

Iran opted for N-bomb under Shah: ex-official - Newspaper

PARIS: Akbar Etemad, Iran's former vice-prime minister, in an interview with daily Le Figaro here has said that Tehran "may very well have a nuclear military capacity".

Etemad, who was in charge of "atomic questions" between 1974 and 1978, at which time he sought political asylum in Paris, the city where he's lived since, observes "how, in today's world context, can Iran remain without an appropriate defence?"

He goes so far as to say that "recent history in Iraq should in any case have given a lesson to Iran, in demonstrating the point that a country, like Iraq, which remains weak (i.e., doesn't give itself a nuclear capability) ends up seeing itself forced to submit to the whims of the foreign powers."

So, he suggests, if Iran doesn't already have the bomb, then perhaps it should think of giving itself that option. Although he seems to think that Tehran has certainly given itself the possibility of building a bomb — even if a device has not yet been built — and this largely because of the groundwork he personally laid when he served as the personal adviser on nuclear affairs to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran.

Akbar Etemad says that he met regularly with the Shah, especially between 1974 and 1976, and notes how he became convinced that he was seriously considering giving Iran the capability of building a bomb.

One day, after several meetings at the end of which the Shah personally asked for Akbar Etemad's handwritten notes, he queried the Iranian head of state: "and what do you await of me? are you thinking of building a bomb?", to which the Shah replied by giving a two-hour discourse on Iran's place in the world."

"He began by exposing his vision of the world, underlining the geo-strategic importance of Iran's position, and above all of the necessity that the free circulation of oil in the Persian Gulf and in the Indian Ocean be maintained, and this out of the grasp of all the foreign powers in the region, above all of that of the then very powerful Soviet Union."

Having said that, relates Akbar Etemad, the Shah "noted he was confident in the superiority of his army over those of the neighbouring states, outside of those of the Soviet Union, and said that he didn't see the necessity of presently launching in the production of nuclear arms. Not only would it be premature and costly, also it would set the Western powers against us, and impede the transfer (to Iran) of civil nuclear technology that would be indispensable'."

But, he adds that the Shah ended his expose with this proviso, that “if within 10, or 15, or 20 years the regional situation evolves (in our disfavour) and this country or that one acquires the atom bomb, then we would have to revise our position. At that time,” stressed the Shah, “the nuclear military option would become a priority.”

Given this observation, and realizing that his own job involved foreseeing future events, Akbar Etemad says he decided immediately to set in place a team of researchers “to which no doors would be closed,” and this because, he adds, “I felt that my duty was to give the country access to all technologies, giving the political decision-makers the possibility of making the appropriate decision and doing so while time permitted them to build a bomb if that is what was required.”

“In the end,” he notes, “I sowed the seeds (for a bomb),” although he admits that as far as he knows Iran ceased all research into giving the country a military nuclear option with the arrival in power of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. But, he does say that President Rafsanjani did “resurrect” the Iranian nuclear research programme — for which he had established much of the theoretical groundwork — and that the country’s organization for atomic energy had undertaken an ambitious programme for the construction of nuclear power plants, and this “with all the necessary nuclear technologies.”

Akbar Etemad says that to draw conclusions on the orientation of present-day research “is not all that easy, especially since,” he stresses, “uranium can be enriched in the same manner for a power plant as it can for a bomb.”