

How Israel Stole Its Nuclear Arsenal—and How the U.S. Helped Cover It Up

Israel's emergence as a nuclear weapons state was not a triumph of scientific innovation, but an act of calculated theft—specifically, the diversion of 100–300 kg of weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU) from the United States in the 1960s. The NUMEC affair stands as the most egregious case of nuclear theft in history. Much like the 1967 **USS Liberty attack**, where clear evidence pointed to Israel's deliberate targeting of an American spy ship, the theft of American nuclear material has been buried under layers of strategic denial, political pressure, and diplomatic immunity.

This essay exposes how Israel stole the uranium that fueled its nuclear arsenal, how it smuggled the material without detection, and how it continues to lie about its nuclear status—enabled by U.S. complicity and a foreign policy doctrine that places silence above accountability.

The NUMEC Affair: America's Uranium, Israel's Bomb

The case of the **Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC)** in Apollo, Pennsylvania, has long been cited as the origin of Israel's nuclear weapons program. Between 1957 and the mid-1970s, between 200 and 600 pounds (90–270 kg) of HEU disappeared from the facility. NUMEC's president, **Zalman Shapiro**, maintained close ties with Israeli intelligence. In 1968, Israeli agents, including **Rafi Eitan**—later known for managing Jonathan Pollard's spy operation—visited NUMEC. Eitan, by then armed with U.S. nuclear weapons design knowledge, was in a perfect position to coordinate the uranium transfer.

Declassified CIA assessments and a 2010 GAO report confirmed the disappearance of the material, strongly suggesting it ended up at Israel's **Dimona reactor**, where it jumpstarted the country's weapons program. By 1967, Israel had at least two deliverable nuclear weapons, used to deter Arab intervention during the Six-Day War. None of this would have been possible without American uranium—stolen in plain sight.

Smuggling the Uranium: Physics of a Perfect Crime

Smuggling HEU in the 1960s and 70s was far easier than most realize. Uranium-235 emits very low levels of gamma radiation due to its long half-life (~704 million years). A 20 kg sample of HEU, if carried as uranium dioxide (UO₂), produces about **1.49 × 10⁷ Bq** of gamma activity—negligible compared to background radiation when properly shielded.

Using exponential attenuation laws:

- $I/I_0 = e^{(-\mu x)}$ with $\mu \approx 1.64 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ and $x = 18.2 \text{ cm}$ yields an attenuation factor of $\sim 10^{-13}$.

- That brings 1.49×10^7 Bq down to **~1.49 Bq effective**.
- At 10 cm, the radiation dose rate is ~ 0.00001 $\mu\text{Sv/h}$ —just **3.65% of the natural background dose** (~ 0.000274 mSv/h).

In other words, a courier could fly from New York to Tel Aviv with 20 kg in a suitcase and never set off an alarm—especially in an era with **no radiation detectors** and little cargo scrutiny. Maritime shipments or diplomatic pouches would have been even less detectable. Multiple small shipments could easily transport the entire stolen quantity over months.

Deliberate Ambiguity: A Policy of Deception

Israel has never admitted to possessing nuclear weapons, adhering instead to a policy of **“deliberate ambiguity.”** This is not strategic opacity; it is calculated evasion.

The **Symington Amendment** (22 U.S.C. § 2799aa-1) prohibits U.S. foreign aid to any country trafficking in nuclear weapons technology outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Israel is not a signatory. In theory, this should make it ineligible for U.S. military assistance. In practice, Israel receives **\$3.8 billion annually** in U.S. aid—with the legal requirement bypassed by successive presidential waivers on the grounds of “national security.”

Just as the U.S. government **classified the USS Liberty attack**—despite NSA transcripts and survivor accounts proving the strike was deliberate—American agencies in the 1970s suppressed investigations into NUMEC. The **Atomic Energy Commission, FBI, and CIA** were all pressured to downplay Israeli involvement. Eitan went on to hold senior Israeli intelligence positions, never questioned by U.S. authorities.

USS Liberty and NUMEC: Parallel Cases of Immunity

On June 8, 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israeli fighter jets and torpedo boats attacked the **USS Liberty**, a clearly marked American intelligence ship in international waters. Thirty-four Americans were killed. Survivors, intercepted communications, and after-action reports confirm Israel knew it was attacking an American vessel. Yet, to preserve the U.S.-Israel alliance, the incident was **declared a “tragic accident”** and swiftly buried.

NUMEC followed the same playbook: clear circumstantial evidence, denials from Israel, silence from the U.S. government, and no accountability. In both cases, the truth was sacrificed for “strategic partnership.”

Denial and the Global Fallout

Israel’s refusal to admit its nuclear arsenal has broad consequences. It destabilizes the Middle East by pushing adversaries like **Iran** to seek deterrents of their own. It also allows Israel to **dictate nonproliferation policy** while operating entirely outside the NPT framework.

Moreover, criticism of Israel's nuclear policy is often deflected as antisemitic under **IHRA definitions**, chilling legitimate inquiry and whistleblowing. The result is a nuclear-armed state that operates without inspections, without accountability, and with full diplomatic immunity.

Conclusion: The Unpunished Crime That Shaped a Region

As of July 1, 2025, the theft of American uranium and the cover-up of the **NUMEC affair** remain unresolved. So does the attack on the **USS Liberty**. Both reflect a deeper truth: when Israel's actions clash with American law or values, Washington often chooses silence over justice.

The uranium theft was not only feasible—it was executed and ignored. The radiation was too weak to detect, the political costs of confrontation too high. Israel built a clandestine arsenal on stolen material, and the world—especially the United States—chose to look away.

This silence isn't just complicity. It's policy.