

Briefing Memo

The Nuclear Situation in the Middle East: Iran, Israel and Nuclear Terrorism

NISHINO Masami

Fellow, 5th Research Office, Research Department

In September 2007, the Israeli military conducted an air strike on a facility inside Syria. Since the concerned parties, Israel and Syria, remained silent, details of the attack were murky for a time. However, in April 2008, the United States stated that the facility destroyed by Israel's bombing was a nearly completed nuclear reactor, the reactor was for military purposes, and North Korea had been involved in its construction. This affair revealed that concerns over nuclear proliferation in the Middle East do not stop with Iran. What is the nuclear situation in the Middle East today? This memo considers this question in three contexts: Iran, Israel and nuclear terrorism.

Iran

Iran is advancing its nuclear development in the name of its right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The UN Security Council, which suspects that Iran's nuclear development is for military purposes, has adopted three resolutions to impose sanctions and demand suspension of uranium enrichment. Iran refuses to meet this demand.

Criticisms of Iran's nuclear development often include the contention that, as an oil-producing country, Iran has no need for nuclear power and therefore, its nuclear development is for military purposes. However, it cannot be said that nuclear power is unnecessary for Iran. It is true that Iran is an oil-producing country and has the world's second largest proven oil reserves. Nevertheless, Iran's situation is different from those of other oil-producing countries in the Middle East. Most of the region's other oil-producing countries have small populations, because their land area is small or predominantly desert. For example, Saudi Arabia, which has the world's largest proven oil reserves, has 24 million people; Iraq with the third largest reserves, 27 million; Kuwait with the fourth largest, 3.2 million; and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which possesses the fifth largest reserves has a population of 4.5 million. Iran's population dwarfs them all at 70 million. Therefore, the domestic demand for electric power is great and is expected to increase further with continuing economic development. However, Iran's greatest export is oil and diverting it to domestic power use would result in decreased export revenues. Thus, Iran wants to fulfill its domestic power demand with nuclear power and export its oil to secure revenue.

It is said that the first country to come up with this concept was not Iran, but the United States. In the 1970s, through its academic research institute, the US encouraged Iran under the Shah to introduce nuclear power. The US hoped to secure stable future oil supplies and was concerned that Iran's oil exports to the US would decrease along with its increased domestic demand for electric power. Therefore, the US reasoned that if Iran introduced nuclear power, oil exports to the US would be maintained. At this point in time, the thinking of Iran and the US were in agreement regarding the advancement of Iran's nuclear development, as Iran wanted to maintain its exports and secure revenue while the US desired a secure and stable supply of oil. There is a fine line between nuclear power plant construction and nuclear weapons development in terms of certain technical aspects. However, since the US and Iran were allies at the time, there was no need for the US to be very concerned about the danger of Iran's nuclear power plants being converted to military use. But when the Islamic revolution of Iran broke out in 1979 before this concept could come to fruition, and diplomatic relations between the US and Iran were severed the following year, the situation changed drastically. Iran turned into an enemy of the US. To the US, Iran's introduction of nuclear power would lead to the development of nuclear weapons by an enemy state and became unacceptable. However, Iran's need for nuclear power in order to maintain the level of its oil exports remained same as before, and Iran continued its nuclear development.

So, does Iran not seek to develop nuclear weapons? This is probably not so. Ever since revelations by a dissident group in 2002, Iran's suspicious activities have been reported countless times. Among them is the practice of uranium enrichment using laser technology and other activities that have no connection to nuclear power for civilian use. In fact, if Iran renounces its right to practice uranium enrichment and reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel, concerns that it is developing nuclear weapons would dissipate, but Iran refuses to do so.

Assuming that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, what is the objective? The most important objective is probably to keep the existing Iranian regime from being toppled by another country (especially the US). Since the Clinton Administration, the US had continued a dual containment policy that viewed both Iran and Iraq as enemies. Later, in 2003, the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein was overthrown by the US citing suspicions regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), though said weapons were not discovered. This fact possibly caused Iran to conclude that, even if they were to eliminate their WMDs, if others doubted that they actually did this, there would still remain the possibility of being toppled militarily. Therefore, keeping WMDs as a deterrent would be a better guarantee for their security. Accordingly, for the international community to encourage Iran to make the strategic decision to give up nuclear weapons development, it probably needs to give the current Iranian regime security guarantees in return. Six countries, the permanent UN Security Council members and Germany, have made offers of "rewards" to Iran for suspending uranium enrichment

but it should be noted that the reward that Iran is most in need of is a guarantee of the security of the current regime; that is, a firm commitment not to attack the current regime militarily. Furthermore, since the US presidential election in 2008 will be followed by one in Iran in 2009, we may possibly see changes in the policies of both countries and moves toward a resolution of this issue.

Israel

Israel, which is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), officially has neither confirmed nor denied possession of nuclear weapons. However, Israel's Dimona reactor is manufacturing plutonium and the country is seen as the only country in the Middle East with nuclear weapons. Israel's stance is that it does not accept the possession of nuclear weapons by any other country in the Middle East, and does not rule out the use of military force to prevent it. The Israeli military bombed Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and attacked a Syrian facility in 2007. Currently, it is thought that Israel is also considering a strike against Iran.

Special circumstances lie behind these preemptive bombings. Israel believes that the only way to preserve its security is to maintain an overwhelming military advantage over its neighboring countries. In 1979, Israel and Egypt concluded Israel's first peace treaty with an Arab country. In 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) achieved a mutual recognition agreement, and in 1994, Israel concluded a peace treaty with Jordan. Although Middle East peace has advanced in such ways, this progress would have been impossible without the recognition on the part of the Arab countries, through four wars, that they could not defeat Israel. Put another way, the superiority of Israel's military power has been a precondition to the progress of Middle East peace, which in turn means security for Israel.

The Arab countries have pursued peace with Israel, but the sentiments of the Arab people towards Israel are still stubbornly hostile. To them, this peace has, to this day, been imposed by force. Israel is aware of this animosity. The current situation, in which reconciliation through public sentiment is going nowhere leaves open the possibility of a collapse of peace in the event that Israel loses its military superiority. At the same time, nuclear weapons are the ultimate tool to secure Israel's military superiority. Therefore, Israel will not accept the possession of nuclear weapons by any other country in the region because it would threaten its own superiority. Although Iran is not an Arab nation, from the viewpoint of Israel it belongs to the same category as the Arab countries, because it is a hostile country located in the region.

Currently it is unclear whether Israel will decide to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. However, compared to the 1981 bombing in Iraq and the 2007 bombing in Syria, both of which were completed by destroying almost a single facility on the ground, an attack inside Iran would be more

difficult. Iran's nuclear facilities are dotted across its vast territory, and some of them are underground. In addition to that, probably there are facilities of which neither Israel nor the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are aware. Therefore, there would be no guarantee that Israel's aerial bombardment could destroy all of the major facilities in Iran. Israel's air strike in Iran would likely necessitate the passing of Israeli military aircraft through Iraq's airspace, and it is uncertain whether the US would grant permission or not. Meanwhile, the construction of Iran's nuclear facilities continues today, and it has been reported that the Bushehr nuclear power plant is nearing completion. Circumstances might be pushing toward Israel's "redline."

The threat of nuclear terrorism

One of the original targets of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the US was a nuclear power plant. In 2002, top-ranking al-Qaida member Khalid Sheikh Mohammed stated in a secret interview with al-Jazeera before his arrest that at first they wanted to fly the hijacked planes into an American nuclear power plant, but changed their targets after concluding this would create an uncontrollable situation. Thus, the year 2001 could have seen a case of nuclear terrorism.

Had a nuclear power plant been destroyed at that time, it would have constituted a case of nuclear terrorism perpetrated by Middle Eastern persons in a region outside the Middle East. In recent years, however, concerns have increased regarding nuclear terrorism inside the Middle East. The Middle East is the only region in the world that has experienced attacks on nuclear facilities and the sense of taboo toward such attacks is relatively weak. Of course, since these attacks were carried out by a country's military, careful measures were adopted to prevent the leakage of radiation during the attacks. Specifically, the attacks were carried out on incomplete facilities or facilities into which radioactive materials had not yet been introduced. Such care could not be expected of an attack carried out by terrorists.

When considering a possible future attack on a nuclear facility in the Middle East, Israel's Dimona reactor seems the top candidate for a target, since Israel possesses nuclear facilities and many terrorists want to carry out terror attacks in Israel. It is said that Israel has been concerned about a revenge terrorist attack on the reactor since the 2007 bombing in Syria. However, geographical characteristics reveals aspects that make it an unlikely target. If the reactor were destroyed while operating and a radiation leak occurred, radioactive material would probably be blown by winds to either the Palestinian autonomous areas or Jordan, and many Arabs would suffer the effects. Among terrorists planning attacks on Israel, those who take Arab lives lightly are rare. Therefore, the Dimona reactor might be ruled out as a terror target. If one were to plan nuclear terrorism from a standpoint of placing priority on Arab lives, then planning to carry it out outside the Middle East would be the logical choice as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed did.

The preceding has been an overview of the nuclear situation in the Middle East from three standpoints. The interests of Israel, which wants to protect its status as the *de facto* sole possessor of nuclear weapons in the region, and Iran, which seeks to become the region's second country with nuclear weapons, are at odds. While the possibility of Israel following up its attack on Syria with a bombing in Iran cannot be ruled out, such an attack would further increase Israeli fears of terrorist retribution. The chance of Israel's nuclear facilities being met with a terror attack is not high. However, the burdens of taking measures to prevent such terror attacks and the intimidation of terrorist threats weigh heavy on Israel. In addition, should Iran succeed in developing nuclear weapons before Israel attacks it, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Arab countries would start nuclear development in response to it and a dash toward horizontal nuclear proliferation would ensue. This is a situation that the international community is strongly concerned about.

There is also some good news on the Middle Eastern nuclear front. In 2008 Bahrain and the UAE announced their intention not to carry out their own uranium enrichment or reprocessing, but choose instead to introduce nuclear power by purchasing nuclear fuel from the international market. This approach guarantees the peaceful use of nuclear power because it does not need to manufacture highly enriched uranium and plutonium, which are essential for nuclear weapons development. The spread of nuclear power in the Middle East in this fashion would be desirable for the international community from the standpoint of nonproliferation .

The purpose of this column is to respond to readers' interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS. A "briefing" provides, among other things, background information. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

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Planning and Coordination Office, The National Institute for Defense Studies
Telephone: 03-3713-5912
Fax: 03-3713-6149
E-mail: nidsnews@inds.go.jp
Website: <http://www.nids.go.jp>