

Israel's Chemical Arsenal Under New Scrutiny

A plan to inspect and destroy Syria's chemical weapons has focused new attention on Israel's undeclared WMDs

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Israeli officials are reported to be increasingly nervous that international efforts to destroy Syria's chemical weapons might serve as a prelude to demands on Israel to eliminate its own, undeclared weapons of mass destruction.

Israel maintains a posture it terms 'ambiguity' on the question of whether it possesses either nuclear or chemical weapons. But Israel is widely believed to have a large arsenal of nuclear bombs, concealed from international scrutiny, and there are strong suspicions that it has secretly developed a chemical weapons programme.

Those concerns intensified following the disclosure this month of a confidential CIA report suggesting that Israel had created a significant stockpile of chemical weapons by the early 1980s. Israel has refused both to sign the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, covering the regulation of nuclear arms, and to ratify the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, which obligates states to submit to international oversight and destroy chemical agents in their possession.

Over the past few days there have been a series of moves by other states in the Middle East to bring international attention to Israel's WMD.

Those efforts followed Damascus' ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention last week and the announcement at the weekend of a timetable agreed by Russia and the United States to disarm Syria of its chemical stockpiles by the middle of next year.

Israel is now one of only six states refusing to implement the convention, along with Egypt, Myanmar, Angola, North Korea and South Sudan. That has prompted concerns that Israel could rapidly become a pariah state on the issue.

The Haaretz daily newspaper reported this week that the prospect of mounting international pressure on Israel to come clean on its WMD was "keeping quite a few top Israeli defence officials awake at night".

Shlomo Brom, a former Israeli general and now a researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, called Israel's current policy on chemical weapons "unwise".

"The reality in the Middle East has changed since Israel refused to ratify the convention. There is no longer a good reason for Israel to remain with the handful of regimes that oppose it."

This week Arab states submitted a resolution to the United Nations' nuclear watchdog body, the International Atomic Energy Agency, calling on Israel to place its nuclear facilities under the IAEA's inspection regime as part of efforts to create a nuclear arms-free zone in the region.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Israel has refused to sign, was drawn up in 1968, the year after Israel is widely believed to have produced its first warhead.

'Serious measures'

A report on Sunday by two proliferation experts assessed that Israel had built a total of 80 nuclear bombs by 2004, the year it is believed to have halted production. The same report concluded that Israel had stocks of fissile material potentially large enough to double the number of bombs at short notice.

US officials, however, rebuffed the Arab states's move at IAEA. Joseph Macmanus, the US envoy to the agency, said the resolution "does not advance our shared goal of progress toward a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Instead, it undermines efforts at constructive dialogue toward that common objective."

An Egyptian plan laying the groundwork for establishing a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction was sponsored by the US in 2010, over Israel's opposition. However, Washington announced last year it was postponing action to an unspecified date. Meanwhile, last Sunday, Iran's foreign ministry urged the international community to "adopt serious measures" to force Israel to back the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Following Syria's ratification of the convention, its ambassador to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, said "the main danger of WMD is the Israeli nuclear arsenal", adding that Israel possessed chemical weapons but most other states were not prepared to speak about it.

That may yet change. Israeli government officials are said to be worried that the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, could demand ratification from Israel as part of US efforts to clear the Middle East of chemical weapons. "Now, Kerry may say, the US needs Israel's help by ratifying the treaty prohibiting the use of chemical weapons," the Haaretz newspaper reported.

According to reports in the Israeli media, Israeli embassies overseas have been issued with guidelines to evade questions posed by journalists and diplomats related to Israeli chemical weapons.

The Israeli defence ministry refused to comment to Al-Jazeera, referring questions to the prime minister's office. David Baker, a spokesman for Netanyahu, also declined to comment, calling all such discussion "speculation". He would not say whether Israel had issued guidelines to officials.

In a rare public statement, Amir Peretz, a former defence minister, told Israel Radio this week: "I very much hope and am certain that the international community will not make this a central question and we will maintain the status quo." Unlike Syria, he said, Israel was a "democratic, responsible regime".

Uri Avnery, an Israeli journalist and former politician, said Israelis strongly assumed that

their country secretly possessed such weapons."The Israeli government has always maintained that Israel is an exception, that it is a responsible government and therefore does not need to subject itself to international conventions, whether nuclear, biological or chemical. Israelis believe that because of the Holocaust they have a right to extra protection, which in practice means access to every kind of weapon."

Israel's secrecy is, in part, motivated by a promise to avoid embarrassing the US by declaring its weapons of mass destruction. Washington would be violating US law by giving Israel the billions of dollars in aid it receives each year if Israel possesses nuclear weapons outside the non-proliferation regime.

Short-sighted position

Calling Israel's refusal to ratify the chemical weapons convention alongside Syria "a short sighted position of dubious usefulness", an editorial in the Haaretz said a change of policy would show Israel was "doing its part in the general effort to rid the region of weapons of mass destruction".

Suspicious that Israel may be hiding a chemical weapons programme have grown following a recent report in Foreign Policy, a US magazine, revealing that US spy satellites located a suspected chemical weapons site in Israel's Negev desert for the first time in 1982.

A confidential CIA report from 1983 disclosed to the magazine identified "a probable CW [chemical weapon] nerve agent production facility and a storage facility" near the Israeli town of Dimona, itself close to Israel's nuclear reactor. The magazine said Israel's chemical industries were also believed to be involved in the production of weapons.

According to intercepts of Israeli military communications made by the US National Security Agency at that time, Israel Air Force bombers had conducted missions simulating chemical weapons bombing runs in the Negev.

The report suggests "several indicators lead us to believe that they have available to them at least persistent and nonpersistent nerve agents, a mustard agent, and several riot-control agents, marched with suitable delivery systems".

Although it is not possible to know whether the chemical weapons storage site identified by the CIA in the early 1980s still functions, there are indications Israel has continued to work on nerve agents in subsequent years.

Israel is known to have an Institute for Biological Research at Ness Ziona, about 20km south of Tel Aviv, which describes itself as a government research centre. Officially the institute conducts medical and defence research, including helping Israel prepare against the effects of an attack using chemical or biological weapons.

The institute is believed to have secretly developed offensive capabilities too, most famously used in an assassination attempt on a Hamas leader, Khaled Meshal, in Jordan in 1997.

Meshal, who had a toxin sprayed into his ear in a Mossad operation, was only saved because the two agents involved were captured while still in Jordan. Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister then as now, agreed to hand over an antidote in return for the agents' release.

Experimental weapons

There have been suspicions that Israel used a similarly hard-to-detect toxin in the still-unexplained death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in 2004.

The connection between Israel and chemical weapons also surfaced following a crash by a Israeli plane near Amsterdam in 1992.

The Dutch media reported that the El Al plane had been carrying substantial quantities of a major chemical component of sarin, the nerve agent used near Damascus last month for which the Syrian government has been widely blamed. The US company that supplied the chemical said it had been for delivery to the Institute for Biological Research at Ness Ziona.

A spate of reports, including by the BBC, early in the second Palestinian intifada, a decade ago, also accused Israel of using what appeared to be an experimental form of tear gas that led to severe convulsions in many of those who inhaled it.

More recently, Israel's repeated attacks on Gaza have fuelled claims that it is using Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME) munitions, an experimental weapon not yet covered by international treaties. Its blast causes severe internal damage to victims and leaves traces of carcinogenic metals such as tungsten in the bodies of those who survive.

In winter 2008-09, Israel was also widely criticised for using white phosphorus in built-up areas of Gaza. Although allowed if used to create a smokescreen on the battlefield, white phosphorus is considered a chemical weapon when used in areas where civilians are likely to be present. Burning lumps of the chemical sear through flesh and lungs and are difficult to extinguish.

Under international pressure, the Israeli military promised to end the chemical's use earlier this year.

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