

Israeli nuclear ambiguity and Arab nuclear activities

by Taysir Nashif

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Among the Middle Eastern states, Israel has the most developed nuclear infrastructure, which she has started to establish from the very year of her coming into being in 1948,¹ a long time before Arab states, many of which were still subject to foreign rule, could have some activity in the nuclear field.

Between 1957, when the Government of Israel decided, because of perceived security interests, to build a French nuclear reactor at Dimona,² and about the mid-1960s, Israel has developed a nuclear weapons option, namely, that operational nuclear weapons have not been assembled but the capability does exist to have them assembled in a relatively short while.³

At some time, probably in the late 1960s or early 1970s, Israel is believed by various students of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East to have moved from a "high" nuclear weapons option, which has the added meaning that the time needed to assemble a nuclear bomb is still shorter, to a "bomb-in-the-basement" posture, namely, that nuclear weapons have been assembled but this fact has not been disclosed.⁴

In this context, it merits to be mentioned that the time needed to convert a nuclear weapons option to the acquisition of nuclear weapons, whether in the form of a "bomb-in-the-basement" or a disclosed one, can be very much shortened. A state possessing a nuclear weapons option may have a long or a very short way to go to achieve a status of a state with nuclear weapons. Such a state may develop a nuclear weapons program, depending of course on its technical and scientific infrastructure, to a point at which it needs a certain time, say one year, one month, or one day, to move from that point to the point of the actual acquisition of nuclear weapons.⁵ The two terms of a "high nuclear weapons option" and "nuclear weapons acquisition" become almost identical when the time needed to move from the point of a "high option" to the point of acquisition is that short, that it is counted in terms of several days or several hours, or, as described by some, a "within-reach" or "screw-turn away" capability. In this case,

the distinction between a "high nuclear option" and a "bomb-in-the-basement" posture is almost nothing but a semantic matter.

Moreover, there is a technical consideration which lends support to the claim that, actually, there is no distinction between a "within-reach" nuclear weapon capability and acquisition of nuclear weapons. According to this line of reasoning, proto-type of a nuclear system is regarded as an actual nuclear weapon. The technical analysis is as follows: In order to develop a reliable proto-type of a nuclear system, it is necessary to carry out fully the task of development.⁶

Israel has followed what has become known in Israel and in various parts of the world as a policy of nuclear ambiguity.⁷ According to this policy, she has not revealed much about her nuclear weapons activities and status. Israeli governmental officials have repeatedly expressed Israel's nuclear position with the formula that she would not be the first state to introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East.⁸ Israel has continued the official ignoring of the fact that acquisition of nuclear weapons has been attributed to her.

Related to the policy of nuclear ambiguity is the question of nuclear weapons testing, which was regarded by states as a criterion publicly to identify a state's crossing of the nuclear threshold and to identify its nuclear intentions. The widely held, though unsubstantiated, view in Israel and outside of her that she has not conducted a nuclear test fits this policy of ambiguity. As nuclear testing was regarded as a clear symbol of the crossing of a nuclear threshold, this view that Israel has not conducted a nuclear test was used by Israelis and non-Israelis as a fig leaf for claiming that she is a non-nuclear weapon state. This view, as above mentioned, was unsubstantiated and, more than that, unfounded, as solid indications exist that Israel has actually conducted tests.⁹

Excluding Arabs from the nuclear field

Various objectives—strategic, political and economic—have been attributed to Israel's following of a policy of nuclear ambiguity. One of the more important of these objectives has been to avoid inducing Arab states in the last three decades to engage in establishing a nuclear infrastructure, which would be likely to lead to the acquisition of a nuclear capability.¹⁰

This objective has not been achieved. It is true that Arab

states, particularly during the first years of the pursuit of the policy of nuclear ambiguity, roughly in the 1960s, were uncertain as to Israel's nuclear weapons status and they, consequently, could not reach a categorical conclusion as to this status. Yet, this policy did not, as evidenced in the Arab official and unofficial statements, reassure Arab states that Israel lacks any intentions to acquire a nuclear weapons capability.¹¹ In the course of time, there has been a gradual but perceptible change in the Arab view of Israel's nuclear status. There has been an increasing number of statements by Arab political figures and intellectuals to the effect that they are skeptical about her acquisition of such weapons, and that they are certain that she has already acquired such weapons.¹² Such doubt and certainty on the part of various Arab sources clearly indicate the failure of the policy of nuclear ambiguity, inasmuch as its objective was to avoid inducing Arab states to engage in establishing a nuclear infrastructure and to set them on the road leading to the possession of nuclear weapons capability. As a matter of fact, this certainty surely led Arabs to make efforts in the nuclear field. As to the skeptics, they certainly were not reassured of the nature of Israel's nuclear activities. Ambiguity was not, of course, reassuring the Arabs, simply because it, by its nature, is not a source of reassurance. It is rather a source of anxiety. It is true that such ambiguity delayed Arab responses to the subject of Israeli nuclear capability and its implications. But such an ambiguity did not prevent the rise, gradually but steadily and increasingly, of such responses with their anxiety and concern. Such responses were becoming increasingly more frequent and tense in the course of time. While, particularly in the initial stages, weakening the Arab sense of being threatened and reducing the intensity of the Arab responses to the so-called ambiguous Israeli nuclear activity, it did not eliminate altogether the Arab sense of being threatened.¹³ As a matter of fact, there were cases, such as the October 1973 war, the Syrian-Israeli military engagements right after that war, Israel's large-scale military operation in southern Lebanon in March 1978, and her invasion of this country in 1982, where she has not shown adequate sensitivity to the Arabs concerning the matter of nuclear weapons possession.¹⁴ The Arab nuclear activities, as evidenced by such Arab states as Iraq and Libya, in the last two decades, which were, at least partially, a result of Israel's activities in this field, attest to the failure of such policy to prevent inducing the Arabs to go in Israel's footsteps.

Continuing flow, over time, of information and analysis by official and unofficial military and strategic research institutions, and of U.S. and European intelligence reports, has made all interested parties, Arab and non-Arab, increasingly less skeptical and more certain about the nature of the activities at Israel's nuclear facilities and that she has unmistakably changed her posture from a "high nuclear option" to a "bomb-in-the-basement," resulting in her possession of increasing nuclear weapons stockpiles of increasing sophistication.¹⁵

And the less ambiguous the Israeli nuclear program and its military and strategic objective became, the stronger became Arabs' motivation to acquire nuclear capability.

The Vanunu revelations

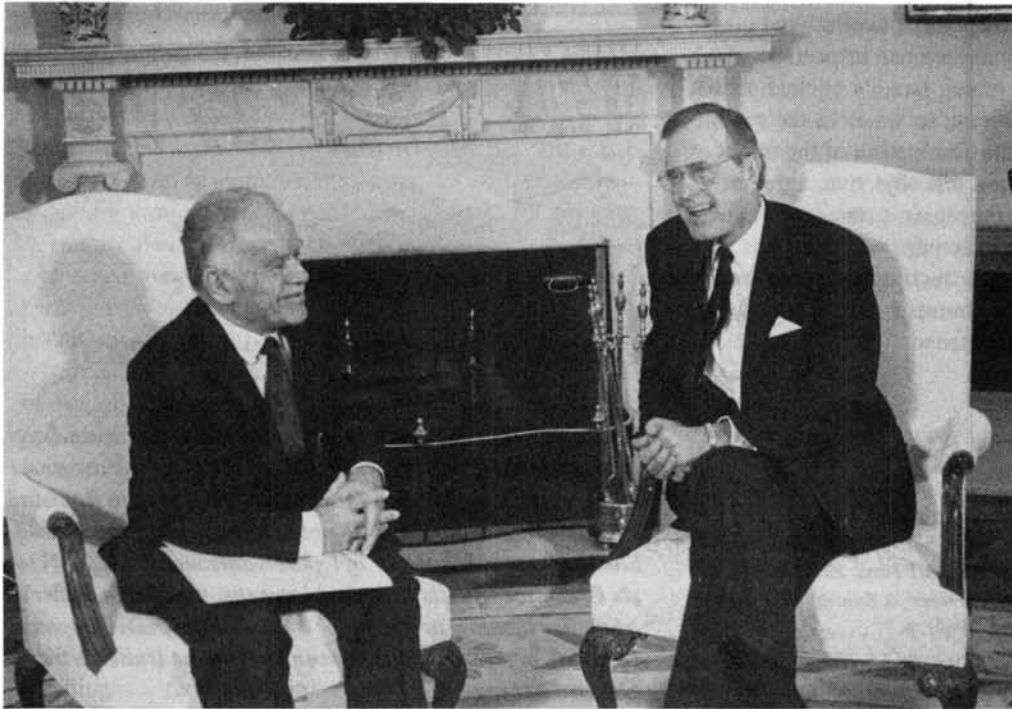
Israel's nuclear weapons development as revealed by the Israeli nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu unmistakably adds to the increasing body of evidence of Israel's status as a nuclear weapons state. Vanunu's revelations serve as a basis for the following conclusions: After Israel had crossed the nuclear threshold in the early 1970s, she has continued her research, development and production momentum. Israel's nuclear weapons stockpile has grown and improved during the 1980s quantitatively and qualitatively, and it has exceeded 100 nuclear weapon heads; Israel has a theoretical and technical access to a wide range of advanced nuclear options, which include development of "second generation" (fusion) and "third generation" (enhanced radiation) of nuclear technologies, with battlefield- and strategic-level nuclear weapons.¹⁶

There is no doubt that Vanunu's revelations and their technical analyses by experts brought about a significant change in the common technological estimates in the world of Israel's nuclear weapons capability. A clear expression to this change is found in the 1987 third annual report by Leonard S. Spector in the Carnegie Endowment's series on the spread of nuclear weapons. The major new aspect in the report, which is regarded as authoritative among open sources in this field, lies in regarding and describing Israel, more than any time in the past, as the sixth nuclear weapon state.¹⁷

With the large body of solid evidence that Israel has an arsenal of nuclear weapons, there is now an international consensus on Israel's being a nuclear weapon state.¹⁸ With this consensus, Israel's status, as far as nuclear weapons acquisition is concerned, can no longer be called ambiguous and it is no longer regarded as such. In this international consensus are also included the Arabs.

This international consensus strengthened the recognition that the so-called nuclear ambiguity, as Avner Cohen has stated, is nothing but a fig leaf for a special nuclear policy, which aims to create an effect of nuclear deterrence;¹⁹ yet, this is not a nuclear deterrence policy in the conventional sense, with its attendant declaration, threats, and declared tests.

In recent years, and it is difficult, because of the nature of the process involved, to determine the exact time, Israel has been instrumental in bringing about what might roughly be called special nuclear rules of the game: On the international level, there is a de facto recognition of Israel's being a nuclear weapons state; and, at the same time, there is a deliberate ignoring of this nuclear status. There is an undisclosed, but known, Israeli monopoly on nuclear weapons acquisition in the Middle East. Israel, obviously, does not



For years the western governments have bought the argument from some Israeli strategists that it is conducive to stability to turn a blind eye to Israel's nuclear weapons program. The opposite is the truth. Here, George Bush, who campaigned so hard for "nuclear accountability" for Iraq, meets with Israeli Premier Yitzhak Shamir in November 1990. Israel is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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want any Arab state to acquire nuclear weapons; she has sought, to a considerable degree of success, to undermine Arab efforts to establish a solid nuclear infrastructure. The Big Powers and other states have shown a great interest in keeping the current state of nuclear affairs in the region. That is because such states believe that such a state of affairs is preferable to giving publicity and legitimacy to Israel's acquiring of nuclear weapons. By taking such an approach, such states seek to keep, as much as possible, the nuclear dimension in the Middle East at a low profile, and to prevent Arab states from acquiring such weapons, thus preventing further nuclear proliferation in the region.²⁰ Such states, which have shown interest in keeping the present situation, where Israel has a nuclear monopoly, estimate that in the change of the present situation lies a danger of bringing about a dynamic of further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, and that, consequently, to avoid such a development it is essential to accept silently things as they are, and to pretend not to be aware of the fact of Israeli activities and plans in the nuclear field. This is a more plausible way to explain the striking scarcity of published material, both on the official and unofficial levels, on Israel's nuclear weapons acquisition. When bits of material are published, they tend not to be too inquisitive into the size of Israel's nuclear weapons stockpile, the nuclear doctrine of Israel, and the intentions of the Israeli policy formulations in this field.

World turns a blind eye

As mentioned earlier, a considerable portion of the international community has ignored the fact that Israel has ac-

quired nuclear weapons. There are Arab states, however, which are not ignoring this fact. As Israel's "high" nuclear option and her "bomb-in-the-basement" posture have considerably contributed to bringing about an Arab interest in nuclear activity, so this last phase of Israel's nuclear status, as above described, with her nuclear monopoly and attendant rules of the game, is not and will not be accepted by Arab states.

Some of the Arab states have not protested against and opposed Israel's rules of nuclear behavior, or have maintained a low profile in their protest and opposition. Other Arab states, on the other hand, have been more vocal in their protest; they have a high profile in their opposition, and have called for taking measures to match Israel's nuclear weapons status.²¹

This Arab reaction to Israel's nuclear weapons acquisition means that politics in the Middle East have been nuclearized. Israel's nuclear dimension has become a factor—an important factor, as a matter of fact—in the political and military considerations of the interested parties in the conflict. This dimension has left its imprint on the policies of Arab states; it has considerably fashioned Arab thinking and behavior.²²

The situation as it now stands is very precarious. Arab states feel threatened by Israel's monopoly on nuclear weapons. Arab states will not resign themselves to this monopoly. This is too obvious to be ignored. This makes it clear that this new phase in Israel's nuclear status is conducive not to stability, as some Israeli strategists claim, but to instability in the region. In reaction to this situation, Arab states are bound to follow Israel's footsteps in the nuclear field. Unless

Israel eliminates her nuclear weapons stockpiles, and places her nuclear facilities under international inspection, Arab states will continue trying to match Israel's nuclear status, and nuclear weapons might spread to states in the region. Safety of the region dictates the elimination of the threat of nuclear proliferation. To achieve this objective, agreements need to be concluded between the region's states to eliminate existing nuclear weapons, not to acquire such weapons, and international inspection of nuclear facilities. Otherwise, the safety of the peoples and environment of the region and beyond would be constantly threatened.

Notes

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3. Shai Feldman, *Israel Nuclear Deterrence; A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 7.
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5. Alan Dowty, "Israeli Perspectives on Nuclear Proliferation," in Johan J. Holst, ed., *Security, Order, and the Bomb* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972), p. 140.
6. Avner Cohen, *Enushut Batsel Haatom* (Humanity in the Shadow of the Bomb) (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987), p. 238.
7. See Gerald M. Steinberg, "Deliberate Ambiguity: Evolution and Evaluation," in *Security and Armageddon*, ed. by Louis René Beres (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1986), pp. 29-43.
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10. Evron, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
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13. Evron, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27.
14. Peter Pry, *Israel's Nuclear Arsenal* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1984), p. 32; Amos Perlmutter, Michael Handel, Uri Bar-Joseph, *Two Minutes Over Baghdad* (London: Corgi, 1982), pp. 80-82.
15. Leonard S. Spector, *Going Nuclear* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1987), pp. 130-32.
16. "Revealed: The Secrets of Israel's Nuclear Arsenal," *Sunday Times* (London), 5 October 1986.
17. Spector, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
18. Avner Cohen, "Nispah 1987: Havikkuaah Sheniftah?" in *Enushut Batsel Haatom*, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-39.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Amin Hamid Huwaydi, *As-Sira al-Arabi al-Israili Bayna ar-Radi at-Taqlidi wal-Radi an-Nawawi* (The Arab-Israeli Conflict Between Conventional and Nuclear Deterrent). (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahdah al-Arabiyyah, 1983), p. 131.
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Interview: Aziz Alkazaz

Iraq's role in the future development of the Mideast

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach interviewed the well-known Iraqi economist Aziz Alkazaz on the eve of the Middle East peace conference. Mrs. Mirak-Weissbach has traveled to Baghdad as a delegate of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq. She is also a collaborator of Lyndon LaRouche, whose "Oasis Plan" for Middle East development, has become part of a Schiller Institute proposal for a "True Fourth Development Decade" presented in September 1991 to the United Nations General Assembly.

EIR: Many people who know the region, say that the situation in the Persian Gulf is still more complicated today than before the war. Does that hit the mark in your opinion?

Alkazaz: Yes, I believe that the situation in the Gulf region is more complicated in fact today than before the Gulf war, because many questions of a medium- and long-term nature have remained open, and new problems have been added to them: the question of the security policy, the possibility of a joint security of the states adjacent to the Gulf; the basic question of whether Iraq will be drawn in, or not drawn in. Is it in any way possible to exclude Iraq from a long-term stabilization of the region? Probably not. Or also if there might be a certain convergence between Iran and Egypt in security policy for the Gulf region. And where does Saudi Arabia stand in all this? The military presence of the U.S.A. may provide stability in the elementary sense. But if the fundamental problems of the region are not solved, I suspect that the political systems of the Gulf States will be very much threatened, even more than before the Gulf war.

EIR: During the last few months, the public all over the world has been made more aware of the religious and ethnic causes of the Gulf conflict; for example, tensions between Shiites and Sunnites in the framework of Iran's role in the region, or ethnic differences between Kurds on the one side, Turks, Arabs, and Persians on the other. Such religious or ethnic aspects have had their historical role, yet does that mean that hostile confrontation is necessarily "built in"? Is there no possibility for a peaceful cooperation? Are there not numerous examples of this from the history of Lebanon or Iraq?