

Exposé of Israeli nuclear arsenal raises urgent U.S. policy questions

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The Samson Option, Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy

by Seymour M. Hersh

Random House, New York, 1991

356 pages, hardbound, \$23

For the past 20 years, successive U.S. administrations have used the issue of nuclear non-proliferation as a battering ram against developing sector nations seeking to develop modern industrial economies. The Bush administration took this hypocritical approach to the nuclear proliferation issue to new heights by bombing Iraq's industry and infrastructure during the Gulf war and then proceeding to impose a ban against any industrial technologies reaching Baghdad. The Bush administration and its friends at the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have since added Algeria, Brazil, Argentina, among other Third World nations, to the list of countries to be targeted for their so-called nuclear weapons programs.

It is in the context of this vicious technological apartheid effort that the publication of a new book exposing how the United States turned a blind eye on Israel's nuclear bomb project, offers an even deeper insight into the degree of hypocrisy governing U.S. policy over the past decades.

Seymour Hersh's book-length exposé of Israel's nuclear weapons program is, to use a bad pun, explosive: The mysterious death of British publisher Robert Maxwell within a week of the book's release points to the quality of at least some of Hersh's material. Maxwell, an ardent Zionist and asset of the British Rothschild interests, did not figure prominently in Hersh's detailed account of Israel's nearly 40-year secret quest to obtain and deploy an arsenal of nuclear weapons. But the brief reference to Maxwell and his Mirror Publishing Group was devastating.

According to Hersh, Maxwell and the foreign editor of the *Daily Mirror*, Nicholas Davies, conspired with the Israeli Mossad to kidnap and silence Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli engineer employed at the super-secret Dimona nuclear weapons plant in the Negev Desert. Vanunu appeared in London in the autumn of 1986 with photos and other details of the

program offering to tell all. While the rival *Sunday Times* of London gave the young Israeli a fistful of money for the story, the *Daily Mirror* team turned Vanunu over to the Mossad and even pinpointed the hotel where he was hiding. As the result of Vanunu's kidnaping, secret trial, and incarceration, most of the world's press never took the Dimona story seriously. And, according to Hersh, after consulting with senior Mossad officials back in Israel, Maxwell led a media campaign to discredit Vanunu and further ensure that the story never saw the light of day again.

While the death of Maxwell is still shrouded in mystery, certain facts indicate that his demise was linked to the Hersh exposé. As soon as *The Samson Option* appeared in Britain, both Maxwell and Davies sued to have it banned as libel. However, days after the suit was filed, Davies was suddenly fired from the *Daily Mirror*, and his name was dropped from the suit. It seemed that independent sources in Britain had turned up evidence which strongly suggested, as Hersh reports, that Davies had been recruited to work for the Mossad, could be proven. Forty-eight hours after Davies was fired, Maxwell's body was found floating in the ocean off the Canary Islands. His death has been called a suicide, a murder, an accidental drowning, and a heart attack.

The Maxwell-Mossad story is just one of a series of startling revelations contained in the Hersh book. A brief section of *The Samson Option* deals with the case of Jonathan Jay Pollard. Prior to the publication of Hersh's book, the only news organization to charge that some of the most damaging American secrets stolen by Pollard had been passed by Israeli intelligence to the KGB was *EIR*. Hersh not only corroborates, but amplifies the original *EIR* information. Citing well-placed American government sources, and documents presented at the Pollard sentencing, Hersh proves that Pollard had been recruited to spy for Israel by no later than 1981—three years before his publicly acknowledged recruitment. Further, Hersh names Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir as one of the architects of the Israeli policy of passing critical U.S. military secrets to Moscow.

Hersh writes, citing an Israeli government source: "Pollard material was sanitized and dictated to a secretary before being turned over to the Soviets. Some material was directly provided to Yevgeni M. Primakov, the Soviet Foreign Ministry specialist on the Middle East who met publicly and pri-



Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir reviewing troops at the Pentagon in 1987. Even though the U.S. knew about Israel's nuclear weapons program, a flagrant violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the White House remained blind, deaf, and dumb to the program: All White House briefings on the Israeli bomb were strictly verbal. No records were to be kept of American knowledge that Israel had obtained the bomb.

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vately with Shamir while he was prime minister. Shamir's turning to the Soviets was consistent with his personal and political beliefs. . . . While in Mossad in the 1950s and 1960s, Shamir was known for his efforts to improve relationships with his KGB counterparts. . . . He worked diligently to develop new ties with the Soviet Union, which he envisioned as a means of balancing, or offsetting, Israel's traditional reliance on the U.S." Yevgeni Primakov is now the head of the overseas division of the KGB.

According to Hersh, the Pollard spy program was not just the handiwork of Shamir, ex-Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, and Sharon's sidekick Rafi Eytan. The entire political leadership of Israel was fully aware that Pollard was spying on America, and a handful of both Labor and Likud leaders knew that data were being passed on to Moscow. Hersh claims that a number of Israelis, including Yitzhak Rabin, were disturbed about the spying. But nobody blew the whistle, and, after Pollard's arrest in November 1985, the entire Israeli political and intelligence establishment joined in the coverup.

The heart of the matter

Much of Hersh's book is a detailed history of how Israel secretly got the nuclear bomb. According to his account, in September 1956, six weeks before the outbreak of the Suez War, a secret agreement was struck between Israel and France. Shimon Peres and Ernst David Bergmann, Israel's top nuclear scientist, got a commitment from the French government to build the nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant at Dimona. Israeli scientists had already been working

for years inside the French, British, and American secret nuclear research programs, but until Israel got the commitment from France to actually construct the facility, it would have been impossible for Israel to get the bomb. From the outset, the program was the personal project of David Ben-Gurion, who was both prime minister and minister of defense when the original deal was struck.

One of the ironies highlighted by Hersh is the fact that the Israeli bomb program, which Ben-Gurion believed was essential to ensure Israel's survival, had a devastating impact on the Israeli economy, and therefore its national security. The program cost an enormous amount of money, even though much of the funding came from secret donations organized by the American Jewish community. It was even more significantly a major "brain drain." Many of Israel's most gifted engineers and scientists were coopted into the Dimona program and never again put their talents to use in building an Israeli agro-industrial infrastructure, which in reality was far more essential to Israel's survival.

By the time of the 1973 Middle East War, Israel had a small arsenal of deployable nuclear weapons. On at least two occasions, according to Hersh, Israel activated its "Samson Option" by putting those warheads on ready status. In secret back-channel talks with Henry Kissinger (President Nixon, caught up in the Watergate scandal, was never consulted or informed by Kissinger), Israel "blackmailed" the U.S. into airlifting an enormous amount of military hardware using the nuclear threat.

A recurring theme of the book was the failure of U.S. intelligence to evaluate the scope of the Israeli program.