

A nuclear Israel

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Former United States President Jimmy Carter courted controversy while discussing Israel's suspected nuclear arsenal when he declared that Israel has 150 nuclear weapons in its arsenal (The Times, 26 May 2008). Israel has maintained an official stance of nuclear ambiguity in terms of disclosing its nuclear ambitions. These revelations would be welcomed by the leadership in Iran which is currently battling International scrutiny towards its own nuclear program.

Carter is not the first high ranking American official to have publicly spoken on Israeli nuclear weapons. That honor goes to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, when he named Israel among a group of nuclear powers which surrounds Iran (Debkafile, 7 December 2006). Days later, Israeli premier Ehud Olmert inadvertently named Israel in a list of nuclear nations more responsible than Iran (Guardian, 12 December 2006).

The earliest known instance of Israel having been confronted on its nuclear program was when US President John F. Kennedy questioned then Israeli deputy minister of defense Shimon Peres in the White House. Mr. Peres responded with a tagline which has since become synonymous with the Israeli position- "I can say to you clearly that we shall not introduce atomic weapons into the region. We will certainly not be the first to do so" (CSM, 14 December 2006). The world witnessed the secret lair of the suspected Israeli nuclear program when Israeli nuclear engineer Mordecai Vannunu, sold surreptitiously taken pictures of the Negev Nuclear Research facility, to a leading British daily in September 1986. The pictures which were studied by experts greatly increased the believed capability of the Israeli nuclear program. While earlier believed that Israel had a handful of nuclear weapons, the new evidence convinced the world that Israel was now in possession of approximately 100-200 warheads (BBC News, 20 April 2004).

Vanunu's disclosures were shocking to the International community and viewed with contempt within Israel. In Israel, it is widely believed, that deterrence is achieved through its policy of nuclear ambiguity. As articulated in his work "Why do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb", Scott Sagan writes "States will seek to develop nuclear weapons when they face a significant military threat to their security that cannot be met through alternative means" (International Security, 1996). The perpetual fear which Israel has had to live with since its inception has forced for its self-preservation. This has led Israel into taking extraordinary measures to ensure its security, particularly so with nuclear weapons in its neighborhood.

This resulted in, among others, military and covert operations. For example, in 1981, Israel undertook a first of its kind, military operation against a nuclear facility (Osiraq) in Iraq, believed to be a nuclear weapons factory. Suspicions were that the French built nuclear reactor could be easily modified to allow Iraq, to produce up to four nuclear weapons per year. This measure was taken after a number of attempts to sabotage the plant, including damaging plant equipment in France and the assassination of Yahya al-Meshad, a senior Iraqi nuclear scientist (The Atlantic, December 2005).

Even Mordecai Vanunu's disclosures are viewed by a section of people to be a work of the Israeli secret service Mossad. Mordecai Vanunu was kidnapped by suspected Mossad agents while vacationing in Rome and brought back to Israel to face prosecution for leaking information related to Israeli National Security. Even the Italian public prosecutor Domenico Sica, was not entirely convinced with Vanunu's story when he was personally interviewed. It was concluded by the Italian prosecution that the entire situation was an elaborate hoax, in order to surreptitiously acknowledge to the world that Israel was a nuclear power. And therefore no Italian law was broken, for there was no kidnap and the investigation was halted (Payne, 1990, pg.182).

In recent years, it has been disclosed that Israel was collaborating with India to attack the Kahuta nuclear plant in Pakistan. It is believed that fears of a retaliatory attack led to the operation being scrapped (Dawn 29 October 2007). In a repeat of the Osiraq attack, the Israeli Air Force bombed a suspected nuclear reactor in Syria on 6 September 2007. Despite news of the raid, details of the target were not immediately released and it was only much later officials admitted that the site was a nuclear facility which was nearing completion (Haaretz, 24 April 2008).

Critics argue that the Israeli position vis-à-vis Iran, is one of hypocrisy. It would serve purpose to note the nature of the Israeli nuclear program as compared to the Iranian. The Israeli program is based on a principle of self-preservation and not a quest for regional hegemony. The Iranian nuclear program has been peppered with virulently anti-Israeli rhetoric including outright threats against Israel. In contrast, Israeli actions against suspected nuclear sites have taken great care in ensuring civilian casualties are kept to a minimum. In Osirak for example, planning ensured according to Amos Perlmutter, "The total destruction of the nuclear reactor would in that case be achieved at the lowest risk to human lives" (FAS, September 2004). It should therefore not be surprising that Robert Gates cautioned "If Iran obtains nuclear weapons no one can promise it would not use them against Israel" (Debkafile, December 7, 2006).