

**The Age of Nuclear Deception:
Nuclear Diplomacy in
Treacherous Times by Mohamed
ElBaradei**

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Mohammad ElBaradei, an Egyptian born Lawyer, has been the Director-General of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from 1997 to 2009. A Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and longest-serving Director General, who got the honour of becoming Director General Emeritus of the agency towards the end of his service. His failed bid to become the president of Egypt after Hosni Mubarak brought him back in the news during the Arab Spring of 2011.

His tenure as a Director-General was one of the most happening times of world nuclear era. Cold War had ended, and the risks of proliferation had grown considerably. Revelations about multiple nations ambitious to lay their hands on nuclear energy, both for peaceful as well as weapon purposes were increasing rapidly. The book is a compelling account of chronological events and challenges faced by IAEA during his tenure.

Arguments in his book revolve around the three underlying principles of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). These important facets of the treaty include the pledge by the (non-nuclear) members to not to try and obtain or develop nuclear weapons, a sincere effort on the part of all members to lead the world towards complete disarmament and thirdly to facilitate the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in all member countries with particular consideration for the needs of developing countries. Linking these issues to nuclear have and have-nots, his narrative seems almost to condone the aspirations of contenders. ElBaradei has drawn some serious censure for his book as well as his work at IAEA. Anyone rising to this level in public service in international organizations is bound to be subject to such criticism by the global north or the south, by a particular religion or a nation and he was no exception.

A significant portion of the book covers Iran's nuclear program and the diplomacy involved in bringing Iran and the west to negotiating terms. His tenure ended before anything substantial could be achieved between Iran and the west, especially the USA. However, the list of his efforts is very descriptive and is spread over more than three chapters. The gulf between his understanding of Iran's nuclear program and that of the west is vast and expands all over the book. While ElBaradei saw and treated Iran's nuclear issue as their right, west looked at Iran as a mocking exploiter of diplomacy, which according to them, has been proven by multiple lies and noncompliance, spread over many years. This laxity on the part of ElBaradei leveraged Iran to continue enriching even after he found out that Iran had deliberately been telling lies to IAEA about their reactor at Natanz. Over the years, Iran's initial stockpile of 1500 Kilograms of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU, less than 5%

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enrichment) swelled to more than 2500 Kilograms, with the increased capability of almost 20% enrichment.

IAEA has numerous operational limitations under the NPT; for example; it can only inspect the declared sites of the member states. Going beyond that, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has to exert pressure on countries to cooperate with IAEA. ElBaradei repeatedly mentions this limitation and his desire to seek more cooperation from the member states on matters related to intelligence sharing, satellite imageries and diplomacy. While talking about nuclear hypocrisy, he explains the Israeli attack on Syria's suspected nuclear facility at Dair Alzour in 2007. After the attack, the agency wanted to inspect the site of which Syria denied the permission. Furthermore, the matter was further escalated by a lack of cooperation by Israel and the USA to share any information that provided a reason for this attack by Israel. He repeatedly blames Israel for being a favoured state on issues related to nuclear weapons.

His criticism of Israel as the sole possessor of nuclear weapons and the non-NPT member is blunt, which drew him serious criticism in American media. At one point John Bolton, a senior US State Department official even lobbied for his ouster as the Director-General. Bolton had been a critique against ElBaradei. Bolton writes, "was my ideological opposite, a champion of 'us-versus-them' foreign policy; he opposed multilateral diplomacy and consistently worked behind the scenes to discredit the IAEA [...] He strove to undermine everything I stood for" (p. 165). The author has also been accused by some to overstep his mandate and get involved in politics by thinking and moving "outside the box". He brushes this criticism by saying, "I told them I had "no box," that I felt it as a part of my responsibility to speak out on matters that had a direct impact on the nuclear non-proliferation regime, a responsibility that, as a Nobel laureate, I felt even more keenly" (p.216).

The author has explained the Iraqi nuclear program that was enshrined in decades of deception and was marred by defiant cooperation with IAEA. He admits that throughout the 1990s, Iraq deceived IAEA about the nuclear ambitions. ElBaradei became one of the most vocal opponents of US invasion of Iraq in 2003. He was right about Iraq's non-possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and asserts that given a choice, he would have wanted to let the inspection process by the IAEA inspectors conclude and then the decision for further action would have been initiated. Americans had already made up their minds to go to war on the evidence that they possessed WMDs and also believed it to be true. He shows his dismay in the book when he says, "For a war to be fought over unsubstantiated WMD charges — and for the IAEA's nuclear diplomacy role to be pushed to the side, serving as merely a fig leaf of due process — was for me a grotesque distortion of everything we stood for. It went against nearly half a century of painstaking labour by committed scientists, lawyers, inspectors, and public servants from every continent. I was aghast at what I was witnessing" (p. 8). He has gone one step ahead to suggest that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in collaboration with UNO must ascertain the "legality of Iraq War" (p. 84). The author also proposes for countries to arrest and implicate the individuals who are responsible for starting this war and compensate Iraqis who became war victims.

Political and diplomatic wrangling is spread all over the book while west makes promises to bring the suspect nations to negotiating tables and then fails to deliver the promised reactors or other assistance. The North Korean nuclear weapons program exemplifies the delicacy of issues that IAEA has to handle. It took ElBaradei years and multiple visits to North Korea to build a working relationship. The

inspections revealed many discrepancies and North Koreans were pressurized to cooperate. Referring to the possibility of bilateral dialogue between the USA and North Korea, ElBaradei makes a logical argument against US refusal to do the same in the case of Iran. His arguments and choice of word for drafting statements from opposing parties show his refined understanding of diplomacy and the vital role of sustained diplomacy in resolving some very contentious issues.

ElBaradei came to be known as someone who could stand up to the bullying and face the USA and the west head-on. He does not shy out from apportioning the blame of each case of a failed diplomatic or a negotiated agreement on the parties responsible. For example, he talks about North Korea walking out of NPT and says, “Framework was ultimately undermined when the United States failed to live up to its commitments with North Korea, most notably by not delivering the promised power reactors” (p. 47). Similarly, he sharply criticizes France for budging to US pressure and refusing to supply Iran with the promised reactor causing a breakdown in negotiations and resumption of enrichment by Iran. During his tenure, he has been labelled as being too soft on Iran by the western media. However, these remarks do not seem to alter his choice for a preference of diplomacy over war.

His account of tireless work to give diplomacy one final chance every time gives the reader an impression of the difficulty and delicacy of negotiated efforts to settle some serious problems facing humanity today. During an interview with the *New York Times*, he called himself a “secular pope” with a mission to ensure that, “we do not end up killing each other”. For his diligent work and elevation of agency’s role from a group of technicians, scientists, and lawyers to a vigilant and assertive organization won him and the agency a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

Divided over twelve chapters, the book traces the history of nuclear proliferation down to the last source, especially in the case of Iran and Libya. He has dedicated one chapter uncovering the involvement of A. Q. Khan in nuclear proliferation. Calling it a virtual Nuclear Wal-Mart he says, “In the coming years, as our monitoring and reporting intensified, our database would come to hold more than 1,300 cases of illicit trafficking in nuclear and radioactive materials” (p.153). In the same context, it is essential to note that he has blamed Western intelligence agencies for not cooperating fully with the IAEA and lack of provision of timely information to the agency. He accuses them of sidelining the agency and his role as the Director-General, especially when he learned about disarming Libya. Libyan Prime Minister for Science and Technology told ElBaradei that while Libya was bound by the NPT and all along wanted to inform IAEA, “they won’t allow it” (p. 139). Towards the end of the book, he has again emphasized the need for cooperation between the intelligence agencies of all members and the IAEA.

American exceptionalism to the rules has been highlighted by the author in almost every case of proliferation. Israeli possession of nuclear weapons creating a serious strategic imbalance in the Middle East is one stark example of such favouritism. Israeli asymmetry in the nuclear arsenal is one of the most serious detriments to peace in the Middle East. Similarly, while talking about the discovery of South Korean efforts to separate small amounts of Plutonium, he calls them “American Allies” and “Good Guys” (p. 196). The author himself can be branded in similar words due to his endorsement of the American — Indian nuclear deal of 2006. While he was fully aware that the deal would undermine NPT, he still takes sides with the USA and offers no plausible explanation for his endorsement other than his wish that India, Pakistan and Israel could join NPT.

Probably one of his most admirable achievements has been chalking out a work plan that eventually ironed out IAEA — Iran differences. This plan helped in sorting out all six of the contentious issues that were the real cause of referring Iran's Case to Security Council regarding sanctions. It is a sad irony that ElBaradei had to resign office on completion of his third tenure in office in 2009, and it would take the international community and Iran almost six more years to reach a deal.

His bold and direct style grabs the attention of the reader and inspires devotion to appreciate the events staged at the international level as well as down to his personal life. For example, his disappointment on account of his daughter's marriage to a non – Egyptian or the way he and his wife heard the news of Nobel Peace Prize announcement, with “tears streaming down our faces” (p.168). However, at times the reader gets an impression of ElBaradei being the head of a “Princely State” who would not appreciate anything lesser than a deluxe treatment, especially when he talks down about the food being fundamental with “few choices: noodles, meat, and kimchee; no fruit or salad” (p. 38), or chilly hotel rooms in North Korea, etc. This kind of thinking makes it harder for masses to relate to him, and possibly this could have been one of the reasons for his non – election as president of Egypt after Hosni Mubarak.

The book is excellent reading for foreign policy, diplomacy and nuclear experts besides leaving some thoughtful lessons for the students of 21st Century. His writing would certainly resonate more with the developing countries than the developed ones, since he criticizes the global structural imbalance and inequalities, leaning more in favour of north than the south and the widening divide between have and have-nots. Graph of his tenure at IAEA fluctuates between has failures and successes in negotiating diverging interests and intractable conflicts on nuclear-related issues. He culminates the book by asserting that quest for human security cannot be selective. Nations, he avows, must come together to formulate a framework whereby the security aspirations of the west and energy needs of the rest are fulfilled in simultaneity. If those in prized possession of nuclear assets keep threatening the have-nots, through their nuclear asymmetry, the chances of a peaceful world free of proliferation can simply be ruled out.