

Israel admits stockpiling nuclear weapons

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At the beginning of February, the Israeli Knesset (parliament) held the first public discussion on the country's nuclear arms programme for nearly 40 years. It was greeted with deafening silence by the international establishment.

Military censorship has always forbidden reports in the Israeli media about its nuclear arsenal, and successive governments have refused to discuss the issue. Finally, Issam Mahoul, an Arab Israeli MP who is a member of the Hadash (Communist) Party, went to the Supreme Court to seek a ruling forcing the government to permit a parliamentary debate. Parliament Speaker Avraham Burg backed down in order to avoid a Supreme Court decision.

In the televised debate, Mahoul stated that according to experts' estimates, Israel has stockpiled huge numbers of nuclear warheads. This had increased to what he described as the "insane amount of 200-300". The weapons had been developed with the help of the South African apartheid regime.

He further alleged that three new German-built submarines just purchased by Israel were to be fitted with nuclear weapons. Their stated purpose was "to cruise deep in the sea and constitute a second strike force in the event that Israel is attacked with nuclear weapons".

Mahoul said this undermined government claims that its nuclear arsenal was a deterrent. "That means that not only do the hundreds of bombs that Israel possesses not pose a defence, they have actually caused the military establishment to fear a nuclear early strike, which escalates the spiral of the non-conventional arms race further and further, at the cost of billions of dollars," he said.

He declared that Iran and Iraq were "threatened by Dimona" [Israel's nuclear reactor], and not the other way round. "The nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev desert has produced a huge amount of nuclear waste which, if leaked, would contaminate Israel for centuries," he said.

He warned that the nuclear stockpile was a hazard turning "this little piece of territory into a nuclear garbage bin, poisoned and poisoning, that could send us all up in a mushroom cloud". He said that Israeli citizens were kept in the dark about the nuclear stockpile and conditions at the ageing Dimona reactor that constituted a huge environmental threat.

The MP referred to reports that Israel had exported nuclear waste to Mauritania in North West Africa. He attacked the cloak of secrecy surrounding the nuclear missile sites near Kfar Zechariah on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and near Yodfat in the Galilee. He also said publicly what has been widely known for years—that Israel was producing "biological warfare" weapons at the government's Biological Institute in Ness Ziona.

Mahoul described the government's official policy of "nuclear

ambiguity" as "nothing but self-delusion". He said, "All the world knows that Israel is a vast warehouse of atomic, biological and chemical weapons that serves as an anchor for the Middle East arms race."

He repeatedly referred to Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli nuclear technician who worked at the Dimona nuclear reactor for nine years and was subsequently jailed for publicly revealing the extent of Israel's nuclear arsenal.

In 1986, Britain's *Sunday Times* published Vanunu's photographs from inside the reactor and his claim that Israel had stockpiled about 100 nuclear weapons. Vanunu's detailed allegations about the scope and sophistication of Israel's nuclear weapons have never been denied or challenged by Israeli officials or knowledgeable Israeli civilian defence experts. Indeed, independent assessments by international arms-monitoring organisations have concluded that Israel's nuclear stockpile is exceeded only by those of the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, citing what it said was a classified United States Department of Energy study, said only a few months ago that Israel has the sixth largest nuclear arsenal in the world.

Vanunu, having blown the whistle on Israel, was lured by Mossad, the Israeli secret service, to Rome, where he was kidnapped and taken back to Israel to stand trial as a spy and a traitor. He was sentenced in 1988, after a secret trial, to 18 years in prison. He has served most of the 13 years since then in solitary confinement.

His revelations were deemed so sensitive that it was only last November that the government finally released more than 1,200 pages of court statements, albeit censored, to the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharanot*, in order to avoid a legal challenge. Only recently has the government allowed even a photograph of Vanunu in jail to be published.

Mahoul's hope that his comments would spark a debate within parliament was mistaken. Although many representatives of international anti-nuclear groups and foreign governments attended the parliamentary session, few Israeli MPs stayed for the debate. It was all over in 52 minutes.

Two dozen right-wing Knesset members walked out in protest and five Arab members were expelled for heckling. Haim Ramon, a cabinet minister speaking on behalf of the government, and the only other speaker in the "debate", refused to respond to Mahoul. In effect calling Mahoul a traitor, he declared, "To do so would aid the enemy. Do you want us to tell Iran and Iraq exactly what we have and what we don't have?... It's unheard of."

Yediot Aharanot devoted almost 10 pages to the case and the subject dominated the airwaves within the region. While the

international press reported the debate, the absence of critical comments in the Western media contrasted starkly with their almost relentless propaganda drive regarding Iraq's supposed possession of "weapons of mass destruction," used to justify continuing air raids and sanctions which have killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Israel developed its nuclear programme in the 1950s. It was originally claimed that the Dimona reactor would provide the cheap nuclear energy required to make water desalination a viable project. But its real purpose was to enable the development of nuclear weapons.

Shimon Peres, who was Labour Prime Minister at the time of the Vanunu trial and is a member of the present government, is credited with organising the development of Israel's nuclear arsenal when he was an aide to former Labour Premier David Ben-Gurion.

Under the present Labour Prime Minister Ehud Barak, the government has followed the same nuclear policy as all its predecessors, one of "ambiguity." As a *Ha'aretz* editorial noted, this ambiguity is backed by a long-standing understanding with the US administration, according to which Israel will not reveal its nuclear capability and the US will consider Israel an exception to its global policy. Consequently Washington will not pressure Israel to join the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). As a result, every arm of the state has worked for nearly 40 years to ensure that no public debate of Israel's nuclear policy, or even acknowledgement of its existence, takes place. Hence the secrecy of Vanunu's trial.

This has allowed Israel to become the sole nuclear power in the Middle East. Israel even bombed Iraq's nuclear plant in 1981 to ensure that it would retain this status.

While discussion within Israel is very limited, considerable information has become available through intelligence reports, books and publications like *Jane's Defence Weekly*. In 1991, journalist Seymour Hersh said in his book *The Sampson Option* that Israel had "hundreds" of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, including more than 100 nuclear artillery shells and "hundreds of low-yield neutron warheads capable of destroying large numbers of enemy troops".

In 1992, Israeli human rights activist Professor Israel Shahak wrote a series of articles on Israel's nuclear and foreign policies, since published as a book. When dealing with the long-concealed events of the October 1973 war, he pointed out that the Israeli High Command, including possibly the then-Minister of Defence Moshe Dayan, were in favour of using nuclear weapons against Syria. They were only restrained by Prime Minister Golda Meir and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

In 1997 *Jane's Intelligence Weekly* examined satellite photographs of what it described as an Israeli military base at Kfar Zechariah. It concluded that "Israel's nuclear arsenal is larger than many estimates".

The site was said to house about 50 Jericho-2 missiles, believed to have a maximum range of about 3,000 miles with a warhead of about 2,200 pounds. The report also said the installation contained nuclear bombs for use from bombers. It claimed that the five bunkers could easily store 150 weapons. "This is more than other

reports state and supports indications that the Israeli arsenal may contain as many as 400 nuclear weapons with a total combined yield of 50 megatons," the study said.

In 1998 the *New York Times* cited an article in *Ha'aretz* reporting a Rand Corporation study commissioned by the Pentagon which concluded that Israel had enough plutonium to make 70 nuclear weapons.

In his book *Israel and the Bomb*, Avner Cohen traced the development of Israel's nuclear bomb. He drew on thousands of American and Israeli government documents, most of them only recently declassified, and more than 100 interviews with key players.

Cohen described the assistance Israel received from France, which provided the necessary sophisticated technology, and the initial failure of American intelligence to identify the Dimona project for what it was. He revealed that Israel crossed the nuclear weapons threshold on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War, and the negotiations between President Nixon and Prime Minister Golda Meir that led to the current policy of secrecy.

According to a special report by *Jane's Defence Weekly*, "Israel first deployed its nuclear weapons in 1968 to deter an unconstrained Soviet attack." *Jane's* continued, "For decades the Israeli Defence Force general staff had to plan to execute stopwatch wars, knowing that the USSR would intervene politically to rescue their client states when they were on the verge of total defeat."

The evidence shows that Israel's nuclear arsenal has been an open secret for years. It could hardly be otherwise, since the US has bankrolled the country for decades to the tune of billions of dollars a year in military aid, most of which must be spent in the US. Israel's nuclear weapons have gone unpublicised because the country serves as the custodian of US interests in the Middle East.

But changing realities pose challenges to Israel's nuclear policy. The peace process exposes Israel to questions, led by Egypt, as to why Israel needs strategic deterrence when it intends to open its borders. It has intensified political tensions between Barak's increasingly beleaguered government and the Arab MPs upon whom he depends for his majority in parliament. The increasing polarisation within Israeli society, moreover, brings to the fore environmental questions concerning the treatment of nuclear waste, reactor safety and the accountability of state institutions that, until now, have been shrouded in secrecy.

References

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