

Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Threat to World Peace. History and Analysis

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*This carefully researched article by **John Steinbach** on Israel's nuclear arsenal was first published by Global Research in March 2002.*

*"Should war break out in the Middle East again,... or should any Arab nation fire missiles against Israel, as the Iraqis did, a nuclear escalation, once unthinkable except as a last resort, would now be a strong probability." **Seymour Hersh**(1)*

*"Arabs may have the oil, but we have the matches." **Ariel Sharon**(2) (right image)*



Introduction

*With between 200 and 500 thermonuclear weapons and a sophisticated delivery system, **Israel has quietly supplanted Britain as the World's 5th Largest nuclear power, and may currently rival France and China in the size and sophistication of its nuclear arsenal.***

Although dwarfed by the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and Russia, each possessing over 10,000 nuclear weapons, Israel nonetheless is a major nuclear power, and should be publically recognized as such.

Since the Gulf War in 1991, while much attention has been lavished on the threat posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the major culprit in the region, Israel, has been largely ignored.

Possessing chemical and biological weapons, an extremely sophisticated nuclear arsenal, and an aggressive strategy for their actual use, Israel provides the major regional impetus for the development of weapons of mass destruction and represents an acute threat to peace and stability in the Middle East.

The Israeli nuclear program represents a serious impediment to nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation and, with India and Pakistan, is a potential nuclear flashpoint.(prospects of meaningful non-proliferation are a delusion so long as the nuclear weapons states insist on maintaining their arsenals,) Citizens concerned about sanctions against Iraq, peace with justice in the Middle East, and nuclear disarmament have an obligation to speak out forcefully against the Israeli nuclear program.

Birth of the Israeli Bomb

The Israeli nuclear program began in the late 1940s under the direction of **Ernst David Bergmann**, “the father of the Israeli bomb,” who in 1952 established the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission.

It was France, however, which provided the bulk of early nuclear assistance to Israel culminating in construction of Dimona, a heavy water moderated, natural uranium reactor and plutonium reprocessing factory situated near Bersheeba in the Negev Desert.

Israel had been an active participant in the French Nuclear weapons program from its inception, providing critical technical expertise, **and the Israeli nuclear program can be seen as an extension of this earlier collaboration.** Dimona went on line in 1964 and plutonium reprocessing began shortly thereafter. Despite various Israeli claims that Dimona was “a manganese plant, or a textile factory,” the extreme security measures employed told a far different story. In 1967, Israel shot down one of their own Mirage fighters that approached too close to Dimona and in 1973 shot down a Lybian civilian airliner which strayed off course, killing 104.(3)

There is substantial credible speculation that Israel may have exploded at least one, and perhaps several, nuclear devices in the mid 1960s in the Negev near the Israeli-Egyptian border, and that it participated actively in French nuclear tests in Algeria.(4) By the time of the “Yom Kippur War” in 1973, Israel possessed an arsenal of perhaps several dozen deliverable atomic bombs and went on full nuclear alert.(5)

Possessing advanced nuclear technology and “world class” nuclear scientists, Israel was confronted early with a major problem- how to obtain the necessary uranium. Israel’s own uranium source was the phosphate deposits in the Negev, totally inadequate to meet the need of a rapidly expanding program. The short term answer was to mount commando raids in France and Britain to successfully hijack uranium shipments and, in 1968, to collaborate with West Germany in diverting 200 tons of yellowcake (uranium oxide).(6)

These clandestine acquisitions of uranium for Dimona were subsequently covered up by the various countries involved. There was also an allegation that a U.S. corporation called

Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC) diverted hundreds of pounds of enriched uranium to Israel from the mid-50s to the mid-60s.

Despite an FBI and CIA investigation, and Congressional hearings, no one was ever prosecuted, although most other investigators believed the diversion had occurred(7)(8). In the late 1960s, Israel solved the uranium problem by developing close ties with South Africa in a quid pro quo arrangement whereby Israel supplied the technology and expertise for the “Apartheid Bomb,” while South Africa provided the uranium.

South Africa and the United States

In 1977, the Soviet Union warned the U.S. that satellite photos indicated South Africa was planning a nuclear test in the Kalahari Desert but the Apartheid regime backed down under pressure.

On September 22, 1979, a U.S. satellite detected an atmospheric test of a small thermonuclear bomb in the Indian Ocean off South Africa but, because of Israel’s apparent involvement, the report was quickly “whitewashed” by a carefully selected scientific panel kept in the dark about important details.

Later it was learned through Israeli sources that there were actually three carefully guarded tests of miniaturized Israeli nuclear artillery shells. The Israeli/South African collaboration did not end with the bomb testing, but continued until the fall of Apartheid, especially with the developing and testing of medium range missiles and advanced artillery. In addition to uranium and test facilities, South Africa provided Israel with large amounts of investment capital, while Israel provided a major trade outlet to enable the Apartheid state avoid international economic sanctions.(9)

Although the French and South Africans were primarily responsible for the Israeli nuclear program, the U.S. shares and deserves a large part of the blame. Mark Gaffney wrote (the Israeli nuclear program) “was possible only because (emphasis in original) of calculated deception on the part of Israel, and willing complicity on the part of the U.S..”(10)

From the very beginning, the U.S. was heavily involved in the Israeli nuclear program, providing nuclear related technology such as a small research reactor in 1955 under the “Atoms for Peace Program.” Israeli scientists were largely trained at U.S. universities and were generally welcomed at the nuclear weapons labs. In the early 1960s, the controls for the Dimona reactor were obtained clandestinely from a company called Tracer Lab, the main supplier of U.S. military reactor control panels, purchased through a Belgian subsidiary, apparently with the acquiescence of the National Security Agency (NSA) and the CIA.(11) In 1971, the Nixon administration approved the sale of hundreds of krytons(a type of high speed switch necessary to the development of sophisticated nuclear bombs) to Israel.(12) And, in 1979, Carter provided ultra high resolution photos from a KH-11 spy satellite, used 2 years later to bomb the Iraqi Osirak Reactor.(13) Throughout the Nixon and Carter administrations, and accelerating dramatically under Reagan, U.S. advanced technology transfers to Israel have continued unabated to the present.

The Vanunu Revelations



Following the 1973 war, Israel intensified its nuclear program while continuing its policy of deliberate “nuclear opaqueness.” Until the mid-1980s, most intelligence estimates of the Israeli nuclear arsenal were on the order of two dozen but the explosive revelations of **Mordechai Vanunu**, a nuclear technician working in the Dimona plutonium reprocessing plant, changed everything overnight. **A leftist supporter of Palestine, Vanunu believed that it was his duty to humanity to expose Israel’s nuclear program to the world. He smuggled dozens of photos and valuable scientific data out of Israel and in 1986 his story was published in the London Sunday Times.**

Rigorous scientific scrutiny of the Vanunu revelations led to the disclosure that Israel possessed as many as 200 highly sophisticated, miniaturized thermonuclear bombs. His information indicated that the Dimona reactor’s capacity had been expanded several fold and that Israel was producing enough plutonium to make ten to twelve bombs per year. A senior U.S. intelligence analyst said of the Vanunu data, “The scope of this is much more extensive than we thought. This is an enormous operation.”(14)

Just prior to publication of his information Vanunu was lured to Rome by a Mossad “Mata Hari,” was beaten, drugged and kidnapped to Israel and, following a campaign of disinformation and vilification in the Israeli press, convicted of “treason” by a secret security court and sentenced to 18 years in prison. He served over 11 years in solitary confinement in a 6 by 9 foot cell. After a year of modified release into the general population (he was not permitted contact with Arabs), Vanunu recently has been returned to solitary and faces more than 3 years further imprisonment. Predictably, The Vanunu revelations were largely ignored by the world press, especially in the United States, and Israel continues to enjoy a relatively free ride regarding its nuclear status. (15)

Israel’s Arsenal of Mass Destruction

Today, [2003] estimates of the Israeli nuclear arsenal range from a minimum of 200 to a maximum of about 500.

Whatever the number, there is little doubt that Israeli nukes are among the world’s most sophisticated, largely designed for “war fighting” in the Middle East. A staple of the Israeli nuclear arsenal are “neutron bombs,” miniaturized thermonuclear bombs designed to maximize deadly gamma radiation while minimizing blast effects and long term radiation- in essence **designed to kill people while leaving property intact.**(16) **Weapons include ballistic missiles and bombers capable of reaching Moscow, cruise missiles, land mines (In the 1980s Israel planted nuclear land mines along the Golan Heights(17)), and artillery shells with a range of 45 miles(18).**

In June, 2000 an Israeli submarine launched a cruise missile which hit a target 950 miles

away, making Israel only the third nation after the U.S. and Russia with that capability. Israel will deploy 3 of these virtually impregnable submarines, each carrying 4 cruise missiles.(19)

The bombs themselves range in size from “city busters” larger than the Hiroshima Bomb to tactical mini nukes. The Israeli arsenal of weapons of mass destruction clearly dwarfs the actual or potential arsenals of all other Middle Eastern states combined, and is vastly greater than any conceivable need for “deterrence.”

Israel also possesses a comprehensive arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. According to the Sunday Times, Israel has produced both chemical and biological weapons with a sophisticated delivery system, quoting a senior Israeli intelligence official,

“There is hardly a single known or unknown form of chemical or biological weapon . . . which is not manufactured at the Nes Tziyona Biological Institute.”(20)

The same report described F-16 fighter jets specially designed for chemical and biological payloads, with crews trained to load the weapons on a moments notice. In 1998, the Sunday Times reported that Israel, using research obtained from South Africa, was developing an “ethno bomb; “In developing their “ethno-bomb”, Israeli scientists are trying to exploit medical advances by identifying distinctive a gene carried by some Arabs, then create a genetically modified bacterium or virus... The scientists are trying to engineer deadly micro-organisms that attack only those bearing the distinctive genes.” Dedi Zucker, a leftist Member of Knesset, the Israeli parliament, denounced the research saying, **“Morally, based on our history, and our tradition and our experience, such a weapon is monstrous and should be denied.”(21)**

Israeli Nuclear Strategy

In popular imagination, the Israeli bomb is a “weapon of last resort,” to be used only at the last minute to avoid annihilation, and many well intentioned but misled supporters of Israel still believe that to be the case.

Whatever truth this formulation may have had in the minds of the early Israeli nuclear strategists, **today the Israeli nuclear arsenal is inextricably linked to and integrated with overall Israeli military and political strategy.** As Seymour Hersh says in classic understatement ; **“The Samson Option is no longer the only nuclear option available to Israel.”(22)** Israel has made countless veiled nuclear threats against the Arab nations and against the Soviet Union (and by extension Russia since the end of the Cold War) One chilling example comes from Ariel Sharon, the current [2002] Israeli Prime Minister

“Arabs may have the oil, but we have the matches.”(23)

(In 1983 Sharon proposed to India that it join with Israel to attack Pakistani nuclear facilities; in the late 70s he proposed sending Israeli paratroopers to Tehran to prop up the Shah; and in 1982 he called for expanding Israel’s security influence to stretch from “Mauritania to Afghanistan.”)

In another example, Israeli nuclear expert Oded Brosh said in 1992,

“...we need not be ashamed that the nuclear option is a major instrumentality of our defense as a deterrent against those who attack us.”(24)

According to Israel Shahak,

“The wish for peace, so often assumed as the Israeli aim, is not in my view a principle of Israeli policy, while the wish to extend Israeli domination and influence is.”

and

“Israel is preparing for a war, nuclear if need be, for the sake of averting domestic change not to its liking, if it occurs in some or any Middle Eastern states.... Israel clearly prepares itself to seek overtly a hegemony over the entire Middle East..., without hesitating to use for the purpose all means available, including nuclear ones.”(25)

Israel uses its nuclear arsenal not just in the context of deterrence” or of direct war fighting, but in other more subtle but no less important ways. For example, the possession of weapons of mass destruction can be a powerful lever to maintain the status quo, or to influence events to Israel’s perceived advantage, such as to protect the so called moderate Arab states from internal insurrection, or to intervene in inter-Arab warfare.(26)

In Israeli strategic jargon this concept is called “nonconventional compellence” and is exemplified by a quote from Shimon Peres; “acquiring a superior weapons system(read nuclear) would mean the possibility of using it for compellent purposes- that is forcing the other side to accept Israeli political demands, which presumably include a demand that the traditional status quo be accepted and a peace treaty signed.”(27)

From a slightly different perspective, Robert Tuckerr asked in a Commentary magazine article in defense of Israeli nukes,

“What would prevent Israel... from pursuing a hawkish policy employing a nuclear deterrent to freeze the status quo?”(28)

Possessing an overwhelming nuclear superiority allows Israel to act with impunity even in the face world wide opposition. A case in point might be the invasion of Lebanon and destruction of Beirut in 1982, led by Ariel Sharon, which resulted in 20,000 deaths, most civilian. Despite the annihilation of a neighboring Arab state, not to mention the utter destruction of the Syrian Air Force, Israel was able to carry out the war for months at least partially due to its nuclear threat.

Another major use of the Israeli bomb is to compel the U.S. to act in Israel’s favor, even when it runs counter to its own strategic interests.

As early as 1956 Francis Perrin, head of the French A-bomb project wrote “We thought the Israeli Bomb was aimed at the Americans, not to launch it at the Americans, but to say, ‘If you don’t want to help us in a critical situation we will require you to help us; otherwise we will use our nuclear bombs.’”(29) During the 1973 war, Israel used nuclear blackmail to force Kissinger and Nixon to airlift massive amounts of military hardware to Israel.

The Israeli Ambassador, Simha Dinitz, is quoted as saying, at the time,

“If a massive airlift to Israel does not start immediately, then I will know that the U.S. is renegeing on its promises and...we will have to draw very serious conclusions...”(30)

Just one example of this strategy was spelled out in 1987 by Amos Rubin, economic adviser to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who said

“If left to its own Israel will have no choice but to fall back on a riskier defense which will endanger itself and the world at large... To enable Israel to abstain from dependence on nuclear arms calls for \$2 to 3 billion per year in U.S. aid.”(31)

Since then Israel’s nuclear arsenal has expanded exponentially, both quantitatively and qualitatively, while the U.S. money spigots remain wide open.

Regional and International Implications

Largely unknown to the world, the Middle East nearly exploded in all out war on February 22, 2001. According to the London Sunday Times and DEBKAfile, Israel went on high missile alert after receiving news from the U.S. of movement by 6 Iraqi armored divisions stationed along the Syrian border, and of launch preparations of surface to surface missiles.

DEBKAfile, an Israeli based “counter-terrorism” information service, claims that the Iraqi missiles were deliberately taken to the highest alert level in order to test the U.S. and Israeli response. Despite an immediate attack by 42 U.S. and British war planes, the Iraqis suffered little apparent damage.(32) **The Israelis have warned Iraq that they are prepared to use neutron bombs in a preemptive attack against Iraqi missiles.**

The Israeli nuclear arsenal has profound implications for the future of peace in the Middle East, and indeed, for the entire planet.

It is clear from **Israel Shahak** that **Israel has no interest in peace except that which is dictated on its own terms**, and has absolutely no intention of negotiating in good faith to curtail its nuclear program or discuss seriously a nuclear-free Middle East, “Israel’s insistence on the independent use of its nuclear weapons can be seen as the foundation on which Israeli grand strategy rests.”(34)

According to **Seymour Hersh**,

“the size and sophistication of Israel’s nuclear arsenal allows men such as Ariel Sharon to dream of redrawing the map of the Middle East aided by the implicit threat of nuclear force.”(35)

General Amnon Shahak-Lipkin, former Israeli Chief of Staff is quoted

“It is never possible to talk to Iraq about no matter what; It is never possible to talk to Iran about no matter what. Certainly about nuclearization. With Syria we cannot really talk either.”(36)

Ze'ev Shiff, an Israeli military expert writing in Haaretz said,

“Whoever believes that Israel will ever sign the UN Convention prohibiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons... is day dreaming,”(37) and Munya Mardoch, Director of the Israeli Institute for the Development of Weaponry, said in 1994, “The moral and political meaning of nuclear weapons is that states which renounce their use are acquiescing to the status of Vassal states. All those states which feel satisfied with possessing conventional weapons alone are fated to become vassal states.”(38)

As Israeli society becomes more and more polarized, the influence of the radical right becomes stronger. According to Shahak,

“The prospect of Gush Emunim, or some secular right-wing Israeli fanatics, or some some of the delirious Israeli Army generals, seizing control of Israeli nuclear weapons...cannot be precluded. ...while israeli jewish society undergoes a steady polarization, the Israeli security system increasingly relies on the recruitment of cohorts from the ranks of the extreme right.”(39)

The Arab states, long aware of Israel's nuclear program, bitterly resent its coercive intent, and perceive its existence as the paramount threat to peace in the region, requiring their own weapons of mass destruction.

During a future Middle Eastern war (a distinct possibility given the ascension of Ariel Sharon, an unindicted war criminal with a bloody record stretching from the massacre of Palestinian civilians at Qibya in 1953, to the massacre of Palestinian civilians at Sabra and Shatila in 1982 and beyond) the possible Israeli use of nuclear weapons should not be discounted. According to Shahak, “In Israeli terminology, the launching of missiles on to Israeli territory is regarded as ‘nonconventional’ regardless of whether they are equipped with explosives or poison gas.”(40) (Which requires a “nonconventional” response, a perhaps unique exception being the Iraqi SCUD attacks during the Gulf War.)

Meanwhile, the existence of an arsenal of mass destruction in such an unstable region in turn has serious implications for future arms control and disarmament negotiations, and even the threat of nuclear war. Seymour Hersh warns,

“Should war break out in the Middle East again,... or should any Arab nation fire missiles against Israel, as the Iraqis did, a nuclear escalation, once unthinkable except as a last resort, would now be a strong probability.”(41) and **Ezar Weissman**, Israel's current President said **“The nuclear issue is gaining momentum(and the) next war will not be conventional.”(42)**

Russia and before it the Soviet Union has long been a major(if not the major) target of Israeli nukes. It is widely reported that the principal purpose of Jonathan Pollard's spying for Israel was to furnish satellite images of Soviet targets and other super sensitive data relating to U.S. nuclear targeting strategy. (43) (Since launching its own satellite in 1988, Israel no longer needs U.S. spy secrets.) Israeli nukes aimed at the Russian heartland seriously complicate disarmament and arms control negotiations and, at the very least, the unilateral possession of nuclear weapons by Israel is enormously destabilizing, and dramatically lowers the threshold for their actual use, if not for all out nuclear war.

In the words of Mark Gaffney,

“... if the familiar pattern (Israel refining its weapons of mass destruction with U.S. complicity) is not reversed soon- for whatever reason- the deepening Middle East conflict could trigger a world conflagration.” (44)

Many Middle East Peace activists have been reluctant to discuss, let alone challenge, the Israeli monopoly on nuclear weapons in the region, often leading to incomplete and uninformed analyses and flawed action strategies.

Placing the issue of Israeli weapons of mass destruction directly and honestly on the table and action agenda would have several salutary effects.

First, it would expose a primary destabilizing dynamic driving the Middle East arms race and compelling the region’s states to each seek their own “deterrent.”

Second, it would expose the grotesque double standard which sees the U.S. and Europe on the one hand condemning Iraq, Iran and Syria for developing weapons of mass destruction, while simultaneously protecting and enabling the principal culprit.

Third, exposing Israel’s nuclear strategy would focus international public attention, resulting in increased pressure to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction and negotiate a just peace in good faith.

Finally, **a nuclear free Israel would make a Nuclear Free Middle East and a comprehensive regional peace agreement much more likely.** Unless and until the world community confronts Israel over its covert nuclear program it is unlikely that there will be any meaningful resolution of the Israeli/Arab conflict, a fact that Israel may be counting on as the Sharon era dawns.

Notes

1. Seymour Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel’s Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1991, Random House, p. 319 (A brilliant and prophetic work with much original research)²
2. Mark Gaffney, *Dimona, The Third Temple: The Story Behind the Vanunu Revelation*, Brattleboro, VT, 1989, Amana Books, p. 165 (Excellent progressive analysis of the Israeli nuclear program)
3. U.S. Army Lt. Col. Warner D. Farr, *The Third Temple Holy of Holies; Israel’s Nuclear Weapons*, USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air War College Sept 1999
<www.fas.org/nuke/guide/israel/nuke/farr.htm (Perhaps the best single condensed history of the Israeli nuclear program)
4. Hersh, *op.cit.*, p. 131
5. Gaffney, *op.cit.*, p. 63
6. Gaffney, *op. cit.* pp 68 – 69
7. Hersh, *op.cit.*, pp. 242-257
8. Gaffney, *op.cit.*, 1989, pps. 65-66 (An alternative discussion of the NUMEC affair)
9. Barbara Rogers & Zdenek Cervenka, *The Nuclear Axis: The Secret Collaboration Between West Germany and South Africa*, New York, 1978, Times Books, p. 325-328 (the definitive history of the

Apartheid Bomb)

10. Gaffney, op. cit., 1989, p. 34

11. Peter Hounam, *Woman From Mossad: The Torment of Mordechai Vanunu*, London, 1999, Vision Paperbacks, pp. 155-168 (The most complete and up to date account of the Vanunu story, it includes fascinating speculation that Israel may have a second hidden Dimona type reactor)

12. Hersh, op. cit., 1989, p. 213

13. *ibid*, p.198-200

14. *ibid*, pp. 3-17

15. Hounman, op. cit. 1999, pp 189-203

16. Hersh, 1989. pp.199-200

17. *ibid*, p. 312

18. John Pike and Federation of American Scientists, *Israel Special Weapons Guide Website*, 2001, Web Address <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/israel/index.html> (An invaluable internet resource)

19. Usi Mahnaimi and Peter Conradi, *Fears of New Arms Race as Israel Tests Cruise Missiles*, June 18, 2000, London Sunday Times

20. Usi Mahnaimi, *Israeli Jets Equipped for Chemical Warfare* October 4, 1998, London Sunday Times

21. Usi Mahnaimi and Marie Colvin, *Israel Planning "Ethnic" bomb as Saddam Caves In*, November 15, 1998, London Sunday Times

22. Hersh, op.cit., 1991, p. 319

23. Gaffney, op.cit., 1989, p. 163

24. Israel Shahak, *Open Secrets: Israeli Nuclear and Foreign Policies*, London, 1997, Pluto Press, p. 40 (An absolute "must read" for any Middle East or anti-nuclear activist)

25 *ibid*, p.2

26. *ibid*, p.43

27. Gaffney, op.cit., 1989, p 131

28. "Israel & the US: From Dependence to Nuclear Weapons?" Robert W. Tucker, November 1975 pp41-42

29. London Sunday Times, October 12, 1986

30. Gaffney, op. cit. 1989. p. 147

31. *ibid*, p. 153

32. DEBKAFfile, February 23, 2001 WWW.debka.com

33. Uzi Mahnaimi and Tom Walker, London Sunday Times, February 25, 2001

34. Shahak, op. cit., p150

35. Hersh, op.cit., p. 319

36. Shahak, op. cit., p34

37. ibid, p. 149

38. ibid, p. 153

39. ibid, pp. 37-38

40. ibid, pp 39-40

41. Hersh, op. cit., p. 19

42. Aronson, Geoffrey, "Hidden Agenda: US-Israeli Relations and the Nuclear Question," Middle East Journal, (Autumn 1992), 619-630.

43 . Hersh, op. cit., pp. 285-305

44. Gaffney, op. cit., p194

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