

# Possible Changes in the Policy of Nuclear Ambiguity of Israel

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**Abstract:** in our opinion, there has been partial change in the policy of ambiguity. The partial change is expressed in the fact that Israel is willing to indirectly admit (or in other words, through newspaper articles and not through official government announcements) the existence of a nuclear reactor and the existence of an Atomic Energy Commission in Israel, but still maintains complete silence about the possibility of the development of nuclear weapons and/or a reactor for military purposes and/or potential abilities that Israel have to engineer nuclear explosives on surface-to-surface missiles and launch them.

**Keywords:** Israel studies, Nuclear ambiguity, Nuclear policy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the heavy losses that Israel suffered in the War of Independence, Ben-Gurion in the beginning of the 1950s was concerned that if the Arab states were to attack Israel in the same way, then Israel could not withstand them. Therefore, he called for Israel to be armed with nuclear weapons so as to avert a war of annihilation by the Arab states that do not accept the existence of Israel and with the hope that this will lead, in a long term process, to peace with the Arab countries that will abandon their aspiration to destroy Israel<sup>1,2</sup>.

However, when the reactor was built in Dimona in the 1950s and 1960s, the United States strongly acted in the international arena to reduce the use of nuclear weaponry by the countries around the world, a policy implemented until today by the different governments in the United States. The most prominent expression of this was the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is an international treaty that requires, first and foremost, all the signatory countries not to use nuclear weapons against countries that do not have nuclear weapons. As of today, Israel is one of only five countries in the world that has not signed the treaty<sup>3,4</sup>.

As a result of the articles of the treaty and the law of the American Congress forbidding the United States from giving aid to a country that admits that it intends to develop nuclear weapons (known as ‘Symington Amendment’), Israel has always adopted the policy called nuclear ambiguity. The meaning of the policy of ambiguity is that Israel, with an official announcement from the government and/or the Knesset (Israel Parliament) will never admit or deny the existence of nuclear weapons at its disposal<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Library, Dvar Newspaper, December 22, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Aaronson, Shlomo, 2014, “Nuclear Weaponry in the Middle East, 1948-2013”, Magnes Press, pp. 15-33.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Reed and Danny B. Stillman (2009). The Nuclear Express: A Political History of the Bomb and its Proliferation, Zenith Press, p. 144

<sup>4</sup> Text of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, Avner, 2000, “Israel and the Bomb”, Shoken Press, pp. 273-274.

This policy is based until today on a sentence said by Shimon Peres in haste when President Kennedy surprised him and asked him about Israel's nuclear weapons in a meeting at the White House. "Israel will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East". This sentence became the sole official declaration of Israel on the topic, primarily following the ambiguity of the word 'introduce'. The word can have two meanings; the first is ownership of the weapons and the second is physical use of the weapon<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The policy of ambiguity of Israel is expressed at its basis in the lack of reference to the topic in the official announcements of the government and the Knesset and in the avoidance of an official announcement and/or details on the Israeli nuclear program on the part of factors involved in the program in the present and in the future. The person in charge of security in the defense establishment in the years 1958-1986 was Haim Carmon, and in the years 1986-2007 it was Yechiel Horev. Today, this person is Amir Kain<sup>7</sup>.

Over the years, the topic was mentioned a number of times, most of the times without the permission of the person in charge of security in the defense system. The first time the topic was discussed was when Ben-Gurion announced in the Knesset the existence of the reactor that was then under construction in Dimona. In this announcement, Ben-Gurion stated that the reactor itself is for the purposes of peace and research and not for military purposes<sup>8</sup>.

On December 1, 1974, the President of Israel, Professor Ephraim Katzir, said to a group of science journalists from Europe and the United States that "Israel has nuclear potential". When the journalists asked him what he meant, he responded, "This potential is not a worrisome topic. Why should this topic worry us? The world should worry."

In February 1976 Moshe Dayan announced in an interview to the French television that "We have the possibility of creating an atomic bomb already now. If the Arabs introduce an atomic bomb to the Middle East at some time in the future, we should have the bomb before them, but of course not use it first." When he was asked why it is important for Israel to have nuclear potential, Dayan responded that "We are a small state and America is no longer the policeman of the world. We must protect ourselves." In the continuation of the month, in an interview to Italian television, Dayan declared that "We waged wars and we never thought about the possibility of using nuclear weapons. However, the situation is completely changed when talking about leaders such as Muammar Gaddafi, or the leaders of Iraq, when nobody can predict their behavior, if they were to acquire nuclear arms."

A few years later, the Knesset member Meir Kahane, during the national press breakfast in Washington, declared explicitly Israeli's nuclear program when he referred to the Vanunu Affair, saying. "Of course Israel has nuclear arms. And why must we conceal this?" Kahane added that "I think that he [Vanunu] did something wonderful. I prefer the entire world to hate the victorious State of Israel – than to love the dead State of Israel."<sup>9</sup>

The only time the government of Israel addressed the topic beyond the first time in the 1960s was when Minister Haim Ramon responded in the Knesset plenum in February 2000 to a proposal on the agenda in light of the publication of the protocols of the Vanunu Trial. His response stated that, "The main tenets of the nuclear policy of Israel, as formed over the years by the governments of Israel, which were elected by most of the nation in a democratic and legitimate manner – whether a government led by Labour, a government led by the Likud, or a national unity government – were as follows and did not change:

1. Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East.

<sup>6</sup> Yossi Melman, "Another Pin in the Balloon", Haaretz Website, December 11, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/1.1528947>

<sup>7</sup> Pehazur, Reuven, 2010, "Quiet of Silence", Haaretz newspaper, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/1.1210757>

<sup>8</sup> The National Library, Davar Newspaper, December 22, 1960.

<sup>9</sup> News Blogs, Israel's Homeland Security Home, "Israel Has Nuclear Weapons – Declared Former Defense Secretary in the United States", April 17, 2013.

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2. Israel supports the principle of lack of dispersion of nuclear arms. However, the NPT, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, with all its importance in the global context does not constitute a suitable response for our region, as proven by the case of Iran and proven by the case of Iraq.
3. Israel has supported for a long time the solution of the establishment of the Middle East as a region free of nuclear arms and ballistic missiles, when conditions in which there is no danger of war will prevail.”

A tragic story related to the topic is the story of Brigadier General (reserve) Yizchak Yakov. Yakov, who did not have the immunity of the Knesset members, wanted in the year 2001 to publish a book that described his actions as the head of the Unit of Research and Development in the Ministry of Defense in the 1960s. Although he was cautioned by the defense establishment that the information at his disposal was forbidden for publication, he hoped that he could publish it in the United States with the note at the beginning of the book that this is a fictional account (like the books of John le Carré). When he returned to Israel in the year 2001, he was arrested by the General Security Service (GSS) and accused of “giving confidential information”. He spent two years under arrest after he was convicted of “giving confidential information without authority”, but he was cleared of two other, more severe offenses: “giving confidential information without authority with the intention to harm state security” and “giving information with the intention to harm state security”. The main fear of the person in charge of the security in the defense system, when dealing with the Yizchak Yakov incident, was the desire of additional people to publish memoirs on their part in the founding of the nuclear reactor. However, the handling of the Yizchak Yakov incident by the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment was perceived as too strict by the public and after extensive public criticism Yechiel Horev resigned from the position as the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment and his place was filled by Amir Kain<sup>10</sup>.

**The Investigations Program of Amnon Levi:**

On July 15, 2012, a chapter of the Investigations Program of Amnon Levi, “Real Faces”, which addressed the atomic program of Israel, was released. In contrast to the research studies published in the past, the program researchers depended not only on the open sources but also on people who were directly involved in the field in the past.

The official non-foreign sources in the investigation were expressed primarily in interviews of scientists and past workers in the reactor and the Committee for Atomic Energy. The founders of the reactor were Professor Naaman Belkind, Professor Yossi Gal, Professor Eli Sagi, Professor Yigal Talmi, and Professor Uzi Even. The past official factors from the Committee for Atomic Energy were Professor Uzi Ilam (formerly the Chair of the Committee for Atomic Energy) and the diplomats who acted for French help to establish the reactor included Asher Ben-Natan.

In the program the researcher mentioned explicitly that the scientists and workers received the approval of the security officer of the Nuclear Research Center (the nuclear reactor in Dimona) to speak with them about their past and their part in the construction of the reactor in Dimona. This contradicted other non-official publications in the past, which were undertaken without the permission of the person in charge of security in the defense establishment and the security officer of the Nuclear Research Center (the nuclear reactor in Dimona).

The very interviews of the people with authority and knowledge on the topic in essence constitutes, for the first time, an official admission of the security establishment of Israel of the existence of the nuclear reactor in Dimona and indirectly an admission of the existence of the Israeli nuclear program. At 27:35 of the program, Professor Yossi Gal hinted that the reactor was intended for military needs<sup>11</sup>.

Hence, it is necessary to examine the possibility that perhaps since the Yizchak Yakov incident there is a certain openness of the security establishment (the security establishment and not the political establishment) regarding the possibility that Israel has nuclear capabilities. Whatever the answer is, the very fact that the security officer of the Nuclear Research Center enables people with authority to speak on the topic constitutes an essential change.

<sup>10</sup> “The Death of Yizchak Yakov: He Did Not Manage to Clear His Name”, NRG, March 27, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> “True Faces, Investigations Program of Amnon Levi”, July 15, 2012, “Secrets of the Israeli Atom”, <http://panim.nana.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=911287>

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Following the permission granted to the investigators by the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment and the security officer of the Nuclear Research Center (the nuclear reactor in Dimona), it can be assumed that after prior incidents, such as the Yizchak Yakov incident, and their outcomes (the resignation of the person in charge of security in the defense system), the new Director of Security of the Defense Establishment reached the conclusion that it is necessary to disclose in a limited manner the nuclear program of Israel. Namely, he admits in the chapter that Israel built a nuclear reactor but refrains from admitting directly the existence of nuclear weapons, apparently, because of the Symington Amendment.

This is a very sophisticated course of action on the part of the person in charge of security in the defense system. In contrast to Yechiel Horev, who decided to adopt the traditional approach of the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment in that he attempted to prevent, with most strident measures, every possible mention of the existence of any nuclear capacity in Israel's hands, Amir Kain decided to allow the scientists who worked to establish the reactor to speak for the first time about their actions in the past without detailing the military capabilities of Israel on this topic. Thus, the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment gave the reactor founders the possibility of telling their story and leaving their mark on Israeli history (a concern voiced by Horev) and retained to some degree ambiguity on the military abilities of Israel (and thus averted a crisis in the relations between Israel and the United States).

There is no official announcement about the military-nuclear abilities of Israel. However, such exposure of the nuclear reactor in Dimona is unprecedented. In the past Israel refrained from admitting the existence of a nuclear reactor for civilian purposes because of the requirement that would follow to send inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Commission to examine the reactor. It can be hypothesized that the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment felt willing to speak about the reactor in terms of civilian needs since there is cooperation between the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission and the International Atomic Energy Commission.

Hence, the following question arises. Is there a change in the approach of the government of Israel on the topic of the disclosure of the nuclear program? It is important to say that there is an essential change in the approach of the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment about the existence of the nuclear program developed by Israel; however it is important to say that simultaneously the policy of ambiguity still remains. The policy of ambiguity by nature is a policy that denies the existence of nuclear arms in Israel.

To conclude, following the access given to Amnon Levi and other journalists after the Yizchak Yakov affair and the resignation of Horev, in our opinion, there has been partial change in the policy of ambiguity. The partial change is expressed in the fact that Israel is willing to indirectly admit (or in other words, through newspaper articles and not through official government announcements) the existence of a nuclear reactor and the existence of an Atomic Energy Commission in Israel, but still maintains complete silence about the possibility of the development of nuclear weapons and/or a reactor for military purposes and/or potential abilities that Israel have to engineer nuclear explosives on surface-to-surface missiles and launch them.

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