

# The US Silence on Israeli Nuclear Weapons and the Right-wing Israeli Government

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*The Israeli protests against its new right-wing government have now touched on Israel's nuclear weapons. To underline what is at stake, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak cast aside Israeli ambiguity over whether it possesses nuclear weapons to [warn](#) his compatriots that Western diplomats are worried that a Jewish messianic dictatorship could gain control over Israel's nuclear weapons.*

One thing we can be sure of is that the United States was not officially represented among those Western diplomats. American diplomats—in fact all US government employees—are forced to pretend they know nothing about Israeli nuclear weapons. Since everyone knows it's not true, the pretense hobbles America's policy on restraining the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Barak's acknowledgment of Israel's weapons, backhanded as it was, should free the United States from this outdated omerta.

The popular explanation of the US gag on Israeli nuclear weapons is that it is required by a September 1969 deal between Richard Nixon and Israel's then-prime minister Golda Meir in which America would accept a nuclear-armed Israel and both would keep Israel's nuclear weapons secret. US policy toward Israeli nuclear weapons was indeed eased after their meeting, but judging by Nixon's memoirs, it was because he didn't care much whether Israeli had them. His main interest was to gain Israeli support in the Cold War.

They spoke alone, kept no notes, and told no one what they talked about. A [memorandum](#) days later to the president from Henry Kissinger, then his national security advisor, shows even he knew little about the conversation. As to maintaining secrecy, they didn't need a formal agreement. Nixon and Meir both understood a declared Israeli nuclear arsenal would have led to pressure on Moscow to provide their Arab allies with nuclear weapons.

The US bureaucracy and academics later created a myth about a nuclear deal, turning a

convenient accommodation into a perpetual obligation, and subsequent presidents fell in line. But an international deal of which there is no record is no deal at all.

Nevertheless, US presidents since Bill Clinton are said to have signed a [secret letter](#) that they will not interfere with Israel's nuclear weapons, and Israel acted as if it was entitled to such a commitment from every incoming US president. It got the commitment. When President Obama took office in 2009, the first question at his first televised press conference, from veteran reporter Helen Thomas, was: "Do you know of any country in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons?" The president's slippery reply was: "I don't want to speculate." Helen Thomas got fired soon after, and while this was for her anti-Israeli remarks on a different occasion, no reporter has asked the question since. In February 2017 Israeli ambassador Ron Dermer managed to infuriate even the newly arrived Trump White House staff, sympathetic to Israel, with his heavy-handed [demands](#) the new president sign "the letter." Still, it worked.

A change won't come easily. A realistic US government assessment of Israel's nuclear weapons will have to overcome not only Israeli intervention for its own reasons, but also State Department and White House resistance, in part because of the embarrassment of such an admission after years of denial, but also because such an admission could lead to complications under US law.

There is persuasive evidence that Israel detonated at least one test nuclear explosion on September 22, 1979, about a thousand miles south of South Africa. The signal, detected by a US Vela satellite, with corroborating evidence, was [widely interpreted](#) by the US intelligence community and most analysts as coming from an Israeli nuclear test explosion.

While the Carter White House publicly argued otherwise, months after the event Carter [wrote](#) in his diary: "We have a growing belief among our scientists that the Israelis did indeed conduct a nuclear test explosion in the ocean near the southern end of Africa." Such an explosion was a violation of the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, to which Israel was a party.

Confirmation of such a test would also trigger the 1977 [Glenn Amendment](#) to the Arms Export Control Act, which imposes tough economic and military sanctions on any state, other than the five nuclear powers authorized under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, that detonates a bomb post-1977. The president can waive the penalty, but not without political embarrassment.

While the US government tiptoes around the issue, Israel brags about its nuclear force. At the 2016 ceremony for the arrival of the fifth German-built submarine which Israel outfits with long range nuclear-tipped missiles, Netanyahu [said](#): "Our submarine fleet is used first and foremost to deter our enemies who strive to extinguish us. They must know that Israel is capable of hitting back hard against anyone who seeks to hurt us ..." No mention of "nuclear," but the message was unmistakable.

Who would have imagined that, just as we have been [worrying](#) about Pakistani weapons falling into the hands of Islamic fanatics, we would come to the point where we have to fear Israel's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of Israeli fanatics, who, as Ehud Barak explained, are "determined to attack Islam." Our government cannot deal with these issues if it ignores the existence of Israeli nuclear weapons.

In his book on Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard, Wolf Blitzer wrote there is “a widely held attitude among Israeli officials that Israel can get away with the most outrageous things. There is a notion among many Israelis that their American counterparts are not too bright, that they can be ‘handled’.” We should not any longer put up with that. The Cold War reasons for America to stay mum about Israeli nuclear weapons evaporated decades ago. What the Israeli government says about its nuclear weapons is its business—but what our government says about it is American business.

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*Featured image: Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, US President Nixon, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the Oval office on November 1, 1973. It is believed Nixon and Meir agreed in a 1969 private talk to keep Israel’s nuclear weapons secret, even from Kissinger. A decade later, Israel would conduct a nuclear test explosion off the South African coast, in violation of the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty. (Photo credit: White House Photo Office / National Archives, via Wikimedia Commons)*

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