

Israel arms subs with nuclear weapons: an escalation of US-backed militarism

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A report Sunday by the *Los Angeles Times* confirms that Israel has successfully equipped three submarines with the capacity to launch nuclear-tipped cruise missiles. This development marks a major escalation in Israel's nuclear arms program, giving it the ability to strike a far wider range of targets. The revelation came in the midst of a sharp increase in Israeli provocations against Syria, Iran and the Palestinians that threaten to destabilize the entire region. These provocations, like Israel's weapons program, have received the full backing of Israel's principal sponsor, the United States.

According to unnamed high-level officials in Washington interviewed by the *Times*, Israel has modified several US-supplied Harpoon missiles to enable them to carry nuclear weapons. The missiles—originally designed for conventional use—will be placed on three diesel-powered submarines that Israel purchased from Germany in 1999 and 2000.

The additional nuclear capacity will vastly increase the threat that Israel poses to neighboring countries in the Middle East—and indeed beyond—since mobility of the submarines will render the country's nuclear arsenal impervious to missile attack. Israel will now have the capacity to launch nuclear weapons from land, air and sea.

The *Times* reports that an unnamed high-level Israeli official confirmed the statements made by the Americans. While it has been known for over a year that Israel has been attempting to equip these submarines with the ability to launch nuclear weapons, the *Times* article was the first direct confirmation that it had in fact succeeded in doing so.

Israel is the only country in the Middle East that possesses nuclear weapons. Estimates put the number of nuclear warheads in its possession at around 200, which would make it the fifth largest nuclear power in the world.

The country's nuclear program began as early as the 1950s with the aid of its then close ally France. Since the

late 1960s American intelligence has been aware that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Far from criticizing Israel's program, the US has aided its development and supplied the country with F-15 and F-16 fighter jets that are also capable of delivering nuclear warheads. This has been only a small part of the massive funding of the Israeli military by the United States.

The *Times* quotes a senior American official as saying, "We tolerate nuclear weapons in Israel for the same reason we tolerate them in Britain and France. We don't regard Israel as a threat." In other words, because Israel is an ally to the United States, it is free to develop whatever nuclear capacity it wishes, capacity that can be used against its neighbors.

Despite general acknowledgment of Israel's status as a nuclear power, the country has maintained its policy of "nuclear ambiguity," refusing to openly declare its nuclear capacity. Israel has enforced the strictest secrecy regarding the details of its program.

In 1986, Mordechai Vanunu, a former nuclear technician, was jailed for 18 years for revealing information about the development of Israel's Dimona reactor to the *Sunday Times* of London. Press reports are routinely censored by the military and attempts by parliamentary members to debate the issue of the country's nuclear program have been quickly suppressed.

The timing of the revelations is bound up with an attempt on the part of American and Israeli governments to step up pressure on Israel's neighbors. According to the *Times*, the American officials "were disclosing the information to caution Israel's enemies at a time of heightened tensions in the region." That is, the leak is meant as a threat of wholesale destruction aimed particularly against Iran and Syria should they respond in kind to the increasingly aggressive actions by Israel itself.

The most recent issue of the German magazine *Der Spiegel* reports that the Israeli intelligence organization

Mossad received orders two months ago to develop plans for attacking Iran. Israel has repeatedly threatened to launch a “preemptive” strike against Iran if it suspects that Iran is developing a nuclear weapons program. For its part, Tehran has stated publicly that it will take unspecified measures of self-defense in the event that Israel launches a strike on its nuclear facilities.

These threats have been coordinated with a systematic campaign by Washington to pressure Iran over its construction of a nuclear facility. The Bush administration has repeated unsubstantiated allegations that the facility—which is being constructed with Russian aid—is part of an ongoing nuclear weapons program. Iran has insisted that the nuclear processing plant is intended only for the production of energy.

The United Nations, under pressure from the US and with the support of European countries, has demanded that Iran open up its nuclear facilities to international inspection. The UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency has set an October 31 deadline for Iran to somehow prove that it has no agenda for producing nuclear weapons. Such a demand parallels the earlier insistence that Iraq prove it had no weapons of mass destruction. By design, such demands are impossible to fulfill since they require the proof of a negative. The US can always claim that it is not satisfied with the evidence provided.

Iran is also being pressured into signing a protocol to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that would force it to give the UN inspection agency unlimited access to any site whenever it chooses. Washington placed similar demands upon Iraq as the Bush administration manufactured its pretexts for launching military action.

While the UN has sharply criticized Iran for its nuclear energy program, it has remained completely silent over Israel’s ever-expanding nuclear arsenal. Highlighting the hypocrisy of the UN position is the fact that Israel—unlike Iran and the other major Arab states—has refused to sign the main component of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty.

This blatant double standard prompted several Arab countries to issue a complaint to the UN last month. Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa told the UN that it is “regrettable ... that some quarters selectively choose to level their false accusations at some Arab and Islamic states but not on others, while simultaneously ignoring the Israeli arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.”

Like Iran, Syria has cause for concern. The revelations concerning Israel’s nuclear program come only a week after Israel bombed a target deep in Syrian territory. Israel has charged that Syria supports Islamist Palestinian movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The United States has echoed these charges. At the same time, the US has alleged that Syria is aiding fighters resisting the American occupation of Iraq by allowing them to cross Syria’s border into Iraq. Last Wednesday, a House panel, with the support of the Bush administration, passed a measure calling for diplomatic and economic sanctions against Syria in response to its alleged support for terrorism.

The Israeli-US threats against Syria and Iran have increased at the same time as Israel expands its attacks against Palestinians, including a recent Israeli-incursion into the Rafah refugee camp on the border of the Gaza Strip and Egypt. After a three-day operation supposedly designed to destroy alleged weapons smuggling tunnels, the Israeli army pulled out on Sunday. Eight Palestinians were killed during the invasion, including two children, and dozens more were injured. The UN estimates that as many as 120 homes were demolished by the army, leaving some 1,500 people homeless. The brutal policy of home demolition is designed to prepare the way for the wholesale expulsion of the Palestinians from the entire region.

Together these developments indicate that Israel is paving the way to another major war in the Middle East. The Sharon government is determined to pursue a policy of expansion, in part to deflect internal tensions heightened by a recent strike of port workers. Israel’s increasing belligerence enjoys the full backing of Washington. Like the Sharon regime, the Bush administration is facing increasing opposition at home, heightened by the crisis of its occupation of Iraq. The US administration is responding to this crisis by preparing for yet another war, for which Israel is functioning as its advance guard.

The enormous and expanding nuclear capacity of Israel—not to mention that of the United States—highlights the catastrophic dangers posed by the provocative militarist orientation of Israel and its principal supporter.



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