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Israel Denies It Offered South Africa Warheads

By ISABEL KERSHNER

JERUSALEM — The office of Israel's president, [Shimon Peres](#), strongly denied Monday that Mr. Peres, as Israel's defense minister, offered to sell nuclear warheads to [South Africa](#) in 1975, as reported by [The Guardian](#).

Dan Meridor, Israel's deputy prime minister and minister of intelligence and atomic energy, told reporters on Monday that he had no particular knowledge of what went on in the 1970s, as he was "not in business" then, but that he believed Mr. Peres.

[Yossi Beilin](#), a former leftist minister, also dismissed the newspaper article and the book on which it was based, "The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship With Apartheid South Africa," by Sasha Polakow-Suransky.

"The article does not concretely say that Israel wanted to sell nuclear warheads. It is a conclusion," Mr. Beilin told Israel Radio. "The book itself does not say this explicitly, and I think that the president's denial puts an end to the subject."

Israel has a longstanding policy of nuclear ambiguity, neither confirming nor denying that it has [nuclear weapons](#), though it is widely believed to have developed a large arsenal.

The president's denial was unequivocal, stating that "there exists no basis in reality for the claims" that "Israel negotiated with South Africa the exchange of nuclear weapons." The Guardian article, the president's office added, was "based on the selective interpretation of South African documents and not on concrete facts."

The Guardian said its reporting was based on the "top secret" minutes of meetings between senior officials from the two countries in 1975. The documents, it said, were uncovered by

Mr. Polakow-Suransky in research for the book, and showed that South Africa's defense minister, [P. W. Botha](#), had asked for nuclear-capable Jericho missiles with the "correct payload," Mr. Polakow-Suransky said [in an interview](#) with [Al Jazeera](#), and that Mr. Peres had responded by offering them "in three sizes."

The "three sizes," The Guardian stated, "are believed to refer to the conventional, chemical and nuclear weapons." That, however, was not detailed in any of the documents shown, though Mr. Polakow-Suransky said the documents made clear that the South Africans had interest in Jericho missiles, "only if they carried a nuclear warhead."

"Sure, there was some kind of cooperation, and there was talk about weapons," said Ephraim Asculai, who worked at the Israel Atomic Energy Commission for over 40 years, and who retired in 2001. But to conclude that the "three sizes" necessarily referred to weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear warheads, was a long stretch, he said.

In an interview with the South African Press Association, Pik Botha, who served as South Africa's foreign minister in the waning years of apartheid, also questioned the article's claims. "I doubt it very much," said Mr. Botha, who is not related to P. W. Botha. "I doubt whether such an offer was ever made. I think I would have known about it."

Mr. Peres, an elder statesman, was responsible for establishing Israel's nuclear program with help from France in the 1950s.

Israelis acknowledge that there was cooperation with South Africa — what Mr. Beilin, the former minister, called "an unholy alliance that Israel, in its isolation, forged with the apartheid regime."

Shlomo Brom, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, said it was well known that there had been cooperation between Israel and South Africa on ballistic missiles. "They paid, we developed them, then they bought," said Mr. Brom, who served as defense attaché at Israel's embassy in South Africa from 1988 to 1990. Mr. Brom said that Israel had also "probably" received uranium from South Africa.

But he said he had a hard time believing that Mr. Peres was trying to sell nuclear warheads to the South Africans in 1975.

Celia W. Dugger contributed reporting from Johannesburg.

