

Vanunu: The fallout

By Neil Mackay

sundayherald.com | April 25, 2004

THERE was more than one reason for the Israeli government rekindling its long-standing hatred of Mordechai Vanunu as he walked out of Shikma prison in the town of Ashkelon on Wednesday at 11.10 in the morning.

The resurgent hatred isn't just down to the fact that Vanunu is seen by the Israeli government as the nation's worst ever spy – a traitor who blew the whistle on the country's secret nuclear weapons programme in 1986 – a crime for which he served 18 years in jail, with 11 of those in solitary.

Israel has been dreading the release of Vanunu for quite a different reason: the government knew and feared that Vanunu's release would re-ignite the international clamour surrounding Israel's covert nuclear weapons programme. Israel was right to be worried. Almost immediately after Vanunu walked to freedom, the eyes of the world turned to concerns surrounding what is happening within the high-security walls of the Dimona nuclear research centre in the Negev desert – the very facility which Vanunu exposed as a nuclear bomb production plant almost two decades ago.

When Vanunu gave his story to The Sunday Times all those years ago, Israel's foreign secret service, Mossad, lured him to Rome with a classic honey trap after a female agent seduced him. He was drugged, beaten and shipped to Israel, where his trial was held behind closed doors. Vanunu says that during his detention his captors tried to drive him mad using techniques like isolation and burning lights in his cell for 24 hours a day.

Little has changed in nearly two decades. Today, only three nations in the world are not signatories to the groundbreaking Nuclear Weapons Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT): Israel, India and Pakistan. Israel is still creating nuclear weapons 18 years after Vanunu exposed its active programme. It is believed that the nation may have up to 300 warheads, which would give Israel a greater nuclear arsenal than the United Kingdom. United Nations resolutions have called on Israel to place its nuclear facilities under international observers and for the establishment of a nuclear-free Middle East. The calls have been ignored.

Dr Mohammed El Baradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – the UN's nuclear weapons inspection team – and one of the world's leading diplomats, criticised Israel for its nuclear weapons programme. A diplomatic source close to El Baradei said: "El Baradei says that we need to get beyond the current narrow legislative point of view that

Vanunu: The Fallout | 2

we take when it comes to nations which have not signed up to the NPT.

“We need to treat the acquisition of nuclear weapons like we would treat slavery. It is just unacceptable. If nuclear proliferation is banned then it must be banned for all countries, not just those who signed the treaty.

“El Baradei makes this comparison with slavery because that is how strongly he feels. He feels that violating a commitment on nuclear weapons is much different to breaking any other form of treaty. If someone breaks a treaty on trade it is not going to be a threat to international peace. But a country that illegally acquires nuclear weapons poses a threat to world security. The question of nuclear weapons is of the greatest magnitude, therefore we have to treat it differently than any other international issue.”

As Israel has not signed the NPT, it is impossible for weapons inspectors to check any of the country’s suspected nuclear facilities. “The international community has little or no accurate knowledge of what Israel does or doesn’t have,” a senior Western diplomatic source at the UN said.

Israeli nukes are the worst kept secret on Earth. On Friday, Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, came close to ending decades of secrecy when he said that the United States recognised that Israel needed a credible deterrent to Iran and other hostile countries. “They understand that Israel’s existence is still in danger,” he said. Israel has always maintained a policy of “ambiguity” on the bomb – neither confirming nor denying that it has nuclear weapons.

The senior Western diplomatic source added: “It’s now 34 years since the NPT was signed. There needs to be political will to push Israel into compliance and that must come from countries making decisions collectively through the UN.”

Tomorrow dozens of representatives from the 188 countries which have signed the NPT will meet at the UN’s headquarters in New York and call for Israel to destroy its nuclear arsenal and join the NPT nations. Of the 188 NPT nations only five are legally deemed nuclear-weapon states: the US, Russia, France, UK and China. More countries have ratified the NPT than any other arms agreement in world history.

Silvana De Silva, of the UN’s department of disarmament affairs, acts as secretary of the NPT committee. She said: “The three non-signatory states [Israel, India and Pakistan] will be called on to join the treaty. They will be called on to give up their weapons and join the other states.

“The issue of the universality of the treaty is central to any meeting of the NPT states. Israel, Pakistan and India will certainly be discussed.” The Sunday Herald has been told that the NPT meeting at the UN will be characterised by “lots of Arab anger and pointed comments” regarding Israel’s nuclear weapons. “The Arabs are furious with Sharon and the

Vanunu: The Fallout | 3

heat will go up on Israel to sign up to the NPT and for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East,” one expert said.

David Albright is probably the world’s leading authority on the Israeli nuclear programme. He is a former UN weapons inspector and president of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington DC. His organisation has worked as a consultancy for the IAEA. Albright says Israel is still producing large amounts of weapons-grade plutonium at the Dimona facility, which has been operating for 40 years. Over its lifetime, he estimates, Dimona could have produced up to 650kg of plutonium.

Although he believes that Israel could have overtaken the UK as a nuclear power (the UK has around 200 bombs, and Israel, Albright says, could have up to 300 bombs), the physicist tends toward a more conservative estimate of Israel possessing 150 nuclear weapons.

“Weapons from the 60s and 70s have been retired and replaced and that has kept up the need for plutonium coming off the production line,” said Albright. The maximum range of Israel’s best rockets – the Jericho II – can reach Russia. However, the country could also be developing cruise missiles, which would make its nuclear capacity much more deadly. “The Israeli nuclear strategy is far from certain,” Albright added. “We believe that they view the bomb as a doomsday weapon which would be employed to save the state of Israel from destruction. However, there is speculation that the military may be moving to a ‘counter force doctrine’ which would see nuclear weapons being used to hit military targets.”

The big concern, says Albright, is the ability of Israel to hold the US hostage. In the cold war, Israel was able to target Russia and could therefore threaten the Soviet Union if it helped the Arabs. That scared the US so much that it was ready to intervene early on Israel’s side should any confrontation have occurred.

With Pakistan now a nuclear power, the same scenario could be played out today. If Pakistan aided enemies of Israel, it could threaten the Islamic country and force the US to step in on the side of Israel to prevent nuclear war. That could also see China, another nuclear power, dragged into a conflict with terrifying global implications.

US intelligence services are terrified about the full facts of the Israeli nuclear programme becoming known by the Islamic world, believing that if the exact details of Israel’s stockpiles were revealed it could easily force Iran to dramatically increase the pace and scope of its own nuclear programme.

The current “big question” regarding Israel’s programme is whether or not it has established a uranium-enrichment plant at Dimona. Albright suspects the Israelis may have developed gas centrifuges with this end in mind. “On paper the US is committed to getting Israel to sign the NPT, but this administration doesn’t really care in practice,” he said. “They see the nations of the world as either friends or enemies and they don’t want to bother

Vanunu: The Fallout | 4

about what is in the arsenals of their friends.”

The administration is, however, debating internally whether or not to put pressure on Tel Aviv to sign up to an international agreement entitled the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), which would effectively ban all signatories from producing plutonium and uranium for bombs. Washington believes this may be one way to deal with Israel, India and Pakistan.

“Israel has told the US it opposes this,” said Albright. “The US is under a lot of pressure to look fair on the international stage even though [Israel signing the FMCT] may not be something that the administration actually wants.”

Whether the FMCT comes to pass or not is fairly irrelevant as there is no element of verification in the treaty. So Israel or India could say they were not producing any fissile material when they were, in fact, still continuing to run plutonium off the production line. It could be nothing more than “a paper exercise”, Albright said.

With India and Pakistan rapidly gaining warheads – top estimates put Pakistan at 90 bombs and India at 110 – Albright says any delay in pushing through the FMCT is a mistake. “We’re not strong critics of Israel,” he said. “We want them to sign the NPT and FMCT but we aren’t pushing them. It is important to keep the pressure on. We want to keep their arsenal as small as possible and we also want to tamp down the nuclear ambitions of other states in the area. A nuclear-free zone in the Middle East is our goal.

“The US has dropped the ball. We need to keep Israel aware that one day they will have to give these things up, not that they will be able to grow their arsenal. We certainly don’t want to see Israel as the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world.”

Ironically, Albright believes the recent invasion of Iraq could be a catalyst for the West forcing Israel to comply with the views of the international community on its nuclear weapons. “Israel said in the 1990s that nothing could change until Iraq and Iran were dealt with,” said Albright. “Well, now Iraq has been dealt with, Iran is being dealt with and Israel is feeling very on edge as Arabs can now say that the threats from Iraq and Iran are non-existent. It is time to start talking.”

In the 18 years since Mordechai Vanunu vanished inside the Israeli penal system it seems, then, that little, if anything, has changed. Vanunu told the world that Israel had sophisticated weapons of mass destruction and the world was shocked and angry – those facts remain the same today. Nothing said or done on the world’s stage then, or now, has changed Israeli policy; the nation will not abandon its weapons, it will not allow inspectors into Dimona and it will not sign up to international treaties seeking disarmament – certainly not without sustained pressure, supported by America, within the United Nations.

Vanunu: The Fallout | 5

When Vanunu emerged into freedom last week, he was greeted by simultaneous cries of “traitor” and “hero” (he was once nominated for a Nobel prize) . To the Israeli government he is still a traitor; for the man who spilled their secrets has come back to haunt them – his release re-igniting fears and alarm over Israel’s unmonitored nuclear arsenal. For a state like Israel, which sees itself besieged on all sides, the pressure to disarm prompted by Vanunu’s release is the last thing the Sharon government wants to deal with.

To many, though, Vanunu is still a hero, a man one step down, some have said, from Nelson Mandela – a man who sacrificed his freedom 18 years ago to tell the world about Israel’s secrets and who now, nearly two decades later, has forced the world’s nations to think once again about what lies at the heart of the Dimona facility and what risks those secrets pose to the safety of the entire planet.

Investigations Editor Neil Mackay is Investigations Editor of the Sunday Herald, Scotland’s leading Sunday newspaper.