

El-Baradei and the IAEA's Nobel Peace Prize a Mixed Blessing

By Stephen Zunes | December 13, 2005

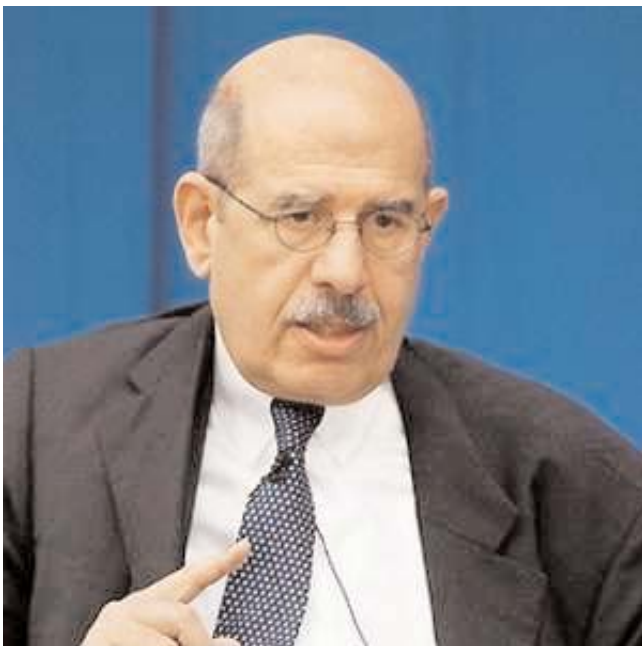
My reaction to the awarding this past weekend of the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Atomic Energy Agency and its director Mohammed El-Baradei was similar to my reaction to the awarding of the 2002 prize to former President Jimmy Carter: while they have pursued a number of policies contrary to the spirit of the Nobel Peace Prize, they have also done much to make the world a safer place.

On the one hand, the IAEA has helped to promote nuclear energy, an extremely dangerous, expensive, and unnecessary means of electrical generation, and has been accused of downplaying the serious health and environmental impact of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and essentially being a shill of the nuclear energy.

On the other hand, the IAEA and Dr. El-Baradei have, in the words of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, exemplified the principle that the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation “must be met through the broadest possible international

cooperation.”¹ Indeed, the choice of the Norwegian Nobel Committee—like their choice three years earlier—was at least in part meant to challenge the dangerous unilateral policies of the Bush administration.

The Bush administration, backed by a large bipartisan majority of Congress, has long opposed the principle that nuclear non-proliferation should be monitored and enforced by a law-based international body but should instead be at the whim of the U.S. government. The Bush administration and congressional leaders of both parties have rejected calls by El-Baradei and others for a nuclear weapons-free zone for Southwest Asia and the Middle East, with the United States blocking a December 2003 UN Security Council resolution to that effect with a threatened veto. Both Republicans and Democrats have asserted that the United States gets to determine which governments can have nuclear weapons and which governments cannot. For example, the United States has blocked enforcement of UN Security Council resolution 478 calling on Israel to place its nuclear program under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy Agency and resolution 1172 calling on Pakistan and India to eliminate their nuclear weapons program while insisting on going to war to enforce resolutions addressing Iraq's nuclear program (even though Iraq, at the time of the March 2003 U.S. invasion, was already in full compliance).



International Atomic Energy Agency director Mohammed El-Baradei.
Photo courtesy of <http://www.aljazeera.com/>.



IAEA Under Fire

Given that the IAEA—as part of the United Nations system—represents such universality, it has been a target of unremitting hostility by the Bush administration and its congressional allies, particularly in regard to Iraq. With President George W. Bush going as far as to claim that the IAEA’s rigorous inspection regime in Iraq was tantamount to “doing nothing,”² the Nobel Committee’s finding that its work was “incalculably” important³ is significant.

While UNSCOM inspectors in charge of locating and destroying Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons programs were periodically subjected to harassment and evasive actions by the Iraqi government prior to their withdrawal in December 1998, the IAEA had largely been able to engage in rigorous inspections without interference, visiting more than one thousand sites, virtually all without prior notification. Their conclusion, described in a detailed report published that month, was that it appeared that Iraq’s nuclear program had been completely dismantled.⁴

The IAEA had found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq.

With the strict sanctions against the import of nuclear-related materials—which had held firm since it was first imposed in August of 1990—thereby denying Iraq any access to the necessary materials from France, Russia, and other countries which had made its former nuclear program possible, combined with no evidence from extensive U.S. spy satellites and other surveillance of any nuclear activity, it was no surprise that the 2001 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate unanimously

confirmed the IAEA’s assessment that Iraq’s nuclear program had not been resumed.

Iraq, IAEA, and Inspections

Despite this, in an effort to frighten the American public into supporting an invasion and occupation of that oil-rich country, the administration repeatedly claimed in the year leading up to the March 2003 invasion that Iraq had resumed its nuclear weapons program. They were joined in their fear-mongering by leading Democrats, including John Kerry, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Jay Rockefeller, and Harry Reid.

Some supporters of the U.S. invasion of Iraq even went as far as to claim that Iraq had already developed nuclear weapons. Vice President Cheney insisted that “We know [Saddam Hussein has] been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons, and we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”⁵ Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington insisted that the “unique threat” posed by Iraq “will grow increasingly more dangerous as Saddam Hussein increases his ... nuclear stockpile.”⁶

When IAEA inspections resumed at the end of 2002, Dr. El-Baradei confirmed his assessments. In January 2003, the distinguished Egyptian lawyer reported to the UN Security Council that two months of inspections in Iraq had resulted in absolutely no evidence of prohibited nuclear activities, confirmed by what he referred to as “useful” interviews with Iraqi nuclear scientists. Regarding the aluminum tubes which U.S. officials had claimed were specifically designed for nuclear weapons development, the IAEA director noted that they, “unless modified, would not be suitable for manufacturing centrifuges.”⁷

On March 7, in his final report to the Security Council before his inspectors were removed from Iraq in anticipation of the U.S. invasion, he concluded that “the IAEA had found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq.”⁸ He also reiterated that documents cited by the Bush administration that

Iraq had tried to buy uranium from Niger were forged.

In short, in order to frighten the American people into supporting an invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Bush administration and its Congressional supporters were required to ignore or discredit El-Baradei and the IAEA. For example, Vice President Cheney insisted in a nationally-televised interview that “Mr. El-Baradei is frankly wrong.” The vice president then falsely claimed that the IAEA had “consistently underestimated or missed what it was that Saddam Hussein was doing” and insisted that there was no validity to the IAEA’s assessments.⁹

In response, the Bush administration launched a concerted effort to deny El-Baradei a third term as IAEA chairman, falsely accusing him of all sorts of fanciful misdeeds, such as covering up for Iranian purchases of beryllium that the Iranian government never succeeded in procuring. As part of its campaign against the IAEA chief, the Bush administration had El-Baradei’s phone wiretapped in an unsuccessful effort to find information to discredit him. The *Washington Post* reported that “The plan is to keep the spotlight on El-Baradei and raise the heat.”¹⁰ In reality, rather than being soft on Iran and other potential developers of nuclear weapons, the Iranian regime—along with the governments of Pakistan, South Korea, and Brazil (also targets of IAEA investigations)—supported removing El-Baradei for being too tough.

Hostility from the Bush administration and Capitol Hill toward El-Baradei and the IAEA has not been focused solely in regard to Iraq. It has also focused on the agency’s demands that Israel cooperate with the effort to rid the Middle East of nuclear weapons as well as its findings that Iran’s nuclear program is not as extensive or dangerous as the United States claims.

Efforts to remove El-Baradei received very little support in the international community, however, even from the Bush administration’s British allies. And now, as a Nobel Prize recipient, U.S. efforts

to discredit the IAEA and El-Baradei have become all the more difficult.

There remains a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington that the United States has the right to determine which countries can develop nuclear weapons and which ones cannot, effectively imposing a kind of nuclear apartheid.

Unfortunately, there remains a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington that the United States has the right to determine which countries can develop nuclear weapons and which ones cannot, effectively imposing a kind of nuclear apartheid. Furthermore, both Republicans and Democrats insist that the United States has the authority to determine compliance with the non-proliferation agreements and how such agreements are enforced. According to this view, the IAEA—and the United Nations as a whole—can be useful if its findings and policies support U.S. policy and can be ignored or rejected when they do not. Unless and until that changes, this noble effort by the Nobel committee in honoring El-Baradei and the IAEA will end up meaning very little.

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END NOTES

- ¹ Norwegian Nobel Committee, October 7, 2005.
- ² White House Press Office, "President George Bush Discusses Iraq in National Press Conference," March 6, 2003.
- ³ Norwegian Nobel Committee, op. cit.
- ⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, Iraq Nuclear Verification Program, December 16, 1998.
- ⁵ NBC, *Meet the Press*, March 16, 2003.
- ⁶ Maria Cantwell, Remarks on the Senate floor, *Congressional Record*, Oct. 10, 2002.
- ⁷ IAEA report to UN Security Council, January 27, 2003.
- ⁸ IAEA report to UN Security Council, March 7, 2003.
- ⁸ NBC, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Dafna Linzer, "IAEA Leader's Phone Tapped: U.S. Pores Over Transcripts to Try to Oust Nuclear Chief," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2004, p. A01

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