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The Untold Story of Israel's Bomb

By Avner Cohen and William Burr
Sunday, April 30, 2006; Page B01

On Sept. 9, 1969, a big brown envelope was delivered to the Oval Office on behalf of CIA Director Richard M. Helms. On it he had written, "For and to be opened only by: The President, The White House." The precise contents of the envelope are still unknown, but it was the latest intelligence on one of Washington's most secretive foreign policy matters: Israel's nuclear program. The material was so sensitive that the nation's spymaster was unwilling to share it with anybody but President Richard M. Nixon himself.

The now-empty envelope is inside a two-folder set labeled "NSSM 40," held by the Nixon Presidential Materials Project at the National Archives. (NSSM is the acronym for National Security Study Memorandum, a series of policy studies produced by the national security bureaucracy for the Nixon White House.) The NSSM 40 files are almost bare because most of their documents remain classified.

With the aid of [With the aid of recently declassified documents](#), we now know that NSSM 40 was the Nixon administration's effort to grapple with the policy implications of a nuclear-armed Israel. These documents offer unprecedented insight into the tense deliberations in the White House in 1969 -- a crucial time in which international ratification of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was uncertain and U.S. policymakers feared that a Middle Eastern conflagration could lead to superpower conflict. Nearly four decades later, as the world struggles with nuclear ambitions in Iran, India and elsewhere, the ramifications of this hidden history are still felt.

Israel's nuclear program began more than 10 years before Helms's envelope landed on Nixon's desk. In 1958, Israel secretly initiated work at what was to become the Dimona nuclear research site. Only about 15 years after the Holocaust, nuclear nonproliferation norms did not yet exist, and Israel's founders believed they had a compelling case for acquiring nuclear weapons. In 1961, the CIA estimated that Israel could produce nuclear weapons within the decade.

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The discovery presented a difficult challenge for U.S. policymakers. From their perspective, Israel was a small, friendly state -- albeit one outside the boundaries of U.S. security guarantees -- surrounded by larger enemies vowing to destroy it. Yet government officials also saw the Israeli nuclear program as a potential threat to U.S. interests. President John F. Kennedy feared that without decisive international action to curb nuclear proliferation, a world of 20 to 30 nuclear-armed nations would be inevitable within a decade or two.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations fashioned a complex scheme of annual visits to Dimona to ensure that Israel would not develop nuclear weapons. But the Israelis were adept at concealing their activities. By late 1966, Israel had reached the nuclear threshold, although it decided not to conduct an atomic test.

By the time Prime Minister Levi Eshkol visited President Lyndon B. Johnson in January 1968, the official State Department view was that despite Israel's growing nuclear weapons potential, it had "not embarked on a program to produce a nuclear weapon." That assessment, however, eroded in the months ahead. By the fall,

you already acquired the bomb when Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin explained to him how he interpreted Israel's pledge not to be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the region. According to Rabin, for nuclear weapons to be introduced, they needed to be tested and publicly declared. Implicitly, then, Israel could possess the bomb without "introducing" it.

The question of what to do about the Israeli bomb would fall to Nixon. Unlike his Democratic predecessors, he and his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, were initially skeptical about the effectiveness of the NPT. And though they may have been inclined to accommodate Israel's nuclear ambitions, they would have to manage senior State Department and Pentagon officials whose perspectives differed. Documents prepared between February and April 1969 reveal a great sense of urgency and alarm among senior officials about Israel's nuclear progress.

As Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird wrote in March 1969, these "developments were not in the United States' interests and should, if at all possible, be stopped." Above all, the Nixon administration was concerned that Israel would publicly display its nuclear capabilities.

Apparently prompted by those high-level concerns, Kissinger issued NSSM 40 -- titled Israeli Nuclear Weapons Program -- on April 11, 1969. In it he asked the national security bureaucracy for a review of policy options toward Israel's nuclear program. In the weeks that followed, the issue was taken up by a senior review group (SRG), chaired by Kissinger, that included Helms, Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson, Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard and Joint Chiefs Chairman Earle Wheeler.

The one available report of an SRG meeting on NSSM 40 suggests that the bureaucracy was interested in pressuring Israel to halt its nuclear program. How much pressure to exert remained open. Kissinger wanted to "avoid direct confrontation," while Richardson was willing to apply pressure if an investigation to determine Israel's intentions showed that some key assurances would not be forthcoming. In such circumstances, the United States could tell the Israelis that scheduled deliveries of F-4 Phantom jets to Israel would have to be reconsidered.

By mid-July 1969, Nixon had let it be known that he was leery of using the Phantoms as leverage, so when Richardson and Packard summoned Rabin on July 29 to discuss the nuclear issue, the idea of a probe that involved pressure had been torpedoed. Although Richardson and Packard emphasized the seriousness with which they viewed the nuclear problem, they had no threat to back up their rhetoric.

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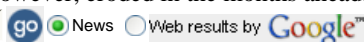
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