

Will Menachem Begin's 'big lies' about Iraq backfire against him?

by Nancy Coker

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin's game may soon be up. One by one, Begin's statements justifying Israel's June 7 bombing of Iraq's nuclear reactor are being exposed inside and outside Israel as outright lies.

The accumulating public evidence that Begin lied could also give the Reagan administration an added margin of maneuvering room for reining in the mad Begin and tilting the electoral chances toward the more moderate Peres. Siding with Begin are Secretary of State Alexander Haig and National Security Adviser Richard Allen. In contrast, President Reagan is said to be personally outraged over Israel's action, as is the inner circle of his White House staff, including Presidential Counselor Edwin Meese, White House Chief of Staff James Baker III, and political advisers Michael Deaver and Lyn Nofziger. Vice-President Bush, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and the Central Intelligence Agency are all reportedly prepared, for somewhat different reasons, to support Reagan in a tough response against Israel.

Last week, an official State Department spokesman declared that Begin had probably lied in claiming that Iraq was building an atomic bomb. It is "not the consensus of the American intelligence community" that Iraq was preparing to build an atomic bomb, stated State Department spokesman David Passage.

Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency are reported to be conducting an official review of the matter to determine whether or not Iraq had any capability to make a bomb. So far, the verdict is negative.

A string of lies

In justifying the attack on Iraq, Begin lied at least five times.

Lie No. 1: At a party at the British embassy a few days after the raid, Begin told reporters that a secret installation for bomb-making 130 feet underground was destroyed by Israeli planes. Later, Begin "corrected" himself, saying that the secret chamber was only 13 feet below the ground. Now, it appears that there was no secret chamber at all! The French foreign ministry has called Begin's claim a "fantasy accusation." "The only

installation at which this fantasy accusation could be aimed is the building destined for scientific experiments concerning solid-state physics. This equipment cannot in any way be used for military ends."

U.S. officials have also refuted Begin's "secret chamber" story. Even the commander of the Israeli Air Force, Lt. Gen. David Ivri, admitted that he had never heard of such a chamber until Begin suddenly mentioned it several days after the raid.

Lie No. 2: Begin attributed a quotation to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that allegedly admitted that Iraq's nuclear reactor was intended to produce nuclear weapons for use against Israel. On June 9, Begin distributed copies of Hussein's "quote" at a press conference. The quote, said Begin, had appeared in the Oct. 4, 1980, issue of the official Iraqi government daily *Al-Thawra*. One week later, both Begin's office and the foreign ministry admitted that there had been a "mistake": the quote never existed, either in that issue of *Al-Thawra* or in any other.

Lie No. 3: Another of Begin's lies was that Iraq had refused to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect the reactor. In point of fact, the IAEA had conducted an inspection of the reactor in January 1981. Another inspection was slated for this month.

Meanwhile, the director of the IAEA, Dr. Sigvare Eklund, has stated that Iraq's reactor was incapable of making nuclear weapons. Meeting at a closed session in Vienna, the IAEA board of governors condemned Israel for its raid on Iraq. It recommended that Israel be denied technical assistance for its nuclear program and be considered for suspension from the agency. The Israeli raid showed "clear disregard for the agency's safeguards regimen and the nonproliferation treaty and could do great harm to the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes," the IAEA board resolution read.

Lie No. 4: Begin asserted that "U.S. intelligence officials" had passed on information to Israel that Iraq was preparing to build a nuclear bomb. On June 15, the chief of Israel's military intelligence stated that no such information was conveyed by the United States to

Israel. In contrast, the *Daily Telegraph* of London reported last week that Iran had secretly given to Israel a series of aerial photographs of Iraq's reactor.

Lie No. 5: Begin lied that the Iraqi reactor would be activated some time between early July and early September, after which time Israel would not be able to carry out a hit for fear of the radioactivity that would result. According to French nuclear specialists, the Iraqi reactor was not scheduled to go "hot" until the end of 1981.

Why Iraq was not building a bomb

by Dr. John Schoonover

The Osirak reactor that was recently attacked and destroyed by the Israeli Air Force is a very unlikely candidate for a bomb-producing facility. While Iraq seems determined to enter the atomic age, in order to do so, it is essential to train the technicians to carry out the industrial and research functions associated with nuclear and radioactive materials. But Osirak's destruction appears to be primarily motivated by the long-standing Israeli policy of keeping the Arab countries in a state of technological backwardness.

Could Iraq produce a bomb?

Atomic bombs are constructed from either the fissile isotopes of uranium (U-233 and U-235) or the plutonium isotope Pu-239. In the case of U-235, the material must be extracted from natural uranium, of which it comprises only about 0.7 percent, while U-238 makes up nearly all the remainder. The extraction process, called enrichment or isotope separation, is an expensive, large-scale industrial process. At this time, it can be said categorically that Iraq does not have the plant to carry out isotopic enrichment on the required scale.

Plutonium, on the other hand, does not occur at all in nature, and must be created in a fission nuclear reactor, a continual process in conventional electricity-generating reactors.

Plutonium can be separated from spent nuclear fuel rods by a purely chemical process, which, despite the need for special handling equipment to deal with the high-level radioactivity, is much more feasible than isotope separation.

The Osirak reactor is a 70 megawatt swimming pool-type reactor, a standard design that uses ordinary water as a coolant, moderator, and biological shield. Its fuel consists of 93 percent pure U-235, in an amount

sufficient to make a small atomic bomb. However, it could not be diverted for this purpose because of the safeguards that have been instituted.

The fuel for the reactor, as well as the reactor itself, is supplied by France. Before the fuel is to leave France it is heavily irradiated, making it literally too hot to handle without the special equipment known as a hot cell, a radioactively shielded room in which materials can be manipulated by remote control equipment. Iraq has ordered three hot cells from Italy to be installed at the Osirak research station, but as far as is currently known, none of them have arrived on the site.

France also keeps tight control over the fuel after delivery. When the fuel has been consumed in the reactor, the spent rods are to be returned to France for reprocessing, and new rods supplied. *At no time is there any storage of spent fuel rods in Iraq.* The only fuel on hand is that which is installed in the reactor. If any of the fuel were diverted to construct bombs, the loss would be immediately noticed, since the reactor would be inoperable.

Technically, the Osirak research reactor could be used to produce plutonium. The fact that the reactor has a high yield of neutrons and uses a fuel composed of highly enriched uranium means that it can be used to irradiate materials placed in it. However, unless low enrichment or natural uranium is put into the reactor core, in addition to the fuel assembly uranium, the reactor would be a poor plutonium breeder, because the high enrichment of the fuel means that the fertile material, U-238, that could produce Pu-239 has been largely removed from the fuel.

Further, the material will be contaminated with Pu-240 if the fertile U-238 is left in the reactor for more than a few weeks at a time. Pu-240 is undesirable in an atomic bomb because its spontaneous emission of neutrons would cause the bomb to go off fractions of a second too early.

Safeguards

In addition to these technical difficulties, the reactor is under supervision by the French government, and by the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency. Logs must be kept by the users to show what the reactor has been used for, how long it has been operated, what materials have been irradiated, and for what purpose. Stated usage of the reactor must tally with the measurable degree to which the fuel has been consumed. IAEA inspectors have free access to all the records and all the facilities. It is possible to imagine a scenario in which a series of imaginary experiments is concocted to account for the amount of use that the reactor is getting, but at some point such a complex scheme would be bound to break down.

The IAEA monitoring system also includes a num-