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Operation Samson: Israel's Deployment of Nuclear Missiles on Subs from Germany

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06/04/2012 -- Many have wondered for years about the exact capabilities of the submarines Germany exports to Israel. Now, experts in Germany and Israel have confirmed that nuclear-tipped missiles have been deployed on

the vessels. And the German government has long known about it. By SPIEGEL

The pride of the Israeli navy is rocking gently in the swells of the Mediterranean, with the silhouette of the Carmel mountain range reflected on the water's surface. To reach the Tekumah, you have to walk across a wooden jetty at the pier in the port of Haifa, and then climb into a tunnel shaft leading to the submarine's interior. The navy officer in charge of visitors, a brawny man in his 40s with his eyes hidden behind a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, bounces down the steps. When he reaches the lower deck, he turns around and says: "Welcome on board the Tekumah. Welcome to my toy."

He pushes back a bolt and opens the refrigerator, revealing zucchini, a pallet of yoghurt cups and a two-liter bottle of low-calorie cola. The Tekumah has just returned from a secret mission in the early morning hours.

The navy officer, whose name the military censorship office wants to keep secret, leads the visitors past a pair of bunks and along a steel frame. The air smells stale, not unlike the air in the living room of an apartment occupied solely by men. At the middle of the ship, the corridor widens and merges into a command center, with work stations grouped around a periscope. The officer stands still and points to a row of monitors, with signs bearing the names of German electronics giant Siemens and Atlas, a Bremen-based electronics company, screwed to the wall next to them.

The "Combat Information Center," as the Israelis call the command center, is the heart of the submarine, the place where all information comes together and all the operations are led. The ship is controlled from two leather chairs. It looks as if it could be in the cockpit of a small aircraft. A display lit up in red shows that the vessel's keel is currently located 7.15 meters (23.45 feet) below sea level.

"This was all built in Germany, according to Israeli specifications," the navy officer says, ,"and so were the weapons systems." The Tekuma, 57 meters long and 7 meters wide, , is a showpiece of precision engineering, painted in blue and made in Germany. To be more precise, it is a piece of precision engineering made in Germany that is suitable for equipping with nuclear weapons.

No Room for Doubt

Deep in their interiors, on decks 2 and 3, the submarines contain a secret that even in Israel is only known to a few insiders: nuclear warheads, small enough to be mounted on a cruise missile, but explosive enough to execute a nuclear strike that would cause devastating results. This secret is considered one of the best kept in modern military history. Anyone who speaks openly about it in Israel runs the risk of being sentenced to a lengthy prison term.

Research SPIEGEL has conducted in Germany, Israel and the United States, among current and past government ministers, military officials, defense engineers and intelligence agents, no longer leaves any room for doubt: With the help of German maritime technology, Israel has managed to create for itself a floating nuclear weapon arsenal: submarines equipped with nuclear capability.

Foreign journalists have never boarded one of the combat vessels before. In an unaccustomed display of openness, senior politicians and military officials with the Jewish state were, however, now willing to talk about the importance of German-Israeli military cooperation and Germany's role, albeit usually under the condition of anonymity. "In the end, it's very simple," says Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak. "Germany is helping to defend Israel's security. The Germans can be proud of the fact that they have secured the existence of the State of Israel for many years to come."

On the other hand, any research that did take place in Israel was subject to censorship. Quotes by Israelis, as well as the photographer's pictures, had to be submitted to the military. Questions about Israel's nuclear capability, whether on land or on water, were taboo. And decks 2 and 3, where the weapons are kept, remained off-limits to the visitors.

In Germany, the government's military assistance for Israel's submarine program has been controversial for about 25 years, a topic of discussion for the media and the parliament. Chancellor Angela Merkel fears the kind of public debate that German Nobel literature laureate Günter Grass recently reignited with a poem critical of Israel. Merkel insists on secrecy and doesn't want to the details of the deal to be made public. To this day, the German government is sticking to its position that it does not know anything about an Israeli nuclear weapons program.

'Purposes of Nuclear Capability'

But now, former top German officials have admitted to the nuclear dimension for the first time. "I assumed from the very beginning that the submarines were supposed to be nuclear-capable," says Hans Rühle, the head of the planning staff at the German Defense Ministry in the late 1980s. Lothar Rühl, a former state secretary in the Defense Ministry, says that he never doubted that "Israel stationed nuclear weapons on the ships." And Wolfgang Ruppelt, the director of arms procurement at the Defense Ministry during the key phase, admits that it was immediately clear to him that the Israelis wanted the ships "as carriers for weapons of the sort that a small country like Israel cannot station on land." Top German officials speaking under the protection of anonymity were even more forthcoming. "From the beginning, the boats were primarily used for the purposes of nuclear capability," says one ministry official with knowledge of the matter.

Insiders say that the Israeli defense technology company Rafael built the missiles for the nuclear weapons option. Apparently it involves a further development of cruise missiles of the Popeye Turbo SLCM type, which are supposed to have a range of around 1,500 kilometers (940 miles) and which could reach Iran with a warhead weighing up to 200 kilograms (440 pounds). The nuclear payload comes from the Negev Desert, where Israel has operated a reactor and an underground plutonium separation plant in Dimona since the 1960s. The question of how developed the Israeli cruise missiles are is a matter of debate. Their development is a complex project, and the missiles' only public manifestation was a single test that the Israelis conducted off the coast of Sri Lanka.

The submarines are the military response to the threat in a region "where there is no mercy for the weak," Defense Minister Ehud Barak says. They are an insurance policy against the Israelis' fundamental fear that "the Arabs could slaughter us tomorrow," as David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the State of Israel, once said. "We shall never again be led as lambs to the slaughter," was the lesson Ben-Gurion and others drew from Auschwitz. Armed with nuclear weapons, the submarines are a signal to any enemy that the Jewish state itself would not be totally defenseless in the event of a nuclear attack, but could strike back with the ultimate weapon of retaliation. The submarines are "a way of guaranteeing that the enemy will

not be tempted to strike pre-emptively with non-conventional weapons and get away scot-free," as Israeli Admiral Avraham Botzer puts it.

Questions of Global Political Responsibility

In this version of tit-for-tat, known as nuclear second-strike capability, hundreds of thousands of dead are avenged with an equally large number of casualties. It is a strategy the United States and Russia practiced during the Cold War by constantly keeping part of its nuclear arsenal ready on submarines. For Israel, a country about the size of the German state of Hesse, which could be wiped out with a nuclear strike, safeguarding this threat potential is vital to its very existence. At the same time, the nuclear arsenal causes countries like Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia to regard Israel's nuclear capacity with fear and envy and consider building their own nuclear weapons.

This makes the question of its global political responsibility all the more relevant for Germany. Should Germany, the country of the perpetrators, be allowed to assist Israel, the land of the victims, in the development of a nuclear weapons arsenal capable of extinguishing hundreds of thousands of human lives?

Is Berlin recklessly promoting an arms race in the Middle East? Or should Germany, as its historic obligation stemming from the crimes of the Nazis, assume a responsibility that has become "part of Germany's reason of state," as Chancellor Merkel said in a speech to the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, in March 2008? "It means that for me, as a German chancellor, Israel's security is never negotiable," Merkel told the lawmakers.

The perils of such unconditional solidarity were addressed by Germany's new president, Joachim Gauck, during his first official visit to Jerusalem last Tuesday: "I don't want to imagine every scenario that could get the chancellor in tremendous trouble, when it comes to politically implementing her statement that Israel's security is part of Germany's reason of state."

The German government has always pursued an unwritten rule on its Israel policy, which has already lasted half a century and survived all changes of administrations, and that former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder summarized in 2002 when he said: "I want to be very clear: Israel receives what it needs to maintain its security."

Franz-Josef Strauss and the Beginnings of Illegal Arms Cooperation

Those who subscribe to this logic are often prepared to violate Germany's arms export laws. Ever since the era of Konrad Adenauer, the country's first postwar leader, German chancellors have pushed through various military deals with Israel without parliamentary approval, kept the Federal Security Council in the dark or, as then Defense Minister Franz-Josef Strauss, a member of the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU), did, personally dropped off explosive equipment. That was what happened in an incident in the early 1960s, when Strauss drove up to the Israeli mission in Cologne in a sedan car and handed an object wrapped in a coat to a Mossad liaison officer, saying it was "for the boys in Tel Aviv." It was a new model of an armor-piercing grenade.

Arms cooperation was a delicate issue under every chancellor. During the Cold War, Bonn feared that it could lose the Arab world to East Germany if it openly aligned itself with Israel. Later on, Germany was consumed by fears over Arab oil, the lubricant of the German economic miracle. Cooperating with Germany also had the potential to be politically explosive for the various Israeli administrations. Whether and in what form the Jewish state should accept Germany's help was a matter of controversy for the Israeli public. The later Prime Minister Menachem Begin, for example, who had lost much of his family in the Holocaust, could only see Germany as the "land of the murderers." To this day, financial assistance for Israel is in most cases referred to as "reparations."

Cooperation on defense matters was all the more problematic. It began during the era of Franz-Josef Strauss, who recognized early on that aid for Israel wasn't just a moral imperative, but was also the result of pragmatic political necessity. No one could help the new Germany acquire international respect more effectively than the survivors of the Holocaust. In December 1957, Strauss met with a small Israeli delegation for a discussion at his home near Rosenheim in Bavaria. The most prominent member of the Israeli group was the man who, in the following decades, would become the key figure in Israel's arms deals with Germany, as well as the father of the Israeli atomic bomb: Shimon Peres, who would later become Israel's prime minister and is the current Israeli president today, at the age of 88.

No Clear Basis

It is now known that the arms shipments began by no later than 1958. The German defense minister even had arms and equipment secretly removed from Germany military stockpiles and then reported to the police as stolen. Many of the shipments reached Israel via indirect routes and were declared as "loans." The equipment included Sikorsky helicopters, Noratlas transport aircraft, rebuilt M-48 tanks, anti-aircraft guns, howitzers and anti-tank guided missiles.

There was "no clear legal or budgetary basis" for the shipments," a German official admitted in an internal document at the time. But Adenauer backed his defense minister, and in 1967 it became clear how correct he was in making this assessment, when Israel preempted an attack by its neighbors and achieved a brilliant victory in the Six-Day War. From then on, Strauss's friend Peres consistently reminded his fellow Israelis not to forget "what helped us achieve that victory."

The fact that the German security guarantee was not a question of partisan politics became evident six years later, when Social Democrat Willy Brandt headed the government in Bonn -- and Israel was on the verge of defeat in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Although Germany was officially uninvolved in the war, the chancellor personally approved arms shipments to Israel, as Brandt biographer Peter Merseburger reported. As those involved recall today, Brandt's decision was a "violation of the law" that Brandt's speechwriter, Klaus Harpprecht, sought to justify by attributing the chancellor's actions to a so-called emergency beyond law. The chancellor apparently saw it as an "overriding obligation of the head of the German government" to rescue the country created by survivors of the Holocaust.

DID THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT FINANCE THE ISRAELI NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAM?

In the 1960s, Israel's interests had moved past conventional arms. Ben-Gurion had entrusted Peres with a highly sensitive project: Operation Samson, named after the Biblical figure who is supposed to have lived at the time when the Israelites were being oppressed by the Philistines. Samson was believed to be invincible, but he was also seen as a destructive figure. The goal of the operation was to build an atomic bomb. The Israelis told their allies that they needed cheap nuclear energy for seawater

desalination, and that they planned to use the water to make the Negev Desert fertile.

The German government was also left in the dark at first -- with Strauss being the likely exception. The CSU politician was apparently brought into the loop in 1961. This is suggested by a memo dated June 12, 1961, classified as "top secret," which Strauss dictated after a meeting in Paris with Peres and Ben-Gurion, in which he wrote: "Ben-Gurion spoke about the production of nuclear weapons."

One can speculate on the reasons that Ben-Gurion, a Polish-born Israeli social democrat, chose to include the Bavarian conservative Strauss in his plans. There are indications that the Israeli government hoped to receive financial assistance for Operation Samson.

Israel was cash-strapped at the time, with the construction of the bomb consuming enormous sums of money. This led Ben-Gurion to negotiate in great secrecy with Adenauer over a loan worth billions. According to the German negotiation records, which the federal government has now released in response to a request by SPIEGEL, Ben-Gurion wanted to use the loan for an infrastructure project in the Negev Desert. There was also talk of a "sea water desalination plant."

No Reason for Concern

Plants for a civilian desalination plant operated with nuclear power did in fact exist, and the development of the Negev was also one of the largest projects in Israel's brief history. When Rainer Barzel, the conservatives' parliamentary floor leader, inquired about the project in Jerusalem, the Israelis explained that obtaining water through desalination was an "epochal task." An official who accompanied Barzel noted that the Israelis had said that "the necessary nuclear power would be monitored internationally and could not be used for military purposes, and that we had no reason to be concerned."

But a desalination plant operated with nuclear power was never built, and it remains unclear what exactly happened with the total of 630 million deutsche marks that Germany gave the Israelis in the period until 1965. The payments were processed by the Frankfurt-based Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (Reconstruction Credit Institute). The head of the organization said in internal discussions that the use of the funds was "never audited." "Everything seems to suggest that the Israeli bomb was

financed also with German money," says Avner Cohen, an Israeli historian at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California who studies nuclear weapons.

Finally, in 1967, Israel had probably built its first nuclear weapon. The Israeli government dismissed questions about its nuclear arsenal with a standard response that stems from Peres: "We will not introduce nuclear weapons to the region, and certainly we will not be the first." This deliberately vague statement is still the Israeli government's official position today.

When dealing with their German allies, however, Israeli politicians used language that hardly concealed the truth. When the legendary former Defense Minister Moshe Dayan visited Bonn in the fall of 1977, he told then Chancellor Helmut Schmidt about neighboring Egypt's fear "that Israel might use nuclear weapons." Dayan said that he understood the Egyptians' worries, and pointed out that in his opinion the use of the bomb against the Aswan dam would have "devastating consequences." He didn't even deny the existence of a nuclear weapon.

First Submarines Are Secretly Assembled in England

A country that has the bomb is also likely to search for a safe place to store it and a safe launching platform -- a submarine, for example.

In the 1970s, Brandt and Schmidt were the first German chancellors to be confronted with the Israelis' determination to obtain submarines. Three vessels were to be built in Great Britain, using plans drawn up by the German company Industriekontor Lübeck (IKL).

But an export permit was needed to send the documents out of the country. To get around this, IKL agreed with the German Defense Ministry that the drawings would be completed on the letterhead of a British shipyard and flown on a British plane to the British town of Barrow-in-Furness, where the submarines were assembled.

Assuring Israel's security was no longer the only objective of the German-Israeli arms cooperation, which had since become a lucrative business for West German industry. In 1977, the last of the first three submarines arrived in Haifa. At the time, nobody was thinking about nuclear second-strike capability. It was not until the early 1980s, when more and more Israeli officers were returning from US military academies and raving

about American submarines, that a discussion began about modernizing the Israeli navy -- and about the nuclear option.

A power struggle was raging in the Israeli military at the time. Two planning teams were developing different strategies for the country's navy. One group advocated new, larger Sa'ar 4 missile boats, while the other group wanted Israel to buy submarines instead. Israel was "a small island, where 97 percent of all goods arrive via water," said Ami Ayalon, the deputy commander of the navy at the time, who would later become head of the Israeli domestic intelligence agency, Shin Bet.

Strategic Depth

Even then it was becoming apparent, according to Ayalon, "that in the Middle East things were heading toward nuclear weapons," especially in Iraq. The fact that the Arab states were seriously interested in building the bomb changed Israel's defense doctrine, he says. "A submarine can be used as a tactical weapon for various missions, but at the center of our discussions in the 1980s was the question of whether the navy was to receive an additional task known as strategic depth," says Ayalon. "Purchasing the submarines was the country's most important strategic decision."

Strategic depth. In other words, nuclear second-strike capability.

At the end of the debate, the navy specified as its requirement nine corvettes and three submarines. It was "a megalomaniacal demand," as Ayalon, who would later rise to become commander-in-chief of the navy, admits today. But the navy's strategists had hopes of a budgetary miracle. Alternatively, they were hoping for a rich beneficiary who would be willing to give Israel a few submarines.

KOHL AND RABIN TURN ISRAEL INTO A MODERN SUBMARINE POWER

The two men who finally catapulted Israel into the circle of modern submarine powers were Helmut Kohl and Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin's father had fought in World War II as a volunteer in the Jewish Legion of the British army, and Rabin himself led the Israeli army to victory, as its chief of staff, in the 1967 Six-Day War. In 1984, having served one term as prime minister in the mid-1960s, he moved to the cabinet, becoming the defense minister.

Rabin knew that the German government in Bonn had introduced new "political principles" for arms exports in 1982. According to the new policy, arms shipments could "not contribute to an increase in existing tensions." This malleable wording made possible the delivery of submarines to Israel, especially in combination with a famous remark once made by former Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher: "Anything that floats is OK" -- because governments generally do not use boats to oppress demonstrators or opposition forces.

After World War II, the Allies had initially forbidden Germany from building large submarines. As a result, the chief supplier to the German navy, Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft AG (HDW), located in the northern port city of Kiel, had shifted its focus to small, maneuverable boats that could also operate in the Baltic and North Seas. The Israelis were interested in ships that could navigate in similarly shallow waters, such as those along the Lebanese coast, where they have to be able to lie at periscope depth, listen in on radio communications and compare the sounds of ship's propellers with an onboard database. The Israelis obtained bids from the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands, but "the German boats were the best," says an Israeli who was involved in the decision.

A few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the German government, practically unnoticed by the general public, gave the green light for the construction of two "Dolphin"-class submarines, with an option for a third vessel.

But the strategic deal of the century almost fell through. Although the Germans had agreed to pay part of the costs, this explicitly excluded the weapons systems -- the Americans were supposed to also pay a share. But in the meantime, the Israelis had voted a new government into office that was bitterly divided over the investments.

'An Inconceivable Scenario'

In particular Moshe Arens, who was appointed defense minister in 1990, fought to stop the agreement -- with success. On Nov. 30, 1990, the Israelis notified the shipyard in Kiel that it wished to withdraw from the contract. Was the dream of nuclear second-strike capability lost? By no means.

In January 1991, the US air force attacked Iraq, and then Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein reacted by firing modified Scud missiles at Tel Aviv and

Haifa. The bombardment lasted almost six weeks. Gas masks, some of which came from Germany, were distributed to households. "It was an inconceivable scenario," recalls Ehud Barak, the current Israeli defense minister. During those days, Jewish immigrants from Russia arrived, "and we had to hand them gas masks at the airport to protect them against rockets that the Iraqis had built with the help of the Russians and the Germans."

A few days after the Scud missile bombardment began, a German military official requested a meeting at the Chancellery, presented a secret report and emptied the contents of a bag onto a table. He spread out dozens of electronic parts, components of a control system and the percussion fuse of the modified Scud missiles. They had one thing in common: They were made in Germany. Without German technology there would have been no Scuds, and without Scuds no dead Israelis.

Once again, Germany bore some of the responsibility, and that was also the message that Hanan Alon, a senior Israeli Defense Ministry official, brought to Kohl during a visit to Bonn shortly after the war began. "It would be unpleasant if it came out, through the media, that Germany helped Iraq to make poison gas, and then supplied us with the equipment against it, Mr. Chancellor," Alon said. According to Israeli officials, Alon also issued an open threat, saying: "You are certainly aware that the words gas and Germany don't sound very good together."

The Shipyards of Kiel

The Germans got the message. "Israel-Germany-gas" would sound like a "horrible triad" in the rest of the world, then Foreign Minister Genscher warned in an internal memo.

On Jan. 30, 1991, two weeks after the beginning of the Gulf War, the German government agreed to supply Israel with armaments worth 1.2 billion deutsche marks. This included the complete financing of two submarines with 880 million deutsche marks. The budgetary miracle had come to pass. Israel had found its benefactor.

According to military wisdom, a country that buys one or two submarines will also buy a third one. One submarine is usually in dock, while the other two take turns being deployed during operations. "After we had ordered the first two boats, it was clear that we had entered into a deal which would

involve repeat orders," says an individual who was a member of the Israeli cabinet at the time.

On a winter's day in 1994, at about 6 [redacted]., an Israeli Air Force plane landed in the military area of Cologne-Bonn Airport. Its passengers wanted to discuss the future of Israel and the Middle East. On board were the then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, his national security adviser and then Mossad chief Shabtai Shavit. The small delegation was driven to the chancellor's residence, where Kohl was waiting with his foreign policy adviser, Joachim Bitterlich, and his intelligence coordinator, Bernd Schmidbauer.

Wheat Beer for Israel

On that evening, Kohl and Rabin discussed the path to peace in the Middle East. Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had been jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the year before, together with Peres. For the first time in a long time, conciliation seemed possible between the Jews and the Palestinians, with Germany serving as a middleman.

In Bonn, Rabin spoke at length about the German-Israeli relationship, which was still difficult. At dinner, Kohl surprised his visitors by serving wheat beer. The Israelis were delighted. "The beer tastes great," Rabin said. The ice had been broken.

On that evening, the Israeli premier asked the Germans for a third submarine, and Kohl spontaneously agreed. At around midnight, Schmidbauer took Rabin back to airport. Kohl, who was virtually unsurpassed in the art of male bonding in politics, sent a case of wheat beer to Israel for Christmas in 1994.

A few months after the secret meeting in Bonn, in February 1995, the contract for the third submarine, the Tekumah, was signed. The German share of the costs totaled 220 million deutsche marks.

THE WELL-PROTECTED SECRETS OF THE SHIPYARD IN KIEL

Since then, one of the most secretive arms projects in the Western world has been underway in Kiel, where a special form of bonding between the German and the Israeli people developed. Around half a dozen Israelis work at the shipyard today on a long-term basis. Friendships, some of them close, have formed between HDW engineers and their families and the Israeli families, and special occasions are celebrated together. But despite these friendships, the Israelis always make sure that no outsiders are

allowed near the submarines. Even managers from Thyssen-Krupp, which bought HDW in 2005, are denied access. "The main goal of everyone involved was to ensure that there would be no public debate about the project, neither in Israel nor in Germany," says former Israeli navy chief Ayalon. This explains why everything related to the equipment on the ships remains hidden behind a veil of secrecy.

One of the special features is the equipment used in the Dolphin class, which is named after the first ship. Unlike conventional submarines, the Dolphins don't just have torpedo tubes with a 533-millimeter diameter in the steel bow. In response to a special Israeli request, the HDW engineers designed four additional tubes that are 650 millimeters in diameter -- a special design not found in any other submarine in the Western world.

What is the purpose of the large tubes? In a classified 2006 memo, the German government argued that the tubes are an "option for the transfer of special forces and the pressure-free stowage of their equipment" -- combat swimmers, for example --, who can be released through the narrow shaft for secret operations. The same explanation is given by the Israelis.

Keeping Options Open

In the United States, however, it has long been speculated that the wider shafts could be intended for ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads. This suspicion was fueled by an Israeli request for US Tomahawk cruise missiles in 2000. The missiles have a range of over 600 kilometers, while nuclear versions can even fly about 2,500 kilometers. But Washington rejected the request twice. This is why the Israelis still rely on ballistic missiles of their own design today, such as Popeye Turbo.

Their use as nuclear carrier missiles is readily possible in the Dolphins. Contrary to official assumptions, HDW equipped the Israeli submarines with a newly developed hydraulic ejection system instead of a compressed air ejection system. In this process, water is compressed with the help of a hydraulic ram. The resulting pressure is then used to catapult the weapon out of the shaft.

The resulting momentum is limited, however, and it isn't enough to eject a three to five-ton midrange missile out of the ship, at least according to insiders. This is not the case with lighter-weight missiles weighing up to 1.5 tons -- like the Popeye Turbo or the American Tomahawk, which weighs just that, nuclear warhead included.

There are indications that, with the expanded tubes, the Israelis wanted to keep open the option of future, more voluminous developments.

The Germans and the Atomic Question: No Questions, No Problems

The Germans don't want to know anything about that. "It was clear to each of us, without anything being said, that the ships had been tailored to the needs of the Israelis, and that that could also include nuclear capabilities," says a senior German official involved during the Kohl era. "But in politics there are questions that it's better not to ask, because the answer would be a problem."

To this day, former German Foreign Minister Genscher and former Defense Minister Volker Ruhe say they do not believe that Israel has equipped the submarines with nuclear weapons.

For their part, experts with the German military, the Bundeswehr, do not doubt the nuclear capability of the submarines, but they do doubt whether cruise missiles could be developed on the basis of the Popeye Turbo that could fly 1,500 kilometers.

Some military experts suggest, therefore, that the Israeli government is bluffing, in a bid to make Iran believe that the Jewish state already has a sea-based second-strike capability. That alone would be enough to force Tehran to commit considerable resources to defending itself.The first person to publicly voice suspicions that the German government was supporting Israel in its nuclear weapons program was Norbert Gansel, an SPD politician from Kiel. Speaking in the German parliament, the Bundestag, he stated that the SPD opposed the shipment of "submarines suitable for nuclear missions" to Israel.

Clearly Squirming

The German government did make at least one stab at clearing up the nuclear issue. It was in 1988, when Defense Ministry State Secretary Lother Rühl, during a visit to Israel, asked then Deputy Chief of General Staff Ehud Barak what the "operational and strategic purpose of the ships" was. "We need them to clear maritime maneuvering areas," Barak replied. The Israeli mentioned the Egyptian naval blockage of the Gulf of Aqaba ahead of the Six-Day War. The Israelis wanted to be armed against such a step, he said. It sounded plausible, but Rühl didn't believe it.

Every German administration has been keenly aware of how explosive the issue is. When the German Finance Ministry had to report the funds for the

financing of submarines 4 and 5 in 2006, the ministry officials were clearly squirming. The planned weapons system is "not suitable for the use of missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. The submarines are therefore not being constructed and equipped for launching nuclear weapons," reads a classified document from Finance Ministry State Secretary Karl Diller to the Bundestag budget committee dated Aug. 29, 2006.

In other words, the government was saying that Germany delivered a conventional submarine -- what the Israelis did with it afterwards was their own business. In 1999, the then State Secretary Brigitte Schulte wrote that the German government could not "rule out any armament for which the operating navy has capability, following the appropriate retrofitting."

THE WAR OVER THE BOMB: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND IRAN

The conflict between Israel and Iran has intensified steadily since 2006. War is a real danger. For months now, Israel has been preparing governments around the world, as well as the international public, for a bombing of the nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordu and Isfahan using cutting-edge conventional, bunker-busting weapons. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Defense Minister Ehud Barak are convinced that the "window" is closing in which such an attack would be effective, as Iran is in the process of moving most of its nuclear enrichment activities deep below ground.

In his recent controversial poem "What Must Be Said," Günter Grass describes the submarines, "whose speciality consists in (their) ability / to direct nuclear warheads toward / an area in which not a single atom bomb / has yet been proved to exist," as the potentially decisive step towards a nuclear disaster in the Iran conflict. The poem met with international protests. Comparing Israel and Iran was "not brilliant, but absurd," said German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. Netanyahu spoke of an "absolute scandal" and his interior minister banned Grass from entering Israel.

But some people agreed with the author. Gansel, the SPD politician, says that Grass has triggered an important debate, because Netanyahu's "ranting about preventive war" touches on a difficult aspect of international law. In reality, it is unlikely that Israel will use the submarines in a war with Iran as long as Tehran does not have nuclear missiles -- even though the Israeli

government has considered using the "Samson" option on at least two occasions in the past.

The country's military situation following the Egyptian and Syrian surprise attack during the 1973 Yom Kippur holiday was so desperate that Prime Minister Golda Meir -- as intelligence service reports have now revealed -- ordered her Defense Minister Moshe Dayan to prepare several nuclear bombs for combat and deliver them to air force units. Then, just before the warheads were to be armed, the tide turned. Israel's forces gained the upper hand on the battlefield, and the bombs made their way back to their underground bunkers.

Unwillingness to Compromise

And in the first hours of the 1991 Gulf War, an American satellite registered that Israel had responded to the bombardment by Iraqi Scud missiles by mobilizing its nuclear force. Israeli analysts had mistakenly assumed that the Scuds would be armed with poison gas. It remains unclear how Israel would have acted if a Scud missile tipped with nerve gas had hit a residential area.

Only Netanyahu and Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, probably know how close the world stands today to a new war. The Israeli prime minister and Khamenei have "one thing in common," says Walther Stützle, a former state secretary in Germany's Federal Defense Ministry: "They enjoy conflict. If Israel attacks, Iran slips out of the aggressor role and into that of victim." The UN won't provide the mandate that would legitimize such an attack, which means Israel would be breaking the law, argues Stützle, who is now at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), a Berlin-based think tank. "True friendship," he believes, "requires the German chancellor to stay Netanyahu's arm and prevent him from resorting to an armed attack. Germany's obligation to protect Israel includes protecting the country from embarking on suicidal adventures."

Helmut Schmidt went even further, long before Grass. "Hardly anyone dares to criticize Israel here, out of fear of being accused of anti-Semitism," the former chancellor told Jewish American historian Fritz Stern. Yet Israel is a country, Schmidt suggests, that "makes a peaceful solution practically impossible, through its policies of settlement in the West Bank and, for far longer, in the Gaza Strip." He also condemns the

current chancellor for, in his view, allowing herself to be essentially taken hostage by Israel. Schmidt says, "I wonder whether it was a feeling of closeness with American policies, or nebulous moral motives, that led Chancellor Merkel to publicly state in 2008 that Germany bears responsibility for the security of the State of Israel. From my point of view, this is a serious exaggeration, one that sounds very nearly like the type of obligation that exists within an alliance."

Schmidt considers it plain that Berlin has no business participating in adventurous policies, and he draws clear boundaries: "Germany has a particular responsibility to make sure that a crime such as the Holocaust never again occurs. Germany does not have a responsibility for Israel."

From the start, Merkel viewed the matter differently from her predecessor Schröder, who approved the delivery of submarines number 4 and 5 on his last working day in office in 2005. For Chancellor Merkel, on the other hand, there was never any doubt that she would do what Israel asked, even at the cost of violating Germany's own arms export guidelines. The rules, amended in 2000 by the SPD-Green coalition government, do allow weapons to be supplied to countries that are not part of the EU or NATO in the case of "special foreign or security policy interests." But there is a clear regulation for crisis regions: The rules state that supplying weapons "is not authorized in countries that are involved in armed conflicts or where there is a threat of one." There is no question that that rule would include Israel. But that did not stop the chancellor from making a deal for the delivery of submarine number 6 -- just as she was not deterred by Netanyahu's unwillingness to make compromises.

Broken Promises and the Deal for Submarine Number Six

In August 2009, Netanyahu, who had recently been re-elected as prime minister as head of the conservative Likud party, came to Berlin. Netanyahu explained to Merkel how important the submarines were for Israel; that wherever an Israeli looks, to the north, south, or east, there is no strategic hinterland to work with, and only airspace and sea to serve as buffer zones. "We need this sixth boat," participants in the meeting say Netanyahu told Merkel during his Berlin visit, coupling the statement with a request that Germany donate this submarine, as it had the previous ones. Merkel's response included three specific requests in exchange. First, Israel should halt its policy of settlement expansion, and second, the government

should release tax assets it had frozen, which belong to the Palestinian National Authority. Third, Israel must allow construction of a sewage treatment plant in the Gaza Strip, funded by Germany, to continue. The critical factor, the chancellor added, was absolute discretion. If details leaked out, the deal would be off, because resistance from the Bundestag would be too much to overcome. The two leaders agreed that German diplomat Christoph Heusgen and Netanyahu's security advisor Uzi Arad would work out the details.

Arad is known as an impulsive and hotheaded individual who has no problem with verbally attacking the Germans. When Merkel criticized Israel's settlement policy in a July 2009 address to the Bundestag, Arad called the Chancellery and fired off a volley of angry complaints at Heusgen. Arad ended the call with the demand that Merkel should not only apologize, but also retract her statements.

Asking for Help

The fact that Arad was supposed to be leading the negotiations delayed the talks over the sixth submarine once again. In the end, Netanyahu asked Yoram Ben-Zeev, Israel's ambassador to Germany, to help out.

Ben-Zeev returned to Israel when his term as ambassador ended on November 28, 2011. He was standing outside his house in Tzahala, a suburb of Tel Aviv, when his cell phone rang. It was Jaakov Amidror, Netanyahu's new security adviser.

"Are you sitting down?" Amidror asked.

"[redacted] standing in my neglected garden," Ben-Zeev replied.

"Netanyahu has one more request," Amidror told him. "Germany is ready to sign the submarine deal. You need to get on the next flight to Berlin."

Ultimately, Ben-Zeev and Heusgen agreed on the final details over the phone, and the contract was signed on March 20, 2012, at the Israeli ambassador's residence in Berlin. Defense Minister Barak flew in especially for the meeting and Rüdiger Wolf, a state secretary in the Federal Defense Ministry, signed on behalf of the German government. Since the Israeli government had financial problems once again, Germany made further concessions, agreeing to pay €135 million ($170 million), a third of the submarine's cost, and to allow Israel to defer payment of its part until 2015. Netanyahu dutifully expressed his thanks with a hand-written letter.

Still, disappointment within the Chancellery is running high, as Netanyahu has simply ignored Merkel's requests. Israel's policy of settlement continues unabated and no further progress has been made on the sewage treatment plant. The Israeli government only released the Palestinian tax money. Merkel has apparently reached the conclusion that there's no point in saying anything further to Netanyahu, since he's sure not to listen in any case.

Missed an Opportunity

But should the German government take this as cause to halt submarine production? That would send Israel a signal that German support comes with certain stipulations -- but it would also amount to showing less solidarity, and that's something Merkel doesn't want.

The chancellor has missed an opportunity to use one of the few sources of leverage the German government has at its disposal to exercise influence on the Israeli government, which behaves like an occupying power on Palestinian territory. The fourth submarine, known as Tannin, was first launched in early May and its delivery is set for early 2013. Submarine number five will follow in 2014 and number six by 2017.

These latest submarines are especially important for Israel, because they come equipped with a technological revolution: fuel cell propulsion that allows the ships to work even more quietly and for longer periods of time. Earlier Dolphin class submarines had to surface every couple days to start up the diesel engine and power their batteries for continued underwater travel. The new propulsion system, which doesn't require these surface breaks, vastly improves the submarines' possible applications. They will be able to travel underwater at least four times as long as the previous Dolphins, their fuel cells allowing them to stay below the surface at least 18 days at a time. The Persian Gulf off the coast of Iran is no longer out of the operating range of the Israeli fleet, all thanks to quality engineering from Germany.

In the Haifa harbor, the Tekumah's diesel engines growl loudly enough that conversation is just barely possible. Out at sea, though, when the submarine is in true operation and all systems are functioning cleanly, "you can barely hear the motors at all," says the naval officer in charge of the boat. The Tekumah can plow through the water at speeds of 20 knots and above, a sleek and powerful predator. But the real skill, says the officer,

comes in the low-speed operations carried out near enemy coasts, places where the Israeli Navy works covertly, where the Tekumah and the other submarines have to approach their targets with great care, moving as if on tiptoe.

'Everything Possible'

The naval officer sees his submarine as "one of the places where Israel is being defended" and his determined tone leaves no doubt he will take whatever action necessary if he considers his homeland to be under attack. "The Israeli Navy needed this boat," he says.

He also says he followed the controversy over Günter Grass' poem and was surprised by the intensity of the debate. His own family originally came from Germany -- his grandparents managed to escape before the Holocaust, fleeing their Munich suburb in 1934 and later becoming part of Israel's founding generation. "We can never forget the past," he says, "but we can do everything possible to prevent a new Holocaust."

This naval officer will likely be needed to serve onboard submarines for some time to come. In Israel, Berlin and Kiel, they are already talking about the fact that the Israelis will soon want to order their 7th, 8th and 9th submarines.

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Article 2.

Los Angeles Times

Toppling Syria's Assad

Max Boot

June 5, 2012 -- After the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, the world said: Never again. And there have been interventions to stop the killing — in Bosnia, Kosovo and Libya. But these have been the exception, not the norm. Even now, as horrifying violence unfolds in Syria, the U.S. and its allies find reasons to limit their response to economic sanctions accompanied by strongly worded, but ineffectual, statements of condemnation.

This, despite the fact that the stakes in Syria are higher, from a strategic standpoint, than in Libya. By the time NATO acted against Moammar Kadafi, he was an isolated despot who had given up sponsoring terrorism and building weapons of mass destruction. Not so with Bashar Assad: His regime sponsors Hezbollah and Hamas. It has a large stockpile of chemical weapons and would be on its way to developing nuclear weapons had not Israel bombed its nuclear reactor in 2007. And it has close links to the Iranian regime, which is the No. 1 enemy of the U.S. and its allies in the region.

Moreover, the longer Assad stays in power without being able to stop the uprising against his government — which is now more than a year old — the greater the odds that regional powers will be drawn into the fray and that extremist groups such as Al Qaeda, already responsible for several grisly bombings in Syria, will be able to establish safe havens on Syrian soil.

There are risks in a post-Assad Syria, to be sure, but toppling him as swiftly as possible — something sanctions have shown no sign of achieving — holds out the promise of meeting significant strategic as well as humanitarian objectives.

Those in favor of a go-slow approach will admit much of this but then argue that there are no good options for intervention. It is true that action to topple a regime always carries risks. It is never an operation to be undertaken lightly, as we learned in Afghanistan and Iraq. But no one is

proposing sending U.S. ground troops into Syria; the riskiest option of all isn't on the table, nor should it be.

Even less risky options, such as airstrikes, would be harder in Syria than in Libya because the Syrian opposition is less unified than in Libya, and it does not control any cities or discrete territory. Thus it would be harder to strike regime assets without injuring civilians.

But is this an argument for simply sitting by and letting the killing continue? That isn't a "good option" either.

Luckily, as the Syria expert Andrew Tabler, among others, has argued, there are other choices.

First, we should become more closely involved in organizing the Syrian resistance by providing it with communications gear, intelligence and other nonlethal assistance. As CIA and special operations officers develop closer ties with the rebels, they will develop the contacts necessary to funnel weapons into the right hands and to avoid arming jihadist extremists.

U.S. diplomats and intelligence operatives can also work with the opposition to draft plans for a democratic, inclusive, post-Assad government. This would ease qualms among Kurds, Christians and other Syrian minorities — along with businessmen and other stakeholders in the Assad regime — who have so far hesitated to embrace the rebellion.

It would also help if safe zones were established along Syria's borders with Jordan and Turkey, where refugees could escape Assad's oppression. Turkey and Jordan have the military capability to defend such zones from the Syrian army, and there are indications that Turkey, which already hosts the Free Syrian Army, might be willing to do more if it received American support — which hasn't been forthcoming so far.

In addition, the U.S. and our NATO allies could strengthen sanctions on Syria by mounting a naval blockade of the Syrian coastline. This would make it more difficult for Syria's principal supporters, Russia and Iran, to provide arms to the regime.

Airstrikes to protect safe zones or take out key regime targets are a more aggressive option that needs to be considered. The Air Force and Navy have shown the ability to accomplish such goals with few if any losses and relatively little collateral damage.

With Russia blocking action at the United Nations, the most difficult part of any such operation might well be winning international approval. That

did not stop President Clinton from intervening in Kosovo, and it need not stop it in Syria, particularly if we can win the backing of NATO and the Arab League.

Max Boot is a contributing editor to Opinion, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of the forthcoming "Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare From Ancient Times to the Present."

Article 3.

Foreign Policy

The Real Reason to Intervene in Syria

James P. Rubin

JUNE 4, 2012 - We're not done with the possibility of an Israeli strike on Iran. Given that the current round of negotiations with the world's major powers will not fundamentally change Iran's nuclear program, the question of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities is likely to return to center stage later this year. In addition to hard-headed diplomacy and economic sanctions, there is an important step the United States can take to change Israel's calculations -- helping the people of Syria in their battle against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Iran's nuclear program and Syria's civil war may seem unconnected, but in fact they are inextricably linked. Israel's real fear -- losing its nuclear monopoly and therefore the ability to use its conventional forces at will throughout the Middle East -- is the unacknowledged factor driving its decision-making toward the Islamic Republic. For Israeli leaders, the real threat from a nuclear-armed Iran is not the prospect of an insane Iranian leader launching an unprovoked nuclear attack on Israel that would lead to the annihilation of both countries. It's the fact that Iran doesn't even need to test a nuclear weapon to undermine Israeli military leverage in Lebanon and Syria. Just reaching the nuclear threshold could embolden Iranian leaders to call on their proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, to attack Israel, knowing that their adversary would have to think hard before striking back.

That is where Syria comes in. It is the strategic relationship between the Islamic Republic and the Assad regime that makes it possible for Iran to

undermine Israel's security. Over the three decades of hostility between Iran and Israel, a direct military confrontation has never occurred -- but through Hezbollah, which is sustained and trained by Iran via Syria, the Islamic Republic has proven able to threaten Israeli security interests. The collapse of the Assad regime would sunder this dangerous alliance. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, arguably the most important Israeli decision-maker on this question, recently told CNN's Christiane Amanpour that the Assad regime's fall "will be a major blow to the radical axis, major blow to Iran.... It's the only kind of outpost of the Iranian influence in the Arab world ... and it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza."

The rebellion in Syria has now lasted more than a year. The opposition is not going away, and it is abundantly clear that neither diplomatic pressure nor economic sanctions will force Assad to accept a negotiated solution to the crisis. With his life, his family, and his clan's future at stake, only the threat or use of force will change the Syrian dictator's stance. Absent foreign intervention, then, the civil war in Syria will only get worse as radicals rush in to exploit the chaos there and the spillover into Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey intensifies.

U.S. President Barack Obama's administration has been understandably wary of engaging in an air operation in Syria similar to the campaign in Libya, for three main reasons. Unlike the Libyan opposition forces, the Syrian rebels are not unified and do not hold territory. The Arab League has not called for outside military intervention as it did in Libya. And the Russians, the longtime patron of the Assad regime, are staunchly opposed. Libya was an easier case. But other than the laudable result of saving many thousands of Libyan civilians from Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime, it had no long-lasting consequences for the region. Syria is harder -- but success there would be a transformative event for the Middle East. Not only would another ruthless dictator succumb to mass popular opposition, but Iran would no longer have a Mediterranean foothold from which to threaten Israel and destabilize the region.

A successful intervention in Syria would require substantial diplomatic and military leadership from the United States. Washington should start by declaring its willingness to work with regional allies like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to organize, train, and arm Syrian rebel forces. The

announcement of such a decision would, by itself, likely cause substantial defections from the Syrian military. Then, using territory in Turkey and possibly Jordan, U.S. diplomats and Pentagon officials could start strengthening and unifying the opposition. Once the opposition knows real outside help is on the way, it should be possible over time to build a coherent political leadership based on the Syrian National Council as well as a manageable command and control structure for the Free Syrian Army, both of which are now weak and divided. This will be difficult and time-consuming, but we should remember that the Syrian civil war is now destined to go on for years, whether the outside world intervenes or not.
James P. Rubin was assistant secretary of state during the Bill Clinton administration.

Article 4.

Asia Times

An unwelcome turn in the Arab Spring?

Brian M Downing

Jun 5, 2012 -- The remarkable uprisings across the Arab world in the past 16 months have ousted or imperiled leaders in several countries, including Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. None of these movements, however, has been successful in its goal of creating a new political system let alone a democratic one. Old rulers are gone in many cases but their regimes have persisted, either through adroit maneuvering or vicious repression.
The leaders of the old regimes believe they can wait out or repress the popular upheavals, much as European monarchies did when youthful revolutions swept the continent in 1848. Young people then and now are not patient. Frustration leads to despair, emigration, and violence. Young people in the Arab world today have options against intransigent authority - guerrilla warfare and terrorism among them - which old regimes should bear in mind. Outside powers hoping for stability in the region should do the same.
Uprisings and regime response
Middle East observers had long noted the immense youth population in most Arab countries, with 50% or more of the public under the age of 22.

Such a demographic bulge would be problematic in any country, but in countries with stagnant economies and stale political systems, it was an impending disaster and all that was needed was a trigger of some sort. That came with demonstrations against food prices and bold acts of violence. In a matter of weeks, public outrage was focused on corruption, oppression, lack of opportunity, and demands for a voice in their future.
In less time than anyone would have expected only a year earlier, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down. The business, military, and political networks that made up his regime, however, are positioned to retain their privileges and suppress popular aspirations, leaving democratic forces with perhaps a decade-long task of incremental change. They are counting on civil disorder to bring middle classes to their side and on delaying tactics to disillusion the rest. The absence of unity in the opposition is on the regime's side. Democratic forces are divided over tactics, factions, and fears of Islamism and Salafism.
Similar uprisings took place in Yemen, though with the complications of regional and sectarian antagonisms. After months of demonstrations and skirmishes, president Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to pressure from his countrymen and regional powers and left the country he ruled for over 20 years. As with Egypt, his associates retained control over the military, state, and key businesses. Popular protest is on hold as people wait to see if meaningful reform will begin. Regional, tribal, and sectarian conflict remains. Hydrocarbon production is tapping out and water supplies cannot match population growth.
Yemen is becoming a ward of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which may augur well for economic aid but not for political reform. These Sunni powers see the Arab Spring as a dangerous threat to the principle of autocracy upon, which they have governed since independence, and as an international conspiracy directed by the Shi'ites of Iran. They are using their diplomatic and financial assets to oppose democracy throughout the region.
The uprising in Syria is in its second year. The military remains intact, loyal, and murderous. Security officers at the small-unit level of regular army formations ensure that defections and even critical discussions are limited. Russia, Iran, and China remain supportive. Saudi Arabia and other GCC states tried last year to detach Bashar al-Assad from his ties to Iran,

but without success. In this effort, they tipped their hand in supporting autocracy over democracy in the region.

After months of repression, peaceful demonstrations gave way to armed opposition. But it has failed to mount effective defenses of rebel neighborhoods or inflict casualties on the army and security forces. In recent months repression has become increasingly murderous, with artillery raining down on cities and militias slaughtering villagers.

Options

Intransigent regimes historically have caused despair, withdrawal from politics, retreat into private life, and emigration. This would of course be welcome by the old regimes today, taking away a good deal of the pressure to reform. The lower turnout in successive Egyptian elections may be encouraging to rulers.

These options are unlikely today as Arab youth has insufficient opportunity to work and have families. Emigration will seem attractive to many, especially to Europe and the US. However, those countries are not as open as they once were to immigrants, and young men from the Middle East may be among the least welcome.

The activists in the Arab world today have thus far exhibited remarkable tenacity in the face of oppression and intransigence from rulers. There is still the conviction that their moment is at hand and failure will bring on decades of continued misrule. Unlike many rulers of the past, those in power today have the capacity to come down on activists and their families both cruelly and relentlessly.

A change in tactics will come and in places take the form of using violence and terrorism, initially sporadic and unorganized but with potential for becoming well organized, whether from new organizations or grafting on to existing ones. They will target personnel in the security forces, military, and state. Student groups and activist networks that coalesced early last year may turn their organizational skills to these acts, just as some in the US antiwar movement formed the Weather Underground after the 1968 police crackdown in Chicago, and launched a bombing campaign.

A more historically significant parallel is the People's Will, a Russian group that emerged following the failure of populism and which assassinated Tsar Alexander III in 1894. It set the groundwork for later secret political movements that were dedicated to overthrowing the

Romanov dynasty and directed by fearsome, single-minded figures.
Existing structures may serve the same purpose. The Muslim Brotherhood or splinter groups of it, in both Egypt and Syria, have been known to use violence. In Egypt, a splinter group assassinated president Anwar Sadat in 1981. In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood began a wave of bombings that led to the regime's ruthless attack on the city of Hama in 1982.
Salafist networks have long inculcated not only an austere form of Islam but also militancy and a zeal to transform the world and establish a just (Islamist) state. Salafis have an at least semi-secret organization with unseen but munificent benefactors, probably in Saudi Arabia. They have long acted as recruitment networks for causes in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan during the Soviet war (1979-89). Today they have ties to the Sunni insurgents in Iraq, who in turn have ties to Iraqi refugees in Syria. Salafi networks, however, are thought to be tied to Wahhabi clerics and Saudi intelligence, both of which recoil from democracy and support the cause of autocracy in the region. Salafism enjoys an intermediary position between the conservative House of Saud and the revolutionary al-Qaeda movement.
Part of al-Qaeda's appeal over the years has been its argument that secular dictatorships are unreformable and can only be brought down through armed struggle, which in turn will bring social justice. The Arab Spring was thought to signal the end of al-Qaeda's appeal by showing that secular dictatorships could indeed be brought down without the cataclysms Osama bin Laden and the like called for.
The persistence of secular dictatorships will bring new appreciation of al-Qaeda as intransigent regimes are ratifying a central part of its thought. Agents of al-Qaeda are doubtless making this point in the region and only a few thousand converts could be problematic if not disastrous. Western powers supportive of democracy and Gulf powers supportive of autocracy might well bear this in mind, though of course the old regimes will not.

Brian M Downing is a political/military analyst and author of The Military Revolution and Political Change and The Paths of Glory: War and Social Change in America from the Great War to Vietnam.