

Revisiting Israel's Nuclear Option

by Dean Andromidas

The launch of Israel's most sophisticated spy satellite, Ofek 5, gave Ariel Sharon's government unprecedented surveillance capability covering the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, at a time when it is moving toward an expanding regional war. The May 28 launch on a Shavit rocket occurred within days of Iran's testing of its Shihab 3 ballistic missile, capable of reaching Israel. Then on June 15, a *Washington Post* "signal" article confirmed Israel's ability to deploy nuclear-tipped cruise missiles from its three newly acquired submarines.

These developments, while the war party in Washington plots an early attack on Iraq, warn of a potential nuclear dimension of the conflict that threatens to engulf the region.

EIR on Nov. 10, 2000 reported that Israel had a submarine-based nuclear capability, and warned that if then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak (Labor) were to form a national unity government with the Likud's Ariel Sharon, Israel's march to a regional war could not be stopped. Now Sharon is Prime Minister in a national unity government that could provide him with the consensus required to back a regional war, and even a nuclear war.

Ofek 5: More Than a Better Satellite

Ofek 5 is able to "see" objects as small as one meter in diameter. Its launching was a warning to Iraq and Iran, which are on the top of Israel's list of strategic threats. But just as important is the fact that the Shavit launch vehicle, with a range of 4,500 kilometers, is the model for Israel's Jericho III intercontinental ballistic missile.

The Ofek 5 ("Horizon") restored Israeli satellite intelligence-gathering capabilities after the failure of Ofek 4 in 1998 and the de-orbit of Ofek 3 in 2001. Beyond Iran and Iraq, the satellite can observe countries as far west as Morocco and as far east as Pakistan, covering all of Western Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. According to senior Israeli intelligence sources, it gives Israel an independent intelligence-gathering capability for target acquisition and battle management in "theaters of war" such as Iran and Iraq. This source said that when the Cabinet was shown the first Ofek 5 pictures of the streets of Tehran and Baghdad, the ministers cheered.

The broad coverage of Ofek 5 matches the radius of Israel's most powerful ballistic missile, the Jericho III. According to a 1999 report in *Janes' Sentinel*, the Shavit could easily be

"modified for military purposes and converted into a powerful ballistic missile" with a payload of 1,100 kilograms. The Shavit is produced by Israeli Aircraft Industries, which also produces all the Jericho-class missiles. Israel has been denied access to U.S. commercial satellite launching sites because the Shavit is such a blatant violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime, the 25-member international suppliers' organization established in 1987 to prevent the spread of nuclear-capable missile systems.

Second-Strike or First-Strike Capability?

The *Washington Post* reported that Israel has "three diesel submarines that it is arming with newly designed cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, according to former Pentagon and State Department officials, potentially giving Israel a triad of land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear weapons for the first time." The cruises were tested two years ago in the Indian Ocean and have a 1,500 kilometer range. The article quotes a former Pentagon official, "It is above top secret, knowing whether the sub-launched cruise missiles are nuclear armed." The United States apparently does not ask.

Despite the fact that Israel's doomsday machine puts it in the first place among "rogue states," the United States continues to be content to allow Israel to possess these weapons under Israel's policy of "ambiguity," where it neither confirms nor denies its possession of them. The *Washington Post* claims they constitute a second-strike capability aimed at Iran's and Iraq's efforts to develop accurate missiles that could knock out Israel's land-based nuclear weapons. The implication is that Israel is playing the same "deterrence" game that the United States and the Soviet Union played during the Cold War.

This is a dangerous assumption. It will be another decade, if ever, before any Arab state or Iran will have missiles accurate enough to knock out Israel's nuclear arsenal. *EIR*'s November 2000 exposé warned that these weapons are not only directed at Israel's Arab adversaries, but also serve as blackmail against hesitant allies, such as the United States, which might see fit to pressure Israel rather than allow it to turn the world's largest source of oil into a charred battlefield. Israel reportedly used this tactic in the June 1967 war, when it threatened to use its nuclear weapons. During the October 1973 war, it activated 13 nuclear weapons, to convince the Americans to launch a military resupply operation, which in turn enabled Israel to throw the Egyptian Army back across the Suez Canal.

Since November 2000, the situation has changed dramatically, with Israel's policies, now dictated by Sharon, totally unacceptable to any of the U.S.'s Arab allies, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, George W. Bush's administration is committed to a war on Iraq and the other nations of the "axis of evil." It refuses to pressure Sharon to negotiate a peace agreement with the Palestinians, though a faction in the administration cautions against allowing Sharon total freedom of action, because it might upset U.S. plans for a war on

Iraq. The situation could set the nuclear stage for a “break-away ally” scenario, where Sharon, or someone even more extreme, such as Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, would lead Israel into a new regional war, including deployment of nuclear weapons.

Sharon’s Regional War in the Works

A senior Israeli intelligence source warned, “Now is the best time for Sharon to start a small, or even a large Middle East war. Internally Sharon is facing an economic collapse for which he has no solution. The economy is so bad, the polls are now showing negative support for Sharon, but . . . when people are asked who they think would be an alternative to Sharon, they are no longer responding with support for Benjamin Netanyahu. They are simply saying nothing. But the most important fact is that the Bush Administration refuses to dump its support for Sharon. Now is the best time for him to start a war.”

The same issue of the *Washington Post* that confirmed Israel’s submarine-based nuclear capability, reported Sharon’s claims to President Bush during their meeting on June 10, that Hezbollah was stockpiling of weapons in Lebanon, and that an attack on Israeli territory “could be launched within the next several days.” The same week, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Al-Shara’a cancelled an official visit to Washington because the Bush Administration indicated he was not welcome.

General Mofaz, detailing the Hezbollah buildup to the Knesset (parliament) on June 19, said that an Israeli response to this danger would prompt a retaliatory strike from Hezbollah with long-range missiles, provided by Iran, against northern Israel. Israel would reply, by launching a military strike inside Syrian territory.

An Israeli attack on Syrian territory could have incalculable consequences. Since the end of the 1973 war, neither Israel nor Syria has violated the cease-fire accords. Moreover, Syria is strongly allied, not only to Iran, but to Saudi Arabia as well, and in recent years has expanded its relations with Iraq. In this context, it has been reported that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak requested President Bush to pass on a letter to Sharon, warning that if Sharon launched a massive military attack on the Gaza Strip, which borders on Egypt, Egypt would consider it a national security danger. This is also a warning to the Bush Administration, since it involves the security clauses of the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David peace agreement, of which the United States is the guarantor. If America should fail to act, Egypt might have to deploy military forces in the demilitarized Sinai.

The senior Israeli intelligence source cited above told *EIR*, “The entire Arab world knows that as long as Sharon is in power, war is certain. If Israel attacks Syria, anything can happen, or nothing can happen. The current situation is just too tense. The most important factor is, what will the Bush Administration do?”