

Israel's Nuclear Weapons in the Spotlight. Scott Ritter

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As the war between Israel and Hamas enters its second month, one of the top priorities of all parties involved is to prevent the conflict from expanding regionally. Israeli concerns over the emergence of a northern front with Hezbollah along Israel's border with Lebanon have prompted the US to deploy significant military power to the eastern Mediterranean Sea as a show of force to deter both Hezbollah and Iran from intervening. The prospect of a larger war between Israel and Iran has also shone an uncomfortable light on Israel's nuclear weapons capability, and the possibility of these weapons being used if the fighting in Gaza were to expand regionally. Both Israel and the US have accused Iran of pursuing a covert nuclear weapons program, which Iran vehemently denies.

Recent comments by Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu, where he alluded to the possibility that one of Israel's options in the war against Hamas could be to use nuclear weapons in the Gaza Strip, thrust the reality of Israel's unacknowledged nuclear weapons program into the international spotlight. Eliyahu's comments were quickly disavowed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the heritage minister was suspended from attending cabinet meetings.

Eliyahu, a member of National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir's far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, made his comments while answering a question during a live radio interview.

"Your expectation is that tomorrow morning we'd drop what amounts to some kind of a nuclear bomb on all of Gaza, flattening them, eliminating everybody there?" the interviewer asked. "That's one way," Eliyahu responded.

It should be noted that Eliyahu never mentioned nuclear weapons himself. Likewise, the questioner did not speak of an actual nuclear weapon, but rather something “that amounts to” a nuclear weapon. Many observers of the ongoing Gaza conflict have made comparisons with the volume of high explosives that have been dropped on Gaza by the Israeli Air Force since Oct. 7, when Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israeli military and civilian infrastructure surrounding Gaza, killing some 1,400 Israelis, most of them civilians. The tonnage dropped on Gaza is estimated at more than 20,000 tons, the equivalent of a 20 kiloton nuclear bomb, which is larger than either of the atomic bombs dropped by the US on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the World War II.

Nuclear Ambiguity

That the mere allusion to the existence and possible use of nuclear weapons by an Israeli government official, however vague and indistinct, could attract such attention underscores the controversy that surrounds Israel’s nuclear weapons program.

The Israeli nuclear weapons program dates to the mid-1950s, when the country’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, ordered the Israeli military to develop a nuclear insurance plan designed to offset the combined conventional military superiority of Israel’s Arab neighbors. Developed in great secrecy with the assistance of France, the Israeli program was centered on a nuclear weapons production facility located at Dimona, in the Negev Desert, where Israel, under the guise of a civilian nuclear power program, began to produce the plutonium necessary for a nuclear weapon.

US President John F. Kennedy confronted Ben-Gurion about Dimona during a May 1961 meeting. Under pressure, Ben-Gurion stated that the Dimona plant had a pilot plutonium extraction capability that could be used for military purposes but sought to mollify US concerns by declaring that Israel had “no intention to develop weapons capacity now.”

The administration of President Richard Nixon subsequently worked with Israel to craft a policy of mutual obfuscation, where Israel promised that it would not be the first to “introduce” nuclear weapons to the Middle East, but premised this on the notion that the term “introduce” meant the acknowledgement of the existence of such a weapon — in short, “introduction” was not about physical possession, but about public acknowledgment of that possession.

While Israel has sought to assiduously maintain its policy of nuclear ambiguity, there have been some notable incidents that strain the credulity of this posture. In 2004, while speaking at a political party gathering in Tel Aviv, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made an indirect comparison between the nuclear ambitions, real and imagined, of Libya and Iran, which he indicated should be halted, and Israel, which Sharon said, “must not be touched when it comes to its deterrent capability.”

In a December 2006 interview with German television, Sharon’s successor, Ehud Olmert, appeared to openly acknowledge Israel’s nuclear status when he criticized Iran for aspiring “to have nuclear weapons, as America, France, Israel, Russia.”

The Israeli Deterrence Model

In 1986 Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli nuclear technician who had been employed at the Dimona facility, went public with information about the technical capacity of Israel to

produce the fissile material necessary for nuclear weapons. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute currently estimates that Israel's nuclear arsenal consists of 80 weapons — 50 for delivery using ballistic missiles, and 30 for delivery by aircraft. Israel is also believed to possess an unknown number of nuclear artillery shells and atomic demolition munitions.

How Israel might transition from its posture of nuclear ambiguity to being a self-declared nuclear state remains unknown. However, given Israel's close collaboration with South Africa over the development and probable testing of nuclear weapons, the South African model of making its nuclear deterrence public is likely to resemble Israel's approach. This involves a three-phase strategy, with phase one being nuclear ambiguity. Phase two involves what is known as covert conditioning, involving a variety of non-attributable methods to reveal nuclear capacity as a means of inducement, persuasion and/or coercion. The third phase involves overtly acknowledging possession of weapons capability, followed by a series of escalating steps — public announcement, public display, demonstration (e.g. a nuclear test), threatened use, and lastly, battlefield use.

Existential Threat

In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, Israel faces a crisis that its senior-most leadership describes as existential in nature. In 2022 and 2023, Israel carried out large-scale military exercises designed to test the Israel Defense Forces' ability to respond to simultaneous attacks from all known enemies of Israel — Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. While the official results of these exercises remain a state secret, some conclusions have been alluded to by Israeli military sources. First, any military conflict between Israel and Iran could only be conducted with significant military assistance from the US, which might not be forthcoming. Second, Hezbollah possesses sufficient missile capacity to overwhelm Israeli air defenses, enabling them to inflict serious harm to Israeli economic, political and military infrastructure. Thirdly, the Israeli exercises did not envision a major attack by Hamas that would consume so much of Israel's conventional military power in response.

If the current conflict with Hamas were to escalate to involve both Hezbollah and Iran, Israel most probably lacks the conventional military capability to defeat this combined threat. At this juncture, Israel would face the decision of initiating the third phase of its nuclear deterrent posture: overt acknowledgement followed by escalatory steps. The decision to publicly declare an Israeli nuclear capability is a matter of great political sensitivity which, if done improperly, could turn even its US ally against it. This is why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded so harshly to the indiscreet ruminations of an obscure Israeli minister. Any step of this magnitude must be conducted in a very controlled fashion, with very specific objectives in mind — all of which should be linked to deterring the potential for operational use, not encouraging it.

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