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Pre-emptive strikes on Iran carry hidden dangers

By Erich Marquardt

S Iran continues its development of nuclear technology, powerful rival states such as the United and Israel have publicly consid- the viability of launching an air against Iran's nuclear facilities Tehran come closer to develop- ability to create nuclear weapons. rael, for example, has a nuclear oly in the Middle East and has its willingness to prevent other Eastern states from acquiring arms. In 1981, when France was g Iraq in its quest for nuclear logy, Tel Aviv launched an air on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, complished its primary objective ng a dent in Baghdad's nuclear programme. Would a similar on Iran's nuclear facilities yield results?

military air strike on Iran's facilities would have a much uccess ratio than the Osirak ad in 1981. Then, Iraq's nuclear programme was concentrated at aitha nuclear centre just outside dad. Baghdad's failure to dis- different aspects of its nuclear me to multiple facilities made it arget for an air strike.

mad Khadduri, a former Iraqi cientist who was the head of ntific experimentation group e Israeli air strike, confirmed to the Power and Interest News Report, "Indeed, in 1981 all of our work was centred at the Tuwaitha site." In order to prevent such attacks from occurring in the future, Baghdad took prompt action after Israel's successful air strike. Khadduri explained, "We began to disperse our nuclear facilities to end up with eight or nine sites for production, processing, enrichment design and research."

Aware of Baghdad's failure to spread its nuclear programme to multiple facilities, Tehran has adopted a safer approach. Realizing that other countries which have military power in the region - such as the US and Israel - may attempt to take military action against their nuclear research programme, Tehran has likely spread its programme into multiple facilities throughout the country. This dispersal strategy will make it very difficult for an outside country to launch a successful air strike.

Dr David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security, recently explained to the Power and Interest News Report the methods that Tehran has taken to protect its nuclear research programme. Albright warned that "while military strikes can hurt Iran's nuclear capabilities, they cannot stop them ... There are likely other facilities that are unknown and would escape damage." Khadduri, too, pointed to the difficulties involved in an attempt to destroy Iran's nuclear research programme: "Unless the attacking country would have human spies infiltrating the Iranian nuclear team, it would be very difficult to pinpoint what to hit in the event of an air attack."

In addition to the operational difficulties in destroying Iran's nuclear research programme, there are also serious political risks involved. In 1981, when Israel attacked Iraq's Osirak reactor, Tel Aviv's move caused Baghdad to accelerate its quest for nuclear arms. By demonstrating Iraq's military weakness in its failure to prevent an Israeli air strike, Tel Aviv's decision merely caused the leadership in Baghdad to believe even more strongly that they needed nuclear weapons to shield against future aggression from hostile states. By acquiring nuclear arms, states are able to increase their defence capabilities since other states are hesitant to take military action against a nuclear-armed rival. As Khadduri writes in his recent book describing Iraq's nuclear research programme, after Israel attacked the Osirak reactor, "Saddam took the political decision to initiate a full-fledged weapons programme immediately afterwards."

President Saddam Hussein's decision in 1981 to accelerate Iraq's nuclear weapons programme displays the danger that would be involved in attacking Iran's nuclear research programme. Any attack would prove to Tehran that its military was too weak to defend the Iranian state from outside threats; just like Baghdad in 1981, this realization would lead Tehran to accelerate its nuclear weapons programme, thus creating an even bigger problem for rival states. Albright asserts that after a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, Iran could "quickly restart a gas centrifuge programme in secret that would be extremely difficult to detect or stop".

The diplomatic anger that would be created by attacking Iran's nuclear research programme would also be fierce. Tehran has extensive diplomatic and economic ties with a variety of states, such as members of the European Union, Russia and India. Russia has been earning much-needed capital by assisting Iran's nuclear research programme. Russian engineers have been building Iran's main nuclear reactor at the southern city of Bushehr. While Moscow has expressed public concern regarding accusations that Tehran may be attempting to develop nuclear arms, it has been unwilling to cease its assistance to Tehran. Along with nuclear assistance, Moscow has been providing Iran with conventional arms. According to "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations", an annual report provided to the US Congress by Richard Grimmett, in the past decade Moscow has provided Tehran with MiG-20 fighter aircraft, Su-24 fighter bombers, T-72 tanks and Kilo class attack submarines.

India also has important ties with Iran. India's strategic concerns over its rival state, Pakistan, are shared in part by Iran; therefore, instability in Iran could weaken India's foreign policy leverage when dealing with the leadership in Islamabad. New Delhi and Tehran have also been collaborating with Russia's state-owned gas company, Gazprom, to build a pipeline that would export gas from Iran to India.

Taking these factors into account, the prospect of launching a successful air strike that would thwart Tehran's pursuit of nuclear technology is not a viable strategy. In addition to the logistical difficulties involved in destroying Tehran's nuclear facilities, there is also the fear that such an attack would only accelerate Tehran's pursuit of nuclear arms. Finally, the political reverberations that would be felt by such an attack would be severe, and the attacking state would likely be held accountable for its actions. —Courtesy Asia Times

What the IAEA wants from Iran

VIENNA: The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohamed El Baradei, has urged Iran to provide "full disclosure" of its nuclear programme, particularly to indicate the origin of traces the IAEA has found of enriched uranium that could potentially be used to make atomic weapons. The main points the IAEA wants Iran to clear up and the steps it wants Iran to take were outlined in a resolution passed by the IAEA board of governors on September 12 that set an October 31 deadline for Iranian compliance.

- The IAEA "calls on Iran to provide accelerated cooperation and full transparency" so that the IAEA can provide its member states with assurances that the Islamic Republic is not secretly developing nuclear weapons.
- It also urges Iran "to suspend all further uranium enrichment-related activities, including the further introduction of nuclear material into Natanz". IAEA inspectors found traces of highly-enriched uranium at Natanz, a fuel production facility south of Tehran. The inspectors also discovered traces of highly-enriched uranium at the Kalaye Electrical Company near Tehran, which the United States says was test-running centrifuges to produce highly enriched uranium. Iran says the uranium particles were imported inadvertently on equipment it bought abroad. It insists it is not producing weapons-grade material but merely trying to develop nuclear power for civilian purposes.
- The IAEA is asking Iran to provide "a full declaration of all imported material and components relative to the enrichment programme" and for "third countries to cooperate closely and fully" in clarifying the matter.
- The IAEA also wants "unrestricted access, including environmental sampling, for the agency to whatever locations the agency deems necessary for the purposes of verification".
- Finally, the IAEA wants Iran to sign an additional protocol to the international nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that would allow its inspectors to make unannounced visits to suspect sites. El Baradei is to submit a report to the IAEA in November on Iran's response to its resolution so the board of governors can reach "definitive conclusions". If El Baradei declares Iran in non-compliance with the international nuclear safeguards process, the board would automatically submit the issue to the UN Security Council, which could impose punishing sanctions on Tehran. —AFP