

The Hypocrisy of Israel's Nukes

For decades, the U.S. and Israel have played a game of not admitting what everyone knows that Israel possesses a secret nuclear arsenal. But this policy of dissembling has made the two countries look hypocritical when they press Iran on its nuclear program, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Some things, or possible things, are important enough that we would be foolish to presume or pretend that they do not exist even if we lack any official confirmation or acknowledgment that they in fact exist. One such possible thing is of high importance to security issues in the Middle East.

Almost everyone outside of government who writes or speaks about these issues takes as a given that Israel has long had an arsenal of nuclear weapons. No Israeli government, however, has ever said publicly that Israel has such weapons, and neither has the U.S. government, under any administration, said so either.

Let us be very careful in how we discuss this subject. The world is full of widely accepted conventional wisdom, some of which turns out not to be true. After all, we do not *know* whether Israel has nuclear weapons. So let us not frame a discussion of this subject in terms of assertions of fact. Instead, we can play off the widely held consensus on the subject, discussing implications of the consensus itself and other implications if the consensus happened to be correct.

One disadvantage of this approach is that to adhere scrupulously to the agnostic qualifiers that the approach requires makes for clumsy prose that is uncomfortable to read. A way to cope with this problem is inspired by the late Alfred Kahn, the Cornell economist who served in Jimmy Carter's administration. Kahn is best known for deregulating the airline industry as chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board. He later was Carter's anti-inflation czar, in which post the blunt-spoken Kahn was once chastised by his political betters at the White House for warning of a possible "depression."

Don't use the word *depression*, he was told. Kahn complied, but rather than resort to some awkward circumlocution such as "an economic downturn that is more serious than what is customarily called a recession" he started using the term *banana* as a substitute for the word he was not supposed to utter. When the head of the United Fruit Company complained to him about this negative use of the term, Kahn switched to *kumquat* as his substitute word whenever he discussed the danger of a depression.

Using both Kahn's technique and his term, in the rest of this essay let *kumquats* mean "Israel's widely suspected nuclear weapons" or, in its more complete form, "Israel's widely suspected nuclear weapons, so widely and strongly suspected that just about everyone who says anything about related topics takes them as a given, even though we cannot say for certain that they exist."

Kumquats are not just a subject of conventional wisdom. They have been carefully addressed by serious historians and political scientists and have been taken into account in countless analyses of security problems in the Middle East. They also routinely figure into global rundowns of nuclear weapons arsenals, such as from the Ploughshares Fund or the Arms Control Association, with Israel listed alongside the eight declared nuclear weapons states.

The Arms Control Association's inventory estimates the number of kumquats at between 75 and 200. Most other estimates are similar; a more detailed examination of kumquats and associated Israeli military forces that appeared in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 12 years ago used the same range. The fullest understanding of the kumquat program can be found in the writings of the foremost historian of that program, Avner Cohen, including in his most recent book, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*.

Cohen and co-author Marvin Miller argued in an article four years ago that the policy of non-acknowledgment of kumquats has outlived whatever usefulness it had for Israel, and that Israel should change that policy. According to these authors, the policy was grounded in an understanding that Golda Meir and Richard Nixon reached in 1969, by which the United States would not make a public issue out of kumquats as long as Israel did not acknowledge their existence.

Cohen and Miller contend that being more transparent about this capability would enable Israel to demonstrate that it is a responsible nuclear power, to participate in arms control endeavors that are in Israel's interests, and to diminish one of the grounds for the international community to treat Israel as an outlaw pariah state. Greater transparency also would facilitate useful discussion and debate among Israelis themselves of issues related to ownership of kumquats, such as questions of safety, command and control, and identification of circumstances in which the kumquats might ever be used.

From a U.S. point of view, the policy of not saying anything publicly about kumquats has also long outlived whatever usefulness it may have had, for the reasons Cohen and Miller offer as well as for others. The very fact that there is now such a broad and strong consensus about the existence of kumquats, which was not yet the case in 1969, is one reason. Moreover, keeping any mention of kumquats out of bounds inhibits full and fruitful discussion about Israel's security, with the Israelis themselves as well as among American politicians and

policy-makers. Anyone who professes to have high concern about Israel's security, which includes almost every American politician, ought to favor uninhibited and fully informed discussion of the subject.

Arms control also is at least as important to U.S. interests as to Israel's, at both regional and global levels. Regionally, proposals for a Middle East nuclear-weapons-free zone (or in some variants, a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone) are worth discussing, however much realization of such a goal will depend on resolution of political conflicts that will determine the willingness of regional states to give up whatever weapons they currently have. Any such discussion will be a feckless charade, however, as long as neither Israel nor the United States will say anything about kumquats.

That the United States is so out of step on this subject with the rest of the world is taken by the rest of the world as one more example of double standards that the United States applies to shield Israel. Even further, it is taken as not just a double standard but living a lie. Whatever the United States says about nuclear weapons will always be taken with a grain of salt or with some measure of disdain as long as the United States says nothing about kumquats.

The issue of Iran's nuclear program, negotiations on which will be coming to a climax this fall, is highly germane to this problem. We have the spectacle of the government of Israel being by far the most energetic rabble-rouser on the subject of a possible Iranian nuclear weapon, to the extent of repeatedly threatening to attack Iran militarily.

Some might call this irony; others would call it chutzpah. Anyone would be entitled to say that any state that not only refuses to become a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) or to subject any of its nuclear activities to any kind of international inspection or control but also already possesses kumquats or their equivalents has no standing to conduct such agitation about Iran, which is a party to the NPT, has already subjected its nuclear activities to an unprecedented degree of intrusive inspection, and is in the process of negotiating an agreement to place even further limits on its nuclear program to ensure it stays peaceful.

The need for full and well-informed discussion of Israel's security will play into any debate in the United States about a completed nuclear agreement with Iran. Fully taking into account kumquats, which, as noted above, private scholars and nongovernmental organizations estimate to number in the dozens or scores, also underscores how misplaced is the preoccupation with an Iranian "breakout" or feared rush to build one or even a few bombs. Whatever the United States may or may not say on the subject, it is safe to assume that Iranian leaders believe that kumquats really do exist, and probably in the numbers that

private experts estimate.

The U.S. refusal to discuss this subject has other, less direct, distorting and stifling effects on discourse in the United States about Middle Eastern security issues. When the U.S. government takes a posture such as this, it has damaging trickle-down effects, not necessarily visible to the public, on the broader discourse. Then there is the sheer silliness of the posture.

With such a broad and strong consensus about kumquats and all the extensive discussion that has already taken place about them elsewhere, clearly the official U.S. posture serves no purpose in safeguarding U.S. security interests. It is only a legacy of a policy constructed to deal with a situation U.S. policy-makers faced 45 years ago.

The U.S. posture appears to outsiders inconsistent not only with the broader consensus but also with some of the United States' own public revelations. Six years ago the U.S. government released a redacted and declassified version of an intelligence estimate from 1974 about prospects for nuclear proliferation, in which the lead judgment about Israel was "We believe that Israel already has produced nuclear weapons." The kumquat program has since had, of course, 40 years to progress from wherever it may have been in 1974.

Within the past couple of weeks the U.S. government has publicly released another pertinent set of previously classified material: about 100 pages of documents from internal U.S. government deliberations about the kumquat problem in 1968 and 1969, spanning the Johnson and Nixon administrations. The documents make interesting reading, although so far the press has given almost no attention to them apart from an article in the left-leaning Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*.

A strong refrain, spanning both U.S. administrations, running through these deliberations was that any Israeli development of nuclear weapons would be a major negative for U.S. interests. As one interagency assessment put it, "The disadvantages to U.S. global interests are such that a major U.S. effort to induce Israel not to produce nuclear weapons is justified."

U.S. policy-makers faced several complications in trying to achieve this objective, however, including the already-emerging problem of Israeli colonization of territory conquered in the Six Day War less than two years earlier. An interagency study group described this part of the quandary this way:

"Use of leverage on the NPT/nuclear issue may seriously detract from our capability to influence Israel on the settlement issue. On the other hand, if we

decide to defer using pressure on the nuclear question so as to preserve leverage on a possible peace settlement, we must ask how long we are prepared to do this in the face of Israel's rapidly advancing program, and the knowledge that, the longer we put off making Israel feel the seriousness of our purpose, the harder it will be to arrest Israel's program."

Another complication was the fear that using the most obvious source of U.S. leverage over Israel, arms supplies, with shipment of F-4 Phantom jets being the top Israeli interest at the time, would only make the Israelis more determined than ever to push ahead with the development of nuclear weapons. The State Department in particular argued this point, and was generally in favor of relying only on persuasion rather than leverage to try to slow down the Israeli program.

The Department of Defense favored taking a harder line and using the arms spigot as a tool of leverage without fear of endangering Israel's conventional advantage over its neighbors, noting that "for the present Israel's military superiority is complete." The documents do not take us to the end of this interagency debate or to whatever Nixon and Meir said to each other in private. But in effect the outcome was a passive don't ask, don't tell approach.

Even at that early stage the kumquat program, like the colonization program, involved a lack of Israeli cooperation with the United States. Israel already was playing the verbal game of saying it would not be the first state to "introduce" nuclear weapons into the Middle East. The declassified documents record repeated U.S. efforts to get Israel to state that not "introducing" weapons meant not producing or stockpiling them. The Israelis refused to do so and instead suggested that as long as weapons were neither tested or announced they would not have been "introduced."

The timing of declassification of government documents can reflect many different and mostly mundane factors, such as when someone happened to submit a Freedom of Information Act request and how fast the wheels of the bureaucratic review process turn. It would be nice to think or at least to hope, however, that this latest release of documents signals a willingness by the current U.S. administration to take a step away from shielding Israeli activities that, even more now than when the policy-makers of 1969 were deliberating, involve significant "disadvantages to U.S. global interests."

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