

Concept

Israel's 'Nuclear Ambiguity' Policy

Definition

This concept refers to an Israeli policy of avoiding exposing the development stage and capabilities of its nuclear program. Israel deems this policy to be central to its national security strategy.

Background: American-Backed Nuclear Ambiguity

Since Israel's establishment, the country's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion aspired to achieve nuclear capabilities in order to ensure Israel's survival in the face of its many challenges.¹ Aided by France, these efforts ultimately led to the beginning of Israel's nuclear project in 1957-58.²

Since the inception of the nuclear project, Israel adopted an ambiguous stance regarding the development stage and purpose of the program, and settled for Levi Eshkol's vague statement that "Israel will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East."³

In the beginning of the 1960s, the US began to push for limiting the global spread of nuclear weapons with the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Kennedy (1960-63) and Johnson (1963-68) Administrations demanded that Israel join the NPT and allow inspection of its nuclear program.

After ongoing discussions with the US, Prime Minister Golda Meir and U.S. President Richard Nixon agreed in 1969 that the U.S. would de-facto acknowledge Israel's nuclear capabilities and not ask it to join the NPT as long as Israel maintained a low profile and did not reveal its capabilities via public statements or nuclear testing. So far, all American presidents have kept these implicit understandings.⁴

Israel's nuclear ambiguity policy is known to have influenced the actions of other countries in the region and became a central component in the country's deterrence, as part of its security strategy.⁵

¹ The memory of the holocaust, geo-political considerations, lack of resources and Ben Gurion's conviction that science and technology should play a key role in the realization of Zionism all played a part in the establishment of Israel's nuclear program.

See Avner Cohen, **Israel and the Bomb**, Shoken Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 2000, p. 28 (in Hebrew).

² In 1956, as Israeli-French relations were strengthening in the context of the Suez Canal Campaign, a window of opportunity for cooperation between the two countries was created, which led to the implementation of the Israeli nuclear program. See Avner Cohen, *ibid*, p. 84.

³ See Yigal Allon, **Curtain of Sand**, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1959, p. 402 (in Hebrew).

⁴ The coordination of Israel's nuclear policy is a component in ['The Special Relations' with the U.S.](#) President Obama has recently vowed to continue and fulfill past understandings between the two states. See Aluf Ben and Barak Ravid, [Ha'aretz](#), (Hebrew) 05/20/09.

Nevertheless, in the past few years the U.S. has several times considered reevaluating this policy. See Aluf Ben, [Ha'aretz](#), (Hebrew) 12/20/08. Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller made a public statement about the issue, saying that "universal adherence to the NPT itself - including by India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea - remains a fundamental objective of the United States." See Emily Landau, **The US and the NPT: Israel on the Line?** IPF - Israel Policy Forum, [INSS Insight](#) No. 107, May 11, 2009.

⁵ 'Deterrence' is one of the three pillars of Israel's traditional national security strategy (along with 'decisive victory' and 'early warning'). See Israel Tal, **National Security**, Dvir, 1996. This contribution of nuclear capabilities has to do with its ability to deter the enemy rather than its usage.

In order to maintain this ambiguity, no legislation concerning the program has been ever passed. Moreover, no public legal document designed to assign responsibilities or define areas of jurisdiction and authority to bodies related to the program has been written, even by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).⁶

Over the years, a complementary strategy was developed – which is neither official nor documented – termed the "Begin Doctrine" according to which Israel will not permit any other country in the region to develop nuclear weapons which may threaten its existence.⁷

⁶ See Avner Cohen, [Placing the "Nucleus of Control" in the Hands of the Law](#), *INSS*, 2009 (in Hebrew).

⁷ This doctrine was named after Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who ordered the attack on the nuclear facility in Iraq in Osirak on 1981.