Israel's secret nuclear arsenal

Talks designed to secure an agreement on Iran's nuclear programme look like they will be extended. Meanwhile, Yassamine Mather looks at the one country in the Middle East that is already armed with nuclear weapons

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On July 13 the Persian-speaking spokesperson of the US state department was asked by the BBC if in the absence of any progress in negotiations between the P5+1 powers and Iran before July 20 there would be an extension to the deadline for the final phase of nuclear discussions. His reply was clear: John Kerry is in Vienna to resolve the differences and we want to sign the final deal. So don't let's talk of extensions.

Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, was in Vienna for those talks in an attempt to resolve what William Hague has called "a huge gap" - in particular between Iran's demand for a future nuclear enrichment programme in spite of the west's strong opposition.

By July 15, after three meetings with Iranian officials, Kerry seemed positive, although both he and Zarif were already hinting at an extension of the July 20 deadline. Further concessions by Iran are likely to include a possible delay of three to seven years in pursuing aspects of the country's nuclear programme. Irrespective of the final outcome, it is clear that Iran is under considerable pressure to sign the final agreement. A return to sanctions worse than in the 2010-13 period is unthinkable. However, the Iranian negotiating team is aware that the "full support" of supreme leader Ali Khamenei will only last as long as they can come up with a face-saving compromise.

In theory the general outlines of the proposed final deal between the P5+1 and Iran is very clear: western powers will recognise Iran's rights to have a nuclear industry, as long as the country accepts inspections and verification of all its nuclear facilities. On the face

of it, both sides agree with this proposal and, given the current US predicament over Iraq (not to mention Syria and Afghanistan), one might have thought there would be fresh momentum to resolve things. However, US-Iranian relations are not that simple and the west's insistence on restrictions on nuclear enrichment, the closure of the Arak heavy water plant and an end to plutonium production go far beyond nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) conditions (they are, according to the Iranian team, "NPT-plus").

Iranian president Hassan Rowhani sent his brother to Vienna, apparently as an advisor to the foreign secretary, but sections of the Iranian press claim he came with new proposals that should narrow the gap between the two sides - better monitoring facilities, and a delay in pursuing certain aspects of the nuclear programme in return for Iran's right to enrich uranium.

However, none of this is sufficient for the US. The reality is, the US wants to punish Iran and make sure it cannot benefit from the political vacuum in the region. It wants to ensure that its own interpretation of the NPT becomes the norm, as far as the developing world is concerned. On this Khamenei is probably right when he says US concerns have little to do with nuclear proliferation.

Stages

Two interpretations of the NPT have dominated the various stages of the talks. On the one hand, there is the non-aligned countries' literal interpretation. The 'Brics' states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) believe the NPT allows for the development of what is known as 'fuel cycle capabilities'. In fact Brazil and South Africa, who have given up nuclear weapons capability themselves, are allowed to enrich nuclear material, and the Iranian president and foreign minister have based their negotiating position on this interpretation of the NPT.

On the other hand, the US and its allies clearly believe that specific rules should be imposed on certain countries. In this interpretation of the NPT, initiated in the early 2000s by George Bush, the intention is to impose an international ban on the transfer of fuel cycle technologies to countries that do not already possess them. This understanding has been followed by the Obama administration, which insisted on changes to NPT conditions to enable more intrusive and proactive inspections in specific states. Definitely the restrictions posed on Tehran are of this category: ie, they are unique to Iran.

That is why the most important obstacle to a deal over the last few months has been the controversy regarding 'dual use' capability and fuel cycle technology. Power stations, as well as nuclear medical research, rely on enriched uranium, and the same reactors producing civil-use uranium can provide the capability to enrich it to the higher levels of concentration necessary for making nuclear bombs.

Over the last decade the US administration has insisted the UN security council adopt resolutions aimed at ending nuclear enrichment in Iran. Tehran accepted them, together with Washington's demand to limit nuclear enrichment to 20%. According to International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, Iran has complied with all the restrictions imposed as of November 2013: all uranium enriched beyond 5% was diluted or converted to uranium oxide. The installation or preparation of new centrifuges was halted, and 50% of the centrifuges at the Natanz enrichment facility and 75% at the Fordow enrichment facility have been made inoperable. At the Arak nuclear power plant fuel production has stopped. The IAEA inspectors have been granted daily access to Natanz and Fordow, with some sites monitored by 24-hour cameras. They also have access to Iran's uranium mines and centrifuge production facilities. In other words, there has been full compliance with the interim conditions.

However, it has been obvious since November 2013 that serious points of contention between Iran and P5+1, not least over interpretation of the NPT, will make the final stages of these negotiations much more difficult. Contrary to what was reported in most of the media, the issue is not over the number of centrifuges, but 'separative work units' (SWU), by which the power of uranium enrichment is measured in kilograms or metric tonnes. Two weeks ago Khamenei surprised many commentators by divulging the sticking point of the negotiations. According to the Iranian side, the country needs 190,000 SWU per year. But clearly this is a red line for the Obama administration.

Israel and NPT

Throughout these negotiations the elephant in the room has been Israel. Here is a country with nuclear weapons capability, yet it denies it has any nuclear plants, has not signed the NPT and therefore is exempt from any inspections or monitoring. However, the whole world knows about its heavy water plant in Dimona (listed as a textile factory), which produces at least 40kg of plutonium a year - sufficient for 10 atom bombs.

Israel began its nuclear weapons research from its inception as a state in 1948. In exchange for Israeli cooperation during the Suez crisis in 1956, France provided know-how and helped in the construction of a reactor complex at Dimona - it is capable of large-scale plutonium production and reprocessing. By 1958 the US knew about the nuclear facility and, according to White House documents released under the 50-year rule, the subject came up in a number of discussions between US presidents and Israeli prime ministers.

However, in the early 1960s French president Charles de Gaulle ordered restrictions and conditions on the supply of uranium to Israel and in 1964 it was discovered that Argentina had agreed to sell 80 tons of uranium 'yellow cake' to Israel, which replaced the fuel it had expected from France. The story of the Argentine yellow cake sale to Israel has remained largely untold because Israel went to great lengths to keep it a secret and because the US government and its close allies kept quiet about what they knew at the time.

After French disengagement in the early 1960s, Israel continued to progress its nuclear programme covertly. Before the 1967 Six-Day War, several nuclear devices were reportedly assembled. Israel had certainly produced its first nuclear weapon by 1967, but it was not until 1968-69 that US officials concluded that an Israeli bomb existed.

The yellow cake issue was a big Israeli secret, but bigger still was the existence of a reprocessing facility to convert reactor fuel from Dimona into weapons-grade plutonium. The Israelis had told the Canadians and the Americans in 1961 that Dimona would include a pilot plant for reprocessing, but it was assumed that it would be too small to support a weapons programme. In reality the original French design for Dimona included a large underground reprocessing facility - Israel's most important nuclear secret, which Dimona technician Mordechai Vanunu made public in 1986. Soon after *The Times* published an interview with Vanunu, he was lured to Rome, where he was kidnapped by Mossad, smuggled back to Israel and jailed.

In 1969 the CIA became concerned about massive loss of material from Pennsylvania's Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation and its possible connection to Israel's nuclear programme. We know this because the CIA wrote to the US attorney general: "It is critical for us to establish whether or not the Israelis now have the capability for fabricating nuclear weapons, which might be employed in the near east."[1]

Israel was expected to sign the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, a number of international events delayed ratification and it was during this period that Israel's internal divisions and hesitations over the treaty became public. The Johnson administration tried to use the sale of 50 F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers to pressure Israel to sign the NPT, but subsequently abandoned the idea. In April 1969 Henry Kissinger issued a national security study memorandum asking for a review of options for dealing with the Israeli nuclear programme, linking it to the pending sale of the Phantom. However, "if we explain our position publicly, we will be the ones to make Israel's possession of nuclear weapons public, with all the international consequences this entails."[2]

In September 1969, US president Richard Nixon met with Israeli premier Golda Meir and, according to Avner Cohen, the author of *Israel and the bomb*,[3] there is sufficient historical evidence to indicate that the two "reached a secret understanding on at least one issue: Israel would keep its nuclear devices out of sight and not test them, and the United States would tolerate the situation and not press Israel to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that has been embraced by scores of countries around the world. That understanding remains to this day."[4]

There is no written record of the meeting between Nixon and Meir that took place on September 26 1969. However, it marks the beginning of the US-Israeli nuclear understanding, whereby Israel pledged to maintain "nuclear restraint" - no testing, no declaration, no visibility - while White House agreed to "stand down" its pressure on Israel. Following on from this, on February 23 1970 the Israeli ambassador to the US,

Yitzhak Rabin, informed Kissinger that, in the light of Nixon's conversation with Meir in September 1969, Israel "has no intention to sign the NPT".

By 1975, 'opacity' regarding Israeli nuclear arms had become the norm and, in keeping with the US-Israel understanding, when Congress questioned the state department as to whether Israel had nuclear weapons, the response was predictable. The state department refused to deny or confirm the existence of an Israeli bomb.

There are many unknowns about Israel's nuclear capability. However, according to a study published by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute entitled *Plutonium and highly enriched uranium, 1996: world inventories, capabilities and policies*, Israel had "a complete repertoire" of nuclear weaponry (neutron bombs, nuclear mines, suitcase bombs, submarine-based missiles ...). This was the year that the UN general assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East. By 2006 the Federation of American Scientists believed that Israel "could have produced enough plutonium for at least 100 nuclear weapons, but probably not significantly more than 200 weapons."[5]

In 2009, during a press conference in the White House, Washington reporter Helen Thomas asked the US president if he knew of any country in the Middle East with nuclear weapons. Predictably Obama avoided a reply, saying only that he did not want to "speculate". UK spokespersons have followed the US lead on this. When asked about the Israeli bomb, Conservative peer and foreign affairs minister Baroness Warsi would only say: "Israel has not declared a nuclear weapons programme. We have regular discussions with the government of Israel on a range of nuclear-related issues."

Safe?

In parallel with such obfuscation, whenever the issue of an Israeli nuclear bomb is raised, there is always the implication that this is not a central question in any case. After all, Israel is a 'democracy' - unlike Iran, a religious autocracy.

Of course, it is true that nuclear weaponry in the hands of a religious dictatorship is hardly an inspiring prospect, especially when sections of the Shia theocracy talk about an Armageddon to precipitate the return of the 12th Shia imam. It is also true that protection against accidents for staff working in the nuclear industry and requirements regarding nuclear plants in an earthquake zone are matters of great importance - despite IAEA monitoring, the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme is, above all else, a danger to its own population.

Having said that, Zionist Israel is unencumbered by external monitoring and can hardly be considered trustworthy. The fact that Israel arranged the kidnapping of the only technician who has dared to speak out about the country's undeclared nuclear facilities, in order to make sure he could reveal no more from his prison cell, tells us a lot.

Are Israel's nuclear facilities 'safe' as far as Israelis and others in the neighbouring countries, or indeed worldwide, are concerned? The answer is definitely no. The nuclear industry is inherently unsafe and obviously secret 'nuclear' plants, which by definition are beyond public scrutiny, are even more dangerous. Nuclear industry specialists consider 40-year-old facilities such as Israel's 'textile factory' nuclear plant to be in desperate need of replacement.

Several accidents have occurred in Dimona. The first we know of took place in 1956 or 1957, before the construction of the nuclear plant itself. Scientists in the Weizmann Institute working on the construction of the reactor revealed: "Material which was supposed to seal the nuclear substance and protect it from leaking cracked and radioactive materials leaked. This was discovered late, and high reading of nuclear material was found in the laboratory and in the bodies of some of the workers. High radiation was also found in the homes of the young scientists, articles they touched and even their children's beds."[6]

This was all reported by the Hebrew-language newspaper *Maariv* in 2006 following 50 years of censorship on this question.

Haya Sadeh, widow of Dror Sadeh, one of the scientists employed at the lab, explains the situation as follows: "Dror arrived from the Weizmann Institute with two other persons and a Geiger counter in order to measure the radiation levels. They said there had been an 'accident'. They went to the hut where we lived and then to the children's dormitory where our son was staying. They found contamination on everything that Dror touched, even on Shmuel's baby crib and his sheets. Dror would come every time from the lab and directly go over to the children's dorm. They saw that everything was contaminated. We had a sink where we would make coffee. The sink and utensils were all contaminated. We got rid of the utensils and Dror's clothes. None of us knew about the dangers of nuclear materials."[7]

This incident forced Israeli authorities to close down the Weizmann Institute while all those working there were asked to undergo tests. We know of at least two scientists, including Dror Sadeh, who died of cancer as a result of the incident.

Haya Sadeh explains the 'democratic' Israeli state's approach: "They were all interested in keeping the incident quiet. Nobody knew that the Weizmann Institute was doing things like that. I too talked to no-one regarding these issues. I thought, 'Why ruin things?' It would have closed down the institute. However, it was always at the back of my mind, but Dror did not want to think about it, not even after the first scientist died."

On December 14 1966 another major accident occurred in the Dimona reactor. One employee was killed and an entire section was contaminated. At the time it was thought that the improper use of alcohol for cleaning purposes was the main cause of the accident. The clean-up took weeks and throughout this period the reactor was shut down.

Then in 1982 a hydrogen leak produced a small explosion and in the early 1990s a large fire broke out in the reactor's grounds, causing another shutdown, this time for a longer period. Again, there was a news blackout - you can hardly admit to nuclear accident if you deny having a nuclear programme.

In 1994, following heavy rains in the Dimona area, water leaked from the reactor's drainage pools. Clearly this water was contaminated. Yossi Sarid, minister of environmental affairs, told reporters they could not bring their own Geiger counters to the scene and instead produced a reading from a ministerial counter, which gave a zero result. Clearly a stage-managed pretence at an investigation. However, Sarid admitted in front of the TV cameras that Yitzhak Rabin, then prime minister, had forbidden the publication of the official findings. And, of course, no-one was allowed to ask about the nuclear waste from a plant that does not exist.

In October 1997, a Tel Aviv district court judge ordered £427,000 be paid to the family of an employee at the Negev Nuclear Research Centre in Dimona, who died of cancer in 1989, aged 43. The judge ruled there was a link between his death and his work, as he could have been exposed to radiation.

None of this means we should ignore accidents that have taken place at Iranian plants, such as the blast at Isfahan in 2011, or the lax attitude to health and safety reported by staff. However, at least Iran's nuclear plants are clearly marked on the map - they are not shown as textile plants and they are regularly monitored by IAEA inspectors. Those of us who have campaigned for a nuclear-free Middle East oppose Iran's nuclear programme as much as that of Israel.

However, achieving such an aim requires openness about existing nuclear capability in the region and the Zionist state's 'secret' nuclear programme, which is so prone to accidents and mishaps, making a mockery of western claims of adhering to non-proliferation. It is such double standards that provoke such deep resentment in the region and, in the absence of a revolutionary left, it will be the fundamentalists and jihadists who continue benefit from such obvious imperialist arrogance l

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Notes

1. http://irmep.org/ila/numec/04021968_Helms_Clark.pdf.

2. www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/kissinger_memo.pdf.

3. A Cohen *Israel and the bomb* Columbia 1998.

4. www.nytimes.com/2007/11/29/world/middleeast/29nixon.html?pagewanted=print.

5. http://fas.org/nuke/guide/israel/nuke.

6. See www.armagedon.org.il/dimona_english.htm.

7. *Ibid*.