

The Dubious Feasibility of a Planned Nuclear Reactor in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Iraq needs stability before it can invest in projects like a planned nuclear power plant.

Last May, Kamal Hussein Latif, the head of the Iraqi Radioactive Sources Regulatory Authority, announced that his agency is conducting a study of twenty initial sites on which to build a nuclear reactor for peaceful energy production. Through a process of elimination, these will be narrowed down to five sites in order to eventually choose one primary site and an alternate site. This statement came around the anniversary of the bombing of the Tammuz nuclear reactor by Israeli jets in 1981 during the Iran-Iraq War—a move that some see as weakening Saddam Hussein while others see as prolonging what was indeed a lengthy and devastating war.

Though the announcement may have symbolic significance, it also comes as the parliamentary elections in Iraq, scheduled for early October, draw near. The aforementioned agency has emphasized that the goal of the nuclear reactor is to resolve Iraq's electricity crisis and is to be used for other peaceful purposes. Yet there is a great irony in the Iraqi government's insistence on building a nuclear reactor: despite owning enough gas-generated energy to last for decades, Iraq imports energy from several other countries and has rejected earlier offers from Siemens to improve electrical production.

Potential Obstacles to Implementing the Project

Iraq has struggled with these types of projects in the past, and the government itself has stated that it is suffering from financial distress as it racks up debts to pay salaries and fund numerous projects that have not yet seen the light of day. Moreover, there are a number of obstacles that may stand in the way of the implementation of this project in particular, most notably the lack of expertise needed to build such a facility, especially after the disappearance or killing of most of Iraq's atomic and nuclear energy scientists.

From the security perspective, Iraq is facing a number of crises, including the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons and the increasing influence of non-state, armed loyalist groups that target state institutions and foreign forces. All

this increases the magnitude of potential risks to the reactor and is an obstacle to attracting U.S. and Western expertise.

Climate is another impediment to implementation, as the temperatures in a country like Iraq are simply not appropriate for this type of project. In 2018, France was forced to shutter four of its nuclear facilities due to the current climate crisis. The average temperature reaches 45 degrees Celsius in Baghdad, and more than 50 degrees Celsius in the cities of southern Iraq. These are the areas anticipated to be candidates for building the project, since some southern governorates fulfill the requirement of being at least 15 kilometers away from residential and inhabited areas.

According to the directives of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the safe operation of this type of reactor also requires a great deal of energy, a resource the country lacks because of its dependence on neighboring countries for its energy needs under various agreements. Reactors likewise require lots of water for cooling, which is yet another of Iraq's crises, as Iran has cut off the water more than 7 billion cubic meters of water from the Karun, Sirwan, and Karkheh rivers feeding into the Upper and Lower Zab rivers. Turkey has also decreased the rate of releases from the Tigris River, according to a televised statement from Iraq's Minister of Environment and Water Resources, Mahdi Rashid al-Hamdani. Moreover, the UN Mission in Iraq has warned of a worsening desertification crisis in Iraq and published official statistics confirming a drought affecting more than 100,000 dunums of farmland per year. Given the country's lack of water, the question of how the Iraqi government would provide the water for a vast nuclear project is quite significant.

Why a nuclear reactor?

Some political experts suggest the decision may have been motivated by Iran to destabilize the security of the region, while others think it comes under U.S. auspices, especially since the current U.S. president is trying to undercut Iran's influence in the area, despite having supported the invasion of Iraq for reasons related to its possession of nuclear weapons. From an internal perspective, the project may be going ahead because it is supported by a political party or as a way of displaying political propaganda.

What everyone agrees on is that Iraq is facing an energy crisis. The Iraqi government estimates that the country is experiencing a 16% drop in electrical production. Hence, there is a pressing need for new energy solutions, especially with the annual increase in demand for electricity reaching 15%, and possibly increasing to 100% the current rate over the next ten years. Along with this ongoing demand, Iraq must seek cheap energy sources to cover its basic needs due to the country's budget crisis. **Q**

The government is against using oil to generate the needed electricity, since oil is Iraq's largest resource for export and burning it to generate electricity is not in the country's economic interests. Furthermore, Iraq is a participant in the Paris Climate Accord and must think seriously about reducing its greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet even some supporters of the project think that if it succeeds, it will face strong pushback from neighboring countries in an attempt to prevent the stability of the region and Iraq's economic independence. The success of the nuclear project is expected to gradually reduce Iraq's need to import electricity from neighboring countries, and thus cancel the joint agreements, which will cause great harm to the exporting countries that are accustomed to huge financial flows from this sector.

Nevertheless, support for the project is based on the assumption that such a project is feasible. Iraqi citizens still suffer from the government's financial shortfalls, the delay in the salaries of its employees and retirees, the frequent cuts in water, and, of course, a lack of electricity in residential cities. In addition, there is growing security tension, including criminal bombings in Baghdad, that have claimed the lives of many citizens. Thus, it is more appropriate

now to resolve the security crisis and impose state control, so that Iraq can study such projects substantively, rather than wasting public money in what is, at present, a guaranteed failure. ❖

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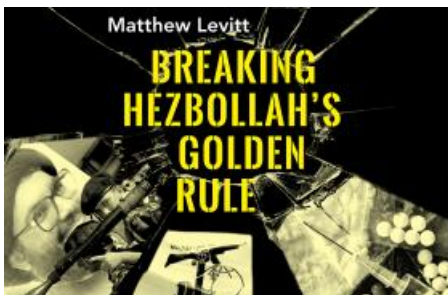
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