

ISRAEL'S NUCLEAR OPTION

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IN THE COURSE of the last two decades, the continuing Israeli-Arab confrontation, punctured by open war, has engendered the most sweeping predictions of regional disaster, escalating conflict, or global war. All seemed agreed that the Middle East has been, is, and will remain a powder keg. Yet all in the Middle East and beyond appear to assume that the powder in the keg is conventional rather than nuclear. Except for rare Israeli pronouncements and occasional scare comments in the Arab press, the general policy has been to ignore the possibility of an Israeli nuclear option. Yet, given Israel's technological capacity, strategic need, and national character, an atomic bomb *should* exist. And still all the actors in the lethal Middle Eastern quarrel seem to follow their allotted course as if there were not now and will not be in the future an Israeli nuclear option.

Officially, even for the most part unofficially, quite literally no one wants to have nuclear weapons introduced within the Middle East; but this universal desire does not mean that the Israelis will not, if they have not already, introduce an atomic option into their strategic arsenal. In fact, even far more strident public announcements of Israeli self-denial than those given at present soon might simply not be any longer accepted and the "non-existent" bomb assume such a sufficient reality that its actual existence is immaterial. After all, it is generally recognized that Israel has for some while had the capacity to manufacture nuclear explosives.

Almost from the creation of the state in 1948, until 1968, there had been the most intimate French-Israeli ties in atomic research. It had soon become clear that with French sympathy and support Israel had sufficient talent to consider seriously developing a nuclear program beyond the laboratory. In 1955, Shimon Peres, who could hardly be considered unmindful of Israeli strategic needs, pushed the construction of a relatively extensive nuclear program. The key and most important project was the construction of the 24,000-kilowatt Dimona reactor in the Negev. The Dimona project, as well as work in French and Israeli laboratories and at various testing sites, remained secret. At this time, the United States, apparently unaware of Dimona, was openly cooperating with the Israelis in the construction of a small, 1,000-kilowatt reactor near Tel Aviv. Reputedly, not until 1960 did United States intelligence

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discover the existence and size of the Dimona reactor. Neither the French nor the Israelis proved very forthcoming with information about the reactor. Dimona can, it is assumed, produce either five to seven megawatts of electrical power or five to seven kilograms of plutonium. Despite regular visits by Western visitors and scientists, there is no way of monitoring whether Dimona is producing largely electrical power or sufficient plutonium for atomic weapons. Nor is there any way of knowing if Dimona is the only active Israeli reactor with a significant plutonium capacity or if additional Israeli construction is underway. All that can be said for certain is that, since operations began at Dimona, Israel has had the capacity to produce sufficient plutonium to construct at least one atomic bomb of the Nagasaki size each year. It also is assumed within the Western scientific community that Israel possesses the sophisticated technical capacity to construct atomic weapons from their plutonium.

The realization by the Arabs of the Israeli nuclear capacity created some anxiety but neither hysteria nor significant policy changes. In the autumn of 1966, President Nāṣir reputedly sought an agreement with Russia that would permit the sale of atomic weapons to Egypt if Israel began production. The Egyptian nuclear potential at that point—and largely since then—was almost nil: a small Russian-built reactor at Inshass and various imported and not particularly productive technicians. If there were to be a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, Russia would have to supply the arms. Apparently with no interest in nuclear proliferation particularly in the volatile Middle East, where their allies appeared often erratic and emotional, the Russians supposedly agreed not to offer a nuclear guarantee if it became necessary and without specific details on what was “guaranteed.” Nāṣir was left with his own resources: “If Israel proceeds with the production of an atomic bomb, then I believe the only answer to this is a preventive war.”¹ The threat of an Arab “preventive war” in 1966 was somewhat less than awesome.²

Other than the still largely cloudy Egyptian-Russian nuclear negotiations, the Arabs have tended to maintain a relatively low profile on the nuclear issue, pointing out from time to time the evil of Israeli nuclear technology but generally evading the basic problem of Israeli nuclear potential and Arab aspirations. In 1968, King Ḥusayn referred to Israel’s military hegemony in the Middle East partly in nuclear terms: “Israel was actively developing its military potential, and, thanks to its scientific capacities, was producing very advanced armaments, particularly in the area of nuclear weapons and an army

1. *New York Times*, July 24, 1966.

2. Arab strategy before the June War gave no indication that provocation would or could be answered by an Israeli nuclear strike. The Israelis too gave no indication that they had a nuclear option; but within the General Staff there was an absolute confidence that Egyptian tactics were an opportunity as much as a threat. The Israelis anticipated a conventional victory, humiliating once more the Arabs while buying time and perhaps space, not an Armageddon.

trained to use them.”³ The purpose of Ḥusayn’s injection of the nuclear problem was apparently almost solely to instill a sense of urgency in Arab circles in order to mute the divisions. Neither then nor later did the Arabs give extensive thoughts to the strategic implications of such an Israeli capacity. There has long been a barely sublimated Arab fear, first voiced as early as 1947, of an Israeli bomb but there has also been a deep reluctance to examine the implications of such a possibility. The theoretical writings of the Palestine fedayeen have from time to time mentioned that guerrilla war cannot be limited by atomic weapons, implying American or Israeli weapons; but in both fedayeen strategy and conventional Arab war plans a minimum of space seems to be given to the nuclear dimension.

On the Israeli side the official policy has been to say almost nothing and that as rarely as possible. The only explanation for the ban on discussion has been that the Arabs may take the word for the deed. Censorship has prevented speculation in the Israeli press concerning a nuclear capacity. There has rarely been discussion in print—or much in private—about Israeli atomic weapons. The Israeli atomic energy industry is buried in silence. There is seldom an “official” policy line—only nothing. There have been the most limited discussions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—pro or con or even descriptive because of a government ban. Since the original construction of Dimona, about the only Israeli public “positions” on their nuclear capacity have been, one, that Dimona production is for peaceful purposes, two, that Israel will not be the first nation to introduce atomic weapons into the Middle East and, three, that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is under consideration. Since no one can prove to everyone’s satisfaction that Dimona production is in fact peaceful, since atomic weapons have been already introduced into the Middle East, by the American Sixth Fleet if by no one else, and since non-discussion of non-compliance is a rather negative approach, Israeli policy is difficult to analyze; it does not seem to exist. Perhaps contemplation of the nuclear option simply does not have a very high priority, public or private, amid the already impressive lists of unpleasant things that the Israelis must consider: terror, border war, Russian intervention, balance of payments, emigration, mobilization, immigration, the United Nations, President Nixon, the French, Sādāt’s intentions and on and on. The visible evidence, then, indicates that much like the Arabs, the Israelis choose—publicly—to think about nuclear weapons at a later date.

Beyond the Middle East, there has also been a minimum of comment on an Israeli bomb or non-bomb.* The Americans were unhappy about Dimona

3. Hussein of Jordan, *My 'War' with Israel* (New York: Morrow, 1969), p. 19.

* A report prepared by an American panel meeting under the auspices of the United Nations Association of the United States of America indicated in July 1972 that Israel may have sufficient plutonium to produce up to eight bombs. Also, the *New York Times* (August 9, 1972) reported on a Russian article from *Moskovski Komsomolyets* newspaper which speculated on an Israeli nuclear capacity. [Ed.]

but on balance seem satisfied with Israeli explanations and the reports of various visiting observers. There has been a feeling, particularly in those quarters some distance from the Middle East, that Israel's reticence in signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty must have some special significance. All the Arab states, except Algeria and Saudi Arabia, signed on the first day possible: either to please the Russians or to pressure an Israeli signature or for their own quiet purposes. In any case, Israel did not sign. This non-compliance has been felt to be of *some* value to Israel. Perhaps, Israel may want to trade a signature for something: American aid or renewed Soviet recognition or a Big Power guarantee.⁴ The implication certainly is that Israel does not have the bomb and, therefore, could sign if so inclined rather than suggesting that Israel is unable to sign because the bomb exists. Within the Middle East because of the present level of mutual trust and good faith, few Arabs would believe an Israeli signature on anything; but informed American opinion at least seems to feel that non-compliance has for Israel only the present advantage of intimidating the Arabs with a vague threat that compliance might not do. In any case, to maintain credibility in the United States the cynical would assume that the weight of advantage for Israel is on the side of non-compliance rather than being caught out violating the treaty after signature. Thus signing or not signing might reveal very little, and no one has shown great interest in building theoretical castles on feeble foundations of non-compliance.⁵

Israel thus has now and has had for probably several years the capacity to construct an atomic bomb at least of the Nagasaki size as well as the ability to deliver such a weapon up to a range of approximately 2,000 miles or under certain drastic conditions perhaps twice that.⁶ There is no available evidence that Israel has undertaken the clandestine manufacture of either larger power reactors or separation plants for reprocessing plutonium that would indicate a nuclear capacity considerably beyond the level of the present Dimona production of five to seven kilograms of plutonium a year. On the other hand, the nature of clandestine production would, if effective, remain clandestine. Even without visible large reactors or a noticeable plutonium enrichment plant, the Dimona production assures Israel of a nuclear capacity, i.e. the imminent capacity to produce atomic weapons, similar to that of ten or more

4. In May of this year, Eugene Rostow, former American Under Secretary of State, suggested that with an American guarantee for peace it should be possible for the Israelis to comply with the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

5. For an excellent survey of the Israeli response to the Non-Proliferation Treaty see George H. Quester, "Israel and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 1969, pp. 7-9, 44-45.

6. Both the Mirage IV A, which comprises the French nuclear strike force, and F-4 Phantoms, both with a range of 2,000 miles and the former with a possible bomb load of 8,000 pounds and the latter 15,000, are quite adequate delivery systems. The new Israeli-built ground-to-ground missile has a minimum range of 300 miles—and would be a fantastically expensive weapon system unless nuclear tipped.

nations with a sufficiently sophisticated atomic energy industry. A reasonable assumption would be that Israel may have had for several years or could have now or can have very soon sufficiently fissionable material and ample technological skill to produce nuclear weapons at the rate suggested above.

With the fluid and violent nature of Middle Eastern politics and the dependable shifts and initiatives of the great powers involved, if Israel were to have a nuclear weapons capacity on call and yet not "formally" possess the weapons, the lead time for completion would have to be most brief to be of any serious use in a bargaining process that might begin almost without notice. Consequently, if Israel is committed to atomic weapons, the distinction between an active weapons system—at present operative—and a "future" weapons systems—operative on call—would have to be negligible. Either Israel has the capacity but as yet not the desire to create an atomic weapons system, or has in fact a weapons system capable of activation on the shortest possible notice. Thus, semantics aside, Israel must either have atomic weapons or not.

The question arises as to what strategic conditions or international considerations or domestic pressures would dissuade the cabinet from proceeding to weapons production. The major reasons that Israel might *not* have a clandestine nuclear potential are, under analysis, hardly substantial. Even the reasons that Israel might consider significant for denying the existence of such a potential are not overpowering. The fact that possession of nuclear weapons might complicate Israel's David-*vs.*-Goliath posture, irritate the great powers, particularly Russia, strain American patience, endanger Israeli credibility, heighten Middle Eastern tensions, and induce some domestic anxiety are matters as much of convenience, image and veracity than of basic security. Israel might be embarrassed by the revelation of a nuclear weapons system; but few interested parties would be surprised, only disappointed, chagrined, or irritated. Even these reactions might be muted by a bald Israeli denial of the obvious. Such a statement might be difficult to contradict unless Israel wanted to have a credible bomb. The major reason that Israel would be troubled by not having weapons would be at the moment of truth when such a capacity was needed and did not exist.

Given the nature of Israel's existence over the past generation, under repeated threat of annihilation, surrounded by enemies, unable or unwilling to depend on the disinterest of international organizations or the continued loyalty of any great power, the reasons for the possession of nuclear weapons are very substantial indeed. Since the establishment of the state, Israelis of almost whatever persuasion have been seized on the question of security and, with rare exceptions, the consensus has been that dependence must rest on Israeli military predominance rather than diplomatic negotiation, international intervention or foreign alliances. The Israelis have not in the past nor do they now place

ultimate reliance on anyone but themselves. The lessons of the holocaust, the incapacities of the United Nations after the partition resolution, and the flexibility of great power commitments have long been learned. Even the special relation with Washington might be ruptured by considerations outside Israeli control. Since the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the Zionists have seen Britain switch from advocate to Arab apologist, Russia urge the creation of Israel and become the prop of the Arab armies, France transformed from the one true ally to an adamant critic. Israelis have existed in a world that seems more often than not dominated by powers and forces determined to maim if not destroy the Jew. Surrounded by tens of millions of Arab opponents, aided and abetted by cynical and self-interested major powers, Israel has been forced daily to face the possibility of extinction. The result is a justifiable, if seemingly pathological, commitment to security and an abiding distrust of allies, however dedicated. In the last resort and often in the first, the Israelis put their deepest trust only in Israeli strength, not distant powers and thrones, not in pacts, alliances, and resolutions, not in good faith or kind words. To secure the state, the dream of two thousand years made manifest, never have the Israelis denied themselves any advantage however slight, any edge over the circling enemies. The vital question then is somewhat clearer. Why, now, should the Israelis deny themselves the ultimate weapon in a dangerous and unsure world?

The only answer from the Israeli side would be that such a weapon was either useless or not truly worth the cost either in money or in the complications that would ensue. Since there would be few insurmountable complications, certainly no more than Israel has faced before when in defiance of the entire international community, and since the money for security has always existed, then the problem is simply—would an atomic weapon be useless? If the major threat to Israel was, is, and would remain the Arab military potential, then a reasonable case could be made for self-denial. Even with substantial exterior assistance, billions upon billions of dollars worth of arms from Russia alone since 1967, it is obvious to all that the Arabs at best can wage only a self-destructive war of attrition, impoverishing their own nations to maintain a façade of defiance. There is little indication that the injection of still more sophisticated technology on the Arab side or further intensive training or a new generation will be able to make a significant difference. For example, without air cover no Arab army is capable of launching even a limited, surgical thrust against Israel much less a massive, coordinated “final” invasion. On the other hand, if there would be no ensuing international sanctions and repercussions—in a purely military vacuum—the Israeli ground forces are obviously capable of inflicting a relatively swift defeat upon any and all Arab armies. With conventional weapons, Israel is secure against the Arabs. With conventional weapons, Israel can destroy the Aswan Dam, devastate Damascus or occupy Amman.

Furthermore, despite the Arab aspirations that their societies can be transformed, their masses awakened, their next generation mobilized as a new, technologically creative élite, there is limited evidence to this effect. Each "new" Arab generation from each "new" and revolutionary Arab society has been found as equally wanting in the cauldron of battle as their elders. The pressures for decay and schism in Arab society, the mushrooming population and declining resources, the vicious cost of armament, all would indicate that for the immediate future the relative capacity of the Arabs to wage modern war is declining in relation to the Israeli potential. Against a frustrated and enfeebled Arab nation, the only real present purpose of an Israeli atomic capacity would be to add still another straw of despair on the overloaded camel. Once more the Israelis would push the Arabs' noses into their own inadequacies; so that finally, this year or next, this generation or next, Arabs would be forced to recognize the fact of Israel's existence. Given the number of times Israel has attempted to degrade the Arabs—the strategy of humiliation—without the desired results, the potential complications arising from the nuclear option used as a straw in a psychological strategy might well not be worth the effort.

Since 1955 and particularly since 1967, the real threat to the security of Israel has not come from the Arabs but from the Arab-Russian alliance. Russia quite obviously has the capacity, if Moscow so desired and the international situation so permitted, to impose a final solution. That Russia might launch or threaten to launch a prohibitive nuclear attack on Israel or commit the very substantial conventional ground forces necessary to crush the Israeli army or by whatever means impose a settlement by brute force does, perhaps even to the Israelis, seem unlikely. The important point in any analysis of Israeli security is to realize that what for another state might be perceived as a minor or at least middle-range threat is viewed differently in Israeli eyes. Israelis often consciously but surely often unconsciously have viewed any step backward as an incredibly dangerous precedent. They have never willingly given an inch, accepting that immediately a new demand for a mile would be made. Israel has exasperated and alienated most of those who have sought solution by an equitable compromise. United Nations officials have been driven to distraction by Israeli refusal not only to give in on the old disagreement but the determination to secure the last ounce of gain from any situation. Various mediators from the great powers and the small have found however charming in conversation, however friendly in dialogue, a deep Israeli distrust of well-meant suggestions for compromise and conciliation. Putting their trust in strength, the Israelis are apparently fearful that concession, however justified, is not simply a sign of weakness but is a weakness, a betrayal of the state. This may be, of course, a harsh and not particularly fair judgment on twenty years of Israeli policy, but there is little doubt that in matters of vital national security Israel has broadened the areas covered. Any provocation must be answered by

massive retaliation—a wink will cost five eyes. That the Israeli retaliation policy was always supposedly “defensive,” Phantoms over Cairo aside, that the military if not emotional need for a new round of war is minimal, that Israel can stand pat, by no means suggests that the ingrained, and highly understandable, strategy of not-an-inch does not now permeate Israeli thinking.

Consequently, Russia obviously has the capacity to challenge Israel by what others might justifiably consider a less than terminal threat. The Israelis may—and for their purposes legitimately—perceive such a “limited” maneuver as a terminal threat to Israeli security. Israel accepts that the first slice of salami, however thin, is as painful as the final and, moreover, goes far to assuring that all the subsequent slices, each more easily cut than the last, will in fact be made. Russia then could very easily attempt to wield the knife or abet the Arabs to do so, innocent of the impact of the threat on Israel.

If such a possible Russian initiative is viewed as a total threat to the security of the state, Israel must have the capacity, if not to prohibit such a Russian adventure, at least the ability to force the Russians to consider carefully the danger of such a policy. If Russia is to risk the ultimate threat, so defined by the Israelis, then the ability to raise the price for such a step beyond the willingness of Moscow to pay solely for a slightly more comfortable position in the Middle East is a highly desirable asset. An atomic capacity and the ability to deliver a punitive strike on Russia consequently would narrowly limit the extent to which Russia might be willing to threaten Israeli security.⁷ The Russians, with one experience of brinkmanship on hand, must—if the Israeli capacity is accepted and most important if the Israeli determination is recognized—weigh their Middle Eastern initiatives on a delicate balance. Fighting a Middle East war by proxy loses much of the charms if the risks of a direct nuclear confrontation with a desperate opponent arises from too great an enthusiasm for Arab aspirations and demands. To impose such discretion on Russia requires that Moscow accept the credibility of an Israeli nuclear weapons system, the capacity to deliver, and the willingness if sufficiently threatened to do so. The acceptance of Israeli atomic weapons and a delivery system hardly strains the mind but the nature of the transformation of the ghetto Jew, swallowed by the death camps, to the Zionist advocate of a Masada strategy may be more difficult, even for the Russians.

Russian policy in the Middle East has indicated that perhaps an Israeli strategy of Masada might be an active consideration. Whether or not Israel *in extremis* is determined to use the bomb has to be considered—bomb or no

7. Given the nature of any Israeli nuclear strike on Russia, it could be assumed that the 2,000 mile range of the Phantom could be greatly extended since once the brink had been passed Soviet retaliation would eliminate the practicality of the mission returning. The possibility of co-opting El Al planes or devising a suitcase delivery system also exists.

bomb. Particularly since 1969-1970, the Russians have shown a delicate awareness of Israeli sensitivities that might come from shrewd analysis of Russia's own interests or from the shadow of the bomb. Apparently Russia does not want to become involved in a Middle Eastern Vietnam but only to limit Western influence and aggrandize its own. The ideal climate for such a policy is the existing confrontation between Israel and the Arabs, not its termination in a solution satisfactory to their Arab clients. Thus the Russians prefer a comfortable—manipulatable—level of tension allowing them simultaneously to placate their Arab allies without actually securing an Arab victory. This has been most difficult, given the inability of the Arabs to pursue the confrontation to their satisfaction, no matter what aid is given them, in the face of the Israeli retaliatory "defensive" policy of repeated humiliation. It might not be inappropriate to suggest that in an effort to persuade the Israelis to be somewhat more discreet in their retaliatory policy, thereby reducing Russia's need to up their commitment beyond the necessity of policy, by indicating that Israel should not be too adamant on defining the first slice into that indivisible Israeli security—the Russians have indicated that they too have a terminal counter.

In the Russian case, a nuclear threat to Israel makes little sense. The Russians in fact want to avoid not only a major overt clash on a conventional level with the Israelis but also certainly to prevent the present sufficiently delicate situation from further deteriorating. The existence of a visible, militant Israel, if not too militant, is a basic ingredient of Soviet Middle Eastern strategy. Consequently, to induce a little discretion and realism in the Israeli hawks, to reduce the potential for a suddenly wholly undesirable escalation to a nuclear level, the Russians may well have—in theory if not in practice—instigated the 1969-1970 campaign against "Zionism" within Russia. The extensive publicity given to anti-Zionist statements and the discreet notice of certain maneuvers that could be perceived without great effort as anti-Semitic may have had considerable domestic advantages, may even be partially the result of personal predilection or bias on the part of Soviet leadership. The hard line was followed in 1971 by a sudden spurt of Russian Zionist emigration to Israel—the carrot after the stick. As a none too subtle club to hold over the Israelis, the Russian Jews as pawns can not be lightly dismissed by the Zionist homeland. The new Russian emigration policy may, of course, be related almost entirely to internal factors—"Zionists" have long been a severe security problem. Whether or not the Soviet maneuver relates at all to the "bomb" or in part to taming Israeli retaliation is nearly beyond conjecture. It at least could be an anti-Israeli nuclear strategy ploy; for whether or not an Israeli bomb exists or not the Russians after all must consider that it might—and given the existing power balance in the Middle East that southern Russia rather than Cairo is by far more likely a target in any ultimate crunch.

Whatever involved scenarios are developed based on the assumption of an Israeli nuclear capacity or conjectures about the nuclear content of either Israeli or Russian moves, the fact remains that many rational men are convinced that Israel would not deny itself whatever security the bomb might bring. The insistence of the existing nuclear powers that bombs bring insecurity would have little effect on a nation such as Israel where "security" is a paramount consideration and the threat of annihilation, conventional or nuclear, a daily reality. No other subnuclear power, Japan or India or Brazil, need fear the very existence of the nation when threatened by either conventional or nuclear opponents. The Israelis see both possibilities. Unlike India or Japan, Israel could not "absorb" several Chinese bombs nor anticipate that a conventional military defeat would leave the nation, much less the people, largely intact. For the Israelis, all threats are ultimate and one attempt at a final solution ample warning. Consequently, whether or not Israel does in fact have a nuclear weapons capacity, those involved in the Middle East crisis would well be advised to give the possibility more than passing notice. Perhaps the Russians have done so already, certainly they should. The tendency, perhaps even within the inner core of Israeli strategic planning, has been to avoid contemplating the unpleasant fallout that would result from general acceptance that a nuclear ingredient has been or soon will be added to the already massive complications and dangers of the Middle East. Such a strategic consensus will in all probability soon exist whatever the objective reality of the Israeli bomb and a sleeping dog strategy indefinitely protracted has little to offer anyone if in theory the nuclear option does exist.
