

Telling Scary Stories about Iran

Israel has a large, sophisticated and undeclared nuclear arsenal, but Prime Minister Netanyahu told scary stories to a rapt U.S. Congress entranced by his warnings about the chance that Iran might consider building one bomb a decade from now, a double standard if there ever was one, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

One of the strangest aspects of the frantic crying of alarm over Iran's nuclear program, with the crying having reached its most publicized peak in Benjamin Netanyahu's Republican/Likud campaign rally in the House chamber, is that the chief crier is the government of a country that not only has the most advanced nuclear program in the Middle East but has kept that program completely out of the reach and scrutiny of any international control and inspection regime.

It is hard to think of a better example in international politics of the pot calling the kettle black, and in this case the pot is much blacker than the kettle, and was so even before Iran put its program under the unprecedented restrictions and intrusive inspections to which it agreed more than a year ago in negotiations with the United States and the rest of the P5+1.

As for any military dimensions (the focus, of course, of all that crying when it comes to Iran), although neither Israel nor the United States says publicly that Israel has nuclear weapons, just about everyone else on the planet who says anything on the subject takes it as a given that it does, and that it has a fairly sizable arsenal of such weapons.

The person outside government who has studied the Israeli nuclear program most extensively is Avner Cohen, an Israeli-born scholar currently based in the United States. Cohen has written two books on the subject, *Israel and the Bomb* and *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*. He probably knows more than anyone outside the Israeli government about the Israeli program and the strategic thinking underlying it.

It thus is especially interesting to hear what Cohen has to say about the current battle over the Iranian program. In a commentary just published in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Cohen writes about how, as I discussed the other day, the actions and lobbying of Benjamin Netanyahu are at odds with his own alarmist rhetoric, and about what this implies concerning Netanyahu's motivations.

Cohen criticizes Netanyahu's drumbeat message that the agreement being negotiated would be very bad for Israel; he notes the "potential advantages" of

the agreement, which is from the standpoint of Israel's interests a "reasonable compromise." He points out that the demand to prevent any Iranian enrichment of uranium will never be realized, and that the demand has no basis in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Cohen goes on to state that the emerging agreement "also contains unique advantages barely discussed in Israel. It clearly distances Iran from a nuclear bomb, from a few weeks as was the case in 2012 to about a year. Most importantly, it establishes a regime of safeguards and transparency for almost a generation."

Cohen concludes by pointedly describing what Netanyahu's scaremongering efforts are really all about, which have to do with Netanyahu having made such alarmism his political signature music, on which he relies both to maintain political power in Israel and to rationalize his policies to the outside world:

"Despite its flaws, the proposed agreement is far from bad for Israel, the only nuclear power in the Middle East, but it is very bad for Netanyahu. The agreement offers Israel almost a generation, or even more if it succeeds, in which Netanyahu won't be able to sow fear about Iran as an existential danger. It would leave Netanyahu as a leader whose *raison d'être* has been taken away from him."

Netanyahu's narrowly-motivated efforts to destroy the diplomacy with Iran are not only directly contrary to U.S. interests; they also are contrary to Israel's interests. Those who really do care about Israel and its security, rather than just ritualistically referring to them while swaying and bobbing up and down to Netanyahu's music, need to realize that.

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Netanyahu's False Narrative

As members of the U.S. Congress bobbed up and down with applause, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu spun a tale of brave little Israel fretting about its survival, but he left out the fact that Israel has a large arsenal of nuclear weapons and has often been the one to invade its neighbors, as Marjorie Cohn recalls.

By Marjorie Cohn

On March 3, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued an impassioned plea to Congress to protect Israel by opposing diplomacy with Iran. Referring to “the remarkable alliance between Israel and the United States” which includes “generous military assistance and missile defense,” Netanyahu failed to mention that Israel has an arsenal of 100 or 200 nuclear weapons.

The day before he delivered that controversial address, Netanyahu expressed similar sentiments to AIPAC, Israel’s powerful U.S. lobby. He reiterated the claim that Israel acted in the 1967 Six-Day War “to defend itself.” The narrative that Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in self-defense, seizing the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, has remained largely unquestioned in the public discourse.

Israel relies on that narrative to continue occupying those Palestinian lands. And the powerful film “Censored Voices,” which premiered at Sundance in February, does not challenge that narrative.

But declassified high-level documents from Britain, France, Russia and the United States reveal that Egypt, Syria and Jordan were not going to attack Israel and Israel knew it. In fact, they did not attack Israel. Instead, Israel mounted the first attack in order to decimate the Egyptian army and take the West Bank.

For two weeks following the Six Day War, Amos Oz and Avraham Shapira visited Israeli kibbutzim and recorded interviews with several Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers who had just returned from that war. Largely censored by the Israeli government for many years, those reels have finally been made public. “Censored Voices” features the taped voices of young IDF soldiers, as the aging, former soldiers sit silently beside the tape recorder, listening to their own voices.

The testimonies documented in the tapes reveal evidence of targeting civilians and summarily executing prisoners, which constitute war crimes. A soldier asks himself, “They’re civilians should I kill them or not?” He replies, “I didn’t even think about it. Just kill! Kill everyone you see.”

Likewise, one voice notes, “Several times we captured guys, positioned them and just killed them.” Another reveals, “In the war, we all became murderers.” Still another says, “Not only did this war not solve the state’s problems, but it complicated them in a way that’ll be very hard to solve.”

One soldier likens evacuating Arab villages to what the Nazis did to Jews in

Europe. As a soldier watched an Arab man being taken from his home, the soldier states, "I had an abysmal feeling that I was evil."

In what proved to be a prescient question, one soldier asks, "Are we doomed to bomb villages every decade for defensive purposes?" Indeed, Israel justifies all of its assaults on Gaza as self-defense, even though Israel invariably attacks first, and kills overwhelming numbers of Palestinians mostly civilians. Each time, many fewer Israelis are killed by Palestinian rockets.

Israel's False Self-Defense Claim

The film begins by showing a map of Israel surrounded by Egypt, Syria and Jordan, with arrows from each country aimed at Israel. The IDF soldiers felt those Arab countries posed an existential threat to Israel.

"There was a feeling it would be a Holocaust," one soldier observed. The Israeli media claimed at the time that Egypt had attacked Israel by land and by air on June 5, 1967. According to British journalist Patrick Seale, "Israel's preparation of opinion" was "brilliantly managed," a "remarkable exercise in psychological warfare."

In his book, *The Six-Day War and Israeli Self-Defense: Questioning the Legal Basis for Preventive War*, published by Cambridge University Press, Ohio State University law professor John Quigley documents conversations by high government officials in Israel, the United States, Egypt, the Soviet Union, France, and Britain leading up to the Six-Day War.

He draws on minutes of British cabinet meetings, a French government publication, U.S. documents in "Foreign Relations of the United States," and Russian national archives. Those conversations make clear that Israel knew Egypt, Syria and Jordan would not and did not attack Israel, and that Israel initiated the attacks.

Egypt was the only one of the three Arab countries that had a military of any consequence. Israeli General Yitzhak Rabin told the Israeli cabinet that the Egyptian forces maintained a defensive posture, and Israeli General Meir Amit, head of Mossad (Israel's intelligence agency), informed U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that Egypt was not poised to attack Israel. Both the United States and the Soviet Union urged Israel not to attack. Nevertheless, Israel's cabinet voted on June 4 to authorize the IDF to invade Egypt.

"After the cabinet vote," Quigley writes, "informal discussion turned to ways to make it appear that Israel was not starting a war when in fact that was precisely what it was doing."

Moshe Dayan, who would soon become Israel's Minister of Defense, ordered military censorship, saying, "For the first twenty-four hours, we have to be the victims." Dayan admitted in his memoirs, "We had taken the first step in the war with Egypt." Nevertheless, Israel's UN Ambassador Gideon Rafael reported to the Security Council that Israel had acted in self-defense.

"The hostilities were attacks by the Israeli air force on multiple Egyptian airfields, aimed at demolishing Egyptian aircraft on the ground," according to Quigley. On June 5, the CIA told President Lyndon B. Johnson, "Israel fired the first shots today."

Article 51 of the UN Charter authorizes states to act in collective self-defense after another member state suffers an armed attack. Although Jordan and Syria responded to the Israeli attacks on Egypt, they and Egypt – inflicted little damage to Israel. By the afternoon of June 5, Israel "had virtually destroyed the air war capacity of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria," Quigley notes. "The IDF achieved the 'utter defeat' of the Egyptian army on June 7 and 8."

United States Empowers Israel

U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said that U.S. officials were "angry as hell, when the Israelis launched their surprise offensive." Yet, Quigley notes, "Israel's gamble paid off in that the United States would not challenge Israel's story about how the fighting started. Even though it quickly saw through the story, the White House kept its analysis to itself."

Although Security Council resolution 242, passed in 1967, refers to "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and calls for "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," Israel continues to occupy the Palestinian territories it acquired in the Six-Day War.

Israel has abandoned its claim that Egypt attacked first. Yet the international community considers that Israel acted in lawful anticipatory self-defense. Quigley explains how the UN Charter only permits the use of armed force after an armed attack on a UN member state; it does not authorize anticipatory, preventive, or preemptive self-defense.

"The UN did not condemn Israel in 1967 for its attack on Egypt," Antonio Cassese of the University of Florence explained. Quigley attributes this to Cold War politics, as the USSR supported Egypt. "For the United States in particular, Israel's success was a Cold War defeat for the USSR. The United States was hardly prepared to condemn Israel after it performed this service."

The United States continues to support Israel by sending it \$3 billion per year in military aid, even when Israel attacks Gaza with overwhelming firepower, as it did in the summer of 2014, killing 2,100 Palestinians (mostly civilians). Sixty-six Israeli soldiers and seven civilians were killed.

If Israel were to mount an attack on Iran, the United States would invariably support Israel against Iran and any Arab country that goes to Iran's defense. Indeed, Netanyahu intoned to Congress, "may Israel and America always stand together."

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