

NOTE

Nuclear Shadow

J S writes :

In the Middle East only Israel has nuclear weapons and Arab states and non-Arab states on the periphery of the Arab world have been living in the shadow of Israeli nuclear weapons for four decades. But the “nuclear threat” in the region has been pointed at Iran.

The IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) has issued numerous statements “affirming that Iran does not have the bomb and that there are no signs it is trying to develop one. Iran itself has said it will not produce nuclear weapons. Furthermore, unlike Israel it has signed up to the NPT and allows inspections of its nuclear installations. In the 1960s and early 1970s, thanks to White House protection, Israel was able to develop nuclear weapons and missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads to Arab capitals without the US using any of the means at its disposal to block developments regarded as threatening to the national interest. It could have used financial pressure and it could have refused to supply the advanced weaponry Israel desperately wanted, but on instructions from the White House, senior administration officials were prevented from resorting to any of these means.

Secure in their knowledge that the president was behind them, Israeli government representatives, from the Prime Minister down to the ambassador in Washington, ducked, weaved and defied attempts to pry commitments from them. They made not one concession to the US apart from the ritual formula that “Israel will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the region”, and then they argued over the meaning of “introduce”, i.e. whether a bomb which had not been tested or fully assembled could be said to have been “introduced”.

From the time Israel developed nuclear weapons it was inevitable that other states in the Middle East would follow suit, unless they were to resign themselves to living forever in the shadow of Israel’s nuclear arsenal. Amazingly, in the past four decades none has but now one state, Iran, has reached the point where it could develop a nuclear weapon if it so desired. The reaction from Israel has been visceral. Monopoly possession of nuclear weapons means that there is no war Israel cannot win if it chooses to use them. The fear and uncertainty already stirred up among the Israeli population at large is reflected in the recent public opinion poll showing that 66% of Jewish Israelis support military action designed to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Senior Israeli political, military and intelligence figures have been threatening Iran with military attack for years. Their warnings have been reinforced with numerous statements of understanding from Washington. The constant threat of military action undermined the reformist Khatami government and prompted Iran to strengthen its overall defence capacity. It has refused to back down to US and Israeli threats. For Iran, nuclear development has taken the place of oil, nationalized in 1951 by a government subsequently brought down by the CIA, as the symbol of national independence. Egyptians felt the same way about the Suez Canal. Iran regards the attitude of the US, the UN Security Council and the EU, both following the US line in support of Israel, as neo-imperialist. □□□

