

## Bomb, Opacity, Democracy

Matteo GERLINI

**Israel's nuclear policy is the nation's last taboo. Avner Cohen's book explains that the country's posture of nuclear opacity is incompatible with the values of a liberal democracy and that it undermines the norm of public accountability and oversight. However, in the name of its special relationship with Israel, the US turns a blind eye to Israel's nuclear program.**

Reviewed: Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret. Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.

Why shouldn't Israel bomb Iranian nuclear facilities in order to frustrate the fulfillment of Ahmadinejad's nuclear option? The common sense answer is that, if such were to be the case, the Middle East would erupt. It might seem obvious, but some observers do not take this possibility into due consideration. However, even if we ignore for a moment the anti-Semitic speeches of the Ayatollah, and consider very closely the hardware of nuclear power and the politics of nuclear deterrence, we might not see any other alternative but the termination of the Iranian nuclear program. This could occur by a renunciation to this program on the part of the Iranians themselves, along with a dismantling of uranium enrichment plants as well as plutonium separation facilities. Or, alternatively, this could occur by the destruction of the Iranian facilities by outside forces. As far as the logic of nuclear deterrence is concerned, *tertium non datur*, if Iran went nuclear, the Israeli nuclear deterrent would become rather reduced in potency, if not quite meaningless. If a reformist leader was to take the place of Ahmadinejad but the Iranian nuclear program was still to continue, the problem would remain for Israel. For this reason, *The Worst-*

*Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, Avner Cohen's second book, provides a very stimulating analysis of Israel's past and present nuclear path.

### **The Rationale Behind the Opacity Posture**

Cohen is doubtless a staunch supporter of the peace cause, but such a position does not leave him complete latitude over the need for Israel to have nuclear weapons. Israeli deterrence capability is, in his eyes, the only assurance against a (forthcoming?) nuclear Iran. This is a very crucial point for current debates on the role of nuclear weapons. Moving from an intriguing historical analysis, Cohen realizes a brilliant theoretical discussion on the nuclear opacity posture, in the international arena as well as in the domestic one.

In 1998, Cohen's book *Israel and the Bomb* marked a watershed in the study of Israel's nuclear program. Cohen, a philosopher by education but with some historical publications, undertook the study of the evolution of Israel's nuclear posture. Thanks to a fruitful collaboration with the National Security Archive at the George Washington University of Washington, Cohen realized in his first book an impressive archival research, undertaken in various archives and collections held in Israel, Norway and, obviously, in the US. Cohen's ability to find unclassified versions in the Israeli archives had enabled him to overcome the secrecy classification restrictions still pending on some US documents. This was the case of two letters sent by John F. Kennedy to David Ben Gurion and to his successor Levi Eshkol.

### ***Amimut* as a Key to Understanding Israel Nuclear Policy**

The inner core of Cohen's new book is political. He is dealing with the "nation's last taboo", as the title of his 2005 book in Hebrew suggested. *The Worst-Kept Secret* offers to English readers an analysis of the Israelis' governance of the bomb, a code of nuclear conduct that encompasses both governmental policy and societal behavior. This posture of nuclear opacity is called *Amimut* by Cohen, because only this Hebrew word "conveys the three characteristics indispensable to it: the native approach of a Sabra [a native Israeli], a flavor of the Jewish element of *chutzpah* [audacity], and a Talmudic love of *pilpul* [disputation]".

According to Cohen, this posture has allowed Israel to deemphasize, in its public opinion,

the salience of living in a state with nuclear weapons capability. Israeli citizens were not informed that their state was securing a nuclear option. Not-acknowledging or, alternatively, not-denying the possession of nuclear weapons remains incompatible with the norms and values of a liberal democracy. The author argues that *Amimut* relies on secrecy, violates the public right to know, and undermines the norm of public accountability and oversight. However, it seemed quite problematic for the Israeli democracy to become nuclear in a more “publicly accountable” way without incurring isolation in the international sphere – as it was contradicting emerging international nuclear norms –, and also from her special ally, the USA.

### **Washington, the Permissive Ally?**

*Israel and the Bomb* concluded by sketching-out some elements of the relations between Richard M. Nixon and Golda Meir, but *The Worst-Kept Secret* investigates this more incisively. As Cohen wrote: on “26 September 1969 Meir and Nixon struck a secret accord that allowed the US to look the other way at Israel’s nuclear weapons program as long as Israel kept the program invisible”. This is a crucial point in the historical debate: the emphasis on the Nixon-Meir accord seems to be excessive, given that the final outcome of the tacit agreement – the American turning a blind eye to Israel’s nuclear program – was in a certain sense already an accomplished fact. After a near diplomatic crisis with the U.S., Ben Gurion stated, in December 1960, that the Israeli nuclear program was a peaceful one. The ‘lame duck’ administration of Eisenhower had put a lot of pressure on Ben Gurion to obtain such a statement – press leaks about the ongoing construction of the Dimona nuclear installation were exciting Arabic fears. The Arabs believed Dimona might be a nuclear weapons building facility, and eventually it was. But at the time Ben Gurion made his speech, the Israel nuclear program was not properly a military one yet, in the sense that there was no actual weapons production.

Washington and Tel Aviv also eventually agreed on the organization of visits by US scientists to the Dimona site, which took place more or less on a yearly basis. But the visits only quelled the fears of the Arab States, as they were ineffective in averting Israel’s eventual turn towards nuclear weapons development. According to some estimates quoted in Cohen’s *Israel and the Bomb*, this happened at the end of the Sixties. The main change introduced by the Nixon administration was the cessation of American visits to Dimona, as part of his new Middle Eastern

policy. The termination of visits was not due to an Israeli renunciation of nuclear weapons, and nor was it due to secondary interest of the Nixon administration in nonproliferation. But Nixon did not consider it any more a priority to reassure Arab States on the outcomes of the Israeli nuclear program.

Cohen's work is considered to be definitive on the history of Israel's relations with the US on the nuclear issue. But to understand what Israel's nuclear stand meant in the international arena during the Cold War, we still need a study that also encompasses the USSR's attitude toward Israel's nuclear program.

At the exception of the US-Israel special relationship, Cohen focuses more on the internal debate than on the international one. The book sheds more light on Israel's political struggle over the bomb and the way it might be governed. For example, the history of Shalheveth Freier, the director-general of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, is part of this debate. Ytzhak Rabin dismissed Freier in 1976, according to evidence quoted by Cohen, on the insistence of Shimon Peres. This happened in the midst of a dispute among Israel's policy leaders about the advisability of developing tactical nuclear weapons.

To sum up, through its nuclear program, Israel held both the ploughshare and the sword, but, in Cohen's opinion, it paid a high price in terms of the democratic openness of information. There is no doubt that nuclear deterrence preserved Israel from a possible destruction due to a military defeat (which has however never occurred). However, Israeli deterrence can only work if no other Middle Eastern State is allowed to become nuclear; it explains why Israel is doing everything it can to avoid a situation similar to the one existing between India and Pakistan.

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