

SECRET - LIMDISDEBRIEFING OF DR. R. T. WEBBER, SCIENCE ATTACHE, AMERICAN EMBASSY, TEL AVIV

November 18, 1965

1. Dimona

Dr. Webber considers that Dimona makes no sense except as the basis for a weapons project. He stressed the isolation of its location and the fact that scientists don't care to work at such a remote place on normal projects. He said that about 50 percent of Israel's total investment for research and development during 1959-64 was put into Dimona. Almost all, if not all, of the French technicians have gone home; at one time there were about 200 at Dimona. The Dimona budget is buried under special funds and by other devices in the GOI budget. One indication that while work at Dimona is continuing it is not on a crash basis is the apparent reduction in the past year or so of the number of Israeli scientists working there.

He believes that Israel has at Dimona a "semi-pilot plant" installation and that facilities have been developed to handle plutonium and irradiated rods. It has a 26-megawatt reactor, which is suitable to produce one or two bombs per year. Israelis generally are "fine chemists but poor mechanics", and their apparent choice of the plutonium rather than centrifuge road is consistent with this.

2. Dimona Inspections

Although the U.S. scientists who have inspected Dimona seem to have been satisfied, Dr. Webber is not. He feels Dimona is much more of a military project than Mr. Stabler of the AEO is willing to accept.

Dr. Webber strongly believes that another U.S. inspection should be made at an early date even though he is not satisfied with the results accomplished by previous inspections. Inspections as in the past are better than none, for they give us information we would not otherwise have, and give us a psychological advantage. His recommendations for improving U.S. inspections are: (a) They should be conducted at least twice and preferably three times yearly, and (b) we should insist on much better access to records on the flow of uranium and on other matters. (Regarding uranium, he believes Argentina is the source of most of Israel's current imports, but said we have no knowledge of what happens to it after it reaches Haifa. We should try to develop import and use figures on this uranium. He noted that some years ago Israel received 10 tons of uranium from South Africa.)

Dr. Webber believes the inspection issue is a very sensitive matter for the Eshkol government and that even though the recent elections have given Eshkol a firmer base of support, his government could be overthrown on the question of Dimona inspections. He stressed that the Finney article

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in the New York Times in the spring of 1965 hurt the USG position on inspections seriously, no matter what recriminations there may have been as to whether the story was spilled by Eban or by an American source. He believes the GOI has decided it cannot trust the secrecy of future U.S. inspections.

3. Israel's Determination to Keep the Nuclear Option

Dr. Webber believes we should discount the GOI's statement that it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Arab-Israel area. He thinks that Israel is determined to retain this option and that should Israel give it up at all it would be on a bilateral basis, not through acceptance of IAEA safeguards. He does not think we are going to get Israeli acceptance of IAEA safeguards no matter what we threaten, yet he concedes that we should make the effort. He believes we will have to fall back on some bilateral form of inspection.

He does not believe Israel is currently producing weapons but rather is building up its base for future weapons production. He suspects Israel is thinking in terms of the entire range of possible weapons, i.e., tactical as well as strategic size weapons. He does not think Israel has plans to have a nuclear warhead ready to attach to the MD-620 missile which will be available in a year or so. He agrees that a plutonium separation plant is an essential element in any nuclear weapons effort Israel may be mounting, and that our current intelligence reveals no sign of such a plant; he believes, but has no concrete evidence, that Israel is currently active somewhere and somehow on this missing link. He commented that it might be possible for Israel to obtain prefabricated weapons parts and thereby bypass some otherwise essential steps in the overall process.

Dr. Webber believes that while Israel is seeking to keep the Arabs scared and off balance, it is not really worried about being able to defeat any possible combination of Arab forces within the next several years. Israel's real worry is that it may be threatened 10 or so years hence by an unbeatable combination of modern conventional military equipment in Arab hands and that it is at that time that having the nuclear option open will be of tremendous importance.

Dr. Webber stressed the psychological motivation that pervades the thinking of top level Israel scientists such as Dr. Ernst Bergmann. He can't imagine that Bergmann would spend the country's substance on such a vast scale as at Dimona simply for pure research. He believes that Bergmann thinks purely in terms of "science and security" and that he has been convinced since the mid-50's that one way or another, despite possible delays due to strategems of the U.S., USSR, or world community, nuclear weapons will proliferate. Therefore, Bergmann is convinced

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Israel must keep the necessary nuclear supplies, designs and facilities on hand. Bergmann and others are convinced that six million Jews died in the 1940's because Jews were too complacent, and they aren't going to make the same mistake again. They wish to ease into a situation where they could make a bomb in a matter of weeks.

4. Testing

Israeli testing would probably be carried out underground, perhaps at the large natural depression southeast of Dimona (Hamakhtesh Haqatan). Testing might not be necessary, however. He does not believe Israel could test without our knowing it. He thinks Israel probably has the requisite test equipment, high-speed cameras, etc. Dr. Webber says that U.S. military officials are continually amazed by the casual handling of high explosives by Israelis.

Dr. Webber estimates that Israel can attain full test capability within two years and weapons production capability in five to eight years.

5. Desalting

The big question for Israel is when to begin desalting water from the sea and not whether to start. Israel has much greater flexibility than is sometimes realized with respect to total water availabilities. Dr. Webber mentioned three projects being pushed by Israel to increase its total water potential: (1) The improvement of irrigation techniques, which could add 100 to 200 MCM annually. (2) The tapping of fresh water just before it flows into the sea, by means of shallow wells fairly close together near the coast. This could add 60 to 80 MCM annually. It is a UN-sponsored research project. (3) Purification of brackish water under the Negev, which is relatively cheap and could add 200 to 300 or more MCM annually.

Dr. Webber pointed out that these possibilities put Israel in position to postpone for many years, if necessary, inauguration of a sea water desalting project. This situation makes it much more difficult for the U.S. to insist on IAEA or other safeguards as a condition of helping finance a large desalting project in Israel.

6. Mysterious Project at Mispé Ramon

At Mispé Ramon, just off the main road about half way from Beersheba to Eilat, Israel is "taking the top off a mountain". It is not a large mountain but the project, whatever it is, produces a strange sight. Dr. Webber points out that this location (Mt. Arikha) is located just far enough from the UAR frontier to be out of range of Egyptian artillery. He is inclined to believe it a rocket emplacement project and he doubts that it is a nuclear installation of any sort.

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7. GOI Position on Non-Proliferation Agreement

Dr. Webber thinks Israel might be persuaded to sign a non-proliferation agreement if Nasser signed, provided the GOI could rely on an escape clause.

8. Israeli Attitude Toward Americans such as Weisner and Oppenheimer

He believes that key Israelis look upon them as well-meaning, but do not give much heed to their views. They are considered "alimony Jews"---willing to pay for Israel's sustenance but not to live there.

9. Recommended Reading

Munya Mardor, a member of the GOI defense establishment, has written Strictly Illegal, an account of pre-1949 Palestine. It was published in English in the U.K. a few months ago. Dr. Webber recommends it for its insights into Israeli/Jewish psychology and determination.

10. Persons Attending

Mr. Alfred L. Atherton - NE
Mr. William Brewer - S/P
Mr. Wreatham E. Gathright - S/P
Mr. Harold Glidden - INR/RNA
Mr. Thomas Halsted - INR/SIS
Mr. David L. Gamon - NE
Mr. Anton N. Nyerges - NE
Mr. Michael Sterner - NE
Mr. William D. Wolle - NE
Mr. William Salmon - SOI

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Duplicity, Deception, and Self-Deception: Israel, the United States, and the Dimona Inspections, 1964-65

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