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Israel deploys nuclear arms in submarines

Peter Beaumont in London and Conal Urquhart in Jerusalem

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Israeli and American officials have admitted collaborating to deploy US-supplied Harpoon cruise missiles armed with nuclear warheads in Israel's fleet of Dolphin-class submarines, giving the Middle East's only nuclear power the ability to strike at any of its Arab neighbours.

The unprecedented disclosure came as Israel announced that states 'harbouring terrorists' are legitimate targets, responding to Syria's declaration of its right to self-defence should Israel bomb its territory again.

According to Israeli and Bush administration officials interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, the sea-launch capability gives Israel the ability to target Iran more easily should the Iranians develop their own nuclear weapons.

Although it has been long suspected that Israel bought three German diesel-electric submarines with the specific aim of arming them with nuclear cruise missiles, the admission that the two countries had collaborated in arming the fleet with a nuclear-capable weapons system is significant at a time of growing crisis between Israel and its neighbours.

According to the paper, the disclosure by two US officials is designed to discourage Israel's enemies from against launching an attack amid rapidly escalating tensions in the region following a raid by Israeli jets on an alleged terrorist training camp near the Syrian capital, Damascus.

In a clear echo of the Bush doctrine of pre-emption, the Foreign Ministry's senior spokesman, Gideon Meir, insisted: 'Israel views every state that is harbouring terrorist organisations and the leaders of those terrorist organisations who are attacking innocent citizens of the state of Israel as legitimate targets out of self defence.'

The disclosure, is certain to complicate UN-led efforts to persuade Iran to make a full disclosure of its nuclear programme. It will also complicate the Bush administration's efforts to reach out to moderate Arab states when they are pressing for an equal disclosure of Israel's nuclear weapons programme.

Although Israel has long been known to possess nuclear weapons, in the past it has abided by a deal struck with President Richard Nixon in 1969 that it would maintain 'ambiguity' about its retention of weapons in exchange for the US turning a blind eye. According to reliable

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estimates, Israel has around 200 nuclear warheads.

It acquired the three Dolphin class submarines, which can remain at sea for a month, in the late Nineties. They are equipped with six torpedo tubes suitable for the 21-inch torpedoes that are normally used on most submarines.

It had been understood they would carry a version of the 'Popeye Turbo' cruise missiles being developed by Rafael Armament Development Authority of Israel.

Israel's seaborne nuclear doctrine is designed to place one submarine in the Persian Gulf, the other in the Mediterranean, with a third on standby. Secret test launches of the cruise missile systems were understood to have been undertaken in May 2000 when Israel carried out tests in the Indian Ocean.

'We tolerate nuclear weapons in Israel for the same reason we tolerate them in Britain and France,' one of the LA Times' sources told the paper. 'We don't regard Israel as a threat.'

Despite the anonymity of the source, the sentiment is almost identical to that of the US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control, John Bolton, who told British journalists last week that America was not interested in taking Israel to task for its continuing development of nuclear weapons because it was not a 'threat' to the United States.

Even if Bolton was not one of the sources for the story, his comments, coming on top of that of the two other sources, suggest the degree to which senior members of the Bush administration can now not even be bothered to hide America's assistance and encouragement for Israel's nuclear programme.



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