

Appendix Eight (Chapter Nine, Note 134) Kennedy and the Israeli Nuclear Program

It is often said that Kennedy was deeply concerned with the problem of nuclear proliferation; the implication is that his efforts in this area--and especially the policy that led to the 1963 test ban treaty--were essentially rooted in this very basic interest. His policy on the Israeli nuclear question is often cited as an important case in point. It is commonly argued (by Seymour Hersh, for example) that because of Kennedy's profound commitment to nonproliferation, he was firmly opposed to the Israeli nuclear program and from the start put heavy pressure on the Israelis to end it.(1)

The evidence, however, shows that Kennedy's policy in this area was rather lax, at least until 1963, when the Israeli question became bound up with far more important issues. The idea, for example, that a May 1961 meeting between Kennedy and Israeli prime minister Ben Gurion was a "major disappointment" for the Israeli leader, in part because of the nuclear issue, is not borne out by the records of that encounter. The meeting was relaxed and the president was friendly, and this was in spite of the fact that Israeli prime minister Ben Gurion made it clear that Israel was keeping her nuclear option open; Kennedy, it seemed, was far more concerned with appearances than with substance.(2)

The key issue had to do with the inspection of the Israeli nuclear facility at Dimona. The Israelis agreed to inspections, but not to serious ones, and the Americans went along with the charade. As McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor, later admitted, these inspections "were not as seriously and rigorously conducted as they would have had to be to get the real story."(3) The first inspection was arranged by the Israelis "outside regular governmental channels." Two American physicists, both European-born Jews who had fled to the United States during the Nazi period, were invited to go on a guided tour of Dimona and reported "no evidence of weapons-related activity." Although well aware of what the Israelis were doing, Kennedy chose to take this as satisfactory evidence of Israeli compliance with America's non-proliferation policy.(4) In 1962, as Hersh himself points out, the U.S. government accepted an inspection arrangement which "guaranteed that the whole procedure would be little more than a whitewash, as the President and his senior advisors had to understand: the American inspection team would have to schedule its visits well in

advance, and with the full acquiescence of Israel."(5) The goal, according to the American who led the inspection team, was to find "'ways to *not* reach the point of taking action' against Israel's nuclear weapons program."(6)

And, in fact, far from getting involved in a kind of "war" with Ben Gurion over Dimona, the issue was essentially put on hold until the spring of 1963. Avner Cohen, who has studied these matters more closely than anyone else, refers to the period from May 1961 to March 1963 as a "long slumber."(7) It was only in mid-1963 that the Kennedy administration decided to apply real pressure. But this had to do with the more general policy the U.S. government was pursuing at the time. It was about to embark on delicate and far-reaching negotiations designed to keep both Germany and China non-nuclear, and the last thing Kennedy wanted was for Israel to do anything that might upset the applecart.(8)

The basic point is that if the Kennedy administration had been committed to non-proliferation as a fundamental and universal goal, it would have opposed the Israeli program from the start. The fact that its policy in this area was as lax as it was shows that the policy was applied in a highly selective way--that it was driven by political far more than by arms control considerations--and this in turn underscores the basic argument made in the text about the importance of interpreting the 1963 test ban negotiations in political terms.

NOTES

1. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 114, 117, 124-125.

2. Hersh, *Samson Option*, p. 102, for the claim about the meeting being a disappointment. For the evidence, see Avner Cohen, "Stumbling into Opacity: The United States, Israel, and the Atom, 1960-63," *Security Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 213-215.

3. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 510, quoted in Cohen, "Stumbling into Opacity," p. 217.

4. Cohen, "Stumbling into Opacity," pp. 213-215; NIE 4-3-61,

"Nuclear Weapons and Delivery Capabilities of Free World Countries other than the US and UK," September 21, 1961, paras. 23-28, FRUS 1961-63, vols. 7-9, mic. supp., no. 243.

5. Hersh, *Samson Option*, pp. 110-111.

6. Hersh, *Samson Option*, p. 112; emphasis added.

7. Hersh, *Samson Option*, p. 114; Cohen, "Stumbling into Opacity," p. 217.

8. Note especially the reference to the effect of the development of an Israeli nuclear capability on certain "larger countries," in Kennedy to Ben Gurion, May 18, 1963, in Avner Cohen, comp., "Recently Declassified 1963 Correspondence between President Kennedy and Prime Ministers Ben-Gurion and Eshkol," *Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1995), p. 196, and the discussion in Avner Cohen, "Israel's Nuclear History: The Untold Kennedy-Eshkol Dimona Correspondence," *Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1995), pp. 171-175, esp. n. 47.

Additional Note (added December 1998): Avner Cohen's book, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) was published shortly after this appendix was written. People interested in this general subject should certainly read this very important new work, and might also want to take a look at that book's [internet supplement](#) (which contains, among other things, a number of original documents bearing on this issue). That supplement was placed on the National Security Archive's website in October 1998.