actors in ways that could harm American interests. Militarily weak oil producers in the Gulf are far more likely to accommodate a nuclear Iraq than seek protection from an outsider. Militarily capable states like Iran, Syria, and Egypt may react differently -- rushing to develop their own nuclear programs. While they have not proceeded with a full-scale effort in the face of Israel's nuclear program, they may react far more aggressively in the face of a nuclear capable Iraq because they see a difference between nuclear weapons in Israeli and Iraqi hands.

Thus, a successful Iraqi drive for nuclear weapons will lead to greater nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, an increased prospect for nuclear weapons use, and a far less comfortable environment for the U.S. It is clearly desirable to prevent such an outcome.

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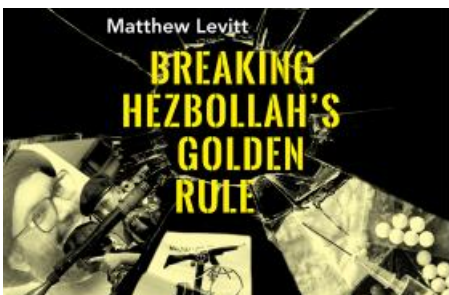
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