

Authority ND 66954

Id:aj:8/21/63  
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

DEF 12 ISR.

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Memorandum of Conversation

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IPS by L. H. HARRIS Date 4-18-00

Other Agency Action                     

DATE: August 14, 1963

SUBJECT: Israel Nuclear Program; Security Guarantee

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. John E. Killick, Counselor, British Embassy  
Mr. Patrick R. H. Wright, First Secretary, British Embassy  
NEA - Acting Assistant Secretary James P. Grant  
NEA/NE - William R. Crawford, Jr.

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Acting on instructions, Mr. Killick said London is increasingly concerned at the possibility of nuclear weapons development in the Near East. Looking at the situation on both sides on the basis of the best current intelligence, there appears no real cause for concern about the UAR. In Israel, however, there have been some new disturbing signs in recent weeks:

1. In early June, the UK Naval Attaché talked to the Israel Chief of Staff. The latter said Israel has reached a point where no further substantial improvements in conventional forces can be made and that if Israel begins to be overtaken in this respect it will have no way of redressing the balance except by development of non-conventional weapons. The Chief of Staff specifically asked that this information be passed along to the British Embassy's Military Attaché.
2. On July 10, the British Charge saw Prime Minister Eshkol, who said the question of whether or not nuclear weapons appear in the area depends on the Great Powers and their willingness to provide Israel with the security assurance it seeks.
3. On July 19, the Israel Ambassador in London, speaking to Lord Home, implied that Israel will have to resort to "new deterrent weapons" if a security guarantee is not forthcoming.
4. On July 29 the British Ambassador in Tel Aviv discussed the test ban treaty with Foreign Ministry Director General Yahil. The latter said Israel has to bear in mind the importance of not abandoning all right to a nuclear capability as a deterrent to Arab threats. Yahil emphasized that he meant this in a theoretical

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Mr. Killick said these conversations, coming on top of our joint intelligence estimates about Israel's technological capabilities in the nuclear field, are cause for concern. The Foreign Office recognizes that the Israelis may be using this as a threat and leverage regarding a security guarantee. Clearly, the Israelis are not satisfied with either President Kennedy's May 8 formula or with the same position subsequently taken by Prime Minister Macmillan. Mr. Killick stressed that since "surely neither the United States nor the UK would under any circumstances consider going further than these statements", we come down to the fundamental question of how Israel is to be deterred from nuclear weapons development. In Ottawa, it will be recalled, Secretary Rusk spoke to Lord Home of the United States determination to deter Israel if it came to that.

In conclusion, Mr. Killick said the UK hopes we can discuss all aspects of this problem including what effect signature of the test ban treaty is likely to have on Israel's plans, what steps we might take with the French, and the possibility of further clarifying what the German scientists are doing in the UAR.

Mr. Grant said the U.S. and the UK are operating from the same factual and intelligence basis. This leads the U.S. to believe that Israel's technology is reaching a stage where Israel could, if it wished, explode a crude atomic device in as little as two years and go on to crude weapons shortly thereafter. But our careful watch on the situation still produces no conclusive proof that Israel is doing more than developing a technological capacity which could be devoted to weapons production on short notice if Israel should decide some years hence that a weapons program were essential to national survival. To keep this situation under control, we are actively pressing forward on a number of fronts, of which we are glad to inform the UK on a highly confidential basis:

We are asking the French Government, some officials of which have expressed concern about Israel's intentions, for information on the nature of the safeguards France says it has over Dimona. How forthcoming France will be is a matter of conjecture as other elements in the Government appear to place great stress on the Israel tie.

Secondly, we have been in touch with the Israelis in an effort to regularize and make more satisfactory our inspections of Dimona. We are fairly hopeful that something can be worked out.

Thirdly, Israel and UAR adherence to the test ban treaty may make a better atmosphere and frame within which to work in the future.

Finally, our objective and that of the UK remains to move these countries in the direction of IAEA safeguards. In present circumstances, the adherence to the test ban treaty plus our own continued inspections of Dimona are actions in the right direction.

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Mr. Grant said we think it is important not to let the Israelis, when they talk to us, establish a "record of acquiescence." They must be made to see clearly that were they to go the weapons path the Arabs would have to follow and this would open the door for the Soviets, perhaps on the Cuba pattern. In our judgment, there is a large element of calculation, related to their pressures on us for a security guarantee, in this Israeli talk of a nuclear deterrent. On this point, we would agree with the UK that a unilateral security guarantee to Israel should not be considered.

Mr. Killick said it is unthinkable that the U.S. or UK could go beyond the present balanced statements of concern for the security of all Near East states. Any formalization of these would not truly be balanced and would immediately devolve into the special bilateral relationship Israel wants, since clearly the Arabs would have to reject whatever were proposed. The UK would like to be sure that even such pressures as may be brought to bear by next summer's elections in the United States will not bring any change in the U.S. view.

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