



## **U.S. Responses to Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East**

By Gerald Steinberg\*

*The U.S. responses to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation in the Middle East is a core issue in the U.S. regional role no less important than the peace process. Over the past 10 years, the peace process has claimed most of the time and resources of those responsible for formulating and implementing U. S. regional policy in the Middle East. The accelerating proliferation of WMD in the region is often relegated to secondary status except during periods of crisis and sudden and intense activity.*

In Washington, some policy makers have claimed that the state of relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) are important factors in determining the U.S. ability to influence Iraqi and Iranian WMD acquisition. In this article, I argue that the causality is reversed. It is U.S. actions, or lack of action, with respect to WMD proliferation that affects the U.S. ability to influence the peace process.

### **PROLIFERATING PROLIFERATION**

Since President John Kennedy first called attention to the dangers of a world with many nuclear powers, the U.S. government has made efforts to prevent proliferation a top priority. President Carter referred to the fears of his daughter Amy regarding nuclear war and, in 1994, President Clinton signed an Executive Order stating, "The proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons (weapons of mass destruction) and of the means of delivering such weapons, constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States." He declared "a national emergency to deal with that

threat," including the use of sanctions and when necessary, military means. This declaration has been renewed annually. In 1997, Clinton added the need for swift action "in the face of what I consider to be one of three or four most significant security threats that all of our people will face in the next whole generation, this weapons of destruction proliferation. We've got to stop it." (1) The Clinton Administration also adopted a program of counter-proliferation, setting up new Pentagon offices to develop appropriate policies and the necessary tactics and weapons.

Compared to other regions, the Middle East has the greatest rate of proliferation in the world. With the notable exception of South Asia, other areas are reducing the levels of conventional arms and establishing regional non-proliferation regimes. The most active efforts to acquire nuclear weapons are found in the Middle East--primarily in Iraq, Iran, and perhaps now Syria. The recent Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, although based on weapons and technology that were developed many years ago, may accelerate nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. With respect to ballistic missiles, the number of

active programs is larger, including Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and even Algeria. These states also have extensive operational chemical weapons capabilities. In the past months, the extent of the biological weapons programs and threats have become more visible, particularly in the case of Iraq.

There is no need to explain the destabilizing impacts of this proliferation. The dangers of war, instability, and uncertain deterrence are quite clear. Both the United States and Israel are threatened by these capabilities and face similar threats from biological attacks, rogue missiles and nuclear terrorism. With respect to threat assessment, there are no differences between Jerusalem and Washington.

The central question is how to respond. For the past 35 years, the U. S. Government has developed a policy based on multilateral supplier regimes and unilateral sanctions. These policies have had many successes, primarily in South America and Asia. But in the Middle East, the results have not been very positive. This is not only an Israeli view, but is widely held in the United States as well. For example, a recent report of the Senate Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services, concludes, "By speaking loudly but carrying a small stick the Clinton Administration risks its nonproliferation credibility and America's security." (2) The same can be said with respect to the impact on Israeli security.

### **IRAQ: THE ULTIMATE ROGUE STATE**

Iraq was and continues to be a major source of proliferation. From the 1970s and through the 1980s, U. S. intelligence and high-level policymakers consistently missed or underestimated Saddam Hussein's programs. The United States was surprised when Israel decided it need to destroy the Iraqi reactor and again in 1990 when the

almost completed Iraqi nuclear weapons capability was suddenly uncovered. The combination of the tilt to Iraq during the war with Iran, the pro-Iraqi lobbying of Arab states (primarily Egypt and Saudi Arabia), and the fact that the vast majority of intelligence assets were directed toward the disintegrating Soviet Union all contributed to this complacency.

After the 1991 war, which left Saddam in power, and despite the intensive efforts by UNSCOM, the Washington again underestimated the Iraqi capability. While it is true that the United States has maintained the sanction regimes and inspections in Iraq, despite the efforts of Russia, China, and France, the fact is that seven years later, we are still preparing for the possibility of an Iraqi missile and biological warfare attack. In his report of April 1998, Richard Butler, head of the UN Special Commission responsible for certifying Iraqi compliance with arms limit requirements, again cited the continuing impediments placed by Iraq on the operations of UNSCOM. It is not possible to rule out the possibility that Iraq is still holding and even adding to its formidable WMD arsenal. The nuclear weapons design teams are still intact, and much of the information on the Iraqi nuclear program is still hidden. With each "diplomatic agreement" delaying military action designed to enforce the agreed limitations, Saddam has gained more time.

From an Israeli perspective, the Americans have failed to fully redeem pledges to destroy these capabilities during the 1991 Gulf war, when the Bush Administration pressed Israel to act with restraint in the face of missile attacks. Although there are many factors that have complicated the destruction of the Iraqi capability, the United States has lost credibility. For the millions of Israelis who spent six weeks in sealed rooms with gas masks and face this prospect again, the lapses and frequent departures from a

strong, consistent U.S. leadership role have a strong impact.

After winning the Cold War, the United States became the world's only superpower, with new responsibilities that came with this role. All other states--including Russia, Britain, and France--can and do behave as ordinary states, emphasizing their own narrow interests and leaving the resulting problems to the Americans.

Since then, however, the United States has acted inconsistently, and not always as the world leader. Inevitably, Washington has prevaricated and delayed, wasting time while WMD programs went from early research to advanced development and testing. In confronting Iraq, the U.S. has consistently sought the backing of an international coalition--a strategy that has distinct advantages but with costs generally underestimated in Washington. It is clear that whatever the U.S. proposes will be strongly resisted by France and Russia, not only reflecting their economic interests but also "their sheer psychological need to exhibit independence from the United States." (3) While this predictable ritual takes place at every stage in the confrontation, the rate of proliferation accelerates.

In a recent article, Eliot Cohen called for a new strategic concept, an imperial strategy, that would embrace "the reality of an America that now acts as a global empire, rather than as one of two rival superpowers, or a normal state." (4) However, the radical reduction in U.S. military capabilities and frequent cycle of threats and concessions have severely reduced American credibility in acting to enforce the Iraqi ceasefire requirements and in other areas. As Cohen notes, these changes have "steadily but noticeably eroded morale and equipment readiness."

When the United States acts like an ordinary state in the Middle East, looking

for allies before responding to the growing threats from Iraq and Iran, this is inconsistent. Cohen diagnoses the problem precisely, observing "When, as in Bosnia, it is prepared to act, its allies usually go along; when, as in the recent confrontation with Saddam Hussein, the United States wavers, friendly states retreat into passivity."

Saddam still has his weapons and nuclear development teams, waiting for the removal of sanctions to resurface like mushrooms from below ground after a spring rain. The United States knows this but is a giant constrained by its own weight and unable or unwilling to take decisive action. When, on some occasions, the United States has demonstrated an ability to act powerfully (although only after a long period of deliberation and preparation), it has not shown the staying power necessary to deal with the persistent threats posed by countries such as Iraq, with a well entrenched WMD infrastructure. To cite Cohen, "U.S. planners would prefer to prepare for quick, unconstrained, knock-down fights with easily identified opponents." However, in the Middle East, the long haul is what finally counts.

### **IRAN AS A RUSSIAN ISSUE**

Turning to Iran, the U.S. policy has been more consistent. Since 1978, the United States has sought to isolate Iran, refusing to provide technology or funds to allow the Islamic regime to become a regional threat. The "dual containment" policy, as well as the accompanying unilateral efforts to extend this policy to other states, are consistent with the need for U.S. leadership and the fact that if the United States had not led, no other state would have acted instead.

However, the United States has stumbled badly in dealing with Russian, and perhaps to a slightly lesser degree, Chinese assistance to Iran. For the two years since

Yevgeny Primakov became Foreign Minister, the Russians have allowed and promoted the transfer of technology and experts for the development of Iranian long-range ballistic missiles, nuclear infrastructure and also biological weapons. In this period, Iran has made rapid progress in developing ballistic missiles with ranges sufficient to strike Israel. With Russian and some Chinese assistance, Iran has also made progress toward nuclear weapons.

For Israel, the development of responsive capabilities is costly and unilateral actions, such as a repeat of the attack destroying Iraq's nuclear reactor, would be difficult both politically and technically.<sup>(5)</sup> The United States would clearly prefer that Israel avoid such actions and worries they would have a negative impact on the region. Israel has little leverage with Russia. Efforts and meetings, including the dispatch of Minister Natan Sharansky (in charge of foreign relations with Russia), had little apparent impact.

At the same time, Israel began an intense dialogue with the U.S. Government on options and approaches in response to Russian military and technological exports to Iran. At first, in early 1997, when Israeli intelligence officials first presented their assessments in Washington, there was little response from the Clinton Administration. The State Department was eager to avoid conflict with the Yeltsin government, which was weak and under threat from the Communists and nationalists.

Later, the US began to acknowledge the seriousness of the developments, leading to some pressure on Russia and the creation of the Gore-Chernomyrdin forum, which met twice annually. Frank Wisner was appointed as a special representative to hold intense meetings with the Russians. Again, these discussions did not lead to a reduction in the flow of Russian technology and expertise to Iran.

At this stage, the Congress (with some support from the Israeli government) began to consider using sanctions under US export limitation regulations and in terms of additional legislation to increase pressure on Russia. The Clinton administration opposes sanctions, while Iran continues to make progress. After Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions legislation, Clinton vetoed the bill, but in July 1998, when it became clear that there were enough votes in Congress to override the veto, the Russian government finally announced the opening of an investigation with respect to some (but not all) of the firms involved.

By the time the Russians began to move, the Iranian capability may already have reached a stage where it was no longer dependent on externally acquired technology. On July 23, Iran conducted the first tested flight of the Shihab 3 missile. While the test was limited to 800 kilometers, the completed missile is expected to have a range of 1300 kilometers, and able to hit Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Southern Russia. Additional infusion of technology may increase the efficiency of the missile or cut some months off the final stage of the development, but in this case, it appears that Iran either already has the technology and materials necessary for independent production of long-range missiles.

Nevertheless, the issue of Russian support of Iranian proliferation is not moot. Perhaps if the Russians pay a very high price for the aid provided in missile development, including restrictions on their space program and access to US markets and cooperative programs, they might be more cautious in the transfer of nuclear technology. But this is no more than a hope.

## **INACTION AND THE LINK TO THE PEACE PROCESS**

Security, for most states, is indivisible, and this is particularly the case

for Israel. Insecurity in one area or with respect to one threat source leads to fears in other areas as well. If Israelis are threatened with terrorism from Scud attacks and chemical weapons, and U.S. pledges to end this threat are not implemented, Washington's credibility on preventing a future Palestinian state from becoming a haven for terrorists is also reduced. If the current political division in Iran do not lead to a fundamental change in policies with respect to Israel, and a nuclear-armed Iran becomes the leader of the rejectionist camp, this will have profound impacts on Israeli security, making Israel even more reluctant to take the risks of redeployment in the West Bank.

A few months ago, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and former Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk claimed that Israeli policies on the peace process were interfering with American efforts to forge an Arab coalition in order to attack Iraq. There, are of course, many other, far more significant reasons for American inability to gain Arab support against Iraq--most notably, the Arab view that again, as in 1991, the United States would not finish the job, leaving Saddam in power and the rest of the region having to appease him.

U.S. policymakers should also understand that a weak response from Washington to the Iraqi and Iranian threats also makes Israel less willing and able to take security risks in the Palestinian peace process. In other words, the causal effect is reversed. U.S. weakness in dealing with proliferation, for whatever reason, has reinforced Israeli threat perceptions that reemerged when the Oslo process began to go wrong with the waves of suicide bombings. It is possible that a strong U.S. response to Iraq and Iran would have led to decreased Israeli regional security concerns, thereby creating some maneuvering room with respect to security issues and the Palestinians. However, when Palestinians

rally and cheer for Saddam Hussein, and see that this brutal dictator has succeeded in defying the United States, they are less likely to tame their own terrorist infrastructure.

## CONCLUSIONS

The United States is the only potential extra-regional actor that can slow or block proliferation in the Middle East but its responses to date have often been a story of "too little, too late."

In terms of rhetoric, non-proliferation, Middle East stability and guarantees of Israeli security are indeed high on America's list of priorities. But in practice, other policies, such as supporting the Yeltsin government in Russia and preventing a rift with key European states, have greater importance.

Without a change in U.S. policy in this sphere, by the year 2000, the threats warned about by President Kennedy and by every American president since, will finally become a reality. The long period of nuclear stability, with five recognized weapons states was shattered by the Indian and Pakistani tests, but an even greater danger is posed by accelerated proliferation in the Middle East. The United States may be uncomfortable playing the world's policeman, but otherwise, at least on this vital issue, the alternative is a very violent, chaotic Middle East with spillovers to the rest of the world.

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## NOTES

1. Cited in The Proliferation Primer, A Majority Report of the Subcommittee on

International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services, Committee on Government Affairs, U.S. Senate, Washington, DC, January 1998, p. 1

2. Ibid, p. 1

3. Eliot Cohen, "CALLING MR. X", The New Republic, January 19, 1998

4. Ibid.

5. Under the "Begin Doctrine", formulated under Prime Minister Begin in the early 1980s, Israel will act militarily to prevent any country in the region from obtaining nuclear weapons. However, in the past 15 years, such operations have become militarily far more difficult, as would-be nuclear powers have dispersed, buried, and fortified facilities. In addition, they have also developed retaliatory capabilities, including the threatened if not credible use of chemical or biological weapons. Saddam Hussein's April 1990 threat to "incinerate Tel Aviv" seemed designed to deter another Israeli attack on his nuclear programs.