ISRAEL’S POSTURE OF NUCLEAR AMBIGUITY

Kesia Saji
Student
Department of International Studies
Christ(Deemed to be university) Bangalore, India

Abstract: Israel has managed to acquire and develop nuclear weapons amidst all International scrutiny and pressures. Israel’s rhetoric is that it would not be the first one to introduce nuclear weapons in the region and its decade long policy of nuclear ambiguity has long served its purpose of nuclear deterrence. The history of Holocaust and the existential threat from its Arab neighbours made the then president David Ben-Gurion to seek for a sustainable development of nuclear weapons programme. This paper majorly looks into a. why the Israelis had to rely on nuclear weapons programme for their survival, with the help of realist theories and examples from the past, b. Evolution of its nuclear weapons programme, and c. the rationale behind its policy of ambiguity.

KEYWORDS: Israel, David Ben-Gurion, nuclear weapons programme, holocaust, Arab nations, nuclear ambiguity.

Introduction

The introduction of nuclear weapon and the power imbalances created after the World War II grew aspirations among the countries to acquire nuclear weapons as a strategic tool in the new world. Jews, a long oppressed community of people emerging from the shadows and the dangers of the holocaust formed a new country ‘Israel’ in 1948, is no different. This unexpected turn of events created turmoil in West Asia as the Arabs were not ready to accept a Jewish state at the heart of the Arab world. This situation was found threatening to the survival of the state of Israel. Insecurities emanating from various threats, shaped the foreign and security policies of Israel since the very beginning. Traditionally resource rich Arab countries were strategically at a more advantageous position than Israel. Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion feared of an Arab coalition against Israel which led him to feel strongly about the security of the state. He insisted on science and technology being the only area where it could have a significant advantage over its numerous Arab enemies. These fears led the then government of Israel to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent force. Israel is the first country in the region which is said to have acquired nuclear weapons. However, it still maintains the policy of ambiguity regarding its nuclear programme—that is neither confirming nor denying.

West Asia for long has remained volatile. The uneasiness is not limited to one country or for one common reason. There's Islamic extremism, political instability, fluctuating oil prices and many more that are
contributing in different ways in different places to the uneasiness\(^3\). The region with its complex instability and unprecedented regime changes have become a breeding ground for violence and terror. It has become a training ground for the Jihadi movement. The emergence of Islamic State\(^4\) in the region has been an outcome of this instability which have contributed further instability in the region.

The nuclear history of Israel has no voice of its own. It is based on non-acknowledgement. In 1963, Shimon Peres, the Deputy Defence minister of Israel, enunciated Israel’s policy of nuclear ambiguity; “Israel will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons in West Asia\(^5\). Unlike all other nuclear weapons states, Israel’s nuclear policy is built upon non-acknowledgement. Israel does not provide any written document or official record. Its nuclear archives are totally sealed, hence great deal of record on the subject remains unavailable for research. Even the states having ties with Israel’s nuclear history follows the same pattern of ambiguity regarding Israel. Trump administration had recently addressed that, Israel nukes should not be up for debate unless all the states in West Asia recognise Israel’s right for existence\(^6\). However, the threat perception in the region forced Israel to take extreme measures for its security and survivability.

**Israel’s threat perception**

According to Bradley A. Thayer, security is one of the most important factors of nuclear proliferation\(^7\). Realist theories explain why security is the most important cause of nuclear proliferation. Realist theories are based on the two basic assumptions: Firstly, that the International system is anarchic, and there is no central authority in this anarchic system. This eventually results in the use of force to establish hegemony over the other states. The second assumption is that the states strive for survival by maintaining their sovereignty and independence. Realists argue that international system is clouded with uncertainties of intentions—whether the present allies will remain or will turn hostile—hence war is always a possibility because states inherently have offensive military capabilities and potentially hostile intentions\(^8\). Realism tries to predict states behaviour by giving predictions. First, state will act as they are fearful because of anarchy and their desire for self-preservation. Second, States will build arms in order to defend themselves from the capabilities of the other states. Realism argues that, in order for a state to defend itself, it is better for them to rely on its arms rather than relying on its allies. Third, states will attempt to maximise their offensive power so as to increase their chances of survival. The fact that all states inherently have offensive capabilities, and are uncertain of the intentions of the other states, makes it necessary for the states to address the problem of their survival.

---


\(^4\) Islamic state formerly known as Islamic state of Iraq and Syria. It was formed in April 2013 growing out of al-Qaeda in Iraq.


\(^8\) Ibid
The decision by Israel to develop nuclear weapons also supports the realist explanations of nuclear proliferation. Its perilous existence and the history of anti-Semitism instilled in the Jewish people the realization that they could not depend on other states to assist them in a time of peril because other states could not or would not assist them. Jewish Diaspora was subjected to ill-treatment all around the world. The horrors of Holocaust were still afresh in the minds of the people. The determination not to be helpless again, a commitment to the idea that Jews should control their own fate, characterized David Ben-Gurion’s determined campaign for Jewish statehood and his pursuit for nuclear weapons.

For Israel its security is of utmost importance. Its existence was questioned at every point, which threatened their security. No state in the region was ready to accept Israel as a state and was ready to challenge its existence. Ever since the inception of the state of Israel, it has been facing existential threat from their hostile Arab neighbours. Ben-Gurion suffered from a strategic pessimism, telling one of his aides: “I could not sleep all night, even for one second. I had one fear in my mind: a combined attack by all Arab armies.” The seeds of Arab-Israeli conflict were planted with the Balfour declaration of 1917 stating that, “His majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.”

The “divided” Arab world, stood united in its fanatical hostility towards Israel and its desire to destroy the emerging state. Just after the inception of the state, Israel was threatened of its existence by the Arabs who declared a war against them. Israel had to fight its first war of Independence, where Arab armies invaded Israel in order to conquer Israel. Though Israel won the war, they were challenged time and again with wars like, the Six day war of 1967, the Yom Kippur war of 1973 and many more. Arab countries were more powerful than Israel in all aspects. Future prospects of winning a war against a united Arab nation seemed to be very diffic. Moreover, the superior conventional capability of its Arab opponents vis-à-vis Israel made Israel all the more insecure. Israel lived in a constant fear of a threat to its existence from its neighbours determined to take back the lost land. All this contributed as a major driving force for the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the newly formed state. Being the sole possessors of nuclear weapons in West Asia provided Israel the tool of deterrence against their Arab neighbours.

These threats to Israel’s existence have only escalated over the time. To their east, Iran’s advancing nuclear project, which Israel claims, is to produce nuclear weapons, has been a source of terror to the Israelis. Iran has become an existential threat to Israel. This has become a mantra which is propagated by virtually all Israeli leaders and much of the US national security establishment. President George W. Bush had even

---

9 Ibid
11 Hillel Schenker, Israel as a nuclear weapon State, Palestine-Israel journal of Politics, economics and culture.
12 Balfour declaration was issued in November 2, 1917. It was in the form of a statement in a letter written by Britain’s then foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, addressed to Lionel Walter Rothschild, a figurehead of the British Jewish community. It was a public pledge made by Britain with an aim to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.
13 British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour declared this during his speech in 1917 which came to be known as the famous Balfour Declaration.
15 Ibid
warned that Iran’s declared intention of destroying Israel could lead to World War III. Iran has always been vocal about its feeling towards Israel with its leaders threatening the annihilation of Israel. Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran had once stated that the Zionist regime is a true cancerous regime in this region that should be cut off.

The relationship between Israel and Iran has not always been this tumultuous. Israel and Iran maintained good relations during the Shah’s regime in Iran. Iran was among the few countries who had accepted Israel’s sovereignty. But after the 1979 Iranian revolution the long set equation changed. Iran since then is believed to have inspired and financed many Islamist groups to take up arms against Israel. They have successfully tested many missiles which could easily reach Israeli territory. All this fears have made Israel insecure about Iran and has for decades helped in forming the nuclear policy.

Insecurities emerging from these security threats made Israel to look for deterrent forces. According to Kenneth Waltz, a state may want nuclear weapons for a fear that its great power allies may not retaliate if attacked by another great power. Israeli leadership had time and again stressed that Israel could not depend unconditionally on the superpowers, which would rather act in their own national interests according to the strategic dangers they themselves faced. Even though Israel had ties with US from the very beginning it was reluctant to fully trust it with their security. United Nations had promptly removed its monitoring from Sinai when Egyptian Dictator Gamal Nasser had asked for it so that he could easily move its Egyptian army towards the Israeli border. And when Nasser blockaded the Straits of Tiran, an act of war, which prohibits Israeli shipping from its southern port of Eilat, Israel appealed to the US to honour its 1957 promise to back Israel in case Egypt blocks Israeli access which the US refused to act. This made Israel all the more serious for its self-reliance on its security matters.

**Evolution of Israel’s nuclear programme**

Nuclear weapons development can be traced back to 1949, when the first nuclear research and development centre was established by the Israeli government. Eisenhower’s initiative of Atom’s for Peace, enabled Israel to have its own first nuclear reactor of 10 MW. The US provided them with the highly enriched uranium on a condition that it would remain under the International safeguards. During the 1950’s, France emerged

---


20 Zaki Shalom, Israel’s Nuclear Option: Behind the Scenes Diplomacy Between Dimona and Washington(Great Britain: SUSSEX ACADEMIC PRESS, 2005)


22 Ibid

as a major ally of Israel. The two countries signed a secret agreement to expand Israel’s nuclear capacity. In 1957, France built a 24 MW reactor for Israel and later provided Israel with French engineers to construct Negev Nuclear research facility near Dimona. After the Suez Canal crisis, Paris agreed to sweeten the nuclear deal cooperation. It agreed to provide Israel with much larger plutonium, natural uranium, and a reprocessing plant - basically everything except the heavy water\(^{24}\). Later when, UK declassified its documents, it was revealed that the British government sold 20 tonnes of surplus heavy water to Israel\(^{25}\). From 1961-1967, Israel had to open up its Dimona facility, which they claimed to be a commercial industrial facility, for inspections by the US inspectors. It did not give these inspectors the access to the underground floors which housed the nuclear facilities and later by 1969, it flatly refused to grant permissions for any kind of inspections. Israel continued to secretly procure materials for its clandestine nuclear weapons program through uranium theft and hijacking by Israeli intelligence agencies. Declassified documents by the FBI revealed that, high level smuggling operations were carried out inside the US territory by Israeli agents and Israeli officials. They smuggled nuclear trigger switches from california based trading company; MILCO International Inc. along with other sensitive nuclear materials\(^{26}\). In 2012, German magazine Der Spiegel ran a story regarding German sale of Dolphin class submarines, which were later to be fitted with nuclear-capable cruise missiles in Israel\(^{27}\). The deal between Germany and Israel was unique in the sense that the German government agreed to share one-third of the project cost amounting to $170 million. There are many reports going around the academic circles that US actually helped Israel in acquiring critical technologies that helped Israel in developing Thermonuclear or Hydrogen bombs\(^{28}\). Hence, Israel’s successful development of its nuclear weapons programme can be mainly attributed to the tacit support by states like France, UK, US and Germany along with some other small small states.

**Nuclear Ambiguity**

Israel, since the beginning, has maintained a policy of ambiguity over its nuclear programme, although it acknowledges that it has the option of building nuclear weapons\(^{29}\). Since the 1960’s this policy has been publicly expressed and reaffirmed by Israeli Presidents time and again,“we won’t be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the West Asia.”\(^{30}\) Declassified documents from US-Israeli negotiations in 1968-1969 about the sale and delivery of F-4 Phantom aircraft shows that the White House understood well that Israeli interpreted the “Introduction” to mean they could possess nuclear weapons as long as they did not test, deploy, or make them public\(^{31}\). The United States have been instrumental in shaping the policy on conditions that Israel committed itself to keeping its bomb “in the basement”, meaning non-testing and non declaration.

\(^{24}\) ibid

\(^{25}\) ibid

\(^{26}\) ibid

\(^{27}\) ibid

\(^{28}\) ibid


\(^{30}\) Ibid

\(^{31}\) Ibid
Israel is yet to make any policy disclosures about its nuclear deterrence. Israel’s policy of ambiguity is a result of shrewd cost/benefit analysis. The aim of the policy was to create as little incentive as possible for the other states in the region to indulge in building the weapons of mass destruction. Israel believes that nuclear silence is golden and often refers to their code of nuclear conduct as the policy of *animut*.

The aim of the policy was to keep its enemies guessing about the Jewish State's probable responses to their enemies threat. This would create a condition of persistent uncertainty that could possibly serve Israel's security for a while longer, but, at one time or another it could also fail altogether. It had helped deter existential threat along with maintaining the sovereignty with respect to the use of its nuclear weapon, being ambiguous gives them the leverage of having any policy, suiting there circumstances. As they don’t have any declared policy, they can follow any course of action available to them. Whether it is a first use action course or a policy of mutually assured destruction, their enemies will be deterred from using any force against them.

Professor Guy Ziv, a prominent Arab–Israeli conflict researcher credited Israel’s nuclear ambiguity being a key factor in deterring Arab leaders goals of destroying Israel. The other most important reason for following a policy of ambiguity is non-compliance with the international law. Although Israel is a member of International Atomic Agency since 1957, it has never signed the treaty on NPT which is aimed at achieving nuclear disarmament. With their policy of ambiguity they are not obliged to come under the umbrella of NPT, thus maintaining their sovereignty. Israel receives much of its military aid from the United States. According to the United States amendment to the Foreign aid act of 1961 called the Symington and Glenn amendments, USA government is prohibited to aid foreign states with nuclear weapon programme that are not recognised under the NPT. All this aid will be deemed illegal if Israel acknowledges itself as nuclear weapon state. Hence nuclear ambiguity allows both Israel and US to do away with the complications associated with the military aid.

Following a policy of ambiguity also helps Israel to partially justify their policy of launching pre-emptive strikes against their enemies’ advances towards nuclear weapons, without any strong opposition. This policy of Israel is known as the Begin Doctrine, named after Israel’s former Prime Minister Menachem Begin. It states that, Israel seeks to prevent countries which are hostile to Israel and calling for its destruction, from developing a nuclear military capability. Being ambiguous made Israel possible to practice the Begin doctrine without any international uproar. Israel has time and again practiced the Begin doctrine justifying it with the security reasons and a common goal of “West Asia nuclear free zone”. This has somewhat help curb nuclear proliferation in the region.

---

33 Josh Lange, Israeli nuclear ambiguity, September 25, 2017, see: http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2017/ph241/lange2/
Legislation on Israel’s nuclear activities is monitored under the “residual power” of the government. It highlights Israeli non-democratic and non-normative nature. It is considered taboo in Israel to talk about its nuclear policy. Even the government officials are charged for treason if they do so. Mordechai Vanunu, a nuclear technician working at Dimona, the nuclear plant of Israel, was charged with treason and espionage and sent to jail for seventeen whole years for leaking the Israel program details to the British press in 1986\(^37\).

Conclusion

Israel for long has been a beneficiary of its policy of nuclear ambiguity. In this era of 21\(^{st}\) century, a globalised world of transparency, it has to see whether it will be able to maintain a balance between its security and foreign policy objectives with this policy of ambiguity. Iran was apparently willing to have its nuclear facility checked by the international inspectors which signalled a new climate of transparency in nuclear affairs thereby putting pressure on Israel to come out clean\(^38\). Hossein Mousavian, who served on Iran’s nuclear diplomacy team, says that, Israel removing its policy of ambiguity is a necessary step towards a stable West Asian region\(^39\). This has led to an atmosphere of distrust among the states in the West Asia and hence complicated the West Asia peace process. For a credible deterrence, Israel must come out of the shadows because too much secrecy can also degrade a country’s security. It has failed to achieve its main goal of providing little incentive as possible to the other states in West Asia for acquiring nuclear arsenals. With nuclear proliferation in West Asia underestimating Israel’s retaliatory capacity, doing away with the policy of ambiguity will help enhance Israeli deterrence capability. To ensure the long term survival of Israel, it is necessary that its neighbouring states not only know about the existence of the weapons but also that they are secure and usable. The states in the region has now made aware of the degree of their nuclear capability. In order for Israel to deter their enemies, they would have to now demonstrate their arsenal by providing information about their capability of penetration at the intended targets. Keeping the nuclear developments under wraps also prevents the necessary supply of materials and goods for the development of nuclear capabilities. It also prevents the proper training of the scientist and hinders the smooth transfer of the nuclear technical knowledge. Hence, not allowing Israel to enjoy the nuclear technological advancements enjoyed by the world. But, coming out clear on their nuclear policy will might have many repercussions for themselves as well as for their region. This might lead to an arms race in the region furthering more instability in the region. It must be done in a responsible way.

References

- Zaki Shalom, Israel’s Nuclear Option: Behind the Scenes Diplomacy Between Dimona and Washington (Great Britain: SUSSEX ACADEMIC PRESS, 2005).


\(^39\) Ibid

