

# An Ounce of Prevention—A Pound of Cure?

The Reagan Administration's Nonproliferation Policy and the Osirak Raid

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"I swear I believe Armageddon is near," wrote a shaken Ronald Reagan after learning about the Israeli raid against the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The June 1981 raid was the first successful attack conducted by one state against an enemy state's nuclear reactor.<sup>2</sup> The raid has received much attention in academic and political debate on the usefulness of strikes against hostile nuclear programs, especially in the Iranian context. Yet surprisingly, and despite Reagan's emotional diary entry, some important questions have been left unanswered. How did the raid affect the initial formation of Reagan's nonproliferation policy, and how was the raid perceived by relevant administration officials? How did the administration design its political strategy of response to the raid, and how did this strategy play out at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)? What does this episode tell us about Reagan's foreign policy priorities? This article addresses these questions by exploring recently declassified documents from numerous archives.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. by Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 24.

2. Bennett Ramberg, "The Preemption Paradox," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (2006), pp. 48–56.

3. We conducted research for this article at numerous repositories, including the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRL) in Simi Valley, CA; the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (JCL) in Atlanta; the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (DDEL) in Abilene, KS; the Hoover Institution Archives (HIA) at Stanford University; the U.S. Library of Congress (LC); the Israeli National Archive (INA) in Jerusalem; The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK) in Kew Garden; the National Archives of India (NAI) in New Delhi; the IAEA's official archive in Vienna; the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS) in Rome; the Achille Albonetti Archive, at Roma Tre University (Rome); the Archive of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, in Pretoria; the Woodrow Wilson Center Digital Archive (WCDA); the Digital National Security Archive (DNSA); and additional online archives and databases.

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The article focuses on several critical aspects. To place the discussion of Reagan's policy in context, we begin by exploring the evolution of President Jimmy Carter's nonproliferation policy and his administration's approach to the Pakistani and Iraqi nuclear programs in the second half of his term. We describe the growing skepticism among Carter administration officials about the original policy of universal nuclear denial and outline the administration's increasingly severe assessments of the Iraqi nuclear program and the rising concern over the possibility of an Israeli strike against it.

Following this, we examine the period between Reagan's election in November 1980 and the raid, outlining how Reagan administration officials, during both the transition period and their first months in office, contemplated and designed the administration's proposed nonproliferation policy. Despite harsh rhetoric leveled against the policy of the outgoing administration, crucial elements of the new policy represented a continuation of Carter's policy, not a departure from it, including several key themes that were discussed during Carter's final year in office.

The raid was consequential for the development of Reagan's initial nonproliferation policy, as presented in National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 6, issued on 16 July 1981.<sup>4</sup> Before the raid took place, the Reagan administration was considering revising the 1978 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act (NNPA), legislation that included harsh limitations on nuclear exports. After the Israeli strike, confronting Congress with a major shift in U.S. nuclear exports policy became untenable, as the raid exposed the fragile balance of the nonproliferation regime. As a consequence, the initial policy, contained in NSDD 6, did not include any revision of the NNPA.

We detail the responses of the relevant offices of the Reagan administration to the raid itself. We explore why and how the administration was caught off guard when the raid took place, and we assess the so-called gap in the administration's "institutional memory" regarding prior knowledge of Israel's intent to attack Osirak. This lack of awareness stemmed from two major failures. The first, already established in the literature, was a failure to transfer knowledge properly during the transition period. The second, hitherto unexplored, is a major failure relating to the meeting between Alexander Haig and Menachem Begin on 5 April 1981. Begin's expressed concern regarding the Iraqi nuclear program was not properly contextualized by Haig, and we

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4. "United States Nonproliferation and Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Policy," Unclassified, NSDD-6, Extract, Excised Copy, 16 July 1981, in DNSA. This and other documents cited in the DNSA are available at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/digital-national-security-archive>.

outline several explanations of this event. One of the “lessons learned” from the Osirak raid is the need to ensure a smooth handover of intelligence and assessments regarding time-sensitive issues.

Following this, we explore the construction of Reagan’s “political strategy,” a term used by the administration in responding to the raid. The debate surrounding the raid and a gap in “institutional memory” contributed to the decision to adopt a milder political strategy than initially considered. This was exemplified by the administration’s decision to suspend the delivery of F-16 jets to Israel and then to proceed with the delivery.

Finally, we explore how the administration’s political strategy of response to the raid tested its relationship with the IAEA in the following years, when the agency became a venue for diplomatic battles over Israel’s status. The administration was dismayed by the IAEA’s harsh response to Israel and eventually withdrew the United States from the agency in September 1982. The short-lived withdrawal proved to the administration that, despite the IAEA’s shortcomings, no viable alternative existed that could serve U.S. interests.

## **Placing the Research in Context: Academic Literature**

The “Osirak” literature, both historical and contemporary, has focused on the raid’s implications for the development of the Iraqi nuclear program and has explored its outcome as a strike aimed at curtailing proliferation. However, the U.S. reaction to the strike has remained largely unexplored.<sup>5</sup> With the aim of addressing that gap, this article engages with three distinct strands of literature. The first strand is the literature on Reagan’s nuclear policy. Some aspects of Reagan’s approach to nuclear weapons have been widely discussed in the literature, particularly his arms control efforts during the Cold War’s final years, but Reagan’s nonproliferation policy vis-à-vis aspiring and new proliferators has received little attention to date.<sup>6</sup> The traditionally accepted view is that the administration, preoccupied by strategic competition with the Soviet Union,

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5. One of the few exceptions is Shai Feldman, “The Bombing of Osirak—Revisited,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1982), pp. 114–142.

6. See, for example, Beth A. Fisher, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997); Martin and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan’s Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009); and Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005).

chose to sacrifice its nonproliferation goals in favor of competing strategic interests.<sup>7</sup> Recent research, however, has produced a more nuanced assessment.<sup>8</sup> Our analysis here contributes to the emerging literature by mapping the initial construction of Reagan's nonproliferation policy and its internal logic.

The second strand of literature involves research on counterproliferation strikes and their usefulness as policy instruments. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a new stream of Iraqi sources has been fueling the academic debate on the usefulness of strikes. Surprisingly, Osirak features as an example in both of the opposing camps. Some researchers cite the raid as an example of successful long-term intervention, stressing its effectiveness in "buying time" for further interruptions and interventions and its role in a larger interruption campaign.<sup>9</sup> A competing camp places an emphasis on the raid's negative proliferation impact, arguing it was counterproductive because it both motivated Saddam Hussein to accelerate his nuclear efforts and convinced him to drive it underground.<sup>10</sup> In the United States the Osirak raid has also featured in

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7. Walton L. Brown, "Presidential Leadership and U.S. Nonproliferation Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Summer 1994), pp. 563–575; Richard Rhodes, *The Twilight of the Bombs: Recent Challenges, New Dangers, and The Prospects for a World without Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); Shane J. Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and John Arquilla, *The Reagan Imprint: Ideas in American Foreign Policy from the Collapse of Communism to the War on Terror* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

8. Francis J. Gavin, "Strategy of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Summer 2015), pp. 9–46; and Or Rabinowitz and Nicholas L. Miller, "Keeping the Bombs in the Basement: U.S. Nonproliferation Policy toward Israel, South Africa, and Pakistan," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Summer 2015), pp. 47–86.

9. For studies framing the raid as a successful operation, see Hal Brands and David Palkki, "Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 133–166; Sarah E. Kreps and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Attacking the Atom: Does Bombing Nuclear Facilities Affect Proliferation?" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2011) pp. 161–187; Uri Sadot, "Osirak and the Counter-proliferation Puzzle," *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2016), pp. 646–676; Jeremy Tamsett, "The Israeli Bombing of Osirak Reconsidered: Successful Counterproliferation," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2004), pp. 70–85; Barry Rubin, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in Uri Bar-Joseph, Michael Handel, and Amos Perlmutter, eds., *Two Minutes over Baghdad*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003), p. xvi; and Shlomo Nakdimon, *Tammuz Belehavot* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonot & Hemed Publishing, 2007).

10. Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, "Revisiting Osirak: Preventive Attacks and Nuclear Proliferation Risks," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 101–132; Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, *Unclear Physics: Why Iraq and Libya Failed to Build Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Jacques E. C. Hymans, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Richard K. Betts, "The Osirak Fallacy," *The National Interest*, No. 83 (2006), pp. 22–25; and Sammy Salama and Karen Ruster, "A Preemptive Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities: Possible Consequences," CNS Research Story, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey, CA, August 2004.

policy debates on whether, and under what conditions, Washington should consider a first strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary accounts from 1981 correctly portrayed the raid as an act that met with wide reproach in the United States. The 1991 Gulf War, however, prompted a reevaluation of the episode by former Reagan administration officials and by well-established nonproliferation experts. Gerard C. Smith, President Carter's special representative for nonproliferation, who in 1981 testified before Congress "critically on the Israeli attack," reconsidered his position in 1993, candidly admitting that he "was wrong" and now favored "military actions" against possible proliferators.<sup>12</sup>

After the Gulf War ended, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney tacitly embraced the Osirak raid, praising the Israeli air force for having destroyed Osirak and thanking it for making the "job much easier in Desert Storm."<sup>13</sup> This reevaluation grew stronger after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and, in some cases, evolved into a revisionist narrative. Richard Perle, a former Reagan administration official and former adviser to the Bush administration, repeatedly cited the raid as an exemplary operation and claimed that the 1981 condemnation was not genuine. Perle maintained that "the State Department of course got out the obligatory condemnation of Israel's unilateral action," but in fact "the president [actually] thought it was a terrific piece of bombing."<sup>14</sup> We now know, however, that Perle's account, suggesting that the raid was partly condoned, is inaccurate.

The third strand of literature deals with U.S.-Israeli bilateral relations. Existing accounts are consistent in describing how, much to the surprise of both governments, June 1981 found U.S.-Israeli relations on shaky grounds as the congenial working relationship the two sides expected did not materialize.<sup>15</sup> Israel's raid on Osirak proved to be the first of several clashes

11. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 391–395; and Whitney Raas and Austin Long, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Spring 2007), pp. 7–33.

12. Gerard Smith to David Hambourg, 27 January 1993, p. 3, in Box 13, Gerard C. Smith Papers, DDEL.

13. Joseph Cirincione, "Bombs Won't 'Solve' Iran," *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2005, p. A17.

14. Richard Perle, "Should Iraq Be Next," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 16 December 2001; Richard Perle, "The United States Must Strike at Saddam Hussein," *The New York Times*, 28 December 2002, p. A19; and Rodger Claire, *Raid on the Sun: Inside Israel's Secret Campaign That Denied Saddam the Bomb* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), p. 221.

15. Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Mitruman Ve'ad Obama* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2011), pp. 168–191. Other important sources on U.S.-Israel relations during the Reagan administration include Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); William B.

during Reagan's first term, and the president found himself repeatedly using "the sanction whip" against Israel.<sup>16</sup> The impact of the raid itself on bilateral relations, especially in the context of the U.S. withdrawal from the IAEA, has received limited scholarly attention.

## The Evolution of Carter's Nonproliferation Policy

In the first half of Carter's term, his administration emphasized efforts to prevent the spread of sensitive nuclear fuel cycle technology and highlighted the importance of establishing a credible and functioning international regime by "universally" denying nuclear supplies to clients that did not meet certain standards.<sup>17</sup> This policy led to stricter regulations on nuclear exports, as contained in the 1978 NNPA, and increased congressional oversight of executive-branch compliance.<sup>18</sup>

However, several nuclear-related developments highlighted the policy's shortcomings. The administration was alarmed by the nuclear programs of Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, and South Korea and was especially concerned about the Pakistani nuclear program.<sup>19</sup> In bilateral talks held in February 1977 with the United States, the Israelis tied the Iraqi and Pakistani programs together, though the Iraqi program was not yet a U.S. concern.<sup>20</sup>

The major worry for the Carter administration regarding Pakistan was that, even after U.S. officials convinced the French not to export

Quandt, ed., *The Middle East: Ten Years after Camp David* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1988); and Mattia Toaldo, *The Origins of U.S. War on Terror: Lebanon, Libya, and American Intervention in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2013). Other studies on the bilateral relations include Douglas Little, "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957–68," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1993), pp. 563–585; Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The United States and Israel since 1948: A 'Special Relationship'?", *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 231–262; Galen Jackson, "The Showdown That Was Not," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 130–169; and George Ball and Douglas Ball, *The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

16. Ben-Zvi, *Mitruman Ve'ad Obama*, pp. 170–173.

17. Presidential Review Memorandum/National Security Council (NSC) 15, "Non-Proliferation, Safeguards, and International Nuclear Fuel Cycle Evaluation," 21 January 1977, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980*, Vol. XXVI, (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers), pp. 782–783.

18. J. Michael Martinez, "The Carter Administration and the Evolution of American Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy, 1977–1981," *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2002), pp. 261–292.

19. Peter A. Clausen, *Nonproliferation and the National Interest* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 135–137.

20. Memorandum of Conversation, Jerusalem, 16 February 1977, in *FRUS, 1977–1980*, Vol. VIII, Doc. 6, p. 26.

plutonium reprocessing plants to Pakistan, the Pakistanis were still “determined to have at least a nuclear option.”<sup>21</sup> A growing U.S. concern was the possibility of a Pakistani nuclear test.<sup>22</sup> In December 1979, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the geostrategic picture changed. National Security Council (NSC) staffers now proposed resuming aid to Pakistan without first obtaining concessions on the nuclear program.<sup>23</sup> Carter attempted unsuccessfully in 1980 to reshape relations with Pakistan, but he reached no new strategic bargains with Pakistan’s leader, General Zia ul-Haq. Still, the administration continued its efforts to limit sensitive exports to Pakistan through a policy of *démarches*, an approach that continued under Reagan.<sup>24</sup>

Iraq’s nuclear program gradually began to present a major challenge to Carter’s nonproliferation policy in the second half of his term. As late as December 1978, the Iraqi program still did not present a serious concern to Washington and, unlike Pakistan, India, and South Korea, was not listed as a matter of nonproliferation concern.<sup>25</sup> But the picture gradually changed in 1979. In the second half of the 1970s the French insisted on exporting two nuclear reactors to Iraq, one relatively large, coupled with highly enriched uranium (HEU). French exports were matched by Italian supplies. The Italian authorities agreed to export numerous facilities to Iraq, including “hot cells,” in return for Iraqi oil. France’s and Italy’s agreements to supply Iraq with “major nuclear components” were described in a June 1979 National Intelligence Estimate as having “obvious implications for U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy.”<sup>26</sup>

21. Or Rabinowitz and Jayita Sarkar, “It Isn’t Over until the Fuel Cell Sings’: A Reassessment of the U.S. and French Pledges of Nuclear Assistance in the 1970s,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1–2 (2018), pp. 275–300; and Assessment by Stansfield Turner, NSC Memorandum, secret/sensitive, Policy Review Committee Meeting, “Subject: Minutes: Policy Review Committee (PRC) Meeting on Pakistan,” 9 March 1979, in National Security Council, Institutional Files, 1977–1981, Box 73, JCL.

22. Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and Its Cold War Deals* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 137–167; Secret memorandum for the president, from Cyrus Vance, attached to a draft letter from President Carter to President Zia, 20 June 1979, in National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Thomas Thornton’s Subject File, RAC Project Number NLC 98-4-3-0, JCL; and Secret memorandum for Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, from Peter Tarnoff, 27 August 1979, in Office Files Zbigniew Brzezinski Material, RAC Project Number NLC-37-5-19-0, JCL.

23. Secret/sensitive NSC memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, from Thomas Thornton and Marshall Brent, “Subject: PRC on West Asia,” 27 December 1979, in National Security Affairs, Staff Material, North/South, Thomas Thornton’s Country File, Box 102, JCL.

24. Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*, pp. 137–167.

25. Memorandum from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter, n.d., in *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. I, Doc. 107, pp. 516–526.

26. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 36.2-1-76, “Iraq’s Role in the Middle East,” 21 June 1979, in *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. XVIII, Doc. 137, pp. 435–438.

In July 1979, U.S. diplomats told their Italian counterparts that it was an “American strong belief” that Iraq was pursuing a nuclear capability, and they asked the Italian government to provide information on the nature of the “nuclear supplies” to Iraq. The Italians dutifully complied but rebuffed any further pressure from Washington as inappropriate.<sup>27</sup> In October, the intelligence community concluded that although Iraq was not likely to attempt to produce nuclear weapons before the late 1980s, it would “probably persist in acquiring all that it needs for this purpose under the guise of peaceful nuclear activities.”<sup>28</sup> Still, in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter administration did not rule out a rapprochement with Saddam Hussein’s regime.<sup>29</sup> In September 1980 the assessment of Iraqi nuclear capabilities grew bleaker, and NSC staffer Jerry Oplinger contended that “a crude Iraqi bomb could conceivably be just two years away,” adding that a “summary of recent intelligence indicates that the Israelis have very good reason to be concerned.”<sup>30</sup>

The reference to the Israeli “concerns” came against the backdrop of ongoing talks with Israel on the subject. Under Prime Minister Begin, the Israeli government had become increasingly wary of Iraq’s nuclear program.<sup>31</sup> Israel had three main concerns, which were all reflected in the talks held with the French in the year before the raid. First, the Israelis worried that Iraq would be supplied with enough HEU to enable it to produce a uranium bomb.<sup>32</sup> Second, they were concerned that Iraq would be allowed to modify its reactor,

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27. Appunto, Ministero degli Affari Esteri [Ministry of External Affairs], 13 July 1979, in Fascicolo 22 “Iraq,” Fondo Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Consigliere Diplomatico, II Versamento, Busta 21, ACS. We thank Leopoldo Nuti for sharing this document with us. See also Memorandum from CNEN to Ministry of External Affairs, “Iraq-Fornitura di attrezzature nucleari – Informazioni all’Ambasciata USA” [Iraq - Nuclear Supplies – Information for US Embassy], 14 settembre 1979, in Achille Albonetti’s personal papers, Box 43, Roma Tre University.

28. Memorandum, from Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence, to the President, 22 October 1979, in File: Iraq, 1-77-3-80, Collection: Zbigniew Brzezinski Material—Country Files (NSA 6), Box 34, JCL.

29. Telegram from the United States Interests Section in Baghdad to the Department of State, 26 June 1980, in *FRUS, 1977–1980*, Vol. XVIII, Doc. 142, pp. 449–450. See also Hal Brands, “Saddam Hussein, the United States, and the Invasion of Iran: Was There a Green Light?” *Cold War History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2012), p. 223.

30. NSC memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, from Jerry Oplinger, “Subject: Iraqi Nuclear Program,” 25 September 1980, in File: Iran/Iraq, 9/80, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material—Country Files (NSA 6), Box 34, JCL.

31. Nakdimon, *Tammuz Belehavot*, pp. 87–109.

32. Top secret telegram, 7203, from the Ambassador, Paris, to the Foreign Office, “Subject: Iraq,” 17 July 1980, in Prime Minister Menachem Begin—France, Physical identifier 8 - 4321/10, INA.

enabling it to produce, reprocess, and accumulate plutonium.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Israel was concerned that Iraq would unilaterally withdraw from existing safeguard arrangements or from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), leaving it with the relevant capabilities to produce nuclear weapons—but free of any treaty obligations not to do so.<sup>34</sup> From 1978 to 1980 Israel tried to undermine the Iraqi program with a mixture of tools, including diplomatic pressure on the United States, France, and Italy and clandestine operations in Europe.<sup>35</sup> When President Reagan was sworn in, the Iraqis were progressing at full speed.

The possibility of an Israeli strike alarmed the Carter administration. Oplinger warned that Israel was “not about to wait” for hostile nuclear programs like Iraq’s “to mature before responding.”<sup>36</sup> He added that “the threat of an Israeli response is now also an objective factor,” concluding that the “only alternative” was to “play hardball with France.”<sup>37</sup> In a meeting on 25 July 1980, U.S. diplomat Thomas Pickering unambiguously warned Israeli Ambassador to Washington Ephraim Evron against a strike, cautioning that “any precipitous [sic] acts would carry grave risks and should be avoided.”<sup>38</sup> The exchanges rang the administration’s alarm bells. An internal memorandum from National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski stipulated that “it is important for U.S. to decide quickly on follow-up actions,” adding that “in view of the urgency,” the recommendations for “further approaches” should be prepared within the week.<sup>39</sup>

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33. Top secret telegram, 1116, from the Foreign Office, to the Paris embassy, “France-Iraq Nuclear Co.,” 28 July 1980, in Prime Minister Menachem Begin—France, Physical identifier  $\aleph$  - 4321/10, ISA.

34. Classified telegram, 7250, to the Foreign Office, “Subject: Fon Min Talk with French Fon Min,” 27 September 1980, in Prime Minister Menachem Begin—France, Physical identifier  $\aleph$  - 4321/10, ISA.

35. Sadot, “Osirak and the Counter-proliferation Puzzle,” pp. 656–659.

36. NSC memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, from Jerry Oplinger, “Subject: Begin’s Appeal on the French/Iraqi Nuclear Issue,” 23 July 1980, in File: Iran/Iraq, 9/80, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material—Country Files (NSA 6), Box 34, JCL.

37. *Ibid.* For pressure on Italy, see Sensitive memorandum for Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, 21 November 1980, in Folder 1, Staff Material—Middle East, RAC Project Number NLC-47-1-13-8, JCL.

38. Draft of talking points [in cable format, with handwritten revisions by Robert Hunter and Jerry Oplinger], “Subject: Begin’s Appeal to President Carter Concerning French Enriched Uranium to Iraq,” 23 July 1980, in File: Iran/Iraq, 9/80, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material—Country Files (NSA 6), Box 34, JCL; and Thomas Pickering, phone interview, 18 January 2018. (Pickering is a former assistant secretary of state for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs.) See also Nakdimon, *Tammuz Behevot*, p. 142.

39. Memorandum for the secretary of state, from Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Subject: French and Italian Nuclear Cooperation with Iraq,” 28 July 1980, in File: Iran/Iraq, 9/80, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material—Country Files (NSA 6), Box 34, JCL.

This sense of urgency was underlined in September when the Israelis confirmed to U.S. officials that they were, in fact, considering a strike. This confirmation was received on 29 September 1980, just as the Iranian air force was attacking targets in Baghdad, including an unsuccessful attack against the Osirak site. Recently retired Defense Minister Ezer Weizman told U.S. Ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis that “the Israeli Defense Ministry was seriously considering the possibility of carrying out an air strike against Iraq’s nuclear facility under cover of the current Iranian air attacks in Baghdad.”<sup>40</sup> On 17 December 1980 Lewis met with Begin and told him, as instructed, that “the United States shares Israel’s serious concern” and that the Iraqi installations “are intended to give that country’s government the option of developing nuclear explosives in the future.”<sup>41</sup>

By 1980, the failure to curb the Pakistani and Iraqi nuclear programs had caused some administration officials to doubt the effectiveness of the existing policy. In June 1980, Gerard Smith proposed to engage Washington’s European allies in a discussion of a revised approach: the United States would assume a more flexible line on plutonium reprocessing by allies in Europe and Japan in return for “improved cooperation in dealing with countries of proliferation concern, including concrete steps to strengthen restraints on exports of sensitive technology and material to such countries.”<sup>42</sup> Carter supported Smith’s proposal against Brzezinski’s advice but asked Smith to keep the talks at an exploratory, noncommittal stage.<sup>43</sup>

Yet despite being dissatisfied with the policy, Carter never made a formal decision to change it, in part because he knew that doing so would meet strong objections both domestically and internationally. In December 1980 the time came to evaluate the policy and prepare for the handover to the incoming Reagan administration. Oplinger argued: “On balance, and judged by

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40. Top secret—sensitive memorandum, “Situation Room Checklist,” 29 September 1980, in 9.21.80–9.30.80, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material, President’s Daily Report File (NSA 1), Box 17, JCL. Weizman served as Begin’s defense minister from 1977 to May 1980. He earlier served as the commander of the Israeli air force from 1958 to 1966 and then as deputy chief of the general staff of the Israeli Defense Forces.

41. Immediate cable, 7592, to Sec-State, from Tel-Aviv embassy, 9 June 1981, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [1 of 6], Executive Secretariat, Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL. These exchanges were also discussed in Nakdimon, *Tammuz Belevavot*, p. 142.

42. Draft Telegram to USIAEA, for Ambassador Smith, from secretary, attached to Memorandum from the president’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, “Subject: Post-INFCE Explorations by Gerry Smith,” 17 June 1980, in *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 383, pp. 977–978.

43. Memorandum from the president’s assistant for national security affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, “Subject: Post-INFCE Explorations by Gerry Smith,” 17 June 1980, in *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 383, pp. 974–975.

its stated objectives, the Carter nonproliferation policy has to be considered a failure.”<sup>44</sup> Smith in his final report also expressed discontent, criticizing the rigidity of the administration’s approach.<sup>45</sup> He pointed to the “serious concern” arising from Pakistan’s nuclear program and the “acquisition of sensitive facilities by Iraq, Argentina and Brazil.”<sup>46</sup> Significantly, he proposed to increase the policy’s flexibility by “eliminating certain sanction provisions in the NNPA and the Foreign Assistance Act.”<sup>47</sup> Carter was unsure how to pose the different options to Reagan’s transition team, writing in the upper right-hand corner of the first page of Smith’s memorandum, “Zbig, How best to present alternatives to next administration?”<sup>48</sup>

## The Inception of Reagan’s Nonproliferation Policy

After Reagan’s election in November 1980, the transition team in charge of nuclear matters called for a clean break from the policies of the outgoing Carter administration. An Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) transition team headed by Eugene Rostow was placed in charge of developing the recommendations for the new nonproliferation policy.<sup>49</sup> In December 1980, these were submitted to James Malone, chairman of the Nonproliferation Coordinating Committee.<sup>50</sup>

The recommendations called for treating nonproliferation policy “in the context of overall U.S. international security requirements,” adding that the United States “should make every effort to restore its credibility and reliability as a nuclear supplier and to enhance its role in international nuclear commerce

44. Memorandum from Jerry Oplinger of the NSC staff to the president’s assistant for national security affairs (Brzezinski), 23 December 1980, in *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 396, pp. 1012–1014.

45. Memorandum from the president’s assistant for national security affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, “Subject: Nonproliferation Policy—Report of Gerry Smith” [includes tabs A, B, C], 24 November 1980, in Folder 11, Staff Material—Global Issues Files (NSA 28), Box 52, JCL.

46. *Ibid.*, Tab B.

47. *Ibid.*, Tab B.

48. See Memorandum from the president’s assistant for national security affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, 24 November 1980, in *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 395 p. 1,004n.1.

49. For an account of the origins of Rostow’s foreign policy views, see John Rosenberg. “The Quest Against Détente: Eugene Rostow, the October War, and the Origins of the Anti-détente Movement, 1969–1976,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2015), pp. 720–744.

50. Memorandum from James L. Malone to Frank Shakespeare, 18 December 1980, in Folder 5, Eugene V. Rostow Office Files, 1976–1992, Internal Documents, Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) Records, Box 71, HIA. Malone was confirmed in June 1981 as assistant secretary of state for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs, and, during the first year of the administration, he acted as the coordinator of the administration’s nonproliferation policy.

as a mean of strengthening its ability to achieve nonproliferation objectives.”<sup>51</sup> The transition team's working assumption was that Carter's nonproliferation policy, especially the adoption of the NNPA, had caused a sharp decline in the status and reputation of the United States as a reliable nuclear supplier and must be promptly revised.<sup>52</sup> In a memorandum from 18 December 1980, Malone stated that the NNPA “should be revised as soon as possible,” echoing Smith's proposal.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the explicit criticism of Carter's policies, the recommendations reflected a striking level of continuity with the thinking that had evolved during the second half of the Carter administration. The Reagan administration's proposed new policy drew heavily from the adjustments considered during Carter's last year in office. To address the loss of U.S. leadership in the international nuclear market and the alienation of allies, the new policy proposed the adoption of a case-by-case approach instead of universal measures, and officials suggested that the “policy of denial” of nuclear supplies be applied only to countries “posing a threat to U.S. international security interests.”<sup>54</sup>

In the following months, administration officials sought to convert the transition team's proposals into an official policy. In April 1981 an interagency study involving the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Joint Chiefs of Staff was completed.<sup>55</sup> The study maintained that the best way to address nuclear proliferation was by focusing on bilateral relations and on the security motivations behind proliferation.<sup>56</sup>

On 7 June 1981, the day of the Osirak raid, a policy paper prepared by the Senior Interagency Group on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Cooperation (SIG) was submitted to the NSC.<sup>57</sup> The discussion paper characterized the administration's nonproliferation efforts as a “key foreign policy

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51. “ACDA Transition Final Report,” n.d., p. 4, in Folder 5, Eugene V. Rostow Office Files, 1976–1992, Internal Documents, CPD Records, Box 71, HIA.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

53. Memorandum from James L. Malone, Chairman, Non-Proliferation Coordinating Committee, to James Edwards, U.S. Secretary of Energy Designate, 18 December 1980, in “Recommendations for the Reagan administration Non-Proliferation Policy,” File 137/10/02, Vol. 9, Doc. 8/27/5/1 (Pretoria, Department of Foreign Affairs), also available online at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org>.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Memorandum from Special Assistant for Nuclear Proliferation Intelligence (NPI), National Foreign Assessment Center (NFAC), CIA, to resource management staff, Office of Program Assessment et al., “Request for Review of Draft Paper on the Security Dimension of Nonproliferation,” 9 April 1981, published in *Nuclear Proliferation International History Project—NPIHP Research Update*, No. 6, WCDA.

56. *Ibid.*

57. “Full Paper of the Senior Interagency Group on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Cooperation,” attached to Memorandum 8117659 for Mr. Richard V. Allen, from L. Paul Bremer III, 7 June

objective” and as “vital to U.S. and international security” and repeated the criticism that the Carter administration had damaged U.S. export reliability. The paper also suggested revising the NNPA.<sup>58</sup>

The SIG document, endorsing one of the themes discussed in Carter’s last year in office, maintained that the United States “must recognize and deal with the security and other motivations which lead nations to acquire nuclear explosives” and that these would be affected by “our readiness to exercise power in the interest of ourselves and our friends.”<sup>59</sup>

Addressing the conceptual difference between policies aimed at preventing proliferation by nuclear hopefuls and policies aimed at dealing with states that had already crossed the nuclear threshold, the memorandum made the following important distinction: “Our efforts will also have to deal increasingly with controlling the results of proliferation in addition to preventing it.”<sup>60</sup> The “control” of the “results of proliferation” was to be accomplished by “direct[ing] our efforts toward preventing or delaying testing, weaponizing or perhaps even the use of nuclear explosives by proliferating states.”<sup>61</sup>

As for relations with the IAEA, a vital component of the policy, the ACDA paper argued that the United States could achieve its nonproliferation goals by using the agency as an agent. The IAEA and the NPT were to be “further strengthened and given greater U.S. support.” To reinforce U.S. influence over the agency, the paper recommended that “support to the IAEA in the form of financial contribution, manpower and technical advice should be increased significantly.”<sup>62</sup> This view, however, was not unanimous, and an internal debate addressed the agency’s merits. The transition team’s report stressed that the United States should focus its efforts on attempting to “reverse the trend” of increased politicization within the IAEA, and it recommended dealing with the issue by acquiring a greater political and economic role inside the agency and by influencing the selection of its next director general.<sup>63</sup>

The SIG report underscored the latent skepticism toward the IAEA. A footnote in the document indicated that the Department of Defense (DoD)

1981, in “NSC00014, 12 June 1981,” Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Box NSC 11-20 (Box 91282), RRL.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–14.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. “Recommendation for the Reagan Administration Nonproliferation Policy,” n.d., pp. 2, 10, in Rostow/ACDA, CPD Papers, Box 175, HIA.

63. *Ibid.*

had expressed “reservations about the effectiveness of IAEA safeguards, the weakness of the IAEA as an international institution, its susceptibility to Third World and East Bloc, its lack of an intelligence capability, and the limits of its scope and jurisdiction” and warned against undue reliance on it.<sup>64</sup> Rostow shared this opinion.<sup>65</sup> The official formulation of Reagan’s proposed nonproliferation policy was then accomplished with the adoption of NSDD 6, issued on 16 July 1981 and coupled with a public presidential statement—only four weeks after the Osirak raid.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Reagan Administration’s Awareness of “Osirak” Prior to the Raid**

How did Carter administration officials brief the incoming Reagan administration on Osirak, and was the issue flagged? The answers remain murky. The issue was not given emphasis in the months preceding the raid, leading to a sense of surprise when it finally took place. Information about Osirak was confined to the State Department, and the highest officials who came in with Reagan were not made aware of it. When asked by Israeli writer Shlomo Nakdimon about how the incoming administration was briefed on the issue, Carter replied, “Reagan chose his secretary of state and his secretary of defense only in the last minute,” a blurry answer that failed to explain how (or even whether) these officials were briefed.<sup>67</sup>

Robert Hunter, director of Middle East affairs in the Carter administration, recalls personally briefing his successor at the NSC, Geoffrey Kemp, on the issue and warning that “if the United States didn’t do something soon about [Osirak], Israel would likely bomb it.”<sup>68</sup> How this briefing was received is unclear. Available records and personal accounts reveal an absence of discussion on the topic; there are no available documents indicating that Reagan or his NSC team discussed the issue prior to the raid or were made aware of it.<sup>69</sup>

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64. “Full Paper of the Senior Interagency Group on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Cooperation,” p. 10.

65. Memorandum from Eugene Rostow to the vice president et al., 1 June 1981, in “NSC00014, 12 June 1981,” Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Box NSC 11-20 (Box 91282), RRL.

66. “United States Nonproliferation and Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Policy.”

67. Nakdimon, *Tammuz Belehavot*, p. 286.

68. Robert Hunter, email interview, 27 December 2017.

69. Douglas J. Feith, phone interview, 30 January 2018. Feith was an NSC staffer at the time of the raid.

RAND researcher Warren Bass interviewed Lewis on this matter in 2012. Lewis, who was apprehensive about a flawed handover of the issue, told Bass he had “made a series of secure phone calls back to Washington” during the transition to make sure the new administration was “provided with a history” of the contacts between the United States and Israel on the Osirak reactor. Lewis said he “was assured” that the issue was included in a key transition document, but “the document was subsequently slapped with an extremely high level of classification, leaving it in a compartment into which very few incoming officials had been read.” Apparently, Secretary of State Haig and other senior officials never saw it. “It got so over-classified that it stayed in a compartment and got lost in the shuffle,” Lewis told Bass.<sup>70</sup>

Other issues—the Iran-Iraq War, the Israel-Egypt peace process, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—dominated Washington’s Mideast agenda at the time.<sup>71</sup> At the operational level, Israel’s technical-military capability to conduct a successful long-range, high-precision bombing raid against the reactor was not examined. Because the Israeli press did not discuss the Iraqi nuclear program in the months leading up to the raid, U.S. analysts observing the region did not flag the issue.<sup>72</sup> The diplomatic corps largely assumed that Israel would consult or inform the United States prior to any raid.<sup>73</sup> In April 1981, the possibility of an Israeli attack was briefly mentioned in a non-proliferation report but was not framed as an immediate threat.<sup>74</sup> Nicholas A. Veliotes, assistant secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, recalled that he spent none of his time “considering the possibility of an Israeli attack on the Iraqi reactor.”<sup>75</sup>

A further unresolved issue surrounding the degree of U.S. awareness of Israel’s intentions before the raid relates to Haig’s visit to Israel and his

70. Warren Bass, *A Surprise out of Zion? Case Studies in Israel’s Decisions on Whether to Alert the United States to Preemptive and Preventive Strikes, from Suez to the Syrian Nuclear Reactor* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), pp. 29–30.

71. Nicholas A. Veliotes, email interview, 28 December 2018; and Wayne White, email and phone interview, 23 December 2018. Veliotes served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs from 1981 to 1984. White is a former intelligence analyst with the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

72. White, interview; and Feith, interview. White notes that this Israeli strategy was labeled as “denial and deception.”

73. Pickering, interview.

74. Special assistant for NPI, NFAC, CIA, to Resource Management Staff, Office of Program Assessment et al., “Request for Review of Draft Paper on the Security Dimension of Nonproliferation,” p. 2.

75. Veliotes, interview.

private meeting with Begin on 5 April 1981.<sup>76</sup> As secretary of state, Haig would have been briefed on the State Department assessments on Osirak before his trip, and Begin and Haig did discuss the Iraqi nuclear program during their meeting.<sup>77</sup> Begin asked Haig, "What did the U.S. do in light of Israel's incessant requests to halt Iraqi nuclear development." Haig replied, "We intervened with Italy and France, but to no avail."<sup>78</sup> Veliotes, who accompanied Haig to Israel, was not informed by the secretary of any mention of the Iraqi reactor, and the issue was not probed further.

Is it therefore plausible, as Haig later wrote in his memoirs, that the Reagan administration did not become fully aware of Israeli concerns and intentions until after the raid, even though Haig had explicitly discussed Osirak with Begin?<sup>79</sup> Available accounts show that Haig seemed genuinely surprised by the raid. Why did he ignore the concern Begin expressed on 5 April? According to Veliotes, Haig might have discounted Begin's apprehension and attributed it instead to Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who had voiced deep trepidation about Osirak. During the visit, Sharon "was quite obnoxious and bombastic, verging on insulting in meetings with Haig," conceivably causing Haig to underestimate his anxiety.<sup>80</sup> Another possibility, noted by Douglas J. Feith, an NSC staffer at the time, is that Haig did not realize that by giving Begin a discouraging report about diplomatic progress with the French and the Italians, "he was in fact making Israeli military action more likely."<sup>81</sup> Alternatively, perhaps Haig did note Begin's concern but, believing that an Israeli raid would not be harmful to U.S. regional interests, decided to turn a blind eye.

Contemporary accounts demonstrate the existence of a complex mixture of elements, including a lack of interest and experience, poor flow of information, prejudice, and conflicts within the incoming administration. These factors produced a confused and incoherent interpretation of the episode's

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76. "Israel: Begin, Haig make Statements after Meeting,' Jerusalem, Domestic Television Service in Hebrew," 5 April 1981, in "Alexander Haig, Department of State Day file, 5 April," Papers of Alexander Haig, Box 147, LC.

77. The memorandum of conversation from the meeting is still classified in both U.S. and Israeli archives. Luckily, Israeli journalist Shlomo Nakdimon had access to the Israeli memorandum. He included it in his book and also read out the note verbatim at a conference. See Nakdimon, *Tammuz Belevavot*, p. 203; and Shlomo Nakdimon, speech (presented at the "Menachem Begin's Heritage" conference, Tel Aviv, 21 March 2002, p. 53.

78. Nakdimon, speech.

79. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Scribner, 1984), p. 183.

80. Veliotes, interview.

81. Feith, interview.

background. Polarized attitudes toward Israel further complicated the flow of information and opinions within the administration and prevented a deep understanding of the situation.

## The Administration's Initial Reaction—Shock and Condemnation

On 7 June 1981, the Israelis conducted the raid against the Osirak nuclear reactor with F-16 jets purchased from the United States under a 1952 bilateral agreement. That agreement prohibited Israel from using U.S.-bought weapons to attack its neighbors unless doing so was an act of “legitimate self-defense.”<sup>82</sup> The raid also represented a potential legal challenge in light of the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) of 1976. The ensuing legal debate within the White House and on Capitol Hill focused on whether the raid violated the AECA, which prohibited the use of U.S.-supplied weapons except in self-defense.<sup>83</sup>

The administration was profoundly surprised by the raid—Reagan himself was “astounded”—especially given the “absence of any prior consultation” by Israel.<sup>84</sup> Still, Reagan’s national security adviser, Richard V. Allen, recalled that after Reagan was briefed about the raid he commented, “boys will be boys.”<sup>85</sup> Despite the surprise of the attack, the president sympathized with the Israelis. A startled Haig was also directly briefed by the Israeli ambassador to Washington.<sup>86</sup>

The international community’s reaction was critical of the Israelis, who were condemned by friends and foes alike.<sup>87</sup> Arab media speculated about

82. NSC memorandum 3494, for Richard V. Allen, from Robert M. Kimmit [NSC staffer], “Subject: Israeli Strike—Legal Aspects,” 11 June 1981, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [1 of 6], Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL.

83. *International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976*, Public Law 94-329, 30 June 1976, 94th Cong.; and Ghassan Bishara, “The Political Repercussions of the Israeli Raid on the Iraqi Nuclear Reactor,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1982), pp. 58–76.

84. Samuel Lewis, U.S. ambassador to Israel from 1977 to 1985, published this description. See Samuel W. Lewis, “The United States and Israel: Constancy and Change,” in Quandt, ed., *The Middle East*, p. 230; Veliotes, interview; Feith, interview; and Pickering, interview; and White, interview.

85. Richard V. Allen, “Reagan’s Secure Line,” *The New York Times*, 7 June 2010, p. A23.

86. Top secret telegram, 6667, from Washington embassy to the Foreign Office, “Subject: Iraqi Reactor,” Foreign Minister—eyes only, 7 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA.

87. Memorandum for Richard Allen, from the Situation Room, 10 June 1981, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [4 of 6], Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL.

U.S. involvement in the attack, and the Egyptians warned Washington that, unless the administration stood “strongly against” the Israeli action, the Arab world “would believe the U.S. was behind it.”<sup>88</sup>

Reagan's national security team dedicated the morning after the attack, 8 June, to the raid.<sup>89</sup> The “Haig-Weinberger split,” which separated advocates of closer strategic ties with Israel, such as Haig, from those who supported a closer affiliation with the Arab world, led by Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, was not evident in the Monday morning meeting.<sup>90</sup> Reagan's officials shared similar negative views of the raid, and Weinberger called for sanctions against Israel and for a suspension of deliveries of Israeli-bought F-16 jets.<sup>91</sup>

According to notes describing the exchange between Haig and Israeli diplomats, Weinberger also proposed a hard stance against Israel at the United Nations (UN), targeting Israel's nuclear program. Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor, which started operating in 1963, was never put under IAEA inspections because of Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity, which was an extremely sensitive issue in U.S.-Israeli relations.<sup>92</sup> According to Haig, Weinberger expressed support for a UN resolution demanding that Israel open Dimona for inspection and calling on Israel to join the NPT.<sup>93</sup> When news of the raid had broken the previous day, Weinberger had told his interlocutor that Begin “must have

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88. Memorandum for Richard Allen, from the Situation Room, 9 June 1981, p. 2, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [4 of 6], Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL; and “Situation Room Checklist,” 12 June 1981, Israel / Iraq Book II (3), Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL.

89. Allen, “Reagan's Secure Line.”

90. This term was coined by Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 404. See also Toaldo, *The Origins of U.S. War on Terror*.

91. Weinberger had consistently rejected closer ties with Israel, stressing the importance of addressing “the needs of the Israelis without damaging [U.S.] relations with moderate Arab states.” Later, he openly conveyed his dismay to Israeli leaders, expressing support for the opposition. See Memorandum for the president, 8 January 1982, in Secretary Weinberger's Weekly Report (1/9/1982–2/20/1982), RAC Box 7, Executive Secretariat: Agency File, RRL; and Memorandum for the president, 13 August 1982, in Secretary Weinberger's Weekly Report (8/5/1982–8/27/1982), RAC Box 7, Executive Secretariat: Agency File, RRL.

92. Austin G. Long and Joshua R. Shifrinson, “How Long until Midnight? Intelligence-Policy Relations and the United States Response to the Israeli Nuclear Program, 1959–1985,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2019), 55–90; Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

93. Top secret telegram, 5682, from the Israeli embassy in Washington to the Foreign Office, 10 June 1981, in file 4341/3-8, INA; and Top secret telegram, 5714, from the Israeli embassy in Washington to the Foreign Office, 10 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA.

taken leave of his senses.”<sup>94</sup> At the meeting, Vice President George Bush and his chief of staff, James Baker, both concurred with Weinberger.<sup>95</sup> Even Haig, a supporter of close ties with Israel, called the raid “reckless.”<sup>96</sup> The secretary of state was “less vocal” than usual at the meeting and chose to support “official American criticism of Israel.”<sup>97</sup>

The State Department announced that the administration “condemned” Israel for the bombing, stressing the raid’s “unprecedented character.”<sup>98</sup> Behind the scenes, Haig told the Israeli ambassador that the Israeli “action in Baghdad [had] caused a serious complication for the U.S., and President Reagan thinks the same.”<sup>99</sup> Administration officials feared that Washington would be blamed for the raid because of its close association with Israel.<sup>100</sup> This fear was compounded by the extreme precision of the attack, which indicated to expert observers around the world that Israel must have had access to “extremely precise targeting information to complete the operation without refueling”; that is, it must have had access to images from the U.S. KH-11 reconnaissance satellites.<sup>101</sup> Many defense officials, including Weinberger and CIA Deputy Director Robert R. Inman, thought the raid, by exposing Washington to accusations of collusion, had severely undermined U.S. regional interests.<sup>102</sup>

On 10 June, much to the surprise of the Israelis, Haig declared the administration’s decision to suspend the delivery of four F-16 jets to Israel. No time frame was given for when the suspension might be lifted.<sup>103</sup> Haig briefed

94. Azriel Bermant, *Margaret Thatcher and the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 61.

95. Top secret telegram, 4882, from the Israeli embassy in Washington to the Foreign Office, 8 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA. See also Allen, “Reagan’s Secure Line.”

96. Claire, *Raid on the Sun*, pp. 219–220.

97. Allen, “Reagan’s Secure Line.”

98. Bernard Gwertzman, “U.S. Says Air Strike May Violate Accord,” *The New York Times*, 9 June 1981, p. A1.

99. Top secret telegram, 5083, from Washington Embassy to Foreign Office, “Subject: Administration Response,” 9 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA.

100. Telegram, from Washington embassy to New Delhi, 12 June 1981, in U.S.–West Asia Relations (Middle East), WII/104/6/81, NAI, p. 2.

101. Israel had previously been given access to U.S. satellite images up to 200 miles from its borders, clearly within the range needed for the raid. This practice, combined with bureaucratic inertia, had allowed Israel to circumvent the agreed limits, according to Inman. Admiral Robert R. Inman, U.S. Navy (Ret.), interview, Austin, TX, 27 January 2017.

102. *Ibid.*

103. Top secret telegram, 5682.

the Israeli ambassador, telling him that Weinberger had demanded the suspension of *all* military aid to Israel but that when Haig and Allen strongly objected, the administration had decided the suspension would apply only to the delivery of the four F-16 jets.<sup>104</sup> Publicly, Haig confirmed that the raid potentially represented “a substantial violation” of the 1952 U.S.-Israeli arms pact and that the administration was “conducting a review of the entire matter.”<sup>105</sup>

Why were the Israelis surprised by the suspension of the F-16 deliveries? Following the 5 April 1981 talk with Haig, Begin incorrectly believed that Israel at the time of the raid was operating with Washington's support—or its partial support at least. According to Major General (ret.) David Ivry, commander of the Israeli air force at the time of the raid, Begin construed Haig's statement

as if he had received a green light from the Americans . . . this was not the American intention. . . . The Americans did not object to the attack because they were never asked for their opinion and we never discussed it with them.<sup>106</sup>

Begin's cabinet secretary, Arye Naor, concurs and explains that “the interpretation of the meeting in Israel was not identical to the interpretation in Reagan's circle, and this is the reason for his [Reagan's] sense of insult and anger” by the surprise of the raid.<sup>107</sup>

In the first 72 hours after the raid, only a minority of Israel's firmest supporters, such as State Department Director of Policy Planning Paul Wolfowitz, openly expressed their satisfaction with it.<sup>108</sup> At the Pentagon, Perle, who was then assistant secretary of defense, stated that the raid was “a great act of anti-proliferation.”<sup>109</sup> Perle, together with Richard Burt, director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, told British Ambassador Nicholas Henderson that the raid was “a blow on behalf of nonproliferation,” irrespective of official public statements.<sup>110</sup>

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104. Ibid.

105. NSC memorandum 3494, for Richard V. Allen from Robert M. Kimmit.

106. Major General (ret.) David Ivry, interview, Tel-Aviv, 6 December 2016.

107. Arye Naor, interview, Jerusalem, 29 January 2017. Nakdimon, who interviewed Begin, reached the same conclusion. See Nakdimon, speech.

108. White, interview; and Feith, interview. White recalls Wolfowitz “giggling” at the briefing.

109. Claire, *Raid on the Sun*, pp. 219–220.

110. Bermant, *Margaret Thatcher and the Middle East*, p. 61.

## Discovering the “Gap in Memory” and Lowering the “Anti-Israeli Rhetoric in Town”

Even as the administration devised its response to the raid, U.S. officials came face to face with what Ambassador Lewis called a “gap” in the administration’s “institutional memory.”<sup>111</sup> In a detailed cable, Lewis described the entire Carter-era dialogue, which left him “with no doubt that before the Iraqi reactor became operational, the Israeli forces would destroy it.”<sup>112</sup> Over the following days, it became clear to top officials that the highest leaders were not fully informed on the issue.

Lewis’s cable took a few days to percolate to the top. Reagan’s diaries make clear that as late as 9 June, two days after the raid, he had not yet been filled in on the history of the talks. With regard to Begin, he wrote, “He should have told U.S. & the French, we could have done something to remove the threat.”<sup>113</sup> By contrast, Allen’s memorandum to Reagan on 15 June stressed that “during the last months of the Carter administration, the State Department knew of Jerusalem’s thinking on Iraq’s nuclear program, including the determination to resort to force if diplomacy failed to eliminate the Iraqi nuclear threat.”<sup>114</sup> On 16 June, Reagan mentioned that “Israel & the previous Admin. did communicate about Iraq & the nuclear threat & the U.S. agreed it was a threat.”<sup>115</sup> According to Kemp, Lewis’s memorandum “sobered us up” and consequently “lowered the anti-Israeli rhetoric in town.”<sup>116</sup>

Lewis’s cable coincided with the Israeli effort to mitigate the potential for a harsh U.S. reaction. In response to the relatively punitive backlash, Israel launched an intensive public relations campaign in the press, in Congress, and in the White House, justifying the decision to attack by divulging sensitive intelligence on Iraq’s nuclear activities.<sup>117</sup> Haig reported to Reagan that inside

111. Immediate cable, 7592, to SecState, from Tel-Aviv embassy, 9 June 1981.

112. *Ibid.*

113. Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 24.

114. Memorandum, 3547, for the president from Richard V. Allen, “Subject; Diplomatic Background to Israeli Raid on Iraq’s Nuclear Reactor,” 15 June 1981, in Israel/Iraq—Book II (4/5), Executive Secretariat—Country File: Israel-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 69), RRL.

115. Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 25.

116. Geoff Kemp, email communication, 6 January 2018.

117. A document explaining Israel’s decision to attack was handed by Israeli officials to their American counterparts. See Memorandum, for Richard V. Allen, from Gene Rostow, ACDA, “Subject: Diplomatic and Nonproliferation Fall-Out from the Israeli Raid on Iraq,” 19 June 1981, in Israel/Iraq—Book I (1), Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 69), RRL.

Congress the “reaction spanned the full range, from open support to questions of possible violations of U.S. arms sales legislation” and that Israel had begun an intensive campaign to convince its supporters.<sup>118</sup> Most of the diplomatic “heavy lifting” was conducted by the ambassador and his staff, who briefed members of Congress and White House officials on Israel’s stance.<sup>119</sup> The Israelis also asked former President Richard Nixon to intervene and mediate in the crisis.<sup>120</sup>

The effort was also supported by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which held briefings for senators to emphasize that the raid was in Israel’s self-defense.<sup>121</sup> From Israel’s perspective, the public relations campaign seemed to have an almost immediate effect. On 12 June, Israeli diplomats reported to Jerusalem a mitigation of tone.<sup>122</sup> Indian diplomats based in Washington noted that, in “confidential briefings, some officials voiced their understanding and even support” for Israel.<sup>123</sup> A more careful approach was, in fact, forming in Washington. The discovery of the “gap” in memory and the Israeli campaign contributed to this shift.

## **Constructing a Milder “Political Strategy” of Response**

The adoption of a more restrained, sober approach toward Israel is revealed by the way the administration constructed its “political strategy for responding to Israeli attack.”<sup>124</sup> Of all the executive offices, NSC staffers supported the mildest response, though they stopped short of overt support of the raid.

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118. Memorandum for the President from Alexander M. Haig, “Subject: Secretary Haig’s Evening Report,” 9 June 1981, in Secretary Haig’s Evening Report (6/6/1981-7/2/1981), Executive Secretariat: Agency File, RAC Box 6, RRL.

119. Telegram, 282, from Washington embassy to Foreign Office, 16 June 1981, in File: Prime Minister Menachem Begin, USA, physical indicator: 4341/3-8, INA; and Secret telegram, 5172, to the Washington ambassador, from Foreign Office, “Subject: Iraqi Reactor,” 9 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA.

120. Nakdimon, *Tammuz Belevavot*, pp. 285–286.

121. Thomas A. Dine and Douglas M. Bloomfield to Senator Charles Percy, n.d., in File 4341/3-8, INA. Dine at the time was executive director of AIPAC, and Bloomfield was legislative director.

122. Secret telegram, 6547, from Washington embassy to Foreign Office, “Subject: ‘Israel-US Relations Following the Action against the Reactor,’” 12 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA.

123. Telegram, from Washington Embassy to New Delhi, 12 June 1981, in Israel-Iraq Conflict, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), WII/104/32/81, NAI, p. 1.

124. Memorandum for the president, from Walter J. Stoessel, Jr., acting [Secretary of State], “Subject: Political Strategy for Responding to Israeli Attack,” 15 June 1981, in Israel/Iraq—Book II (4/5), Executive Secretariat—Country File: Israel-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 69), RRL.

Raymond Tanter, for example, recommended a “middle course of action,” one that would distance the United States from the strike “while avoiding extreme measures designed to punish Israel.”<sup>125</sup> Douglas J. Feith took the debate a step further by stating that “no rebuke of Israel’s raid against Iraq should be issued without an equally emphatic rebuke of Iraq.”<sup>126</sup>

One clearly pro-Israeli voice belonged to Rostow. For him, the raid was framed by the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, and he contended that the administration should “lead great coalitions” to “restore the policy of containment” and reinstate “world public order.”<sup>127</sup> He stressed that Israel should basically be given an exemption from the NPT on the grounds that “no one can ask or expect nations facing destruction to adhere to the NPT or accept IAEA inspection in good faith.”<sup>128</sup>

Haig also departed from Weinberger’s critical line by introducing a third, intermediate approach to the issue, plotting a path between Weinberger and the NSC.<sup>129</sup> His suggested political strategy, approved by Reagan on 12 June, also took a milder course compared to the initial condemnation of 8 June.<sup>130</sup> The policy was constructed around the notion of red lines. Rather than the line proposed by the NSC, the United States would harshly condemn Israel but would also “draw the line on punishment,” making clear that “if Israel is expelled from the UN General Assembly, *or any other UN body*, U.S. participation would be jeopardized.”<sup>131</sup>

On 16 June Reagan publicly addressed the raid. Adopting the proposed “mirrored rebuke,” he stated that “Israel had reason for concern” because of

125. NSC memorandum 3360, for Richard V. Allen, from Raymond Tanter, “Subject: Israel’s Air Strike on Iraq’s Nuclear Facility,” 9 June 1981, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [4 of 6], Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL.

126. Feith’s argument was based on the fact that Iraq had continually refused to acknowledge Israel’s existence and was officially at war with it. See NSC memorandum 3368, for Richard V. Allen, from Douglas J. Feith, “Subject: Israeli Raid on Iraqi Nuclear Facility,” 9 June 1981, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [4 of 6], Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL.

127. Secret memorandum from ACDA Director-Designate Eugene Rostow to all participants in the NSC meeting, “Subject: Additional Comment on NSC Discussion Paper: Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Cooperation,” 11 June 1981, in “NSC00014, 12 June 1981,” Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Box NSC 11-20 (Box 91282), RRL.

128. *Ibid.*

129. In addition to the “Haig-Weinberger split,” National Security Adviser Allen continually clashed with Haig. See Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 403.

130. Confidential, memorandum for the President, from Walter J. Stoessel, Jr., “Subject: U.S. Strategy for UN Security Council Meeting on the Israeli Raid on the Iraqi Nuclear Facility,” 12 June 1981, in Israel/Iraq-Book I (1), Executive Secretariat—Country File: Israel-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 69), RRL.

131. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

Iraq's history and that "Israel might have sincerely believed that [the attack] was a defensive move."<sup>132</sup> Haig's deputy, Walter J. Stoessel, Jr., repeated these points to the Senate and admitted that the United States had "long been concerned about the Iraqi nuclear facility."<sup>133</sup>

## Assessing the Legality of the Raid and Lifting the Suspension

Another aspect of the U.S. response to the Israeli raid was the suspension of the F-16 deliveries. The suspension prompts several questions: Was the raid a legitimate, legal act within a "self-defense" framework? Or was it an illegal, unprovoked attack in violation of the arms agreement? The Iraqi installation was, after all, an IAEA-safeguarded nuclear facility, established by an NPT member-state, attacked by a non-member-state. Reagan, like other observers, expected an official finding on the raid's legality. Showing his positive sentiments for Israel, he confided in his diary on 10 June that, if Congress found that Israel had indeed violated the agreement, "I'll grant a Presidential waiver. Iraq is technically still at war with Israel & I believe they were preparing to build an atom bomb."<sup>134</sup>

However, no presidential waiver proved to be necessary. The new discovery regarding the so-called "gap" in institutional memory, which, given Haig's discussion with Begin in April, was not a "gap" but more of a bungle, changed the tone in the White House. A week after the raid—unbeknownst to the Israelis, who were still extremely concerned and disappointed about losing the jets—the suspension of the F-16 deliveries was approaching its end.<sup>135</sup> The administration was backing away from its declared intention to conduct a legal review of the raid. Allen informed Reagan that the administration was "not required to make a legal determination on whether Israel violated U.S. law" and commented that the issue of the raid was "to be treated as a *political* rather

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132. Ronald Reagan: "The President's News Conference," 16 June 1981, in *The American Presidency Project*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php>.

133. "Statement by Walter J. Stoessel before the Subcommittees on Europe and the Middle East and International Security and Scientific Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee," 17 June 1981, in Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Facility, 6/8/81) [3 of 6], Executive Secretariat—Country File: Iran-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 68), RRL; and "Statement by Walter J. Stoessel before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," 18 June 1981, in Gerard Smith Personal Papers, Box 33, DDEL, p. 2.

134. Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 24.

135. Top secret telegram, 6191, from Washington embassy to Foreign Office, "Subject: Evron—The President," 11 June 1981, in File 4341/3-8, INA.

than a *legal* question.”<sup>136</sup> Stoessel agreed: “We will try to avoid an extended congressional review which could interfere with our decision to resume F-16 deliveries when we deem that step desirable.”<sup>137</sup> Although the White House and Congress debated the legal implications of the raid, no official determination was ever made. Political concerns prevailed over legal matters, and the suspension was officially lifted on 17 August 1981.<sup>138</sup> Whether the Israelis were informed about U.S. intentions prior to this date is unclear.

Rostow, a former law professor, offered a legal interpretation of the raid that was not officially endorsed. He stated, “The Israeli move parallels our own behavior in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and represents a similar combination of circumstances. . . . [Both] come within the inherent right of a state to defend itself under article 51 of the [UN] Charter.”<sup>139</sup> Arthur J. Goldberg, former associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States and a former permanent representative of the United States to the UN, sent a letter to Begin offering his own legal analysis, which concluded that the raid was indeed legal.<sup>140</sup>

Indian diplomats speculated at the time that the fighter jet suspension may have been a U.S. gesture of goodwill toward Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat, aimed at appeasing him and keeping the embryonic peace process with Israel alive.<sup>141</sup> A memorandum from Haig reinforces this view, stating that the Israelis were dismayed at the “Egyptian intervention in this important bilateral U.S.-Israeli matter.”<sup>142</sup> The lifting of the suspension might have been coordinated with Sadat, who, according to Haig, had asked for “daylight” between his visit to Washington and the announcement of resumed deliveries.<sup>143</sup> Further research is required to determine the depth of Sadat’s

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136. Memorandum 3553, for the President, from Richard V. Allen, “Subject: Political Strategy for Responding to Israeli Attack,” n.d., attached to Stoessel memorandum from 15 June 1981, in *Israel/Iraq—Book II (4/5)*, Executive Secretariat—Country File: Israel-Iraq, Box 37 (Box 69), RRL; emphasis in original.

137. Memorandum for the president, from Stoessel, Jr., “Subject: Political Strategy for Responding to Israeli Attack,” 15 June 1981.

138. Richard F. Grimmett, “U.S. Defense Articles and Services Supplied to Foreign Recipients: Restrictions on Their Use,” 14 March 2005, Congressional Research Service, p. 6.

139. Secret memorandum from ACDA Director-Designate Eugene Rostow, 11 June 1981.

140. Telegram, 288, from Yossi Gal, Washington embassy, to PM’s office, 16 June 1981, in File 8470/12, INA.

141. Cable from Embassy Baghdad to Foreign Ministry in Delhi, 11 June 1981, in *U.S.-West Asia Relations (Middle East)*, MEA, WII/104/6/81, NAI.

142. Memorandum for the president from Alexander M. Haig, “Subject: Secretary Haig’s Evening Report,” 13 August 1981, Secretary Haig’s Evening Report (7/30/1981–8/17/1981), Executive Secretariat: Agency File, RAC Box 6, RRL.

143. *Ibid.*

involvement and whether the administration would have lifted the suspension earlier, had it not been for Sadat's request (or later in the absence of Israel's efforts to get the deliveries resumed).<sup>144</sup>

## **Domestic and International Implications for the Administration's Nonproliferation Policy**

Following the logic of the "red lines," the U.S. government endorsed the international condemnation of the Israeli raid at the UN. With the support of the U.S. delegation, on 19 June the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 487.<sup>145</sup> The resolution "strongly" condemned the attack and stated, in opposition to Rostow's legal analysis, that it was "in clear violation" of the UN Charter.<sup>146</sup> The resolution also stated that the attack was a serious threat to the "entire safeguards regime" of the IAEA and stressed that Israel should "urgently place its nuclear facilities under safeguards," also specifying that Iraq was entitled to redress.<sup>147</sup>

On Capitol Hill, congressional debate moved from considering the raid itself to scrutinizing the administration's intentions regarding its emerging nonproliferation policy. This review transpired weeks before the release of NSDD 6 and before the White House had the opportunity to introduce its new proposed policy to Congress and the public. In the wake of the Israeli attack, the NNPA "was pulled off the congressional shelf, dusted off and read carefully" by congressional members who had a newfound interest in nonproliferation.<sup>148</sup>

Administration officials addressing the raid were asked to comment on the administration's stance toward the nuclear programs of Pakistan and India and on Reagan's nonproliferation agenda.<sup>149</sup> Almost unanimously, congressional representatives stated the importance of preserving and reinforcing the existing domestic and international rules and legislation on proliferation when

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144. The authors are grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers for this comment.

145. For the original text of the resolution, see UNSC Resolution 487, adopted 19 June 1981, Official Document System of the United Nations, <https://documents.un.org/prod/ods.nsf/home.xsp>.

146. *Ibid.*, Article 1.

147. *Ibid.*, Articles 1, 5, and 6.

148. "The Mood of Congress after the Israeli Bombing of the Iraqi Reactor," *Nucleonics Week*, Vol. 22, No. 24 (1981), p. 4.

149. "Testimony of Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology, James Buckley, U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Energy, Nuclear Proliferation, and Government Processes, Hearing," 24 June 1981, in Gerard Smith Personal Papers, Box 33, DDEL.

discussing the Osirak raid. On 18 June, Stoessel sought to deflect congressional criticism by testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the administration's "nonproliferation policy guidelines" were soon to be released. Toning down the emphasis on change and flexibility that had dominated the internal debate in the previous months, he now stressed the need for strict control and highlighted U.S. support for "global adherence [to], and respect for, the most stringent safeguards."<sup>150</sup>

The same cautious approach was evident in testimony given by other administration officials.<sup>151</sup> The White House had no chance to win a confrontation on the NNPA revision without causing a major clash in Congress, and the issue was simply dropped. Not surprisingly, NSDD 6 did not contain any specific reference to revision of existing U.S. nonproliferation legislation, nor did Reagan's official statement of 16 July.

The IAEA's safeguard system was another recurrent item of discussion during the congressional debate on the raid. Its credibility was questioned, especially after Roger Richter, a former IAEA inspector, gave controversial testimony.<sup>152</sup>

The U.S. government was aware of the negative impact the Israeli bombing could have on the IAEA and on the credibility of the international nonproliferation regime. An interagency intelligence assessment from July warned of the raid's damaging impact on "the Nonproliferation Treaty and the IAEA safeguard system" and argued that it might enhance Third World sympathies for an Arab nuclear deterrent.<sup>153</sup> U.S. officials also feared that India might decide to attack Pakistani nuclear facilities in a similar fashion, thus establishing a pattern that could disrupt the existing nonproliferation regime.<sup>154</sup>

150. "Statement by Walter Stoessel before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," pp. 2–3.

151. "Hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Energy, Nuclear Proliferation and Government Processes, Committee on Governmental Affairs," 24 June 1981, in Gerard Smith Personal Papers, Box 33, DDEL.

152. Roger Richter, "Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," 19 June 1981, in Gerard Smith Personal Papers, Box 33, DDEL, pp. 2–3; A. O. Sulzberger Jr., "Ex-Inspector Asserts Iraq Planned to Use Reactor to Build A-Bombs," *The New York Times*, 20 June 1981, sec. 1, p. 1; Eliot Marshall, "Fallout of the Raid on Iraq," *Science*, Vol. 213, No. 4503 (1981), pp. 116–120; and "Hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Energy, Nuclear Proliferation and Government Processes, Committee on Governmental Affairs," pp. 14–15.

153. "Implications of Israel Attack on Iraq," Interagency Intelligence Assessment, 1 July 1981, pp. 2–3, Document Number (FOIA)/ESDN (CREST): 0000211961, in CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room (ERR), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>.

154. "India's Reaction to Nuclear Developments in Pakistan," Special NIE, 1 September 1981, in CIA, FOIA ERR.

## The September 1982 Decision to Withdraw from the IAEA

The international community was critical of the raid, and diplomatic battles over Israel's status began to play out in the IAEA and its General Conference (GC) in the months that followed. For the Reagan administration, the two policy questions stemming from the raid converged: how to handle the diplomatic fallout, and how to keep the IAEA from being hopelessly politicized.

After the raid, some administration officials revisited their views of the role of the IAEA and the NPT. Rostow, for example, stressed that "the principles of the NPT and the IAEA should be the lodestars of our policy," adding that the IAEA is "is the only mechanism there is."<sup>155</sup> Later he added that expulsion of Israel from the agency would "gravely weaken the IAEA as an institution and endanger our nonproliferation objectives in the Middle East." He went so far as to warn that expulsion could lead Israel to reconsider its policy of nuclear ambiguity.<sup>156</sup>

The second casualty of the raid, in addition to Iraq's reactor, was, therefore, the IAEA's credibility.<sup>157</sup> In 1982, the administration raised "questions concerning the credibility and reliability of IAEA safeguards," and both the Senate and the House held special hearings on the "technical and institutional shortcomings" of the agency.<sup>158</sup> Richard T. Kennedy, Reagan's representative to the IAEA, raised similar concerns, stressing the "uneven" nature of the organization's safeguard system.<sup>159</sup>

September 1981 found the atmosphere at the IAEA's annual GC meeting ripe for conflict. The U.S. delegation was instructed by Haig to address the anticipated "severe attack" against Israel. Building on Haig's "red lines strategy" employed at the UN Security Council, the delegation was told to "go

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155. Secret memorandum from ACDA Director-Designate Eugene Rostow, 11 June 1981.

156. Memorandum for the president, from Eugene Rostow, "Subject: Arms Control Issues Affecting the Middle East, Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone," 5 November 1981, Guhin Michael Files, Box 1 (RAC Box 2,3,4,6), RRL.

157. IAEA officials staged their own counter-campaign. See Sigvard Eklund, "Attack on the Iraqi Nuclear Research Center," 7 June 1981, in Achille Albonetti's personal papers, Box 200, Roma Tre University; and Hans Gruemm, "Safeguards and Tamuz: Setting the Record Straight," *IAEA Bulletin*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1981), pp. 10-14.

158. United States Executive Office of the President, "Report to the Congress Pursuant to Section 601 of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Act of 1978: For the Year Ending December 31, 1981," 1982, pp. 23-24, in DNSA.

159. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

along regretfully with a condemnation but object vigorously [to] suspension of technical aid.”<sup>160</sup>

Haig informed Reagan that the U.S. delegation would “condemn *exclusion* of Israel” but would not walk out; however, if Israel’s IAEA membership was suspended, the U.S. delegation “would immediately withdraw from the meeting,” and the United States would reassess “participation in the IAEA.”<sup>161</sup> The difference between the two paths, exclusion and suspension, is important. Suspension would have amounted to the official expulsion of Israel, a harsh move requiring a two-thirds majority vote. On the other hand, the motion to reject the credentials of the Israeli delegation would qualify as a “slap on the wrist”; Israel would still officially be a member of the IAEA, but its delegation to the meeting would not be officially recognized. Consequently, it would be barred from participating in the remainder of that specific GC meeting.<sup>162</sup>

On 26 September 1981, the GC adopted Resolution 381, which called for the IAEA to consider suspending Israel if it failed to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 487; that is, if it refused to open the Dimona site for inspection.<sup>163</sup> Confirming an earlier decision by the agency’s board, the GC immediately suspended any aid to Israel under the IAEA assistance program.

Because no one expected that Israel would reconsider its policy of nuclear ambiguity and open its Dimona installation for inspections, GC Resolution 381 effectively called for Israel’s suspension from the IAEA, paving the way to a second showdown in September 1982. A July 1982 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on proliferation trends noted a “global accumulation of information damaging to the IAEA.”<sup>164</sup> It also predicted “a major

160. Memorandum for the president from Alexander M. Haig, “Subject: Secretary Haig’s Evening Report,” 15 September 1981, in Secretary Haig’s Evening Report (9/5/1981–10/11/1981), Executive Secretariat: Agency File, RAC Box 6, RRL.

161. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

162. A similar vote was used to reject the credentials of the South African delegation to the IAEA in 1979. See “Negotiating Global Nuclearities: Apartheid, Decolonization, and the Cold War in the Making of the IAEA,” in John Krige and Kai-Henrik Barth, eds., “Global Power Knowledge: Science, Technology, and International Affairs,” *Osiris*, Vol. 21 (2006), pp. 25–48.

163. See IAEA, “Military Attack on Iraqi Nuclear Research Centre and Its Implications for the Agency,” resolution adopted during the 237th Plenary Meeting on 26 September 1981, GC(XXV)/RES/381, available online at <https://www.iaea.org/>. For a treatment of Israel’s policy of nuclear ambiguity and its unsafeguarded nuclear site at Dimona, see Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*; and Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*.

164. NIE-4-82, “Nuclear Proliferation Trends through 1987,” July 1982, published in *NPIHP Research Update*, No. 1, WCDA and available online at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org>.

indictment of IAEA effectiveness,” causing a detrimental impact on the entire international regime if the agency’s political and technical deficiencies were not remedied.<sup>165</sup>

The summer of 1982 saw several diplomatic moves against Israel at UN agencies, most of them motivated by Israel’s invasion of Lebanon.<sup>166</sup> Israel’s IAEA status at the September 1982 GC meeting was of particular concern, prompting Kennedy to warn a British diplomat that attempts to “score a few cheap political points” by undermining the UN principle of universality would induce the administration to reconsider “whether those institutions were any longer able to serve their purpose.”<sup>167</sup>

Prior to the GC meeting, some British diplomats wondered whether the replacement of the pro-Israeli Haig with the more moderate George P. Shultz could “lead the U.S. to adopt a slightly less pro-Israel position.”<sup>168</sup> They were informed that, with Haig’s departure, “the attitude of Washington to the suspension of Israel had hardened.”<sup>169</sup> Days before the GC meeting convened, the Europeans already understood that the U.S. delegation would likely “walk out of the conference and review its policy towards the agency” if Israel lost the suspension vote. The Europeans were unsure what action they ought to take, and in the end they “all decided to abstain” from the vote.<sup>170</sup>

Eventually, the harsher vote on Israel’s suspension was defeated, and the milder vote to reject its credentials was adopted.<sup>171</sup> In a departure from Haig’s

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165. *Ibid.*

166. These included consideration of a proposal to deny Israel’s UN credentials, discussed in June 1982 in Havana by members of the Non-Aligned Movement, in addition to three anti-Israeli resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly in August 1982 with European abstention. See Memorandum for the president, from Alexander M. Haig, “Subject: Secretary Haig’s Evening Report,” 1 June 1982, Secretary Haig’s Evening Report (5/21/1982–6/9/1982), Executive Secretariat: Agency File, Box 91376, RRL; and Memorandum for the president, from George P. Shultz, “Subject: Secretary of State Evening Report,” 19 August 1982, Secretary of State Evening Report (8/8/82–9/1/82), Executive Secretariat: Agency File, Box 91376, RRL.

167. D. M. D. Thomas, British embassy in Washington, to W. J. Adams, FCO, “Suspension of Israel from the IAEA,” 22 July 1982, in FCO 58/2894, Israel and the IAEA, TNAUK.

168. Memorandum, “Subject: Suspension of Israel from the IAEA,” from I. R. Kenyon to Gilmore, attached to Gossling’s letter of 8 July 1982, in FCO 58/2894, Israel and the IAEA, TNAUK.

169. Gossling to K. Haskell, NED FCO, 16 July 1982, in FCO 58/2894, Israel and the IAEA, TNAUK.

170. Memorandum for the president from Alexander M. Haig, “Subject: Secretary Haig’s Evening Report,” 26 September 1981, Secretary Haig’s Evening Report (9/5/1981–10/11/1981), Executive Secretariat: Agency File, RAC Box 6, RRL; and N. C. R. Williams to Haskell, “Israel/IAEA,” 9 September 1982, in FCO 58/2894, Israel and the IAEA, TNAUK.

171. As for the first attempt, regarding the “Consideration of the Suspension of Israel,” the vote took place on 23 September 1982; 43 members voted in favor, 27 voted against, and 16 abstained. Thus the required two thirds majority of 47 votes was not reached, and the proposal was defeated. After the

1981 policy, two hours before the vote the U.S. delegation received new instructions requiring a walkout if the meeting rejected Israel's credentials.<sup>172</sup> For the agency, U.S. withdrawal meant the suspension of Washington's financial contributions, which could lead to "severe program cuts" and jeopardize IAEA activities.<sup>173</sup> Of the agency's proposed 1983 budget of \$82 million, the U.S. contribution was expected to cover 25 percent.<sup>174</sup> The "safeguards" component of that budget amounted to \$52 million.<sup>175</sup>

A State Department source told the press that the U.S. government hoped the walkout would discourage "similar challenges to Israel" at the UN.<sup>176</sup> Soon after, Shultz informed Reagan that the State Department was studying "the legal implications of withdrawing from the UNGA [UN General Assembly] including options for deferring, reducing or stopping our financial contributions."<sup>177</sup> Congress supported the administration, passing a resolution in early December that called for the government to withhold contributions to any other UN agency that expelled Israel.<sup>178</sup>

But the withdrawal was surprisingly short-lived. It was followed by the establishment of an interagency group to conduct a three-month policy reassessment. Although a State Department source told the press that the reassessment "must be a very serious one," in reality it was non-existent.<sup>179</sup> Before it was concluded, the administration had already decided to resume

first vote failed to reach a majority, resulting in a tie of 40 in favor, 40 against, and 6 abstentions, the representative from Madagascar, who was not in the room for the original vote, asked to record his vote despite his abstention. Therefore, an amended result was accepted, and the resolution passed, with 41 votes for and 40 against. See "Record of the 26th Plenary Meeting of the IAEA General Conference," 24 September 1982, in GC (XXVI)/OR.246, May 1983, IAEA Archive, Vienna, pp. 7–11.

172. Roger Kirk, "The Suspension of U.S. Participation in the IAEA: 1982–1983," in *International Atomic Energy Agency: Personal Reflections* (Vienna: IAEA, 1997), p. 98.

173. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

174. "Scale of Assessment of Members' Contribution for 1983," IAEA GC, 26th Regular Session, Item 11 of the Provisional Agenda, GC XXVI/671, 11 August 1982, in IAEA Archive.

175. "Appendix: Members' Contribution to the Agency's Regular Budget for 1983," attached to "Scale of Assessment of Members' Contribution for 1983," 11 August 1982, IAEA GC, 26th Regular Session, Item 11 of the Provisional Agenda, GC XXVI/671, 11 August 1982, in IAEA Archive.

176. Judith Miller, "U.S. Walks Out as Atom Parley Bars the Israelis," *The New York Times*, 25 September 1982, p. 1.

177. Memorandum, 53800, for the President, from George P. Shultz, "Subject: Arab Threat to Israeli Credentials at 37th General Assembly," 12 October 1982, in Israel 1982, 10/15/1982–10/19/1982, Box 3, Geoffrey Kemp Collection, RRL.

178. H.Con.Res. 322, 97th Cong., "A Concurrent Resolution Regarding Membership in the United Nations General Assembly," 1982.

179. Miller, "U.S. Walks Out as Atom Parley Bars the Israelis."

full participation in the IAEA. This transpired in February 1983, once the IAEA's Board of Governors had clarified Israel's status.<sup>180</sup>

In a report to Congress, the administration explained that it had withdrawn from the agency because of "the seriously disturbing trend by some IAEA member states to introduce extraneous and divisive political issues" into the agency's deliberations.<sup>181</sup> However, the administration explained, given the unique tasks of the IAEA, its critical role, and the lack of alternatives for its safeguards system, the United States would resume participation.<sup>182</sup> The administration clarified that the decision was also based on commitments given by key member-states to support U.S. efforts "to reduce extraneous political controversy" in the agency.<sup>183</sup>

The U.S. withdrawal was thus successful in convincing the Europeans to cooperate with the United States in subsequent GC votes. In the October 1983 meeting, a fresh attempt by the Iraqis to expel the Israelis was defeated by a firm U.S.-European front.<sup>184</sup> The 1985 ACDA report to the Congress, an extensive account aimed at presenting the administration's arms control and nonproliferation achievements, confirmed Washington's lingering doubts surrounding the agency. Most of the discussion of the IAEA focused on its politicization and the impact that this political malfunction had on its overall technical credibility.<sup>185</sup> Although Israel's position within the agency remained firm throughout Reagan's presidency, the conflict over Israel's IAEA status remained a bone of contention, and technical assistance to Israel was not restored until 1994.<sup>186</sup>

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180. Kirk, "The Suspension of U.S. Participation in the IAEA," pp. 101–103.

181. Report to the Congress Pursuant to Section 601 of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Act of 1978: For the Year Ending December 31, 1982," n.d. [January 1983], p. 5, in DNSA.

182. *Ibid.*

183. *Ibid.*, V-2. (In the original report the chapters are assigned Roman numerals and paginated separately, V-2 is thus page 46 of 91.)

184. "Record of the Two Hundred and Fifty-Sixth Plenary Meeting of the IAEA General Conference," 14 October 1983, pp. 3–5; and "Examination of Delegates' Credentials—Report to the General Committee," 14 October 1983, both available online at <https://www.iaea.org/>.

185. "U.S. ACDA 1985 Annual Report," March 1986, pp. 85–88, in Gerard Smith Personal Papers, Box 43, DDEL.

186. The Israeli government interpreted the restoration as an acknowledgement by the Agency that the 1981 strike was justified. See: "Restoration of Technical Assistance to Israel," A Statement made by the president, Endorsed by General Conference on 23 September 1994, GC(XXXVIII)/DEC/19, available online at <https://www.iaea.org/>. See also "Record of the 268 Plenary Meeting of the IAEA General Conference," 28 September 1984, and "Provisional Record of the 284 Plenary Meeting of the IAEA General Conference," 27 September 1985, both available online at <https://www.iaea.org/>.

## The Osirak Raid and the Perception of the Iraqi Nuclear Effort during the Reagan Years

After the raid, and during the rest of Reagan's presidency, the Iraqi nuclear program was not considered a serious threat. Available assessments show that different intelligence evaluations deemphasized the immediate danger of the Iraqi nuclear program, though a minority still believed that Saddam Hussein might be tempted to pursue one covertly.<sup>187</sup>

An interagency dispute in 1985 on the export of dual-use items to Baghdad demonstrates the clash between State Department officials, who adopted a tolerant view of Iraq's program, and Pentagon officials like Perle, who supported a stricter, more suspicious view and urged Weinberger to delay the shipment.<sup>188</sup> Commenting on the episode, a State Department internal memorandum stated that "DoD differed radically" from all other agencies (the State Department, the CIA, and the Department of Energy) in its assessment of the Iraqi nuclear threat.<sup>189</sup> According to the document, the majority of voices inside the administration believed that Iraq did "not have the resources for a weapon-program development and will not have in a foreseeable future."<sup>190</sup> (That assumption was proven to be incorrect in 1991.)<sup>191</sup> ACDA concurred with the assessment, and its 1985 annual report to the Congress did not list Iraq as an existing proliferation threat.<sup>192</sup>

The Reagan administration was interested in establishing better relations with Saddam Hussein, and this led to the resumption of diplomatic ties in 1984.<sup>193</sup> From Washington's perspective, the destruction of Osirak had removed a diplomatic obstacle and a source of friction. The reactor's absence

187. For one such assessment, see U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Defense Estimative Brief: Prospects for Iraq*, 25 September 1984, p. 3, in DNSA.

188. For the view of the State Department, see U.S. Department of State, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, "Letter to Secretary Weinberger on U.S.-Iraqi Relations and Advanced Technology Exports to Iraq [Letter from George Shultz to Caspar Weinberger Attached]," 29 April 1985, in DNSA. For Perle's view, see U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary for International Security Policy, "High Technology Dual-Use Export to Iraq," [Letter from George P. Shultz to Caspar W. Weinberger, 30 April 1985, Attached], 1 July 1985, in DNSA.

189. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, "Computers for Iraq: DOD's Proliferation Concerns," 3 April 1986, p. 1, in DNSA.

190. *Ibid.*

191. Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, *Unclear Physics*, pp. 169–195.

192. U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Annual Report, 1985*, 99th Cong., 2nd Sess., Washington DC, March 1986, pp. 85–88.

193. Iraq had severed diplomatic relations with the United States during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Ties were restored in November 1984 after a visit of the president's special envoy Donald Rumsfeld

thus allowed for a rapprochement with Baghdad, something the United States had been seeking since the late 1970s.

## The Aftermath of the Episode

For the Reagan administration, the Osirak raid presented a nonproliferation dilemma. Was it an act that undermined U.S. nonproliferation efforts by subverting the NPT, the IAEA, and the nonproliferation regime in general, institutions the administration supported? Or was it an “anti-proliferation operation” that complemented the U.S. strategy to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East?<sup>194</sup> After all, strikes against hostile nuclear programs had not been considered illegitimate in principle by former presidents. Plans to launch a first strike against an imminent Soviet threat were considered as early as the 1950s by U.S. war planners, and attacks were also considered against China and Pakistan by Reagan's predecessors.<sup>195</sup>

The administration was also truly surprised by Osirak. Absorbed by more urgent matters in the region, the administration underestimated Israeli concerns and intentions toward the reactor. A bad flow of communication and continual internal friction over U.S. policy in the Middle East further prevented a clear understanding of the threat posed by the Iraqi program, even though it was thoroughly deliberated during Carter's final year in office.

The raid, once it took place, raised questions about U.S. nonproliferation policy, U.S.-Israeli relations, U.S. geostrategic interests in the Middle East, and broader Cold War considerations. It also revealed an intricate internal power struggle that influenced the U.S. response throughout the episode and separated the supporters of closer ties with Israel from those who opposed the raid. The different approaches often produced conflicting policies, as exemplified by the F-16 suspension.

in December 1983. Rumsfeld and members of the Iraqi government discussed the improvement of the U.S.-Iraq relationship. See, for example, Cable, United States Embassy, Italy, “Rumsfeld's Larger Meeting with Iraqi Deputy PM and FM Tariz [Tariq] Aziz, December 19,” 20 December 1983, in DNSA (date of meeting and date of cable are different).

194. For media reference to the attack as an “anti-proliferation” act, see Ernst Conine, “Nuclear Non-proliferation: Israel Had to Do the Job by Itself,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 1981, quoted in Feldman, “The Bombing of Osirak—Revisited,” pp. 130–131 n. 40.

195. David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71; William Burr and Jeffrey Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000–2001), pp. 54–99; and Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*, pp. 143–144. A decade later, the Clinton administration also considered an attack against North Korea. See Jamie McIntyre, “Washington Was on Brink of War with North Korea 5 Years Ago,” CNN, 4 October 1999.

These contradictory inputs resulted in an uneven response that attempted to achieve several conflicting goals. On the one hand, the NNPA was not revised during Reagan's presidency because a public endorsement of a more relaxed nonproliferation policy became difficult to support. On the other hand, the administration adopted a blasé approach to Iraq's nuclear program after the raid, failing to notice Saddam Hussein's covert nuclear effort.<sup>196</sup>

The "gap" of "institutional memory" also showed an initial lack of attention to, or even interest in, halting nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. The interagency intelligence assessments of July and September 1981 evaluated the impact of the raid, including the potentially harmful and destabilizing consequences. Similarly, the resumption of full IAEA participation just five months after the initial withdrawal and the decision to avoid any substantial reassessment of the agency's role demonstrate that the withdrawal was mainly a statement in support of Israel's status inside international agencies and was used as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Washington's European allies.

Some U.S. government officials did view the IAEA with suspicion, and this skepticism contributed to the withdrawal. But in the end, the more moderate view, which saw the IAEA as a crucial element of the nonproliferation regime, prevailed. The episode contributed to the growing sense of mistrust toward the agency and its political neutrality. The subsequent debate on Capitol Hill, coupled with assessments of the role of the IAEA, proved that the United States during the Reagan years considered the agency the weak link of the international nonproliferation regime. For some Pentagon officials, the Osirak episode left a long-lasting impression that Iraq's program was still suspicious and that the IAEA was not a reliable instrument for safeguarding it.

As for the consequences for U.S.-Israeli relations, the fact that the administration supported a relatively tough approach against Israel in the UN Security Council is notable. The discussion of political strategy exemplified by the adoption of Resolution 487 tested the limits of U.S. support for Israel and delineated the administration's support for the existing nonproliferation regime and, by extension, the U.S. government's commitment to the IAEA and the NPT. But even though the administration was willing to join a harsh, unanimous condemnation of Israel, the line was drawn at Israel's expulsion or other severe sanctions.

This policy primarily stemmed from a preoccupation with U.S. objectives in the Middle East. Prominent members of the administration feared that the raid could hamper the peace process between Israel and Egypt and

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196. Braut-Hegghammer, *Unclear Physics*, pp. 71–79.

upset moderate Arab countries, jeopardizing U.S. regional standing. One of the administration's primary objectives, therefore, was to avoid any allegation of U.S. technical assistance for the raid. This relatively tough approach against Israel at the UN Security Council was also designed to prevent more severe consequences, like the expulsion of Israel from other branches of the UN, and to avoid the creation of an estranged European front inside the international organization. With the same objectives in mind, the September 1982 decision to withdraw from the IAEA was mostly aimed at containment by inhibiting further moves to expel Israel from other UN agencies.

Following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 487, the United States launched a campaign to prevent such expulsions. Preventing Israel's expulsion from the IAEA had not been motivated by a U.S. desire to undermine the agency; instead, it was part of a "red-line" tactic aimed at preventing further expulsions—including those motivated by concerns beyond the Osirak raid, such as the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Israel was tied to a "bigger picture" strategy of containing the Soviet Union, one of the Reagan administration's top priorities. The administration feared the emergence of a "hostile Third World bloc" that would act as a proxy for the Soviet Union in repeatedly trying to hamper Israel's participation in international agencies. Therefore, such initiatives had to be rebuffed. In this context, nonproliferation goals were clearly not the administration's first concern, but neither were they ignored or overlooked.

The U.S. reaction to Osirak showcases the hierarchy of the Reagan administration's foreign policy priorities. Similarly, it underscores the role played by U.S. nonproliferation policy during the late Cold War. At first glance, the ambiguity of the U.S. response to the raid could be interpreted as a consequence of the conflicting positions on Israel. A deeper analysis reveals U.S. attempts to achieve policy goals that, from time to time, were incompatible with one another. Not surprisingly, the administration had to set priorities: preserving its credibility in the Middle East by firmly denying any involvement in the raid, sending warning signals to Israel while addressing the irritation of moderate Arab governments, and drawing firm "red lines" to prevent damage to Israel's international status by containing Soviet efforts to radicalize UN agencies.

Nonproliferation concerns had a shaky but steady position among U.S. priorities, and the Reagan administration adopted an improvised, cautious approach rather than a well-ordered strategy. The administration aimed to preserve the existing nonproliferation regime, seen as the only credible option at hand. Contrary to a later narrative, and with the exception of a few

voices, the administration did not condone the raid and even supported harsh condemnation by the UNSC. As for the IAEA, the United States confirmed its intention to enforce the “red lines” by ceasing U.S. participation when Israel’s status was in danger. Departing from its early intentions and declaratory policy, the administration embraced a quiet “damage limitation” stance that sought to reconcile its primary foreign policy goals with nonproliferation concerns.

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