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Israel and the NPT: new insights into old questions

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In late August 2021, United States President Joseph Biden hosted the newly elected Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennet, at the White House for an official meeting. Shortly after, Israeli journalist Barak Ravid reported that Biden and Bennet ‘reaffirmed the strategic understandings’ between the two allies on Israel’s ‘alleged undeclared military nuclear program’, noting that this reaffirmation of policy has been repeated by every US President since Richard Nixon.¹ As shall be explored below, this statement is mostly accurate, with the seemingly glaring exception of President George H.W. Bush. Upon its publication, Ravid’s story became the most recent in a long line of reports detailing this repeated commitment by US presidents to their Israeli counterparts.²

What role does this commitment play in Israel’s long history with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)? The primary aim of this article is to answer this question by charting Israel’s relationship with the NPT and its decades long fear of American coercion to join it. A secondary aim of this article is to provide a concise primer, or introduction, to this nuanced question for scholars and students alike, by reviewing the existing literature and adding insights from new archival sources to this growing body of work.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first charts the emergence of Israel’s NPT policy and the technical-diplomatic road which led to the emergence of the policy in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The second charts how this policy impacted Israel’s nuclear energy policy in the following decades, ultimately preventing it from pursuing its plan of launching a massive civilian nuclear infrastructure program, specifically nuclear power plants for electricity production. The third concludes with charting Israel’s NPT policy at the end of the Cold War. Research for this study was conducted

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¹Barak Ravid, ‘Biden and Israeli PM renewed agreement on covert nuclear program’, *Axios*, 1 September 2021, <https://www.axios.com/us-israel-nuclear-weapons-agreement-biden-bennett-46251c24-e467-4912-bac8-9a569dabdc20.html>, accessed 19 February 2025.

²Aluf Benn, ‘US: Israel is not next in line for disarmament’, [Hebrew], *Ha’aretz*, 25 December 2003; Adam Entous, ‘How Trump and Three Other U.S. Presidents Protected Israel’s Worst-Kept Secret: Its Nuclear Arsenal’, *The New Yorker*, 19 June 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-trump-and-three-other-us-presidents-protected-israels-worst-kept-secret-its-nuclear-arsenal>, accessed 23 September 2020; Aluf Benn, ‘Olmert to Bush: Make sure Obama doesn’t press Israel on nuclear issue’, *Ha’aretz*, 26 November 2008; Aluf Benn, ‘Will Obama’s Denuclearization Plan Mean “Dimona for Natanz”?’ [Hebrew], *Ha’aretz*, 7 May 2009; Barak Ravid, ‘Obama Committed Not to Undermine Israel’s “Nuclear Ambiguity”’ [Hebrew], *Ha’aretz*, 7 July 2010; Eli Lake, ‘Obama agrees to keep Israel’s nukes secret’, *The Washington Times*, 2 October 2009, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/02/president-obama-has-reaffirmed-a-4-decade-old-secr/>, accessed 19 February 2025.

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in archives in the US, United Kingdom, Canada and Israel, and taps both primary and secondary sources; Hebrew translations are by the author, unless otherwise noted.³

The study also benefitted from documents made accessible by historian Adam Raz, however, these documents have an unusual provenance, which limits the extent to which they can be used as historical evidence. At an undisclosed time, circa 2018, an anonymous source handed Raz an envelope full of handwritten notes, letters and protocols, apparently relating to Israel's nuclear program. Some notes were reported in the press, detailing their origin, others were published on-line by the Wilson Center.⁴ These notes raise an interesting dilemma for researchers. On the one hand, the handwriting on the notes matches those of prominent Israeli ministers who served in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the topics covered in the notes match the issues which were discussed at the time, lending them much credibility. On the other hand, it is impossible to prove their authenticity given their uncertain origin. I therefore treat them as an important auxiliary source which sheds light into Israel's nuclear history, but not as a sole source for conclusive information. At the bottom line, I believe they are too important to ignore.

The final section of the article outlines Israel's NPT accession policy in the bilateral context during the George H.W. Bush and Clinton presidencies. In lieu of archival documents for this period, research for this section was conducted based on media reports and secondary sources and is therefore limited in its scope and aims to outline the relevant developments and invite future research. As more documents are expected to be made accessible to researchers in US archives and elsewhere, more information on this period is likely to emerge in the coming years.

Israel's NPT Policy and the Technical-Diplomatic Road Leading to It

The roots of Zionist and Israeli nuclear aspirations appeared as early as August 1945, shortly after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and three years before the state's establishment. Dr Chaim Weizmann, a leading political figure within the Zionist movement, (albeit in decline at the time) and a world-renowned chemist, contemplated whether and how he could use the dominant participation of Jewish scientists in the Manhattan project to pressure the British government to open the gates of British controlled Palestine to Jewish immigration.⁵

To achieve this goal, Weizmann tried, and failed, in 1945, to harness Albert Einstein to a campaign touting Jewish participation in the Manhattan Project. Later, in 1947, he

³The primary archives accessed for this study include the Israel State Archives (ISA), the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (LBJPL), the Richard Nixon Presidential Library (RNPL), the Gerald Ford Presidential Library (GFPL), the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (JCPL), the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRPL), Library and Archives Canada (LAC), and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

⁴Raz has made all the notes in the collection available to me, and I am grateful for his assistance in researching this article. I cite some of these notes in the article under 'the Adam Raz collection,' noting the file number of the scan where it exists in the original. Two Israeli news reports that also cited these notes are Adam Raz, "Protocol of Concealment: The Meetings That Led to Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz Weekend Magazine*, 16 January 2019; and Ronen Bergman and Or Fialkov, "Atomic Pressure" [Hebrew], *Yedioth Aharonot*, *Shiva'a Yamim* supplement, 8 September 2023. The Wilson Center's blog has also published some of these notes, with my commentary, together with their translations, see: Or Rabinowitz, "The Secret Handwritten Memos behind Israel's Nuclear Project: What Do They Tell Us and How to Study Them," Sources and Methods, Wilson Center, 11 January 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/secret-handwritten-memos-behind-israels-nuclear-project-what-do-they-tell-us-and-how>.

⁵Or Rabinowitz and Yehonatan Abramson, 'Imagining a "Jewish atom bomb", constructing a scientific diaspora,' *Social Studies of Science* 52, no. 2 (2022).

worked discreetly to promote the establishment of a nuclear reactor in British controlled Palestine.⁶ After the Israeli declaration of Independence in 1948, under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) David Ben Gurion, Israel took its first steps into the nuclear field. During the first years of the state's existence, scientists were sent to train abroad, the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) was established and in 1958 work began on the construction of a French bought nuclear reactor near the town of Dimona.⁷

The adoption of a policy of benign neglect by the Dwight Eisenhower administration saw US pressure on Israel to halt its nascent nuclear program start in earnest only during President John F. Kennedy's term. Kennedy pressured Ben Gurion, and later his successor, Levi Eshkol, to agree to periodic biannual US inspection visits to Dimona, aimed at making sure that Israel was not producing plutonium or otherwise advancing a weapons program.⁸ An undated note from the Raz collection, seemingly written by Yisrael Galili, an influential member of Knesset at the time, details how Israel chose to treat the commitments given by Ben Gurion, referred to as 'B.G' in the notes, in his letters to Kennedy. The note consists of a list of short explanatory statements on the nature of these commitments and how Israel interprets them. 'We did not disclose the object of the factory', 'We did not commit to inspection', 'We mentioned and stressed sovereignty in the timing of friendly inspections', 'We did not break from the content of B.G letters', and 'The French inspection procedure on the fuel before start-up' (emphasis in the original).⁹

In the following years, the Israelis employed different ploys to convince the inspectors that Israel was not producing plutonium or more broadly developing weapons at Dimona.¹⁰ Israeli-American Eli Geisler, who served as an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldier at Dimona at the time, recalled that from the outside, the building where Israel was hiding its plutonium production plant looked like 'an unassuming one-floor building' presented as an administrative hub; in truth it concealed the entrance to a 'multilevel subterranean reprocessing facility' for plutonium production.¹¹ None of the reports filed by the inspectors concluded with certainty that Israel was producing nuclear weapons, though they varied in the degree of conviction. In early 1964 US officials briefed their British counterparts that they were only '90 percent certain' that nothing suspicious was going on at Dimona.¹² Consequently, one British intelligence official correctly assumed as early as 1964 that Israel had likely secretly built a plutonium separation plant, hiding it from the American inspectors.¹³

⁶Ibid.

⁷Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁸Avner Cohen and William Burr, "How a Standoff With the US Almost Blew Up Israel's Nuclear Program" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz Weekend Magazine*, 3 May 2019; Zaki Shalom, *Israel's Nuclear Option: Behind the Scenes Diplomacy Between Dimona and Washington* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 26; Abraham Ben-Zvi, *From Truman to Obama: The Rise and Early Decline of American-Israeli Relations* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miscal, 2011), 73; Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The US-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 51–67.

⁹This unsigned note is included in the Adam Raz collection. Scan of the original note, and its translation, were published on the Wilson Center's blog. Handwritten note, 3 September 1963, author unknown, possibly Yisrael Galili, recipient unknown, File 1, p. 5 of 32, Adam Raz collection, author's translation; published as Document 4 in Or Rabinowitz, "The Secret Handwritten Memos behind Israel's Nuclear Project: What Do They Tell Us and How to Study Them," Sources and Methods, Wilson Center, 11 January 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/secret-handwritten-memos-behind-israels-nuclear-project-what-do-they-tell-us-and-how>.

¹⁰Ronen Bergman, "For Him It's Nuclear" [Hebrew], *Shiva'a Yamim, Yedioth Aharonot*, 17 March 2005; Avner Cohen and William Burr, "How Israel Built a Nuclear Program Right Under the Americans' Noses," *Ha'aretz*, 17 January 2021.

¹¹Eli Geisler, "The Israeli nuclear drama of May 1967: a personal testimony," *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 5-6 (2018).

¹²P. R. H. Wright to W. Morris, secret memorandum from British Embassy, Washington, to the Foreign Office, 6 February 1964, FO 371/175843, TNA, Kew.

¹³D. Arkell to R. J. T. MacLaren, 16 April 1964, untitled memorandum, FO 371/175843, TNA.

During the Johnson presidency, and especially during the two meetings the President held with Eshkol in June 1964 and January 1968, Johnson clearly diverged from Kennedy's relatively harsh approach to Dimona. Johnson was largely sympathetic to Israel. He was willing to export arms to the country and to maintain only a 'tacit linkage' between these exports and Israel's nuclear behaviour.¹⁴ But his relative lack of interest in Dimona led to some internal tension with his officials. In their first meeting, in 1964, Johnson did not make a concise effort to lean on Eshkol to divulge Israel's nuclear goals. The two held a private 15-minute meeting, of which Johnson's advisors were not briefed.¹⁵ An informal guarantee to President Kennedy, voiced in 1963 by the Israeli Deputy Minister of Defence, Shimon Peres, 'not to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region', became formalised in a bilateral agreement in March 1965, and in the meantime, its nuclear program progressed clandestinely.

At the same time in Israel, the Dimona project caused internal political tension and lacked consensus, especially given the fact that the estimated costs of the reactor's construction were widely underestimated.¹⁶ In mid-1964, a note likely written by Labour minister Yigal Allon mentions that while previously it had been reported to the government that the reactor would cost 60 million dollars, in reality this sum had already tripled.¹⁷ In an undated note, apparently written by Finance Minister Pinchas Sapir to minister Yisrael Galili, Sapir seemingly asked: 'had we known in advance that it will cost 340 million dollars – would we have voted for Dimona?'¹⁸

The period of 1967–1969 was momentous for both the Israeli nuclear program and the NPT. First, as Cohen details, in the spring of 1967, Israel reportedly crossed the nuclear threshold for the first time, completing the assembly of nuclear devices in the days leading to the Six Day War.¹⁹ Gideon Remez and Isabella Ginor argued in 2007 that the Soviets deliberately instigated the 1967 conflict with the goal of using it as a pretext to strike Dimona jointly with the Egyptians, citing Egyptian plans to target the reactor.²⁰ This explanation has not gained widespread acceptance in the scholarly community. Hassan Elbahtimy notes that while the Dimona reactor does appear in these Egyptian plans, it is mentioned only as one target in a list of potential assets. He noted that the plans were prepared superficially and without proper operational planning and there is no indication that a raid against Dimona was discussed at any point during the war by the Egyptian leadership.²¹ Ultimately, Israel won the war, but the victory was followed by

¹⁴Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 79–80; Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 210.

¹⁵Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 202; Shalom, *Israel's Nuclear Option*, 92.

¹⁶Adam Raz, *The Struggle for the Bomb* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel), 2015.

¹⁷Unsigned note, Adam Raz collection. The note is also cited in Adam Raz, "Protocol of Concealment: The Meetings That Led to Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz Weekend Magazine*, 16 January 2019.

¹⁸Unsigned note, undated, presumably from Finance Minister Pinchas Sapir to Minister without Portfolio Yisrael Galili, File 13, Adam Raz collection, published as Document 3 in Or Rabinowitz, "The Secret Handwritten Memos behind Israel's Nuclear Project: What Do They Tell Us and How to Study Them," Sources and Methods, Wilson Center, 11 January 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/secret-handwritten-memos-behind-israels-nuclear-project-what-do-they-tell-us-and-how>.

¹⁹Avner Cohen, 'Nuclear dimensions of the 1967 Middle East War: an Israeli perspective', *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 5-6 (2018).

²⁰Gideon Remez and Isabella Ginor, *Foxbats Over Dimona: The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 121–37.

²¹Hassan Elbahtimy, 'Missing the mark: Dimona and Egypt's slide into the 1967 Arab-Israeli War', *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 5-6 (2018), 393.

a costly regional arms race which forced Israel to invest heavily in armament, and to enquire about the purchase of US Phantom jets.

Parallel to this development, progress was reached on the international stage during the NPT negotiations held in August 1967, when the US and the USSR submitted an identical draft for consideration. Like previous drafts, this draft contained two separate categories of membership: Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS), and Nuclear Weapon States (NWS). NNWS members were obligated to refrain from developing nuclear weapons and were tasked with opening their nuclear facilities to inspections; NNWS members, were, by and large, allowed to keep their nuclear arsenals and were not required to agree to inspections.²² This draft, from the summer of 1967, defined a nuclear-weapon state, for the first time, as a state that had “manufactured and exploded” a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device before 1 January 1967.²³ This definition, which revolved around the conduct of a nuclear test, remained in the final version of the treaty.²⁴ It would prove to be crucial for the development of Israel’s NPT policy.

Israeli-US bilateral relations continued to circle the question of Israel’s nuclear program in the following months. In January 1968, Eshkol and his wife arrived at Johnson’s Texas ranch for a two-day summit.²⁵ Johnson’s preparatory material prioritised targeting both Israel’s nuclear and missile programs by convincing Israel to join the NPT.²⁶ However, the published protocols do not include any reference to Israel’s nuclear program in this context or otherwise.²⁷ A National Security Council (NSC) memo prepared by staffer Harold Saunders simply states that ‘Nuclear weapons, missiles, and NPT did not come up’.²⁸ Cohen notes that it is possible that the issue was discussed privately between Johnson and Eshkol.²⁹ The ongoing talks did not impact Israeli practice at the time of hinting publicly at what was referred to as Israel’s nuclear potential. Eshkol himself told journalists during his visit to Canada, days after his meeting with Johnson, that ‘Israel has the people with the know-how to build nuclear weapons’.³⁰

²¹Hassan Elbahtimy, ‘Missing the mark: Dimona and Egypt’s slide into the 1967 Arab-Israeli War’, *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 5-6 (2018), 393.

²²Bertrand Goldschmidt, ‘The negotiation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)’, *IAEA Bulletin* 22, no. 3 (August 1980).

²³Draft Treaty of the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, August 24, 1967, [submitted to the ENDC by the US delegation as ENDC/192 and by the Soviet delegation as ENDC/193], in *Documents on Disarmament, 1967, Publication 46* (Washington, DC: United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, July 1968), 338.

²⁴Revised Draft Treaty of the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, January 18, 1968, [submitted to the ENDC by the US delegation as ENDC/192/Rev.1 and by the Soviet delegation as ENDC/193/Rev.1], in *Documents on Disarmament, 1968, Publication 52* (Washington DC: United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, September 1969), 5.

²⁵Johnson-Eshkol meeting today [Hebrew], *Al Hamishmar* (Tel-Aviv), 7 January 1968.

²⁶Walt W. Rostow, ‘Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson,’ Washington, 5 January 1968, document 33, ‘The Issues for Eshkol,’ in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 20, *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967–1968*.

²⁷‘Memorandum of Conversation,’ subject: ‘US-Israeli Talks,’ LBJ Ranch, Texas, 7 January 1968, session I, document 39, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 20, *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967–1968*; ‘Memorandum of Conversation,’ subject: ‘US-Israeli Talks,’ LBJ Ranch, Texas, 8 January 1968, session II, document 40, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 20, *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967–1968*; ‘Memorandum of Conversation,’ subject: ‘US-Israeli Talks,’ LBJ Ranch, Texas, 8 January 1968, session III, document 41, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 20, *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967–1968*.

²⁸Hal Saunders, ‘Decisions from the Eshkol Visit,’ memo for the record, 9 January 1968, Visit of Prime Minister Eshkol of Israel, January 7–8, 1968 [1 of 3], Box 3, Files of Harold H. Saunders, National Security File, LBJPL.

²⁹Avner Cohen, interview with Walt Rostow, 1993, Wilson Center Digital Archive, accessed 19 February 2025, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/interview-walt-rostow-avner-cohen>.

³⁰Al Holman, ‘Israel seeks no arms in Canada says Eshkol’, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 16 January 1968 [paper clipping], Box: ‘RG – 25, Vol. 9192’, File: ‘Political visits – Israel’, 20-Isr-9, 16 Jan 1968 – 10 April 1970, LAC.

Israel reacted very differently to the two parallel developments: the positive bilateral talks with the Johnson administration over the sale of Phantom jets, and the emergence of the NPT as in the international sphere. The Israeli commentators were excited about the first, and equally critical of the second. Following the presentation of the January 1968 NPT draft, one commentator, Zvi Amitay, writing in the socialist newspaper 'Al-Hamishmar', framed the draft as a blatant attempt by Washington and Moscow to 'monopolize weapons production'.³¹ In June 1968, when the treaty was brought for a vote, Elkana Gali, writing in the socialist-oriented paper 'Davar', exclaimed that the treaty demonstrates 'the moral weakness of the claims made by the superpowers', namely the rationale that 'what we are allowed to do is forbidden to others'. He also anticipated the discussion would turn into 'a new battleground between the haves and the have-nots'.³² Israeli daily 'Ma'ariv' further reported that Washington had applied explicit diplomatic pressure on Israel to vote in favour of the treaty at the UN.³³ According to the report, Israel agreed to do so despite its own reservations, in a move which was framed as a 'gesture of friendship toward the US'.³⁴

The closing months of 1968 saw dual-track developments within these two spheres. In July 1968 the treaty opened for signature, and in October-November 1968, Israel used it for the first time in talks with Washington, mentioning the nuclear test criteria. This took place in talks between Israeli Ambassador to Washington Yitzhak Rabin, and Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs, Paul Warnke. Israel's main concern was to avoid the creation of an American linkage between a US demand for Israel to join the NPT, and the Phantom deal, according to Cohen.³⁵ Specifically, Rabin told Warnke that 'he would not consider what had not been tested to be a weapon', adding that an untested but 'advertised' weapon would also constitute 'introduction'.³⁶ President Johnson, adhering to his pro-Israeli views, decided to adopt a more lenient approach, authorising the Phantom sale to Israel without ordering an explicit NPT linkage, receiving a heartfelt letter from Eshkol thanking him for this decision.³⁷

Eshkol passed away in February 1969. He was replaced by Golda Meir, who in September held a visit to the White House and met with Nixon. It is during this meeting that a secret bilateral understanding on Israel's nuclear posture and the NPT took shape, although no written evidence of it has surfaced in its first five decades of existence. The accepted wisdom holds that Meir pledged not to test, not to declare and not to threaten to use nuclear weapons; and that Nixon agreed to remove the issue from the bilateral agenda. The deal was first disclosed in the Israeli press in 1991, and later detailed by many scholars, including former Foreign Minister, Shlomo Ben Ami.³⁸

³¹Zvi Amitay, "An agreement on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons" [Hebrew], *Al-Hamishmar*, 23 January 1968.

³²Elkana Gali, "The atom will be cracked after the assembly as well" [Hebrew], *Davar*, 5 May 1968.

³³Israel expresses doubts regarding the Non-Proliferation Treaty' [Hebrew], *Ma'ariv*, 30 May 1968.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 303–18.

³⁶"Memorandum of Conversation," subject: "Negotiations with Israel—F-4 and Advanced Weapons," 12 November 1968, document 12, in "The Battle over the NPT: The Warnke-Rabin Dialogue," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/israel/documents/battle/index.html>.

³⁷Levy Eshkol, Untitled letter from Prime Minister to President Lyndon Johnson, 17 January 1969, Israel 10/1/68 – 1/20/69 [1 of 2], Box 18, Files of Harold Saunders, LBJPL.

³⁸Aluf Benn, "Even after Vanunu's Stories" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz*, 29 November 1991; Shlomo Ben Ami, "Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: The Israeli Perspective," paper presented at the Regional Meeting of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Cairo, September 2009.

Consequently, Israel's reliance on the NPT's nuclear-test criterion became further entrenched, as Israeli officials recognized that this definition could serve as a useful diplomatic instrument when articulating Israel's nuclear policy. Yigal Allon, by then Minister of Education, seemingly referred to it in an undated note to Minister Yisrael Galili: "Yisrael, I keep using the agreed term with Kissinger, that Israel is not a nuclear state. This definition stems from the agreement against the proliferation of nuclear weapons [NPT]. According to this agreement, a nuclear state is one which has exploded a nuclear bomb or device."³⁹

Similarly, in October 1969, Rabin informed State Department officials that in Israel's view, 'introduction means the transformation from a non-nuclear weapon country into a nuclear weapon country', noting that his response 'conformed to the language used in the nuclear non-proliferation treaty'.⁴⁰ The deal's existence was a tightly held secret for more than two decades. It was also concealed from the British, who had to make do with Israel's official policy that it 'will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the area'.⁴¹ For the British, Israel's policy of 'deliberate ambiguity' made it 'impossible to determine' with absolute certainty whether Israel 'actually possesses nuclear bombs' even as late as 1982.⁴²

Because the deal was initially kept secret, occasional leaks in the international press heightened Israeli suspicions that Washington might be retreating from, or even betraying, the understanding. One such case was a front-page story published by the New York Times on 18 July 1970.⁴³ The article appeared just as a crisis was emerging between the US and Israel over Washington's willingness to contain, rather than confront, the Soviet military deployment in Egypt during the Israeli-Egyptian War of Attrition.⁴⁴

In the previous months, the Soviets started covertly deploying armed forces on Egyptian soil, including Soviet flown jets and advanced air defence systems, capable of targeting the Israeli Phantoms. The Israelis hoped for a strong US response to this, but Nixon backed the approach adopted by his Secretary of State, William Rogers, which prioritised containment rather than escalation. On June 1970 Rogers proposed a ceasefire plan that demanded both sides to maintain the military status quo near the Suez Canal. Under this plan, the Soviets and the Egyptians were forbidden from relocating anti-aircraft batteries closer to the canal, the Nixon administration heavily pressured Israel to accept it.⁴⁵ The July 1970 report was published against this backdrop, shedding light on Israel's nuclear capabilities.

³⁹Unsigned note, undated, ca. 1969–70, presumably from Minister Yigal Allon to Minister without Portfolio Yisrael Galili, File 13, Adam Raz collection, author's translation; published as Document 1 in Or Rabinowitz, "The Secret Handwritten Memos behind Israel's Nuclear Project: What Do They Tell Us and How to Study Them," Sources and Methods, Wilson Center, 11 January 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/secret-handwritten-memos-behind-israels-nuclear-project-what-do-they-tell-us-and-how>.

⁴⁰"Memorandum of Conversation," subject: "Israeli Nuclear Program," 15 October 1969, Israeli Nuclear Program [file released on 19 March 2014], Department of Defense, Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP), accessed 19 February 2025, <https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2009-076-doc1.pdf>.

⁴¹M. J. Fuller, Research Department to Mr. Roberts, "Israel's Nuclear Weapons Potential," 2 March 1982, in Israel: Nuclear Power Matters, FCO 151/8, TNA. In 1985, Rabin, as Minister of Defense, repeated this to visitors from the British Royal College of Defense Studies. See Tim M. Dowse, British Embassy, Tel Aviv, to Alan Charlton, NENAD, "Israel's Nuclear Capability," 12 September 1985, FCO 93/4367, TNA.

⁴²M. J. Fuller, Research Department to Mr. Roberts, JNU, "Israel's Nuclear Weapons Potential," 2 March 1982, in Israel: Nuclear Power Matters, FCO 151/8, TNA.

⁴³Hedrick Smith, "US Assumes the Israelis Have A-Bomb or Its Parts," *The New York Times*, 18 July 1970.

⁴⁴For the dynamics of the War of Attrition, see Boris Dolin, *Suez Wall* [Hebrew] (Hevel Modi'in, Israel: Kinneret, Zmora, Dvir, 2020), 606–52.

⁴⁵Dolin, *Suez Wall*, 612.

Citing ‘reliable sources’, the report claimed that Washington assumes Israel ‘either possesses an atomic bomb or has component parts available for quick assembly’.⁴⁶ A handwritten note, seemingly written by Galili, then a minister in Meir’s cabinet and her close confidant, analysed the potential sources of the leak. In his analysis, suspicion fell either on ‘the same circle that does not know about the agreement we have with the President’, on ‘the circle which knows and opposes the President’s position in this matter’, or alternatively, presented an attempt by ‘Rogers and his friends’ to reduce the tensions with the Soviet Union, as a part of his effort to promote his initiative.⁴⁷ Israel accepted the plan, the ceasefire was expected to take place on 7 August 1970. As the Israelis anticipated, the Egyptians and the Soviets used the cover of night to immediately move anti-aircraft batteries closer to the canal.

During the 1970s, the secret deal survived two nuclear related events which tested its robustness: the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the September 1979 Vela incident. As to 1973, handwritten notes from the Raz collection support the existing thesis that during the war, Israel placed its nuclear forces on alert at least twice, though exact dates and details of this readiness remain murky. One note, undated and unsigned, seemingly written by Galili, reports an approach by Defence Minister Moshe Dayan to Meir on 8 October in the afternoon. Dayan reportedly told Meir that Israel ‘may need to prepare Dostrovsky’s things, to use unconventional [sic], in preparation for activating the thing’. He was alluding to Yisrael Dostrovsky, Director-General of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC).⁴⁸ Meir told Dayan, according to two other notes, not to conduct ‘anything’ without her permission, ‘to forget about it’, and to ‘disband the party’.⁴⁹ According to journalist Ronen Bergman, who also cited these notes in a 2023 press report, by the time the war broke out, Israel had a squadron of operational, nuclear-capable, Mirage jets.⁵⁰ The Raz notes reinforce older existing accounts according to which Dayan proposed to Meir to hold an unspecified nuclear ‘demonstration’, a proposition she reportedly rejected.⁵¹

According to the existing literature, circa 17 October 1973, Israel reportedly displayed its Jericho missiles openly, aiming to signal to Soviets not to deploy nuclear missiles to Egypt. Yuval Ne’eman, a leading figure in the Israeli nuclear establishment, explained later that the Egyptians were meant to ‘guess’ which warheads the displayed missiles were carrying.⁵² Several indications imply that the missiles were likely not yet operational at

⁴⁶Smith, “US Assumes the Israelis Have A-Bomb or Its Parts.”

⁴⁷The note is from the Adam Raz collection. It was also published by the Wilson Center. See: Unsigned handwritten note on Prime Minister’s Office stationery, 18 July 1970, possibly by Minister without Portfolio Yisrael Galili, concerning the publication of a story on Israel’s nuclear program in the New York Times, File 11, p. 3 of 4, Adam Raz collection, author’s translation; published as Document 2 in Or Rabinowitz, “The Secret Handwritten Memos behind Israel’s Nuclear Project: What Do They Tell Us and How to Study Them,” Sources and Methods, Wilson Center, 11 January 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/secret-handwritten-memos-behind-israels-nuclear-project-what-do-they-tell-us-and-how>.

⁴⁸Handwritten note, Raz collection, page unavailable. The note was also cited verbatim in the Israeli press, see: Bergman and Fialkov, “Atomic Pressure” [Hebrew].

⁴⁹Handwritten notes, Raz collection, page unavailable. The notes were also cited verbatim in the Israeli press, see: Bergman and Fialkov, “Atomic Pressure” [Hebrew].

⁵⁰Bergman and Fialkov, “Atomic Pressure” [Hebrew].

⁵¹For a detailed account of the different sources on Dayan’s proposal, see Adam Raz, “The Significance of the Reputed Yom Kippur War Nuclear Affair,” *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 4 (January 2014).

⁵²Yuval Ne’eman, ‘Operative liaison between Israel and the US during the Yom Kippur War [Hebrew]’, in *Jews, Israel, and the Nuclear Issue: An Anthology of Articles Written by Professor Yuval Ne’eman*, ed. Shmuel Sabag (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2007).

this time.⁵³ The available Israeli and US documents do not shed light on whether Israel used its nuclear capability to apply pressure on Washington to hasten the arrival of the US strategic airlift of weapons and supplies to Israel, a claim repeated since the mid-1970s.⁵⁴

The 1979 Vela incident took place on the night of 21–22 September when a US Vela satellite detected an optical signal indicative of a nuclear test over the Indian Ocean. President Jimmy Carter noted in his diary his assumption that if it were a test, either Israel, South Africa or both jointly were behind it.⁵⁵ But this created an internal challenge for the administration. If the administration were to officially conclude that this was an Israeli nuclear test, it would have to place sanctions on Israel, a costly political move in an election year, in addition to risking the nascent Israel–Egypt peace accord.⁵⁶ In the following weeks, State Department officials debated the merits of publishing a Presidential statement declaring sanctions against ‘any country exploding a nuclear device’; it was acknowledged that when ‘dealing with our allies’, specifically Israel and Pakistan, such a broad statement could be problematic.⁵⁷ The author of the memo, Hal Saunders, wondered whether the proposal assumed that ‘Israel will not test a nuclear device’, and whether the administration would be prepared to ‘apply the sanctions suggested, including a cut off of military and economic assistance’ in such a case.⁵⁸ The Carter administration manoeuvred to avoid reaching such a conclusion and the presidential statement was never issued.⁵⁹ It is widely assumed by the scholarly community that the Vela incident was a nuclear test conducted jointly by Israel and South Africa, though the exact parameters of this collaboration remain unknown.

The 1970s also saw occasional modifications to Israel’s policy of ‘no first introduction’, leading observers to ponder the significance of each modification. One such modification was voiced by Shimon Peres, who became Defense Minister in June 1974. At the end of a US visit, Peres declared that ‘Israel does not possess tactical nuclear weapons’.⁶⁰ The reference to ‘tactical nuclear weapons’ left some observers to speculate as to Israel’s possession of non-tactical weapons. On 1 December 1974 Israeli President, Ephraim Katzir, a leading chemist involved with the establishment of Dimona, told foreign journalists that Israel has ‘nuclear potential’, causing an international stir.⁶¹ A few days

⁵³Several sources make this claim. A 2012 Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) fact sheet cited “a knowledgeable source” in support of it. See Nuclear Threat Initiative, “Factsheet: Israel Missile Overview,” 21 November 2012, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-missile/>. Adam Raz noted in 2014 that, in a 1998 interview, Yuval Ne’eman stressed that this was the first time the missiles were deployed, adding that IDF Chief of Staff David (Dado) Elazar gave the order to deploy them, rather than Prime Minister Golda Meir, thus lending credence to the thesis that the nuclear warheads were not yet deployable. See: Adam Raz, “The Significance of the Reputed Yom Kippur War Nuclear Affair,” *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 4 (January 2014). Bergman and Fialkov also repeated this claim in 2023. See: Ronen Bergman and Or Fialkov, “Atomic Pressure” [Hebrew], *Yedioth Aharonot*, *Shiva’a Yamim* supplement, 8 September 2023.

⁵⁴For a source that makes this claim see: Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel’s Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 166–76.

⁵⁵Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 405.

⁵⁶Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and Its Cold War Deals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 114–26.

⁵⁷Harold H. Saunders to Thomas Pickering, “Draft Presidential Letter Suggesting Collective Sanctions against Any Country Exploding a Nuclear Device,” secret memorandum, 20 October 1979, Staff Material: Global Issues Files, NSA 28, Box 52, NLC-28-52-8-1-5, JCPL.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*, 114–26; Or Rabinowitz, “The Dilemma of a ‘Trigger Happy’ Protégé: Israel, France, and President Carter’s Iraq Policy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2021).

⁶⁰Peres: I encountered understanding of Israel’s needs in my US talks [Hebrew], *Al-Hamishmar*, 27 June 1974.

⁶¹Shmuel Segev, ‘Kissinger on Katzir’s statement: I would have phrased differently the statement on Israel’s nuclear capability [Hebrew], *Ma’ariv*, 4 December 1974.

later, on the heels of the Katzir media storm, Prime Minister Rabin was asked in an interview on British television how quickly could Israel become the second state to introduce nuclear weapons to the region. Rabin, in a rather circular phrasing, replied ‘I believe we cannot afford to be the second nation. We cannot be the first and simultaneously we cannot be the second . . .’.⁶²

Two years later, in November 1976, in a meeting with a delegation of US senators who were not privy to the deal, Rabin flatly denied Israel’s status as a ‘nuclear country’ while introducing the following modification. ‘There are [nuclear] weapons in the area I believe, Russian and American in the Mediterranean . . . Therefore, when we say we will not be the first to introduce, we mean in the Arab-Israel conflict’.⁶³ Rabin was likely alluding to reports about Mediterranean nuclear weapons deployment by the Soviet fifth flotilla, which purportedly deployed nuclear armed submarines, and the US sixth fleet. An early source to report these deployments was the Israeli navy magazine *Ma’archot Yam* in 1971.⁶⁴ In 1982, M.J. Fuller, a staffer at the Joint Nuclear Unit (JNU) of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) noted that he had ‘heard it said’ that ‘pushed to an admission, Israel would say that it was the US and the Sixth Fleet which first did so’, in reference to the introduction of nuclear weapons to the region.⁶⁵ Fuller further assessed that such an explanation was ‘only too likely to appeal’ to Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s ‘sense of chutzpah’, implying Fuller’s belief that under certain conditions, Begin would consider using this excuse to disclose Israel’s nuclear capabilities.⁶⁶ There is no evidence that Begin considered such an action.

Despite the secrecy surrounding the 1969 deal, a handful of indirect references to it can be found in accessible records of the time. One such off-hand remark was made when Nixon met Rabin, this time as prime minister, during Nixon’s June 1974 visit to Israel. Brushing off Rabin’s complaint on Washington’s intention to export nuclear power reactors to Egypt, Nixon told Rabin: ‘Well, Israel will be doing all right too. We know how well off you are in this respect. Just don’t let’s kid each other’.⁶⁷ President Ford stuck to the deal, as did Carter, despite initial qualms, although archival documents on what drove this process are not yet available.⁶⁸

President Reagan also upheld the deal, though more declassified documents are needed to fully study the process. In Reagan’s first year in office, his administration had to contend with the diplomatic and regional fallout from Israel’s 7 June 1981 raid on the Iraqi nuclear reactor near Baghdad, and its ramification to the NPT regime.⁶⁹ One of

⁶²Gil Keysari, ‘Dayan: if the Arabs introduce nuclear bombs to the region, we should have one before them [Hebrew]’, *Ma’ariv*, 12 November 1986.

⁶³Protocol of meeting, Senate committee headed by Senator A. Ribicoff, meeting with PM Rabin, Jerusalem, 7 November 1976, in File: USA – Minister Yigal Allon, correspondence, 6861/3 (ISA).

⁶⁴Meir Shafir, ‘The Sixth Fleet [Hebrew]’, *Ma’arachot Yam*, July 1971; Dolin refers to the nuclear deployment of Soviet forces, see: Dolin, *Suez Wall* [Hebrew], 144; for US nuclear deployment in the Mediterranean, see: Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, ‘Declassified: US nuclear weapons at sea during the Cold War’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 1 (2016).

⁶⁵M. J. Fuller, Research Department to Mr. Roberts, JNU, ‘Israel’s Nuclear Weapons Potential,’ 2 March 1982, in Israel: Nuclear Power Matters, FCO 151/8, TNA.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷‘Working Meeting’, [Between Nixon, Rabin and respective delegations], 16 June 1974, King David Hotel, Jerusalem, in File: Talks with US (From Hebrew - ‘Sihot Im Arhav’), archive identifier: 7038/18 (ISA).

⁶⁸For Carter’s approach, see: Or Rabinowitz, ‘Signed, Sealed but Never Delivered: Why Israel did not Receive Nixon’s Promised Nuclear Power Plants’, *The International History Review* 40, no. 5 (2018).

⁶⁹Giordana Pulcini and Or Rabinowitz, ‘An Ounce of Prevention—A Pound of Cure? The Reagan Administration’s Nonproliferation Policy and the Osirak Raid’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 23, no. 2 (2021).

the consequences of the raid was a reinvigorated Arab-led campaign to promote the establishment of a Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East, which became known as ‘the Zone initiative’, an initiative sponsored jointly by Egypt and Iran at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1974. After the 1981 raid, Israeli representatives tried to moderate the negative reactions to it by stressing Israel’s support for the initiative.⁷⁰ Reagan administration officials now had to consider how to approach the initiative, and any possible linkage to Israel’s NPT accession.

Administration officials did not agree on the desirability of endorsing the initiative, and NSC staffers were particularly not supportive of it. Michael Guhin, of the NSC’s Planning and Evaluation Directorate, noted that he was not sure ‘how actively the US should be selling this idea with other countries’.⁷¹ Chris Shoemaker, at the NSC’s Defense Policy Directorate, noted more bluntly that the establishment of such a zone may create problems for US naval deployment in the Indian Ocean, stating that the administration should be ‘beyond’ the so-called ‘Carter fixation on arms control for arms control sake’.⁷²

Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) director Gene Rostow supported the zone initiative but wanted to create an explicit link between any UNGA resolution on ‘the Zone’, which would call ‘on Israel to give up its nuclear weapons potential at Dimona’ on the one hand, and Arab states’ acceptance of Israel, on the other. Rostow believed such a linkage would require the Arab states to recognise and ‘make peace with Israel’.⁷³ Rostow does not appear to have been initiated into the details of the Nixon-Meir understanding, including the US commitment not to pressure Israel to accede to the NPT. This is suggested by his warning that “It would be a catastrophe for our diplomacy to condone an international effort to press Israel to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty before its neighbours make peace ...”.⁷⁴ This lack of inclusion rendered Rostow’s analysis as to Israel’s interests in this regard irrelevant, as the US was, in fact, not about to pressure Israel to join the NPT.

Secretary of State Al Haig wrote a memo, in response, explaining that contrary to the impression left by Rostow, the Israelis were not bothered by US support for the Zone initiative. Haig, who seems to have been aware of the Nixon-Meir deal, explained that in the past the US had negotiated the draft resolution ‘with Israel’s interests in mind’, adding that “we successfully resisted an effort by the Egyptians to include language ‘declaring’ a MENWFZ (Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone) into existence”.⁷⁵ Haig further noted that creating such a linkage between the political process in the region and Israel ultimately signing the NPT, “has never existed, was not presently ‘a good idea’, and likely ‘not something that Israel would want’”.⁷⁶ Richard V. Allen, Reagan’s National Security

⁷⁰Yehuda Z. Bloom, “Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East,” A/36/315, 10 June 1981, UNIDIR Document Depository, <https://unidir.org/node/5630>.

⁷¹Michael Guhin to Richard V. Allen, through Norman A. Bailey, “Policy and Tactics on a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ),” NSC Memo 5580, 22 September 1981, Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone, Box 4, Michael Guhin Files, RAC Box 2, 3, 4, 6, RRPL.

⁷²Chris Shoemaker to Michael Guhin, “Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (MENWFZ),” NSC memorandum, 3 September 1981, Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, RAC Box 1, Christopher Shoemaker Files, RRPL.

⁷³Gene Rostow, “Arms Control Issues Affecting the Middle East,” memo for the President, 5 November 1981, Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone, Box 4, Michael Guhin Files, RAC Box 2, 3, 4, 6 [folder label], RRPL.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Alexander M. Haig, “Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone,” memo for the President, Secretary of State Memo 8132711, 9 November 1981, Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone, Box 4, Michael Guhin Files, RAC Box 2, 3, 4, 6, RRPL.

⁷⁶Ibid.

Advisor, agreed with Rostow's main idea, that the US 'cannot expect Israeli NPT adherence and realisation of a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone without major progress toward peace'.⁷⁷

Reagan ordered a review of US policy towards the zone, requiring his officials to 'refrain from linking Israeli adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (or the equivalent such as a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone) to Middle East peace'.⁷⁸ He signed the proposed memo adding a comment: 'Isn't that a little dated in light of the present situation?'.⁷⁹ This open-ended question leaves some space of speculation as to his intention. One possible explanation (though certainly not the only one) is that Reagan was alluding to Israel's existing nuclear arsenal in the context of the Nixon-Meir deal. In this reading, a linkage between Israel's NPT accession and peace negotiations would be futile, or in Reagan's words 'a little dated'. Ultimately, US efforts to negotiate an agreed text that year failed, the December 1981 UNGA resolution declared it an 'imperative', that Israel place all its nuclear facilities under safeguards; it was adopted with the support of 107 members, three abstentions and only two members voting against it, Israel and the US.⁸⁰

Israel's NPT 'non-adherence' blocks its civilian nuclear program

In the 1970s Israel expressed an emerging interest in importing civilian power reactors. Israel's refusal to join the NPT, and its refusal to place Dimona under safeguards, was used by Western nuclear suppliers to justify their lack of political will to export civilian nuclear power plants to Israel, even though the treaty itself does not prohibit safeguarded nuclear exports to non-signatories.

From Israel's perspective, the first years of the decade were promising. In 1974, the Nixon administration promoted an initiative to export safeguarded nuclear power reactors to both Israel and Egypt. As a first step, an ad-hoc committee was established in April 1974 to assess the initiative, submitting its report 7 June 1974. Significantly, the report rejected the creation of linkage between nuclear exports and NPT accession.⁸¹ It recommended that both clients guarantee that 'each would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East', echoing Israel's original guarantee.⁸² The

⁷⁷Richard V. Allen, "Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone and Other Middle East Arms Control Issues," memo for the President, White House Memo 6564, undated, ca. 13 November 1981, Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone, Box 4, Michael Guhin Files, RAC Box 2, 3, 4, 6, RRPL.

⁷⁸Decision memo for Haig and Rostow, "Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone and Other Middle East Arms Control Issues," attached to Richard V. Allen to the President through Edwin Meese III, "Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone and Other Middle East Arms Control Issues," White House Memo 6564, 27 November 1981, Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, RAC Box 1, Christopher Shoemaker Files, RRPL.

⁷⁹Richard V. Allen to the President, through Edwin Meese III, "Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone and Other Middle East Arms Control Issues," White House Memo 6564, 27 November 1981, Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, RAC Box 1, Christopher Shoemaker Files, RRPL.

⁸⁰UN General Assembly, Resolution 36/87A, "Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," A/RES/36/87A, 9 December 1981, UN Digital Library, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/36/87>; UN General Assembly, Resolution 36/87B, 9 December 1981, UN Digital Library, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/36/87>.

⁸¹Lewis and Atherton to the Secretary, "Nuclear Energy Cooperation with Egypt and Israel," memorandum, 7 June 1974, attached notes and draft agreements, Director's Files of Winston Lord, Policy Planning Staff, RG 59, Box 348, NARA.

⁸²Ibid. This terminology was also repeated in Fred Iklé and Winston Lord to Henry Kissinger, "Draft for Analytical Staff Meeting on Non-Proliferation Strategy," 31 July 1974, Annex E, "Israel and Egypt," attached to draft memorandum, Winston Lord Papers, Box 344, NARA.

committee further recommended to attach a condition stipulating that: 'all future nuclear facilities and materials from any source would be placed under IAEA safeguards'.⁸³ It was assumed that this would represent a functional equivalent to an NPT obligation catching in its net all future facilities, bar Dimona: "If Israel accepts this 'Partial NPT' agreement, it is likely that Egypt will follow", the memo assessed.⁸⁴

After a two-year delay, the two identical agreements were initialled in Washington in August 1976 by both prospective clients, Israel and Egypt. The Israeli agreement was later amended during the Carter administration, to reflect a new legislation, the 1978 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act (NNPA). The amended US offer demanded that Israel would accept safeguards on all its nuclear facilities, and, by implication, the Dimona reactor, in return for nuclear exports, leading Israel to reject it.⁸⁵

European nuclear suppliers were not eager to export civilian nuclear technology to Israel. At an unspecified date during the first months of 1974 the Israelis approached URENCO, the European uranium enrichment consortium, and enquired about the 'sale of enrichment to Israel'.⁸⁶ The representatives from Germany, the Netherlands and the UK all agreed that 'because the enquiry was complicated not only by Israeli non-adherence to the NPT but also by possible reactions amongst her neighbours' it was preferable to 'leave the original enquiry lying on the table'.⁸⁷ The participants noted internally that nuclear exports were not barred under the NPT, but that the 'problem' was mainly 'the political one'.⁸⁸

The British similarly thwarted Israeli attempts to establish bilateral civilian nuclear cooperation, keeping their distance from Israel's program due to the expected negative backlash from the Arab and Muslim world. One official, Barbara Maclean, of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA), explained this rationale in a 1973 letter to the FCO, noting that establishing ties with Israel would be 'unwise' given 'possible repercussions on our relations with the Arab States'.⁸⁹ Maclean stated that the UK should make it clear to the Israelis that any offer of a nuclear reactor was conditional upon Israel's accession to the NPT, despite the fact that this was not a treaty stipulation.⁹⁰

As the decade drew to a close, British policy towards nuclear cooperation with Israel crystallized. A 1979 internal memo from one JNU staffer, R. Fletcher-Cooke, explained that Israel's refusal to join the NPT was only a part of the picture. Since Israel was a 'principal party to the Middle East conflict', supplying it with nuclear exports was 'politically sensitive' given the fact that it was also a 'threshold nuclear weapon state'. Due to these political sensitivities, the memo explained, even an Israeli accession to the NPT 'would not automatically remove the political constraints on nuclear cooperation'.⁹¹

⁸³Iklé and Lord to Kissinger, "Draft for Analytical Staff Meeting on Non-Proliferation Strategy," 31 July 1974.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵Rabinowitz, "Signed, Sealed but Never Delivered."

⁸⁶A. J. Craig, Foreign Office, London, to C. T. Brant, Washington, draft secret memorandum, "Supply of Nuclear Enrichment to Israel," 28 June 1974, FCO 96/220, TNA.

⁸⁷M. J. Wilmshurst, Energy Department, to Mr. Williams, NENAD, "Enrichment for Israel," reference MEN1/408/1, 4 July 1974, FCO 96/220, TNA.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹Barbara Maclean, UKAEA, to Nick Fenn, FCO, untitled letter, 16 July 1973, FCO 55/1179, TNA.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹R. Fletcher-Cooke, Joint Nuclear Unit, to Tim Walker, FCO, "Nuclear Exports to Israel," 2 April 1979, FCO 93/2105, TNA.

The British maintained close collaboration with the Canadians on the question of nuclear exports to Israel. Like the British, the Canadians had similar long-standing policy dating to the 1960s not to export civilian nuclear technology to Israel due to the 'unsettled political situation in the region'.⁹² In the fall of 1980, the Canadian ambassador to Israel, Joseph Stephen Stanford, informed his British counterpart, J.A. Robinson, that the Israelis were exploring the possibility of importing a Canadian reactor.⁹³ Stanford explained that Canada's export policy 'was governed by two general rules', yet interestingly, only one of them was seemingly communicated to the Israelis, indicating some degree of collusion between these two suppliers.

The first rule, which was the one known to the Israelis, was that Canada would not export a reactor 'to a country which did not either sign the NPT' or accepted the 'equivalent safeguards under the IAEA'.⁹⁴ The second rule, seemingly undisclosed to Israel, was that Canada would not export to 'confrontation states' in the Middle East, 'of which Israel was one'.⁹⁵ The Canadian diplomat further told his British counterpart that Israeli Prime Minister Begin had written personally to Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, seeking his agreement to export a nuclear power reactor to Israel. According to Stanford, Trudeau was 'not sure about telling Begin about the second rule', and was about to send Begin 'a letter of refusal'.⁹⁶ It seems that the Canadians did not disclose the second, secret, rule, although access to more files is needed to clarify this point. The Canadians likely felt it unnecessary to tell the Israelis that even if they sign the NPT, chances of nuclear exports were slim, as they thought it was unlikely that Israel would clear the first hurdle, and in this assumption they were correct.

In the days before President Ronald Reagan's White House inauguration in January 1981, some observers anticipated that the incoming administration would grant Israel a waiver. Israel, on its part, was now willing to accept safeguards on all facilities other than the Dimona reactor. On the week of Reagan's inauguration, the Israelis conveyed to the Americans that 'they are prepared to place everything except Dimona under IAEA safeguards' . . . and that they are 'anxious to demonstrate to the Arab world that their nuclear power stations are not in any way connected with nuclear weapons'.⁹⁷ Exports from other Western exporters were not likely. The British noted internally that there was consistent Canadian, German, and French reluctance to export to Israel.⁹⁸ Israel's public statements echoed acceptance of the principles reflected in the recommendations of the 1974 Nixon administration ad-hoc committee, but in the coming months these would prove to be irrelevant. Following the June 1981 Israeli raid against the Iraqi Osirak reactor, any US willingness to consider nuclear exports to Israel seems to have evaporated.

⁹²Confidential memo from Ottawa to Ambassador at Tel-Aviv embassy, [no further details appear] nuclear power generating station for Israel, 26 August 1969, RG20, Vol 1636, file 20-68-18, Atomic Energy Israel, ATIP Interim Container 362, LAC.

⁹³J. A. Robinson, British Embassy, Tel Aviv, to Robert Alston, JNU, 2 September 1980, FCO 93/2516, TNA.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Walter Marshall, Deputy Chairman of the UKAEA, to Robert Alston, JNU, untitled letter, 16 January 1981, in Israel: Nuclear Power Matters, FCO 96/1349, TNA.

⁹⁸Robert Alston, JNU, to J. A. Robinson, British Embassy, Tel Aviv, "Israel: Nuclear Energy," 2 January 1981, in Israel: Nuclear Power Matters, FCO 96/1349, TNA.

Israel's NPT path since the end of the Cold War

A key question for Israel, especially as the Cold War was winding down in 1990–91 during the George H.W. Bush administration, was whether Washington would maintain its part of the Nixon-Meir deal and refrain from pressuring Israel to join the NPT. The Israeli concern was that given geo-political developments, namely the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the improving relations between Washington and the Arab world and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Washington would abandon the Nixon-Meir deal and join Arab efforts to disarm Israel and pressure it to join the NPT, or otherwise pressure it to place limitations on its nuclear program. To make matters worse, the personal relationship between President Bush and Israeli Prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, was dramatically strained.⁹⁹

The first tangible cracks in the wall surrounding an assumed Bush commitment to uphold the Nixon-Meir deal were observed in May 1991, when Bush unveiled his Middle East Arms Control Initiative, dubbed 'the Bush plan'. It included a series of proposals aimed at curbing the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, as well as ballistic missiles, in the Middle East. On the nuclear front it called on 'all' regional actors to implement a ban on the production of fissile material, join the NPT, place all nuclear facilities under safeguards and support the eventual creation of a regional nuclear weapon-free zone.¹⁰⁰ The Israeli leadership was concerned about the initiative, that seemed to be targeting Israel, the only regional actor believed to be producing fissile material, and operating an unsafeguarded nuclear reactor. The press reported that administration officials assured the Israelis that Washington would not pressure Israel on such a sensitive matter.¹⁰¹

As pressure was mounting on Israel to participate in a regional peace summit in the fall of 1991, bilateral relations deteriorated. Parallel to this, administration officials started applying direct pressure on Israel to accept certain limitations on its nuclear program. Press reporting from the time reflects some of these tensions. Unnamed administration sources stated in September 1991 that an Israeli decision to shut down the Dimona reactor, thus ceasing its plutonium production, 'could help lead to a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East'.¹⁰² Senior Israeli sources expressed their concern that 'depriving Israel of its nuclear deterrence' was a main goal in Bush's vision for a new regional order.¹⁰³ At the same time, the Israelis observed with much disquiet the 'close collaboration' and the 'coordination of tactical moves' which took place between US and Egyptian delegations at the IAEA's General Conference (GC), on the promotion of a resolution calling for all countries in the Middle East to accept full scope agency safeguards on all their nuclear facilities.¹⁰⁴ Administration officials also reportedly

⁹⁹Yitzhak Shamir, *Summing Up* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal–Yedioth Aharonot, 1994).

¹⁰⁰Andrew Rosenthal, 'Bush unveils plan for arms control in the Middle East', *The New York Times*, 30 May 1991.

¹⁰¹Ran Dgony, Avinoam Bar Yoseph, 'Bush: the arms control initiative will not harm Israel's security [Hebrew]', *Ma'ariv*, 30 May 1991.

¹⁰²Mark Hibbs and Neal Sandler, 'U.S. wants Israel to cease Dimona Plutonium production', *Nucleonics Week*, 26 September 1991.

¹⁰³Akiva Eldar, 'Concern in Jerusalem: Bush decided to act to limit Israel's steps in the nuclear field, [Hebrew]', *Ha'aretz*, 10 October 1991.

¹⁰⁴Eldar, 'Concern in Jerusalem: Bush decided to act to limit Israel's steps in the nuclear field, [Hebrew]'; Mark Hibbs, 'IAEA votes for Middle Eastern special safeguards regime', *Nucleonics Week*, 26 September 1991.

approached their Soviet counterparts, asking them to refrain from exporting power reactors to Israel.¹⁰⁵

The alarm led Shamir to conduct a review of Israel's nuclear policy.¹⁰⁶ The Bush administration's Madrid peace conference was convened in late October and shortly after, the Nixon-Meir deal was disclosed publicly for the first time, in a story by Aluf Benn in the Israel newspaper *Ha'aretz*.¹⁰⁷ The story details, based on unnamed Israeli official sources, the leadership's concern with the abandonment of the Nixon-Meir deal. It seems likely that the green-light for the Israeli military censor's approval was motivated by the leadership's desire to push-back against the perceived delegitimization of Dimona by the Bush administration.

Before any further pressure was applied by the administration on Israel, Bush was replaced in the oval office by President Bill Clinton, who became heavily invested in the regional peace process. This was coupled with an Israeli move to closely align with US-led arms control initiatives, like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), combined with greater openness on its nuclear policy.¹⁰⁸ The Israeli leadership clarified publicly that an Israeli pre-condition for any talks relating to the nuclear issue was the achievement of comprehensive and stable peace in the Middle East.¹⁰⁹ When the 1995 conference on the indefinite extension of the NPT was convened, Clinton adopted a lenient policy towards the question of Israel's NPT accession. He applied pressure on Egypt, who was threatening to sabotage the treaty's extension. At the conference, Moscow, London and Washington jointly sponsored a 'Resolution on the Middle East', which called for NPT members to pursue the establishment of a Weapons-of-Mass-Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East. Significantly, Israel was not singled out by the resolution.¹¹⁰

In 1998 it was the turn of yet a new Israeli Prime Minister to tackle this issue. Benjamin Netanyahu was elected to the office in 1996, following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Netanyahu served as Deputy Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1991 and had firsthand experience of the 1991 crisis with the Bush administration. As a part of the Wye River Memorandum signed in October 1998 between Israel and the PLO, Netanyahu reportedly received from Clinton a letter guaranteeing that the US would work toward 'preserving Israel's strategic deterrence', and that Washington would not adopt measures which would 'detract' from Israel's 'deterrent capabilities'; Clinton reportedly handed a similar letter in the summer of 1999 to a new Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, who purportedly added to the letter that Israel would "defend itself, by itself."¹¹¹ In the following years, according to press reports, Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden all issued a similar letter to their Israeli counterparts.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵Hibbs and Sandler, 'U.S. wants Israel to cease Dimona Plutonium production'.

¹⁰⁶Reuven Pedhazur, 'Shamir to consider implementing a new nuclear policy [Hebrew]', *Ha'aretz*, 11 October 1991.

¹⁰⁷Aluf Benn, "Even after Vanunu's Stories" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz*, 29 November 1991.

¹⁰⁸Shai Feldman, *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in the Middle East* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁹Aluf Benn, 'Peres will discuss tomorrow with Mubarak Israel's proposal for disarmament in the Middle East [Hebrew]', *Ha'aretz*, 22 February 1995; Aluf Benn, 'In the Peres meeting with Mubarak and Musa no understanding was reached on the nuclear issue [Hebrew]', *Ha'aretz*, 24 February 1995.

¹¹⁰Michal Ondarco, *Networked Nonproliferation: Making the NPT Permanent* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2021), 82–92.

¹¹¹Aluf Benn, "No Re-Entry into the Basement" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz*, 14 September 1999; Aluf Benn, "Clinton Guaranteed Netanyahu: Israel's Nuclear Capability Will Be Maintained" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz*, 14 March 2000.

¹¹²Entous, "How Trump and Three Other US Presidents Protected Israel's Worst-Kept Secret"; Ravid, "Biden and Israeli PM Renewed Agreement on Covert Nuclear Program."

Legacy and impact of Israel's NPT policy

Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has survived the end of the Cold War and the tectonic geo-strategic shifts of the first two decades of the 21st century, including several wars and the aftershocks of the Arab Spring and many other conflicts. It has also survived the reactions to the Israeli raids against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, the Syrian reactor in 2007 and ongoing efforts targeting Iran's nuclear program in the first two decades of the 21st century. Looking ahead, its functionality in the decades to come will likely revolve around the emergence of other regional nuclear actors, the degree of US regional involvement and broader relations with the Arab world.

Down the road, Israel may be required to consider whether to adjust its policy in the face of a regional arms race, or a renewed US-led effort to promote regional arms control initiatives. If a nuclear Iran emerges, Israeli decision makers may decide to abandon ambiguity in favour of a more assertive, overt, nuclear posture. This option was laid out in a report, known as 'Project Daniel', submitted in 2003 to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.¹¹³ Another policy consideration for Israeli leaders would be the possible emergence of other nuclear actors in the region. Saudi officials have repeatedly expressed the position that should Iran cross the nuclear threshold the kingdom would follow suit, and other potential nuclear aspirants in the coming decades may include Egypt, the United Arab Emirates or Turkey. Just how long Israel's NPT policy would remain in place remains an open question.

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¹¹³Louis René Beres, "Israel, Iran and Project Daniel" (paper presented at the Herzliya Conference, Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Herzliya, Israel, April 2–4, 2009).