

Nuclear Reactors or Hernia Surgery?

The debate on the use of nuclear power in Europe inspired an Italian cinema company, MOROL Productions, to produce a documentary entitled 'The Nuclear Question'. This documentary was shown at the Rome Film Festival in October 2009 and received awards for presenting the

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nuclear question from ethical, environmental and economical perspectives.

A quarter of a century after the Chernobyl disaster and its repercussions, and three decades after the Three Miles Island nuclear accident in the US, the film poses several questions: is there a moral justification for accepting the potentially disastrous results of nuclear accidents in order to meet raising energy demands? Is the nuclear energy option inevitable? Or was Italy's 1987 decision to ban nuclear reactors (based on a referendum held after the Chernobyl disaster) a wise decision?

When MOROL recently approached me to request an interview for another documentary on nuclear energy in the Arab region, I welcomed the idea and found it useful to contribute to a serious discussion on the subject in the Arab region.

I was asked, "Are you afraid of the devastating effects of nuclear radiation in the Arab region, given the possibility of an accident similar to Chernobyl at an Iranian nuclear reactor?" This opening question surprised me because before the Lebanese should fear the effects of an accident 2,000 km away in Iran, they should fear a nuclear accident in the Israeli Dimona reactor, which is only 200 km away. This also assumes that we limit fears to a mere accident. The Dimona reactor produces fuel for nuclear warheads and is located in a country which is at war with its neighbours and which refuses to sign the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Iran has signed that treaty but is still suspected of pursuing its nuclear program for military ends. What guarantees can the Lebanese and the Arabs have against an intentionally triggered nuclear apocalyptic attack, especially from a country with which they are officially considered to be in a state of war with?

Furthermore, at the opposite end of the Mediterranean, dozens of nuclear reactors exist in France and it is sufficient for just one accident to occur for radiation to reach Arab countries across the Mediterranean. Moreover, Turkey is preparing to construct nuclear reactors on the Akoya coast close to Cyprus, only 300 km away from Beirut.

"These reactors are all closer to us," I pointed out to my interviewer. He commented that in spite of this, many Arab countries have begun to build nuclear power stations. "This is true," I told him, "and Arab countries have multiple motives. Some suffer from a deficit in energy resources yet possess stocks of uranium, plan to extract it and use it to produce

electricity from nuclear energy, as is the case in Jordan." Feasibility studies often ignore the cost of dismantling nuclear reactors and dealing with the waste which, apart from the environmental risks, would increase the liabilities and outweigh potential economic benefits in any case.

Moreover, other Arab countries are rich in conventional energy resources and still want to 'purchase' nuclear technology under the banner of diversifying energy resources and accelerating development. The danger lies in luring some countries into buying ready-made nuclear technology and equipment, under the pretext of a regional balance of power, which may lead to wasting national wealth in an absurd race. This race is not based on developing and owning technology but on buying ready-made equipment from 'international sales representatives', including heads of state, who offer both nuclear reactors and military equipment on the same plate, sometimes as part of so-called 'peace initiatives'.

It seems my answer provoked my interviewer, so he asked, "Are you against Arabs acquiring advanced technology, including nuclear?" Of course I want Arabs to develop and own all technologies and invest in science, literature and art. But what does buying nuclear reactors mean, when Arab citizens still have to travel to hospitals in Europe and America for treatment of the simplest injuries or diseases?

Before we talk of nuclear reactors, what have we achieved in the field of scientific research, whether in medicine, engineering, physics, economics or sociology? The Arab region still ranks amongst the lowest in the world in terms of budget allocation to scientific research. A stark manifestation of this is that while Arab countries produce 60 per cent of desalinated sea water in the world, they continue to import desalination technology, equipment, spare parts and in most cases foreign scientists, managers, technicians and workers. So we have to ask whether the construction of nuclear reactors should be accorded a priority over building a factory to produce membranes for water desalination, let alone complete

desalination plants? Is a nuclear reactor more important than developing medical services so

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that citizens are not forced to travel to foreign hospitals, like the Mayo Clinic, for surgery as simple as removing a hernia or a gallbladder?

Ultimately, is it not more useful to invest in renewable energies, especially sun and wind, which are free, clean, safe and abundantly available in the Arab region, before seeking to produce nuclear electricity?

Arabs have the right to develop and own technology, including nuclear, on condition that they identify priorities and uses according to real needs and in compliance with safety and security considerations. We should be aware, however, of falling victim to an artificial nuclear race that only serves international salesmen.

This commentary has been re-written by the author for 'Perspectives Middle East', based on his monthly editorial published in September 2010. Translated from Arabic by Doreen Khoury.



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