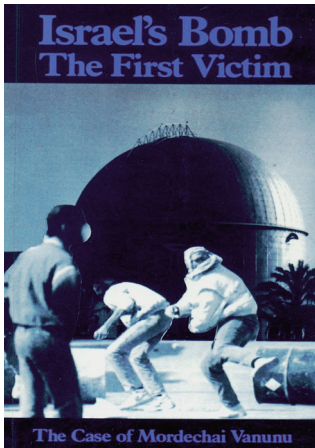


Israel's Bomb

Ken Coates



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... The nuclear test which took place in the South Atlantic on 22nd September 1979 was monitored by a United States satellite. The explosion, which gave off a characteristic double flash, took place at a height of eight kilometres, which is commensurate with the performance of the GS Howitzer, which has been manufactured in South Africa since the United States supplied Pretoria with a range of modern artillery delivery systems. The Americans have also supplied the South Africans with 300,000 shell casings, adequate to deliver a two to three kiloton nuclear device.

It has been confirmed that forces of the South African fleet were present in the South Atlantic in the area of the explosion at the time that it took place. And further, it is credibly alleged that the 1979 explosion was a joint Israeli-South African achievement, as necessary to the Israelis for verifying their technology as it was to the South Africans for threatening their neighbours. That the United Nations were persuaded to record a verdict of "not proven" about this explosion tells us a good deal about the respect of some of its experts for the rules of evidence.

However, new evidence continually appears, and it would be instructive to reopen this enquiry in order to evaluate it. Since we now know that the allegations of Fuad Jabber, or the judgements, from a different perspective, of Robert E. Harkavy, were founded on realistic assumptions, it becomes necessary to evaluate the contemporary analyses of Israeli-South African cooperation, all over again.

Valuable evidence for such a new investigation has been presented by Jane Hunter in her most disturbing work on *Israeli Foreign Policy*.

In 1965, after South Africa brought its Safari safeguarded reactor on line, Israeli scientists began advising South Africa on their Safari 2 research reactor. In 1968, Professor Ernst Bergmann, the 'father' of Israel's nuclear program, went to South Africa and spoke strongly in favour of bilateral co-operation on the development of nuclear technology.

According to the authors of a novelized treatment of Israel's nuclear program - barred from publication by the Israeli censor - as early as 1966, South Africa had invited Israel to use its land or ocean space for a nuclear weapons test. Led at that time by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Israel declined the invitation. However, according to the Israeli authors, whose sources included Shimon Peres, an enthusiastic intimate of the Israeli nuclear program, and Knesset Member Elijah Speizer, during his April 1976 visit to Israel Premier Vorster again extended the invitation to Israel to conduct a nuclear test.

It is commonly held that Israel wanted a test venue far from the Middle East in order to uphold its longtime position that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the region. This 'position', hinging on some arcane reading of the word 'introduce', is as meaningless as the endlessly heard term 'peace process'.

The following year, a Soviet satellite picked up unmistakable signs of preparation for a nuclear test in the Kalahari Desert. Fearing that such a test 'might trigger an ominous escalation of the nuclear arms race,' the U.S., Britain, France and West Germany joined the USSR in pressuring South Africa to abort the test. As to the bomb that was to be tested, 'I know some intelligence people who are convinced with damn near certainty that it was an Israeli nuclear device', said a high-ranking Washington official.

At three o'clock in the morning on September 22, 1979, Israel and South Africa conducted a nuclear weapons test where the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans merge. A newly recalibrated U.S. Vela intelligence satellite recorded the characteristic double flash of light. It was a small blast, designed to leave very little evidence. The CIA told the National Security Council that a two or three kiloton bomb had been exploded in 'a joint South African-Israeli test'. A Navy official revealed that U.S. spy planes over the test area had been waved away by South African Navy ships and forced to land secretly in Australia. The CIA knew (and later told Congress) that South African ships were conducting secret manoeuvres at the exact site of the test. The South African military attaché in Washington made the first ever request to the U.S. National Technical Information Service for a computer search on detection of nuclear explosions and orbits of the Vela satellite.

Almost immediately the Carter Administration convened a special panel to conduct an investigation of the incident. The panel heard reports from the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the CIA; and representatives of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Department of Energy and the State Department presented evidence to the panel supporting the occurrence of a nuclear explosion. Their findings were summarily dismissed by the Carter White House, which after a delay of seven months declared:

Although we cannot rule out the possibility that this (Vela) signal was of nuclear origin, the panel considers it more likely that the signal was one of the zoo events (reception of signals of unknown origin under anomalous circumstances), possibly a consequence of the impact of a small meteor on the satellite.

Moreover, as new information became available, it was simply ignored. In one critical instance, evidence of radiation observed in the thyroid glands of Australian sheep was discounted. The initial lack of this “smoking gun,” traces of radiation, suggested to a Los Alamos scientist that the low-yield weapon tested had been a neutron bomb. However, the Carter panel had used the absence of radiation as a prime excuse in its cover-up.

Many who had been involved with the investigation were aghast and wondered by the Carter White House was ‘equivocating’. Some within the government said that the Carter Administration was hiding behind the ‘zoo’ theory to avoid dealing with the political headaches that would accompany acknowledgement of the test. An affirmative report might have affected the ongoing negotiations over the creation of Zimbabwe in which South African co-operation was needed and upset the just negotiated Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt. Carter also had reasons to fear ‘complications in gathering Jewish votes during the upcoming Democratic Party primary campaign against Sen. Edward Kennedy.’

But beyond that, as a State Department official explained, coming clean on the test ‘would be a major turning point in our relations with South Africa and Israel if we determined conclusively that either had tested a nuclear bomb. It makes me terribly nervous just to think about it.’ Of course by deciding to ignore reality the Carter administration - and following in its footsteps, the Reagan administration, which went on record May 21, 1985 as upholding the Carter ‘verdict’ - destroyed the already tattered credibility of the nonproliferation posture of the U.S. There was no challenge forthcoming from Congress. Quite the contrary: in 1981 Representatives Stephen Solarz and Jonathan Bingham withdrew legislation they had

introduced calling for a cutoff of U.S. aid to nations manufacturing nuclear weapons after they learned from the State Department “that such a requirement might well trigger a finding by the Administration that Israel has manufactured a bomb.” The U.S. government turned its back on the potential victims of Israeli and South African nuclear aggression and stuck its head in the sand like an ostrich.

Five years later, the Washington Office on Africa Educational Fund in cooperation with Congressman John Conyers (D-MI), the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and the World Campaign Against Military and Nuclear Collaboration with South Africa issued a report on the 1979 nuclear weapons test. Based on documents obtained from the government under the Freedom of Information Act, the report detailed scientific evidence not taken into account by the Carter panel. It demonstrated conclusively that a cover-up had been perpetrated by the Carter Administration. Written by Howard University Professor Ronald Walters, the report warned that the cover-up, ‘coupled with the Reagan Administration’s subsequent allowance of an increase in nuclear aid to South Africa has serious implications for international peace and security.’

The sponsors of the report urged that the investigation be reopened under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineers, and also called for a Congressional investigation and the release to the public of all pertinent information.

Of course whether enquiries are reopened in the USA, or the United Nations, or not, many African States are deeply uneasy about these events. Unsurprisingly, the conclusions which they have drawn reflect considerable alarm. A number of African countries have quite reasonably concluded that they are prospective candidates for nuclear bombardment by South Africa. No Government in the front-line states can possibly ignore this threat. Persistent cross-border military activity by the apartheid regime is a permanent fact of political life in the southern part of the African continent.

But it is not only in the front-line states that alarm bells have been ringing. As Oye Ogunbadejo informs us:

Nigeria, for example, sees itself as ... a potential target. Lagos has consistently argued that any improvements in South Africa's military power and nuclear capability, with the assistance of the west, pose direct military threats to Nigeria, and make it an open target of long-range nuclear attack. Alhaji Shehu Shagari, as President, continued to emphasise the need for his country to catch up with South Africa in the nuclear field. For the time being, however, Nigeria's efforts are geared, essentially, towards energy purposes.

Yet, Ogunbadejo cites other prominent African spokesmen who are very impatient with the restrictions of nuclear capacity to the civilian sector. Thus, Ali Mazrui is reported as a strong critic of the Non-Proliferation Treaty:

From a third world point of view, I don't believe the Treaty is worth the paper it is written on. And if I were to become President of a third world country, I would not hesitate to withdraw from it. Imperialism in the nuclear age is the monopoly stage of nuclear technology.

Mazrui foresees an alliance of black South Africa with Nigeria and Zaire, which would develop its own African 'deterrent'.

Africa under its triumvirate of diplomatic leaders partly endowed with nuclear credentials, will have begun to enter the main stream of global affairs. And the world as a whole, once it discovers the lunacy of its nuclear ways, will have learned an old lesson in a new context: the lesson that wild mushrooms are dangerous.

Of course, the attitude of the Government of Free South Africa cannot yet be determined. Fortunately, for many years, progressive people throughout the African continent have given their support to the goal of a nuclear-free zone in the whole region. Kwame Nkrumah froze all French assets because of the tests in the Sahara desert during 1961. At the same time, Nigeria severed its diplomatic contact with France. The advent of the Non-Proliferation Treaty was perhaps more keenly welcomed in Africa than in any other sector of the globe. Ogunbadejo believes that only a major initiative towards nuclear disarmament by the great powers can maintain this kind of wider global commitment.

In the maintenance of future world order, the close co-operation and understanding between the superpowers and the other states with nuclear weapons is an essential precondition.

The advent of the Gorbachev-Reagan summits, and the conclusion of a Treaty to dismantle intermediate nuclear forces, welcome though it is, nonetheless arrives after the eleventh hour, when we consider the savage implications of the problems of proliferation. Conventional theories of deterrence are deeply flawed, and nowhere more than in their standard presumption of a bipolar model of nuclear confrontation. In a crude way,

several thousand warheads may, when confronted by several thousand other warheads, determine a certain kind of behaviour. No such determination may be presumed, however, once proliferation has extended to the 'pariah' states. In the hot spots which include and surround these states, there is sufficient turbulence to encourage the insane idea that nuclear weapons can be useful as means of actual warfare. What elsewhere would be normal restraints of public opinion are here conspicuously absent.

We have more than a little evidence that neither domestic nor international law controls the potential responses of such governments.

In small things, the Israeli Government kidnaps its opponents, and visits exemplary repression upon them. In large things, it misleads the United Nations and extends the threat of nuclear destruction to two of the most dangerous areas in the contemporary world.

It is hardly surprising that good people who are facing such threats may flinch in their commitment to oppose all or any reliance on nuclear weapons. Thus, Ogunbadejo tells us:

Edem Kodjo, the last substantive Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity, caused quite a stir at the 19th summit during June 1983 in Addis Ababa, when he militantly urged African Governments to match 'South Africa's nuclear might': 'it is the duty of member states which are able to resolutely embark on the nuclear path to do so.'

Nuclear proliferation is the tragic *reductio ad absurdum* of deterrence theory. That old cynic, Harold Macmillan, cogently expressed the problem:

If all this capacity for destruction is spread around the world in the hands of all kinds of different characters, dictators, reactionaries, revolutionaries, madmen - then sooner or later, and certainly, I think by the end of the century, either by error or insanity, the great crime will be committed.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the idea of nuclear-free zones, can neither of them continue unaffected by the nuclearization of the military forces of Israel and South Africa. If there is still time to maintain the civilized commitment of Africa and the Arab world to non-nuclear defence policies, it must be evident that that time is rapidly speeding away. Mordechai Vanunu has removed the last veil which had been concealing this ugly situation.

Now, in order to survive, the Non-Proliferation regime must discover how to disarm Israel and South Africa of their nuclear bludgeons. A failure to confront this intransigent issue may not at once create the field full of dragon's

teeth which will eventually grow. Problems of resources and technology will ensure an uneven development of nuclear military potential. But here, we are talking about something more fundamental than budget allocations: at stake is the whole question of the political will for peace and disarmament, as well as the deep-rooted problem of social justice. If the rest of the world abandons the front-line states to South African intimidation, including nuclear intimidation, all Africa will conclude that Ali Mazrui is right. If everyone outside the Middle East remains deaf to the process which is now reopening behind locked doors in Jerusalem, then the call for an Arab bomb will become irresistible. We are members of one another, and it is at critical moments like the present that it becomes necessary to demonstrate this fact.

So widespread is the international movement for peace that the Third United Nations Special Session on Disarmament will see continued healthy pressures for the destruction of nuclear weapons, and the extension of ever wider nuclear-free territorial agreements. Yet, it seems to me, that all these events provide us with a powerful argument that disarmament can no longer be left to governments.

There are widespread debates about the need for reform of the United Nations system, and many new proposals are emerging from the different peace movements, as they experience the weaknesses and limitations of the inherited UN system. Even within the old system, however, many voices have been raised for the creation of a new information order, as a pre-condition for an enlightened and active world public opinion.

The confrontation between Israel and its neighbours, the plight of the Palestinian people, and the abscess of apartheid are major parts of a global crisis of militarism. This is worsening as a result of economic crisis, contraction and collapse. If the Stock Exchange crash leads through trade wars to the explosion of the world's debt bomb, then the present proliferation of nuclear weapons is a perfect formula for Armageddon. No-one can tell where conflict will spill over, once any of these sinister devices are detonated.

So urgent is this problem that nothing less than a worldwide popular movement is needed to meet it. It cannot be left to the immediate victims of these new nuclear threats to protest and appeal in isolation. "Send ye not", said our English poet John Donne, "to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee."