

The Vanunu Myths and Israeli Deterrence Policy

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- The concept of "whistle blower" refers to individuals who go public with information on corrupt practices and violations of the law, enabling the constituted authorities to hold the culprits accountable. In contrast, by seeking to impose his personal views of Israeli security requirements on the elected representatives of the Israeli government, Vanunu acted in violation of the law and the core principles of democracy.
- The development of Israel's strategic deterrent capability resulted from the threat to national survival posed by Arab and Islamic rejectionism, and any decision to dismantle this deterrent depends on the end of this threat.
- Vanunu's supporters do not offer any pragmatic alternatives or strategies to prevent attacks against Israel, or evidence to support claims that if Israel were to give up its nuclear deterrent, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and other regional powers would cease to be threats.
- Israel's nuclear option is credited with forcing Egypt and Syria to limit their attacks in the 1973 war; with bringing Sadat to the realization that he must make peace with Israel; and with deterring Saddam Hussein from using chemical warheads in the 1991 missile attacks against Israel.
- Unlike Iran, Iraq under Saddam, and Libya, Israel did not sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has not violated any of its terms. Israel has not tested nuclear weapons and declared itself officially to be a nuclear power.

Increasing attention in the Arab world and Europe is being devoted to "nuclear whistle blower" Mordechai Vanunu, scheduled to be released this month at the end of his 18-year prison sentence. Therefore, a review of the facts and context of the Vanunu case may be helpful in order to clarify Israel's nuclear policy.

For the past three decades, Israel's nuclear deterrent is widely credited with offsetting the asymmetries that encouraged major attacks, creating a degree of stability, and convincing some Arab leaders, including Sadat, of the need for peace. Unlike Iran, Iraq under Saddam, and Libya, which blatantly violated the terms of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to seek illicit weapons, Israel did not sign the treaty, and has not violated any of its terms. Furthermore, unlike India and Pakistan, Israel has not tested nuclear weapons and declared itself officially to be a nuclear power.

Vanunu undermined the core security policies of the democratically elected government of Israel, and, with external assistance, sought to transform his private views into national policy. In this context, the accolade "whistle blower" is entirely inappropriate. He violated the terms of his employment at Israel's Dimona nuclear facility and sold information to journalists. This was the basis for his trial, conviction, and prison sentence.

Israeli Strategic Deterrence and the Vanunu Case

The ostensible reason for Vanunu's revelation of Israel's "nuclear secrets" is his opposition, on what he claims to be moral grounds, to Israel's nuclear deterrence strategy. On this basis, Vanunu's cause has been adopted by anti-nuclear campaigners around the world, who have also nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Yet this messianic crusade is based on a very unrealistic view of history, in which wars, terrorism, and Arab threats to destroy Israel have been conveniently erased. Vanunu's supporters do not offer any pragmatic alternatives or strategies to prevent attacks against Israel, or evidence to support claims that if Israel were to give up its nuclear deterrent, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and other regional powers would cease to be threats.

In contrast, a large majority of Israelis support Israel's current nuclear policy.¹ They view the development of a nuclear option as necessary to deter the possibility of combined Arab attacks, as have occurred in the past. All Israeli prime ministers have realized that the geographic and demographic asymmetries in the region leave Israel quite vulnerable to attack. Its tiny size prevents the possibility of "strategic depth" - the ability to absorb a first strike or surprise attack and then launch a counter-attack. Geographically, Israel appears to be a very weak state, wide open to attack by any external enemy.

As British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently noted, the threat of extinction "places Israel in a different security category from any other country in the world." Similarly, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, "Israel is a small state with a small population. It's a democracy and it exists in a neighborhood [where many] prefer it not be there and they'd like it to be put in the sea. And Israel...has arranged itself so it hasn't been put in the sea."²

The Logic of Deterrence

Based on the uniqueness of the Israeli threat environment, David Ben-Gurion authorized the development of a strategic deterrent designed to overcome the inherent geographic asymmetry by demonstrating that an attack that endangers Israel's survival would trigger a counter-attack that would have a parallel impact. The logic of deterrence is based on the assumption that Israel's enemies - Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, etc. - would recognize that they could not destroy Israel without causing their own destruction. This threat did not have to be explicit - rational decision-makers would understand the implications and act accordingly, even without overt declarations and nuclear tests.

The core of this policy of "strategic ambiguity" is the Dimona nuclear reactor, where construction began in the late 1950s, providing Israel with a clear potential for retaliation. At the same time, the low profile meant that this did not trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, and also allowed for reduction of friction with the United States over this issue.

Since the mid-1960s, when Dimona became operational, Israel's ambiguous deterrence policy has worked well, and has enjoyed consistent and wide support from all political and military leaders, as well as the Israeli political consensus. With the singular exception of Vanunu, no one has taken it upon himself to reverse this strategy through unilateral action.

Israel's nuclear option is credited with forcing Egypt and Syria to limit their attacks in the 1973 war; with bringing Sadat to the realization that he must make peace with Israel; and with

detering Saddam Hussein from using chemical warheads in the 1991 missile attacks against Israel. If, as expected, Iran's fundamentalist Islamic government, which repeatedly declares its goal of destroying Israel, succeeds in acquiring nuclear weapons, Israeli planners will rely on deterrence to prevent Iranian aggression.³

Israel's policy of deterrence based on nuclear ambiguity - neither confirming the existence of a weapons capability, nor denying it - is dependent on keeping the details out of the spotlight. Vanunu's tale and the accompanying photographs had exactly the opposite impact. International attention was suddenly focused on exposing "Israel's nuclear secrets," raising questions of the size of the Israeli nuclear stockpile and the nature of its weapons.

Vanunu gave away few, if any, real "secrets." Most of the information that he divulged was either already known among experts or was of questionable reliability, concerning areas and details to which Vanunu - a low-level technician - had no access. (Indeed, some foreign analysts and conspiracy enthusiasts claimed that Vanunu was really a Mossad agent, and that his "revelations" were really part of a clever plot to boost the credibility of Israel's deterrent.) The decision of the Israeli government under Prime Minister Shimon Peres to lure Vanunu to Rome and then bring him to Israel for trial added to his credibility and helped to confirm the reliability of the newspaper interviews. In retrospect, it might have been better, in terms of Israeli interests and policy, had Vanunu's revelations been ignored and ridiculed, although this might have been seen as weakness, and allowed for more self-styled crusaders to sell their secrets to journalists.

In recent years, in international frameworks such as the UN and NPT review conferences, Israel has come under increasing pressure, largely led by Egypt (particularly during Amr Musa's tenure as foreign minister), to end the ambiguity and deterrence capability. The simplistic campaign to tie the image of Israel to nuclear weapons and mass destruction is consistent with the efforts to delegitimize and isolate Israel in the international arena. Arab officials,⁴ European government representatives, UN diplomats, journalists, and NGOs that are spearheading the demonization of Israel in other dimensions are also active on the nuclear issue.⁵ From this perspective, the campaign in support of Vanunu and against Israel's nuclear deterrent policy is an important instrument in the broader political war against Israel.

The Myth of the "Whistle Blower"

Beyond the critical issues of deterrence and survival, the use of "whistle blower" to describe Vanunu is entirely inappropriate and false. The concept refers to individuals who go public with information on corrupt practices and violations of the law, enabling the constituted authorities to hold the culprits accountable through due process of law. Real whistle blowers have been instrumental in publicizing and ending illegal pollution of the environmental, secret kickbacks paid to politicians for government contracts, and similar violations.

In contrast, by seeking to impose his personal views of Israeli security requirements on the elected representatives of the Israeli government, Vanunu acted in violation of the law and the core principles of democracy. Vanunu never claimed that his former employer - the Israel Atomic Energy Commission - violated any statutes or obligations, or acted illegally or without authorization.

The primary claim voiced by Vanunu and his supporters (most of whom are not Israelis) is that in maintaining a policy of ambiguity regarding its nuclear option, Israel has infringed on moral principles and norms. This is a personal position - an opinion - and no individual, including Vanunu, has any right to impose his views on others. But this is exactly what Vanunu attempted to do.

After Vanunu left his job at Dimona, he began to travel and ended up in Sydney, Australia, without funds or skills. In 1986 he converted to Christianity, and church officials there, learning of his "unusual" background, got in touch with journalists. The *Sunday Times* flew

him to London, negotiated a substantial payment, and published the information and photos that Vanunu provided, as well as considerable speculation and mythology.

Of the many Israelis who have been involved in Israel's nuclear program since the 1950s, only one - Vanunu - has violated the rules of the game and gone public.⁶ This makes his singular betrayal of trust all the more unacceptable to the vast majority of Israelis.

Given the continuing messianic self-image of Vanunu and his supporters, and the readiness of Arab, Iranian, and other officials to seek to use this case to strip Israel of its strategic deterrent, efforts to restrict his movements are understandable. Vanunu might provide information not previously revealed, such as the names of his co-workers. As a result, after his release, Vanunu will be barred from leaving the country, speaking to journalists or diplomats, and his freedom of movement will be limited and monitored. There is concern that he will try to seek asylum in a foreign embassy or church, and Jerusalem Anglican Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal (a Palestinian Arab) declared his readiness to assist.

A Middle East Free of Nuclear Weapons - Dreams and Realities

The development of Israel's strategic deterrent capability resulted from the threat to national survival posed by Arab and Islamic rejectionism, and any decision to dismantle this deterrent depends on the end of this threat. As long as the open hostility of these regimes continues, the concept of a Middle East nuclear-weapons free zone (MENWFZ) remains very far-fetched.

The continued Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, in violation of its undertakings under the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the failure, to date, of the International Atomic Energy Agency (charged with verifying the treaty) to halt this activity, highlights the continuing dangers.

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Notes

1. *Poll of Israel Public Opinion - National Security Survey - 2002*, Almidan/Mahshov Research Institute, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2003.

2. <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2004/tr20040207-0432.html>.

3. Gerald M. Steinberg, "Parameters of Stable Deterrence in a Proliferated Middle East," *NonProliferation Review*, 7:1 (Fall-Winter 2000); http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~steing/conflict/armspapers/Parameters_of_Stable%20Deterrence_in_a_Proliferated_Middle_East.htm.

4. For example, Amr Mousa, who served for many years as Egyptian Foreign Minister and led the anti-Israel campaign during the 1995 NPT Review conference, is also active in the delegitimization activities as head of the Arab League. The Arab press is also active in promoting the Vanunu myths; see <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/680/re103.htm> and http://www.palestinemonitor.org/takpoints/the_man_who_knew_too_much_mordechai_vanunu.htm.

5. For example, Robert Fisk of *The Independent* (UK) is one of the leading anti-Israel publicists campaigning against Israeli defense against Palestinian terrorism, and is also very active in promoting Vanunu and condemning Israel's nuclear policy. Among the NGOs, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are also active in both dimensions, and HRW sponsors the screening of films "exposing the secrets of Dimona." See <http://www.hrw.org/iff/2003/london/dimona.html>.

6. Unlike Vanunu, Avner Cohen (author of *Israel and the Bomb*) was not involved in nuclear policy on an official level, but published his book in the U.S. after the military censor prohibited Israeli publication of an earlier manuscript. In another case, Brigadier General Yitzhak Yaakov, who had held high-level positions in the security structure, was tried for attempting to publicize his own role in the development of the nuclear deterrent, which is also very different from the Vanunu case.

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