Operation Babylon

(Codeword: Opera) was a surprise Israeli air strike carried out on June 7, 1981, that destroyed a nuclear reactor under construction 17 kilometers (10.5 miles) southeast of Baghdad, Iraq. In 1976, Iraq purchased an "Osiris"-class nuclear reactor from France. Iraq and France maintained that the reactor, named Osirak by the French, was intended for peaceful scientific research. The Israelis viewed the reactor with suspicion, saying that it was designed to make nuclear weapons.[3] On June 7, 1981, a flight of Israeli Air Force F-16A fighter aircraft, with an escort of F-15As, bombed and heavily damaged the Osirak reactor.[9] Israel claimed it acted in self-defense, and that the reactor had "less than a month to go" before "it might have become critical."[10] Ten Iraqi soldiers and one French civilian were killed.[11] The attack took place about three weeks before the elections for the Knesset.[12]

The attack was strongly criticized around the world and Israel was rebuked by the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly in two separate resolutions.[13][14] The destruction of Osirak has become cited as an example of a preventive strike in contemporary scholarship on international law.[

Iraq had established a nuclear program sometime in the 1960s, and in the mid-1970s looked to expand it through the acquisition of a nuclear reactor.[18] After failing to convince the French government to sell them a gas-graphite plutonium-producing reactor and reprocessing plant, and likewise failing to convince the Italian government to sell them a Cirene reactor, the Iraqi government convinced the French government to sell them an Osiris-class research reactor.[19][20] The purchase also included a smaller accompanying Isis-type reactor, the sale of 72 kilograms of 93% enriched uranium and the training of personnel.[21] The total cost has been given as $300 million.[22] In November 1975 the countries signed a nuclear cooperation agreement and in 1976 the sale of the reactor was finalized.[19]

Construction for the 40-megawatt light-water nuclear reactor began in 1979 at the Al Tuwaitha Nuclear Center near Baghdad.[23] The main reactor was dubbed Osirak (Osiraq) by the French, blending the name of Iraq with that of the reactor class. Iraq named the main reactor Tammuz 1 (Arabic: *EH2) and the smaller Tammuz 2.[24] Tammuz was the Babylonian month when the Ba'ath party had come to power in 1968.[25] In July 1980, Iraq received from France a shipment of approximately 12.5 kilograms of highly enriched uranium fuel to be used in the reactor. The shipment was the first of a planned six deliveries totalling 72 kilograms.[26] It was reportedly stipulated in the purchase agreement that no more than two HEU fuel loadings, 24 kilograms,
could be in Iraq at any time.[27]

Iraq and France claimed that the Iraqi reactor was intended for peaceful scientific research.[8] Agreements between France and Iraq excluded military use.[28] The American private intelligence agency STRATFOR wrote in 2007 that the reactor "was believed to be on the verge of producing plutonium for a weapons program".[29] In a 2003 speech, Richard Wilson, a professor of physics at Harvard University who visually inspected the partially damaged reactor in December 1982, said that "to collect enough plutonium [for a nuclear weapon] using Osirak would've taken decades, not years".[30] In 2005, Wilson further commented in The Atlantic:

the Osirak reactor that was bombed by Israel in June of 1981 was explicitly designed by the French engineer Yves Girard to be unsuitable for making bombs. That was obvious to me on my 1982 visit.[31]

Elsewhere Wilson has stated that

Many claim that the bombing of the Iraqi Osirak reactor delayed Iraq's nuclear bomb program. But the Iraqi nuclear program before 1981 was peaceful, and the Osirak reactor was not only unsuited to making bombs but was under intensive safeguards.[32]

Iraq was a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, placing its reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.[18] In October 1981, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists published excerpts from the testimony of Roger Richter, a former IAEA inspector who described the agency's nuclear safeguards weaknesses to the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Richter testified that only part of Iraq's nuclear installation was under safeguard and that the most sensitive facilities were not even subject to safeguards.[33] IAEA's Director-General Sigvard Eklund issued a rebuttal saying that Richter had never inspected Osirak and had never been assigned to inspect facilities in the Middle East.[33] Eklund claimed that the safeguards procedures were effective and that they were supplemented by precautionary measures taken by the nuclear suppliers.[33] Anthony Fainberg, a physicist at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, disputed Richter's claim that a fuel processing program for the manufacturing of nuclear weapons could have been conducted secretly.[33] Fainberg wrote that there was barely enough fuel on the site to make one bomb, and that the presence of hundreds of foreign technicians would have made it impossible for the Iraqis to take the necessary steps without being discovered.[5]
In Israel, discussions on which strategy to adopt in response to the Iraqi reactor development were taking place as early as Yitzhak Rabin’s first term in office (1974–1977).[34] Reportedly, planning and training for the operation began during this time.[34] After Menachem Begin became Prime Minister in 1977 the preparations intensified; Begin authorized the building of a full-scale model of the Iraqi reactor which Israeli pilots could practice bombing.[35] Three Israeli pilots died in accidents while training for the mission.[36]

Israel's Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan initiated diplomatic negotiations with France, Italy—Israel maintained that some Italian firms acted as suppliers and sub-contractors—and the United States over the matter, but failed to obtain assurances that the reactor program would be halted, and was not able to convince the French governments of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand to cease aiding the Iraqi nuclear program.[37] Saddam Hussein consistently maintained that Osirak was intended for peaceful purposes.[38] Begin considered the diplomatic options fruitless, and worried that prolonging the decision to attack would lead to a fatal inability to act in response to the perceived threat.[16] According to Karl P. Mueller, in the spring of 1979, Begin had reached the conclusion that an anticipatory attack was necessary.[39]

Anthony Cordesman writes that Israel conducted a series of clandestine operations to halt construction or destroy the reactor.[40] In April 1979, Israeli agents in France allegedly planted a bomb that destroyed the reactor's first set of core structures while they were awaiting shipment to Iraq.[40] In June 1980, Israeli agents are said to have assassinated Yehia El-Mashad, an Egyptian atomic scientist working on the Iraqi nuclear program.[41][42] It has also been claimed that Israel bombed several of the French and Italian companies it suspected of working on the project, and sent threatening letters to top officials and technicians.[40][42][43] Following the bombing in April 1979, France inserted a clause in its agreement with Iraq saying that French personnel would have to supervise the Osirak reactor on-site for a period of ten years.[41]

Iranian attack

Iran attacked and damaged the site on September 30, 1980, with two F-4 Phantoms, shortly after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War.[44] At the onset of the war, Yehoshua Saguy, director of
the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate, publicly urged the Iranians to bomb the reactor.[44][45] This was the first attack on a nuclear reactor and only the third on a nuclear facility in the history of the world. It was also the first instance of a preventive attack on a nuclear reactor which aimed to forestall the development of a nuclear weapon, though it did not achieve its objective as France later repaired the reactor.

Trita Parsi, in the book Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States, writes that a senior Israeli official met with a representative of the Khomeini regime in France one month prior to the Israeli attack. The source of the assertion is Ari Ben-Menashe, a former Israeli government employee. At the alleged meeting, the Iranians explained details of their 1980 attack on the site, and agreed to let Israeli planes land at an Iranian airfield in Tabriz in the case of an emergency.

Operational planning

The distance between Israeli military bases and the reactor site was significant—over 1600 km (1000 miles). The Israeli planes would have to violate Jordanian and/or Saudi airspace in a covert flight over foreign territory, making mid-air refueling unfeasible. The Israelis eventually concluded that a squadron of heavily fueled and heavily armed F-16As, with a group of F-15As to provide air cover and fighter support, could perform a surgical strike to eliminate the reactor site without having to refuel.

The decision to go through with the operation was hotly contested within Begin's government.[52] Ariel Sharon, a member of the Security Cabinet, later said that he was among those who advocated bombing the reactor.[53] Dayan, Defense Minister (until late 1980) Ezer Weizman and Deputy Prime Minister Yigael Yadin were among those opposed.[39] According to Mueller, "the principal difference between the hawks and doves on this issue lay in their estimation of the likely international political costs of an air strike".[39] Shai Feldman specifies that "[those opposed] feared that the operation would derail the fragile Israeli-Egyptian peace process, fuel Arab anxieties about Israel's profile in the region, and damage Israel-French relations".[54] Begin and his supporters, including Sharon, were far less pessimistic than their opponents about the political fallout.[39] Yehoshua Saguy argued for continued efforts in trying to find a non-military solution as it would take the Iraqis five to ten years to produce the material necessary for a nuclear weapon.[52] In the end, Begin chose to order the attack based on a worst-case estimate where a weapon could be created in one to two years time.[52]
It has been claimed that Israel felt it necessary to destroy the reactor before it was loaded with nuclear fuel, in order to prevent radioactive contamination.[23] An analysis by Warren Donnelly of the United States Congressional Research Service concluded that "it would be most unlikely for an attack with conventional bombs upon the reactor when operating to have caused lethal exposures to radioactivity in Baghdad, although some people at the reactor site might receive some exposure".[55]

In October 1980, Mossad reported to Begin that the Osirak reactor would be fueled and operational by June 1981. This assessment was significantly aided by reconnaissance photos supplied by the United States, specifically using the KH-11 KENNAN satellite.[36] French technicians installing the reactor later said it was scheduled to become operational only by the end of 1981.[36] Nonetheless, in October 1980, the Israeli cabinet (with Dayan absent) finally voted 10-6 in favor of launching the attack.[39]

The attack squadron consisted of eight F-16As, each with two unguided Mark-84 2,000-pound delay-action bombs.[49] A flight of six F-15As was assigned to the operation to provide fighter support.[36] The F-16 pilots were Ze'ev Raz (who was later decorated by the Chief of Staff for his leadership), Amos Yadlin, Dobbi Yaffe, Hagai Katz, Amir Nachumi, Iftach Spector, Relik Shafir, and Ilan Ramon.[56]

On June 7, 1981, at 15:55 local time (12:55 GMT), the operation was initiated. The Israeli planes left Etzion Airbase, flying unchallenged in Jordanian and Saudi airspace.[51] To avoid detection, the Israeli pilots conversed in Saudi-accented Arabic while in Jordanian airspace and told Jordanian air controllers that they were a Saudi patrol that had gone off course.[35] While flying over Saudi Arabia, they pretended to be Jordanians, using Jordanian radio signals and formations.[35][57] The Israeli planes were so heavily loaded that the external fuel tanks that had been mounted on the planes were exhausted in-flight. The tanks were jettisoned over the Saudi desert.[51]

En route to the target, the Israeli planes crossed the gulf of Aqaba. Unknowingly, the squadron flew directly over the yacht of King Hussein of Jordan, who was vacationing in the Gulf at the time. Taking into account the location, bearing, and armament of the Israeli planes, Hussein quickly deduced the Iraqi reactor to be the most probable target. Hussein immediately contacted his government and ordered a warning to be sent to the Iraqis. However, due to a communication failure the message was never received and the Israeli planes entered Iraqi air space undetected.
Upon reaching Iraqi airspace the squadron split up, with two of the F-15s forming close escort to the F-16 squadron, and the remaining F-15s dispersing into Iraqi airspace as a diversion and ready back-up. The attack squadron descended to 30 m over the Iraqi desert, attempting to fly under the radar of the Iraqi defences.[51]

At 18:35 local time (14:35 GMT), 20 km from the Osirak reactor complex, the F-16 formation climbed to 2,100 m and went into a 35-degree dive at 1,100 km/h, aimed at the reactor complex. At 1,100 m, the F-16s began releasing the Mark 84 bombs in pairs, at 5-second intervals.[51] At least eight of the sixteen released bombs struck the containment dome of the reactor.[49] It was later revealed that half an hour before the Israeli planes arrived, a group of Iraqi soldiers manning anti-aircraft defenses had left their posts for an afternoon meal, turning off their radars.[36] The Israeli planes were still intercepted by Iraqi defenses but managed to evade the remaining anti-aircraft fire.[36] The squadron climbed to high altitude and started their return to Israel. The attack lasted less than two minutes.

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