

Israel's nuclear ambiguity: Time to come out of the closet

Ambiguity or disclosure of Israel's nuclear program does not make any difference for proliferation in the region. Iran will continue its endeavor to be a nuclear power, whether Israel runs its nuclear program overtly or covertly.

SAIMUM PARVEZ

IN recent Washington nuclear security conference, held on April of this year, US President Barack Obama stated that every country in the world should sign the international Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including Israel. Though Israel has signed the treaty, but its signature has yet to be ratified. Not only this recent remark of Obama, but also experts from both outside and inside Israel stressed that this is the high time for Israel to put an end to its policy of ambiguity and unveil its nuclear activities.

Israel has been maintaining a nuclear weapons program covertly for more than five decades. As Israel's nuclear weapons have long been an open secret, this allows even to its adversaries to use it as an example for legitimizing their nuclear development. Also the countries like India and Pakistan successfully used the example of Israel's bombs to progress on their nuclear nonproliferation objectives. Many argue that, Israel gained nothing but criticism by maintaining a farce that no one believes. On the other hand, policymakers of Israel argued in favor of policy of opacity that if it unveils nuclear activities then it may stimulate nuclear proliferation in Middle East. By its ambiguous nuclear doctrine, Israel gets the benefit of being perceived as a nuclear power while at the same time not facing probable consequences from the international community.

But situations and realities are changing. In this changed reality, Israel needs to rethink whether it will unveil its nuclear activities or not. Before discussing it, we should look back to the background of the nuclear development and known capacity of Israel's nuclear arsenal.

Nuclear program of Israel was first revealed publicly on 13 December 1960 in an article of 'Time' magazine. After that a flood of media speculations followed the tacit nuclear agenda of Israel. After long 26 years, the first extensive details of the weapons program were

revealed in the Sunday Times (London based) on 5 October 1986. That article was written based on the information provided by Mordechai Vanunu, a technician formerly employed at the Negev Nuclear Research Center near Dimona. Shortly after this revelation, Israel could kidnap Vanunu by its intelligence agency Mosad, but it could not seal the news

would be the sixth-largest nuclear power. These warheads can be launched by air, by ground (intermediate-range ballistic missiles) or by sea. Experts say Israeli missiles can reach Libya, Iran, or Russia. It is also believed Israel has at least 100 bunker-busting laser-guided bombs or mini-nukes, which can penetrate underground targets like nuclear



The Dimona Plutonium Nuclear Reactor

which reached to the international world about the intensity and extensity of Israel's nuclear program.

It's widely believed that Israel began its nuclear program in the mid-1950s. According to an estimate of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), Israel possesses around 200 nuclear warheads. If it is the fact, then Israel

labs or storage facilities for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

It is interesting that though US governments overtly stated several times that Israel should ratify nuclear non-proliferation treaty, they have backed Israel to maintain its policy of opacity. In order to maintain this opacity, many voices were raised against Iran but not a

single legislation concerning the nuclear program of Israel has been ever passed. Even the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did not take any legal steps regarding authority and legality of this nuclear program.

But recently, it seems that the course is changing. Firstly, in May of 2010, all of the members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty came into a consensus about the 1995 resolution which stated a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and other WMD. Members of NPT also endorsed Israel's accession to the treaty and the placement of all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards. For implementing 1995 resolution, UN

Apart from above mentioned two developments, Israel is facing another obstacle from a country that always backed it. The ambiguity of Israel's nuclear program was relevant in the past when the situation was based on understandings that the perception is satisfactory and the US could live with it. Moreover, the perception of inexplicitness is good when no one in the Middle East comes close to nuclear capabilities, and up until the 1990s, Israel had no interest in discussing the nuclear issue because it proclaimed that it was irrelevant. There were only limited Iraqi and Syrian plans, not an international campaign; this is a classic situation for ambi-

Iran can be a nuclear power, and Israel should consider lifting the ambiguity in the face of an Iranian threat, thus creating a clear balance of terror.

To handle these upcoming developments, there are three-fold steps that Israel can take. Firstly, Israel should provide adequate information about the command and control, size and nonproliferation objectives of its nuclear arsenals. As other non-NP nuclear powers--India and Pakistan--had already done that but doing so would reassure the international community about nuclear program of Israel.

Secondly, Israel has already vowed its intention to pursue civilian nuclear energy; it should sign a safeguard agreement with the IAEA covering all existing or future civilian nuclear facilities. India signed a similar accord with IAEA in 2008, which allowed it to receive international support for its peaceful civilian nuclear reactors. Finally, Israel should reverse its existing policy and participate in legitimate international forums where the issues of a nuclear-weapon- and WMD-free Middle East are debated. In addition, Israeli diplomats should openly discuss their country's nuclear intentions and objectives, and either oppose or defend the 1995 resolution.

If Israel can earn the good-faith in multilateral efforts to control and safeguard Weapons of Mass Destruction in Middle East, it can have also a voice in the debate of nuclear nonproliferation. Besides, it is not likely that revelation of nuclear program will cause any diplomatic isolation for Israel. Also, Ambiguity or disclosure of Israel's nuclear program does not make any difference for proliferation in the region. Iran will continue its endeavor to be a nuclear power, whether Israel runs its nuclear program overtly or covertly. So, if Israel confirms a fact taken for granted by its friends and adversaries alike, it can get a strong foot on the politics of Middle East. But, as past records show, Israel always believes in coercive rather than peaceful policies, so it is less likely that Israel will end its policy of opacity. Instead, though it is the high time to divulge the nuclear capability, Israel can enhance its nuclear capability clandestinely to deter the possible nuclear threat from Iran.

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The Dimona Nuclear Power Plant

Secretary General will appoint a facilitator to coordinate this process. Secondly, in forthcoming mid-September, International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Yukiya Amano is going to issue an unprecedented report on achieving progress toward Israel's accession to the NPT and placing its nuclear capabilities under IAEA safeguards.

guity. Now, the situation has changed, particularly in light of the Iranian race to nuclear capabilities. Israel should consider what is most effective in terms of the balance of terror and the Israeli and American public opinion as US is no longer satisfied with the vagueness, and Obama wants to push Israel to become successful in peace process. Within years,

President Obama backs mosque near Ground Zero

There was one particular reference that made the President's support for the mosque at Ground Zero both refreshing and full of promise. To his audience at the White House, the President said, "Al Qaeda's cause is not Islam... It is a gross distortion of Islam".

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AT an event in the White House marking the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, President Obama defended the right of the Muslims to build a 13 storey cultural center and a mosque to be named Cordoba House at a stone's throw from Ground Zero. Ever since the news of this project became known, various groups and politicians have vehemently opposed the project. Sarah Palin called the project a stab in the heart of the families of the victims of 9/11. Former Speaker Newt Gingrich called the project "an assertion of Islamist triumphalism". One protester's billboard read: "Islam builds mosque at site of their conquests."

The US President gave his support for the project in the presence of US Congressmen, government officials and diplomats, stressing unequivocally that denying the project would contradict US' commitment to religious freedom. The President highlighted what the opponents of the project have avoided mentioning; that the project would in fact be a short distance away from the hallowed Ground Zero and on private land that is subject to local laws. The President further said that the United States welcomes people of all faith to live in the country and the law treats all religious groups as equal. Hence, he said, the project must have the green light of the concerned authorities just like any other project of any religious community in the USA.

The White House had initially hesitated getting involved in an extremely sensitive issue. It had left it to the local authority ever since a New York developer had announced plans for the project and controversy erupted over it immediately. Among the few notable politicians who did not oppose the project has been the New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. After its initial hesitation, President Obama backed the project with clear understanding of what the US stands for and the values it preaches in its contacts with the international community. He said America's religious tolerance sets it apart from "its enemies" and it is on the basis of that tolerance, the project must be given official approval.

There was one particular refer-



ence that made the President's support for the mosque at Ground Zero both refreshing and full of promise. To his audience at the White House, the President said, "Al Qaeda's cause is not Islam... It is a gross distortion of Islam". In the days, months and years till President Bush left office, the US and its allies had lumped Al Qaeda, Islam and all the Muslims of the world into one; holding them responsible for the 3,000 deaths in the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. In Afghanistan and Iraq, thousands of innocent Muslim men, women and children paid the price because the administration of George Bush felt that the followers of Islam must pay for the actions of few dozens of Al Qaeda. At the height of insensitivity, his administration called the death of these hundreds of thousands of innocent Muslims as "collateral damage." Looking back in retrospect into those days, one cannot but draw many unfortunate conclusions from President Bush's reference to the word "crusade" that

he blurted out to the media in giving his first reaction on 9/11.

For years, it was not the Iraqis and the Afghans who were called day in and day out to answer for the crimes of Al Qaeda. The name "Mohammad" which millions of Muslim men all over the world use as their first name became a hassle for travelling to the USA and for those living in that country. Another first name "Abu" became equally suspect because a few of the 9/11 hijackers had "Abu" as their first name. Even kids were stopped at airports and questioned who had such a first name. Very few Muslims have travelled by air in the USA and to the country since 9/11 without fear of being put to security screening that made such travelling a nightmare. The sad aspect of facing such nightmares has been the fact that the Muslim world was deeply hurt and angered by the acts of 9/11. Many Muslim countries supported the US and allied attack of Afghanistan in pursuit of the Al Qaeda.

In June last year, President Obama had given his historic speech in Cairo extending US' hand of friendship to the Muslim world in an attempt to bridge the deep divide his predecessor had inserted between the West and Islam like he was following on Professor Huntington's prophecy of the clash of civilizations. In the early 1990s, this Harvard Political Scientist had evolved the thesis that in the post Cold War era, people's cultural and religious identities would be the primary source of conflict. Under President Bush, it looked all but inevitable that the clash of civilizations had begun; a clash that had the potentials of grave consequences for the world. With the presidency of President Obama, that doomsday prediction seems to have been averted. Most recently, he has kept his election pledge to end the US occupation of Iraq by handing Iraq back to the Iraqis. Although he has been forced to increase troops in Afghanistan, he had little option but to accept his Commander in Afghanistan General McCrystal's recommendation of fighting Taliban resurgence. Recently, he has sacked the General and replaced with General Petraeus who as Commanding General of Multi National Forces in Iraq, has been credited for turning the tide in that country. In Iran, the President has kept his promise to seek a solution on the nuclear issue through negotiations, in the process inching away from the preparations that were made by his predecessor for an armed intervention there.

President Obama is living up to the promises for which just not the USA but the world, particularly the Muslim world, had hoped he would win the election for the White House. On the Palestinian issue he has not yet lived up to the expectations of the Muslims. Nevertheless, they feel that he would do the right thing for settling the Palestinian cause eventually; namely ensure they are free and have a state with East Jerusalem as the capital. For the moment, his firm stand on the mosque on Ground Zero has assured Muslims that under his watch, they can hope to receive fair treatment and not victimized simply for being a Muslim.

The President's support has come when elections to the Congress are due in three months and the Democrats are in a tight corner. He has thus placed ethics and principles ahead of politics that not enhances his credibility to the Muslims only but also his stature as a statesman to the rest of the world.

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Elections in Myanmar

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MYANMAR'S military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), recently announced that elections will be held in Myanmar on November 7, 2010. As expected, the announcement has invited speculations (often marred by scepticism) about the motives of the junta. There have also been questions raised about the way elections are going to be held; for instance how democratic, non-partisan and fair or otherwise they will be? The stand taken by countries on this issue is also quite on expected lines. For one, the US State Department and European Union member countries and the United Kingdom have questioned the 'inclusiveness and credibility' of the elections and its entire process, while ASEAN member countries are more or less positive and appreciative of the junta on the issue.

On one hand the military Junta is wary of the international backlash in case it tampers with the election process, and on the other it knows what its fate would be if 'truly fair and democratic elections' are held. The reason for its fear is apparent; the junta has to fight elections with Aung San Su Kyi (who, so far, has been barred from fighting elections as she is still a prisoner) who commands popular national and international support. The junta is resolved to accommodate international apprehensions as long as it doesn't hamper the junta's political interests.

As a gesture of truce to the opposition parties and international community, the junta released Tin Oo, the vice chief of the National League for Democracy on February 14, 2010. Apparently, on his release from house arrest, he stated that there is need for dialogue between the government and the opposition in order to arrive at lasting peace and prosperity in the country. His release was seen as a response to US President Barack Obama's call for restoration of democracy in Myanmar and the release of the opposition party members including Aung San Su Kyi. During his visit to Japan in November 2009, Obama had said that the junta should unconditionally release all political prisoners, halt any conflict with ethnic minorities, and work towards the democratic process by initiating a dialogue with the opposition. It is widely believed that Obama's diplomatic move was a part of his policy of engagement as he himself admitted that neither sanctions nor engagement with other parties have helped resolve the crisis in Myanmar. ASEAN member countries have also been consistently indicating that rather than being harsh on Myanmar, the international community and the countries of the region have to take recourse to dialogue and constructive engagement.

The upcoming general elections in Myanmar will prove to be a 'litmus test' for the junta as it seems to have acceded to the demands of a formidable opposition for democratic elections. The other reason for the announcement of election dates is that Myanmar's economy and the condition of its

people are in dire straits. The junta has realized fully well that if it has to prevent any further popular uprising, it has to achieve legitimacy to govern the country. Perhaps the junta is seeking an easy devolution of power similar to that of 'guided democracy' in Indonesia where a percentage of seats in parliament are reserved for military personnel and a number of corporate firms governed by the military.

If the junta's plans fall in place, it will not



only be able to effectively control national politics and administration but will also secure greater international support. Though nothing substantial can be asserted at this juncture, nevertheless, if the junta comes to power it is likely to get closer to India. India, due to its own security and strategic concerns, has been supporting the junta albeit hesitantly. During the recent India visit of Than Shwe, India did not force Myanmar on the issue of restoration of democracy, and thus avoided a controversy. This is just one example of how sensitive India is on matters concerning Myanmar. Last month, during the visit of India's Union Home Secretary and other officials, Myanmar assured India of possible support for apprehending insurgent leaders like Paresw Barua and others belonging to a number of northeastern groups like NSCN-IM and separatist groups of Tripura. Also, Myanmar has been keen on upgrading its air force and has sought MiG-29 purchase from Russia while seeking training assistance from the Indian armed forces.

Myanmar's eagerness to befriend India is not just about maintaining good relations with a neighbouring country and a rising power but also because its relations with China have gone through a bumpy ride owing to border problems between ethnic Burmans and Chinese on the northern borders. This has led to clashes between the two communities. Additionally, Myanmar wants to safeguard its resources which are seen by many within Myanmar as the cost levied by China for supporting the restrictive regime.

In the international context, the situation in Myanmar, particularly manifested by the announcement of elections, has evidently diluted the strong stance of the Generals. The current state of affairs has come about due to variety of reasons ranging from the situation after cyclone Nargis, the monk revolution (also called as Magon revolution), international diplomatic pressure particularly of the US to the unrelenting pressure from human rights groups and international aid agencies to expedite the process of governance and hold free and fair elections.

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