

# Deterrence and Ambiguity: Motivations behind Israel's Nuclear Strategy

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PIETER ZHAO, NOV 20 2022

Ever since Bernard Brodie's influential work *The Absolute Weapon* (1946), theories around nuclear strategy have been centered around the concept of nuclear deterrence. This concept was reiterated in an article in *NATO Review* by Jessica Cox, Director of NATO's Nuclear Policy Directorate, in which she emphasized that nuclear deterrence is still relevant and should be the main philosophy behind all nuclear weapon policies (Cox, 2020). Thus, deterrence—the threat to carry out a devastating attack—still dominates over defense as the main way to protect the state in nuclear strategy (Tannenwald, 2020). Major nuclear powers, like China, the United States, and Russia, are therefore happy to emphasize this deterrent effect by showing off their latest nuclear technologies. Yet, this dominant theory surrounding nuclear strategy often seems to be centered around the great nuclear powers and the balance between them. But are these principles actually applicable to all nuclear powers, including the regional ones? Following this question, this paper considers the case of Israel with its policy of 'nuclear ambiguity' based on a declassified memorandum retrieved from the Wilson Center Digital Archive. The article starts by introducing the source and evaluating its usefulness and reliability. Afterward, attention is shifted toward the necessary historical context before analyzing the source to address Israel's nuclear policy and the dominant International Relations (IR) theories that underpin it.

Israel has widely been recognized as the sixth state to become a member of the so-called "nuclear club." However, the Israeli government has never officially acknowledged nor denied having such nuclear weapons capabilities, leading to a policy of deliberate ambiguity, i.e. 'nuclear ambiguity' (Bahgat, 2007). Thus, in order to find out more about Israel's nuclear policy, analysts and observers are forced to use non-Israeli primary sources. A declassified memorandum, written by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to President Nixon on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1969 to discuss the "Israeli Nuclear Problem," therefore, provides interesting insights (Kissinger, 1969). In this memorandum, Kissinger summarizes the situation regarding the Israeli Nuclear Program to President Nixon and advises on how to proceed. Kissinger wrote the memorandum following a meeting of the National Security Council on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1969. The main issue was that even though Israel had not publicly acknowledged it, the United States knew that Israel had developed some sort of nuclear weapons capability. This was highly problematic because it could increase the danger in the Middle East and increase tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The National Security Council, therefore, drew up several recommendations on how to proceed (Kissinger, 1969). Interestingly enough, in this memorandum, Kissinger clearly tries to impose his own opinion as the best way to proceed, while somewhat neglecting the recommendations from the National Security Council. This observation fits the so-called 'special relationship' between Nixon and Kissinger, relating to the prominent role Kissinger played in US foreign policy (Litwak, 1986). As this memorandum was exclusively addressed to the President, it is a reliable source of information about US foreign policy thinking regarding Israel's nuclear weapons program in this period. Admittedly, however, certain parts of the document remain censored, meaning that not everything is declassified. But this does not severely undermine the overall usefulness of the source.

What makes this source particularly interesting is that it provides a (partial) explanation for Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity. Publicly, the United States opposed Israel's nuclear program in its entirety, but because it was too late to prevent it altogether, Kissinger looked for a more pragmatic solution. In short, the United States wanted to prevent Israel from publicly becoming a nuclear weapon state as this would affect nuclear non-proliferation efforts, create

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charges of US complicity, increase the danger in the Middle East, and intensify Soviet-American tensions (Kissinger, 1969). Thus, Kissinger first proposes to use the delivery of American weapons, in particular Phantom fighter-bombers, as leverage to force Israel to freeze its nuclear program. However, he continues that this is not a very practical objective (as it still makes the United States accomplices), and instead, the United States should—'for the record'—publicly state that it wants to prevent Israel from attaining nuclear weapons. In turn, Kissinger suggests persuading the Israelis to promise not to publicly announce their possession of nuclear weapons while using their arms trade relationship as leverage. In doing so, he also advises that Israel should sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as there are enough loopholes within the treaty to continue their program in secret (Kissinger, 1969).

As a result, this source perfectly fits the broader historical setting of the time. Israel had been pursuing nuclear technology since its genesis, as they firmly believed that a nuclear weapons capability was necessary to ensure Israel's survival and security (Reed & Stillman, 2010). A declassified 1964 report from the Canadian Defence Research Board confirms this by quoting Israeli Chief of Staff Major-General Tzur, who emphasizes the need for Israel to develop 'new weapons,' clearly hinting toward nuclear weapons (Canadian Defence Research Board, 1964). Indeed, Israel sought to deter any attack from its hostile Arab neighbors and maintain military superiority in the region, which it believed could not be done conventionally. Moreover, the period in which this memorandum was written is characterized by the relaxation of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the so-called *Détente* (Litwak, 1986). It could, therefore, be problematic for the United States if Israel's nuclear weapons program became public. Moreover, the Non-Proliferation Treaty had just been negotiated and opened for signature, which maintained the nuclear balance of power. Israel's nuclear publicity would, therefore, severely undermine these NPT efforts.

However, if the deterrent effect against Israel's hostile Arab neighbors was the main aim of Israel's nuclear weapons program, why then, would Israel keep a policy of nuclear ambiguity? This does not follow the logic of the nuclear revolution theory and the dominant principles guiding nuclear strategy based on nuclear deterrence (Jervis, 1986). Israel could, for example, maximize this deterrent effect by publicly testing or acknowledging its nuclear weapons. The memorandum, therefore, helps us understand Israel's motivations behind its position. As Kissinger proposed, Israel's policy of deliberate ambiguity enables Israel and the United States to continue their crucial relationship. In doing so, this analysis perfectly illustrates how the conduct of both states during this period of history mainly seems to be fueled by realist assumptions and hard-power considerations. The increased institutionalization through international institutions like the United Nations, and International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as international treaties like the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which should promote cooperation and transparency as liberalist IR theory would argue, seems to be heavily undermined by the more Waltzian realist motivations. Indeed, the United States even advised Israel to sign the NPT (which they eventually did not) and use its loopholes to continue their nuclear developments in secrecy. The case study, therefore, nicely illustrates how individual state interests dominated in relation to the American-Israeli interactions surrounding Israel's nuclear weapons program and motivated both parties to undermine international agreements for the sake of their national security and strategic interests.

To conclude, it turns out that the dominant theories and principles that underpin nuclear strategies and policies do not necessarily apply to all nuclear powers. Instead of openly acknowledging its nuclear weapons capabilities and, thereby, maximizing its deterrent effect, Israel keeps a policy of deliberate nuclear ambiguity, which goes against the logic of the nuclear revolution theory. A memorandum written by Henry Kissinger to President Nixon in 1969 provides a partial explanation for this unique position and subsequently exposes the strategic and theoretical underpinnings of American and Israeli conduct in international politics during this period of history. Of course, because of the limited nature of this paper, I could not look into all the sources and factors involved. But the differences in nuclear strategy between all nuclear powers, and particularly regional powers, remain an interesting topic that is often overlooked by a focus on the great powers and should, therefore, gain more attention.

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