

**March 18, 1964**

**Memorandum, Executive Secretary Benjamin Read,  
US Department of State, 'Israel's Assurances  
Concerning Use of Atomic Energy'**

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**Summary:**

This memorandum from Executive Secretary Benjamin Read of the Department of State to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy provides a valuable chronology of the US discovery of the nuclear reactor project at Dimona and the pledges made by the Israelis in response to requests from the United States. Included in the chronology is an item about a meeting on 25 May 1963 where senior French diplomat Charles Lucet told CIA director John McCone that even though the French had helped build the Dimona reactor, "there might be a nuclear complex not known the French." Lucet further stated that the Israelis had tried to purchase "safeguard-free" uranium from Gabon but that the French government stopped the sale through preemptive purchases.

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MEMORANDUM FOR MR. McGEORGE BUNBY  
THE WHITE HOUSE

Subject: Israel's Assurances Concerning Uses of  
Atomic Energy

The United States has made repeated efforts since 1960 to obtain assurances regarding Israel's atomic energy program. In response, the Israel Government has been careful to hedge on whether it plans to develop nuclear weapons. Apparently the Israelis believe any unilateral and categorical statements eschewing future nuclear weapons development would rob them of an important psychological weapon against Arab countries which, as Israel is aware, are fearful of Israel's technological superiority. Prime Minister Eshkol's explanations for his refusal to allow us to give assurances to Kasser following the recent inspection of Dimona exemplify Israeli thinking in this respect.

United States efforts to gain assurances concerning Israel's intentions began in earnest late in 1960. At that time, we discovered a nuclear reactor, previously described to us by Israel as a textile plant and later as a metallurgical plant, was being built at Dimona with French assistance and with no permanent safeguards. Premier Ben Gurion assured our Ambassador on January 4, 1961 that the reactor would be used only for peaceful purposes and that Israel had no intention of producing nuclear weapons at Dimona. In subsequent meetings, however, Ben Gurion did not rule out the possibility of nuclear weapons development. On May 27, 1961, Ben Gurion reportedly told Canadian Prime Minister Diefenbaker that if Israel's defensive capability became heavily outweighed, Israel might have to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Three days later, Ben Gurion told President Kennedy that Israel might build a plutonium separation plant in three to four years but there was "no intention to develop weapons capacity now".

Statements by Israel officials since 1961 have been similar. They leave Israel with the option to develop nuclear weapons in the future. In July 1963, for example, Prime Minister Eshkol went so far as to probe how the United States would view possible advanced consultations in the event Israel found developments in the Middle East made it necessary for her to embark on a nuclear weapons program. Efforts to persuade Israel to accept IAEA safeguards so far have been resisted.

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-2-

In sum, we have no evidence that Israel's atomic energy program is other than peaceful. Moreover, Israel does not now appear to have the capability to produce a nuclear weapon. Nevertheless, available information indicates a studied Israeli effort to gain technological experience and build production facilities for Israel's power requirements which would additionally facilitate its developing a nuclear weapon should it choose to do so. The reactor at Dimona has now gone critical. Israel has obtained uranium outside of French control (i.e., South Africa, Argentina). It is actively seeking to become self-sufficient in production of uranium (by developing Israeli phosphate deposits). It is intensively investigating surface-to-surface missiles. The effect of these efforts is clearly to give Israel the potential to develop nuclear weapons. Should Israel deem it necessary to pursue this course, it would find its adherence to the partial test ban treaty a handicap but not necessarily an insurmountable one.

Enclosed is a chronology of Israel's assurances regarding its atomic energy program and related matters.

Benjamin H. Read  
Executive Secretary

**Enclosure:**

**Chronology of Israel Assurances of Peaceful  
Uses of Atomic Energy and Related Events**

cc: ACDA - Mr. Weiler

NEA:NE:FMDickman:es:3/18/64

Clearances:

- |                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| SCI - Mr. Thomas         | NE - Mr. Symes     |
| S/P - Mr. Gathwright     | NEA - Mr. Jernegan |
| INR - Mr. Brown          |                    |
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CHRONOLOGY OF ISRAEL ASSURANCES OF PEACEFUL USES OF ATOMIC ENERGY  
AND RELATED EVENTS

July 12, 1955 US-Israel Atoms for Peace Agreement signed.

May 2, 1958 US agreed to assist in building a one megawatt research reactor at Nahal Rubin near Tel Aviv.

June 14, 1960 Embassy Tel Aviv reported rumors that the French were collaborating with the Israelis in an atomic energy project near Beersheba. In response to subsequent Embassy queries, the Israelis said they were constructing "a textile plant". Later they described it as "a metallurgical research installation".

December 2, 1960 Assessment made by US Joint Atomic Energy Interagency Committee that a large reactor appeared to be under construction near Beersheba.

December 4, 1960 Chief of Israel Atomic Energy Commission Bergman confirmed for the first time to Embassy Tel Aviv that a "project is under construction" near Beersheba and offered a proposed public statement.

December 9, 1960 Secretary Herter called in Ambassador Harman to inquire about the project.

December 20, 1960 Ambassador Harman called on the Secretary. He acknowledged that a 24 megawatt reactor was being built at Dimona for "research". He said the construction had begun one year ago and it would require three to four years to complete. He confirmed that Israel was receiving French assistance. He assured the Secretary that the project was for "peaceful uses only" and when completed, it "would be open to students from friendly countries".

December 21, 1960 Ben Gurion's statement before the Knesset

In disclosing that Israel was building a 24 megawatt reactor at Dimona, Ben Gurion stated inter alia:

"1. The report (that Israel was engaged in the production of an atomic bomb) is either a deliberate or an unconscious untruth."

"2. The research reactor which we are now building in the Negev will not be completed

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until three or four years from now. This reactor is intended exclusively for peaceful purposes."

December 22, 1960

Department's press statement

The Department noted Ambassador Harman's call and welcomed Ben Gurion's statement. The US's continuing watchfulness against poliferation was restated.

December 31, 1960

Ambassador Reid instructed to obtain answers to specific questions:

- (a) weapons
- (b) plutonium
- (c) IAEA safeguards
- (d) visits
- (e) a third reactor

January 4, 1961

Ambassador Reid-Ben Gurion meeting (Embtel 625)

(a) Weapons: In response to question whether Israel "can state categorically that it has no plans for producing nuclear weapons", Ben Gurion said "The reply is a categorical yes. I made it perfectly clear in my statement to the Knesset and our Ambassador made it clear to the Secretary of State".

(b) Plutonium: Regarding Israel's plans for disposing of plutonium which will be bred by the new reactor, Ben Gurion said: "I told you from our phosphates we can produce uranium. But no country is selling uranium--only if it gets plutonium; only if it will get it back". "As far as we know this is a condition when we come to purchase it" (from another country). There is "no plutonium now in Israel".

(c) IAEA: Responding to a question whether Israel would agree to adequate safeguards with respect to the plutonium produced, Ben Gurion stated flatly: "I refuse, we don't want Russians coming in as part of an international body . . . "If you mean international safeguards (referring to IAEA), the same law should apply for everybody" . . . "We will not permit international bodies to inspect the reactor until all reactors are treated as equals".

(d) Visits: Ben Gurion agreed to visits to Dimona by nationals of "friendly powers" and to a visit by qualified US scientist provided there would be no

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-3-

leaks. Asked if the visit would be completely "free and open", he said "yes".

(e) Third Reactor: Ben Gurion denied that a third reactor is in the construction or planning stage.

January 11, 1961

Ambassador Harman's appointment with the Secretary

Following an appointment with the Secretary Ambassador Harman told newsmen that he "was able to convey again information that Israel's atomic energy program is and will be directed to peaceful uses".

February 3, 1961

Ambassador Harman's meeting with NEA Assistant Secretary Jones

Jones said that the US "fully accepted the statements of Prime Minister Ben Gurion with regard to the peaceful uses of the Dimona reactor...no question of doubting his word...noted with pleasure his offer to invite an American to the Dimona site.... The Ambassador said "They are building a reactor which will take some two years to complete. There is no plutonium. Ben Gurion has given all the assurances that anyone could and additionally has explained that he proposes to hand back the plutonium to the country supplying the uranium."

February 26, 1961

Theodore Kollek, Director General of Prime Minister's Office, call on Assistant Secretary Jones

Mr. Kollek assured Mr. Jones that the placing of the Israel AEC under the Ministry of Defense was only "a great administrative convenience". He saw no reason why an unpublicized visit to Dimona by a US expert should not take place "during the month of March."

May 24, 1961

First visit to Dimona

Two US scientists report Dimona reactor is "entirely as advertised".

May 27, 1961

Ben Gurion meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Diefenbaker

Ben Gurion denied that Israel's atomic research program is leading to the production of nuclear weapons.

However,

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-4-

However, in a later report received from German representatives in Washington Ben Gurion is reported to have also said "that if the Arab threat continued to grow and Israel's defensive capability became heavily outweighed, Israel might as a matter of self-defense be required to develop nuclear weapons capability" (Department's A-4 to Bonn, July 5, 1961).

May 30, 1961

Ben Gurion-Kennedy meeting

Commenting on Israel's interest in acquiring training and experience in order to produce cheap atomic power in the next 10-15 years, Ben Gurion said "Our main--for the time being--and only purpose is this". He added that after three or four years, Israel might also want to develop a pilot plant for plutonium separation, which is needed for atomic power, but there is no intention to develop weapons capacity now.

Later the President expressed his appreciation for Ben Gurion's willingness to permit the US to advise Arab states of findings of American scientists who had viewed Dimona. The President added that of course the US is sometime suspect in matters dealing with Israel, "because we are close friends", and asked whether it would not be helpful to let neutral scientists also observe the reactor. After the President explained that the neutrals he had in mind were the Scandinavians or the Swiss, Ben Gurion replied he would have no objection to this.

June 15, 1961

Instructions to the field

(a) Dispatch of personal message to UAR Foreign Minister Fawzi reporting on the scientists' visit to Dimona.

(b) Dispatch of a circular telegram to Embassies in other Near Eastern capitals authorizing them to convey information regarding the scientists' visit to foreign ministers.

June 30, 1961

Sauvagnargues (France) meeting with NEA Assistant Secretary Talbot

Sauvagnargues confirmed that Dimona plutonium production would be returned to France. Talbot indicated

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SECRET  
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-5-

US interest in method of arranging neutral visit that would be palatable to Israel.

November 14, 1961

Ambassador Harman meeting with Assistant Secretary Talbot

Ambassador Harman agreed that Ben Gurion had concurred regarding a neutral visit. He said Israel would prefer Scandinavian or Swiss scientists as "neutrals".

November 1961 to  
May 1962

Inconclusive discussions with Swedish representatives.

June 22, 1962

Signature for the extension of the US-Israel agreement on the peaceful uses of atomic energy

At the same time Mr. Talbot took the opportunity to inform Ambassador Harman that US wished to make a further unpublicized visit to the Dimona reactor.

August 6, 1962

Ben Gurion statement in Knesset in answer to opposition allegations that Israel was not following a course to remove the danger of nuclear <sup>development's.</sup> *proliferation.*

"The development of the Negev required scientific research in many fields and for this purpose various research institutes were established, such as the Negev Research Institute. An atomic reactor was also being established, which would serve the needs of science, agriculture, and industry and which would at a later stage also serve as a power station. This reactor, similar to that at Nahal Soreq, was intended for peaceful aims and would be open to foreign students just as the reactor which Canada set up in India".

September 26, 1962

Second Dimona visit

US scientists reported "our observations of the reactor indicate that it is certainly not a power reactor but rather a large reactor". They found no evidence of preparation for nuclear weapons production. However, visitors given only 40 minutes to examine the site and access barred to one large building.

SECRET

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-6-

December 27, 1962

Kennedy-Meir conversation

Mrs. Meir assured the President that "there would not be any difficulty between us on the Israeli nuclear reactor".

January 2, 1963

Report of Technological Committee appointed by Israel AEC to review power needs

Report recommends construction of nuclear power stations. If the Government decides to build such stations, report estimates that 125 MW capacity by 1970 would be reasonable.

February 8, 1963

Statement of Shimon Peres, Israel Deputy Defense Minister

Embassy Tel Aviv reported that Peres allegedly commented that "in time the Arab states would acquire nuclear technology and that Israel would have to meet that challenge".

March 15, 1963

Proposed construction of a third reactor

NEA Desk Office Crawford reports meeting in Tel Aviv with Embassy Science Attache Webber. Latter reports Israel has definitely reached a decision to proceed with a 125 MW power reactor. Decision to be made later in the year as to the type of reactor to be built.

April 2, 1963

President's meeting with Deputy Minister of Defense Peres.

In response to the President's expression of concern regarding Israel's reactor developments, Peres reportedly gave "unequivocal assurance that it would not do anything in this field unless it finds other countries in the area are involved."

April 2, 1963

Ambassador Barbour-Ben Gurion meeting

Our proposal for semi-annual visits to Dimona was broached by the Ambassador. Ben Gurion "did not demur".

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-7-

May 14, 1963

Ambassador Barbour-Ben Gurion meeting (Embtel 894)

After the Ambassador had pressed hard for semi-annual visits to Dimona reactor, Ben Gurion interrupted with "we know they (UAR) are building something bigger" . . . "We know Nasser is making unconventional weapons. He has some foreign experts, he is sending some people abroad. . . "We are afraid when he has missiles with nuclear warheads, he will do it (destroy Israel). What will you do to him?". . . "If it comes to war, we must rely on ourselves".

Ben Gurion later said he was not sure that telling Nasser (about Dimona) had the effect of diminishing UAR efforts in the nuclear field. Maybe it is better that Nasser be "a little afraid". The meeting ended by Ben Gurion promising to consult the Cabinet but in the meantime, the US should carefully consider the points he made on Israel's security situation in his May 12 letter to the President (re security assurance, demilitarization of the West Bank, arms assistance, US-USSR agreement to limit Near East arms race, and mutual Israel-Arab arms inspection and control).

May 25, 1963

Charles Lucet (French Embassy) conversation with Mr. John McCone

Mr. Lucet said he felt that there was no chemical separation facility at Dimona. However, he was not sure the French knew of all Israeli atomic installations and indicated the possibility that there might be a nuclear complex not known to the French.

Lucet said the French had discovered the Israelis were attempting to purchase "safeguard-free" uranium outside of France in Gabon and other former French colonies, but this had been prevented by France through pre-emptive buying even though the French already had a surplus.

May 27, 1963

Ben Gurion letter to the President (Embtel 948)

Letter is in response to the President's letter of May 19 noting Ben Gurion's meeting of May 14 with  
Ambassador

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-8-

Ambassador Barbour and expressing concern with the disturbing effects on world stability which would accompany the development of a nuclear weapons capability by Israel:

"Let me assure you, at the outset, Mr. President, that our policy, on nuclear research and development has not changed since I had the opportunity of discussing it with you in May 1961. I fully understand the dangers involved in the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and I sympathize with your efforts to avoid such a development. I fear that in the absence of an agreement between the great powers on general disarmament, there is little doubt that these weapons will, sooner or later, find their way into the arsenals of China and then of various European states and India. . . . "

"In our conversation on 1961, I explained to you that we were establishing a nuclear training and research reactor in Dimona with French assistance. This assistance has been given on condition that the reactor will be devoted exclusively to peaceful purposes. I regard this condition as absolutely binding. . . . "

"In the same sense, I informed you in 1961 that we are developing this reactor because we believe, on the strength of expert scientific advice, that within a decade or so the use of nuclear energy will be economically viable and of great significance to our country's development. I went on to add that we should have to follow developments in the Middle East. This is still our position today."

The letter then points out that while the US has not helped to build the reactor at Dimona, "we do agree to further annual visits to Dimona by your representatives, such as have already taken place".

July 4, 1963

President's letter to Eshkol

Letter recalls exchanges with Bea Gurion concerning US visits to Dimona. Ask that these visits correspond as nearly as possible to international standards which, for a reactor of this size, require semi-annual visits with full access to all areas of the site and related part of the complex.

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-9-

July 10, 1963

Premier Eshkol's remarks to foreign correspondents:

Construction of the Dimona reactor according to plan. "When the building program is completed, scientists and students from friendly countries will no doubt be invited to visit the installations." In response to rumors about US pressure regarding certain scientific developments, Eshkol said "There is nothing new from me and no special pressure. I don't feel any special pressure."

July 17, 1963

Eshkol's letter to the President--Barbour's conversation

Letter acknowledges President's July 4 letter, promises a substantive reply at a later date.

In subsequent conversation with Ambassador, Eshkol asked how the US "would view a possible proposal from Israel that Israel would consult the US in advance in the event that, some time in the distant future, developments in the Middle East made it necessary for her to embark on a nuclear weapons program."

August 19, 1963

Eshkol letter to the President:

Letter confirms Ben-Gurion's assurance to the President on the peaceful character and purpose of the Dimona reactor and emphasizes that for the peaceful uses of the reactor Israel is bound by a specific agreement with the French Government.

December 30, 1963

Shimon Yiftak, Acting Scientific Director of the Israel AEC, stated publicly Dimona reactor will be completed on time but no plants would be erected for the separation of plutonium.

January 18, 1964

US inspection team visited Dimona and determined the reactor went critical December 26, 1963, but had operated only at low power. It was clearly designed as an experimental reactor capable of operation at 15-20% above design power of 26 megawatts. Operation at full power was not anticipated until late 1964. The plant had no weapons-making capability at that time.

February 19-23,  
1964

In conversation with Rowen, Strickland, and Merrim, Israeli COS Rabin said Israel is not interested in missile with nuclear warheads, only conventional.

To Rowen's insistence that the type of missile Israelis were investigating was useful only with nuclear warheads, Eshkol, looking aghast, stated: "Don't try to persuade us to put nuclear warheads on them."