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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

FILE

6 March 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Consequences of Israeli Acquisition of
Nuclear Capability*

SUMMARY

The most general consequence would be substantial damage to the US and Western position in the Arab world. However much the US expressed disapproval of Israel's achievement, it would be difficult to avoid an increased tendency for the political confrontation in the Middle East to take the form of the Bloc and the Arabs against Israel and its friends in the West.

* For purposes of this Memorandum, Israeli "acquisition of a nuclear capability" may mean either (a) Israeli detonation of a nuclear device, with or without the possession of actual nuclear weapons, or (b) an announcement by Israel that it possessed nuclear weapons even though it had not detonated a nuclear device. (It is conceivable that Israel might manufacture a weapon according to acquired designs, without testing, through its access to nuclear technology in the international scientific community and possibly its special relationship with the French.)

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Implications for Israeli Policy

1. Even though Israel already enjoys a clear military superiority over its Arab adversaries, singly or combined, acquisition of a nuclear capability would greatly enhance Israel's sense of security. In this circumstance, some Israelis might be inclined to adopt a moderate and conciliatory posture in order to allay as far as possible the world-wide concern arising from the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. A few might even hope to reach a settlement of the long controversy with the Arabs, by negotiating magnanimously from their new position of strength.

2. We believe it much more likely, however, that Israel's policy toward its neighbors would become more rather than less tough. This is not to say that Israel would forthwith make war on the Arabs; we think this extremely unlikely. It would, however, seek to exploit the psychological advantages of its nuclear capability to intimidate the Arabs and to prevent them from making trouble on the frontiers. It would probably feel freer than it does now to take vigorous retaliatory action against border harassments when they did occur. And it would probably make propaganda underlining the impotence of the principal Arab governments in the face of Israeli power, and would thereby seek

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to compound Arab frustrations and to promote disunity in the Arab world.

3. In dealing with the US, Israel would make the most of the almost inevitable Arab tendency to look to the Bloc for assistance against the added Israeli threat, arguing that in terms of both strength and reliability Israel clearly was the only worthwhile friend of the US in the area. It would use all the means at its command to persuade the US to acquiesce in, and even to support, its possession of nuclear capability. Israel could be expected to use the argument that this possession entitled it to participate in all international negotiations respecting nuclear questions and disarmament.

Reaction of the Arabs

4. Arab reaction to the revelation of an Israeli nuclear capability would be one of profound dismay and frustration. Responsible Arab leaders might appreciate the political factors that would work against actual Israeli use of its nuclear weapons, but such considerations would not greatly impress even the more sophisticated, and in most circles would mean nothing at all. There would probably be a period of highly emotional outbursts --

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of inflammatory speeches and writings, local disturbances, riots and acts of violence directed against the real or presumed friends and accessories of Israel, and attempts to bring about some sort of international action tending to redress the situation. The Arabs are united in their hatred of Israel, and would share a common fear of any Israeli nuclear capability. We do not believe, however, that they would prove able to act in any more unified or coordinated fashion than in the past.

5. Among the principal targets of Arab resentment would be the US. At present many Arab governments consider the US as the one power which could, if it chose, prevent the development of an Israeli nuclear capability; this consideration probably plays some part in forming Arab attitudes and policies toward the US. Once the Israeli nuclear capability became a fact, a few Arab leaders might still argue that since the US could restrain Israel from using the weapons it therefore ought not to be antagonized. But we think that this counsel would be far outweighed by feelings of resentment and betrayal. In view of past US statements and positions, charges of US complicity in the Israeli achievement would be widely made and widely believed in the Arab world. The anti-US sentiments implicit in certain Arab

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nationalist doctrines would be strengthened. US influence with the Arabs, limited at best, would be drastically reduced.

6. It is possible, though we do not think it very likely, that Arab resentment against the US would lead to the confiscation of important US properties in the area, or to their destruction by local acts of violence. Arab leaders would probably be against such acts for economic reasons, and would probably be able to prevent them. It might be, however, that the intensity of public demand for some considerable retaliatory action would be so great that the leaders could not overrule it. Many Arabs would not stop to inquire whether the opportunities for retaliation which presented themselves were likely to be profitable.

7. Yet with all this outcry the Arabs would be basically frustrated. No really satisfactory course of action would be open to them to counter the Israeli achievement. Nasser might be tempted to strike at Dimona, but would probably be deterred by the fear that Israeli retaliation would destroy him before international peace-keeping machinery could intervene to suppress the conflict. The nationalist leaders would doubtless try to work up a high degree of international pressure to restrain Israel from

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aggressive action. They would probably attempt to persuade the great powers to force Israel to submit its nuclear capability to international control -- an attempt which would almost certainly be unsuccessful. Nasser would contemplate, and might embark upon, a nuclear weapons program of his own, with what technical help he could beg or hire from abroad; but this would at best be a lengthy and expensive enterprise, highly provocative to Israel. The principal advantage in the short term would be to give Nasser something to make speeches about. In his efforts to restore Arab morale, Nasser might claim to have nonnuclear weapons of mass destruction -- chemical or biological -- and might even make an effort to develop some capability along these lines.

8. The obvious recourse of the Arabs would be to turn to the Bloc for assistance or assurance against the new Israeli threat. We think it virtually certain that Nasser and other Arab nationalists would take this course, yet it would be distasteful and unsatisfactory to them. On the one hand, they would be apprehensive of compromising their independence or their neutrality by submitting themselves too much to the Soviets; on the other, for reasons set forth in the next section, they would almost certainly be disappointed in the response which the Soviets would make.

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9. Arab pressures for Bloc help would present a number of opportunities to the Soviets, together with some problems. We do not believe that the USSR would be willing to provide Arab governments with nuclear weapons, if only because of the difficulty of extending to such regimes what it is unwilling to give to its own satellites. We doubt also that the USSR would give the Arabs any substantial assistance in developing nuclear weapons of their own; the Soviets would almost certainly prefer to exploit the situation to increase Arab dependence on them, rather than to create an independent Arab nuclear capability.

10. It is conceivable that the Soviets might place nuclear weapons on Arab territory, retaining them under Soviet control. This might involve no more than a few bombs which could be dropped by Egyptian aircraft, but we think that the Soviets would see some risk and no particular advantage in a program of this scale. Or, it might go so far as the establishment of missile bases, with an extensive Soviet military presence. Such a course we believe to be extremely unlikely, both because it would offer no particular military advantage to the Soviets, and because the Arabs themselves would almost certainly not want foreign bases in their territory, even in the circumstances postulated.

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11. The Soviets would, however, see plenty of opportunity for winning political advantage. According to their habit, they would seek to please the Arabs with resounding declarations of sympathy and support, and with dire threats against Israel or any other power that might dare to use military force against an Arab state. Experience from the time of the Suez affair suggests that these manifestations would indeed win friends and influence in the Arab world. If the Israelis refrained from attacking the Arabs with major military force (as we believe they would), the Soviets might even persuade many Arabs that they had in fact been protected from destruction solely by the exercise of Soviet power. In such fashion, without involving themselves in dangerous commitments, the Soviets would substantially enhance their influence and position throughout the Middle East, and perhaps find the basis for a firmer Bloc-Arab alignment against the West than they have so far been able to achieve.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

Sherman Kent

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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