

Opinion | Israel has nukes. It's time to admit it.

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With the Israel-Hamas war, a nuclear Rubicon of sorts has been crossed: Two elected Israeli officials — a government minister and a member of parliament — not only publicly referenced Israel's possession of nuclear weapons but suggested that they be detonated over Gaza. This was a disturbing first. Meanwhile, in Washington, a long-standing secret executive order has prohibited American officials from even acknowledging that Israel has nuclear arms. Given the increasing risks of nuclear weapons proliferation — and, worse, use — continuing such self-censorship about Israel's nuclear arsenal is not just bizarre; it's harmful.

One of us directs a national security research center, which last month conducted an unclassified Israel-Iran nuclear war game. Israel fired nuclear weapons against Iran twice (using a total of 51 weapons) and Iran replied with a nuclear strike of its own. Surprisingly, the strategic uncertainties following the exchange were greater than those that preceded it.

The questions we were gaming were: How much damage might Israeli nuclear strikes inflict against Iran's nuclear and missile sites, infrastructure and population? Would Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities be incapacitated, or are they buried so deep they would survive? Would the region's economies be "knocked out" by such a nuclear exchange or just "jolted?" Would Washington, Moscow or Beijing be drawn into the conflict? In what way?

None of the participants in the war game was confident they could answer any of these questions. One of the best ways to clarify these matters is for American and Israeli experts and officials to peek into the future by gaming different nuclear war scenarios.

Yet U.S. policy makes this impossible. Why? Because a course of action adopted half a century ago prohibits cleared U.S. employees from openly admitting Israel has nuclear arms. In the late 1960s and 1970s, this might have made sense: The last thing Washington or Tel Aviv wanted was to goad the Soviets into sharing nuclear weapons or technology with Egypt or Syria to “balance” whatever nuclear weapons Israel had.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, though, Washington doubled down on this know-nothing stance in part due to Israeli pressure. Tel Aviv demanded President Bill Clinton and every subsequent American president commit to a secret agreement that the United States will not press the Jewish state to give up its nuclear weapons so long as it continues to face existential threats.

When this practice began, the White House also promulgated a regulation — described in an Energy Department classification bulletin — that threatens present and past government employees with disciplinary action, including firing, if they publicly acknowledge Israel has nuclear weapons. So far, the regulation has been withheld from public release.

With Israeli officials’ recent public outbursts on using nuclear weapons in Gaza, though, whatever possible benefit this policy might have had has evaporated. Maintaining it will only make matters worse.

One of us was a CIA officer who helped stop South Korea from getting nuclear weapons and just published a book, “Hunting Nukes,” detailing this and related nonproliferation efforts. After the CIA’s review board approved the book’s publication, though, the Pentagon demanded that references to Israel’s nuclear program be deleted.

Another of us has initiated the declassification of many archival documents on Israel’s nuclear weapons program. Yet the Pentagon recently redacted all references to Israel’s nuclear program from a 60-year-old memorandum that U.S. diplomats had written on the need for regional Middle Eastern denuclearization talks, even before Israel had produced a weapon.

What is the Pentagon protecting? Does it really think keeping Israel’s nuclear program classified is in our national security interest? If we pretend we don’t know Israel’s nuclear status, doesn’t it only make it easier for Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, South Korea, Japan and others to proceed with nuclear weapons programs of their own?

Worse, doesn’t it provide policymakers cover to finesse dealing honestly with proliferation challenges they would prefer to ignore, such as in North Korea? Here, also for diplomatic reasons, U.S. officials stubbornly declare they will never accept Pyongyang as a nuclear weapons state despite its repeated nuclear tests and growing arsenal.

Also, with increasing prospects of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and of Israel and Iran attacking one another, what is to be gained by preventing open official discussion of what might unfold? Shouldn’t our government instead be encouraging talks on how to promote greater nuclear restraint by both parties and in the Middle East more generally?

For us, these questions are all rhetorical. Effectively, Israel is no longer silent about its nuclear program. Our government's forced silence should end as well.

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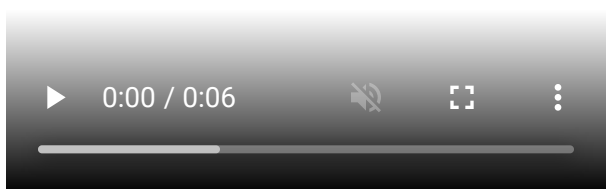
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