



## The Third Temple

*You are the secret agent of the people.*

*You are the eyes of the nation.*

*Whistleblower, tell us what you've seen.*

Mordechai Vanunu, 1987

**I**N SEPTEMBER 1986, A NUCLEAR physicist formerly employed at Israel's highly secret Dimona Nuclear Research Center spoke in private with reporters of the London-based *Sunday Times*.

The scientist—31-year old Mordechai Vanunu—revealed that despite its denials to the world, Israel had for decades operated a secret nuclear weapons development program, and in fact had already amassed a stockpile of about 100-200 nuclear bombs.

The story appeared that October under the incendiary headline “Revealed: The Secret of Israel's Nuclear Arsenal,” and soon afterward, Vanunu mysteriously disappeared.

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Mordechai Vanunu was born in Morocco in 1954, the second of 11 children of Orthodox Jews. His father owned a grocery store.

 Virtually from its inception in 1948, Israel had been laying the groundwork for a nuclear weapons program. Its secret nuclear weapons center in Dimona—constructed by and initially supplied with uranium by France—began operation in 1963, when Vanunu was only 8.

In 1963, Vanunu's family emigrated to Israel. After graduating high school with honors, he took a job as a court clerk.

 In 1966, Israel performed its first nuclear test underground in the Negev Desert. (The test would remain unconfirmed for 30 years.) By 1968, Israel had enough material for up to 13 bombs and was producing 3-5 more/year.

In 1971, Vanunu was drafted into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), where he would reach the rank of sergeant-major.

✨ In October 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in the Yom Kippur War. When IDF defenses crumbled, Israel seriously considered using its nuclear weapons, with Defense Minister Moshe Dayan declaring, "This is the end of the third temple." (The Biblical reference was a code for nuclear weapons.)

Vanunu saw action during the Yom Kippur War and was later honorably discharged. Unable to juggle both his studies and work, he returned to his parents' home and took up menial jobs in a bakery and a rest home. In 1976, he accepted a well-paying job at the Dimona Nuclear Research Center, becoming a plant technician in 1977.

✨ In 1979, a joint Israeli-South African nuclear weapons test secretly occurred in the Indian Ocean. By this time, Israel had amassed a stockpile of about 100 nuclear bombs.

✨ In 1981, in an effort to preserve its nuclear monopoly in the region, Israel attacked and destroyed Iraq's Gammuz-1 reactor in Osiraq.

By 1983, Vanunu was becoming critical of the Israeli government's policies with regard to Arabs, and began campaigning for equal rights for Arab-Israelis. In late 1985, he lost his job in a mass layoff, and after being reinstated, he smuggled a camera into work and covertly took 57 photographs of operations inside the secret facility.

After taking an extended break to travel, Vanunu settled in Australia, where he worked as a cabdriver. In September 1986, he flew to London to meet with the *Sunday Times*.

Shortly afterward, he was befriended by an Israeli Mossad agent in a classic 'honey trap' operation and persuaded to fly with her to Rome, where he was drugged by Mossad operatives and brought back to Israel.

On Oct. 5, 1986, after verifying his story with leading nuclear experts, London's *Sunday Times* published Vanunu's exposé.

🇮🇱 Israel adamantly denied the allegations, portraying Vanunu as a minor technician with very limited knowledge of the Dimona facility. After weeks of media speculation that Vanunu had been abducted, the Israeli government confirmed that it was holding him prisoner.

Vanunu's trial opened in secret on August 30, 1987, and the following day, it was announced that he had been nominated for the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize—a nomination that has been repeated annually ever since.

In March 1988, Vanunu was convicted and sentenced to 18 years in prison. (Charged with treason, he could have been executed, but likely due to media attention, prosecutors declined to seek the death penalty.)

His appeals rejected, Vanunu would serve out his entire 18 year sentence, the first 11 years in solitary confinement. Denied parole because of his refusal to swear not to speak out about the Dimona facility, his abduction, or his harsh treatment in prison, Vanunu was called by his lawyer "the most stubborn, principled and tough person I've ever met."

Vanunu was released from prison in April 2004. Now living in Israel, he has repeatedly stated that he will not be truly free until he is permitted to move abroad, which has been prevented by the conditions of his release.

🇮🇱 Israel continues to neither confirm nor deny its nuclear arsenal, which currently numbers 90-400 weapons, along with a 'triad' of delivery systems consisting of U.S.-built aircraft, German Dolphin-class submarines, and a large number of Jericho missiles.

Vanunu insists that he has no regrets about his sacrifice: "From the beginning it was clear for me that I did the right thing... I followed my conscience. I did it for peace."

His last social media post in mid-2024 was succinct, at once both hopeful and unrepentant: "See you in freedom." ■