

The superpower drive to curb the Mideast 'missile race'

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Inadvertently or not, Iraq's Saddam Hussein has given new impetus to the carefully constructed effort of the United States and the Soviet Union over the past four years to impose a regional style accord on the Middle East, modeled on the U.S.-Soviet Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement. With his speech of April 2 threatening to obliterate half of Israel with chemically equipped ballistic missiles, and with the March 28 arrest of three Iraqi agents at London's Heathrow Airport as they tried to smuggle nuclear detonators to Iraq, the environment has been created for a drive to control not only Iraq's missile capabilities, but everybody else's—including Israel's.

Since the ratification of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in 1988, the Soviet Union, which, for geographic reasons, is more immediately concerned than the United States with the issue of Mideast nuclear and chemical weapons proliferation, has regularly included the Mideast military balance in the superpower regional affairs agenda and could count on an increasingly receptive American response. The Soviet Union was and remains particularly concerned over the development and successful testing of the nuclear-capable Jericho II missiles and Israel's satellite program (as shown by the launching of Offek-II on April 3), which will give Israel a reliable ICBM capability and an independent early warning system. The Soviet Union's somewhat warmer relations with Israel over the past two years do not extend to Israeli missiles.

In contrast to its predecessors, the Bush administration has shown a far less sympathetic attitude to Israeli high-tech efforts in the military domain, and has in the main agreed with the Soviet position concerning the missile race in the Mideast. The primary American concern is to retain control over the proliferation of advanced military technologies by limiting the independence of regional actors. U.S. opposition to the Lavi jet fighter, to Jericho II, and more recently to Israel's independent Arrow ATBM (anti-tactical ballistic missile) program are motivated by this concern. Fear that a regional crisis would pass the threshold of classical conflict and spill over into the superpower domain has hardened both Soviet and American attitudes in this regard.

Ironically, the success of the Soviet-American non-proliferation campaign depended on the creation of an effective

balance of terror in the region. While the United States and the U.S.S.R. engaged in talks to build down their medium-range nuclear forces in Central Europe, they not only allowed, but in some cases assisted, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and appropriate vectors in the Mideast. In Washington and Moscow it was reasoned that only a no-win Mutually Assured Destruction equation would force both sides to engage in a general bargaining, leading to a build-down of forces under superpower supervision. Both Iraq and Syria now possess missiles equipped with chemical weapons warheads; Iran has chemical weapons; and Saudi Arabia has medium- and long-range missiles. Recently, Libya has developed mid-air refueling capabilities for its Sukhoi-24 and TU-22. Though Israel retains technological and strategic superiority, its future military preponderance depends on the development of a reliable ballistic missile defense umbrella.

The United States and Soviet Union did little over the past years to interdict missile proliferation. Why, one might ask, did the intelligence agencies of the United States so long allow the Space Research Corporation, praised by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in his speech on April 2, to build up Iraq's missile force, when it was known that Iraq possessed a very large chemical weapons inventory? When, during the Iran-Iraq war, it was feared in Washington that the Iranian forces were about to overrun Iraqi defenses, the United States shifted support to Iraq and the Gulf Coordination Council; this led to a series of secret accords with the GCC concerning U.S. stationing rights which are still binding today. The tilt toward Iran after the war ended did not fundamentally affect Iraqi-U.S. relations, which remained good.

Recent declarations by former Under Secretary of State Richard Murphy, testimony of Under Secretary of State John Kelly to Congress stressing the need for good American ties to Baghdad, the moderate response of Washington to the execution in Iraq of British journalist Farzad Bazoft, all point to a carefully choreographed U.S. intelligence game. Iraq is currently the second-largest OPEC exporter to the United States.

Enormous pressure on the proliferation issue is now going to be brought to bear on all Mideast protagonists by

Washington and Moscow. The balance-of-terror theorists may, however, have overlooked the fact that geography and history make the Mideast an area of predilection for preemptive strike strategies.

Political manipulation

The "anti-missile" campaign was geared up in June 1988, when State Department official Michael Armacost embarked on an international tour to raise the issue with several countries in the Middle East. In Israel, however, he broached the subject only in general terms, expressing general concern about the missile race. A few months before the U.S. presidential elections, no one in Washington was going to take the risk of embarking on a head-on collision course with Israel over the issue.

On Sept. 8-9, 1988, Allen Holmes of the Political and Military Department at Foggy Bottom chaired a conference in Rome attended by French, British, Italian, German, Japanese, and Canadian military representatives. The main topic was an American warning to especially European representatives against helping non-NATO countries in developing ballistic missile capabilities. On Sept. 26, Holmes met with his Soviet counterpart Viktor Karpov in Washington, to strengthen the cooperation between the superpowers in "preventing the development of missiles, as well as the proliferation of other system capable of delivering nuclear weapons."

A few well-orchestrated scandals were given public prominence. Less than two months after the May 1988 Moscow summit between President Reagan and Gorbachov, the U.S. media made headlines over Egypt's missile project. By September, it was Argentina's turn, over the Condor-II medium-range missile project. The Argentina scandals allowed the U.S. media to start attacking European-based companies—Italian, in that case—for their complicity.

By January 1989, a new qualitative step was taken. A world conference to ban the use and production of chemical weapons was convened in Paris, attended by foreign ministers of more than 50 countries, including the superpowers and NATO members. The specter was raised of third countries—notably Third World countries—able to develop ballistic missile capabilities and to equip their missiles with chemical warheads. The antics of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi came just in time to substantiate the point. It was then revealed that a group of primarily West German companies was helping Libya to build a chemical plant at Rabta. After Egypt and Argentina, Libya was becoming a real danger.

By the summer of 1989, the campaign was extended to Iraq, when it was discovered that the Atlanta, Georgia-based branch of the Italian Banca Nazionale di Lavoro had extended close to \$2 billion worth of credit to Iraq over a three-year period, to help finance its military program. The scandal made international headlines by mid-August, only a few days after one of the Iraqi industries which had been financed through the BNL credit, the Al Iskanderia firm, was rocked

by explosions which reportedly killed dozens of people, when key elements of a missile program exploded.

In 1988, Moscow may have had a particular concern over Israel's technological capabilities. With political ambitions toward the region, and increased economic dependence on the Gulf oil-exporting countries (including Iraq), Washington was not long in agreeing on the need to bring Israel to heel. A few years earlier, the same case had been made when the U.S. administration had used all of its might to kill the Lavi jet project. While expensive, the project would have made Israel dangerously independent in its procurement of jet fighters. Worse, as far as American military industries were concerned, the Lavi would have been a dangerous rival to America's own arms sales, notably in Asia and in Ibero-America.

Israel's Jericho medium- and long-range missile production is an important target, but not the only one. As indicated by the ongoing negotiations in Geneva between the United States and the Soviet Union on the Strategic Defense Initiative, both superpowers are committed to remain the only powers able to deploy anti-ballistic missile capabilities. Yet, in the immediate aftermath of the initiation of Strategic Defense Initiative by the Reagan administration and prior to the INF treaty, several regional projects were set into motion, which would have included U.S. allies in an SDI-based defense system. Since early 1988, Israel has initiated the Arrow ATBM project, which will be submitted to a first series of tests starting this June, and should be deployed by the mid-1990s.

Washington has no ability to reverse these trends without provoking a head-on confrontation with most of its allies. Yet, it is committed at all cost to impose its control. Enforcing a missile treaty would obviously undermine the usefulness of anti-missile defense programs. In March, the U.S. administration offered to deploy in Israel its Patriot ATBM system; the Israelis bluntly rejected the offer, since accepting the Patriot would mean that Israel's defense would have to rely on American satellite guidance. Faces were grim in Washington when on April 3, Israel successfully launched its Ofek 2 satellite, the first serious step toward an independent satellite guidance system.

One of Washington's fears is that not only is the Arrow system going ahead independently, but that it has paved the way for cooperation involving Israel and several European countries, as indicated by the recent visit of Alfred Biehle, chairman of the defense committee of the West German parliament, who stressed the need for cooperation between two countries. The simultaneous deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems in both Europe and Israel would severely undermine the blackmail capabilities of both Washington and Moscow. No less worrying for the superpowers, is that deployment of such systems will give Israel and the Europeans the kind of space research and deployment capabilities over which both Moscow and Washington want to retain a monopoly.