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Israel Silent on Chemical Weapons

By Pierre Klochendler

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“Does Israel have chemical weapons too?” is the question posed by the U.S. publication *Foreign Policy*, citing a newly uncovered CIA document from 1983 which alleged that Israel is likely to have developed such weapons.

Written ten years after the 1973 war in which Egypt and Syria attacked Israel, the CIA document revealed in *Foreign Policy* alleged that “Israel undertook a program of chemical warfare preparations in both offensive and protective areas.”

True or not, the report underpins Israel’s doctrine to deter frontline Arab states from attacking it by tilting the balance of power in its favor, Prof. Shlomo Aronson, Israeli weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) scholar at the Hebrew University Jlem tells IPS.

“Since the Arab states started to produce chemical weapons, it would be quite natural that Israel has something similar. They have chemical weapons. We must have them as well.”

“Syria produced chemical weapons to balance the threat of Israeli nuclear weapons,” Ziad Abu Zayyad, former head of the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East peace talks on Arms Control and Regional Security (1991-1996) tells IPS.

“While we cannot confirm whether the Israelis possess lethal chemical agents,” the CIA report said, “several indicators lead us to believe that they have available to them at least persistent and

non-persistent nerve agents, a mustard agent, and several riot-control agents, marched with suitable delivery systems.”

It’s been known since the early 1970s that chemical tests are conducted at the secretive Israel Institute for Biological Research located in the town of Ness Ziona, 20 km south of Tel Aviv.

The secret Intel file identified “a probable chemical weapons nerve agent production facility and a storage facility at the Dimona Sensitive Storage area in the Negev desert,” – that is, in the vicinity of the nuclear research center where it’s widely assumed that nuclear warheads have been manufactured.

Whether Israel retains the alleged chemical stockpile is unknown.

Officially, it neither confirms nor denies the existence of a chemical weapons program – let alone of a nuclear weapons program – and intentionally shrouds in ambiguity its suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, only exhibiting chemical warfare protection drills and gas mask kits distribution centers.

Aronson deciphers the Israeli WMD doctrine – “not to admit the existence of WMDs before peace prevails; not taking the Arab people hostage to the behavior of their leaders; not committing publicly to any red line in the realm of unconventional weapons.”

Israel signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (September 1993) which prohibits the production, stockpiling and use of such arms, but never ratified it.

If implemented, the convention would endow chemical weapons inspectors with intrusive powers, notes Aronson. “The treaty could allow inspectors in Israel’s facilities, including the nuclear facility.”

Abu Zayyad believes that after Syria, Israel should disarm from its chemical weapons.

“There should be a linkage,” he tells IPS. “We’re aiming at a WMDs-free Middle East.”

Israel rejects any demand to link Syria’s chemical disarmament with a ratification of the Convention that would lead to the dismantlement of the arsenal it reportedly has.

“The big difference is Syria, not Israel, uses chemical weapons,” Aronson points out. “Conventional Israel was never accepted. Unconventional Israel was, and is, accepted. Our very survival rests on unconventional weapons.”

“Peace is the sole solution to Israel’s security predicament,” counters Abu Zayyad.

Israel declines to answer queries by foreign journalists, opting instead for more discreet reactions in the local media.

“Some of the countries in the region don’t recognize Israel’s right to exist and blatantly call to annihilate it,” a Foreign Ministry spokesperson was quoted in the liberal newspaper *Haaretz*.”

“In this context, the chemical weapons threat against Israel and its civilian population is neither theoretical nor distant,” the official said by way of rationale for not ratifying the Convention.

US Secretary of State John Kerry flew to Jerusalem to brief Netanyahu about the U.S.-Russian framework agreement on terminating Syria’s chemical weapons the day after it was a done deal.

“If we achieve that,” Kerry declared, “We’ll have set a marker for the standard of behavior with respect to Iran and North Korea.”
“The determination the international community shows regarding Syria will have a direct impact on the Syrian regime’s patron Iran,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said to Kerry.
“If diplomacy has any chance to work, it must be coupled with a credible military threat.”

Netanyahu knows that the US, after having precisely adopted such a two-pronged approach on Syria, cannot afford not to back Israel publicly on Iran, even as Tehran is signaling readiness to compromise on its nuclear program.

And for the time being, demands for Israel to disarm from its alleged poison gas arsenal are bound to evaporate into thin air.