

# US Still Won't Confirm Israeli Nukes

Among the more absurd aspects of U.S. foreign policy is the persistent refusal to confirm that Israel has a nuclear arsenal, even as U.S. officials threaten and even attack other countries for allegedly harboring the intent to build a single bomb, hypocrisy that Sam Hussein dissects.

By Sam Hussein

Retired Gen. (and former CIA Director) David Petraeus – who despite recent scandals is (according to CNN) still advising the White House – was asked at a recent Aspen Institute event about Israel's nuclear weapons arsenal and replied "I can't comment."

This seems to be part of long-standing U.S. and Israeli government policy not to confirm the existence of Israel's nuclear weapons arsenal. This policy has apparently taken the form of official gag orders on the issue, as Grant F. Smith, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Research: Middle Eastern Policy, has noted.

It's particularly absurd that someone like Petraeus, who presumes to engage in tough straight talk and allegedly shows bravery, is incapable of saying that Israel has a nuclear weapons arsenal.

Similarly, Philip Gordon, former special White House assistant on the Middle East and now at the Council on Foreign Relations, was recently asked on C-Span if it "isn't time for the U.S. to stop officially pretending that it doesn't know whether Israel has nuclear weapons?"

Gordon replied that there's not a lot of doubt about the "the existence of a nuclear weapons capability in Israel," but that a U.S. acknowledgement of that fact would be irrelevant. For instance, he argued that "Iranian nuclear aspiration is driven significantly by their insecurity" resulting from U.S. actions in the region, not Israel's nuclear weapons. (Transcript below)

What's perhaps most remarkable about Gordon's response is that it shows U.S. officials being more willing to point to U.S. government actions as a destabilizing factor in the region than the actions of the Israeli government. Somehow, a cost-free action of simply acknowledging the empirical fact of Israel's nuclear arsenal is not to be considered.

It's also notable that there's much vocalizing about the alleged Iranian program setting off a nuclear arms race in the Mideast, but the thought that Israel's nuclear weapons program has influenced others in the region is off limits. This

is particularly absurd because we know that Israel's program and its aggressive actions helped spawn the Iraqi nuclear weapons program when it existed in the 1980s. [See ["Myth: Israel's Strike on Iraqi Reactor Hindered Iraqi Nukes."](#)]

So the idea that Israel's nuclear arsenal would have no effect on Iran seems rather far-fetched. The *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* recently published the piece ["Of weapons programs in Iran and Israel, and the need for journalists to report on both,"](#) which notes: "As shown in the Bulletin's coverage over the years, the Israeli government does indeed have a robust nuclear program that began decades ago; it continues to operate outside the international nuclear nonproliferation regime to this day.

"This program has a convoluted history. In a July 2013 article, nuclear proliferation scholar Leonard Weiss outlined the Lavon Affair, a failed 1954 Israeli covert operation against Egypt, undertaken in hopes it would destabilize the regime of Egypt's leader, Gamel Abdel Nasser. In a complicated way, the bungled effort eventually deepened the Franco-Israeli military cooperation that helped Israel create its nuclear arsenal."

Yet, senior U.S. officials from both the Republican and Democratic parties decline to confirm that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Years ago when I asked former Sen. John Edwards about Israel's nuclear weapons, he ignored it all together and worried aloud about the Iranian nuclear program setting off the Saudis and Jordanians. [See ["The Absurd U.S. Stance on Israel's Nukes: A Video Sampling of Denial."](#)]

### **Transcripts:**

#### **Petraeus:**

Questioner: We know Israel has a nuclear weapons programs – Petraeus: I can't comment.

Questioner: My question was do you support that, do you support Israel having nuclear weapons?

Petraeus: I can't –

Questioner: You can't comment on that, okay. And then seeing an apartheid state, why is the U.S. allowing them to be an apartheid state against the Palestinians, while we're developing a strategy for it? ... [inaudible]

#### **Gordon:**

Caller: I just wanted to ask Gordon whether you think it's time for the U.S. to stop officially pretending that it doesn't know whether Israel has nuclear

weapons? The NNTP conference at the U.N. totally collapsed last month because the U.S., U.K. and Canada didn't want any initiatives for a nuclear free Middle East to go forward. Its well documented that charitable donations, material know how, technology has flowed from the U.S. to Israel for its nuclear program, yet there are never any prosecutions.

And according to a poll released this week, 55 percent of Americans want that program to be officially acknowledged, so why can't the federal government, the U.S. federal government, finally admit what everyone knows and stop pretending it doesn't exist?

Host: And what poll was that?

Caller: That was the Institute for Research Middle Eastern Policy poll titled "Israel's Nuclear Weapons program should be acknowledged and inspected."

Philip Gordon: So as Grant suggests, I don't think there is a lot of doubt throughout the region or in the United States about the existence of a nuclear weapons capability in Israel, I also don't think that the question of official U.S. acknowledgment or not on that issue would make a significant difference to the problems we are talking about.

Look, in the long run I think we would all agree that it would be best if there were no nuclear weapons at all in the Middle East, and that's something that the United States should strive for. But again, I don't know that on the issues we're talking about, or frankly even on nuclear issues like the Iranian nuclear issue, I think the Iranian nuclear aspiration is driven significantly by their insecurity, their concern about U.S. military power being used to its east and west, their drive for regional hegemony, and it would exist whether, not only whether Israel had nuclear weapons that existed, but whether Israel itself existed. So I'm not sure that's an essential variable in this debate."

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