

Iraq's nuclear dreams

A group of men described as "Iraqi operatives" were arrested in London yesterday and charged with trying to smuggle triggering devices for nuclear weapons into Iraq.

This fascinating incident confirms that Iraq is fast emerging in the media as international Public Enemy No. 1.

It also seems clearly tied to the execution by Iraq on March 15 of Farzad Bazoft, an Iranian national who reported for the British newspaper, *The Observer*. Bazoft was charged with being an Israeli spy after he sent back reports of a massive and mysterious explosion last September that levelled a top-secret military production complex south of Baghdad. A British nurse who accompanied Bazoft was jailed for 15 years.

Pleas by Britain to spare Bazoft's life were rudely spurned by Iraq. The British were outraged and have no doubt struck back by arresting the Iraqi airline officials at Heathrow.

The question still remains: Are the Iraqis really trying to build nuclear weapons? Circumstantial evidence suggests the answer is yes.

In recent years Iraq has embarked on an intense program to develop a hi-tech national arms industry. Since the end of the long war with Iran, 18 months ago, Iraq has poured billions of dollars into the effort to produce indigenous arms, thus freeing it from foreign suppliers.

Last year, Iraq displayed its new arsenal at a major arms exhibit at Baghdad. Foreign observers were amazed by the sophistication and range of the equipment. Included were tactical missiles, up-gunned tanks, self-propelled guns, radars, rocket launchers, radar warning aircraft, armored vehicles and other electronic gear. The most startling development, however, was Iraq's claim that it would shortly produce intermediate-range missiles capable of reaching Israel.

Alarm signals went off.

Most of Iraq's new arsenal has been produced with extensive technical help from France, Italy, Spain, Brazil and North Korea. Many of the weapons systems have clearly been imported in compo-

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nents and merely assembled in Iraq. With the drastic downturn in the world's arms market, suppliers have been rushing to do business with Iraq, one of the last major customers for weapons — in spite of its unsavory reputation and brutal regime.

In the 1970s, Iraq sought to acquire a French nuclear reactor. Israeli agents twice sabotaged the reactor core before it could be delivered to Iraq. When it finally went on stream in 1981, Israeli jets struck and destroyed the reactor. Israel claimed Iraq was close to developing nuclear weapons.

This was untrue. The Iraqis were at least eight to 10 years away from producing a workable weapon — if, in fact, they were planning to do so at all.

But in recent years Iraq appears to have been trying to make a nuclear device, possibly with secret help from China or North Korea, which has a growing and worrisome covert nuclear program of its own.

Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, has made no secret of his ambition to become leader of the Arab World and to make Iraq, with its huge oil reserves, into a regional superpower. Nor of his ruthlessness. Iraq earned worldwide condemnation for using poison gas and blistering agents during the Gulf War and against its own chronically rebellious Kurdish population.

Iraq very clearly wants nuclear weapons as a means of countering Israel's nuclear arsenal. The Arabs cannot hope to fight a war against Israel without the participation of the Iraqi Army. To get to the warfront in Syria and Jordan, Iraqi troops must transit 800-1,000 km of desert. Israel has openly hinted that it might target its nuclear weapons against any advancing Iraqi expeditionary force.

If Iraq can develop a few missile-borne nuclear warheads, Israel's own nuclear trump card could be rendered unusable. Just one Iraqi nuclear strike could devastate most of central Israel. As a result, Israel is watching events in Iraq with growing dismay and has put its powerful propaganda machine into high gear to issue dire warnings of the Iraqi chemical and nuclear threat.

In spite of these alarms, it's most unlikely that Iraq is anywhere near to producing workable nuclear weapons. Even so, Israel seems determined to again short-circuit any Iraqi attempts to go nuclear, even at an early stage.

The explosion of the secret Iraqi weapons facility last fall could very well have been caused by Israeli sabotage. More covert action by Israel is likely, perhaps even in concert with Iran, which is still deeply hostile toward Iraq.

No one save Saddam Hussein wants to see a mighty Iraq with nuclear or chemical arms. As Egypt's late leader Gamal Abdel Nasser used to warn, "watch out for the wild men of Baghdad!"



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Mexico City
MEXICO

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