

Aiding Proliferation

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In Spokesman 85, we reported how Israel was secretly developing its nuclear arsenal whilst publicly advocating a nuclear-weapons free zone in the Middle East. Now, Britain's key contribution to Israel's efforts to build the bomb has been revealed.

The Dimona nuclear facility in the Negev desert produced 88 pounds of plutonium each year, according to Mordechai Vanunu. Vanunu used to work there, and alerted the world to Israel's nuclear weapons programme in 1986. This quantity of plutonium was enough to make something between eight and ten bombs annually.

Where did Israel obtain the materials to develop Dimona and its nuclear cycle? Michael Crick, a journalist on the BBC *Newsnight* programme, has documented Britain's role in Israel's nuclear weapons proliferation by research at the National Archives in London.

In 1958, site preparation work began at Dimona so that a secret French team could start building what was later claimed by France to be a small 'research reactor'. France supplied Israel with 4 tonnes of heavy water for the reactor. But Israel required much more if it was to be able to produce sufficient quantities of plutonium for a weapons programme.

In the same year, Britain agreed to sell Israel 20 tonnes of heavy water. British officials decided not to tell Washington about the sale. 'On the whole I would prefer NOT to mention this to the Americans,' concluded Donald Cape of the Foreign Office.

British officials also decided it would be 'over-zealous' to impose safeguards on the Israelis, and chose not to insist that Israel use the heavy water only for peaceful purposes. Earlier, the Americans had refused to supply heavy water to Israel without such safeguards.

Both France and Norway have been criticised for helping the Israelis develop the bomb, but Britain has escaped criticism until now. Frank Barnaby, who worked on the British bomb project in the 1950s, and later debriefed Mordechai Vanunu, had 'no idea' that Britain was 'involved' in supplying Israel with heavy water. 'Heavy water was crucial for Israel,' he told *Newsnight*. 'Therefore it was a significant part of their nuclear programme.'

It is unclear how much oversight of this decision ministers in the Macmillan Government had.

The 20 tonnes of heavy water were part of a consignment which Britain bought from Norway in 1956, but the UK later decided this was surplus to requirements. The papers in the National Archives show how officials presented the sale internally as a straight sale from Norway to Israel. But the minutes reveal that the heavy water was shipped from a British port in Israeli ships – half in June 1959 and half a year later. In 1960, the *Daily Express* first exposed the Israelis' work at Dimona, and the fact that Israel was probably making a bomb.

When Israel asked Britain for a further five tonnes of heavy water, in 1961, the Foreign Office decided against a second transaction. 'I am quite sure we should not agree to this sale,' advised Sir Hugh Stephenson of the Foreign Office. 'The Israeli project is much too live an issue for us to get mixed up in it again,' he wrote.

Robert McNamara, who became President Kennedy's defence secretary in 1961, expressed his surprise to *Newsnight* that Britain didn't inform the Americans it had sold heavy water to Israel:

'The fact that Israel was trying to develop a nuclear bomb should not have come as any surprise... But that Britain should have supplied it with heavy water was indeed a surprise to me. It's very surprising to me that we weren't told because we shared information about the nuclear bomb very closely with the British.'

Certainly, Britain had reversed its practice of supplying Israel with heavy water by 1961. On 2 June that year, Prime Minister Harold Mcmillan sent a personal minute to his Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, of his meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. He wrote:

'I saw Mr Ben-Gurion this afternoon and told him of our concern about the Israel nuclear reactor in the Negev. Mr Ben-Gurion explained that its object was to train personnel in preparation for an atomic energy programme in 10 or 15 years' time aimed at providing cheap power for taking the salt out of sea water to irrigate the Negev. I asked Mr Ben-Gurion whether he could not accept international inspection and safeguards. Mr Ben-Gurion said that he did not think he could since this would mean bringing in the Russians and the Arabs. But he might be prepared to accept inspection by neutrals...'

Mr Ben Gurion pressed his case for defensive missiles which he told me he had discussed with you this morning. He was particularly concerned about the fact that the Israelis had no counter to the MIG 19. Mr Ben Gurion was anxious for an early reply. I told him that I would discuss the matter with you but that while I saw the strength of his case, I shared your fear of starting a missile race. I also pointed out to him that one of the main difficulties was that some defensive missiles might be thought capable of offensive use.'

The Israelis co-operated with apartheid South Africa on the development of nuclear technology.