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Israel's Nukes Derail U.S. Nonproliferation Goals

By: Victor Kattan · July, 2012

Overview

United States President Barack Obama swept into office with a powerful commitment to the cause of nuclear nonproliferation. However, the escalating U.S. sanctions and covert actions against Iran's alleged quest for a nuclear weapon as well as its increased military presence in the Gulf – all the while ignoring Israel's arsenal – push that goal well out of reach. In this policy brief, Al-Shabaka Program Director Victor Kattan explains why this is the case, and argues that if the U.S. is really serious about nuclear nonproliferation it must also and as part of its nonproliferation strategy tackle Israel's longstanding nuclear weapons program.

How Israel Torpedoes Nonproliferation

Strengthening the international nonproliferation regime is one of President Obama's key foreign policy goals. During a speech in Prague, in April 2009, he announced his "intention to seek a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons." He argued that because the US was the "only power to have used a nuclear weapon" he and his fellow countrymen had a "moral responsibility to act" by leading the disarmament agenda.

The US Government's failure to seriously address Israel's clandestine nuclear

weapons program and its stockpile of hundreds of such weapons, which include thermonuclear weapons in the megaton range, makes the Administration's policy towards nuclear nonproliferation elsewhere, look two-faced. Calling for more intrusive inspections of Iran's alleged nuclear facilities is particularly incongruous in light of Israel's refusal to accede to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and its refusal to allow weapons inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect its nuclear facilities – about which the whole world has known for some time.

Knowledge of the existence of Israel's nuclear weapons program, which began in earnest in the 1950s, and became critical in the 1960s, has contributed to an arms race for nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Past attempts by Libya, Iraq, and Syria to acquire such weapons, and Iran's alleged attempts to acquire a nuclear weapon today, can only be understood as a reaction to the West's refusal to put pressure on Israel to sign up to the NPT and allow IAEA weapons inspectors to inspect Israel's nuclear program with a view to establishing the Middle East as a Nuclear-Free Zone.

In September 2009, the IAEA expressed concern about Israel's "nuclear capabilities" and called on it "to accede to the NPT and place all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards…" And in April 2010, President Obama urged all countries, including Israel, to sign the NPT. He added: "That's been a consistent position of the United States government, even prior to my administration".

However, this is as far as the U.S. has gone towards Israel, in sharp contrast to the way it is dealing with Iran. If the Obama administration is serious about nuclear nonproliferation then it needs to radically overhaul its posture vis-à-vis Israel's nuclear weapons program and treat all countries equally. Otherwise, some state somewhere, will always try to obtain the bomb to redress the power imbalance in the Middle East.

Until Israel either abandons its nuclear weapons, as South Africa did in 1994, or allows its facilities to be inspected by the IAEA, the effort to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and eventually complete nuclear disarmament will not succeed. Indeed, Israel's refusal to accede to the NPT is the principal stumbling block to Obama's policy. As former Israeli foreign minister Silvan Shalom, told Army Radio when former premier Ehud Olmert inadvertently let the nuclear cat out of the bag: "We always face the same question which our enemies ask: 'Why is Israel allowed to [have a bomb] and not Iran?'"

Some serious analysts have argued that Iran should have the bomb because it leads to stability. That was Kenneth Waltz's argument in the august establishment journal Foreign Affairs, which was provocatively entitled "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb." However, as the international law expert Richard Falk pointed out in Guernica, this is a very dangerous line of argument to take. The only way to truly provide safety and stability for this planet is to fully – and at long last – implement the NPT.

Revisiting the NPT

It will be recalled that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which entered into force in 1970, required the original five nuclear weapon states – the US, Britain, Russia, France and China – to reduce and eliminate their nuclear arsenals. In exchange, all other signatory states agreed not to acquire such weapons although they were allowed the peaceful use of atomic energy.

In addition each state is required to accept safeguards to be negotiated and concluded with the IAEA "with a view to preventing diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful uses to nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices". Three countries remained outside the NPT: India and Pakistan, which declared their nuclear status, and Israel, which did not confirm or deny it. North Korea was a party to the treaty but announced its withdrawal on 10 January 2003.

The five nuclear states never met their obligations to liquidate their nuclear stockpiles but still insisted that the remaining treaty provisions be upheld, a hypocritical stance that has promoted proliferation. Of course, the problem with the NPT is, as Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out, that in order to ensure the peaceful uses of atomic energy the NPT allows a country to achieve levels of technical competence that makes it very easy to go one step further and build a nuclear bomb. Japan, for example, is widely believed to have that nuclear capability.

The development of such a nuclear capability is what Iran is alleged to be doing. As will be discussed below, the jury is still out as to whether Iran is building a nuclear weapon, according to the best U.S. intelligence. And yet, the very states that helped Israel get the bomb are leading the charge against Iran. Given the lengths to which those states are going to stop Iran from enjoying its rights under the NPT, it is worth quickly reviewing the history of just how Israel got the bomb.

Helping Israel Get the Bomb

Although the U.S. is now Israel's closest ally, it was not one of the early enablers of Israel's nuclear weapons program, which began in the 1950s. The first country to do that was France, which promised to give Israel a nuclear reactor to be built near Dimona in the Negev desert as well as a supply of uranium fuel in exchange for Israeli support of France and Britain during the 1956 Suez War. Britain also agreed to help Israel although it remains unclear whether this was due to Israel's support for the invasion of the Suez – an act of aggression that was condemned by the US.

According to several declassified top-secret British documents available online at the National Archives, Britain made hundreds of secret shipments of restricted materials to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s. These included specialist chemicals for reprocessing and samples of fissile material – uranium-235 in 1959, and plutonium

in 1966, as well as highly enriched lithium-6, which is used to boost fission bombs and fuel hydrogen bombs. Britain also shipped 20 tons of heavy water directly to Israel in 1959 and 1960 to start up the Dimona reactor. The transaction was made through a Norwegian front company called Noratom, which took a 2 per cent commission.

These deals were all done clandestinely by British civil servants behind the backs of their ministers. According to Tony Benn, Minister of Technology in 1966 while the plutonium deal was going through, the nuclear industry was part of his "white heat of technology" brief but no one told him that Britain was exporting atomic energy materials to Israel. "I'm not only surprised, I'm shocked," he told the BBC, adding that neither he nor his predecessor Frank Cousins agreed to the sales. "It never occurred to me they would authorize something so totally against the policy of the [British] government."

At the time, Israel deliberately sought to hide its Nuclear Weapons program from the U.S. Government so that it could be presented with a fait accompli at the appropriate moment. In one of the top-secret declassified British documents it was revealed that Israel was willing to pay more money to purchase Norwegian rather than American heavy water – even though the latter was much less expensive and they were short of cash: "The purchase of American heavy water would, however, have been likely to involve publicity and strict safeguards; and presumably this is what the Israelis were paying extra money to avoid."

Israel's policy of keeping its nuclear weapons secret from the U.S. changed after the June War in 1967. Whether or not Israel's practice of nuclear opacity was then "codified" between the U.S. Government and Israel or just "tolerated", as one scholar has suggested, in secret agreements during the Cold War, does not make Israel's retention of such weapons in a post-Cold War world any less objectionable today. It is clear that Israel's possession of the bomb is contributing to proliferation in the Middle East: If Iran acquires a weapon, then what will stop Saudi Arabia or

the other Gulf Kingdoms from doing so?

What the U.S. Knew and When

In September 1979, the US satellite VELA detected Israel's tests of a series of nuclear devices in the vicinity of the Prince Edward and Marion Islands in the sub-antarctic Indian Ocean in collaboration with apartheid South Africa. According to documents obtained by Sasha Polakow-Suransky the CIA and nuclear scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico concluded that no natural phenomenon could have caused the VELA incident.[fn]See Sasha Polakow-Suransky, The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa, New York: Vintage Books, 2010, pp. 136-142.[/fn]

In both the opinion of the experts at Los Alamos and at the CIA it was a nuclear explosion. However, because US President Jimmy Carter was preparing for an election campaign in the midst of the Iranian hostage crisis, his administration decided to bury the reports rather than openly confront Israel and South Africa.

Declassified documents reveal that four years before the VELA Incident, South Africa's defense minister asked Shimon Peres, then Israel's defense minister and now its president, for nuclear warheads. Peres responded by offering them "in three sizes". The two men signed an agreement governing military ties between the two countries that included a clause denying "the very existence of this agreement".

The US State Department and the CIA suspected that Israel was the chief suspect behind the explosions. In 1979 South Africa had not yet perfected the science that would allow it to independently make its own nuclear weapon, which the Israelis had already mastered but not tested.

According to Polakow-Suransky, South Africa began its relationship with Israel during the heyday of apartheid when it agreed to supply Israel with yellowcake

uranium in 1961 – the same year that South Africa was forced to leave the Commonwealth due to international opposition to its policy of apartheid. Between 1961 and 1976, Israel built up a stockpile of about 500 tons of uranium.

In 1976, South Africa lifted the bilateral safeguards that accompanied the sale of yellowcake uranium to Israel. In return for the yellowcake and lifted safeguards, South Africa received from Israel 30 grams of tritium, a radioactive substance that thermonuclear weapons require to increase their explosive power. Thirty grams was enough to boost the yield of several atomic bombs.

In October 1986, Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli nuclear technician, gave testimony to The Sunday Times of London, checked with leading nuclear experts in the U.S. and in Europe, in which it became evident that Israel was "a major nuclear power." It was then estimated to rank sixth in the atomic league table, with a stockpile of at least 100 nuclear weapons and with the components and ability to build atomic, neutron or hydrogen bombs.

According to Vanunu, in addition to building weapons made from plutonium, Israel produces tritium. According to The Times, "this is of immense significance, for it means Israel has the potential to produce thermonuclear weapons far more powerful than ordinary atomic bombs". Two of the pictures that Vanunu supplied to The Times appeared "to show a lithium deuteride hemisphere which could be used in the construction of the most devastating weapon of all – the thermonuclear bomb – a weapon capable of yielding the equivalent explosive force of hundreds of thousands of tons of TNT. In the chilling jargon of the nuclear bomb makers, Israel has moved beyond the ability to produce small 'suburb-busting' nuclear bombs to 'city-busters'".

A week after Vanunu's story, The Sunday Times also reported that Professor Francis Perrin, the father of the French bomb, admitted that the French government secretly supplied Israel with the technology to make nuclear bombs in

1957 contradicting 30 years of repeated official denials from Paris and Tel Aviv.

Turning on Iran

The U.S. and the rest of the world have known beyond a shadow of a doubt that Israel has had a 50-year-long clandestine nuclear weapons program. Yet, even though Israel has never opened its facilities to international inspections or signed the NPT, the U.S. is in lockstep with Israel in leading an international campaign against Iran and tightening up sanctions, together with the European Union, Canada, Japan and Australia. The sanctions already implemented include restrictions on Iranian oil sales, a ban on the supply of heavy weaponry and nuclear-related technology, and an asset freeze on certain individuals and organizations.

Nevertheless, the Obama Administration is careful in the language it uses. Its repeated threat is to stop Iran making a "nuclear weapon" which leaves open the possibility that the U.S. could live with an Iran that has a nuclear capability. It would therefore seem by implication that the U.S. would be willing to live with an Iran that has the capability to produce a weapon, but does not produce one. According to an analysis by the Carnegie Endowment, Iran could be allowed to enrich uranium so long as the enrichment is below weapons grade (i.e. 93 per cent – Iran is reportedly currently enriching uranium at 20 per cent). In other words, enrichment of uranium above 90 percent is one of Washington's Red Lines that would be interpreted by the U.S. Government as an actionable indicator that Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Only then, would the U.S. be willing to consider taking military action against Iran.

The Israeli Government, on the other hand, has always made it clear that it will not live with an Iranian nuclear capability let alone an Iran with a nuclear weapon, and it has threatened to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities as it bombed Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981.

In this regard, it is intriguing that Israel's claims about Iran's nuclear intentions are not new. Back in 1992, Binyamin Netanyahu who was then a member of Israel's Knesset (parliament) predicted that Iran was "3 to 5 years" from having a nuclear weapon. In the same year Israel's then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres told French TV that Iran would have a nuclear warhead by 1999. In 1995, The New York Times quoted U.S. and Israeli officials saying that Iran would have the bomb by 2000.

And yet the jury is still out as to whether Iran is actually building a weapon. In 2007, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the US published its National Intelligence Estimate. It assessed "with high confidence" that Iran did have a nuclear weapons program until 2003, but this was discovered and Iran stopped it. Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program in 2007, but the NIE said, "We do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons".

There are, of course, concerns about the direction in which Iran is presently going, and it may indeed be the case that in light of the threats to its security and the buildup of troops in the Gulf, that Iran is trying to build a bomb. As Kenneth Waltz aptly noted in Foreign Affairs: "If Tehran determines that its security depends on possessing nuclear weapons, sanctions are unlikely to change its mind. In fact, adding still more sanctions now could make Iran feel even more vulnerable, giving it still more reason to seek the protection of the ultimate deterrent". In November 2011, the IAEA said it had been unable tonon-proliferation "provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran" and that it continued to have "serious concerns" regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program.

And yet, despite these concerns, and despite the fact that Israel has had a nuclear weapons program since the 1950s and maintains a large stockpile of such weapons, no major power has ever suggested imposing sanctions against it. On the contrary, Israel has been "rewarded" and admired for having the audacity to

develop its own weapon's program.

For instance, recently, Germany was reported to have sold Israel advanced attack nuclear submarines fully capable of carrying, storing, and launching nuclear weapons. Armed with such weapons, these submarines send a clear signal to Iran that Israel would not be defenseless in the event of a nuclear attack, but could strike back with far more powerful weapons at a time of its choosing.

This makes it all the more questionable as to whether Iran – assuming that it indeed intends to build the bomb and is successful in so doing – would ever dream of launching a nuclear strike since such an act would likely lead to its own destruction. With such a powerful deterrent, it may be questioned why Israel even needs to prevent other states from having the weapon since they would never want to use it.

Indeed, the sanctions and the hectoring and constant warmongering against Iran is more likely to encourage the Iranian government to build a bomb in order to protect itself from attack with its own deterrent. Having a nuclear weapon is a very good insurance policy. But, of course, it makes a nonsense of any attempts to promote nuclear nonproliferation.

A Uniform Policy for All

Israel's determination to make Iran the issue has successfully detracted attention from its own arsenal (as well as its rapid colonization of the occupied Palestinian territories) and helped to keep the region tense and unstable, with the constant risk of another war in the background. It is also contributing to proliferation in the Middle East.

The objective of nuclear nonproliferation will not succeed until all countries are treated equally. The five nuclear NPT powers will have to play their role in reducing their nuclear arsenals, which the U.S. and Russia have in theory pledged

to do. The NPT nuclear powers must also work to coax all countries that are outside the NPT like Israel, Pakistan, India, and North Korea into joining the NPT. If the fight against proliferation is to succeed all states should join the NPT.

President Obama is now caught up in his re-election campaign. If he wins a second term, he should heed the lessons of the past and confront the region's existing nuclear powers – Israel, India, and Pakistan – to fulfill the dream of a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and on the path to complete nuclear disarmament.

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