

The Release of Mordechai Vanunu and U.S. Complicity in the Development of Israel's Nuclear Arsenal

By Stephen Zunes | April 22, 2004

The recent release on April 22 of Mordechai Vanunu from an Israeli prison provides an opportunity to challenge the U.S. policy of supporting Israel's development of nuclear weapons while threatening war against other Middle Eastern states for simply having the potential for developing such weaponry.

Vanunu, a nuclear technician at Israel's Dimona nuclear plant, passed along photographs he had taken inside the plant to the *Sunday Times* of London in 1986. His evidence demonstrated that Israel had developed up to two hundred nuclear weapons of a highly advanced design, making it the world's sixth-largest nuclear power. For his efforts, agents from the Mossad, Israel's intelligence service, kidnapped him from Rome and brought him to Israel¹ to stand before a secret tribunal that convicted him on charges of espionage and treason and sentenced him to eight years in prison under solitary confinement.

Though labeled a spy and a traitor, he was in fact simply a whistle-blower who became "a martyr to the causes of press freedom and nuclear de-escalation."² He never received any money for this act of conscience, which he took upon recognizing that Israel's nuclear program went well beyond its need for a deterrent and was likely offensive in nature. A former strategic analyst at the Rand Corporation observed that Vanunu's revelations about Israel's nuclear program demonstrated that: "Its scale and nature was clearly designed for threatening and if necessary launching first-use of nuclear weapons against conventional forces."³ Prior to Vanunu's revelations, many suspected that Israel's nuclear program was limited to tactical nuclear artillery and naval shells.

Israel is one of just four countries—the others being Pakistan, India, and Cuba—that has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. UN Security Council resolution 1172 urges all countries to become parties of the treaty.⁴

It is noteworthy that Israel finds whistle-blowing more threatening than actual spying. None of the half dozen spies convicted in Israel for nuclear espionage served as much time in prison as has Vanunu.⁵

Vanunu, who has been referred to by Daniel Ellsberg as "the preeminent hero of the nuclear era,"⁶ has been awarded the Sean McBride Peace prize, the Right Livelihood Award, and an honorary doctorate from a Norwegian university. He has also been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The European parliament, former President Jimmy Carter, the Jewish Peace Fellowship, the Federation of American Scientists, and many other prominent individuals and organizations have long called for Vanunu's release. By contrast, with few notable exceptions—such as the late Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota—there has been virtually no support in Congress. The four administrations in office during Vanunu's confinement have been even less supportive. For example, in response to an inquiry by Tom Campbell, the former Republican Congressman from California, Clinton's assistant secretary of State Barbara Larkin claimed that Vanunu had had a fair trial and was doing well in prison.⁷

This lack of U.S. support for Vanunu is just one part of the longstanding U.S. acquiescence of Israel's nuclear program.

Israel has long stated that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East, which is a rather disingenuous commitment given that U.S. planes and warships have been bringing nuclear weapons into the region since the 1950s. Israel is generally believed to have become a nuclear



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power by 1969. The newly elected President Richard Nixon and his chief foreign policy adviser Henry Kissinger privately endorsed Israel's program that year. They quickly ended the regular U.S. inspections of Israel's Dimona nuclear center. This was of little consequence, however, since these "inspections" were *pro forma* and not taken seriously. (President Lyndon Johnson demonstrated his lack of concern over the prospects of Israel becoming a nuclear power by rejecting calls that one of the early major weapons sales to Israel be conditioned on Israel signing the NPT.) The Nixon administration went to great lengths to keep nuclear issues out of any talks on the Middle East. Information on Israeli nuclear capabilities was routinely suppressed. The United States even supplied Israel with krytrons (nuclear triggers) and supercomputers that were bound for the Israeli nuclear program.⁸

Under the Carter administration, which took the threat of nuclear proliferation somewhat more seriously than other administrations, the issue of Israel's development of nuclear weaponry was not raised publicly. When satellite footage of an aborted nuclear test in South Africa's Kalahari Desert gave evidence of a large-scale presence of Israeli personnel at the test site, the Carter administration kept it quiet.⁹ Two years later, when a U.S. satellite detected a successful joint Israeli-South African atomic bomb test in the Indian Ocean, the Carter administration rushed to squelch initial media reports. According to Joseph Nye, then-Deputy Under Secretary of State, the Carter administration considered the Israel's nuclear weapons program a low priority.¹⁰

Top officials in the Reagan administration made a conscious effort to keep information on Israel's nuclear capability from State Department officials and others who might have concerns over nuclear proliferation issues.¹¹ The senior Bush administration sold at least 1,500 nuclear "dual-use" items to Israel, according to a report by the General Accounting Office, despite requirements under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that the existing nuclear powers like the United States not help another country's nuclear weapons program "in any way."¹²

The Israeli media reported that President Clinton wrote rightist Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu in 1998 pledging that the United States would continue to protect Israel's nuclear program from international pressure. According to *Haaretz*, "the United States will preserve Israel's strategic deterrence capabilities and ensure that Middle East arms control initiatives will not damage it in the future. The Clinton letter provides written—if secret—back-up to the long-standing agreement between Jerusalem and Washington over the preservation of Israel's nuclear capabilities if Israel maintains its policy of 'ambiguity' and does not announce publicly that it has the bomb."¹³

Meanwhile, Congress has for many years made it clear to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and other responsible parties that it did not want to have anything revealed in an open hearing related to Israel's nuclear capability. A major reason is that there are a number of laws that severely restrict U.S. military and technical assistance to countries that develop nuclear weapons. Israel is the largest recipient of U.S. arms exports, which are highly profitable for the politically influential arms industry.

Outside of Washington, top Israeli nuclear scientists have had open access to American institutions and many leading American nuclear scientists had extended visits with their counterparts in Israel, in what has been called "informational promiscuity" in the seepage of nuclear intelligence.¹⁴

In addition, given the enormous costs of any nuclear program of such magnitude, it would have been very difficult for Israel to develop such a large and advanced arsenal without the tens of billions of dollars in unrestricted American financial support. More than simply employing a double standard of threatening perceived enemies for developing nuclear weapons while tolerating development of such weapons by its allies, the United States has, in effect, subsidized nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

In order to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush, Senator John Kerry, and others argued that Iraq had an ongoing nuclear weapons program in violation of UN Security Council resolution 687. (In reality, the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency had determined in 1998 that Iraq's nuclear program had

been completely dismantled and IAEA inspections in the months immediately prior to the U.S. invasion and exhaustive searches by U.S. forces subsequently have confirmed that assessment.) What both Republican and Democratic leaders have failed to observe, however, is that Israel remains in violation of UN Security Council resolution 487, which calls on Israel to place its facilities at Dimona under IAEA trusteeship. Despite bipartisan efforts in Congress to seek repeal of that resolution, it is still legally binding. Bush and Kerry, however, believe that UN Security Council resolutions, like nuclear non-proliferation, do not apply to U.S. allies.

Within Israel, however, there was much debate among Israeli elites regarding the wisdom of developing nuclear weapons. Some Israeli leaders—ranging from former Labor Prime Ministers Golda Meir and Yigal Allon to former Likud Defense Minister Rafal Eitan—argued that a nuclear Israel would increase the possibility of Arab states developing weapons of mass destruction and launching a first strike against Israel.¹⁵ Give the country's small size, Israel might not have a credible second-strike capability. There is also the fact that most of Israel's potential nuclear targets are close enough so that a shift in wind could potentially send a radioactive cloud over Israel.

Furthermore, while one could make a case for an Israeli nuclear deterrent up through the mid-1970s, Israel's qualitative advantage in conventional forces relative to any combination of Arab states developed subsequently—resulting in large part from a prodigious amount of taxpayer-funded arms transfers from the United States—would appear to weaken the case for a nuclear weapons development. Furthermore, Israel has an extensive biological and chemical weapons program that far surpasses those of any potential hostile power and—combined with vastly superior delivery systems—would constitute a more-than-adequate deterrent.

Vanunu was forced to remain in solitary confinement until 1998, when ongoing pressure from human rights groups forced the Israelis to end his segregation, though he was still not allowed to talk with fellow prisoners. Amnesty International, for example, observed that the prolonged isolation of Vanunu constituted cruel, inhuman, and degrading

treatment and violated international human rights law.¹⁶ The eleven and a half years in solitary confinement has reportedly taken a psychological toll, raising concerns that he may not be a credible voice in the cause of nuclear non-proliferation upon his release.

It appears, however, that Israel's U.S.-backed rightist government may not give him a chance. On March 9, Israeli Attorney General Mordechai Mazuz said that Vanunu's release from prison "will create a significant danger to state security" and that there will likely be major restrictions placed upon his movements and what he can say without the risk of returning to prison.¹⁷ Though the Moroccan-born Vanunu had decided to leave Israel prior to his 1986 kidnapping, he had converted to Christianity during an extended stay in Australia the previous year, and has stated that he would like to emigrate to the United States, the Israeli government will reportedly bar him from leaving the country.¹⁸

Like Israel, the United States has acknowledged its willingness to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear adversaries. And, like in Israel, there is an obsession with secrecy that allows the government to get away with dangerous and destabilizing nuclear policies that risk a nuclear catastrophe. It is not surprising, then, that the United States has failed to challenge the Israeli government's policy toward this courageous nuclear whistle-blower.

As Ellsberg has observed, "The cult and culture of secrecy in every nuclear weapons state has endangered and continues to threaten the survival of humanity. Vanunu's challenge to that wrongful and dangerous secrecy must be joined worldwide."¹⁹

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END NOTES

- ¹ The woman who lured Vanunu was an American working for the Mossad.
- ² *The Sunday Times*, December 27, 1992.
- ³ Daniel Ellsberg, "Mordechai Vanunu's Meaning for the Nuclear Age," *Blaetter fuer deutsche und internationale Politik*, April 2004.
- ⁴ UN Security Council Resolution 1172 (1998), article 13.
- ⁵ P. R. Kumaraswamy, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 1999.
- ⁶ Ellsberg, op. cit.
- ⁷ <http://www.nonviolence.org/vanunu/archive/f99howstatedept.html>.
- ⁸ Seymour Hersch, *The Sampson Option*, New York: Random House, 1991, p. 209-214.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- ¹⁰ Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 291
- ¹² Jane Hunter, "A Nuclear Affair," *Middle East International*, 24 June 1994, pp. 12-13.
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- ¹⁹ Ellsberg, op. cit.

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