

Lettre de Avner Cohen

March 8, 2001

Dear friends and colleagues,

Over the past decade, many Israeli historians armed with newly declassified documents have been reexamining many of the myths that shaped the early history of the state of Israel. But while historians have taken a fresh look at seminal questions such as the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem, one area remains shrouded in official secrecy: the history of Israel's nuclear weapons program. In 1998, after almost a decade of research, I published in the United States my book [Israel and the Bomb](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), a political history of the origins and the early years of Israel nuclear project.

Ever since, I have been closely monitored, at times being harassed and spied on, by the office of the Chief of Security at the Israeli Ministry of Defense (MALMAB). The MALMAB has made numerous efforts, under the cloth of state legality, to repress the publication of the book.

When this effort failed the MALMAB tried to silence my voice by way of intimidation-invoking the air of unspecified suspicions, ongoing investigation, and even possible arrest. In recent years, and especially since the publication of the Hebrew translation of my book, I have been living with a dark cloud hovering over me regarding my legal situation in my native land. My lawyers are told that the MALMAB has some grounds for investigation against me, but they have been told nothing as to the nature of these allegations. This is a Kafkaesque situation.

In January the Israeli Society for History and Philosophy of Science has invited me to give the keynote speech in its annual meeting in Jerusalem on March 14. The two-day meeting is devoted to the theme

of "Science and Technology in Israel in the Making: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives." I accepted the invitation, not only because of the academic importance of the meeting, but also as an occasion to bring this affair to an end.

As the Hebrew saying goes, "if I am not for myself, who will be for me?" The longer I remain outside Israel with this cloud, the more it looks like I'm afraid to return because I've done something wrong, and I did not. I've been in a kind of exile, and I just don't want to continue to live with that. I am ready to confront it, if necessary.

While the MALMAB leaves the impression as if the issue is state secrets, the real issue at stake, apart of the MALMAB's vendetta about their failure to prevent the publication of my book, is the tension between the policy of "nuclear opacity" and the foundations of democracy. The real issue is the boundaries of discussion and the freedom of academic research on the nuclear subject in Israel.

Decisions about nuclear weapons -- research, development, deployment, and all aspects of that complex -- are among the most fateful decisions that the state can make. And these decisions have ramifications in many, many areas -- from the health of those employed in this effort to questions of regional politics, national security and peacemaking in the Middle East. When all factual discourse regarding nuclear issues is simply not allowed publicly, citizens cannot have even a semblance of an informed discussion. And informed discussion is the essence of democracy. I am convinced that the time has come to update the unwritten contract that Israelis signed with nuclear secrecy some two generations ago.

With some anxiety and trepidation, I intend to go to Israel. There is clearly some personal risk involved. The risk is not because I did something wrong-my conscience is clear-but due to the intrinsic

ambiguity, including legal ambiguity, of the nuclear issue in Israel. Also, the MALMAB has enormous power within the legal system. Since Israel has never openly acknowledged its nuclear weapons program, any reference could be construed as a disclosure of state secrets.

If troubles occur, I will need all possible support. I appreciate your interest in this matter and hope I can count on your support.

Avner Cohen

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FAS Note: Israeli scholar Avner Cohen, author of the book *Israel and the Bomb*, summarizes his encounter with Israeli legal authorities on the subject of nuclear secrecy in the following letter. For further background, see his [letter to Israeli Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein](http://www.fas.org/sgp/eprint/avnercohen.html). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/eprint/avnercohen.html>