

Public Opinion and Nuclear Weapons

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Israel's nuclear potential is one of the country's most closely guarded secrets. Israelis are increasingly aware of, and concerned about, the threat of nonconventional war. The country's nuclear policy is an example of a consensus issue for which the public tends to show high levels of support for government policy even though there has never been intense political debate about the issue.

Although it has evidently been the topic of policy discussions since the 1950s, the government has never taken a clear stance as to whether or not Israel has a nuclear capacity, and no major political party has ever raised the issue in an election campaign. This secrecy can be understood as a means of preventing a

nuclear arms race with Arab neighbors, though some maintain that an acknowledged nuclear capability would provide more robust deterrence. Israel's official reaction to queries on this subject is that it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East; then Foreign Minister Yigal Allon further complicated the issue when he added that Israel would also not be the second to introduce such weapons into the area.

Although this statement is open to various interpretations, the fact is that Israel has not signed the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Interestingly, however, and equally ambiguous in its significance, in a 1994 survey, 72 percent of a representative sample of Israeli Jews

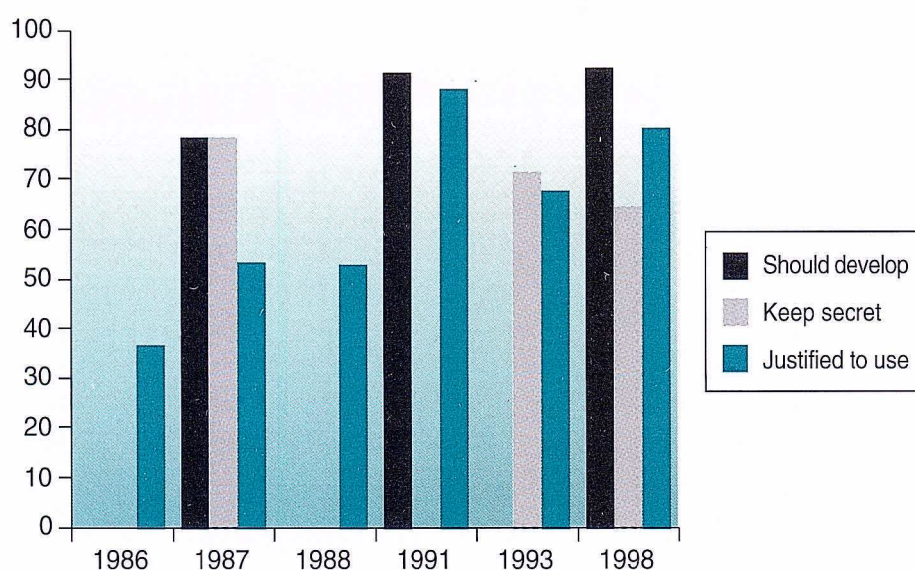
supported the proposition that Israel should sign that treaty (35% strongly supported, 37% supported), with only 28 percent opposing it (12% strongly opposed, 16% opposed).

Although most experts are convinced that Israel has a nuclear capacity, the public's orientation to the topic of nonconventional weapons, and especially nuclear ones, was remarkably dormant before the 1991 Gulf War. It was, in fact, a nonissue, absent from public debate. Yet when called upon to express an opinion, the public was ready and able to do so; the rate of nonresponse was low and similar to other questions, from 1 percent to 3 percent. But on an open-ended question, asked over the years, as to what major issue should be addressed by the government, the issue of nuclear weapons *never* came up, compared to a 10 percent rate in American surveys.

The strict military censorship of the subject helps keep nuclear policy a nonissue in Israeli politics. The combination of uncertainty and censorship has meant that most of the debate on the issues was conducted abroad, and then reported in Israel as news items from foreign newspapers—which, ironically, is permitted under Israeli practice.

In 1991, however, the nuclear issue became hot, under the marked impact of the Gulf War. The public now regarded nuclear weapons as the main threat. Support for Israel's development and use of these weapons grew, and the conditions

Figure 1. Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons, 1986-1998



for use seemed to crystallize in the Israeli mind. Not only has there been a change over time in the public's position on the development and use of these weapons, the public has expressed its fear of the threat that they pose. When asked about threatening situations in different surveys, the menace from nonconventional warfare was rated highest.

Since the mid-1980s, the Jaffee Center's National Security and Public Opinion Project has surveyed public attitudes about Israel's nuclear weapons policy. The three questions asked concerned whether or not Israel should develop nuclear weapons, whether or not such weapons should be kept secret (if they existed), and under what conditions would it be justified to use them.

In the 1998 survey, 92 percent supported the proposition that Israel should develop nuclear weapons, similar to 91 percent in 1991. In comparison, 78 percent supported the proposition in 1987 (see Figure 1).

There was a trend away from keeping Israel's nuclear capacity shrouded in uncertainty, although a large majority still supported secrecy. Two-thirds of the 1998 sample agreed that it was best to keep Israel's nuclear plans concealed, compared to 71 percent in 1993 and 78 percent in 1987.

There has been a steady, dramatic increase in support for the use of nuclear weapons—from 36 percent in 1986 to 80 percent in 1998. The year 1991 saw especially high rates of support because of the threat of the Gulf War; but even if that

peak is ignored, the data show regular progression. The highest rates of agreement were in the 1991 and 1998 surveys. The 1991 survey followed the Gulf War; the 1998 survey coincided with the crisis between the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) and Iraq, with the United States threatening air strikes on Iraq. Many Israelis, remembering the 1991 Gulf War, prepared for an Iraqi SCUD attack.

Concerning the conditions under which nuclear weapons might be used (if Israel has such weapons), there was a clear pattern. The percentages in Table 1 are presented as a proportion of those who indicated that there might ever be a justification for using nuclear weapons.

The figures in the table were calculated by multiplying the percentage of respondents who reported that there were conditions under which this was justified (provided in the column heads) by the percentage who assented to use of nuclear weapons in that particular context. As these numbers are read, one must keep in mind that the complement to the number in the column head is the size of the sample opposed to the use of nuclear weapons in any situation.

Most Israelis justify the use of nuclear weapons following a nonconventional attack by another country. A lower number, about half, support the use of nuclear weapons in a desperate military situation; far fewer Israelis support the use

Table 1. Conditions for Use of Nuclear Weapons^a

	1986	1987	1991	1993	1998
Percentage of total sample justifying					
the use of nuclear weapons:	36%	53%	88%	67%	80%
In response to nuclear attack	^b	99%	99%	98%	99%
In response to gas or biological attack	^b	^b	85%	84%	86%
In a desperate military situation	91%	^b	^b	^b	^b
To avoid defeat in conventional war	^b	60%	53%	58%	45%
To save many lives	63%	53%	48%	41%	25% ^c
To save few lives	18%	19%	20%	17%	^c
If the Golan Heights were taken	^b	^b	^b	18%	21%
Instead of using the regular army	13%	13%	12%	8%	12%

^a Data include only those who replied that there existed conditions under which the use of nuclear weapons would be justified, assuming Israel had such weapons. Based on Likert scale with four response options; "definitely justified" and "justified" reported here.

^b Not asked.

^c In 1998, "to save lives."

Table 2. Public Opinion on Arms Control Issues: 1991 - 1998

	1991	1993	1996	1998
Prohibit nonconventional weapons to all nations of region	75%	71%	43%	82%
Prevent outside arms supply to nations of region	64%	66%	57%	63%
Enlarge demilitarized zones	60%	67%	65%	68%
Reduce size of armies	54%	56%	56%	56%

of these weapons in more conventional military situations. The pattern generated in 1998 was the same as in previous years, except that by 1991 the threshold of opposition to nuclear use had been lowered considerably.

Although relatively weak, the strongest correlation with demographic variables was for education; the direction, however, was opposite to the one generally found in other countries. In Israel, support for the use of nuclear weapons was *directly* related to level of education. Among those with only elementary school education, 68 percent in the 1987 survey supported the development of nuclear weapons, and 41 percent thought there were conditions where the use of such weapons would be justified. The parallel figures for the most highly educated were 81 percent and 61 percent, respectively. Those who perceived a greater threat from the Arabs were more likely to support the development and use of these weapons. Respondents over age

66 supported the development and use of nuclear weapons more strongly than did all other age groups.

The nonpoliticized nature of the nuclear weapons issue, and the undifferentiated pattern of response, are especially striking when compared to Israeli public opinion on many other issues

Although the small geographical dimensions of the Middle East might seem to argue against developing the strategic weapon-of-last-resort, the fear that Arab

states may attempt to do so could lead Israel to try to have it in its arsenal as a deterrent. But even if Israeli planners might envisage the use of nuclear weapons in tactical settings, the populace tended to see a reactive role for them (assuming Israel had such a capacity). Most Israelis thought of the use of nuclear weapons as a last resort following a nonconventional attack by another country.

There is some confirmation of this position in the responses to a 1988 survey, in which the sample was asked the open-ended question why those who favored the use of nuclear weapons might take that position. The most frequent response, provided by a third of the sample, mentioned the experience of the Jews in the Holocaust.

Israelis perceived the use of nuclear weapons differently than did Americans or West Europeans during the Cold War. The overwhelming response there and then was that nuclear weapons should be used only in a total, global war and not in regional conflicts. Moreover, the use of these weapons of mass destruction was feared because of the implications of total annihilation. According to a 1984 poll, almost all (96%) Americans thought nuclear war was too dangerous, and 89 percent agreed that a nuclear world war would destroy mankind (Yankelovich and Doble 1984). Interestingly, in 1987 the assessment of chances of a world war was identical (49%) between Israelis and Americans (Smith 1988).

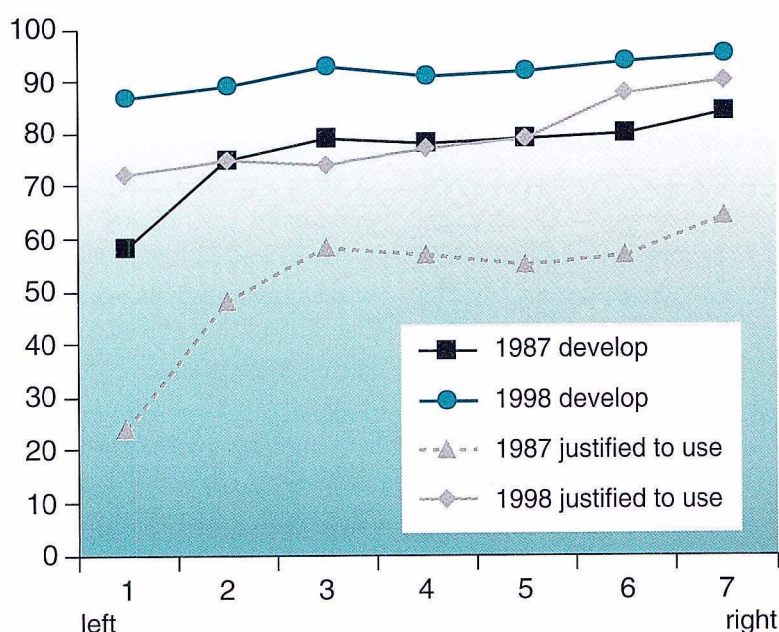
The topic of nuclear weapons entered the discourse of Israeli politics as a consensual issue. Before 1991, the issue was infrequently considered in public discussions; since then more frequently, but with little difference in opinions expressed. This emerges if one focuses on left-right self-placement (see Figure 2) concerning the questions of development and justification of use of nuclear weapons in the 1987 and 1998 surveys. In 1987, there was a correlation with one's self-placement on the left-right continuum, especially for the extreme groups. For example, in 1987, fewer than half of the respondents who placed themselves in the two positions farthest to the left on a seven-point scale thought there were conditions that

justified the use of nuclear weapons. By 1998 that political distinction had vanished, with more than 70 percent of all ideological groups able to justify their use. The nonpoliticized nature of the nuclear weapons issue, and the undifferentiated pattern of response, are especially striking when compared to Israeli public opinion on many other issues and to public opinion on nuclear matters in other countries such as Germany (Rattinger 1987), New Zealand (Lamare 1989), and the United States (Gildemeister and Furth 1989). This is underlined by support for a nuclear-free Middle East by leaders of the right, such as the nuclear physicist and former politician Yuval Ne'eman, and the championing of nuclear deterrence by

individuals from the left.

Israelis favored the idea of arms control regarding nonconventional weapons, but much less so regarding conventional forces. In 1998, 82 percent supported the notion of prohibiting armies in the region, including Israel's, from having nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons; only 56 percent agreed to reducing the size of conventional forces. More popular was the enlargement of demilitarized zones, supported by over two-thirds. Sixty-three percent agreed to preventing all outside arms supply to nations of the area. These rates were very similar to the ones recorded in three previous surveys (see Table 2).

Figure 2. Nuclear Weapons by Left-Right, 1987 and 1998



Notes

Rattinger, Hans, "Change Versus Continuity in West German Public Attitudes on National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the Early 1980s," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51:1987, 495-521;

Lamare, James W., "Gender and Public Opinion: Defence and Nuclear Issues in New Zealand," paper presented at the American Political Science Association meeting, Atlanta, 1989;

Gildemeister, Joan E., and Hans Furth, "Attitudes Toward Nuclear Issues: Perspective of 'Hard Liner' and 'Soft Liner' College Students," paper presented at the International Society of Political Psychology, Tel Aviv, 1989.