

SADDAM'S STRATEGY: NO TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS; YES TO BIOLOGICALS

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Advocates of war with Iraq currently contend that Saddam Hussein is actively and aggressively pursuing a nuclear weapons capability much as he did prior to Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. Very little evidence is presented to support this argument, but the logic associated with it generally maintains that Saddam has a capacity for developing illicit weapons in secret. The world was surprised by the post-DESERT STORM revelations of a massive hidden nuclear weapons program by Iraq. If Iraq fooled us once, could they not do so again?

The "better safe than sorry" argument nevertheless overlooks a variety of difficulties that may make nuclear weapons a less desirable alternative for Saddam at this time. Nuclear weapons development requires substantial financial resources, access to technology, and the time to go through a series of stages in the nuclear weapons production cycle. These issues were not major obstacles for Iraq prior to 1990. Baghdad had legal access to a variety of nuclear technologies prior to DESERT STORM as the result of its acceptance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The only drawback of such membership was minor and required that Baghdad accept very nonintrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. These safeguards inspections were easily deceived by the hidden weapons program. Additionally, Saddam could supplement his legal purchases of nuclear technology by illegal purchases obtained from countries with lackadaisical export-control laws and procedures. Western leaders knew that Saddam had a powerful black market procurement network in Europe, but they overlooked it because Saddam was fighting the fanatical Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran from 1980-88. Saddam seems an important bulwark against virulent Iranian nationalism.

In the aftermath of DESERT STORM, Saddam faced a completely new type of inspections regime and huge new problems in purchasing nuclear technology abroad. Inspections were now highly intrusive, and export controls were tightened throughout many countries in the developed world. Additionally, post-war inspections identified and eliminated more of Saddam's nuclear infrastructure than was destroyed in combat, creating the need for a nuclear weapons infrastructure to be developed again, almost from scratch, if Iraq hoped to build its own nuclear weapons.

During years of post-war inspections Saddam appears to have given up on maintaining much of his nuclear infrastructure. Instead, he sought to protect his biological weapons facilities above all other assets. As the Head of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), Richard Butler noted the special protection given to biological assets. Likewise, the defection of Saddam's sons-in-law in 1995 led to a treasure trove of information on biological weapons which Saddam attempted to keep secret long after he gave up other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). This trend of

stressing biologicals continues to be seen in the patterns of legal and illegal acquisitions noted by the United Kingdom's recent White Paper on Iraqi WMD. A great deal of biological warfare related material has been obtained compared to only a trickle of nuclear technology.

Stressing biological weapons over nuclear weapons is also logical for a dictator concerned first and foremost about regime survival. A biological weapons capability is more achievable in the short term. At 65 years old, Saddam has little interest in weapons that promise regime protection in the distant future. Nuclear programs may therefore have only a tangential claim on Iraqi resources. Saddam wants assets to protect his regime now, not 10 years from now. Moreover, a biological program is much more concealable to any country with a legitimate pharmaceutical industry.

When all else fails, the advocates of preemptive war suggest that Saddam may at least be able to purchase special nuclear materials on the black market if he is unable to produce them himself, and, that having such material, he could then produce a weapon. This statement is true, but it can also be applied to all but the most impoverished of countries. Ghana might be able to produce a nuclear weapon if it was able to buy special nuclear material elsewhere. Such an action is very close to buying a finished nuclear weapon. Moreover, no evidence has yet been placed before the U.S. public that such a feat of smuggling has taken place.

Saddam Hussein's apparent decision to emphasize biological weapons over nuclear systems is of concern, but certainly of less concern than if he was close to developing a strong nuclear capability. The reliability of biological weapons in combat are more in doubt, while the opprobrium of a nation using these banned systems would be more severe. Threatening neighbors with biological weapons would be more problematic since no one really knows how useful they will be in combat. While Saddam's overwhelming interest in biological weapons cannot be dismissed, advocates of war with Iraq might at least consider that Iraq is and will probably remain a non-nuclear power for quite some time.