

Israel's Nuclear Arsenal

Tony Simpson

Israel has manufactured between 90 and 300 nuclear warheads according to the authoritative Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The estimate is broad because there is little public data on Israel's nuclear arsenal. It is based on estimated production of nuclear materials at the Shimon Peres Dimona Nuclear Research Center in the Negev Desert. SIPRI inclines to the lower end of the estimate.

There is no systematic international monitoring of Israel's nuclear programmes. Israel has not acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, nor has it accepted International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards on aspects of its nuclear activities. For decades, the Israeli state has maintained a studied ambiguity about its nuclear capabilities and their military deployment.

Such ambiguity was somewhat undermined in November 2023 when a member of the Israeli government told Israeli media that dropping a 'nuclear bomb' on Gaza is 'an option'. He was quickly slapped down by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, but the cat was out of the bag. The Palestinian Foreign Minister duly complained to the IAEA about the Israeli Minister's nuclear threat, saying that it was 'completely consistent with the prevailing discourse in Israel'. The Foreign Minister pointed out that the threat entails 'an official recognition that Israel possesses nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction', and urged the Agency and all its member states to condemn Israel and take action against the threat of dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza.

It seems highly unlikely that the Israeli military would explode a nuclear device over Gaza, which it occupies, whatever some of its government ministers might think. But Israel's

substantial nuclear arsenal surely casts a shadow over the wider region. It has done so for decades and Israel has bombed nuclear facilities in Iraq and Syria in order to prevent development of threatening nuclear arsenals elsewhere. Currently, Israel's preoccupation is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. In the context of Israel's merciless and extended onslaught on Gaza, tensions rise in the wider region. The UN Secretary General, invoking Article 99 of the United Nations Charter, has warned the Security Council of the threat to peace in the wider Middle East region, but the United States chose to veto his appeal for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, contrary to the views of 13 other members of the Council. The United Kingdom abstained.

Israel deploys its nuclear weapons on land, in the air, and at sea, according to SIPRI. Earlier in 2023, the Israeli Navy took delivery of what is believed to be its sixth nuclear-weapons-capable submarine. The latest boat, *INS Drakon*, was, like its predecessors, built and launched in Germany. *INS Drakon* is larger and longer than any previous Israeli submarine with an enormous sail, thought to be able to accommodate ballistic missiles, which could be nuclear armed.

Those with ultimate control of Israel's nuclear arsenal are the same people who are waging genocidal war on more than two million Gazans. Such criminal and inhumane conduct subverts any international legitimacy that Israel may seek to claim for its burgeoning nuclear arsenal.

Long ago in September 1979, Israel and apartheid South Africa exploded a nuclear device in the South Atlantic, which was detected by a US satellite. Thus began an extended inquiry into the Israeli Bomb, which was definitively exposed in 1986 when whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu told the *Sunday Times* in London what he had discovered about Israel's nuclear programme whilst working at the Dimona plant. Vanunu paid heavily for his courageous public candour, spending long years in an Israeli prison, many of them in solitary confinement. He alerted the world to the growth of Israel's nuclear arsenal, which threatens the wider world to this day. We revisit some of these enduring controversies by reprinting an excerpt from Ken Coates's essay, 'Israel's Bomb: The First Victim', which the Russell Foundation published in 1988.

The burgeoning blockade of Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat, initiated by the Houthis in Yemen, increases the risks of sparking wider conflict. Some even say the blockade could be extended to Israel's Mediterranean ports by closing the Strait of Gibraltar. Meanwhile, escalating exchanges of fire on Israel's border with Lebanon are accompanied by characteristically apocalyptic threats from Israeli military spokespeople. These people could have recourse to Israel's bomb. In these dire circumstances, the UN Secretary General has warned the Security Council of the 'threat to the maintenance of international peace and security'.