Israel’s Nuclear Policy of Deliberate Ambiguity & It’s Ramifications for Iran

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South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI) University
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Abstract

Israel, since their independence (1948) has worked on their nuclear program, however all information is classified. This is understood as being the Israeli nuclear policy of ‘Nuclear Ambiguity or Opacity’, which aimed to deter any attack on Israel, establish an unspoken military dominance in the Middle East and help in making it a WMD Free Zone. Yet there has been no clear proof that this policy has been very successful. Unlike Israel, Iran is a signatory of NPT and was the biggest supporter of a WMD Free Middle East, the once de facto ally of Israel, but now a long-time rival especially because of their nuclear advancements. The rivalry stems from the security dilemma that a nuclearized Israel poses and the nuclear technological developments that Iran is making. The Israel-Iran conflict has all the potential of becoming a major conflict in the Middle East and a nuclear flashpoint. The purpose of this paper is to understand the reasons behind this unique policy, by looking at the events and multilateral interactions that Israel established, as well as try to establish a link between the nuclearization of Israel and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, with consideration of the Iranian nuclear program and analyzing the events that led the nation to become so volatile. This paper will also evaluate how successful has the policy been in deterrence and the non-proliferation in the Middle East, along with which it will also determine whether this policy truly just has a self-serving agenda.
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The Israeli Nuclear Policy

Background

The first & only time the world has witnessed the phenomena of ‘Nuclear Ambiguity’ or ‘Nuclear Opacity’, was after the advent of the Jewish homeland, Israel. The policy has proven to be one of the most controversial nuclear policy up-to-date that a nation has implemented. Israel has been acknowledged as having nuclear capabilities for a long time now and is generally believed to be the 6th nuclear power in the world. Nonetheless, there has never been an official admittance of the existence, let alone the extent, of Israel’s nuclear capabilities; we still consider Israel to ‘possess’ nuclear weaponry rather than declare it. The Arms Control Association estimated 80-90 nuclear warheads under Israel’s purview, along with fissile materials for up to 200 warheads. This policy is usually viewed as a legacy of the persecution suffered by the Jewish people in the course of the Second World War, especially during the Holocaust. The, then, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion had entertained and introduced the idea of nuclear weapons acting as a deterrent which would prevent other nations from attacking/annihilating Israel. The Arab-Israel War of 1948 only served to strengthen this resolve and gave rise to the famous Jewish shibboleth “Never Again Auschwitz”, which had become the basis of the Israeli secret nuclear program due to the existential crisis that Israel was facing then. Yet the Israeli policy of nuclear ambiguity was not implemented through a well-thought-out strategy but rather because of a series of extemporizations under the first and third Prime Ministers of Israel; Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol. This was coupled with the secretive meetings and under-the-counter dealings with other powerful countries on a multilateral level, i.e. France, USA and Egypt. Israel is one of the three non-signatories of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), notwithstanding the pressures from other countries, they claimed that being a part of the NPT would be contrary to the Israeli national security interests. Another Jewish motto that also helped with maintenance of the Israeli Nuclear Ambiguity in the region, is that “Israel wishes not to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the area (Middle East).” The first time the world became aware of how extensive the Israeli nuclear weapon program was in the 1986 when the nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu, a former Israeli nuclear technician and an avid peace activist, released pictures and details of the inner workings of Dimona (the Israeli Nuclear Reactor) to the British press. The basis of the perpetuation & perseverance of Israel’s nuclear ambiguity is attributed to two categories

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firstly, the defense advantage that nuclear weapons offer and secondly for Israel to preserve their relationship with USA.\(^8\)

**Origins of Nuclear Opacity:**

‘Amimut’ Israel’s most unique and paradoxical contribution to the Nuclear Age has been this policy; according to Avner Cohen, a well-known historian and professor on the basis of his work on Israeli nuclear history and strategic policies, their commitment to nuclear caution is not only practiced on a foreign level but also on a domestic level\(^9\). This policy of nuclear opacity/ambiguity has essentially been inspired by the Hebrew word ‘Amimut’; which denotes obscurity, vagueness or opacity.\(^10\) Due alleged capriciousness of Israeli allies, this policy was seen as a method of keeping Israel and their nuclear program safe. In Zain Hussain’s article “Why the Israeli Policy of Nuclear Ambiguity is Harmful for Prospects of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East” (2019), he mentions that there are two elements that ‘Amimut’ comprises of; the first being “Keeping their nuclear enterprise a secret”\(^11\) which meant that could neither announce or test their nuclear weaponry. The second element being the strengthening and reinforcing of the Israeli nuclear image through rumors, leaks and veiled statements, alongside publishing ancillary proof of their existing capabilities. Israel, in not conceding their nuclear prowess, has strayed from the traditional canons of the rational deterrence theory that entails that deterrence can only be achieved in the case that a state can convincingly convey its capabilities intent\(^12\). In his book, The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel’s Bargain with the Bomb (2010), Cohen did concede the fact that ‘Amimut’ had prior efficacy but now had caustic effects for two things; the Israeli domestic democratic values and the norms of transparency on an international level. In his view by accepting this policy of ‘Amimut’ Israelis had deprived themselves of one of their basic democratic rights. In the light of the fact that Israel refuses to enter any international deal with Iran due to its own nuclear deterrent and prerogative, Cohen concluded by saying that “Israel’s insistence on the exceptionalism of Amimut is not only parochial and anachronistic; it is wrong for both Israel & the world.”\(^13\)

**Development of the Nuclear Program**

The history of the development of the Israeli nuclear weapons program can be traced back to their earliest year, right after their independence. In the wake of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust, after the termination of the British Mandate Ben-Gurion decided that the best course of action

\(^\text{11}\) Hussain, Zain. Ingram, Paul & Messmer, Marion 2019. “Why The Israeli Policy Of Nuclear Ambiguity Is Harmful For Prospects Of A WMD Free Zone In The Middle East - BASIC (British American Security Information Council)”.
for Israel would be to acquire a nuclear arsenal. This desire for a nuclear Israel was only reinforced due to the wars with their surrounding Arab neighbors and the persistent threat of obliteration of the newly established Jewish homeland. The pioneers/architects of Israel’s nuclear program saw it as a means to achieve self-sufficiency in the terms of national security. To understand the Israeli nuclear policy, we must first understand its political origins. Israel had already started producing heavy water, which is a must for the operation and generation of nuclear power, in 1953. The French government had already acceded to supply an 18-Megawatt (MWt) research reactor to Israel but was delayed due to the Suez Crisis or the Sinai/Suez War (1956). The French then promised a 24 MWt research reactor, a plutonium reprocessing plant and natural uranium. Notwithstanding the IAEA safeguards, the clandestine construction of this nuclear power-plant began near the city of Dimona (Southern Israel). Therein we can observe the main and duplicitous role that France played in the Israeli nuclear weapons program and the foundation of ‘Nuclear Opacity’.

FRANCE

The French, on one hand, had already provided Israel with nuclear capabilities; and highly sensitive ones i.e. plutonium reprocessing facility. Yet made Israel pledge during the 1960s that they would never assemble their own nuclear weaponry, reprocess plutonium and make the existence of the Dimona Reactor public or fear losing the French assistance in further constructing it. Nonetheless it has still been reported that the cooling system in the Dimona nuclear plant was already 3 times larger than required for civil use and Israel later further enlarged its capacity. This engagement went two-ways; there was an active involvement of Israeli scientists in the nuclear program of France when it was initiated in the 1950s. There was a sharing of nuclear knowledge and expertise of both nations, as well as, Israeli participation in the bomb tests in the area of Algeria during the early 1960s.

USA

While we can say that France may have helped Israel get their nuclear footing and laid the foundation for ‘Nuclear Opacity’, the US helped in the perpetuation of the Israeli policy. Although initially the U.S. was against the nuclear policy that Israel had adopted; they had soon come to understand that they would not be able to stand between Israel and their determination for the acquisition and development of their nuclear capabilities. On the other hand, Israel had also come to the understanding the fact they could not have their cake and eat it too. They realized that they could not overtly rebel against an America that was championing the cause

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of non-proliferation and also have their backing in the form of conventional weapon supplies or the US security guarantees\(^\text{18}\) (the ultimatum given by President John F. Kennedy’s to PM Levi Eshkol 1963\(^\text{19}\)). The solution to this conundrum was reached during the Nixon- Meir Agreements 1969 and the answer was simple, ‘Nuclear Opacity’. President Nixon agreed; on the condition that Israel would not publicly state or demonstrate their nuclear capabilities; the US would not pressure them into signing the NPT and de-facto acknowledging their nuclear capabilities. This agreement has been upheld and sustained by all the US presidents till date\(^\text{20}\). The Carter administration was also, allegedly, involved in the cover-up for an Israeli nuclear test in their region\(^\text{21}\).

**EGYPT**

Egypt has been the only Arab neighbor to Israel that has established diplomatic relations with them for the last 30 years and more; and though their part was small in the perpetuation of the Israeli nuclear program, it was nonetheless important. Egypt (the then leader of the Arab nation) although initially had a very strong anti-Israeli sentiment, later signed a peace treaty with them in 1979 (The Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty)\(^\text{22}\). The Egyptians had agreed to downplay the issue of Israel nuclear program on the condition that Israel would keep a low profile in the Middle East. Ever since then Egypt reduced their defense budget, from 22% in 1974 to 2.75% in 2002\(^\text{23}\).

**Present-Day Israel**

**Domestic & Foreign Policies**

What truly sets Israel apart other nuclear powers, is their obligation to restrain & control (in nuclear aspects) that is exhibited through their distinctive code of nuclear conduct.\(^\text{24}\) The citizens have yet to acknowledge Israel’s nuclear capabilities, even though it has been more than five decades since they had crossed the nuclear threshold. Nuclear caution is practiced, on both domestic and international levels, as a stringent policy and conduct of atomic ambiguity. Avner Cohen, in his book ‘The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb’ (Ch. 5), alludes to the fact that the Israeli policy of ‘Amimut’ is reinforced and sustained by a multilayered institutional infrastructure.\(^\text{25}\) The concept of ‘Nuclear Taboo’ is practiced on a domestic level in Israel, it has been inculcated in the citizens there & groomed them into creating

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a culture of absolute silence on the subject of ‘Nuclear’. This infrastructure included Censora (Israeli Military Censor) who were also known as the ‘gatekeeper of Israel’s nuclear secrets’; for instance they make editorial changes such as replacing the term ‘nuclear weapons’ with more tolerable terms like ‘strategic/ doomsday weapons’ along with which any and all nuclear weaponry is referred to as being ‘foreign’. Cohen also believes, as stated in the book, that new democratic practices and the stigma that nuclear weapons carry may have started to wear away on practice and outdated infrastructure of ‘Amimut’. This view is supported by Zeev Maoz, in his paper “The Mixed Blessing of Israel’s Nuclear Policy” in which, Maoz mentioned the support for Israel posture of nuclear ambiguity has been dwindling. He compared two polls from 1987 and 2002, where he observed that the backing for Israel’s nuclear ambiguity had fallen from 80% to 61% in a span of 15 years. This was mainly because of the fact that domestic law has no effect on the state’s international conduct.

In the context of foreign policies, Israel foreign policy has been the same since the Six-Day War (1967), the policy of ‘Amimut’ has become the anchor of the State’s Defense Doctrine. Although one advantage that Nuclear Ambiguity had given Israel, in the vein of foreign policies, was the Begin Doctrine. Named after the former Israeli PM Menachem Begin; this doctrine was put in place to partially justify the launching of pre-emptive attacks against Israel’s adversaries who were developing their nuclear capabilities, just as Begin had done in case of Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq 1981. Israel also developed another policy that they called the ‘Samson Option’; which essentially inferred that the nation (due to its modest size) would use its nuclear arsenal as a last resort against any adversary or perceived threat (before they can strike); taking the whole region out with themselves (collective suicide).

Alleged Nuclear Arsenal & Capabilities

It has been believed that Israel has harnessed advanced nuclear capabilities, which includes unmated (from nuclear warheads) land-based systems. According to the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) the estimates made by the U.S intelligence suggested that Israel’s stockpile might include 80 warheads, but it is confirmed that Israel has produced enough plutonium for 100-200 warheads. The Israeli warheads have the capability to be deployed by air (F-16s & F-15Es), they can be deployed on ground (i.e. Jericho II intermediate-range ballistic missile) and/or also by sea (US - made Harpoon missiles based on diesel-powered submarines

or ships), according to CFR (Council on Foreign Relations). The missiles, themselves, can travel different distances that range from Libya to Iran and all the way to Russia. Israel is also believed to possess at least a hundred ‘mini-nukes’ (bunker-busting bombs) that are laser-guided and have the capability of penetrating targets underground such as another country nuclear laboratory or their storage areas for WMDs.

Security Dilemma in the Middle East: Iran’s Nuclearization

Iran-Israel Relations

Although Israel and Iran were once de facto allies, they have started viewing each other with growing hostility in these recent decades. They now view each other as a regional adversary for influence and power in the Middle East but the one fact that has to keep in mind is that they are not natural adversaries/competitors. This is because they neither have territorial nor economic disputes, the relations between the two were often grounded on their shared geopolitical interests, which led to years of cooperation both before and after the Iranian Revolution (1979). According to Israel and Iran, A Dangerous Rivalry (RAND) the Israelis hold the view that a nuclearized Iran in the Middle East, would be very influential which would severely limit both the US and Israel military & political maneuverability.

While that is all true, one thing to bear in mind is that, they did not mention that Israel would face an existential crisis. In another instance in the same document they again alluded to the fact that the Israeli leaders may be framing the ‘Iranian Threat’ as a dire strategic and existential challenge. We shall look at the events that led these two states to engage in a very heated rivalry in the Middle East, setting aside the Iranian/Islamic religious issues with Israel.

While it is true that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 greatly altered the relations between the two countries, there was the matter of the substantial debts that Israel owed Iran for the business conducted between the two. The debt was in billions and was based on the oil purchases made by Israel and; more importantly, from the joint venture between Israeli companies and the National Iranian Oil Company, known as the Eilat-Ashkelon (Trans-Israel) pipeline (including the associated port facilities). Gareth Porter (Asia Times) revealed in an article, that Iran had agreed to accept Israel in 2003 but the secret proposal was rejected by the US, the copy of which was obtained by the Inter Press Service (IPS). All Iran had asked in return for not only accepting Israel but also stopping their

funding to Hezbollah, was that the US end their hostility towards Iran and recognize them as a legitimate power in the Middle East. This occurred under the Bush administration which was referred to by, Porter, as one of the major propaganda themes of their administration for 10 months.

By the time of Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-2013) we could observe, what may be described as, a series of provocations for Iran courtesy Israel. The allegations that entailed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards assisting Hezbollah fighters, gave Israel the leeway to launch a series of covert operations against Iran. There was a wave of assassinations in Iran in 2010 which targeted Iranian nuclear scientist, which was believed to be the work of Mossad (Israeli Intelligence). Another event that also occurred in 2010 (June) was the discovery of an advance computer virus, Stuxnet, which was believed to have been developed by the US and Israel to attack the Iranian nuclear facilities. Mossad has also been suspected to be responsible for explosions that damaged Iran’s Isfahan nuclear facility and also the revolutionary guard, at separate instances. It was in response to the covert operations that Iran started to visibly and out-rightly retaliate against Israel and the US. In the article ‘The Secret History of the Push to Strike Iran’ authors Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti detail events starting with the Bush presidency to Barack Obama’s presidency to Donald Trump’s steps, in tandem with Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu, that have led to the recent volatility in Iran. While Obama may have supported the Palestinian narrative in front of Netanyahu, he may have inadvertently pushed the PM to make rash decision about Iran, but the relationship between the two states was warmer at the cabinet level. Along with that US also dissociated out of the pre-emptive strike against Iran that Israel had planned but Obama still had hope for a nuclear deal with Iran; therefore, the White House began a campaign of relentless and punishing sanctions on Tehran, whose purpose was to pressure them into diplomatic negotiations. It was Trump’s decision that really made the difference, when he inherited both the nuclear deal and the plans for an Iran strike from the Obama administration. Trump withdrew from the Iran deal and supported the strike, after Netanyahu, allegedly had presented evidence that Iran was making nuclear weapons, which brought the nuclear standoff back to square one.

Analysis
Ramifications for Israel

Israel has always favored the policy of nuclear ambiguity over its possession of nuclear weapons/capabilities, which had been a major deterrent in the establishment of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle Eastern region. In fact, their policy of ‘Amimut’ may have encouraged their neighboring states to increase their own WMD capacities.
This fact was also indicated by Zeev Maoz in ‘The Mixed Blessing of Israel’s Nuclear Policy’ where he stated that the Israeli policy had two principle adverse effects; the first one being that the policy had been largely contributory in stimulating a non-conventional arms race in the Middle East\(^45\). The second being the detrimental effects the policy had on Israel’ democracy. Maoz also highlighted that the fundamental objectives that Israel claimed the policy fulfilled, as was observed in the Arab attacks of 1973 & 1991, as well as the Egyptian attacks (1973), which had not been deterred by the policy or that the policy had any influence on the Arab decision to make peace with the Jewish state. According to him, by the 1960s the gravity of the threat of an Arab coalition destroying the Jewish homeland had become less realistic and the balance of conventional armed forces was titling in Israel’s favor. There have been sources that have indicated that the Israeli nuclear arsenal and tactical nuclear weapons had reached a significant overkill capacity\(^46\).

As for the issues with Democracy, the policy of opacity demands secrecy which is against the tenets of a liberal democracy. The policy has excluded and denied Israeli citizens their basic rights of democracy, such as open debates, the public’s right to know about the status and affairs of their nation, accountability of the nation to its people and, perhaps most importantly, governmental transparency\(^47\).

Maoz pointed out that Israel is not an ambiguous nuclear power but an undeclared one. According to him the secrecy surrounding Israel’s nuclear capabilities, coupled with rumors and leaks both intended and unintended, suggested that there could be a potential disconnect in the Israeli citizens view/purpose for their nuclear weapons as opposed to the Israeli government or leadership’s view\(^48\). Any support for the development and possession of tactical nuclear weapons should have been the result of open discussion between the citizens and the government not “a bureaucratic fait accompli made in secrecy with little or no governmental, parliamentary, or public oversight”\(^49\).

### Ramifications for Iran

According to an article in the ‘Washington Post’ it may have been Israel nuclear arsenal that propagated Iran’s nuclear program in the first place\(^50\). Before Khomeini came to power, Iran & Israel had enjoyed a brief partnership (after the Six-Day War) wherein they had established secret military links and wide-ranging projects\(^51\), i.e. Project Flower (joint military project, 77-79) was an attempt at developing a new Iranian-Israeli missile\(^52\). It is also important to remember

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that Iran (also Egypt) was the first state in the Middle East to take any initiative towards WMD Free Zone during the 60s, while Israel refused to ‘denuclearize’; mainly because of their policy of ambiguity (they would have to admit their nuclear capabilities in order to denuclearize, in the first place). Since the disclosure of the clandestine Iranian uranium enrichment facility (Natanz) in 2002 and the election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013); Israel has perceived them as, a sometimes over-exaggerated threat. The Iran-Israel Proxy Conflict or Cold War that has been continuous since 3rd August 2005; was an attempt by Israel to prevent the Iranian government from acquiring a nuclear arsenal and their backing/support for Hezbollah; due to the threat they felt to their regional hegemony in the Middle East region. Ever since then Israel has been making persistent attempts for a case of military strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities and has fervidly opposed the Iran Nuclear Deal or JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action 2013)\(^{53}\). Israel along with its Western Allies had initially tried to persuade Iran to give up on their uranium enrichment program, along with stopping work on their heavy-water reactor at Arak\(^{54}\); even though Iran never explicitly stated that they had any malicious intent in the usage of their nuclear capabilities, especially against Israel. Iran’s refusal to give up their nuclear program led to negotiations between the P5+1 and Tehran to go on for a decade, Iran was, correspondingly, subjected to harsh and binding sanctions by the UNSC, EU and the US\(^ {55}\). Along with that they were also at the receiving end of threats of the usage of force/military action against them by Israel and the US. Israel has also displayed petty behavior towards Iran, for instance in 2015 (May) they declared Iran as an enemy state and refused to pay their $1.1 Billion debt (over oil since the 1970s)\(^ {56}\). Another instance was when Trump was deciding on pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal (2015); Netanyahu tried making the case that Iran was violating their nuclear agreement though he did not provide an evidence\(^ {57}\).

**Conclusion**

It is clear that the policy of Nuclear Ambiguity/Opacity has outlived its purpose, times have changed since the Second World War. What may have started out as Israel’s attempt at self-preservation, has now turned into a strategy for dominance in the Middle East. The double standard that the international community has shown in accepting nuclear capabilities only in Israel’s case in the Middle East, has only deepen the sense of injustice and unfairness in the region. While on the domestic level the policy has completely undermined Israel’s declaration to be a liberal democratic state. Nuclear experts have argued that the policy is meaningless and is only a reflection of Israel’s reluctance to

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adhere to the international norms. As put by Leonard Wiess in an article in The Guardian, “If it is admitted Israel has nuclear weapons at least you can have an honest discussion. It seems to me it’s very difficult to get a resolution of the Iran issue without being honest about that.”

Iran, for their part, has always been willing to broker a peace deal with Israel, on the condition that Israel would give up their nuclear weapons. As pointed out by Zeev Maoz that just as the Israeli nuclear policy had started a massive arms race in the Middle East, it could also be just as effective in the regional disarmament of the Middle East and agreement on the control of arms. We can also argue that it is only natural that a country that is with enriched uranium, as Iran is, is only natural that they would like to follow a nuclear path. It is possible that Israel may have exaggerated the ‘Iranian Threat’ to be more than it truly was/is.

Major matter of the concern is the tense situation between the two nations in Middle East and the fact that both of them purportedly have nuclear capabilities; which can only mean that Iran and Israel have now become nuclear flash points. The ‘New Great Game’ is afoot; it had already started in Syria, under the guise of Russian military intervention and as the aftermath of military campaigns against the Islamic state.

The New Great Game has been summarized by Matthew Edwards (2003) as being the shorthand for the competition, in the areas of Central Asia and Caucasus, for power, profits, influence and hegemony (often referring to the oil and natural gas reserves and industries) with petroleum conglomerates, contracts, tanker routes and oil/gas pipelines as the prize. According to Ramzy Baroud in his article for Middle East Monitor (MEMO) the recent assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani reveals the American and Israeli desperation to come-out-on-top in the New Great Game in the Middle East. He went a step further by saying that both the leaders were vying for a way to shed some positive light on themselves for their own domestic media, therefore the decision for the assassination was the best course of action; and that it was blatant that Israel has been ‘itching for a war against Iran’. The message of this action was clear, the US and Israel are willing to set the whole Middle East on fire as to maintain their strategic presence and serve their economic interests. Due to the cooperation that Iran and Israel had before 1979 (joint military exercises and missile development); it can be said that Iran’s stubbornness, when it comes to their nuclear program, is a page out of Israel’s playbook. They have refused to denuclearize unless Israel also

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follows the same path; a better idea than putting Iran in the spotlight would be that the International collective should work on denuclearization of the whole region of the Middle East, starting with Israel and their policy of nuclear ambiguity.

\*Both elements of “Amimut” were introduced by Zain Hussain, 2019, in his article "Why the Israeli Policy of Nuclear Ambiguity Is Harmful for Prospects of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East” on the website for BASIC (British American Security Information Council).
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