

FINE PRINT



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Elements of 1960 CIA Report Hold True Today

“We do not believe that Israel will embark on the development of nuclear weapons with the aim of actually starting a nuclear war,” reads the declassified 48-year-old CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate.

The estimate, publicly released June 5 by [George Washington University's National Security Archives](#), continues, “Possession of a nuclear weapon capability, or even the prospect of achieving it, would clearly give Israel a greater sense of security, self-confidence and assertiveness.”

“In any public announcement concerning their nuclear reactor program, the Israelis would almost certainly stress the peaceful nature of their efforts, but they would also, as time goes on, make plain that henceforth Israel is a power to be accorded more respect than either its friends or its enemies have hitherto given it,” reads the estimate.

The December 1960 intelligence analysis, which still has elements redacted, is interesting in today's context as the Obama administration confronts the nuclear weapon ambitions of North Korea and Iran.

Does the understanding of why a friendly country seeks a nuclear weapon apply when the analysis involves two countries that are potential U.S. enemies? No, is the safe bet when public reaction is considered.

But shouldn't intelligence analysts recognize that friends — and potential foes — may have similar reasoning for nuclear ambitions: to deter potential invaders and to promote their standing among allies and enemies alike? Wouldn't that be worth understanding even in unpredictable and potentially unstable governments? It might when trying to talk them out of it — though it has to be noted that it didn't help with Israel, a stable ally.

The authors of the 1960 estimate suggest the possession of a nuclear weapon — in this

case, Israel's — would be used to deter others from attacking it. “It probably would make it increasingly clear that an Arab attack on Israel would be met with nuclear retaliation,” reads the estimate.

On the diplomatic side, however, the analysts saw that a nuclear weapon could also make a country more of a challenge. The estimate noted: “Israel would be less inclined than ever to make concessions and would press its interests in the area more vigorously.”

That certainly rings true today for North Korea and Iran.

In another ironic twist, the estimate said Israel's enemy, the UAR [United Arab Republic, the then-combination of Egypt and Syria] “as a last desperate resort . . . might try to destroy the Israeli program through preventive military action.”

U.S. military experts today have argued that any Israeli attempt today to knock out Iran's nuclear program would fail and create havoc. Back in 1960, American intelligence analysts believed that the main Arab leader attempting such an effort against Israel also would have been counterproductive. “Given present relative military capabilities,” the estimate said, Gen. Gamal Abdel Nasser, UAR president, “would almost certainly realize that such military action would precipitate a war which he is likely to lose.”

Analysts 48 years ago saw Moscow probably reemphasizing “a former appeal for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East.” The same is true today.

In 1960 the intelligence analysts said the UAR would look to Moscow “for countervailing military aid” and demand Soviet assistance “in achieving nuclear capability.” Moscow did supply Nasser with conventional arms, but as the analysts predicted, the Soviets “would almost certainly not provide nuclear weapons to the UAR nor assistance in developing a capability for the production of fissionable material.”

Matters came close in 1973,

when Arabs invaded Israel. Israel's conventional forces not only repulsed the invading troops, but its military crossed the Suez Canal into Egyptian territory. In late October 1973, a U.S. intelligence report, “Soviet Nuclear Weapons in Egypt?,” noted that equipment associated with Soviet medium-range Scud missiles “were already in Egypt.” Presence of the missile equipment “adds seriousness to the evidence that Moscow introduced nuclear weapons into the Middle East,” according to the document, which was also released earlier this month by the National Security Archives.

The 1973 crisis ended without an open nuclear confrontation, but as the newly released intelligence document reasoned, the Soviets may have thought “the presence of [Moscow] nuclear weapons in Egypt could balance the possibility that an Israeli nuclear capability might be brought into play, either psychologically or in actual use.”

In more recent times, Moscow has become a supplier to Iran of nuclear technology, primarily with the nuclear reactor in Bushehr. But the Russians have joined the United States and European nations in working to prevent Tehran from achieving nuclear weapon capability.

An awkward part of the U.S.-Israel relationship arises out of a still-secret September 1969 understanding between then-Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and then-President Richard Nixon. As disclosed in 2006 by [the National Security Archives](#), [William Burr and Avner Cohen](#), “the president had emphasized to Meir that ‘our primary concern was that the Israeli [government] make no visible introduction of nuclear weapons or undertake a nuclear test program.’” Thus, Israel would never publicly acknowledge it has nuclear weapons and the United States would play along, leaving Israel's nuclear weapons an unannounced certainty.

According to recent estimates, Israel has approximately 200 nuclear bombs and warheads.