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E-Notes

WHY DID SADDAM WANT THE BOMB?
The Israel Factor and the Iraqi Nuclear Program
By Hal Brands and David Palkki

Hal Brands is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Duke University. He is the author of From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World, *and* Latin America's Cold War. *David Palkki is Deputy Director at the Conflict Records Research Center. This essay is adapted from a longer and more thoroughly documented essay, "Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?" International Security 36, 1 (Summer 2011).*

INTRODUCTION

On March 27, 1979, Saddam Hussein, the de facto ruler and soon-to-be president of Iraq, laid out his vision for a long, grinding war against Israel in a private meeting of high-level Baathist officials. Iraq, he explained, would seek to obtain a nuclear weapon from "our Soviet friends," use the resulting deterrent power to counteract Israeli threats of nuclear retaliation, and thereby enable a "patient war"—a war of attrition—that would reclaim Arab lands lost in the Six Day War of 1967. As Saddam put it, nuclear weapons would allow Iraq to "guarantee the long war that is destructive to our enemy, and take at our leisure each meter of land and drown the enemy with rivers of blood."[1]

Until recently, scholars seeking to divine the inner workings of the Baathist regime were forced to resort to a sort of Kremlinology, relying heavily on published sources as well as the occasional memoir or defector's account. This is no longer the case. The transcript of the March 1979 meeting is one of millions of Baathist state records captured during and after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. These records, many of which are now being made available to scholars, include everything from routine correspondence to recordings and transcripts of top-level meetings between Saddam and his advisers. These records illustrate the logic (and illogic) of Saddam's statecraft to an unprecedented degree. They also shed light on one of the most crucial questions pertaining to Iraqi foreign policy: Why did Saddam want the bomb?

THE IRAQI NUCLEAR PROGRAM

The Iraqi nuclear program commenced in the late 1950s, with the purchase of a Soviet-made research reactor. The program lagged amid chronic political instability for much of the next fifteen years, but accelerated when Saddam became head of the Iraqi Atomic Energy Committee in 1973.

Saddam recruited Iraqi scientists to work on the program and concluded nuclear cooperation accords with France, Italy, the Soviet Union, and other countries. The deal with France provided Iraq with the 40-megawatt Osirak research reactor and highly enriched uranium. The agreement with Italy allowed Iraq to obtain fuel fabrication and plutonium reprocessing tools, as well as "hot cells" that could yield plutonium from the uranium processed by the Osirak reactor. At the outset of the 1980s, Iraq was reportedly within a few years of being able to manufacture a simple nuclear device.[2]

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[1] SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting," March 27, 1979, Conflict Records Research Center, Washington, D.C. In this essay, captured Iraqi records are cited by CRRC number, title, and date. The best available translation of this passage is in Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark E. Stout, eds., *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files, 1978-2001: Toward an Understanding of Authoritarian Regimes* (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010), pp. 262-263.

[2] Central Intelligence Agency, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD (hereinafter Duelfer Report)*, September 30, 2004, Vol. 2, http://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/index.html; Central Intelligence Agency, "Iraq's Nuclear Interests, Programs, and Options," October 1979, NLC-6-34-4-10-3, Carter Library (JCL); State Department, "Paper on the Iraqi Nuclear Program," November 21, 1980, NLC-25-47-1-13-9, JCL; and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq and the War*

Saddam publicly claimed that the nuclear program was geared toward peaceful purposes, but the military applications of nuclear power were never far from his mind. Saddam believed that possessing a nuclear weapon would showcase Iraqi technological development, thereby furthering Baghdad's claim to leadership of the Arab world. More concretely, he believed that obtaining the bomb would allow Iraq to deter attacks by its two main enemies—Iran in the east, and Israel in the west. "We have to have this protection for the Iraqi citizen so that he will not be disappointed and held hostage by the scientific advancement taking place in Iran or in the Zionist entity," Saddam said in 1981. "Without such deterrence, the Arab nation will continue to be threatened by the Zionist entity and Iraq will remain threatened by the Zionist entity."[3]

This view of nuclear weapons fits nicely with much of the scholarly literature on proliferation, which frames security-related motives for pursuing nuclear weapons overwhelmingly in defensive terms.[4] For Saddam, however, nuclear weapons were about offense as well as defense, and his desire for the bomb had much to do with his revisionist objectives vis-à-vis Israel.

SADDAM AND ISRAEL

Throughout his time in power, Saddam viewed Israel through a prism of intense hostility. Saddam's public statements, his discussions with foreign leaders, and his private comments to advisers were filled with references to the dangers posed by Israel and the deep antagonism between Iraq and the Jewish state. "Our worst enemy is Zionism," he told subordinates in 1980.[5] In private as in public, Saddam argued that the conflict between Arabs and Israelis was intractable, and that conflict was inevitable. "This issue between the Arabs and Israel will never be resolved," he told advisers in October 1985. "It is either Israel or the Arabs....Either the Arabs are slaves to Israel and Israel controls their destinies, or the Arabs can be their own masters and Israel is like Formosa's location to China, at best."[6]

Saddam's animus toward Israel flowed from several factors. There was, of course, opportunism—haranguing the Zionists always played well in Iraqi politics and the Arab world. There was also the long history of conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, a struggle that had flared during the early years of the Baathist regime. The Baathist government contributed one division to the Syrian front during the Yom Kippur War of 1973; Israel, for its part, sought to bleed and distract the radical Baathist government by supporting an insurgency among Iraq's Kurdish population. These events, as well as the broader legacy of Arab-Israeli strife, weighed heavily on Saddam's perceptions. "The Zionist entity is not weak and oppressed," Saddam explained to his advisers. "It is not an oppressed entity seeking peace....It is a hostile, arrogant entity that is imposed on the Middle East region."[7]

Saddam's perceptions of Israel were also deeply wrapped up in his anti-Semitism. Saddam often claimed in public that his opposition to Israel was based on anti-Zionism rather than anti-Semitism, but there was no clean divide between these two influences in his thinking. Saddam often referred to Israelis as "the Jews," and the sense that Jews and Israelis were devious individuals motivated by sinister designs was a virtual article of faith within the Iraqi regime. At Iraq's Special Security Institute, students were told that "spying, sabotage, and treachery are an old Jewish craft because the Jewish character has all the attributes of a spy."[8]

This assessment fit nicely with Saddam's own beliefs. In one extended monologue, Saddam told his inner circle that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was an accurate representation of Jewish/Israeli aims. "The Zionists are greedy—I mean the Jews are greedy," he said. "Whenever any issue relates to the economy, their greed is very high." Indeed, Saddam believed that the *Protocols* provided a blueprint of sorts for understanding Israeli designs: "We should reflect on all that we were able to learn from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*....I do not believe that there was any falsification with regard to those Zionist objectives, specifically with regard to the Zionist desire to usurp—usurping the economies of people."[9]

Geopolitical conflict and opportunism thus merged with Saddam's anti-Semitism to inform an intense hostility toward Israel and a belief that confrontation was inevitable. "The extortionist Zionist enemy cannot survive without erasing the whole Arab nation," he said in 1979.[10] The requirements of waging that confrontation were central to Saddam's thoughts on nuclear weapons.

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of Sanctions: Conventional Threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), pp. 604-606.

[3] Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 266.

[4] See the discussion in Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996-97), especially pp. 57-59.

[5] SH-SHTP-A-000-751, "Meeting with Saddam Hussein," undated (1980).

[6] SH-SHTP-D-000-567, "Meeting Between Saddam Hussein and Baath Party Officials," October 5, 1985.

[7] Woods, Palkki, and Stout, eds., *A Survey of Saddam Hussein's Audio Files,* p. 93. See also SH-SHTP-A-000-858, "Meeting Presided over by Saddam Hussein," undated.

[8] Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 75.

[9] Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files,* pp. 80-82.

[10] SH-PDWN-D-000-770, "Remarks by Saddam Hussein," December 14, 1979.

PLANNING THE NEXT BATTLE

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Saddam frequently said that Israel had to be made to yield to military force and spoke of his desire for the "next battle."[11] He often implied that the conflict would be a Pan-Arab war under Iraqi leadership. On some occasions, he indicated that the outright destruction of Israel was envisioned; more often, Saddam seemed to foresee military action designed simply to force Israel back to its pre-1967 borders.[12] If successful, such a war would significantly weaken Israel's geopolitical position and make Saddam a hero throughout the Arab world.

In a meeting with the Revolutionary Command Council following the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979, Saddam described the possibility of war with Israel in vivid fashion. "This is what we envision," he said. "We envision a war with the enemy, either with the Unity nation or with Iraqi-Syrian military effort, or with the Iraqi, Syrian, and Jordanian military effort that should be designed and based on long months and not just weeks….We have the capability to design it the way it should be designed. Do we really want a war in which we gain miles quickly, but then step back and withdraw, or do we want the slow, step-by-step war, where every step we take becomes part of the land and we keep moving forward? The step itself is not the most important thing here; even more important is the widespread cheering from the masses that will accompany each step we take forward, which will reach every corner of the Arab world."[13]

Even as Saddam made these inflammatory comments, however, he acknowledged that climactic struggle could not happen immediately. This caution derived in part from a grudging respect for Israeli military prowess. "The Zionist enemy is a smart and capable enemy, and we must not underestimate him," he warned in 1979.[14] Fundamentally, though, Saddam feared that as long as Israel possessed a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East, it could respond to any Arab military strike in devastating fashion. "When the Arabs start the deployment," Saddam told a group of military officials in 1978, "Israel is going to say, 'We will hit you with the Atomic bomb.'"[15]

Here, in Saddam's eyes, was the key strategic salience of the Iraqi nuclear program. If the Arabs attacked Israel without nuclear weapons, Saddam believed, their advances could be halted by Israeli nuclear threats. Yet if Iraq also possessed nuclear weapons, it could neutralize these threats by holding the Israeli citizenry hostage. This mutual deterrence would allow a conventional war of attrition that, Saddam believed, would favor the Arabs with their larger armies and greater tolerance for casualties, allowing them to liberate the Golan Heights and perhaps the West Bank. As he explained in 1978:

> When the Arabs start the deployment, Israel is going to say, "We will hit you with the atomic bomb." So should the Arabs stop or not? If they do not have the atom, they will stop. For that reason they should have the atom. If we were to have the atom, we would make the conventional armies fight without using the atom. If the international conditions were not prepared and they said, "We will hit you with the atom," we would say, "We will hit you with the atom too. The Arab atom will finish you off, but the Israeli atom will not end the Arabs."[16]

Saddam returned to this theme a year later. Iraq should "go put pressure on our Soviet friends and make them understand our need for one weapon—we only want one weapon," he said.

> We want, when the Israeli enemy attacks our civilian establishments, to have weapons to attack the Israeli civilian establishments. We are willing to sit and refrain from using it, except when the enemy attacks civilian establishments in Iraq or Syria, so that we can guarantee the long war that is destructive to our enemy, and take at our leisure each meter of land and drown the enemy with rivers of blood.[17]

For Saddam, nuclear weapons would be the great equalizer, the deterrent force that would allow him to wage a war of liberation to reclaim the Arab territories lost to Israel.

Saddam was very much the amateur strategist, and he never delved deeply into the complex tactical, strategic, and logistical issues that any such war would raise. How would Iraq supply numerous divisions operating in a faraway theater? Would Syria and Jordan cooperate in the attack? Why would Israeli officials not see an assault on the Golan as prelude to an

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[11] SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University," June 3, 1978.

[12] For evidence of the more extreme aim of destroying Israel, see SH-SHTP-A-000-635, "President Saddam Hussein Meeting with Ministers," undated (1981-82); SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University," June 3, 1978; and Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, with Mounir Elkhamri, *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War*, McNair Paper No. 70 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2009), p. 94.

[13] SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting," March 27, 1979.

[14] SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting," March 27, 1979.

[15] SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University," June 3, 1978.

[16] SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University," 3 June 1978.

[17] SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting," 27 March 1979.

offensive into Israel proper, and thus conclude that there was no alternative to going nuclear? Would a conventional war truly favor the Arabs, who had been beaten by Israel several times before?

Yet superficiality was never a barrier to action in Saddam's Iraq: he ordered the Baathist military to attack Iran in 1980 and Kuwait a decade later with little or no advance preparation.[18] And Saddam's comments on the inevitability of war with Israel were sufficient to persuade certain advisers that he was sincere in his desire for an eventual war against the Jewish state. Saddam "had the confidence that he could accomplish this mission and eliminate Israel," recalls Raad Hamdani, an officer who rose through the ranks in the 1970s and 1980s and would eventually become one of Saddam's more trusted subordinates. "He expressed this confidence that he could accomplish this goal in many meetings I had with him."[19]

Ultimately, of course, Saddam was never able to bring the Iraqi nuclear program to fruition or undertake large-scale military action against Israel. By 1980, the prospect of an Iraqi bomb had become quite frightening to the Israeli government of Menachem Begin, who termed Iraq "the bloodiest and most irresponsible of all Arab regimes, with the exception of Kaddafi in Libya."[20] In June 1981, an Israeli air raid destroyed the Osirak reactor, setting the Iraqi program back by several years. Saddam later sought to reinvigorate the program, but his plans were disrupted by the 1990-91 Persian Gulf conflict and the severe UN inspections regime subsequently imposed upon the regime. Saddam remained virulently anti-Semitic and bitterly hostile to Israel through the remainder of his time in power, but his dreams of a climactic confrontation ultimately went unrealized.

SADDAM, WMD, AND THE GULF WAR

The Persian Gulf conflict was satisfying for Saddam in one way, however. Iraqi forces launched some 40 conventionally armed SCUD missiles at Israel, damaging roughly 4000 buildings and injuring several hundred civilians. Twenty Israelis were killed, nearly all of them as a result of heart attacks or misuse of gas masks.[21] Baghdad Radio trumpeted the attacks as a devastating blow against Zionism: "The hour of Arab victory has come and…the price of the Zionist crimes will be paid in full."[22]

Why did Saddam attack Israel? The most common explanation is that he hoped to provoke Israeli retaliation against Iraq, thereby making it politically impossible for Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries to remain part of the US-led coalition. Indeed, Saddam was nothing if not opportunistic, and there were pronounced political and diplomatic overtones to the SCUD attacks. Iraqi newspapers predicted that the SCUDs would "liquidate every form of aggression and occupation, and every aggressive occupying entity, on Arab soil," and Iraqi missiles were given names meant to honor Palestinian stone-throwers. At one point, Iraqi engineers operationalized this imagery by filling the warhead of a missile launched at the Israeli nuclear complex at Dimona with cement rather than explosives.[23]

Yet the roots of the SCUD attacks went deeper than pure political opportunism. Saddam never obtained nuclear weapons, but he had assembled a massive chemical arsenal during the Iran-Iraq War. For Saddam, these weapons provided the essential deterrent power necessary to strike Israeli cities (with conventional weapons) without provoking an overwhelming nuclear response. Israel might retaliate with its own conventional missile strikes, Saddam believed, but it would probably have to refrain from using chemical or nuclear arms for fear of eliciting Iraqi chemical attacks. "It will be conventional, they will also reciprocate by attacking us with missiles," he predicted. If Israel did dare escalate, Iraq could do so as well: "We will use the other warheads, you know, in return for the warheads they use."[24]

Additionally, Saddam's actions were wound up in the history of Iraqi-Israel relations and his own sense of historical destiny. When Iraqi missile forces struck Dimona, the attack was characterized as revenge for Israeli's preventive raid on the *Tammuz* reactor a decade earlier.[25] And Saddam, who had long styled himself as the statesman who would galvanize the Arabs, clearly took satisfaction in his ability to strike Israeli cities and terrorize the Israeli populace: "This scared them all, of course," he later said of the attacks. "Some of them choked in their masks and when this happened, they thought it was the chemical and

[18] On these cases, see Kevin Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), chap. 5; Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 182-203; Hal Brands, "Why Did Saddam Invade Iran? New Evidence on Motives, Complexity, and the Israel Factor," *Journal of Military History* 75, 3 (Summer 2011).

[19] Quoted in Woods, Murray, and Holaday, *Saddam's War,* p. 94.

[20] Quoted in Tel Aviv to the White House, July 19, 1980, Box 37/41, NSC Country File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

[21] Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 307.

[22] FBIS-NES-91-014, "Talk Praises Attacks on Israel, Saudi Arabia," 21 January 1991.

[23] Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 200-201; Jerry M. Long, *Saddam's War of Words: Politics, Religion, and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp. 30, 115, 139.

[24] Woods, Palkki, and Stout, eds., *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files,* pp. 294-296.

[25] SH-MISC-D-000-298, "Daily Statements on the Gulf War," various dates.

they died even before they died."[26] In this sense, the attacks represented the culmination of the hostility that Saddam had long evinced toward Israel.

CONCLUSION

While Saddam hoped that acquiring nuclear weapons would provide regional prestige and security from foreign attack, his desire for the bomb was also thoroughly wound up with his revisionist aims regarding Israel. Saddam hoped to liberate lost Arab territories, and he believed that nuclear weapons would provide the deterrent power necessary to wage a conventional war against the Jewish state. Indeed, while the wisdom of the Israeli strike on Osirak is still debated, in the newly available Iraqi records Saddam makes the case for preventive Israeli action far more persuasively than Israel's own officials could have done at the time.

When thinking about the potential consequences of nuclear proliferation, it is worth keeping Saddam's views in mind. The Iraqi case certainly does not invalidate the argument that some or even most states seek nuclear weapons primarily for defensive reasons. It does indicate, however, that as scholars, we need to consider more carefully the roles that offensive concerns play in pushing leaders to pursue the bomb.

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[26] Woods, Palkki, and Stout, eds., *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files,* p. 284.