

# Mideast bomb scare

**I**raq will have an A-bomb in two years. So charged the *Washington Post* last week. *Stern*, a German scandal sheet, chimed in with claims that West German firms had been aiding Iraq to build missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

A few days later, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd announced that his nation would provide financial aid for Iraq's "peaceful" nuclear program. All this hot news came on the heels of reports that Iraq was also producing chemical and biological weapons. Not surprisingly, a big rumpus has ensued.

Israeli hawks are demanding that their air force take out any new Iraqi nuclear installations. Demolishing Iraqi nuclear capability before it can pose a threat remains an Israeli policy. Israeli agents sabotaged a French-built Osirak reactor destined for Iraq before it could be shipped from France. When it was finally repaired and delivered, Israeli jets struck and levelled the reactor. That was eight years ago.

The Iraqis managed to salvage about 25 kilos of enriched uranium from the wreckage of Osirak, says the *Post*, and will use it to produce nuclear warheads. Pakistan, claims the *Post*, will provide missiles capable of carrying the warheads to—guess where?—Israel.

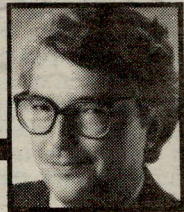
Nonsense reply the Iraqis, angrily. The story is clearly disinformation planted by Israeli intelligence. Our nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes.

Who's telling the truth?

First, the story does bear many of the hallmarks of a typical Israeli disinformation plant. Past examples are phony stories about Libyan A-bombs or the secret plot to produce an "Islamic A-bomb." Israel is delighted to see the U.S. and Iraq in a nasty quarrel and also happy to divert media attention away from the Palestinian uprising. But there's also evidence that Iraq did intend, as far back as 1980, to embark on the development of nuclear weapons.

Israel's own very extensive nuclear program and the scare of a near defeat by much larger Iran in

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the Gulf War probably spurred Iraq's nuclear program. If there is a major Arab-Israeli War, Iraqi troops moving toward Israel will be a prime target for Israeli nuclear strikes.

Iraq's tough leader, Saddam Hussein, has ambitions to become the leader of the Arab World. A nuclear-armed Iraq would obviously make Saddam into the Mideast's big kebab. It would also make the Iranians think twice before launching a surprise war of revenge against Iraq.

On top of all that, Iraq also needs civilian nuclear power. Claims that Pakistan will supply Iraq with missiles are, I think, bogus. Pakistan has recently developed such missiles but is not about to infuriate neighboring Iran by supplying them to Iraq. Nor to court outrage in the U.S. Congress, which supplies Pakistan with lots of money and arms.

More than likely, Iraq can develop its own missiles just as Iran has done using Chinese technology and components. Or Iraq could simply mount warheads on some of its Scud-B missiles. They could reach Israel from bases in western Iraq.

Having said all this, I still don't believe Iraq has nuclear capability. Israeli claims in 1981 that Iraq was on the verge of producing a nuclear weapon were false. Iraq was at least a decade away. But the Israelis are do-it-now kinds of guys. Why wait, they said.

This time, Iraqi nuclear work is being done underground. Once bombed, twice shy, as they say in Baghdad. Even so, Iraq is still probably years away from building an A-bomb—unless it has received secret help from a nuclear power. I can't think of one who would: The regime in Baghdad is one of the world's most unloved.

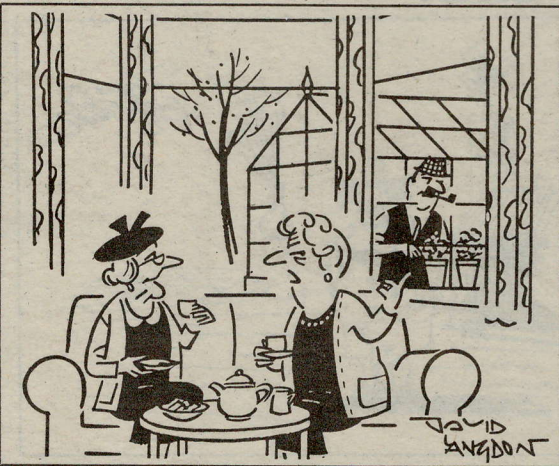
Possible secret help could have come from Argentina, Taiwan, South Korea or France. The French lust after Iraq's oil. They also secretly set up Israel's nuclear weapons program.

Still, it's unlikely we'll see a Baghdad bomb in the near future. Nor will any other Arab nation manage to produce one. In the short term, the real danger to Israel comes from chemical and biological weapons carried by missiles.

The number of short- and medium-range missiles in the Mideast is now multiplying rapidly. Soon every major Arab nation and Israel will have a large arsenal of these weapons, some of which are less technologically complex than Japanese toys and easily manufactured. They are the modern version of medieval catapults—crude, effective and scary.

One thing is sure. In time, the Arabs will manage to produce nuclear arms. Israel will lose its nuclear monopoly. The thought of Arabs and Israelis armed with nuclear, chemical and germ weapons ought to scare all concerned into some urgent peace talks.

**Punch**



"I blame my depression on the greenhouse effect — him spending all day out there without a word."