

The Samson Option: Israel’s Plan to Nuke Its Opponents

What’s ambiguous about Israel’s nuclear policy is not whether the country has these weapons, but how it plans to use them.

BY **ARVIND DILAWAR** JUNE 24, 2024 4:00 PM



On September 22, 1979, U.S. surveillance satellite “Vela 6911” detected a double flash of light in the Indian Ocean midway between Africa and Antarctica that appeared to be consistent with the detonation of a nuclear weapon. As researchers with the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) note in their paper, “Israeli Nuclear Weapons, 2021,” U.S. intelligence at the time of “the Vela incident” believed the double flash to be an Israeli nuclear test, conducted with logistical support from the Apartheid-era South African government. A panel assembled by President Jimmy Carter, however, rejected this conclusion based on a premise that the Administration knew to be false, but did not want to challenge politically—that Israel did not possess nuclear weapons.

Israeli “nuclear ambiguity,” its lack of official confirmation or denial that it possesses nuclear weapons, persists to this day. Nevertheless, as of 2021, researchers estimate that the country possesses ninety nuclear warheads, capable of being delivered by aircraft, land-based ballistic missiles, and sea-based cruise missiles. Israel is reserving these weapons for “the Samson Option”: an all-out assault on the civilian population centers of its opponents.

Researchers have been able to reconstruct the history and current status of Israel’s nuclear program through declassified materials, as well as statements by Israeli politicians and officers themselves.

“Israeli officials do not explicitly discuss the country’s nuclear doctrine, but the country still needs to implicitly signal the circumstances under which it would use nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes,” says Kelsey Davenport, director of nonproliferation policy at the Arms Control Association, which advocates for nuclear disarmament. “Reading between the lines of statements from former and current officials and military planners provides insights into how the country may use its nuclear weapons, such as the Samson Option.”

In 1999, Israeli-American historian Avner Cohen published *Israel and the Bomb*, which relied on recently declassified documents from archives in Israel and the United States to piece together the process by which the government of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion colluded with or deceived U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, French Prime Minister Guy Mollet, and Norwegian Prime Minister Einar Gerhardsen to begin construction of a nuclear reactor in the late 1950s. Ben-Gurion’s government first denied the reactor’s existence, then insisted on its peaceful purposes in scientific research and energy production—all while intending to produce weapons-grade plutonium. Israel may have assembled its first nuclear weapon as early as 1967. It remains the only country in the Middle East with nuclear weapons.

The ambiguity around Israel’s nuclear arsenal also extends to its nuclear doctrine, or the circumstances under which it would choose to deploy nuclear weapons. A previous report from the FAS describes a key component of Israel’s nuclear doctrine as “the Samson Option,” a reference to the biblical figure Samson, who killed himself and his enemies by collapsing the pillars of the temple in which they all stood. The Samson Option similarly invokes murder-suicide, threatening any force that successfully defeats Israel’s conventional military with nuclear retaliation.

“Israel’s policy of never formally acknowledging its nuclear arsenal makes its doctrine ambiguous, but the Samson Option is believed to refer to Israel’s plans for overwhelming nuclear retaliation against non-nuclear adversaries if the country faces an imminent, existential threat,” says Davenport. “It would likely include deliberate, disproportionate nuclear strikes against non-military targets, such as cities, despite the clear violation of international humanitarian law.”

The Samson Option stands in contrast to doctrines embraced by other nuclear powers, such as “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD). Developed during the Cold War, MAD posits that nuclear powers like the United States and the Soviet Union could deter each other from ever using nuclear weapons through the threat of retaliatory strikes—that is, if one nuked the other, the other would nuke back, meaning neither would survive. Unlike MAD, Israel’s Samson Option specifically threatens its non-nuclear opponents.

“MAD is designed to deter war or prevent war from escalating to nuclear use,” explains Davenport. “The Samson Option is not designed to deter a nuclear adversary from a first strike or counter strike—Israel is the only nuclear-armed state in the region. Rather, its purported purpose is to ensure Israel’s survival. Under the Samson Option, nuclear weapons would be deliberately used against a non-nuclear adversary as a last resort to prevent an Israeli defeat.”

The events of October 7, as well as the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, reveal the dangers of Israel’s nuclear doctrine. On October 7, conventionally armed Palestinian militants were able to successfully overwhelm defenses at multiple points of the militarized border wall constructed by Israel around Gaza. The Palestinian militants advanced under a barrage of rockets fired from Gaza into Israel—one of which struck an Israeli military base housing nuclear-capable missiles, according to an analysis by *The New York Times*.

Even after the Israeli military managed to repel the Palestinian militants, at least one Israeli politician called for the use of nuclear weapons against Gaza, as reported by the Associated Press and others. Therefore, the true ambiguity that now remains is not whether Israel possesses nuclear weapons, but how those weapons might be used.

“Israel’s nuclear arsenal does not protect the state against conventional strikes, particularly from non-state actors,” says Davenport. “Furthermore, the irresponsible rhetoric of Israeli politicians threatening to use nuclear weapons against Gaza erodes the taboo against nuclear use and underscores the critical importance of redoubling efforts to reduce nuclear risk and work toward disarmament.”

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I am glad Israel has nukes and is willing to use them against its enemies. It the only deterrent they will understand

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