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Will Nuclear Deterrence Fail in the Middle East?

Mark H. Gaffney • March 11, 2025 • 2,000 Words • 44 Comments • Reply

A week ago, University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer delivered an outstanding lecture on a timely subject: Israel’s nuclear weapons program. Mearsheimer briefly reviewed the history, from the program’s **inception in the mid-1950s** to Israel’s first deployment of nukes sometime in 1966-67. He also discussed a related issue: former president Obama’s nuclear treaty with Iran (the JCPOA) that Benjamin Netanyahu worked so hard to scuttle, and which Donald Trump mooted in 2017 when he unilaterally pulled the US out of the deal. And Mearsheimer also spoke (with some obvious trepidation) about the logic of nuclear deterrence and its perfect record of success, to date, in averting a major war between members of the nuclear club.

Usually I agree with the realist Mearsheimer who is a first-rate scholar. However, as I listened, I could not help but wonder, given the Ukraine war and the fragile cease fire hanging by a thread in Gaza, if the success of deterrence has been illusory. Is the doomsday clock running out on our complacency?

If deterrence fails in the near future, the most likely flash point is the Middle East. Israel developed the Bomb covertly to acquire a weapon of last resort, what Seymour Hersh called “the Samson Option.” And, for a number of years, Israel’s nuclear deterrent did serve (or appeared to serve) in that capacity. But was it all a mirage?

In the early 1990s, there was some reason to hope that Israel might agree to a historic peace deal with the Palestinians. Unfortunately, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 dashed those hopes and set the stage for the ascendancy of Benjamin Netanyahu and the extreme right. Since then, the outlook has only worsened. Today, **Israel finds itself in an increasingly untenable situation, one largely of its own making.** At the end of this article I will return to the question of outcomes. But first, I need to review some pertinent facts about Israel’s nuke program.

In late 1981, while Israeli defense minister Ariel Sharon was preparing to invade Lebanon to destroy the PLO, an Israeli whistleblower approached US government officials with new evidence about Israel’s nuclear project. In his book Seymour Hersh does not name the individual, but evidently he was a scientist or technician who had worked at the Dimona nuclear complex. The man claimed that Israel’s arsenal numbered more than a hundred nuclear warheads, and he documented the claim with numerous photos taken inside an Israeli weapons depot. The photos showed warheads lined up in cold storage. **US experts were shocked and amazed because the obviously genuine photos meant that Israel’s program was considerably more advanced than intelligence experts had imagined. The weapons were plainly thermonuclear warheads.** (Seymour Hersh, The Samson Option, 1991, p. 288-291)

Five years later, another whistleblower named **Mordechai Vanunu** confirmed the above and also provided many more details. For eight years Vanunu, a Sephardic Jew, had worked as a technician at one of the most sensitive facilities in Israel, **Machon 2, a plutonium separation plant buried eighty feet below ground at the Dimona complex.** The plant is a chemical reprocessing facility where plutonium is extracted from highly radioactive rods of spent uranium fuel from the nearby Dimona reactor. The rods are so “hot” they must first be cooled for weeks in water-filled tanks. Even after cooling, the rods are still so dangerous that extraction must be conducted using remote controlled robotics behind heavy lead shielding.

Vanunu was a controller on the night shift at Machon 2, but lost his job in October 1985 due to his outspoken support for a two-state settlement. Earlier that year Vanunu had attended a pro-Arab rally at David Ben Gurion University in Beersheba, where **he called for creation of a Palestinian state**. This ultimately led to his termination. However, before he was let go, Vanunu smuggled a camera into the plant and took fifty seven photos that later proved critical in establishing his credibility.

After he was fired, Vanunu left Israel and traveled solo across Asia, eventually settling in Sydney, Australia. There, one day while wandering the streets of Kings Cross, a seedy entertainment district, he found himself in the doorway of a coffee shop associated with St John’s parish. Someone invited him in and struck up a conversation. Something, maybe the friendly atmosphere of the place, attracted Vanunu and soon he became a regular at the coffee shop where folks would gather to discuss social and political issues. At one of these informal meetings, Vanunu began to talk about his job at Dimona helping to make nuclear weapons from plutonium. Later, he gave a presentation about Dimona that included a slide show of the photos he had taken. One thing led to another. It was through his contacts in the St John’s church community that Vanunu was introduced to Peter Hounam, a well-known reporter for the London Sunday Times.

Hounam was more than intrigued by Vanunu’s remarkable story, and arranged for him to fly back to London where the paper began an extensive vetting process. For two days Vanunu was debriefed by Dr Frank Barnaby, a British nuclear weapons expert. Dr Theodore Taylor, who once headed up the US atomic weapons testing program, was also called in to review the photos and Vanunu’s notes. Both experts agreed: Vanunu was the real deal. (Mark H Gaffney, Dimona: the Third Temple, 1989, p. 2-5)

On October 5, 1986, the Times aired a stunning three-page expose based on Vanunu’s testimony, complete with inside photos of the Dimona plant. But meanwhile, incredibly, the whistleblower had disappeared! Vanunu remained a missing person for more than a month. Five days before the story went to press, an attractive Mossad agent named Cheryl Bentov had lured Vanunu to travel with her to Italy. Upon their arrival in Rome, the Mossad jumped Vanunu, gave him a forced injection, and took him back to Israel in chains where he was hauled before a judge and indicted for treason and espionage. Later, Vanunu was convicted in a rigged trial and sentenced to eighteen years in a maximum security prison. He did his time at Ashkelon prison where he endured a fate worse than death: eleven and a half years in solitary confinement, compounded by almost non-stop psychological harassment. Somehow Mordechai survived the ordeal, a credit to his toughness, but not without scarring. After completing his sentence in 2004 Vanunu was released, yet, to this day remains under house arrest in Israel.

Copies of Vanunu’s photos and his unpublished notes were made available to US nuclear weapons experts at the Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore National Labs. After studying the evidence, the experts concluded that Israel has the know-how to make low-yield neutron bombs. **First developed by the US in the 1950s**, the neutron bomb is one of the most sophisticated types of nuclear weapons. The design maximizes production of intense short-lived radiation in order to kill humans while minimizing blast effects and long term fallout. Based on Vanunu’s testimony about Unit 93, a facility at Dimona that began operating in 1984, dedicated to large scale production of tritium, the experts judged that **Israel started full scale production of neutron bombs in the mid-1980s.** (The Samson Option, p. 200)

What does all of this mean? For starters, it means that the familiar reference to the biblical Samson who destroyed the Philistine temple by pulling down the columns was already out of date when Hersh published The Samson Option in 1991. **Neutron bombs are not weapons of last resort. They are tactical weapons intended for war-fighting, designed to efficiently kill humans while sparing the neighborhood.** Originally intended for deployment in Germany to halt a theoretical Soviet invasion of Western Europe, president Jimmy Carter deferred their production in April 1978 after the issue became highly controversial in Europe and in the US. One of the principal arguments against neutron weapons is that they lower the threshold for general nuclear war. (Richard Burt, “Neutron Bomb Controversy Strained Alliance and Caused Splits in the Administration,” The New York Times, April 9, 1978)

Carter found the neutron bomb morally distasteful and wanted to cancel it outright. But he was persuaded the weapon still had some utility as a bargaining chip with the Soviets. His successor Ronald Reagan resumed production but never deployed neutron bombs to Europe. Production was finally halted by president H.W. Bush in 1992 as a result of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia. Thanks to the INF treaty, the US destroyed its stockpile. (John T Correll, “The Neutron Bomb,” Air & Space Forces Magazine, October 30, 2017)

Israel’s leaders were of course privy to the conversation surrounding the neutron bomb, and the controversy. They surely knew what they were doing in the 1980s when they made the informed decision to build them. But the contra arguments that eventually led to the cancellation of the US program carried no weight in Israel. The very same set of facts that Carter found repugnant made the neutron bomb especially appealing to the Israelis. Here, after all, was a tailor-made weapon for use against Israel’s enemies. The moral issues failed to register because Israeli Jews do not regard gentiles as human beings, but rather, as sub-human. So they feel no moral compunction about killing them in large numbers. **Think bugs on a sidewalk.** Given such values (or lack of them), it’s understandable and hardly surprising Zionists would embrace such a weapon.

Two weeks ago, the American traitor (and former Israeli nuclear spy) Jonathan Pollard warned during a Youtube podcast that Israel could find itself in another war with Egypt in the very near future. Pollard added that in the event of such a war Israel might have to use neutron bombs against the Egyptian army, currently deployed in force with heavy armor just south of the Philadelphia corridor. By one estimate the Egyptian force there numbers 50,000 men, by another account 70,000. The Egyptian troops have been deployed to prevent the IDF from driving two million Palestinians out of Gaza and into Egypt.

Since October 7th, Egyptian president Sisi has been under heavy US and Israeli pressure to admit a million or more Palestinians into Egypt. Sisi, of course, has refused. He fears that if he bows to Trump and Israel’s demand he will be overthrown by the Muslim Brotherhood. King Abdullah of Jordan faces a similar dilemma. He too has been under heavy pressure to admit Palestinians into Jordan from the West Bank. He has likewise refused, and for the same reasons. The tense standoff on Israel’s southern border is ongoing, and is probably unsustainable. If the cease fire comes to an end or blows up, anything can happen…

In conclusion, it would be hard to imagine a more dire set of circumstances than what presently exists on Israel’s southern border. As bad as the wanton destruction of Gaza and Lebanon has been, the genocide may be far from over. President Trump probably does not know it, but by pressuring Egypt to admit Palestinians from Gaza he has lit the fuse for a wider conflict. If wise and courageous decisions are not forthcoming from our president in the coming days, an already apocalyptic situation will likely become MUCH worse.

War between Israel and Egypt is the last thing the US, Israel and the Mideast needs. **Trump must impress upon the Israelis that there is no possible military solution to the ongoing conflict with Hamas.** The president must pressure Israel to

1. extend the cease fire,
2. withdraw from Gaza, and
3. immediately begin face-to-face negotiations with the Palestinians (meaning: Hamas), without preconditions.

He should announce that, henceforth, US military aid to Israel will be conditional on their FULL compliance, with no side deals and without private reservations. All of this will come as a bitter pill to Benjamin Netanyahu and his extremist cabinet, but it’s a pill they must be made to swallow for their own good. If Trump fails in this, if he is unable to reign in the Israelis, the renewal of violence will likely escalate to a regional war with the potential to burn down his presidency.