

# How Shimon Peres Stole the Nuclear Bomb with a Bluff

By [Richard Silverstein](#)

Global Research, October 01, 2016

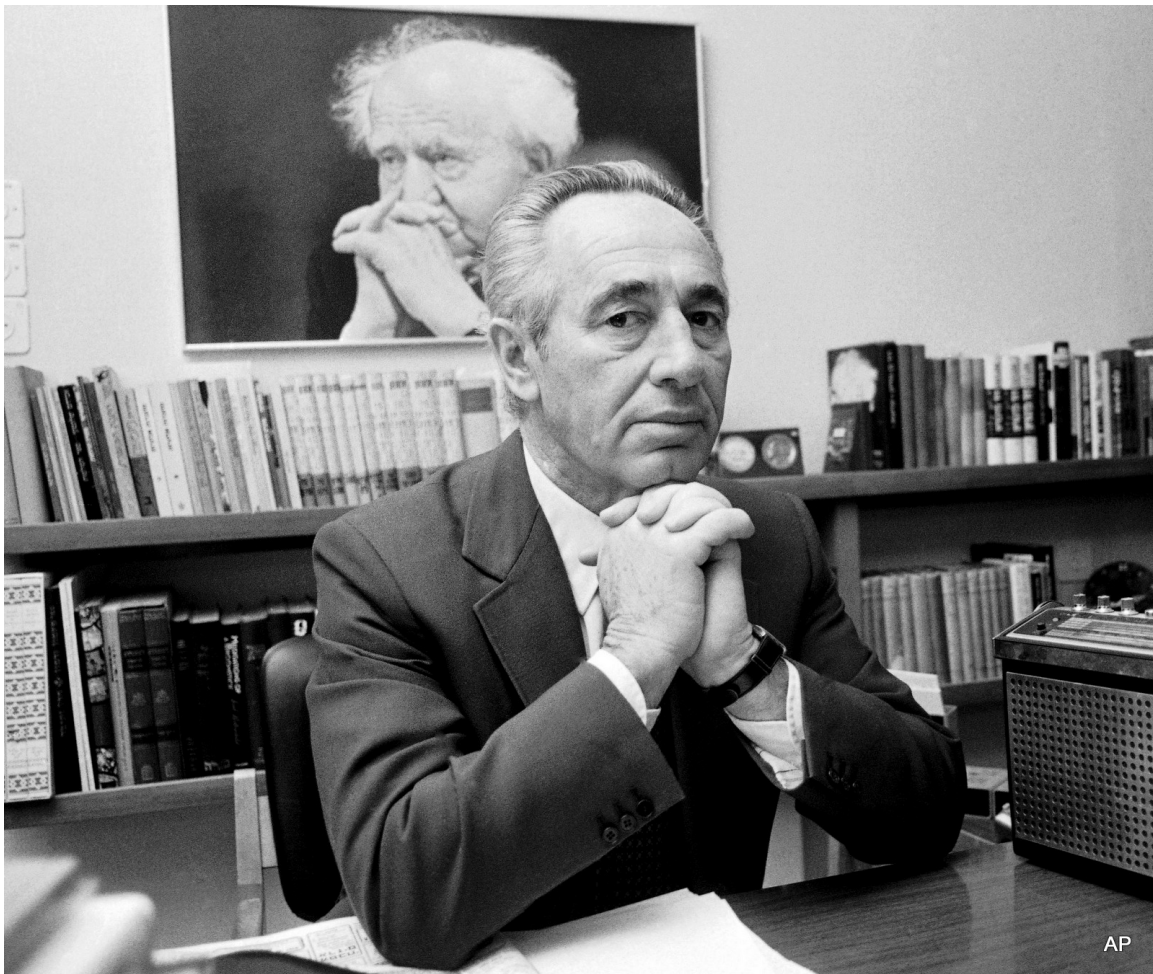
[Mint Press News](#) 29 September 2016

*And why the military censors don't want you to know about it.*

*Published in partnership with [Tikun Olam](#) [תיקון עולם](#).*

*You will read much hagiography in the Peres obituaries published in Israeli and world media. [Here](#) is a perfect example in the NY Times of the half-truths and undeserved admiration that is being heaped upon his memory:*

*He was consistent in his search for an accommodation with the Arab world, a search that in recent years left him orphaned as Israeli society lost interest, especially after the upheavals of the 2011 Arab Spring led to tumult on its borders.*



In an especially vain moment, Shimon Peres is pictured mimicking the pose of his political mentor,

## David Ben Gurion.

This is at best only partially true. Peres was *intermittent* in his search for peace with the Arabs. True, in 1993, he led the effort that culminated in the Oslo Accords. But subsequent Israeli governments abandoned them and they eventually came to be discredited entirely both on the left and right.

After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Peres had an opportunity to call a snap election which would've confirmed his mandate to solidify the gains from those Accords. Instead, he temporized and waited until it was too late. By the time he called elections a year later, Palestinian militants had engineered a series of savage terror attacks inside Israel which discredited Peres' leadership and brought Bibi Netanyahu to power for his first term as prime minister. Though there were subsequent opportunities for Israeli governments to negotiate peace deals, especially with Ehud Barak, another Labor prime minister, all of them were squandered. Regardless, Peres' accession to the position in 1995 and the cataclysm that followed, was a pivotal moment that led to the political stagnation which has lasted ever since.

Much of what you will read about Peres is either outright false or only partially true. A certain portion of what you read may even be true. But Shimon Peres is one of those Israeli leaders like Ben Gurion, his mentor, and Ariel Sharon, who built a myth around themselves. Part political hype, part astute branding, and part a need in Israelis and the rest of the world to believe the myth they were sold of Israel as the miracle in the desert, the people which made a barren land bloom, which drained swamps and turned them into thriving kibbutzim. The little State that could.

So in assessing Peres' legacy it's important to keep this in mind; to separate fact from fiction; myth from reality.



Prime Minister David Ben Gurion with his chief aide, Shimon Peres. In background: defense minister Moshe Dayan and Ben Gurion aide, Teddy Kollek.

Shimon Peres had a [severe stroke](#) two days ago and while his [health has improved](#) since he entered the hospital, at age 93, he is in the twilight of his years. It's appropriate to take

stock of his legacy as an epochal figure who spans the founding of the State to the present day. I can't think of another active Israeli politician with that length of service or span of history.

When Peres dies, an entire nation will mourn him as a founding father of the state. Someone who served it faithfully and diligently for nearly seven decades. The accolades will pour forth. Newscasters will show historic footage of him with his political mentor, David Ben Gurion, and intone solemnly about the deeds of the Great Man.

But, as is often the case in these matters, the truth lies elsewhere. Peres began his career as Ben Gurion's errand boy. He was diligent and inventive. What the boss needed done, he always figured out a way to accomplish. Eventually became his chief fixer. That's how he was assigned the monumental task of getting Israel the Bomb. Such a task is no small feat and it required immense amounts of grit, determination, invention, and even outright thievery. Peres was more than up to the task.

## "אל תמכרו לנו אורניום, תלוו לנו": כששמעון פרס הקים מפעל טקסטיל

"פרס שאל את בן-גוריון 'עכשיו?' ובן-גוריון ענה לו 'לך'. פרס חצה לצד השני של האולם, והכול התחיל". החברות עם הצרפתים, הרעיון שעקף את האיסור הבינלאומי והבלוף המבריק שאפשר את חוזה העסקה: כך ביצר שמעון פרס את בטחון ישראל כשדחף למימוש המיזם הסודי בחולות דימונה

תגיות: שמעון פרס, הכור בדימונה, דוד בן-גוריון, משה דיין

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Uncensored version of Wall story which describes Peres' bluff which enabled French to circumvent international nuclear prohibition against selling uranium to Israel.

From almost the first moment after the State was founded Ben Gurion aspired to create a nuclear weapon. He saw it as his Doomsday device. The ace he could draw from the deck if all the cards were stacked against him. Though Israel's actual strategic strength was quite robust, Ben Gurion suggested otherwise. In a famous episode of that era, he's reputed to have looked at a map of the Middle East spread upon the wall of his study and exclaimed to those around him: "I didn't sleep a wink last night because of this map. What is Israel? A

single tiny speck. How can it survive amidst this Arab world?!"

This was part and parcel of the Israeli strategy of portraying itself as the eternal victim, the weaker party to every conflict, who required moral and military support to prevent its destruction. None of it was true. But in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the world felt it couldn't take a chance that it might happen again. That's how Israel became little David to the Arab Goliath in the eyes of much of the world after 1948.

Though the conventional Israeli belief is that Israel's WMD was meant to protect Israel from imminent destruction should it suffer a catastrophic defeat, that theory is wrong either in whole or in part. In actuality, Israel never faced such a threat. It always maintained military superiority over its enemies in every war from 1948 through 1967 (and after).

Ben Gurion's real goal in obtaining nukes was *political*. He wanted to ensure Israel would never have to negotiate away the gains it made on the battlefield. He wanted a weapon he could hold over the heads of any enemy, that would ensure he never had to renounce anything that was rightfully Israel's (in his mind at least). So Israel's Bomb has enabled it to reject virtually every peace initiative offered going all the way back to 1967. Israel's leaders knew that the U.S. would never gamble that it wouldn't use WMD if it had to. So American presidents already had one hand tied behind their backs in such negotiations. In a card game, when one party holds the ace of spades in his pocket and everyone else playing knows this, it's not much of a game, is it?

## Israeli Opponents of the Bomb

It would be a misnomer to believe that Ben Gurion and Peres were lionized by their peers for their visionary project. Opposition to an Israeli Bomb was strong and crossed party lines. Among those who were against were future prime minister Levi Eshkol, Pinchas Sapir, Yigal Alon, Golda Meir, and Israel's leading weapons developer, Yisrael Galili. Even then IDF chief of staff Chaim Leskov opposed the Bomb. Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, in his typically prophetic fashion created an NGO that called for making the Middle East a nuclear-free zone (it was called in Hebrew "the Public Committee to Demilitarize the Middle East of Nuclear Weapons"). It was probably the first such call anywhere in the world. In one matter, he turned out to be wrong. He predicted that by building the nuclear reactor Israel would tempt its enemies to bomb and destroy it. Afterward, Leibowitz predicted, they would call Dimona: "Shimon's Folly."

The sheer chutzpah that Peres employed to get what he wanted was astonishing. He played on the heartstrings of German guilt to obtain funding for the nuclear arms project. He recruited [Arnon Milchan](#) as a covert operative to organize a conspiracy to steal highly enriched uranium from the U.S. depository where it was stored. Peres negotiated with the French a complex deal to build the Dimona plant, which to this day produces the plutonium for Israel's WMD arsenal.





Shimon Peres visits an Israeli police counter-terrorism unit, 2011.

The defense ministry director general traveled extensively to France in those days and cultivated the entire political leadership in pursuit of the necessary agreements to build the Dimona plant. On the very day he flew to France to sign the final deal, the government in Paris fell. Though Ben Gurion saw Peres' trip as wasted, the latter refused to give up. He went to the resigning prime minister and suggested that they back-date the agreement to make it appear as if it had been signed before the resignation. The French leader agreed.

And so, Israel's Bomb was saved by an audacious bluff. When someone asked Peres afterward how he thought he could get away with such a stratagem, he joked: "What's 24 hours among friends?"

Peres facilitated outright theft as well. If Israel waited to produce the highly enriched uranium it would need to create a Bomb on its own, it would've taken years longer than it did. If it could procure the uranium by other means it would immensely speed the process.

That's how the father of the Israeli Bomb recruited future Hollywood film producer Milchan to steal hundreds of kilos of nuclear materials from a warehouse in Pennsylvania with the connivance of American officials who were pro-Israel Jews recruited to the task.

Roger Mattson recently published a book on the subject, [Stealing the Atom Bomb: How Denial and Deception Armed Israel](#). [This article](#) summarizes his findings. Among them, are that a group of American Jewish scientists and engineers founded the company which likely embezzled and transferred to Israel enough material to make six nuclear bombs. Several officers of this company later became national officers in the Zionist Organization of America. A founder of the company fought in the Haganah during the 1948 War and was a protege of future Israeli intelligence chief, Meir Amit. Key figures in U.S. intelligence even suggested that the company itself was established by Israeli intelligence in order to steal U.S. materials and technological expertise in the service of Israel's nuclear weapons project. All of this means that leaders of one of the key organizations in the Israel Lobby aided and abetted a huge national security breach which gave Israel the bomb.

If you're a pro-Israel advocate you likely see such figures as heroes. If so, consider this: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1956 for doing far less harm to America's nuclear program than these individuals did.

## Israel Lobby's Covert Fundraising Program

The WMD project was extraordinarily expensive. The new State, saddled with huge expenses to feed and house millions of new immigrants, had no budget to fund it. That's where Peres turned to wealthy Diaspora Jews like [Abe Feinberg](#) to covertly raise funds for the Israeli bomb. Feinberg spearheaded a fundraising campaign which raised \$40-million, equivalent to \$260-million in today's dollars. Feinberg also conspired through his Democratic Party connections to secure from Pres. Johnson Israel's right to refuse to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation pact.

The Israeli news portal Walla [describes](#) the brilliant stratagem Ben Gurion and Peres concocted that drew France to Israel's side in the effort to make a Bomb. It began in 1956 with a secret meeting at a French villa outside Paris with a high-level British and French contingent. The goals of the French and British were aligned with those of Israel, but not completely so. The British and French wanted to give Egypt's new firebrand leader, Gamal Nasser a black eye for nationalizing the Suez Canal and offering aid to the Algerian resistance. They hatched a plan to attack Nasser and carve up Egypt's strategic assets for themselves. Israel was happy to go along for the ride. But it had a separate goal-to garner European support for its nuclear effort.

After getting the go-ahead sign from Ben Gurion, Peres approached his French counterparts and announced Israeli agreement to join in the attack which later came to be known as Operation Kadesh. But Israel, he told them, faced far more danger in the venture than either the British or French. If Israel lost, its very existence could be threatened. That's why it needed a strategic weapon that could prevent its annihilation in the event of a disastrous defeat.

As negotiations proceeded with the French, they warned the Israelis that there were prohibited from selling them uranium under international agreements. Peres came up with a typically brilliant and devious solution: "Don't sell it to us, *lend* it to us," he said. "We will return it to you after our mission is completed." So began the real effort to build an Israeli Bomb. The reactor was completed in 1960 and by 1967 Israel had its first primitive nuclear weapon to use in case it lost the 1967 War.

For some strange reason, the Israeli military censor disapproved of Walla talking about Peres' "bluff" regarding back-dating the French-Israeli nuclear agreement. In the [censored version](#), you won't find any reference to it. Nor will you find the story about Peres' suggestion that the French "lend" the uranium to Israel, since it was illegal to sell it. My guess is that with Peres' demise likely, they preferred not to tarnish the Old Man's reputation any more than necessary. Which raises the question: why is a censor stooping to protect Israeli politicians' reputations rather than protecting the security of the state, which is its putative mission?"

*Richard Silverstein is a MintPress analyst who has written the Tikun Olam blog since 2003, specializing in Israeli politics and US foreign affairs. He earned a BA from Columbia University, a BHL from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and MA in Comparative Literature from UCLA. Follow Richard on Twitter: @Richards1052*

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