



The Begin Doctrine at 25

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Twenty-five years after the Israel Air Force's extraordinary operation destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor, there is still a lively debate on the results and lessons.

The French-built Osirak facility was shattered and never replaced - an open and shut case, or so it would seem.

Iran is not Iraq, and 2006 is not 1981, so that a rerun of Operation Tamuz (or Babylon, depending on the particular version) is overly simplistic. But the Begin Doctrine, which asserts the fundamental need to prevent any of Israel's enemies from obtaining nuclear weapons, would seem to stand intact.

The assumption that the destruction of Osirak dealt a decisive blow to Iraq's nuclear ambitions, however, is widely challenged, including by numerous Israelis. In the spirit of revisionist history, based on the assumption that the direct and obvious explanations are wrong, many pundits reject the conclusion that the Israeli attack prevented Saddam from obtaining nuclear weapons. The impact, they argue, was temporary - within a few years, Iraq had rebuilt its nuclear infrastructure, obtaining enrichment technologies that avoided the need for a reactor to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.

From this perspective, the 1981 attack did not stop the Iraqi nuclear program, but rather, accelerated and diversified the effort.

Indeed, in the early 1990s, after the first Iraq war and the creation of a special UN inspection regime, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the inspectors uncovered a large-scale effort to obtain nuclear weapons. This technology was widely available, and if Saddam had not been foolish enough to invade Kuwait in August 1990, triggering the war and the inspections, he could have had the bomb within a few years.

THIS PATTERN was repeated less than a decade later. After evicting the UN inspectors, ending the verification process, and building a massive structure for avoiding sanctions, the Iraqi regime resumed the import of nuclear and enrichment technology. Had the 2003 war not led to the dismemberment of Saddam's regime and his capture, Iraq would finally have been able to join the nuclear club.

The debate on the missing WMD and the war focuses on the status of these weapons and capabilities at the time, but there is little disagreement on Saddam's intentions and plans in this area.

Thus the critics of the Begin Doctrine conclude that despite the 1981 Israeli operation Iraq came close to acquiring nuclear weapons twice within 20 years. The attack increased Saddam's determination, and his failure to achieve this goal was the result of other factors that were unpredictable and unconnected.

In other words, the success of the Begin doctrine was a matter of luck, rather than a successful strategy.

BY THIS LOGIC, if Israel were to use military action against the Iranian nuclear weapons program, it would, at best, result in a temporary setback. The retaliation would be swift and painful (much greater than in the case of Iraq) and many of the protected targets scattered around Iran would escape damage. Finally, it is argued, the Iranian people, who are not particularly interested in Israel and do not share the regime's hatred and obsession, would start to view the Jewish state as a real enemy, creating a generational conflict.

The argument makes sense, as far as it goes, but it is incomplete, to understate the case.

The bottom line of the Begin Doctrine and its application in 1981 is the successful outcome. Had prime minister Begin chosen not to act, Iraq would probably have had nuclear weapons within a few years, and the 1991 and 2003 Gulf wars would never have taken place.



In all likelihood, Saddam would still be in power, and far more dangerous than he was at the time. The chances are that by now he would have attempted to translate the nuclear weapons into a source of intimidation, escalating violence and perpetual crisis.

While Begin and the Israeli-decision makers who supported this operation could not have predicted the two Gulf wars, they took a calculated risk, and they were right. The politically correct American and European officials who were quick to condemn Israel's actions at the time have now admitted that they were wrong.

GIVEN THE complexities and unpredictability of international relations, the expectation that the consequences of strategic decisions can be mapped out in detail is illusory. History is not deterministic - the changes set off by one major act, such as the destruction of the Osirak reactor in 1981 - set off additional responses in all directions.

The best any leader and government can do in such circumstances is to select the least bad option. Every situation requires a careful consideration of the available alternatives, and the consequences of both action and inaction.

On this basis, if faced with a similar decision over Iran, Menachem Begin's precedent and the doctrine that he set out in dealing with Saddam's nuclear ambitions retain their importance.

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