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Osirak Raid: A vote of no confidence in Atomic Agency

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The Israeli bombs which blasted Iraq's Osirak reactor in early June were a shattering vote of no confidence in the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] and its 'safeguards'.

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Israel announced through its actions that its scientists had absolutely no faith in the ability of the IAEA, whose inspectors had visited the Osirak reactor in January 1981, to keep such a nation from using such a reactor to produce nuclear weapons.

Is the raid a precedent? Will in future the small 'wars' which periodically erupt in Asia, Africa and Latin America [Vietnam-China, Ethiopia-Somalia, Argentine-Chile] begin with pre-emptive strikes against the enemy's nuclear power plants?

The progress from US President Eisenhower's announcement on 8 December 1953 of the 'Atoms for Peace' programme, which declared nuclear energy a benefit to all mankind, to the Israeli raid on June 7, 1981, which declared 'peaceful' reactors valid and even vital military targets, has been slow but relentless.

In 1956 the UN set up the IAEA. It was given a dual responsibility: to promote the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to act as a watchdog to ensure that such uses remained peaceful.

Non-weapons countries, especially those in the Third World, have always regarded international nuclear assistance as the IAEA's primary role. Activities like the supply of nuclear materials, training of staff, conferences and other transfers of equipment and information have always consumed most of IAEA's budget.

Currently the agency spends some \$75 million on promotion and \$25 million on regulation.

The safeguards agreements have always been secret, confidential to the nuclear supplier, the customer and the IAEA.

But a typical agreement commits the customer to allow IAEA inspectors to visit the installation, examine the records of nuclear materials and to place seals at sensitive points in the plant. Sometimes they may even install closed-circuit TV cameras, which take pictures at unknown intervals, and other monitoring devices linked to the IAEA's computer in Vienna.

But by no means all safeguarded installations are fitted with such elaborate and expensive technology.

The agency has safeguards jurisdiction over some 500 installations in about 15 countries; but it has only about 150 inspectors. It has no enforcement powers. If it discovers a violation, it can only report this to the UN, something it has never done.

The IAEA's safeguards task has grown steadily more difficult. After France and China exploded nuclear bombs in the first half of the 1960s, the US and USSR drew up a treaty designed to limit the further spread of weapons capability.

This Non-Proliferation Treaty [NPT] came into force in 1970, and by the late 1970s more than 100 nations had ratified it. The NPT commits non-weapons countries party to the treaty to accept IAEA safeguards not only on individual nuclear installations but on all nuclear activities in the country – so called 'full scope' safeguards.

As of February 1981, 78 non-weapons states had negotiated NPT safeguards with the IAEA. Their number did not include Argentina, Brazil, China, France, Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa or Spain, none of which has become party to the treaty.

Some of these are on record as reserving the right to manufacture nuclear weapons. Knowledgeable observers consider that some may already possess nuclear weapons, and that the others could rapidly produce them with their existing civil capabilities.

The oil price rise of 1973 increased enthusiasm for civil nuclear energy, with Third World countries joining in the clamour for its purported benefits. But then economic recession, rising electricity prices, energy conservation and public opposition combined to bring about the near-collapse of the market for power reactors in most industrial countries.

With no domestic markets, the nuclear industry began a fierce battle for export orders. In the rush to export, the nuclear exporting countries offered even more generous terms, often to countries which were not party to the NPT. The battle for contracts led suppliers to offer not only power reactors but also fuel facilities – enrichment plants and reprocessing plants – which can also be used to produce weapons materials.

By 1977 some supplier countries were growing alarmed. At the behest of US President Jimmy Carter, 60 countries took part in the International Nuclear Fuel Cycle Evaluation [INFCE], perhaps the most thorough technical analysis of the nuclear proliferation problem ever carried out.

It concluded, in its final report published in February 1980, that all civil nuclear activities increase the danger of the spread of nuclear weapons. But like virtually all the earlier analyses carried out by the world's nuclear community, it also declared that proliferation is a political issue and cannot be regulated by controlling the spread of civil nuclear technology.

Iraq is a party to the NPT. Its nuclear centre near Baghdad is under NPT safeguards and received a clean bill of health from IAEA inspectors in January.

Israel is not a party to the NPT. Its own nuclear centre at Dimona, in the Negev, is top secret.

After the Israeli raid Colonel Muammar Gaddafi of Libya declared that it was now time for Arabs to attack and destroy Dimona.

The IAEA board of governors convened in Vienna in early June. As Israeli bombs were falling on Osirak, Third World representatives were pressing for a yet higher proportion of the budget to be devoted to dissemination of nuclear capability around the world.

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