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North Korea's intermediate-range strategic ballistic rocket Hwasong-12 lifting off from the launching pad on August 29, 2017, in a photo released by Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).
Credit: STR/AFP

'Trump Has His Finger on the Nuclear Button, and No One Can Stop Him'

The story behind Israel's nuclear ambiguity, and how Trump's threats on North Korea could backfire ■ Interview with nuclear proliferation expert Or Rabinowitz

By Ayelett Shani | Sep 01, 2017

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Talking to: Dr. Or Rabinowitz, 36, lives in Ra'anana, researches nuclear proliferation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Where: Tel Aviv café. When: Thursday, 10 A.M.

Why did you choose nuclear proliferation as your area of research?

I find it fascinating. Nuclear weaponry is the dark side of humanity, from every point of view. The fact that it was developed in the first place, the fact that it has been used, the even more amazing fact that

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Eight: the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Israel [reportedly], India, Pakistan and China. South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons. **North Korea** will be the ninth nuclear state: It's currently working hard to enable its entry into the nuclear club. Iran is asterisked: As far as we know, it doesn't presently have nuclear arms, but it does have a nuclear infrastructure.

At the moment, Israel is the only Middle Eastern state that reportedly possesses nuclear arms.



Dr. Or Rabinowitz. Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

In my opinion, not reportedly, but actually. I research nuclear weapons, and Israel, according to the professional international literature, possesses nuclear arms.

And the whole nuclear story worldwide is under the supervision of the United States. It has assumed the role of universal babysitter.

Yes. A universal babysitter with children that it prefers.

Among whom we're numbered.

Yes, and there are other children, such as Pakistan and South Africa, who simply learned from us. The Israel-Pakistan analogy isn't given enough consideration. Pakistan went nuclear in the 1970s, and Israel's policy of ambiguity served it as a model. For my research, I interviewed a Pakistani general from the nuclear strategy department. He told me that they decided to learn from Israel – that the way it went nuclear, refrained from joining the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and went on maintaining good relations with the United States, simply served to inspire them.

He's referring to the policy of nuclear ambiguity, of course: no confirmation, no denial. It wasn't a unified policy, right? In time, it just became a strategy.

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came up a number of times and in several formulations between Israeli and American statesmen. The famous declaration, "Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East," was made even before Israel was said to have crossed the nuclear threshold, back during the Kennedy administration. In the end, the policy was enshrined, according to international reports, in the Golda-Nixon understandings of September 1969. Within the framework of the understandings, according to the reports, [Prime Minister] Golda [Meir] undertook that Israel would not declare that it possessed nuclear arms and would not conduct a test, and [U.S. President Richard] Nixon agreed to take the subject off the table and stop pressuring Israel.

Is that really what happened? Speculations abound about all kinds of tests Israel carried out, but there's no proof.

Yes, there's no proof.

And Israel hasn't joined the NPT. What standards does the treaty dictate?

The treaty stipulates that a state that manufactured and detonated a nuclear device prior to January 1967 is eligible to join as a "nuclear-weapon state," but not others. The nuclear-weapon states are permitted to possess nuclear arms in unlimited quantities, and there is no inspection requirement for their facilities. All other signatories are obligated not to develop nuclear arms. Nuclear-weapon states undertake not to transfer knowhow to non-nuclear states. Accordingly, only five of the states that I mentioned earlier are accorded the privilege of possessing nuclear arms; Israel, India and Pakistan are not parties to the treaty.

General view of the Israeli nuclear facility in the Negev Desert outside Dimona seen in this August 6, 2000 file photo. | Credit: REUTERS

That position serves the Israeli interest well.

On that point, there's almost an absolute consensus among researchers. We ostensibly prevented the exposure of Israel's

researchers have written that [President Gamal Abdel] Nasser tried to obtain [nuclear] weapons from the Soviets and the Chinese, and that when they turned him down, he simply dropped the idea, he didn't foster or develop a nuclear program. Israel achieved its primary goal and created deterrence vis-à-vis its neighbors and vis-à-vis the Arab world.

Internally, the policy is seen in the fact that this interview will undergo [and indeed did] censorship and will come back with many additions of phrases like "ostensibly," "reportedly," "according to." There's no legislation on the subject. In general, there's an effort not to talk about it.

I don't have secret information. The research that people like me do is based on archives that have been opened abroad, and the information exists and is available. The rules of censorship were toughened tremendously after the [Vanunu affair](#) [referring to Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli nuclear whistle-blower arrested in 1986]. One result is that Israelis really don't have the basic information that every political science student in the world who takes a course in nuclear proliferation has.

German 'guilt feelings'

Israelis really don't have the basic information that every political science student in the world who takes a course in nuclear proliferation has.

Do you talk about this with your students in Israel?

That's the thing – that even when I raised the subject of the [submarines](#) [referring to Israel's deal to buy German submarines, which is now under police investigation], I was told, "There are things that shouldn't be talked about."

Who said that? When you submit a curriculum, is it censored?

I'm not referring to the administration. It's the students. They had a really hard time with the word "nuclear."

The psychological warfare worked.

There's indoctrination. Unequivocally. These students are very inquisitive and open, but they come to university after army service, and that period is still fresh for them. It's hard for them to deal with it, they're accustomed to thinking of it as secret. But the truth is that there is plenty of available material in the world that people in Israel aren't familiar with, because of the feeling that we mustn't talk about it, that it's dangerous to state security.

Let's talk a little about the submarine affair.

That story actually starts with guilt feelings harbored by [German Chancellor] Helmut Kohl after the Gulf War [in 1991], when it became known that German companies had armed Saddam Hussein's nonconventional [arms] project. Kohl agreed to sell Israel the first three submarines, with very generous financing – the first two were pretty much free – and that was the start of our ties with



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu climbs out of the Rahav, a submarine widely believed to be capable of firing nuclear missiles, Haifa, Israel, January 12, 2016. Credit: Baz Ratner, Reuters

Yes, when I looked for material, I found a document from 2012 claiming that the plan was to have a fleet of six submarines.

The current dispute is over submarines Nos. 7, 8 and 9. Let me remind you of what [former head of the National Security Council] Uzi Arad told TheMarker [Hebrew edition] earlier this month: that it's not clear why the prime minister decided that nine submarines are needed, and that if you enlarge the fleet by 50 percent you have to explain why.

Countries like Britain and France make do with far smaller submarine fleets.

Of course you have to bear in mind the difference in needs, but this is an excellent example. Each of those countries has four submarines that are capable of launching nuclear warheads. It's crucial to clarify a certain point here, because people tend to google the subject and claim that their fleets are far larger. The term "nuclear submarine" has a dual meaning: It can refer to a submarine with a nuclear-powered engine, or to a submarine that is capable of firing missiles with nuclear warheads. In the Cold War period, the focus was on developing both nuclear-powered submarines and submarines that carried ballistic nuclear missiles. Britain and France needed to deter the Soviets when it came to targets, some of which were in the other part of the world; that required heavy, long-range missiles and submarines with powerful engines.

That's not the situation in the Middle East.

No. In 2015, we saw the Russians make a very interesting, innovative use of cruise missiles, when they succeeded in hitting Syria with them. In the Middle East and the Straits of Hormuz, you don't need the advantages provided by nuclear engines or ballistic missiles.

Then why was Israel greedy for nine submarines?

It seems illogical on the face of it. There's a consensus that between four and six missiles should be enough. Why do we need submarines Nos. 7 to 9? Do our enemies possess technological capabilities we haven't heard about? What's going to change in the geostrategic picture? Have the first six become more vulnerable? From what we know, that's not the case. The assumption today is

the point of acquiring more of them?

If something happens that's made them more vulnerable, why invest in this platform and not a different one? That's a perfectly legitimate discussion, only it's not taking place. You can say: I'm going for a surplus, I want to have spares. But then you have to understand what the cost of spares is, and as far as we know, the cost is very high. With submarines, like inkjet printers, the true cost lies in the maintenance.

Can you be more specific? How much are we talking about?

A state that's sufficiently determined to develop a nuclear arsenal will simply develop it.

The truth is that it's all so clandestine and secret that I haven't seen numbers anywhere. It's impossible to make a precise assessment, but over decades it probably runs into the billions. You have to train submarine crews, who are from the most elite units, and there's no surplus of people like that. Think of an iron pipe that's been in the water for 30 years. The amount of rust; the amount of maintenance; the sensitivity of the electronic components that are used underwater; the amount of computerization that's required; the number of systems.

So maintenance is not only costly, it's also very intensive. And I don't suppose spare parts can be ordered from AliExpress.

Not really. It's exactly here that the shipyard enters the picture. It's the shipyard that maintains the submarines. According to media reports, one of the possibilities that came up in the talks with [the German shipbuilder] ThyssenKrupp is that the Germans would sell advanced submarines to both Israel and Egypt, and that their maintenance would pass to private hands. The Germans of course have a vested interest in Israel acquiring submarines from them at a discount, or even for free, because in that case the parts and future infrastructures will be purchased exclusively from German manufacturers. They alone are capable of servicing these submarines, and these technologies cannot be purchased on the open market. Is it smart to have the same manufacturer service both Egypt and Israel? But more than that, it's necessary to ask a question that I haven't seen being asked: Of all the services in the world, is it proper to privatize the maintenance of a vessel to which nuclear capability is attributed?



People watch a TV screen showing a local news program reporting about North Korea's missile launch at Seoul Train Station in Seoul, South Korea, Aug. 30, 2017. Credit: Lee Jin-man/AP

Instead of leaving it in the hands of the state.

Yes. A state, after all, is supposed to decide what it's privatizing, and what's too important and too dangerous and has to remain in its hands and thus under its supervision. Should submarine maintenance be privatized? I think not, though I am of course willing to listen to the contrary arguments. The thing is that the discussion is simply not taking place.

What discussion is taking place?

There are claims that submarines Nos. 7 to 9 are meant to replace submarines Nos. 2 to 4, in the same way that submarine No. 6 is meant to replace submarine No. 1. But submarines Nos. 2 to 4 are new, and the timetable is also unclear. When are Nos. 2 to 4 supposed to be retired, when are Nos. 7 to 9 supposed to arrive, why commit to the purchase of new ones already now? One can say we got a good deal – but what about the other factors? After all, it's our money, and people have to understand that another submarine means less protection for armored personnel carriers, for example.

That's a painful example.

Indeed. This discussion needs to take place, but it's not taking place, or is taking place in the dark, and that's not appropriate by any means.

Based on your knowledge, do you see a reason for buying submarines Nos. 7 to 9?

I agree with [former Defense Minister] Moshe Ya'alon and Uzi Arad, that it's really not clear why they did it. I don't rule out the notion that there's a [legitimate] reason, but I think we should be shown the rationale behind the decision and what's behind the policy change.

'Hair-trigger alert'

No one has a good response or a solution for the North Korea crisis.

Perhaps you can explain something about the three elements of second-strike capability.

The professional literature defines a second strike as the ability to preserve a nuclear arsenal even if you've taken a first strike from the

of concrete, and even if the enemy discovers the base and tries to bomb it, he simply will not succeed in hitting out the missiles. For example, the Iranian site Fordow, which is highly concretized and is immune to being taken out. The third element is concealment: If the enemy does not know where your missile bases are, he simply will not be able to hit them. North Korea does this with mobile launchers, Russia does it with secret train tracks. Submarines also fall into this category, because they're extremely difficult to locate. The United States is truly outstanding in its technological ability to locate submarines – no other country has such capabilities.



President Donald Trump, Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis attend a Memorial Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Va., May 29, 2017. Credit: Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP

But now it's on a collision course with North Korea.

North Korea is following the Chinese model. You know, China conducted its first nuclear test in October 1964. The Kennedy administration's fear of Chinese nuclearization very much brings to mind the current administration's fear of North Korean nuclearization. Yet, in time the Chinese nuclear project became accepted. The [NPT] treaty was formulated such that China would be able to join as a nuclear-weapon state, because it carried out its first test before 1967, and no one now casts doubt on the legitimacy of China's maintaining a nuclear arsenal. The supposition is that this is what North Korea is aiming for: that despite the current fears and threats, in the long range, there will be international acceptance of that position. No one has a good response or a solution for the North Korea crisis.

It's also the only state that allows itself to carry out tests all the time.

That's right. India and Pakistan announced that they ceased nuclear testing after the tests they carried out in 1998. North Korea is still [doing tests](#). At first they were pooh-poohed, because the tests failed, but you have to understand that a first test is only the gateway to tests Nos. 2 and 3, and at the end of the day, a state that's sufficiently determined to develop a nuclear arsenal will simply develop it.

technological improvements, but the bottom line is that either you enrich uranium or you produce plutonium, which are more or less the same technologies. North Korea has no problem achieving good nuclear capability. There was [also] shortsightedness here, particularly on the Americans' part, in thinking that North Korea was very far from being capable of launching an intercontinental ballistic missile. Now we know that this is not the case. The first nuclear weapon was manufactured and developed in 1945, and it's still possible to manufacture generation-one nuclear weapons using the very same technologies. It's true that there are more advanced weapons than the third generation, but even the [technology dating back to the] first generation is totally enough to wipe out cities like Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

How reassuring to think that the person in charge of all this at the moment is Donald Trump.

I very much understand everyone who's concerned about that. It really is frightening.

Because, what kind of statement is, "If we have nuclear capability, let's use it"? Who says things like that?

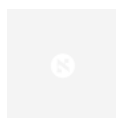
It's the statement of someone who has never contemplated nuclear strategy in his life. Trump is behaving with enormous irresponsibility. He is issuing militant, ill-considered declarations that contradict the policy of all previous presidents, and without consulting with senior members of his administration. The result is that he's tying the hands of the United States and reducing its scope for diplomatic maneuverability. It's really a pity, because the whole American strategy is based on what's known as hair-trigger alert. In other words, if the Americans discover that the Russians or the Chinese have fired missiles at the United States, they can react immediately, because they have missiles in ready-to-launch status, and the American president always has someone with him carrying the famous nuclear briefcase.

What's in it?

We don't know too much about it, only that the codes are in a kind of device called the "nuclear biscuit." Other presidents were a bit irresponsible with it: Jimmy Carter sent it to dry-cleaning by mistake, Bill Clinton lost it for a few months. When Trump was elected, people simply didn't believe that he would be the person with his finger on the red button. Well, he is that person. He's under no obligation to consult with anyone and he doesn't need anyone's authorization – not the cabinet, and not the secretary of defense. The great hope is that if Trump tries to do something dangerous, the secretary of defense will block it.

Good luck to him.

Yes. The bottom line is that it's Trump who has his finger on the button, and no one can stop him.



Ayelett Shani
Haaretz Contributor

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everything is non-sense. NO.Not a single American president was SOLELY in charge of American policy. The one who are in charge are behind the back, behind the curtain. Those are secretive societies that define WHO will be next president. Trump and all other presidents represent these groups. TRUMP is just A Puppet.
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I don't have secret information

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