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Why Israel Pulled Back

Analysts for months have been baffled as to why the Israelis, who since 1948 had never returned a square foot of captured Arab land, in January suddenly agreed to abandon their Suez Canal defense line and pull back into Sinai.

The move was such a sharp reversal of a policy that had stood for a quarter of a century that many observers were inclined to believe that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger must have given Israel a secret iron-clad commitment to the effect that the United States would come to her aid if the peace broke down and she found herself hard-pressed by the Arabs.

Kissinger, both in private and in public, emphatically and categorically has maintained that the United States entered into no secret understanding with Israel. But doubts persisted.

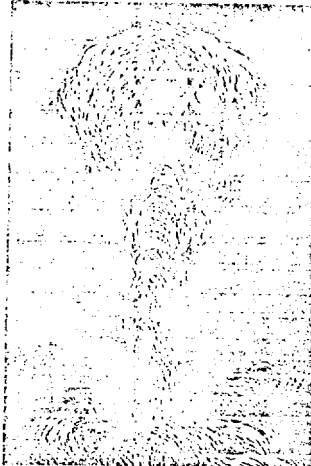
It now appears likely, however, that Israel's moderation may have been grounded at least partially on a new self-confidence based on an Israeli scientific breakthrough of awesome dimensions: The Israelis are reported to have perfected a simple, inexpensive means of producing the enriched uranium necessary for nuclear weapons.

The Israeli technique, developed by Isaiah Nebenzahl, a scientist attached to the Israeli defense ministry, and Menahem Levin, a physicist at Tel Aviv University, involves passing uranium vapor through two lasers that selectively excite the uranium atoms, then bombarding them with a powerful carbon dioxide laser that electrifies these atoms, which then can be collected on an oppositely charged electrode.

As recently as January, John O. Erlwine, deputy general manager of the Atomic Energy Commission, was publicly on record as saying the United States

had not yet perfected a means of separating uranium isotopes by the laser method. Last month, the AEC asked Congress to up the appropriation for research into laser enrichment from \$1 million to \$9 million, in the hope of developing the technique by 1975.

So far as is known, the world's other nuclear pow-



ers — the Soviet Union, Communist China, Britain and France — have not yet developed the laser technique. Thus the Israelis appear to have stolen a march of at least a year, perhaps more, on the other nuclear powers.

Within months of the creation of the state in 1948, Israel began nuclear research at Nahal Sorek on the coast south of Tel Aviv. In the 1950s, the Israelis secretly began work on a major reactor at Dimona, 20 miles southeast of Beersheba in the Negev desert.

Ostensibly, these facilities were for research into the peaceful applications of atomic power. In 1960, however, CIA Director Allen Dulles proclaimed publicly that Israel had "misled" the United States about its nuclear activities.

In the 1960s, Israel, at Nahal Sorek and later at the Dassault plant in France, concentrated on the development of a delivery sys-

tem. By late 1971, the Israelis had developed the Jericho rocket, capable of carrying a 1,500-pound payload 300 miles. Asked in 1972 if the Jericho made sense for delivering a conventional, non-nuclear explosive, a top American security expert told this reporter: "No."

The Israelis quickly developed the capacity to produce about five of the two-stage, solid-fuel Jericho missiles per month, at an estimated cost of \$1.5 million each. The problem then became the slowness of Dimona to produce by conventional means the enriched uranium for the warheads: The Israelis could turn out only about one nuclear warhead per year.

The laser method, once it is fully developed and perfected, may eliminate or at least ease this production bottleneck.

On nuclear matters, the Israelis always have followed a policy of "deterrence through uncertainty." This means that they have neither denied nor admitted that they have a military nuclear capacity, confining themselves to the purposely ambiguous comment that they will never be the first to use nuclear weapons in the Middle East. But, significantly, Israel never has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1969.

In this space just two years ago, on March 22, 1972, this observer predicted that "within four years at most" Israel would become the world's sixth nuclear power.

In view of the reported development of the laser technique by Nebenzahl and Levin, that estimate appears to have been about on the button. And that may help to explain why Israel felt strong enough to pull back from Suez in January without any secret commitment from Kissinger.

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