

Why Saddam doesn't need missiles.

Stealth Bomber

By JANINE ZACHARIA

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

THE SCENES ARE grimly familiar. In the Gaza Strip, Palestinian children carrying rifles chant, "Ya Saddam! Ya Saddam!" and goad the Iraqi leader to lob Scud missiles at Israel. Up the Mediterranean coast, in the basement of a Tel Aviv kindergarten, 20 teachers watch a female soldier demonstrate how to administer atropine, an anti-nerve-gas agent, to students. The Israeli army's home-front command is urging citizens to upgrade old gas masks and take home iodine pills in case Saddam Hussein sends a missile into Israel's nuclear reactor and radiation leaks out. On August 21 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his top security advisers ordered the immunization of emergency "first-response teams" against smallpox, a virus Saddam is believed to be able to mount on his Scuds, and they continue to discuss a population-wide inoculation. And Israel has scattered Arrow anti-missile batteries across the country to defend against an Iraqi attack.

It's not hard to understand why Israelis worry about missiles. In 1991 Saddam fired 39 Scuds at the Jewish state. Back then Israelis got lucky: No one was killed by the conventional missiles, and Iraq fitted 25 Scuds with germ warheads only to abandon them—in part out of fear of a potential Israeli nuclear response and in part because Saddam recognized that his rule was not necessarily threatened. This time, with regime change the American goal, that logic might not contain him. "If the administration goes ahead with a plan to remove Saddam . . . he will have every incentive to attack Israel with the goal of killing as many as possible," says one U.S. intelligence source. "The counter-measures available may be similar, but the Iraqi calculation on the risks of hitting Israel will be different."

Still, while the Israeli public focuses on a missile attack, Israeli security and terrorism experts quietly worry about a more sinister prospect: that Saddam could equip Palestinian militants with deadly biological pathogens that, if disbursed clandestinely, could go undetected until scores of people fall ill. The missile threat certainly exists. Even one Scud topped with a nonconventional warhead could cause considerable damage and even more chaos. But Israel has spent the last eleven years bolstering what military analysts call "active" and "passive" defense measures; and over the same period Iraq's missile capability has withered under years of U.N.

sanctions. A veteran Israeli military planner estimates that Saddam has just 15 Scuds left and is confident that Israel could knock them out of the sky with its Arrows. And if one missile does penetrate, Israel has one of the best response programs in the world for isolating the area and treating the victims. "Israel has the best regimented system of civil defense," says former Mossad deputy head Uzi Arad, now director of the Institute of Policy and Strategy at Herzliya's Interdisciplinary Center (IDC). "The level of damage [Saddam] can cause Israel has been reduced to very little." None of this, sadly, can be said about a nonconventional terrorist attack, one that would combine Iraqi weapons with Palestinian guerrilla skills.

THERE ARE PLENTY of signs that Saddam is trying to ally himself with Palestinian militants. On August 12 the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) hard-line foreign minister, Farouq Qaddoumi, visited Baghdad to confer with his Iraqi counterpart, Naji Sabri. Last year Fuad Shubaki, a senior financial adviser to Yasir Arafat, secretly visited Baghdad. Saddam shelters several prominent Palestinian terrorist organizations in Baghdad, some of which are active in the Gaza Strip and West Bank—including the Arab Liberation Front, a terrorist faction of the PLO that rejects the peace process and coordinates payments to families of suicide bombers. For years Saddam backed the Palestine Liberation Front, headed by Abu Abbas, who carried out the 1985 *Achille Lauro* cruise ship hijacking; and Saddam has sheltered the infamous Abu Nidal Organization, the name-sake of which was reported on August 19 to be dead in Iraq. All these groups have offices in Baghdad and receive training, logistical assistance, and financial aid from the Iraqi leadership. "With the PLO structure historically, and until now, there are factions—two to three—that are well-known to be pro-Saddam Hussein, and they are still on the payroll of the Iraqi government, and they are widely viewed as an Iraqi intelligence tool," one U.S. government expert on Iraq says. "Those factions have constituencies and active cells within the [Palestinian Authority] areas." With his handsome payments of \$25,000 for each suicide bomber's family, Saddam is arguably the most popular figure in Palestine today.

Now Saddam's weapons and the P.A.'s goals may be converging. Israeli intelligence repeatedly warns of the "mega-terror" bomb the Palestinians hope to devise, one that will boost their killing potential. To that end, Palestinian bombers have already tried several times to go nonconventional, albeit in rudimentary ways. Last December a suicide bomber soaked the nails placed in the explosive in rat poison. The body of one June 2001 suicide bomber was discovered to be infected with hepatitis; Israeli intelligence claimed the Palestinians deliberately chose someone with the disease to see if it would infect victims. The bombing of an Israeli hotel that killed 29 at a Passover seder in March, according to the IDF, was originally planned as a cyanide gas attack that might have killed many more. The head of Israeli military intelligence later said the plot was scrapped

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at the last minute because of technical difficulties.

That's where Saddam comes in. He still has chemical capabilities, experts say, including nerve gas, which can—among other evils—effectively contaminate a water system. But by most accounts, his easy-to-disguise biological warfare program is believed to have made the most progress since U.N. inspectors left Iraq with their mission unfulfilled in December 1998. And Saddam, says Dany Shoham, a veteran Israeli military intelligence analyst and a nonconventional-weapons expert, “has a special affinity for biological weapons . . . which are much more dreadful.” Earlier this month an American spy satellite photographed a convoy of 60 trucks at a known biological weapons factory near Taji—which after the Gulf war was found to have produced hundreds of liters of botulinum toxin. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld spoke openly recently about Saddam’s mobile biological warfare laboratories. Biological weaponry “is the thing that worries me more than anything else, because [Saddam] was very successful at hiding a lot of the biological stuff from UNSCOM even before he threw the inspectors out,” says one senior U.S. administration official. In 1998, before the launch of Desert Fox—a limited U.S. strike on Iraq designed to punish Saddam’s intransigence over U.N. weapons inspections—the United States shipped sophisticated biological-weaponry-detection equipment to Israel under the rubric of an exercise with European forces, one former official involved in the planning explains. And according to an intelligence report submitted to Prime Minister Tony Blair and first reported by *The Times* of London on August 3, Saddam is suspected of planning to arm a Palestinian terrorist group with biological weapons to attack either American or Israeli targets. “The Palestinian connection is now at the heart of intelligence thinking,” the newspaper said.

WHY WOULD SADDAM arm the Palestinians rather than just use these weapons against Israel himself? For one thing, it's hard to predict how such biological agents could be effectively dispersed.

The agents at Saddam's disposal, according to varying reports, include botulinum toxin, anthrax, ricin, smallpox, and maybe the Ebola virus—the hardest of all to distribute. No one knows how these would behave on top of a missile in sweltering heat. They could burn up in flight or land among Arabs in the West Bank or even in Jordan. Israeli officials worry that to get around this problem, Saddam might slam a kamikaze plane into an Israeli city or send a drone to crop-dust an area with his nonconventional arsenal. A CIA report earlier this year said Iraq has been converting L-29 trainer aircraft into pilotless vehicles “for delivery of chemical, or more likely, biological warfare agents.” But a drone, like a missile, can be shot down.

Which is why the easiest way for Saddam to circumvent these difficulties may be simply to equip a Palestinian terrorist with a slightly modified aerosol can, replace the deodorant with a test-tube-sized amount of smallpox (which is highly contagious and easily transmittable by air), and have the ter-

rorist spray the virus in a shopping mall, movie theater, or school. If the terrorist wants to avoid the risk that the illness will spread to the Palestinian territories via contagious viruses like smallpox, he could always use other agents—for instance, botulinum and ricin—to sabotage Israel's water system. Or he could use high-grade powdered anthrax, like that sent by U.S. mail. It would be enough, says Shoham “to open a test tube and shake it. . . . If he is more sophisticated he could put it in the ventilation of the Azrieli building,” a Tel Aviv skyscraper. Experts say it could take a few days before people began detecting symptoms of illness, which would make the perpetrator harder to detect and would give Saddam—the once-removed source of the attack—even more cover.

Of course, Saddam may not desire cover: He might want Israel—and more importantly the Arab world—to know the destruction was his. But if his goal is simply to kill as many Israelis as possible as easily as possible, smuggling a syringe into the Palestinian territories may be more effective than a missile. After all, today Saddam has a strategic asset that wasn't available during the Gulf war: a militant Palestinian population willing, even eager, to die in the fight against the Jewish state. ■

White House Watch

Future Tense

By RYAN LIZZA

IF THERE IS one lesson President George W. Bush is supposed to have learned from his father's presidency, it is that political capital disappears if it is not spent. George H. W. Bush's great mistake, the thinking goes, was that he failed to use his post-Gulf-war popularity to attack the domestic problems that concerned voters in 1992. So when Bush's approval ratings soared after September 11, White House aides promised that 43 would not repeat the mistakes of 41. Speaking to reporters last December, Bush Senior Adviser Karl Rove explained, “This president understands the perishability of [political] capital. You build up capital through right action, and you spend it. If you don't spend it, it's not like treasure stuck away at a storehouse someplace. It is perishable. It dwindles away.”

Conservatives had hoped that Bush would spend his capital pushing the right's agenda through Congress. But there is scant evidence Bush ever intended to do so. Long before Enron, the White House decided against promoting Bush's Social Security plan in 2002. Bush hasn't wasted much energy fighting for his judicial nominees—51 are still pending before the Senate. And though the president opposed much of the important legislation passed by Congress this year—the farm bill, campaign finance reform, corporate accountability—he signed all of it into law. He hasn't issued a single veto.

What Bush *has* spent his political capital on is the 2002

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