Wrestling With Nuclear Opacity

Reviewed by Bennett Ramberg.

The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain With the Bomb
By Avner Cohen

Israel is the most curious of nuclear-armed states today. It remains the only member of the exclusive club that has never acknowledged or given evidence of its arsenal while its adversaries call for its nuclear disarmament. Israel’s repeated response: “Israel will not be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons into the region.”

No one believes the refrain, but no one can quite get a handle on the extent of Israel’s nuclear weapons program. According to figures compiled by Cohen, estimates of the Israeli stockpile have ranged from 60 to more than 400 bombs. It is nearly impossible to make any accurate calculation of Israel’s plutonium stocks and resulting bomb making absent knowledge of the Dimona reactor’s power generation and operational time.\[1\] No source outside Israel has the information, not even the “experts.” Israel has done a remarkable job of keeping its nuclear enterprise under wraps.

While some debate Israel’s weapons numbers, others attempt to bring context to the speculation. Certainly, no one has done a better job than Avner Cohen. His 1998 book, Israel and the Bomb, is a masterful study of the personalities and decisions that made Israel a nuclear-armed nation.

Cohen’s new book, The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel’s Bargain With the Bomb, represents a far different treatment. Although it updates the earlier work with significant new findings about how the Nixon administration removed itself as an obstacle to Israel’s nuclear development, the book’s focus lies elsewhere. The Worst-Kept Secret is a passionate indictment of what the author contends is Israel’s anti-democratic coddling of an all-too-secret nuclear enterprise. Unlike the United States, which subjects its weapons research, development, and deployment activities to annual legislative budget review, periodic nuclear doctrinal assessment, and excruciating Senate scrutiny in the nuclear arms control treaty ratification process, Israel does nothing of the sort.

Cohen argues that Israel is long overdue to modify what he calls its nuclear strategy of amimut (Hebrew for “opacity” or “ambiguity”). He contends that amimut’s institutionalization of secrecy—a policy that was credible enough to generate effects of deterrence but opaque enough to maintain political distance, even deniability”—although appropriate for an earlier era, has become “anachronistic and awkward because Israel’s nuclear status is no longer ambiguous.” He calls for greater willingness, appropriate for a mature democracy, to reconsider behavior that is “parochial” and “strange and inexcusable.” However, by hedging on what the lifting of amimut would entail, the book indicates that Cohen himself is conflicted.

Concerned about pushback from friends and foes, Israel shrouded its nuclear enterprise from the earliest days. Israel and the Bomb reveals that, in May 1963, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, the father of the weapons program, attempted to pull the wool over the eyes of a skeptical President John F. Kennedy, who was determined to halt Israel’s nuclear quest. Ben-Gurion wrote, “In our conversations in 1961 I explained to you that we were establishing nuclear training and reactor in Dimona with French assistance. This assistance has been given on condition that the reactor will be devoted exclusively to peaceful purposes. I regard this condition as absolutely binding.”
remained unconvinced and continued to press the Israelis on the program until his death.

Cohen reports that that the Johnson administration pursued “protracted” efforts to push Israel to sign the 1968 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to no avail, leaving it to President Richard Nixon to push forward. Providing important new information, The Worst-Kept Secret reveals that, in July 1969, the new president’s senior staff struggled to craft a policy that would allow Israel latitude to continue weapons-related research while preserving NPT integrity. The consensus settled on three minimal objectives: NPT ratification, an Israeli written pledge not to be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the region, and acquiescence to the principle that “possession” meant “introduction.” As in the Kennedy administration, the denial of military aircraft exports appealed to Nixon administration officials as leverage to move Israel. However, Nixon himself never bought into the plan.

What Nixon decided instead marked a dramatic change in U.S. policy: an acceptance of Israel as a nuclear-weapon state. In a critical September 26, 1969, White House meeting, Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir came to an understanding that the United States would turn a blind eye to Israel’s nuclear effort, end U.S. inspections of Dimona,[2] and not press Israel to join the NPT as long as it abstained from declaring, publicizing, or testing the arsenal. Cohen reveals that national security adviser Henry Kissinger and Yitzhak Rabin, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, memorialized the understanding in writing. Neither that document nor meeting notes authored by Nixon or Meir have ever come to public light. Neither have Nixon’s motives. Some speculate U.S. domestic politics played a role. Cohen suggests that the Nixon Doctrine, the president’s 1969 call for regional allies to strengthen themselves militarily to promote Washington’s interests, may be more telling.

For four decades, the Nixon-Meir understanding has guided U.S. presidents as Israel settled into what Cohen calls its “bargain with the bomb,” namely “enough credible evidence to deter enemies but sufficient ambiguity and lack of acknowledgment to allow friends to look the other way.” Israel sought “to enjoy the benefits of nuclear resolve and nuclear caution and has refused to make a clear-cut choice of one or the other.”

Through the years, Israel largely has stuck to the bargain. It continues public nuclear silence. It has not explosively tested its arsenal, although suspicions persist that it may have exploded a device over the Indian Ocean off South Africa in 1979. Remarkably, even in the most dire circumstance, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel resisted issuing threats against Egypt or Syria as their armies threatened Israel. Indeed, Cohen reports that the war cabinet never seriously considered nuclear use although he and others write that Israel’s placement of its nuclear-capable Jericho missiles on alert in response to a state of alert of Soviet SCUD missiles in Egypt sufficed to scare the United States to airlift much-needed conventional munitions to Israel to dampen fears of nuclear use.

In recent years, Israel has begun to stretch the understanding, albeit modestly. Its acknowledged purchase of German-manufactured submarines capable of launching nuclear-armed cruise missiles translated to a May 2010 report in London’s Sunday Times that it had placed elements of the fleet off the coast of Iran. Such moves constitute a modest revelation of the nuclear threat, which might be called “opacity plus.”[3]

However muted this nuclear saber rattling, Cohen’s concern lies with Israel’s nuclear self-censorship and the implications for Israeli democracy and policy. Given the secrecy that shrouds the program, Cohen clears the institutional underbrush to reveal new but limited information about the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC), the organ responsible for nuclear research and development, as “probably Israel’s most secretive government agency”; the Office of Security for the Israeli Defense Establishment, the most secret department in the Ministry of Defense, responsible for protecting the atomic secrets; and the Office of the Military Censor (Censora) that suppresses public discussion. Cohen notes that the Knesset never brings up the nuclear program for discussion or review. The prime minister exercises ultimate nuclear responsibility, including the appointment of senior nuclear management; but nowhere does the government reveal lines of authority, command and control, nuclear use doctrine, or safeguards to prevent unauthorized use or diversion of weapons or material.

Cohen is impassioned in his condemnation of the Israeli government’s “deliberate and continued
refusal to allow discussion of the subject”: “the bargain with the bomb is at odds with its commitment to democratic norms”; “total amimut is an insult to Israel’s democracy”; “Israel is probably the nuclear democracies’ most extreme case of nondemocratic policymaking”; “Israel’s bargain with the bomb was born and cultivated in an undemocratic, elitist, guardianship ethos dominated by secrecy.”

He concludes that “there is a growing sentiment that the old bargain, centered on amimut, has become anachronistic and awkward.” He says amimut reflects a conservative defensive mindset—“the world is against us”—that has changed little over time. In addition to being undemocratic, the strategy is dangerous, Cohen says. It excludes vital checks and balances. It risks groupthink. It fails to make use of experts outside government. It raises the possibility of nuclear mistakes for a country that has had its share of mistakes in other arenas, such as the 1973 Yom Kippur War and 2006 Lebanon war.

However, when Cohen translates his passion into policy, fault lines emerge and boldness gives way to timidity, generality or, perhaps better put, reality. Cohen finds that wholesale democratization of the nuclear enterprise may not be justified, at least not now as Israel confronts Iran’s nuclear rise. He notes, “As long as Israelis continue to view themselves living under a state of siege, they will not be interested in reforming the bargain, they believe, gives them that existential security.”

Still he pushes the argument for nuclear transparency, at least incrementally. Legislation would define “the legal status of the IAEC as the government’s nuclear agency, its overall mission, authority, subordination, oversight, and so on.” It would specify “the authority of the Prime Minister over nuclear affairs…supervision principles through the Knesset; issues of safety in the IAEC facilities; and more.” Having laid out the principles, Cohen qualifies his passionate call for democratization when he writes, “[S]uch legislation need not require a formal end to amimut. If the state of Israel were not politically ready to move beyond the current boundaries of amimut, no act of legislation could do so.” Indeed, not even the United States’ Atomic Energy Act, which Cohen cites as a model, allows total transparency. True, U.S. institutions reveal much, but the government uses an elastic “no unreasonable risk” criterion to declassify even “formerly restricted data.”

Cohen also hedges on liberalization of Censora’s monitoring. He would not criminalize publication unless it “with near certainty would harm the national interest.” No doubt such language would be a gold mine for dueling lawyers.

More to the point, Cohen’s argument butts against his acknowledgment that amimut has not harmed Israel. In fact, he concedes the benefits: existential deterrence, freedom of nuclear development, preservation of the United States as a tacit partner, and no NPT constraint. This prompts the question, if the system is not broken, why fix it? Cohen concedes that amimut “allows Israel to live in the best of all possible worlds by having the bomb but without having to deal with many of the negative consequences that such possession entails.”

Israel’s policy “is at odds with…emerging international proliferation norms,” Cohen argues. Yet, that critique does not trump the nuclear insurance that amimut provides. Indeed, Israel’s latent nuclear capacity may have tempered regional proliferation and may continue to do so. True, over many years, several of Israel’s neighbors have attempted to acquire the bomb despite amimut: Iraq, Libya, and Syria tried, and Iran continues. However, the lifting of amimut arguably would have inspired more rapid development and encouraged others.

Cohen is correct that amimut challenges Israel’s democratic institutions and nuclear oversight. On balance, however, given the compelling risks posed by nuclear revelation, the limited evidence of harm, and the authority of the elected prime minister over the nuclear enterprise, it appears that amimut remains prudent. That said, The Worst-Kept Secret provides a laudable effort to contest this conventional wisdom and to stir much-needed debate, particularly in Israel.

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