

IX. Israeli nuclear forces

Israel has not confirmed or denied that it has nuclear weapons. It is thought to have as many as 200 nuclear warheads, consisting of aircraft bombs, missile warheads and non-strategic weapons. Although a 2001 US DOD report omits Israel from its review of the Middle East, a 1991 US Strategic Air Command study lists Israel as a 'de facto' nuclear weapon state along with India and Pakistan.⁵⁷

Since the late 1990s, the question of the continued validity of Israel's long-standing policy of nuclear ambiguity has been raised in several contexts: parliamentary pressure for a policy review in 1997–98; the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in 1998; rumours in 2000 of Iran's alleged development of a nuclear weapon capability; and the terrorist attacks in the United States of 11 September 2001. However, no apparent change has resulted from these debates. Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai stated in July 1998 that the 30-year policy not to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the region was 'a formula that has served us well and, at least for the time being, should remain in place'. The policy 'has achieved a deterrent', a senior defence official was reported to have said, 'yet it hasn't broken any taboos'.⁵⁸

Israel first began to separate plutonium at the Dimona facility in 1966, and design work on the first nuclear explosive device was successfully completed around the same time. On the eve of the Six-Day War of June 1967, Israel reportedly 'improvised' two deliverable nuclear explosive devices.⁵⁹ After the war, efforts to build an operational nuclear arsenal intensified and an explosion on 22 September 1979 high in the atmosphere over the South Indian Ocean off the coast of South Africa is believed by some to have been a clandestine Israeli test. Today, nuclear weapons are assembled at the design laboratory at Yodefat Rafael facility, outside Haifa, known as Division 20. Dimona, in the Negev desert, is the location of a plutonium–tritium production reactor and underground chemical separation and nuclear component fabrication facilities. Nuclear weapon research and design takes place at the Soreq Center near the town of Yavne and the 'Soreq Center runs the full nuclear gamut of activities . . . required for nuclear weapons design and fabrication', according to a 1987 Pentagon study.⁶⁰ The Soreq Center shares a security zone with the Palmikhim AB, from where missiles are assembled and test launched into the Mediterranean Sea. Operational nuclear weapons are thought to be stored near the Tel Nof AB, south-east of Tel Aviv, which is also adjacent to the Sdot Micha AFB for the Jericho missiles. Some sources say that these weapons may be stored at the nearby Tiros depot, but all three facilities may form part of a larger complex (it is only 9 km from Tel Nof in the north to Sdot Micha in the south).

Strike aircraft

Over the past 30 years Israel has had many different types of aircraft capable of carrying nuclear bombs. These include the F-4 Phantom, the A-4 Skyhawk and, more

⁵⁷ US Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Proliferation: Threat and Responses*, released in Jan. 2001, URL <<http://www.defenselink.mil>>; US Strategic Air Command, 'The Phoenix Study', Sep. 1991, p. 67, URL <<http://www.nautilus.org/nukestrat/USA/Force/phoenix.html>>.

⁵⁸ Blanche, E., 'Nuclear reactions', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 17 June 1998, p. 22; and Rodan, S., 'Israel mulls nuke stance amid new threats', *Defense News*, 29 June–5 July 1998, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Cohen, A., *Israel and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1998), pp. 273–74.

⁶⁰ 'Strategic Israel', MSNBC International News, n.d. [1998], URL <http://archive.msnbc.com/modules/Israel_Strategic/>.