





# The Reluctant Terrorist

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FIRST EDITION

ISBN: 1448656494

EAN-13: 9781448656493

For Sandra,  
thanks







## **1 – Israel**

**The atom bomb that destroyed Tel Aviv might have been** manufactured in Pakistan or North Korea or Iran. Maybe it was smuggled out of the former Soviet Union. It could even have been made in Israel itself and been the bomb the Jewish state secretly traded to South Africa before the Afrikaner government gave way to black majority rule. When it comes to bombs, especially nuclear ones, it doesn't matter who makes them or even who delivers them. What mattered was that the bomb caused the death of the State of Israel before its Biblical three score and ten years of existence.

American specialists estimated the bomb was in the one-megaton range, based on satellite images showing a crater 1,200 feet across and nearly two hundred feet deep. The detonation ignited a firestorm fueled by ruptured gas lines, gasoline tanks, and literally every object that could burn within a half mile of ground zero. This firestorm, many times more ferocious than the firestorm caused by the Allied bombing of Dresden, which killed 100,000 Germans, burned every molecule of oxygen within a mile of the blast and caused hurricane force winds as air rushed in to replace the blistering air driven high into the atmosphere. Temperatures in the Tel Aviv neighborhoods through which it flashed roasted people huddling in basements and behind stone walls that had stood since Biblical times.

The first sign of the explosion was the enormous fireball that rose over the center of Israel, creating a glare bright enough to burn out the retinas of people twenty miles away. Half a million people, most of them Jews but also tens of thousands of Palestinians, were killed immediately or died within a few days. Cool Mediterranean breezes spread the radiation cloud inland and north through Israel's best agricultural region, an area created from desert by generations of Jewish settlers during Israel's brief life span.

Israel was cut in half by the bomb. Following contingency plans written three dozen years earlier and modified year by year as Israel's neighbors swayed from sworn enemies to secret ally and back again, the

Israeli air force was in the air within minutes of the detonation. Two hours later, their fuel exhausted and no enemy aircraft revealed, the planes landed on scattered desert airfields, waiting for orders that never arrived.

Half the Syrian tank crews that stormed through the Golan Heights died in the furious armored and artillery defense put up by Israel Defense Force units. But with supply lines leading back to a radioactive wasteland, the Israeli forces depleted their fuel and ammunition and were overrun, standing helplessly at their carefully emplaced weapons.

Thousands of the surviving Syrian troops died of radiation poisoning during the next week as their commanders drove them deeper and deeper into Israel, roaring through the worst of the radiation in a race to beat the Egyptians and Jordanians to Jerusalem. Fortunately for the hundreds of thousands of Israelis in towns and farms in the northern half of the country, the Syrians were more excited about liberating Jerusalem than the wholesale slaughter of Jews. There would be time for that later, for those who survived the radiation sickness.

Egyptian humanitarian relief convoys driving across the Sinai carried tons of food supplies, field medical units and tents. Cairo proclaimed its continued allegiance to its friend Israel. It was natural, the government radio said, that such valuable supplies required military protection.

For the first time since 1967, Egyptian troops occupied the Gaza Strip.

Perhaps in a hundred years Jews will memorialize the million who were slaughtered by one army or another. Or the thousands who died fighting to their last bullet rather than give up their homeland. If there are Israelis in a hundred years, however, they will be descendants of those who managed to flee to the port of Haifa, where every craft that could float was crammed with hysterical people old enough to remember the last Holocaust or young enough to fear the next. The eastern Mediterranean swarmed with ships with no destination except “away.”

Doors slammed shut. No nation wanted hundreds of thousands of refugees who had no home to return to, especially as oil-rich countries warned of petroleum reprisals against any nation providing comfort to the Jewish “criminals who stole Palestinian land.”

The State of Israel ceased to be at the close of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century. The only certainty to follow the Tel Aviv bomb was that the wheel of violence would take one more turn and that this bomb would be answered by more yet to come. The nation died and the Jewish terrorist, yet another stereotype for God’s chosen people, returned to the world stage.

## ***2 – Israel***

**Three days after the bomb, only the depths of the Negev Desert** remained under Israeli control. A half dozen aging F-16 fighter-bombers provided support for the tank battalion on maneuvers there at the time. Lt. General Gideon Hazama ordered a defensive ring formed around a concrete dome rising out of the desert at a spot known as Dimona, the location of Israel's intentionally worst kept secret.

Hazama, two air wing commanders and the Minister for Cultural Affairs, Debra Reuben, who had been on an inspection tour of Southern Negev settlements, gathered in a conference room buried fifty feet below the sands.

“We have no discretion in the matter. The debate took place years ago when the plans were formulated, precisely so this debate would not have to take place now,” Reuben lectured to the men seated around her. As the highest-ranking Israeli government official surviving, or at least in a position to exercise a government function, Reuben felt the weight of generations of pioneers, soldiers, diplomats and politicians.

Debra Reuben looked like a person who would be staggered by the weight of a well-fed sparrow landing on her shoulder. After surviving fashionable high school anorexia on Long Island in New York, she'd grown into the type of woman who could see exactly where on her hips a bowl of Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia took up residence, and then spend the next week exercising it away. The obligatory Sweet Sixteen nose job gave her Gidget's features. Her hair was colored throughout so much of her life that she couldn't name her natural color on the first try. At present, it was a startling red.

Her appearance was deceptive.

Debbie Reuben's obsession with Israel had separated her from her girlfriends at Great Neck High School. From her early days attending Hebrew School at Temple Beth Shalom and through her teenage years as a leader of the Temple Youth Group, the story of young European Jews

fleeing oppression to settle in the desert, learning to farm, learning to fight, creating their own government, had triggered a response Reuben found difficult to explain. Compared with what she saw in her parents and their friends, with what she saw in herself and her friends, these Israeli Jews seemed larger, stronger, heroic. Mythical super Jews.

I can do that, too, she'd thought. She expected her future would be in Israel. Her parents smiled and nodded, confident she would outgrow it, if only she'd meet the right boy.

They were wrong. Golda Meir, Israel's first, and only, woman prime minister, a woman with features so prominent she looked as if she'd already been carved in stone at twice life size, would have shaken her head in wonder to see tiny Debra Reuben holding the tattered reins of power over the State of Israel. Golda would have smiled, though, to see the stiff-backed soldiers biting any response to Reuben's harangue.

Reuben's rise to cabinet rank was viewed by most Israelis as a fluke, the kind of compromise that pleased nobody but was common in the hothouse of Israeli politics. She had been a producer of television documentaries for the New York City CBS affiliate until a dozen years earlier, when she vacationed in Israel following a failed engagement to her on-again, off-again college heart throb. She decided it was time to stop resisting what she'd expected would be her fate all along and stayed in Israel. Reuben found work in Israeli television, where she earned a reputation for integrity with her American brand of investigative reporting.

When a neutral but publicly respected person was needed to round out a coalition cabinet, her name was proposed as somebody few people would object to. To nearly everyone's surprise, she took her new position seriously, worked hard and earned a grudging respect.

She freely admitted she knew nothing about military strategy and, in fact, would have been hard put to load and fire a simple Uzi pistol. Nonetheless, as a cabinet minister she'd been briefed about Israel's fundamental contingency plan. That General Hazama was in a position to take orders from her was typical of the tragedy of Israel's final days.

It was doubly ironic that she played the role of the hard-nosed militant while Hazama and one of the two Israeli Air Force pilots argued against following orders from a nonexistent central government. The second air force officer observed the debate silently.

"Do I have to repeat the decision made by our government years ago?" Reuben asked the tired men.

“If the fall of Israel is inevitable, Rule Number One is that the weapons can not fall into enemy hands. If all else is lost, they are to be detonated in place. The loss of the Negev is a small price to pay to prevent the future blackmail of whatever Jewish state eventually reestablishes itself.

“Rule Number Two is that if an atomic weapon is used against Israel, our weapons are to be deployed, immediately, against the capital city of the country that attacked Israel.

“Rule Number Three is that if any devices remain unused they are to be safeguarded and removed for future use.

“The devices were constructed for use in the present situation. If we don’t use them now, the next time the State of Israel is in a position like this our enemies will assume we’ll back down again,” Reuben preached to the men, not truly believing she was saying what she was saying. An image of her father came to mind, her father who’d spent most of last week’s telephone call complaining about problems with a supplier for the purchase of ten thousand zippers, whenever he could squeeze a word around her mother’s worries about whether strawberry cheesecake was too heavy a dessert for Saturday evening’s dinner party. Now, a week later, she, nice Debbie Reuben, former editor of the Great Neck High School newspaper, was trying to convince Israel’s remaining armed forces to drop atomic bombs on Tehran and Damascus.

That Israel had nuclear weapons was an open secret, assumed by the intelligence services of all the major powers and feared, to varying degrees, by her neighbors and enemies. Israel’s problem had not been in designing the bomb. It was no surprise that the Manhattan Project, despite the wartime frenzy to complete America’s secret weapon, had to shut down for Yom Kippur, the most holy of Jewish holidays, because so many scientists there were Jews. The problem was that atom bombs were expensive.

Israel’s real secret was not that it had nuclear weapons, but that it had so few. As early as 1952, Israel’s top leadership decided that only the atomic bomb could put teeth in the new nation’s bedrock principle of “never again,” never again another Holocaust. Israel did what was necessary to develop a nuclear industry, primarily by building its secret reactor at Dimona, side by side with an even more secret underground uranium enrichment plant. But the Manhattan Project had strained even America’s vast wartime resources. Years of siphoning ten percent of its military budget into the Dimona desert left Israel’s leaders shaking their

heads, wondering if they were paying too high a price for a weapon they doubted they would ever use.

Israel realized it was not the atom bomb that gave the country protection; it was the fear in Arab hearts that Israel had and would use the bomb. It turned out to be less expensive to convince the world that Israel had a stockpile of hundreds of hydrogen bombs than to actually build the bombs. For deterrence, pretend bombs carried as much of a wallop as the real thing.

Israel's best kept secret was that what the world was led to believe was the worst kept secret - its stockpile of hundreds of nuclear weapons - was a well crafted fable. Israel's nuclear stockpile was history's greatest Potemkin village. The scheme included hints dropped by Israeli physicists to their American counterparts. It included a carefully staged disclosure to British tabloids by a man thought to be a disgruntled former employee at the uranium enrichment plant, complete with photographs of the plant he "smuggled" out of Israel, given the greatest authenticity by a seeming secret scheme to lure him out of England to Italy, where he was "captured" by Israeli agents, placed on trial and held in prison for revealing Israel's greatest secret. Israeli marines training with U.S. Navy Seals whispered hints about suitcase-sized bombs already smuggled into cities throughout the Middle East.

The secret within the secret within the secret was that after building four bombs, Israel ran out of money. One was tested in the Indian Ocean with the cooperation of South Africa, a test the Israelis allowed an American Velas spy satellite to confirm. The remaining three were stored at Dimona.

For two days Reuben had repeated the contingency plans and the lack of discretion they had about whether or not to implement them to General Hazama and, particularly, to the two air force pilots. The problem was that while there was no question that an atomic bomb had been detonated in Tel Aviv, there was no way of knowing where the bomb came from. Still, something had to be done, soon, before time ran out on what was left of the Israeli Defense Force.

"The country is overrun with Arab soldiers. Palestinians are slaughtering our people. Tel Aviv and who knows how much of the rest of the country is a radioactive wasteland. And you, the lions of Judah, the last remaining arms of the nation, can't decide whether or not to strike back." Reuben, near hysteria from lack of sleep and too much coffee, from the haunting fear that decades of Jewish dreams and Jewish blood had piled on

her and that she'd failed, that somehow the entire disaster was now her fault, her responsibility, was at her breaking point.

"Let me add, gentlemen, that we can't hold out here much longer. One serious attack on the airstrip and any chance to deliver these weapons will be lost. Another day, maybe two, and we'll all be Egyptian prisoners, or dead. I am now the government of the State of Israel. I order you to load two devices onto aircraft and drop them on Damascus and Tehran. The planes are to leave in one hour."

Reuben abruptly rose from the table and walked across the room, gesturing to one of the pilots, the man who had remained silent throughout the lengthy arguments, to walk with her. She spoke with the man in whispers for several minutes, then she returned to the conference table where Hazama waited.

She sat down, rested her head in her arms. She wanted her father to tell her what to do, her mother to rub her back and say that whatever she did was right. Instead she fell asleep.

Hazama moved the plastic coffee cup from near her right elbow so it would not spill. He looked at the two air force commanders. "You, Damascus," he said slowly, as if he were pronouncing their death sentences, rather than that of millions of others. "You, Tehran."

And the last one, the little one, we'll hold onto for now, just in case we need it later, Hazama thought to himself. He left the room and supervised the loading of the weapons.

One hour later he gently placed his hand on Reuben's shoulder and slowly shook her awake.

"The planes are in the air. May God forgive you. May God forgive us."

Reuben rose from the table, still feeling removed from herself, as if she were watching from a far corner.

"Let's load the other device into a truck and get the hell out of here," Hazama said. "A boat is waiting in Elath. Where it will take us I have no idea, but I have a feeling that we are two Jews who will have few friends in the land of Israel for a long time to come."

The high-flying Saudi AWACs plane detected two small jets flying low over the Negev, one heading almost due north, the other directly south. The information was radioed to Riyadh, where it was passed on to Saudi air defense command. Nothing further was done. Neither plane was headed for Saudi territory.

“Probably two Jews trying to save their hides,” the Saudi captain manning the air defense desk commented to the private who was pouring him a glass of hot mint tea. They both laughed, regretting more the loss of two planes to be added to the Royal Saudi Air Force than the escape of two Jews.

The AWACs plane tracked the northbound jet as it flew low off the Israeli coast, turning east before Beirut. The explosion over Damascus appeared as a bright glare, just over the horizon to the AWACs pilot stationed at thirty-five thousand feet.

The southbound Israeli pilot, who had not said a word during the debate between Reuben and Hazama, skimmed just feet over desert dunes until the Red Sea waves reached up for its belly, flying ten feet above the water’s surface, heading south. Rather than turning eastward to cross the Arabian Peninsula, he continued south, following Reuben’s whispered instructions.

Israel will need this weapon later, when we are ready again to fight for our land. Not yet though, Reuben had instructed him. One bomb is enough to use for now, she’d said. And there are still Jews in Ethiopia who will guard Israel’s treasure.

The pilot, the highest ranking Ethiopian Jew in the Israel Defense Forces, calculated how far his fuel would carry him and prepared his aircraft for the desert landing he’d practiced dozens of times in training.



### 3 – *Israel*

**The Tel Aviv bomb stunned the world. The Damascus bomb** disgusted it. An older generation that grew up hiding under their school desks from Russian atom bombs believed that era in history was, well, was history. Over with. The new generation that grew up on Bruce Willis movies in which terrorists had atom bombs but never got to use them believed the bombs weren't history, but at least were fiction. September 11 shook that belief, but two decades of waiting for the second terrorist shoe to drop pushed those fears into the realm of bad movies.

With the limited exception of American Jews, sympathy for Israel had dwindled after years of West Bank closings, bombings and counter-bombings, Israeli assassinations of Palestinian leaders, missiles launched from Gaza into Israel and missiles launched from Israel into Gaza. American sympathy dwindled to the point where most Americans were unsure who the good guys were when it came to Israelis and Palestinians. We have enough with our own problems, most Americans thought. By the time of the Tel Aviv bomb, the United States was wallowing in the national post-traumatic stress syndrome that followed the humiliating conclusion to the Iraq war when American troops marched away and sparked a renewed bloodbath between Sunnis and Shiites. The last thing Americans wanted was to deliver their sons and daughters into another Middle East caldron, especially one in which the lines between good guy and bad guy were not just blurred but, in most minds, were nonexistent.

The Tel Aviv bomb briefly changed that. Hollywood special effects – alien destructo-beams raking Washington – paled in comparison to satellite images of the smoking crater on the Mediterranean shore. The American aid machine that awakened to deal with earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and far-off civil wars geared up to once again shelter and feed millions of people with neither homes nor food.

The United States Sixth Fleet, with the restored battleship *New Jersey* and the supercarrier *Lyndon Johnson* on its first operational cruise, rounded up its sailors from the streets and brothels of Tripoli, cutting short

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