

ANALYSIS

04/17/2014 - 22:10

Did Israel steal bomb-grade uranium from the United States?

Victor Gilinsky Roger J. Mattson

Victor Gilinsky

A physicist, Gilinsky is an independent consultant, and advised Nevada on matters related to the proposed nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain. His expertise spans a broad range of energy issues. From 1975 to 1984, he served on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, having been nominated by President Gerald Ford and renominated by President Jimmy Carter. Earlier in his career he worked at Rand Corporation; he was also an assistant director for policy and program review at the Atomic Energy Commission.

Roger J. Mattson

Roger J. Mattson is a mechanical engineer who consults on safety matters with NRC licensees and Energy Department contractors. From 1967 to 1974, he was on the Atomic Energy Commission technical staff. In 1976, he led an NRC task force that addressed the Apollo/NUMEC affair. He left government service in 1984.

Last month the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP), the nation's highest classification authority, released a number of top-level government memoranda that shed additional light on the so-called NUMEC affair, "the story that won't go away—the possibility that in the 1960s, Israel stole bomb-grade uranium from a US nuclear fuel-processing plant."

The evidence available for our 2010 *Bulletin* article persuaded us that Israel did steal uranium from the Apollo, Pennsylvania, plant of the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC). We urged the US government to declassify CIA and FBI documents to settle the matter. In releasing the current batch—the release being largely due to the persistent appeals of researcher Grant Smith—the government has been careful to excise from all the released documents the CIA's reasons for fingering Israel. Despite this, the documents are significantly revealing. For one thing, the excisions themselves are a backhanded admission of the persuasiveness of the CIA's evidence. (Why these excisions

are legally justified is not apparent—after nearly 50 years, the “sources and methods” issues have long ago dissipated.)

While we still don’t know *exactly* what the CIA told high government officials, we do know from the released memoranda that top officials thought the CIA’s case was a strong one. Also, as described in our earlier article, one of us was present at the CIA’s February 1976 briefing of a small group at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). At that session Carl Duckett, then-CIA deputy director for science and technology, told the NRC group the CIA believed the missing highly enriched uranium ended up in Israel.

The newly released documents also expose government efforts, notably during the Carter administration, to keep the NUMEC story under wraps, an ironic twist in view of Jimmy Carter’s identification with opposition to nuclear proliferation.

The context of NUMEC. A bit of background is in order here. After a 1965 inventory, NUMEC was found to be missing about 100 kilograms of bomb-grade uranium, even after accounting for all processing losses. The close personal and commercial ties to Israel of the plant owners and operators raised suspicions that remained unresolved. The affair of the missing bomb-grade uranium was revived in 1976. The newly formed NRC was in the process of writing licensing regulations for commercial fuel firms—of which NUMEC was one—and had heard rumors of possible theft in the 1960s from NUMEC's Apollo facility.

The NRC asked for a CIA briefing. Duckett startled the NRC group with CIA’s conclusion that the missing uranium was in Israeli bombs. The NRC chairman informed the White House, and President Ford took an interest in the case. Ford’s Attorney General, Edward Levi, discovered that the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), the NRC predecessor nuclear licensing agency, had previously convinced the FBI not to open a criminal investigation into the material’s disappearance. The AEC was concerned that the public revelation of the NUMEC case would draw attention to its lack of control over nuclear bomb materials in the hands of private firms, and thus undermine the commission’s efforts to get nuclear power programs underway. In addition, then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was not eager to get into a technical area with which his agents were unfamiliar. Levi gave the FBI its *first* instruction to investigate the material’s disappearance, a decade after the 1965 inventory that was the object of concern. In fact, although they attracted little attention, NUMEC inventories through 1968 showed even larger unexplained losses.

After the 1976 election, the Ford White House alerted the incoming Carter administration to the NUMEC affair. In December 1976, according to a July 1977 National Security Council memorandum, then-CIA Director George H.W. Bush briefed President-elect Carter on the case. Congress had been pressing for public disclosure of records of large unexplained losses of bomb-grade material (in government parlance, “material unaccounted for,” or MUF) from the government’s nuclear weapons complex. The White House feared the story was sure to hit the headlines if there were any suggestion of Israeli theft from the NUMEC facility. And any disclosures about Israel’s bomb program would of course have threatened the Carter administration’s Middle East policies.

Carter instructed his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to deal with the NUMEC matter in the context of the impending public release of MUF data. Brzezinski’s staffers John Marcum and Jessica Tuchman posed questions to the CIA about the NUMEC affair. Ted Shackley, then-CIA’s deputy director for covert operations, called Marcum on a secure line on July 28, 1977, to provide answers. Marcum’s entire two-page description of the call in his memorandum to Tuchman is blanked out in the version just released by ISCAP. As noted in our earlier article, other evidence suggests that the next day Shackley briefed senior officials of the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), the principal successor agency to the AEC. He told them that environmental samples taken by the CIA in Israel in 1968 contained highly enriched uranium, whose enrichment level was so high it pointed to the Portsmouth, Ohio, uranium enrichment plant as the source. Portsmouth was where NUMEC obtained uranium stock for its naval fuel products. We don’t know whether this information is in the excised portion of Marcum’s memorandum. We do however now have Marcum’s unredacted conclusion: “The CIA case is persuasive, though not conclusive.” Marcum preceded his conclusion with the pregnant observation, “At this point, despite the FBI clean bill of health, I do not think the president has plausible deniability.”

The unusual Brzezinski interlude. The matter passed up to Brzezinski, who submitted a memorandum to the president on August 2, 1977. (The president’s diary records a discussion on NUMEC the same day.) Brzezinski summarized for President Carter the views of ERDA, the FBI, and the CIA regarding Israeli involvement. His characterization of the CIA’s views is excised in the version just released. His descriptions of the other agencies’ views omit important evidence. For example, the memorandum understates by about a factor of *six* the unexplained amount of missing uranium—more than 330 kilograms by 1968, or enough to make over a dozen Hiroshima-yield bombs. He reported

ERDA's statements that there was "no evidence" of theft, adding that the agency had no basis for that conclusion. Nevertheless, when it came to his conclusion for the president, he used the same formulation (with our emphasis): "while a diversion might have occurred, there is *no evidence*—despite an intensive search for some—to prove that one did. For every piece of evidence that implies one conclusion, there is another piece that argues the opposite. One is pretty much left with making a personal judgment—based on instinct—as to whether the diversion did or did not occur." Leaving aside the contradiction between saying there is no evidence of theft and then saying there is more or less equal evidence on each side of the case, there was in fact a great deal more evidence of Israeli involvement already available in ERDA, FBI, and CIA records that Brzezinski apparently did not take the trouble to look into.

Brzezinski took at face value the AEC's claim that it had investigated the NUMEC affair. As we showed in our 2010 article, however, the commission's inquiries into the NUMEC affair were mainly designed to exculpate NUMEC and the AEC itself from any charges of wrongdoing. In evaluating these past so-called investigations, Attorney General Levi wrote President Ford on April 22, 1976 that federal officials might have violated criminal statutes, including those that cover accessory after the fact and failure to report a felony.

Brzezinski also passed off the FBI's findings as amounting to no more than confirmation that the president of NUMEC, Zalman Shapiro, had frequent contacts with Israeli officials, including a science attaché "thought to be an intelligence officer," and received unexplained VIP treatment in Israel. In fact, Shapiro was by then known to have had contacts with Israel's head of military intelligence and the head of its nuclear weapons program. He later acknowledged knowing Binyamin Blumberg, head of Israel's "bureau of scientific liaison," which engaged in high-risk intelligence capers. On one strange occasion in 1968, Shapiro hosted an Israeli intelligence foursome at the Apollo plant. One was the Mossad agent who headed the team that spirited former Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann out of Argentina and who later ran Jonathan Pollard's spying on the United States for Israel. (Mossad is the Israeli agency that handles foreign intelligence collection and covert action.) Another was that agent's deputy in the Eichmann kidnap, who went on to become head of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service. A third was Mossad's director of technical services. The last was Israel's science attaché, who had held a senior position in Israel's nuclear weapons program.

The FBI, Brzezinski told Carter, had just concluded its latest investigation and “was unable to uncover any evidence of theft, although the interviews included many current and former NUMEC employees.” In fact, the FBI investigation continued for two more years, and its interviews of NUMEC employees revealed many suspicious circumstances concerning NUMEC shipments to Israel.

The last part of the Brzezinski August 1977 memorandum to President Carter is the most revealing of the Carter administration’s intentions regarding the NUMEC affair: “We face tough sledding in the next few weeks (particularly in view of [Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's] Mid-East trip) in trying to keep attention focused on ERDA’s technical arguments and, if necessary, on the FBI investigations, and away from the CIA’s information.”

Time for real transparency. It's fair to ask, in view of the other losses in the US nuclear weapons complex, why the CIA and others singled out NUMEC for grave suspicion as the source for Israeli bomb-grade uranium. In brief, the reasons are these: NUMEC's unexplained losses were a significantly larger proportion of its throughput of highly enriched uranium than was the case for other firms that dealt with nuclear materials. Sloppy accounting and lax security made the plant easy to rob without detection. NUMEC had commercial relationships with Israel’s defense and nuclear establishments and regularly made sizeable nuclear shipments to Israel, which at that time were not checked by the AEC. NUMEC’s owners and executives had extremely close ties to Israel, including to high Israeli intelligence and nuclear officials. Israel had strong motives to obtain the highly enriched uranium before it was producing enough plutonium for weapons. High-level Israeli intelligence operatives visited the NUMEC plant. Israeli intelligence organizations were used to running logistically complicated, risky operations to support nuclear weapons development, and it would have been very much out of character for them to pass up an opportunity like this. On top of all this, records show the CIA believed its 1968 environmental sample taken in Israel evidenced an enrichment level unique to Portsmouth.

Nearly 50 years have passed since the events in question. It is time to level with the public. At this point it is up to the president himself to decide whether to declassify completely the NUMEC documents, all of which are over 30 years old. He should do so. We know that is asking a lot given the president’s sensitivity about anything involving Israel, and especially anything relating to Israeli nuclear weapons. But none of his political concerns outweigh his responsibility to tell the US public the historical truth it deserves to know.