

Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb

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Nuclear Alarmism Justified?

On March 27, 1979, Saddam Hussein, the de facto ruler and soon-to-be president of Baathist Iraq, laid out his vision for a long, grinding war against Israel in a private meeting of high-level Iraqi 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.” Saddam envisioned that this war would cost Iraq some 50,000 casualties, to say nothing of Israeli losses.¹

Until recently, scholars seeking to divine the inner workings of the Baathist regime were forced to resort to a kind of Kremlinology, relying heavily on published sources as well as the occasional memoir or defector’s account.² This is now decreasingly 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

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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 article, 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. This IDA report will be published as *The Saddam Tapes: Inside an Authoritarian Regime, 1978–2001*, by Cambridge University Press.

2. This has not precluded the publication of deeply insightful works on Iraqi politics and foreign policy by scholars such as Amatzia Baram, Ofra Bengio, F. Gregory Gause III, Phebe Marr, and Judith Yaphe.

and transcripts of top-level meetings between Saddam and his advisers. When combined with previously available primary and secondary sources, they illustrate the dynamics of the regime and the logic of Saddam's statecraft to an unprecedented degree.³

This article uses a selection of these documents (mostly records of high-level regime meetings) to examine Saddam's views on nuclear weapons and Israel, particularly the effect that he expected the former to have on a prospective war with the latter. We focus primarily on the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Iraqi national power was on the rise, the regime was engaged in intensive efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, and Saddam expounded at greatest length on the strategic utility he expected these weapons to have in a conflict against Israel. We also examine, in less detail, the influence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) on Saddam's decision to attack Israel with SCUD missiles during the 1990–91 Persian Gulf conflict, as well as the impact of that war and its aftermath on the Iraqi nuclear weapons program and Saddam's ambitions vis-à-vis Israel.

The Iraqi records indicate that the views Saddam expressed in March 1979 did not constitute a mere rhetorical flourish or an aberration in his strategic thought. In meetings and discussions with his top military and civilian advisers between 1978 and 1982, Saddam repeatedly returned to the subject of how an Iraqi nuclear capability could be used against Israel. This was a critical strategic and identity issue for Saddam. Although Saddam styled himself as the transcendent leader who would unite the Arabs and defeat the "Zionist entity," in private he concluded that Israel's nuclear monopoly in the Middle East made taking major military action to accomplish this goal an unacceptably risky proposition. In the face of an Iraqi or Arab attack, Saddam believed, Israel could simply threaten to use nuclear weapons against its enemies, thereby forcing them to halt their advance.

Saddam thus came to see nuclear weapons as a powerful coercive tool for dealing with Israel. Saddam's aim was not to launch a surprise first strike against Israel; rather, he believed that an Iraqi bomb would neutralize Israeli

3. Analysts under contract with the U.S. Department of Defense have used these documents in a number of books and shorter studies. See, for instance, Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*; Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008); Kevin M. Woods, Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Official U.S. Joint Forces Command Report* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006); Hal Brands, "Inside the Iraqi State Records: Saddam Hussein, 'Irangate,' and the United States," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2011), pp. 95–118; and Hal Brands and David Palkki, "'Conspiring Bastards': Saddam Hussein's Strategic View of the United States," *Diplomatic History* (forthcoming).

nuclear threats, force the Jewish state to fight at the conventional level, and thereby allow Iraq and its Arab allies to prosecute a prolonged war that would displace Israel from the territories occupied in 1967. In short, Saddam expected that an unconventional arsenal would permit Iraq to achieve a conventional victory, thereby weakening Israel geopolitically and making him a hero to the Arab world. Although Saddam expressed this view most frequently in the period before his regime suffered two major geopolitical setbacks in the early 1980s—the Israeli attack on the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 and the downturn in Baghdad’s military fortunes in the Iran-Iraq War—he did return to this same basic logic at least once in the late 1980s, and he seems to have reluctantly relinquished the idea only after the 1990–91 war and its aftermath crippled Iraq’s advanced weapons programs and severely constrained Iraqi power.

While Saddam’s views on Israel and nuclear weapons are fascinating in their own right, they also have implications for several key debates regarding Baathist Iraq and nuclear proliferation. In one sense, Saddam’s views on this subject demonstrate that his vituperative public hostility toward Israel was not merely a matter of political theater or rhetorical excess, but rather indicated a perception of irreconcilable strategic and ideological conflict and a desire to wage war against the Jewish state. This idea formed a key element of Saddam’s strategic thought even before he formally assumed the presidency of Iraq in July 1979, and he returned to the notion repeatedly during the late 1970s and early 1980s. While various observers have argued that the Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 merely convinced Saddam of Israel’s hostility and led him to redouble his efforts to obtain nuclear weapons, the captured records do not indicate that the opposite course—permitting Iraqi nuclear development to proceed—would have been the wiser choice for Israeli officials at that time.⁴ Indeed, in these records Saddam makes the case for preventive Israeli action far more persuasively than Israel’s own officials could have done at the time.

The captured documents also allow scholars to evaluate the implications of the Iraqi case for ongoing debates on the causes and consequences of nuclear proliferation. With respect to causes, Saddam’s views on nuclear weapons demonstrate the need to go beyond what one scholar calls the “status quo

4. See Richard K. Betts, “The Osirak Fallacy,” *National Interest*, No. 83 (Spring 2006), pp. 22–25; and Dan Reiter, “Preventive Attacks against Nuclear Programs and the ‘Success’ at Osirak,” *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (July 2005), pp. 355–371. For the other side of this argument, see Jeremy Tamsett, “The Israeli Bombing of Osirak Reconsidered: Successful Counterproliferation?” *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Fall–Winter 2004), pp. 70–85; and Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 392.

bias" in security studies.⁵ International relations scholars overwhelmingly emphasize the expectation that nuclear weapons will provide a primarily defensive deterrent against aggression or exploitation by a nuclear-armed rival. "Although nuclear weapons could also be developed to serve either as deterrents against overwhelming conventional military threats or as coercive tools to compel changes in the status quo," writes Scott Sagan in his landmark essay on this subject, "the simple focus on states' responses to emerging nuclear threats is the most common and most parsimonious explanation for nuclear weapons proliferation."⁶

Saddam's views on nuclear weapons ran in a different direction. Although Saddam did believe that a nuclear capability would provide protection against attack by enemies such as Israel and Iran, the theme he returned to again and again—the idea that these weapons would enable the Arab states to achieve territorial gains vis-à-vis Israel—was essentially offensive and coercive in nature. Saddam certainly viewed an Iraqi bomb as a means of enhancing his country's security and prestige, but his attraction to nuclear weapons during the period under consideration in this article revolved around fundamentally revisionist objectives.

These offensive motives, in turn, bear on the literature regarding the consequences of proliferation, in particular, the ongoing debate between "proliferation optimists" and "proliferation pessimists." Whereas proliferation pessimists argue that the spread of nuclear weapons will increase the risk of accidental—or intentional—nuclear war, optimists answer that the spread of the bomb will promote the emergence of stable deterrent balances between geopolitical rivals.⁷ Because the threat of nuclear destruction will deter aggression, writes Kenneth Waltz in a recent article, "Those who like peace should love nuclear weapons."⁸ Similarly, at the time of the Persian Gulf crisis in 1990–91, Richard Rhodes argued that Iraqi acquisition of nuclear weapons would not be particularly dangerous because "45 years of postwar history has demonstrated that acquiring such weapons in a nuclear-armed world is inescapably self-detering."⁹ More recently, proliferation optimists have been

5. For a critique of the status quo bias, see Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107.

6. 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), p. 57.

7. See Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, Adelphi Papers, No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

8. Kenneth N. Waltz, "Is Nuclear Zero the Best Option? Waltz Says No," *National Interest*, No. 109 (September–October 2010), p. 93.

9. Quoted in Adam Garfinkle, "Culture and Deterrence," E-Notes, Foreign Policy Research Insti-

joined by scholars writing on the topic of “nuclear alarmism.” These scholars argue (in part) that, because most states acquire nuclear weapons primarily to address perceived security weaknesses, when they get the bomb they will feel more secure and thus behave more prudently.¹⁰

Drawing on the stability-instability paradox, we argue that the Iraqi case undermines these more sanguine assessments of proliferation and its consequences. The stability-instability paradox holds that nuclear proliferation makes general war less likely, but limited or proxy wars more likely. In a confrontation between two nuclear-armed states, both participants will have a major incentive to prevent any conflict from escalating to general war, for fear that this will result in the use of nuclear weapons. Yet because both states (presumably rational entities) are aware that their competitor seeks to avoid escalation, they may feel free to engage in aggression at lower levels of intensity, via limited war, terrorism, or proxy conflict.¹¹

Saddam’s nuclear logic offers a clear example of how the dynamics of the stability-instability paradox can shape a leader’s strategic thinking. We found no direct evidence that Saddam intended to use his prospective nuclear arsenal for a first strike against Israel or any other power, and he did hope that an Iraqi bomb would lead to the emergence of a deterrent balance with Israel. As the stability-instability paradox suggests, however, stability at the nuclear level would not necessarily have led to overall geopolitical stability. Saddam hoped to exploit the deterrent balance with Israel to initiate a conventional war that likely would have been immensely destructive and destabilizing. In other words, though Saddam never obtained nuclear weapons, his views on their potential utility give good cause for both pessimism and alarm.

tute, August 25, 2006, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20060825.americawar.garfinkle.culturedeterrence.html>. For a thoughtful argument that Iraqi possession of nuclear weapons would have had little effect on the outcome of events in 1990–91, see Barry R. Posen, “U.S. Security Policy in a Nuclear-Armed World or: What If Iraq Had Had Nuclear Weapons?” *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring 1997), pp. 1–31.

10. On nuclear alarmism, see Francis J. Gavin, “Same As It Ever Was: Nuclear Alarmism, Proliferation, and the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Winter 2009/10), pp. 7–37; Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the Past: Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/05), pp. 100–135; John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006). See also Joseph Cirincione, *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Jeffrey Lewis, *The Minimum Means of Retribution: China’s Search for Security in the Nuclear Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007); and Jeffrey Record, “Nuclear Deterrence, Preventive War, and Counterproliferation,” Policy Analysis, No. 519 (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, July 8, 2004).

11. For a concise summary of the literature on the stability-instability paradox, see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 19–23.

The remainder of this article consists of five substantive sections and a conclusion. The first section discusses the roots of Saddam's hostility toward Israel. The second and third sections, which constitute the core of our analysis, focus on Saddam's strategic calculus as expressed in various meetings and discussions held during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second section analyzes Saddam's desire to conduct offensive military operations against Israel and his realization that the Israeli nuclear monopoly made such a course of action infeasible. The third section explores Saddam's views on nuclear weapons, emphasizing the motives of the Iraqi nuclear program, his belief that a nuclear capability would allow him to wage a war of attrition against Israel, and the logical gaps in his strategic analysis. The fourth section examines the role that other nonconventional weapons—chemical and biological arms—played in Saddam's decision to launch SCUD missiles against Israel in 1991. The fifth section briefly discusses the role of the 1991 Persian Gulf conflict and its aftermath in disrupting the Iraqi nuclear and WMD programs, weakening the country geopolitically, and effectively constraining Saddam's ambitions vis-à-vis Israel. The conclusion summarizes and interprets our findings.

One disclaimer may be useful at the outset. This article is not intended to enter the ongoing debate about whether the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be justified in terms of counterproliferation. The Iraqi nuclear program (as well as chemical and biological programs) were severely disrupted during the early 1990s and were essentially dormant during the period preceding the 2003 war. Our purpose, rather, is to examine Saddam's views on nuclear weapons and Israel during an earlier period in which his regime was working to acquire these weapons, and to bring this analysis to bear on important debates in the literature.

Saddam's Views of Israel

When Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq in 1979, he had already been the foremost voice in Iraqi policymaking for several years. Following the Baathist takeover in 1968, Saddam used his positions as deputy chair of the ruling Revolutionary Command Council and head of the security services to ensure a steady accumulation of personal influence. He ordered potential rivals exiled or murdered and filled the top ranks of the Iraqi government with men bound to him by personal, familial, and tribal obligation. As early as 1970–71, foreign diplomats recognized Saddam as the “strongman” of the regime; by 1974–75, he was the primary decisionmaker in security and foreign policy issues.¹²

12. Beirut to State, October 16, 1970, Box 3282, Subject Numeric File, Political and Defense File,

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," Saddam told subordinates in 1980.¹³

This hostility stemmed, at least in part, from a perception of irreconcilable conflict between Saddam's regional ambitions and Israel's strategic posture. Saddam viewed himself as a latter-day Saladin, the transcendent leader who would unite the region behind the Baath Party's pan-Arab project.¹⁴ As he put it in a private meeting with his advisers in 1981, "There is no escape from the responsibility of leadership. It is not our choice to accept it or not. It is, rather, imposed on us. . . . Iraq can make this nation [i.e., the Arab world] rise and can be its center post of its big abode. There are smaller posts, but it must always be Iraq that feels the responsibility, and feels it is the central support post of the Arab nation. If the post breaks, then the entire abode will fall."¹⁵

Israel, from Saddam's perspective, was unalterably opposed both to Saddam and to the broader "Arab nation." Looking at the sweep of Israel's history—its creation in 1948 and its victorious wars against Arab neighbors, including Iraq, in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973—Saddam did not see a small, vulnerable country besieged by unfriendly powers. Like many Arabs, he saw an aggressive state that had stolen Arab land and sought to sustain its military superiority in the region by keeping the Arabs fractured and weak. "The Zionist entity . . . is not a dove that is looking for peace," Saddam explained to his advisers. "This 'dove,'" he continued, "is looking for hostility to plant in the Middle East region. . . . The main goal of this dove is to prevent the Arab nation from being developed, advanced, and living on a suitable level." In Saddam's view, Israel's grand strategy consisted not simply of efforts at territorial aggrandizement, but also of a desire to impede legitimate Arab

RG 59, National Archives and Record Administration (NARA). See also Baghdad to State, May 9, 1975, RG 59, NARA Archival Database. Saddam's ascent is discussed in greater detail in Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Grove, 2002), chaps. 2–4.

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

14. Saddam regularly invoked Saladin in his public rhetoric, noting that, like Saddam, Saladin was born near Tikrit in what would later become modern-day Iraq. See SH-PDWN-D-000-770, "Speech by Saddam Hussein Entitled 'Our Independence,'" December 14, 1979. Saddam's worldview is discussed in Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Jerrold M. Post, *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), especially pp. 211–225.

15. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, "Saddam Hussein Discusses Neighboring Countries and Their Regimes," undated. See also SH-SHTP-A-000-571, "President Saddam Hussein Attending a Meeting Regarding the Israeli Attack on the Iraqi Nuclear Reactor," June 1981; Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*; and Sandra Mackey, *The Reckoning: Iraq and the Legacy of Saddam Hussein* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), especially pp. 201–230.

hopes for industrial and technological development. If Israel had its way, he commented, it would “obligate the Arabs to eliminate all of the colleges and the tools to teach chemistry, math, and astronomy from the educational curriculum.”¹⁶

Because Saddam believed that he was destined to lead the Arab world in confronting Israeli designs, for him it followed logically that the Jewish state placed special emphasis on targeting his regime.¹⁷ During the roughly thirty years in which Saddam dominated Iraqi politics, he and his advisers identified a wide variety of nefarious Israeli intrigues. They accused Israel of supporting Kurdish rebels in hopes of breaking Iraq into smaller, weaker states;¹⁸ seeking to eliminate the Iraqi leadership and targeting Iraqi-military industrial facilities;¹⁹ provoking Iraq’s neighbors to antagonize and attack Saddam’s regime;²⁰ and working to weaken the morale of the Iraqi public through ideological penetration and misinformation.²¹ Some of these accusations were accurate or at least plausible in light of the frequent tensions between the two countries,²² whereas others seem to have flowed from the obsession with conspiracies that characterized Saddam’s regime. One of the more ludicrous accusations of Zionist perfidy came in 2001, when the Directorate of General Security (DGS) reported to Saddam that the television series *Pokemon* was in fact an Israeli plot to contaminate the minds of Iraqi youths. “Pokemon” was Hebrew for “I’m Jewish,” the DGS reported.²³

Saddam’s perceptions of Israeli perfidy were also colored by the anti-Semitism that suffused his worldview. Saddam often claimed in public that his opposition to Israel was based on anti-Zionism rather than anti-Semitism, a stance that was well suited to the international political climate of the 1970s, when the “Zionism is racism” campaign was at its height.²⁴ As a review of the

16. SH-SHTP-A-000-858, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials,” undated.

17. SH-SHTP-A-000-635, “President Saddam Hussein Meeting with Ministers,” undated (1981–82).

18. SH-SHTP-A-000-788, “Saddam Hussein Attending a Meeting with Senior Iraqi Officials,” undated (1988–89). See also SH-MISC-D-000-508, “Seminar Attended by Saddam Hussein to Study the Kurdish Case,” undated (mid-1975).

19. SH-GMID-D-000-323, “Memos on Plan to Assassinate Saddam Hussein by American and Zionist Forces,” August 1990–February 1991; and SH-PDWN-D-000-546, “GMID Intelligence Report Regarding Israeli Military Forces,” May–June 1990.

20. SH-BATH-D-000-300, “Lecture on the Iran-Iraq War,” February 18, 1987; SH-GMID-D-000-464, “Intelligence Reports from the Iraqi General Military Intelligence Directorate,” June–November 1986; and SH-SHTP-A-000-555, “Meeting with Ministries,” November 15, 1986.

21. SH-GMID-D-000-728, “GMID Study of Enemy and Opposition Propaganda,” early 1990.

22. Among other things, Israel had supported the Kurds in the 1970s and backed Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, and it did strike Iraqi nuclear facilities in 1981.

23. On the *Pokemon* issue and Saddam’s intense fear of conspiracies, see Woods et al., *The Iraqi Perspectives Report*, pp. 5, 12; and Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, p. 50.

24. Deon Geldenhuys, *Isolated States: A Comparative Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 98–103, covers Israel’s isolation during the 1970s.

Iraqi records makes clear, however, there was no clean divide between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism in Saddam's thinking. Saddam often referred to Israelis as "the Jews," and anti-Semitic ideas were ubiquitous in his private comments on Jews and Israel. Discussing Israeli politics, Saddam referred to "the Jews" as nefarious, clever characters. "This is the way the Jews are," he said. "I mean, they are smart, or, rather, wicked."²⁵

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."²⁶ This assessment fit nicely with Saddam's own beliefs. In one extended monologue on the subject, Saddam told his inner circle that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (a notorious anti-Semitic forgery) 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*. . . . We should identify the methods adopted by these hostile Zionist forces; we already know their objectives. 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."²⁷

Geopolitical conflict thus merged with Saddam's prominent ideological proclivities to inform an intense hostility toward Israel and a belief that confrontation with that country was inevitable. "The extortionist Zionist enemy cannot survive without erasing the whole Arab nation," he said in 1979.²⁸ As the following section demonstrates, the requirements of waging that confrontation constituted one of Saddam's central strategic preoccupations.

Thinking about the "Next Battle"

During the 1970s, Saddam considered multiple methods for containing Israel, weakening its influence, and pushing it to surrender some if not all of its territorial gains of 1967 and 1973. He nationalized foreign-owned petroleum companies, in part, as a way of using "the oil weapon" to separate Israel from its foreign supporters; offered moral support and material assistance to

25. SH-SHTP-D-000-797, "Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Commanders," undated.

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

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–82.

28. SH-PDWN-D-000-770, "Remarks by Saddam Hussein."

Palestinian terrorist groups; and sought ways of restricting Jewish immigration to Israel. Following the Camp David accords in 1978, Saddam claimed leadership of the Arab states that rejected the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, and Iraq temporarily moved toward a union with Syria in an effort to bolster the anti-Israel forces.²⁹

Saddam was also attracted to more drastic measures to resolve the conflict with Israel. Saddam presented himself as a decisive, forceful leader. "We must remember that those who make history are not the lazy and inept," went one of his favorite aphorisms. "The ones who make history are those who carry their spears high and their swords sharp."³⁰ During the period between 1978 and 1982—after Saddam had largely consolidated his control of the Iraqi government, making a more assertive foreign policy possible, but before reversals in the Iran-Iraq War left him fighting for his political survival—Saddam frequently said that Israel had to be made to yield to military force and spoke of his desire for the "next battle."³¹ "This conflict will last for a very long period of time," he told advisers in 1981. "The Arab's duty is to prepare for this conflict, technically and scientifically, politically and economically, socially and culturally."³² As this statement implies, Saddam believed 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.³³ 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.

29. These various strategies are discussed in SH-PDWN-D-000-458, "Interview with Saddam about Oil and America," December 20, 1974; SH-SHTP-D-000-725, "Meeting with Saddam Hussein," October 11, 1978; SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting"; SH-RVCC-D-000-805, "Two Speeches for Saddam Hussein," undated (1977); "Saddam Husayn Interviewed by *al-Mustaqbal*," FBIS-MEA-79-200, October 15, 1979; and SH-SHTP-A-000-911, "Discussion between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials on 26 November 1979." The Iraq-Syria union was ephemeral, as neither Hafez al-Assad nor Saddam was willing to play a secondary role to the other. See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 354–355.

30. SH-PDWN-D-000-345, "Meeting with Army and Air Force Officials," June 26, 1999.

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

32. SH-SHTP-A-000-858, "Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials."

33. For evidence of the more extreme aim of destroying Israel, see SH-SHTP-A-000-635, "President Saddam Hussein Meeting with Ministers"; SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University"; 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.

"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."³⁴

In some ways, the late 1970s seemed a propitious time for such a war. By 1975, Saddam had established himself as the clear heir to Ahmed Hasan al-Bakr, Iraq's president, and he would formally assume that office in July 1979. The defeat of a Kurdish insurgency in 1975 had temporarily quieted a recurring problem in the Iraqi defense posture, and after 1977, Iran was increasingly weakened by internal turmoil. The Iraqi military was completing a nearly decade-long buildup involving major purchases of Soviet- and French-made weapons (paid for by an oil-induced economic boom); and by the close of the 1970s, the Iraqi armed forces were among the most powerful in the region. While the Iraqi-Syrian union was ephemeral, widespread Arab rejection of the Camp David accords allowed Iraq to improve its regional standing. In 1979, the CIA reported that Iraq could likely devote five divisions to a military conflict with Israel, and predicted that "Iraq will be a state to reckon with in the Middle East for at least the five-year period of this Estimate."³⁵

Nonetheless, Saddam admitted on several occasions in the late 1970s that the climactic showdown with Israel would have to wait. "We must admit that Zionism is going to last for a long time to serve its evil purposes," he conceded in December 1979.³⁶ In other instances, he noted that "it is a long way to victory" and predicted that the war with Israel would not occur until sometime in the mid-1980s.³⁷

If war was what Saddam intended, why this cautious attitude? In part, Saddam's forbearance reflected 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. Having been caught napping on the eve of the

34. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting."

35. National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79, "Iraq's Role in the Middle East," National Security Archive (NSA), Washington, D.C., June 21, 1979.

36. SH-PDWN-D-000-770, "Remarks by Saddam Hussein."

37. SH-SHTP-D-000-725, "Meeting: Saddam Hussein Talks about Relations with Egyptian Leader Sadat," late 1978; and SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting."

Yom Kippur War, Israel, Saddam believed, would not hesitate to act preemptively if Iraq or another Arab state massed its forces for an attack. Israel “will not allow the 1973 experience to be repeated,” he predicted.³⁸ Similarly, Saddam seems to have recognized that Iraqi forces needed additional training and preparation if they were to undertake sustained offensive operations in enemy territory.³⁹

Yet Israel’s conventional prowess was not the determining factor in deterring Saddam. Given the disparity in size and population between Israel and the Arab world, Iraqi officials seem to have believed (perhaps unrealistically) that a unified Arab effort could defeat the Jewish state.⁴⁰ On various occasions during the late 1970s and 1980s, Iraqi officials predicted that Iraq’s conventional forces were or soon would be equivalent or superior to Israeli conventional forces.⁴¹ What truly troubled Saddam and his advisers, rather, were Israel’s key diplomatic alliance with the United States and its unacknowledged—but widely assumed—nuclear arsenal.

On the first count, Saddam (like many observers in the Arab world) believed that Israel benefited from the unqualified support of the United States. Indeed, he hardly differentiated between the two countries. Saddam was never entirely clear on whether the United States controlled Israel or vice versa, but he nevertheless perceived a dangerous nexus between U.S. power and Israeli ambitions. He argued that Israel had been “created by colonialism,”⁴² and that Israel was merely “an extension of the United States of America and the English.”⁴³ According to Saddam, Washington’s “unconditional financial and economic support of the enemy and supply of weapons” had built Israel into a strategic juggernaut.⁴⁴ Saddam was particularly incensed by the massive U.S. resupply of Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.⁴⁵ In these circumstances, Saddam reasonably concluded that the United States would not permit Iraq and its Arab allies to defeat Israel. In a private discussion in 1979, he specu-

38. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.” Iraqi forces had played a minor role in the 1973 war, facing combat in Syria. See W. Andrew Terrill, “Iraq’s Role in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Winter 2000), pp. 1–20.

39. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.”

40. We discuss the flaws and gaps in Saddam’s strategic logic in the next section.

41. See, for instance, SH-SHTP-A-000-627, “Audio Recording of Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Military Officials,” undated. As this prediction indicates, the experience of the 1948, 1967, and 1973 wars—when Israel had roundly defeated a combined Arab assault—does not seem to have diminished Saddam’s belief in the likelihood of victory.

42. SH-PDWN-D-000-341, “Speech at al-Bakr University.”

43. SH-PDWN-D-000-730, “Transcripts of Meetings between Saddam Hussein and Various Commanders during the Iran-Iraq War,” undated (1988).

44. SH-PDWN-D-000-458, “Interview of Saddam about Oil and America.”

45. SH-RVCC-D-000-805, “Two Speeches by Saddam Hussein.” On this theme, see also SH-SPPC-D-000-705, “Letter from Bakr to Brezhnev,” undated (1976).

lated that an Iraqi attack would prompt Washington to threaten to “throw an atomic bomb at us.”⁴⁶

As this statement indicates, Saddam was keenly aware of his inability to deter nuclear threats issued by Iraqi adversaries. In this context, the Israeli nuclear capability posed an insuperable obstacle to a successful Arab attack. By the mid-1970s, it was widely believed—in Iraq and elsewhere—that Israel possessed a working nuclear arsenal, and that these weapons were well integrated into its defense and contingency plans.⁴⁷ Saddam frequently lamented that Israel possessed a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East, noting that an Arab military strike thus risked provoking a devastating nonconventional response.⁴⁸ “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.’”⁴⁹

This sense of impotence in dealing with a nuclear-armed Israel came up numerous times in Saddam’s deliberations with top advisers. This sentiment is perhaps best captured in the following conversation between Saddam and high-ranking Iraqi defense and military officials shortly after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980:

Saddam Hussein: I believe that whoever makes a move against Israel before possessing such weapons, they will destroy him with an atomic bomb.

Adnan Khairallah [defense minister]: Because, sir, they know very well that this scientific gap began to even out.

Saddam Hussein: They are waiting for the Iraqi Army to strike them so they can respond by striking Baghdad; this is if they own an atomic bomb and we don’t have it. We have arrived at this judgment and figured it out about 4–5 years ago. If we don’t have one or more of these bombs, in the next Arab-Israeli war they will . . .

Mohamed Jassam Hanesh [commander of air force and air defense]: . . . destroy us.

Saddam Hussein: And the first target will be Baghdad, not Damascus or Amman.

46. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.” U.S. economic and military support for Israel did escalate significantly from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s. See Zach Levey, “The United States’ Skyhawk Sale to Israel, 1966: Strategic Exigencies of an Arms Deal,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 255–276; and Salim Yaqub, “The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” in Frederik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially pp. 229–239.

47. The Israeli nuclear program is discussed in Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

48. SH-SHTP-A-000-858, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials.”

49. SH-PDWN-D-000-341, “Speech at al-Bakr University.”

Abdul Jabar Shanshal [army chief of staff]: And this remains so even now!

Saddam Hussein: Yes, even now! Even in the past we expected it; now, however, as soon as they sense that the Iraqi Army is moving in that direction, they will strike Baghdad immediately.⁵⁰

In short, Saddam believed that as long as Iraq was unable to deter Israeli nuclear threats, launching any sort of major conflict against Israel was an unacceptably risky proposition. It was this concern that gave the Iraqi nuclear program its strategic salience.

Saddam's Nuclear Calculus

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 dramatically when Saddam Hussein 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 Brazil, France, India, Italy, the Soviet Union, and other countries. The deal with France provided Iraq with a 40-megawatt research reactor (Osirak, as the French called it, or Tammuz 1 in Iraqi nomenclature) along with a supply of 93 percent 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. Both countries also provided technical assistance in operating the reactor, which by the late 1970s had been brought online. At the outset of the 1980s, Iraq was reportedly within a few years of being able to manufacture a simple nuclear device.⁵¹

Iraqi officials generally claimed that the program was geared toward peaceful purposes, and in 1980, U.S. intelligence officials found “no hard evidence that Iraq has decided to acquire nuclear explosives.”⁵² As discussed below,

50. SH-SHTP-D-000-856, “Transcript of a Meeting between Saddam Hussein and His Commanding Officers at the Armed Forces General Command,” November 22, 1980. See also SH-SHTP-A-000-858, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials.”

51. The preceding paragraphs draw on *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD* (hereinafter *Duelfer Report*), Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, September 30, 2004), https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/index.html; Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq's Nuclear Interests, Programs, and Options,” NLC-6-34-4-10-3, Jimmy Carter Library (JCL), October 1979, State Department, “Paper on the Iraqi Nuclear Program,” NLC-25-47-1-13-9, JCL, November 21, 1980; and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq and the War of Sanctions: Conventional Threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), pp. 604–606.

52. State Department, “Paper on the Iraqi Nuclear Program.”

however, Saddam's private comments clearly indicate a desire to work toward a nuclear weapons capability. There is also some circumstantial evidence that Iraq sought to accelerate its nuclear development during this period by purchasing nuclear components or even nuclear weapons from friendly countries such as the Soviet Union.⁵³

International relations theorists typically point to three issues that drive states to pursue nuclear weapons: desire for greater international prestige, national security concerns, and bureaucratic pressures.⁵⁴ In the case of Iraq, the push for nuclear weapons revolved around the first two of these issues.⁵⁵ With respect to international prestige, Saddam placed a premium on technological development as a marker of Iraq's regional and global status. He frequently lamented that Iraq remained a third-world country in terms of economic development, and he argued that technological advancement was a prerequisite for assuming leadership of the Arabs. "The one who is going to raise the Arab nation should be the one who is richer in scientific knowledge than the others," he declared.⁵⁶ From this perspective, the Iraqi nuclear program served notice of Saddam's claim to preeminence in Arab politics and Iraq's growing role on the international scene. As Saddam put it in 1981, the nuclear reactor was a symbol of "Iraq's progress."⁵⁷

Security concerns were also at the heart of the Iraqi nuclear program.

53. As noted below, Saddam hinted at one point that Iraq might approach the Soviet Union for help in acquiring a single nuclear weapon. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting." In a later instance, however, Saddam apparently feared that accepting nuclear assistance from the Abdul Qadeer Khan network might expose him to U.S. and Israeli efforts to entrap Iraq and embarrass it internationally. See Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, *Deception: Pakistan, the United States, and the Secret Trade in Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Walker, 2007), pp. 220–221; "President Warns Israel, Criticizes U.S.," FBIS-NES-90-064, April 3, 1990; and SH-MICN-D-000-741, "Information about a Letter from a Pakistani Scientist to the Iraqi Government," October 1990.

54. The literature is summarized and critiqued in Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?" pp. 54–86. See also William C. Potter, "The Diffusion of Nuclear Weapons," in Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, eds., *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 148–149.

55. There is an extensive literature on Iraqi motives for seeking nuclear weapons, nearly all of it written without the benefit of access to the captured records. See, for instance, Amatzia Baram, "An Analysis of Iraqi WMD Strategy," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 25–39; Timothy V. McCarthy and Jonathan B. Tucker, "Saddam's Toxic Arsenal: Chemical and Biological Weapons in the Gulf Wars," in Peter R. Lavoy, Scott D. Sagan, and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), especially pp. 56–60; Shai Feldman, *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in the Middle East* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), especially pp. 135–136; and Avigdor Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm: Iraq, Poisonous Weapons, and Deterrence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).

56. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, "Saddam Hussein's Discussion of Neighboring Countries and Their Regimes," undated.

57. "Text of Saddam Hussein 23 June Cabinet Statement," FBIS-MEA-81-121, June 24, 1981.

Saddam was well aware that the program would not reach fruition for several years at the earliest (which may have influenced him to seek alternative means of acquiring the bomb), but he was clearly grappling with how to integrate nuclear weapons into Iraq's foreign and defense policy. From a defensive standpoint, Saddam thought an Iraqi bomb would deter Israeli or Iranian attacks. "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," he 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."⁵⁸

This view of nuclear weapons fits nicely with the literature on proliferation, which frames security-related motives for pursuing nuclear weapons overwhelmingly in defensive terms.⁵⁹ For Saddam, however, nuclear weapons were as much about offense as defense. Saddam's views of nuclear weapons provide a detailed, vivid illustration of how the logic behind the stability-instability paradox can influence the strategic mind-set of a world leader. As the paradox suggests, the available documents do not show that Saddam seriously considered launching a nuclear first strike against Israel (or any other power) once he had attained nuclear weapons. What he believed, rather, was that the development of what he called the "main weapon" would allow him to wage a war of attrition against Israel, pushing it back to its pre-1967 borders. If the Arabs sought to wage such a war without nuclear weapons, Saddam realized, any advance could be stymied by U.S. or Israeli nuclear threats against Arab cities. As Saddam said in 1978, "I imagine that the first strike is going to be directed to Baghdad."⁶⁰

If Iraq possessed nuclear weapons, however, it could neutralize Israeli threats by holding Israeli population centers at risk. This would allow the prosecution of a conventional war meant to erase Israeli gains from 1967 and after, though presumably not one that threatened the survival of the Israeli state.⁶¹ Saddam expressed various versions of this logic between 1978 and 1981. In 1979, for instance, he argued that the purchase of a nuclear weapon from the Soviet Union would allow Iraq to achieve the aforementioned territorial gains:

The most important requirement is that we be present in Iraq and Syria and will have planned ahead that the enemy, the air force, that the enemy will

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

59. See the discussion in Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?" especially pp. 57–59.

60. SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University."

61. If the Arab advance was seen to pose an existential threat to Israel, Israeli officials would presumably have little reason to avoid using nuclear weapons.

come and attack and destroy, etc. We should bear it and keep going—and go put pressure on our Soviet friends and make them understand our need for one weapon—we only want one weapon. 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. We have no vision for a war that is any less than this.⁶²

This “patient war,” Saddam added, would last “for twelve continuous months” and cost Iraq perhaps 50,000 casualties, but it would bring Iraqi forces to the Sea of Galilee and inflict an unprecedented defeat on Israel.⁶³

This conversation was hardly the sole instance in which Saddam predicted that an Iraqi nuclear capability would enable a war of attrition against Israel. A year earlier, Saddam had laid out a similar scenario in explaining why the Arab states must pursue nuclear weapons. By dint of their larger geographical size and population, Saddam believed, the Arab states were better able to withstand nuclear attacks than was Israel. Israel would therefore have little choice but to keep the war at the conventional level. “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.’”⁶⁴

Saddam returned to the same themes on several other occasions. In 1981, he indicated that he saw nuclear weapons as a way of neutralizing Israeli military advantages. “The Arabs have to say to them, ‘Here is a weapon where you can face the Zionist threat of using atomic bombs,’” he explained. “You have to do this in order to prevent the Zionist entity from using the atomic bomb against the Arabs.”⁶⁵ Similarly, in 1978 Saddam argued (somewhat vaguely) that growing technological capabilities would allow the Arabs to launch new wars against Israel. Iraq’s patience in dealing with Israel, he said, “is the patience of active revolutionaries. We think that in twenty years, Israel will be in serious

62. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.” The best translation of this passage is in Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam’s Audio Files*, p. 263.

63. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.”

64. SH-PDWN-D-000-341, “Speech at al-Bakr University.”

65. SH-SHTP-A-000-858, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials.”

trouble as a result of growing Arab capabilities. Yet, the battle shall continue and perhaps the Arabs will start wars before the twenty years are over.”⁶⁶

Saddam seems to have believed that Iraq would be ready to launch this war sometime in the mid-1980s. In 1979, he told advisers that the battle would be “not this year and not in the next five years,” a timeline that likely stemmed from the expectation that it would be several years before the Iraqi nuclear program reached fruition.⁶⁷ Around the same time, Saddam boasted that if Israel or another enemy wished to strike Iraq, it would have to do so before 1985. After that, “all of [Iraq’s] enemies” would have to think twice about such an attack.⁶⁸

What, exactly, would a conventional war against Israel look like? The available records indicate that Saddam, who had little background in military affairs prior to becoming Iraqi president, considered operational requirements for such a war, but only in broad and superficial terms. In the aforementioned discussion in March 1979, Saddam implied that the war would require a combined Arab assault involving Iraq, Syria, and perhaps Jordan. (Egypt, which had just signed a peace treaty with Israel, presumably would not participate in the fighting.) The ideal situation, Saddam commented, would be to have “one force with proper formations,” although given Jordan’s vulnerability vis-à-vis Israel, the Jordanian front was “in a very precarious situation” and could not be counted on.⁶⁹ Similarly, in a 1995 meeting, Saddam recalled a discussion with Syria’s Hafiz al-Assad in 1978 or 1979, in which the Iraqi leader proposed to mount an eventual Syrian-Iraqi attack into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. “I explained to him how the Golan Heights could be liberated,” Saddam later said. The attack would be spearheaded by infantry, with armor and artillery following close behind. Iraq would contribute three to five infantry divisions and an equivalent number of armored and artillery divisions, to be accompanied by unspecified Syrian forces. This combined force, Saddam assumed, would be sufficient to push Israeli defenders out of the Golan and hold the territories against a counterattack. “I think the mission is very simple,” Saddam recalled saying.⁷⁰

Saddam’s confidence to the contrary, there was nothing “simple” about waging an effective war against Israel. For one thing, supplying multiple Iraqi divisions as they conducted operations from Syria and possibly Jordan would

66. SH-RVCC-D-000-805, “Speech by Saddam Hussein,” March 29, 1978.

67. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.”

68. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, “Discussion of Neighboring Countries and Their Regimes.”

69. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.”

70. SH-SPPC-D-000-660, “Speech of Saddam Hussein during a National Command Session,” January 25, 1995.

be a complex logistical feat, one significantly beyond anything the Baathist military had previously accomplished. Saddam acknowledged the difficulties involved in 1978 (the Arabs needed a “long transportation line that can reach the front and that is into Syria or into Jordan,” he told military officials), but his ideas for overcoming this challenge were poorly refined. He speculated that Iraqi units operating in Syria “will be provided with ammunition and supplies by the Syrian side,” but this assertion rested on the dubious assumption that Assad’s regime had both the capacity and the desire to sustain Saddam’s forces in addition to its own.⁷¹

Indeed, despite Saddam’s confidence that an Iraqi nuclear capability would enable an effective Arab advance, his vision for war raised as many questions as it answered. Would the Syrian and Jordanian governments actually assist Iraq in another conflict against Israel? This issue was certainly open to question, given that Saddam and Assad were bitter rivals (notwithstanding the brief and abortive attempt at an Iraqi-Syrian union in 1978–79), and that both Syria and Jordan had lost considerable territory in earlier tangles with Israel. If the Arab coalition held, would Arab armies triumph in a conventional war? Israel had handily defeated combined Arab forces before, and the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace accord in 1979 meant that Israel would presumably be able to devote greater resources to defending the Golan Heights and the West Bank. In at least one instance, Saddam obliquely acknowledged that there were many problems to be resolved before a successful war would be possible. “We are in the process of research and movement mobilization plans,” he said, “but the strategic visualization is what is important.”⁷²

Beyond all this, there was reason to doubt whether Israel would behave in as accommodating a manner as Saddam seemed to hope. Iraqi forces would have to complete an extensive deployment into Jordan or Syria (or both) prior to attacking. Why would Israel not strike those forces preemptively, as it had done in similar circumstances in 1967? Saddam recognized this problem—“The Iraqi army is still in Iraq,” he conceded—but he had no ready solution.⁷³ Perhaps most important of all, would Israel really refrain from making nuclear threats, or even using its nuclear weapons, in the event of a successful Arab advance? Given that Saddam and other Iraqi leaders had publicly called for Israel’s destruction ever since the Baath had first taken power in 1968, would not Israeli leaders assume that an attack on the Golan or the West Bank was the prelude to an assault on Israel proper? And if Israeli leaders made such an as-

71. SH-PDWN-D-000-341, “Speech at al-Bakr University.”

72. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.”

73. *Ibid.*

sumption, would a rudimentary Iraqi nuclear capability really deter Israel from seeking to derive leverage from its own, much larger nuclear arsenal? Saddam's vision for a war with Israel was immensely ambitious, but it was also deeply problematic.

In light of these gaps in Iraqi planning, should scholars conclude that Saddam was not actually serious about a prospective war with Israel, that there was more bravado than sincerity in his discussion of this subject? Although Saddam was given to bluster, we think this conclusion too sanguine, for two reasons. First, this interpretation requires waving away not merely what Saddam said in public—where calls for Israel's destruction or the liberation of the territories could be expected to play well with Arab and Iraqi audiences—but also his repeated private comments. As established previously, Saddam discussed the relationship between nuclear weapons and a conflict with Israel on numerous occasions during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the same vein, even though many Arab leaders evinced a fierce hostility to Israel in public, Saddam's private comments leave little doubt that he believed the fate of the Arab nation to be wrapped up in an eventual struggle to reduce the power of the "Zionist entity." In October 1985, for instance, Saddam returned to this subject in a discussion with his advisers. "This issue between the Arabs and Israel will never be resolved," he said. "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."⁷⁴

Combined with other well-established features of Saddam's behavior—most notably his belief that he was destined to lead the Arab world and his tendency to use military power in pursuit of risky and aggressive ventures—his private comments on this subject were sufficient to persuade certain advisers that he was sincere in his desire for an eventual war against Israel. 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."⁷⁵

Second, and no less important, the absence of detailed operational planning for a war against Israel does not mean that Saddam was not serious in contemplating such a conflict. In the United States, the military prepares contingency

74. CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-567, "Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Baath Party Officials," October 5, 1985.

75. Quoted in Woods, Murray, and Holaday, *Saddam's War*, p. 94.

plans for missions that its civilian leaders are unlikely ever to authorize. In Baathist Iraq, the situation was the reverse: Saddam's intuitive and compartmentalized style of decisionmaking ensured that the military was frequently ordered to undertake missions for which it had not engaged in serious planning. In the case of the invasion of Iran in 1980, for instance, some senior commanders received only days or weeks of warning prior to the attack. In the lead-up to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Republican Guard was given less than a month to prepare for the attack, and according to Saddam, neither the defense minister nor the army chief of staff was informed of the impending operation. As has become clear from recent research, Iraqi forces thus struggled to resolve unaddressed and potentially debilitating logistical issues on the eve of the attack. In Saddam's Iraq, a lack of serious planning or preparation was no barrier to bold, aggressive military action.⁷⁶

Perhaps because Saddam operated in this manner, he could easily (and simplistically) conclude that the obstacles to a confrontation with Israel were surmountable. Although Saddam's expectation that the Iraq-Syria merger would lead to greater combined capabilities was frustrated by the rapid collapse of that union, he held out hope—rather unrealistically—that the Iraqi example would inspire the Arab masses to overthrow their governments and install rulers more supportive of Baghdad's policies. "As long as the masses have kept themselves on solid ground psychologically then they can wait [for] the unhealthy governments to be removed," he predicted.⁷⁷ With respect to the issue of military effectiveness, Saddam believed that several (somewhat contradictory) factors would eventually enable improved Arab performance. In 1978, he argued that the rise of "progressive" regimes such as Iraq's would, in and of itself, lead to greater success on the battlefield.⁷⁸ Along the same lines, he predicted that the Arabs' "revolutionary spirit" would allow them to overcome their technological and military deficiencies. "Deployment and the speed of deployment is not just a classical military ability," he said, "but mainly it is

76. On these cases, see Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, chap. 5; SH-SPPC-D-000-660, "Speech of Saddam Hussein during a National Command Session"; Raad Hamdani, "Memoir" (unpublished), in authors' possession, pp. 21–30; Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 182–203; Woods, Murray, and Holaday, *Saddam's War*, pp. 32–34; and Lt. Gen. Abid Mohammed al-Kabi, interview by Kevin Woods and Williamson Murray, November 12, 2009. The authors thank Woods and Murray for sharing this transcript with us.

77. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting."

78. According to Saddam, "The reason of the 1948 defeat was not about the unity of the military command, but the main point was the weakness of the regimes that . . . fought in 1948. Those regimes were associated with colonialism." With more "authentic" regimes in power, the Arabs would presumably fight with greater effectiveness. SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Speech at al-Bakr University."

about the special political spirit that we call the Revolutionary Spirit, coming from the spirit of the regime that is led by the Arab Socialist Baath Party." On this and other occasions, Saddam also touted the notion that the Arabs would eventually surpass Israel in conventional capabilities, presumably because of technological progress and demographic superiority, or perhaps through combined training involving Iraq, Jordan, and Syria.⁷⁹

This sense that Iraq's military deficiencies could be overcome was evident from Saddam's analysis of the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980. Saddam did not initially see the invasion of Iran as a distraction from his long-term goal of confronting Israel; quite the opposite. Saddam invaded Iran for a variety of reasons, including perceptions that the Iranian regime sought to undermine his government, a desire to retake land he had conceded to the shah in the humiliating 1975 Algiers accord, and efforts to exploit postrevolutionary chaos in Iran.⁸⁰ In numerous instances, however, Saddam and his advisers also expressed an expectation that waging war against Iran would give the Iraqi military valuable experience in large-scale offensive operations and put Baghdad in a stronger strategic position for the eventual showdown with Israel. As early as September 1980, one Iraqi official predicted that seizing disputed territories from Iran would "move Iraq into a big and dangerously effective position. Through this, in the future, Iraq can take big steps to accomplish its goals, whether they are within the country or national [i.e., pan-Arab]."⁸¹ Similarly, Saddam predicted prior to the start of the war that reclaiming Iraq's "extorted land" from Iran would inspire "all the people who have an extorted land," which from the context of the conversation appears to have been a reference to the Palestinians or perhaps the Arabs more broadly. "Getting your land back will scare them," he said of the Israelis, "because it takes you to another level of ability and to another psychological effect on the Arab people and the national [pan-Arab] public opinion."⁸²

This view persisted well after the war was under way. On various occasions, Saddam told advisers that fighting with Iran provided necessary battlefield lessons on how to wage war against Israel. "We are going to benefit from this

79. *Ibid.*; and SH-SHTP-A-000-627, "Audio Recording of Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Military Officials."

80. On these subjects, see F. Gregory Gause III, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 45–70; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999), chap. 2; Efraim Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals: The Iran-Iraq War Revisited," *International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Winter 1987–88), pp. 83–95; and Will D. Swearingen, "Geopolitical Origins of the Iran-Iraq War," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (October 1988), pp. 405–416.

81. SH-SHTP-A-000-835, "Meeting between Saddam Hussein and High-Ranking Officials," September 16, 1980.

82. *Ibid.*

with God's help because we are seeing our soft spots," he commented early in the fighting.⁸³ Israel "cannot tolerate Iraq walking out victorious" from its war with Iran, Saddam asserted in 1981 or 1982, because "once Iraq walks out victorious, there will not be any Israel."⁸⁴ In another instance, Saddam remarked that "the Jews" should be worried by Iraq's growing military prowess. "They see that the experience we are gaining [from] the war, as it goes on, will be intact after the war, and that will be a threat to them later," he said.⁸⁵

These expectations proved unrealistic. Far from augmenting Iraqi strategic capabilities, the conflict with Iran turned into a bloody war of attrition that left Saddam's regime struggling to survive. Moreover, before the war was even a year old, Israel moved decisively to disrupt the Iraqi nuclear program. This intervention did not take Saddam completely by surprise, as he was under no illusion that Israel would allow Iraq to proceed toward a nuclear capability unhindered. As he explained to his advisers, he had believed that Israel would "plan an attack against Iraq's vital facilities, an attack that will exceed conventional means, and will target main rings that will stop development or will stop Iraqi prosperity in the programs of scientific and economic advancements, which are the main sources of Iraq's strength."⁸⁶ In a separate conversation, he reiterated his expectation that Israel would launch a preventive nuclear strike against Iraq. "If they are going to hit Iraq, they will hit it before 1985 with an atomic bomb," he said. "After that, they will not be able to hit it."⁸⁷ Recognizing that Iraq faced a window of vulnerability as it built a nuclear deterrent, Saddam initiated planning for civil defense efforts to shield the Iraqi population from nuclear attacks.⁸⁸

Saddam was wrong to expect a nuclear attack from Israel, but correct in anticipating Israeli counterproliferation efforts. The prospect of an Iraqi bomb was frightening to Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who termed Iraq "the bloodiest and most irresponsible of all Arab regimes, with the exception of Kaddafi in Libya."⁸⁹ During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Israeli operatives reportedly threatened Italian and French workers involved with the Iraqi program, sabotaged shipments of nuclear components destined for Iraq, and murdered Iraqi nuclear scientists in Europe. Although it is unclear that the attempted bombing of the Tuwaitha facilities by Iranian jets shortly after the out-

83. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, "Discussion of Neighboring Countries and Their Regimes."

84. SH-SHTP-A-000-635, "President Saddam Hussein Meeting with Ministers."

85. SH-SHTP-A-000-627, "Recording of Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials."

86. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 267.

87. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, "Discussion of Neighboring Countries and Their Regimes."

88. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, pp. 264–268.

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

break of the Iran-Iraq War was a deliberate attempt to target the Iraqi nuclear program, fears that Iraq would soon begin to produce the materials needed to build an atomic weapon spurred Israel to take dramatic action. In 1981, an Israeli air raid destroyed the Osirak reactor, setting the Iraqi program back by several years.⁹⁰

After the destruction of the Osirak reactor, Saddam acknowledged that the Israeli airstrike was a reasonable response to Iraqi nuclear development. In one meeting, he bragged that Iraq's technological progress "made Begin spend sleepless nights."⁹¹ At another gathering with his advisers, he conceded, "Technically, they are right in all of their attempts to harm Iraq. . . . They might hit Iraq with an atomic bomb someday if we reach a certain stage. And we are prepared, and if God allows it, we will be ready to face it."⁹² In Saddam's view, Israel had good reason to feel alarmed by Iraq's growing power and technological advancements.

The destruction of the Osirak reactor did not put an end to Saddam's desire for a nuclear capability and an eventual collision with Israel. Saddam's government reinvigorated the nuclear program during the 1980s, and by early 1990 Iraq was perhaps only a few years away from developing a rudimentary nuclear weapon.⁹³ More than that, Iraq's success in forcing Iran to agree to a cease-fire in 1988 led Saddam to believe that Iraqi conventional forces were approaching the level of readiness necessary to confront Israel. After Iraq retook the Fao Peninsula in 1988, Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz told Saddam that the battle showed Israel "that the Arabs are capable of going through bold and assaulting battles to uproot the wicked enemy from the land it occupied and reinforced, no matter how long it takes, and to expel them from it."⁹⁴ In a meeting in early 1990, Saddam predicted that Iraq would have "one or ten" nuclear weapons within a half-decade, and as before, he argued that these capabilities would make possible the liberation of Arab lands. "Now, if the Arabs were to have a nuclear bomb," Saddam hypothesized, "wouldn't they take the territories that were occupied after 1967?"⁹⁵ During the period between late 1988 and early 1990, in fact, Saddam again began to tout the idea of waging a war of liberation against Israel. Hamdani recalls that Saddam instructed

90. The Israeli raid and other covert actions to impede the Iraqi program are covered in Rodger W. Claire, *Raid on the Sun: Inside Israel's Secret Campaign That Denied Saddam the Bomb* (New York: Broadway, 2004).

91. FBIS-MEA-81-121, "Text of Saddam Husayn 23 June Cabinet Statement."

92. SH-SHTP-A-000-635, "President Saddam Hussein Meeting with Ministers."

93. Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 143.

94. SH-SHTP-A-000-857, "Meeting with Senior Officials on the Iran-Iraq War," April 18, 1988. The best translation is Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 186.

95. SH-SHTP-A-000-732, "Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials about the Arab Summit Conference," undated (early 1990).

the Republican Guard leadership to prepare for the eventual launching of such a conflict, and that his unit “continued training, attending lectures and workshops to raise our army’s standards in preparation for the war with the Zionists.”⁹⁶

Saddam never got a chance to act on this ambition. Confronted with a dire and deteriorating economic situation in 1990, the Iraqi regime shifted its attention to its oil-rich neighbor to the south, invading and occupying Kuwait on August 2. As we discuss in the sections that follow, the resulting Persian Gulf conflict did provide Saddam with an opportunity to strike Israel militarily, but the war and subsequent UN sanctions crippled Iraq’s nuclear program and severely constrained the country’s geopolitical potential.

WMD, Israel, and the 1991 Persian Gulf War

Even though Saddam lacked nuclear weapons, he did wage a limited military conflict against Israel during the Persian Gulf War, attacking Israel with conventionally armed SCUD missiles during January–February 1991. At first glance, this behavior is puzzling in light of Saddam’s earlier claims that he would be unable to wage conventional warfare against Israel without first acquiring nuclear weapons. On closer inspection, however, these strikes were fully consonant with his views of the deterrent power provided by an unconventional arsenal.

In discussing this issue, it is important to consider two separate but related factors—the reasons why Saddam desired to attack Israel in 1991, and the reasons why he believed that he would be able to attack Israeli population centers and other targets without triggering the devastating response he had earlier feared. With respect to the first subject, Saddam was drawn to the idea of attacking Israel for several reasons. For one, he likely expected the attacks to inspire the Arab masses to rally behind Iraq, thereby forcing their governments to distance themselves from the U.S.-led coalition. Years earlier, Saddam had predicted that Iraq’s use of conventional forces in liberating Palestinian territories would cause “widespread cheering . . . from every corner of the Arab world.”⁹⁷ Actions such as Iraq’s firing of a concrete-filled warhead at Israel in 1991 were designed to play on Islamic imagery, symbolize solidarity with Palestinian stone throwers, and elicit such Arab support.⁹⁸

Additionally, because Saddam frequently failed to distinguish U.S. from

96. Hamdani, *Memoir*, pp. 122–127.

97. SH-SHTP-A-000-553, “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting.”

98. Charles Duelfer, *Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), pp. 71–72; and Bengio, *Saddam’s Word*, pp. 194–202.

Israeli policies, he held Israel largely responsible for the conflict and assumed hidden Israeli involvement. In December 1990, he announced that “if aggression were to take place, we will assume that Israel has taken part in it. Therefore, without asking any questions, we will strike Israel.”⁹⁹ In the same vein, Saddam appears to have calculated that hurting Israel (“America’s daughter,” as he called it) would weaken political will in the United States and lead to an early cease-fire.¹⁰⁰ He later boasted to a Cuban interlocutor that “if Iraq had possessed long-range missiles [during the 1991 Gulf War], we would have hit the White House.” Because Israel was a “partisan to the United States in the region,” he explained, Iraq attacked Tel Aviv instead to hurt America indirectly.¹⁰¹ Some evidence even indicates that Iraqi leaders believed that Israel was directly involved in the coalition’s attacks on Iraq.¹⁰² Simple retribution for past offenses may also have played a role; the orders to strike Israel’s Dimona reactor described the attack as “revenge” for the attack on the Osirak reactor in 1981.¹⁰³

With respect to the second subject, Saddam’s belief that he could attack Israel with conventional weapons without triggering a devastating response had much to do with the massive arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, along with surface-to-surface missiles and other delivery vehicles, that Iraq had accumulated during the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam had used these capabilities—particularly chemical weapons and SCUD missiles—extensively. Iraq used more than 100,000 chemical munitions against Iranian forces and Iraqi Kurds, and Saddam employed his missile capabilities to bring the war to Iran’s cities and compel the Iranian government to accept a cease-fire.¹⁰⁴ In later years, Saddam attributed the eventual outcome of the war to Iraq’s superior chemical weapons and missile capabilities. “When we attacked Iran with our missiles they came and told us, ‘let’s agree,’” he recalled.¹⁰⁵

99. “Saddam Husayn’s Interview for Spanish Television,” *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, December 29, 1990, originally broadcast on Republic of Iraq Radio, December 26, 1990.

100. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam’s Audio Files*, pp. 295–296. See also SH-MISC-D-000-249, “Notes from a Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Alvarez Cambras, a Member of the Cuban National Council,” August 21, 2001.

101. SH-SPPC-D-001-099, “Transcript of a Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Cuban National Council Member Alvarez Cambras,” August 21, 2001.

102. SH-MISC-D-000-298, “Daily Statements on the Gulf War,” various dates (entry of February 7, 1991); and SH-SHTP-A-001-043, “A Revolutionary Command Council Meeting Discussing Baath Party Issues and the Coalition Forces,” undated (circa January 17/18, 1991).

103. SH-MISC-D-000-298, “Daily Statements on the Gulf War.”

104. “Transmittal Message,” in *Duelfer Report*, Vol. 3, pp. 5, 10; *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 72; and Thomas L. McNaughter, “Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990), pp. 5–34.

105. SH-SPPC-D-000-334, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and the Russian Delegation,” July 18, 2001; and “Regime Strategic Intent,” in *Duelfer Report*, p. 1.

As this comment indicates, Saddam appreciated these weapons not simply for their military value, but also for their ability to deter and compel. The belief that these weapons could terrorize enemies psychologically and cow them into inaction is evident from Saddam's remarks to air force officers in 1984: "Sometimes what you get out of a weapon is when you keep saying, 'I will bomb you,' [and] it is actually better than bombing him. It is possible that when you bomb him the material effect will be 40 percent, but if you stick it up to his face the material and the spiritual effect will be 60 percent, so why hit him? Keep getting 60 percent!"¹⁰⁶

By the late 1980s, Saddam had begun to brandish his chemical arsenal as a deterrent to a potential Israeli attack on Iraq. Saddam was convinced that Israel and its allies were manipulating the increasing international criticism of his regime in late 1989 and early 1990, and Iraqi military intelligence warned that an Israeli military strike was likely. In May 1990, military intelligence analysts laid out several potential courses of action open to Israel, concluding that the most likely possibilities were "attempts to personally target" Saddam and air and missile attacks against "vital targets" including nuclear and chemical facilities. Saddam apparently subscribed to this prediction; several months later, he reminded aides that Washington had been "preparing Israel to attack us" during early 1990.¹⁰⁷ In these circumstances, Saddam calculated that chemical weapons could deter the Israeli threat. On April 2, 1990, Saddam made a public statement to this effect. "We will make the fire eat up half of Israel, if it tries to do anything against Iraq," he warned.¹⁰⁸ Israel's decision not to attack Iraqi targets in mid-1990 appears to have convinced Saddam that this deterrent threat had worked.¹⁰⁹

During the Persian Gulf conflict in 1991, Saddam thus viewed his arsenal of chemical weapons, complemented by biological weapons and delivery systems, as a deterrent to Israeli nuclear retaliation. Saddam recognized that his chemical weapons were not as powerful as Israel's nuclear weapons,¹¹⁰ yet

106. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 259.

107. SH-PDWN-D-000-546, "GMID Intelligence Report Regarding Israeli Military Forces"; and SH-SHTP-D-000-557, "President Saddam Hussein Talks about the Historical Right of Iraq in Kuwait," December 15, 1990.

108. Alan Cowell, "Iraq Chief, Boasting of Poison Gas, Warns of Disaster If Israelis Strike," *New York Times*, April 3, 1990.

109. At a later meeting with advisers, Saddam argued that his deterrent threat had been effective. SH-SHTP-D-000-716, "Iraqi President Presiding over a National Command Meeting on 25 January 1995," January 25, 1995.

110. As Saddam admitted in a December 25, 1990, meeting, Iraq's arsenal of nerve agents was not "as effective as a nuclear weapon, surely its effect would be less significant." SH-SHTP-A-000-810, "Saddam's Meeting with the Delegation from the Jordanian Arab Democratic Youth," December 25, 1990.

told his advisers, "If we want to use chemicals, we will exterminate them, you know." He boasted that Iraq had acquired chemical weapons whose destructive power was "200 times more" than that used against Iran, adding that at most one or two countries could match the quality or quantity of Iraq's chemical or biological weapons arsenals.¹¹¹ As one of Saddam's advisers told him prior to the Gulf War, Iraq's acquisition of binary chemical weapons and long-range delivery systems had ended Israel's regional dominance and replaced it with a balance of forces.¹¹²

This new "balance of forces" increased Saddam's confidence in 1991 that he could attack Israel with conventional warheads without facing WMD reprisal. "Iraq is in possession of the binary chemical weapon," Saddam told an interviewer a month before invading Kuwait. "According to our technical, scientific, and military calculations, this is a sufficient deterrent to confront the Israeli nuclear weapon."¹¹³ The West was furious about Iraq's acquisition of binary chemical weapons, he explained on another occasion, because "they thought they could strike us. Well, let them try."¹¹⁴ According to the state-controlled Iraqi media, the imperialists and Zionists had recognized Iraq's new "parity with the Arab nation's enemies."¹¹⁵ For Saddam, chemical weapons were now playing the deterrent role that he had earlier intended for nuclear weapons.¹¹⁶

This sense of parity underlay Saddam's missile attacks against Israel. Iraq would initially attack with only conventional warheads, he told advisers, and would use its chemical and biological weapons "in return for the warheads they use."¹¹⁷ Saddam realized that if his deterrent failed, and he followed through on this threat, the conflict could escalate dramatically. He exclaimed,

111. SH-SHTP-A-000-848, "Saddam and the Revolutionary Command Council Discuss Iraq's WMD Capabilities and Deterrent Threats," circa mid-November 1990.

112. SH-SHTP-A-000-569, "Saddam Meeting with Yasser Arafat," undated.

113. FBIS-NEA-90-128, "Wall Street Journal Interviews Saddam," July 3, 1990.

114. FBIS-NES-90-076, "Saddam Comments on Binary Chemicals, Missiles," April 19, 1990.

115. "Iraqi Comment on Plans for Baghdad Summit 'Sincere' Attempt to Unify Arabs," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, May 7, 1990.

116. Saddam's belief that his WMD arsenal would deter massive Israeli retaliation was not necessarily incompatible with the hope, often attributed to Saddam, that his SCUD attacks would provoke Israeli attacks and thereby fracture the coalition. As Saddam's comments indicate, he may have expected that Israel would retaliate with conventional attacks at a relatively low level of intensity—thereby allowing the Iraqi leader to achieve his diplomatic goal of splitting the coalition—while abstaining from nuclear threats or attacks against Iraqi cities. It is also possible that Saddam assumed that Israeli retaliation was not necessary to split the coalition, that Iraqi attacks on Israel would elicit such an enthusiastic response on the "Arab street" that it would be impossible for Arab governments to remain allied with the United States.

117. "Saddam and His Advisers Discuss Iraqi Missile Attacks on Targets in Israel and Saudi Arabia," circa January 17/18, 1991, in Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 294.

"Who says they will strike and leave? Well, how will they strike and leave? We have stated that the first strike we get we will in turn fire on Saudi [Arabia] and Israel—they can't just come hit and run."¹¹⁸ Ultimately, though, the prospect of WMD warfare does not appear to have overly worried Saddam, who told his advisers he was about to attack Israel with conventional warheads "so that the battle gets more exciting."¹¹⁹ In sum, Saddam believed that nonconventional (albeit nonnuclear) weapons provided him with the deterrent power he needed to strike Israel.¹²⁰

War, Sanctions, and Disruption of Iraq's Nuclear and WMD Programs

In the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, Saddam depicted the SCUD attacks as a victory for the Arabs and a shattering blow to the myth of Israeli military invincibility. "God bless surface-to-surface missiles, which deserve every amount of praise," he declared in 1992. "Because you made Israel cry, everything else will be easy."¹²¹

It was a hollow victory, however, because even more than the attack on the Osirak reactor in 1981, the Persian Gulf War proved devastating to the tools Saddam had planned to use in a full-scale confrontation with Israel. The coalition bombing campaign in January and February 1991 severely disrupted the Iraqi nuclear program. As the CIA's *Duelfer Report* notes, "Nearly all of the key nuclear facilities—those involved in the processing of nuclear material or weapons research—were bombed during Desert Storm." Some of these facilities were damaged to varying degrees, whereas others were more or less destroyed, setting the Iraqi program back by at least several years.¹²²

The air campaign and the U.S.-led ground attack that followed also took a heavy toll on Iraqi conventional forces. The regime lost most of its air force

118. SH-SHTP-A-000-670, "Meeting with Senior Iraqi Officials," October 1990.

119. "Saddam and His Advisers Discuss Iraqi Missile Attacks on Targets in Israel and Saudi Arabia," p. 294.

120. Iraq also tried using its chemical and biological weapons to deter the U.S.-led coalition from liberating Kuwait. After the war, Saddam's lieutenants concluded that Iraq would have succeeded in deterring the coalition's military campaigns had it acquired nuclear weapons before invading. It is not entirely clear why Saddam invaded Kuwait prior to acquiring at least a rudimentary nuclear weapon. Most likely, he felt that Iraq's precarious financial position and a suspected international conspiracy against his regime were too pressing to wait until he had crossed the nuclear threshold. His anger at reports of insulting Kuwaiti negotiating behavior might also have played a role. See "Regime Strategic Intent," pp. 33–34; "Transmittal Message," p. 8; F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 89–102; and Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), chaps. 2–3.

121. FBIS-NES-92-059, "Saddam Praises Scud Missile Attacks in Gulf War," March 25, 1992.

122. "Evolution of the Nuclear Weapons Program," in *Duelfer Report*, Vol. 2.

(which had fled to Iran at the outset of the air campaign), as well as significant fractions of its armor, artillery, and antiaircraft capabilities. The regime's forces remained sufficient to put down internal unrest, as the bloody end of the Shiite and Kurdish uprisings in 1991 demonstrated. Yet the armed forces were far reduced from the military that had fought Iran to a stalemate and conquered Kuwait. As U.S. intelligence analysts concluded in late 1993, "Iraq's ability to project power . . . was severely diminished by Desert Storm. . . . Although increased training has improved defenses, Iraq can conduct only limited offensive cross-border operations. It would have great difficulty supporting forces far from logistic nodes within Iraq."¹²³

Although space limitations preclude a detailed discussion of the post-Gulf War trajectory of Saddam's views on Israel, the available records indicate that the war and its aftermath made it increasingly difficult for even someone as optimistic as the Iraqi dictator to contemplate a successful war of coercion against Israel. This is not to say that the war put an end to Saddam's anti-Semitism, his sense that he was destined to lead the Arab world, or his intense hostility toward Israel. To the contrary, in the mid-1990s Saddam told advisers that Israel was "an imperialistic claw used against the Arab nation." "Zionism's line of defense is based on the principle that the Arab nation must be broken," he argued. At another point, Saddam alleged that "Jews from all around the world" were agents of the Israeli intelligence services. In the latter years of his regime, Saddam passed his time, in part, by writing anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic tracts.¹²⁴

What the Persian Gulf War and its aftermath accomplished, rather, was to weaken the Iraqi regime militarily and confront it with threats more pressing than that posed by Israel. Although the UN sanctions and inspections regimes were thoroughly imperfect, they were nonetheless sufficiently intrusive and harsh to impede efforts to seriously reconstitute Iraqi chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons programs. As early as mid-1991, the need to escape severe economic sanctions had convinced Saddam and his top lieutenants that the regime could not risk being caught in efforts to reconstitute its WMD arsenal. As a result, while Saddam sought to mask the extent of Iraq's pre-1991 WMD development and may have hoped to rebuild his advanced weapons programs

123. National Intelligence Estimate, "Prospects for Iraq: Saddam and Beyond," December 1993, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

124. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, pp. 76–77, 80–81, 87. Even as Iraq struggled with UN sanctions, Iraqi intelligence remained vigilant for the opportunity to blacklist companies that traded with Israel. See SH-PDWN-D-000-606, "IIS Correspondence," various dates.

once the sanctions were lifted, the regime apparently made no determined attempt to acquire nuclear weapons between 1991 and 2003.¹²⁵

Additionally, by reducing Iraq's oil revenues and preventing Baghdad from importing weaponry, the sanctions regime led to a continuing deterioration of the Baathist armed forces. In 1995, a memorandum composed by the U.S. National Intelligence Council concluded that improved training had raised Iraqi defensive capabilities, and that the Baathist military might be able to mount an offensive against Kuwait. On the whole, however, the report asserted that the Baathist military "remains plagued by a host of materiel, technical, and operational shortcomings which would limit its warfighting effectiveness beyond Iraq's borders."¹²⁶ The Persian Gulf conflict and the sanctions that followed hardly eased Saddam's animosity toward Israel, but they did largely rob him of the capabilities he had planned to use in an offensive war against the Jewish state.

Just as important, after early 1991 Saddam found himself dealing with dangers more immediate than that posed by Israel. The Shiite and Kurdish uprisings in 1991, as well as several real and suspected coup plots during the early and mid-1990s, raised the specter of internal revolt against the regime. Saddam and his subordinates subsequently devoted much of their attention to dealing with these and other domestic threats.¹²⁷ No less problematic, Saddam now faced a U.S. containment policy that included regular aerial attacks on Iraqi targets, determined efforts to hold the sanctions in place and, at times, efforts to overthrow his regime. Saddam averred that this conflict with the United States would end in a victory for his government, but nonetheless conceded that it significantly taxed the energies of the regime. "Our battle is not over yet," he commented in 1995; "it is still ongoing."¹²⁸

Following the 1991 war, Saddam continued low-grade efforts to antagonize Israel. He opposed the Arab-Israeli peace process, provided payments to

125. "Evolution of the Nuclear Weapons Program" and "Results of ISG's Investigation on Nuclear Issues," in *Duelfer Report*, Vol. 2.

126. "Iraqi Military Capabilities Through 1999," Update Memorandum: MIE 94-19, January 1995, CIA FOIA Reading Room.

127. On this point, see Woods et al., *The Iraqi Perspectives Report*, chap. 1; SH-IISX-D-000-488, "IIS Report on the United States and the Iraqi Opposition," April 2001; SH-PDWN-D-000-328, "Analysis [of] the 1991 Revolution," March 1991; and SH-IDGS-D-000-629, "Correspondence between the General Security Directorate and Other Security Directorates Regarding the Emergency Plan Applied in Every Governate during the Aggression after the Second Gulf War," December 1999.

128. Woods, Palkki, and Stout, *A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files*, p. 66. See also SH-SHTP-D-000-756, "Proceedings of a Meeting Dated 9 Feb 1998 of the Revolutionary Command Council." On U.S. policies toward Iraq during the 1990s, see Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), pp. 182-187, 238-242.

the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, and maintained ties to various Palestinian terrorist groups.¹²⁹ Yet even though Saddam was loath to renounce his ambitions for a more decisive confrontation with Israel, he privately recognized that Iraq's geopolitical potential—and thus the possibility of a successful war—had been significantly reduced. “We have to be careful in not giving promises that exceed our capabilities of executing,” he allowed in late 1995, “as we are a blockaded country that has [faced] many problems as a result of this blockade.”¹³⁰ Saddam's hostility toward Israel remained intact, but the imperatives of survival now took precedence in Iraqi statecraft.

Conclusion

Even before Saddam Hussein formally assumed the Iraqi presidency in 1979, the issue of nuclear weapons was central to his planning for an eventual confrontation with Israel. Desiring to liberate Arab territories, yet aware that Israel's nuclear monopoly threatened to derail such offensive action, Saddam came during the late 1970s and early 1980s to see the acquisition of a nuclear arsenal as the tool that would allow him to neutralize Israeli nuclear threats and bleed the Jewish state in a war of attrition. The disruption of the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981 and again during and after the Persian Gulf War helped ensure that Saddam never got a chance to put this plan into action. Nonetheless, his decision to launch SCUD missiles at Israel in 1991 is consistent with his belief that possession of an unconventional arsenal would provide the deterrent power necessary to take the fight to the “Zionist entity.”

Scholars and policy analysts have long debated Saddam's motives in pursuing nuclear weapons and the sincerity of his frequent public promises to do Israel harm.¹³¹ Although our research of the captured records reveals no evidence that Saddam intended to launch a nuclear first strike against Israel once his nuclear program came to fruition, it does make clear that his public threats were not merely a rhetorical façade.¹³² In public as in private, Saddam was a

129. Saddam's dealings with these and other terrorist groups are detailed in *Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Documents* (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2008).

130. SH-PDWN-D-000-493, “Meeting with Defense Minister of Sudan,” October 26, 1995.

131. Aside from the sources cited in n. 58, see Amatzia Baram, “Israeli Deterrence, Iraqi Responses,” *Orbis*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 397–409; National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79, “Iraq's Role in the Middle East”; Directorate of Intelligence, “The Iraqi Nuclear Program: Progress Despite Setbacks,” June 1983, NSA; Adee I. Dawisha, “Iraq: The West's Opportunity,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 41 (Winter 1980–81), especially pp. 139–145; and Jerrold Post and Amatzia Baram, “Saddam Is Iraq: Iraq Is Saddam,” *Counterproliferation Papers* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air War College, 2002).

132. Although we found no evidence that Saddam intended a nuclear first strike against Israel, Wafiq al-Samarrai, the head of GMID during the 1991 Gulf War, suggested that “Saddam might

deeply anti-Semitic individual who repeatedly spoke of his desire to undertake large-scale conventional action against Israel and believed (perhaps unrealistically) that nuclear weapons were the coercive lever he needed to do so successfully. Scholars have criticized the Israeli attack on the Osirak reactor in 1981 for driving Iraqi nuclear development underground and causing Saddam to accelerate the program, but this critique loses much of its persuasiveness in light of the insights provided by the captured Iraqi records.¹³³ As Saddam himself admitted, the Israelis were right to lose sleep over Iraq's technological development.

Scholars of preventive war argue that rational leaders of rising states should downplay their aggressive revisionist objectives and ascending capabilities so as to avoid preventive military strikes by (relatively) declining competitors.¹³⁴ Saddam, by contrast, either saw things otherwise or simply could not refrain from boasting and threatening. As Saad al-Bazzaz pointedly observed, whereas the Israelis had nuclear weapons but refrained from announcing it, "Saddam announced the weapons even before he had finished building them."¹³⁵ In a press conference on July 20, 1980, Saddam publicly denied that Iraq had a program for building atomic bombs but warned that "whoever antagonizes us should know that, the nation he is antagonizing today will be different in five years' time: it will be an advanced not a backward nation."¹³⁶ He also ominously predicted that the Arab nation would survive even if Israel killed 40 million Arabs.¹³⁷ Whatever the intent of these statements, Saddam's attempts at atomic diplomacy helped generate the Israeli reaction that denied him the bomb.

The foregoing analysis also bears on important theoretical debates over nuclear proliferation and its consequences. Saddam's views challenge the notion prevalent in much of the literature that the security-related concerns motivating states to seek nuclear weapons are necessarily defensive in nature. While Saddam hoped that acquiring the bomb would provide security from foreign

use this weapon when he's about to die. . . . And perhaps he would say to himself that he will be immortalized in history text books." See Wafiq al-Samarrai interview, *Frontline*, originally broadcast January 25, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/samarrai/3.html>.

133. See n. 5.

134. On the logic of preventive war, see Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); and James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414.

135. "Saad al-Bazzaz: An Insider's View of Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* (December 1995), <http://www.meforum.org/article/277>.

136. See "Saddam Husayn's 20th July News Conference," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, July 24, 1980, originally broadcast on Baghdad television on July 22, 1980; and Edward Cody, "Israel Angered as French Send Uranium to Iraq," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1980.

137. "Saddam Husayn's 20th July News Conference."

attack, his desire for nuclear weapons was thoroughly wound up with his revisionist aims regarding Israel. Believing that his own destiny and that of the Arab world hinged on an offensive war to liberate the occupied territories, Saddam naturally viewed nuclear weapons through this prism. Because leaders' conceptualizations of nuclear strategy vary considerably, this case does not invalidate the argument that some or even most states seek nuclear weapons for primarily defensive reasons.¹³⁸ It does indicate, however, that proliferation theorists need to consider more carefully the roles that offensive concerns play in pushing leaders to pursue the bomb.

Finally, Saddam's views on nuclear weapons have implications for the continuing debate regarding the geopolitical consequences of proliferation. Whereas proliferation optimists, as well as scholars such as Francis Gavin and John Mueller, rightly caution against rushing to the conclusion that every case of potential proliferation is a grave threat to international stability and U.S. security, nuclear apathy can be every bit as dangerous as nuclear alarmism.¹³⁹ Saddam's private statements provide a reminder that nuclear proliferation can be destabilizing even when it results in the establishment of a stable deterrent balance at the nuclear level. As the stability-instability paradox might suggest, Saddam hoped that an Iraqi nuclear deterrent would free him to initiate violent, destabilizing policies toward Israel. In the case of Saddam's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons during the 1970s and 1980s, a strong dose of alarm may have been warranted after all.

138. On the diversity of thought among amateur nuclear strategists, see James DeNardo, *The Amateur Strategist: Intuitive Deterrence Theories and the Politics of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

139. See Gavin, "Same As It Ever Was"; Gavin, "Blasts from the Past"; and Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*. Gavin, it should be emphasized, does not count himself among the proliferation optimists.