**Israel and the Question of a Nuclear-Free Zone in the Middle East**

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• Back in 1980, Israel itself proposed the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. The establishment of a nuclear-free zone would have required a degree of recognition and peaceful relations between all the countries of the Middle East as a prerequisite to discussing its implementation.

• The Egyptians have effectively manipulated the Iranian issue in order to advance their long-term nuclear objectives vis-a-vis Israel, and have created a new linkage between Iran and Israel. It is Egypt's hope that the U.S. will feel compelled to pressure Israel on the nuclear issue in order to win Arab support for dealing with Iran.

• The Egyptian argument of linkage is completely baseless. Iran's drive for nuclear weapons emanates from its regional ambitions to become the main hegemonial power in the Middle East. Even if Israel did not exist, Iran would still be racing to develop nuclear weapons to further its own ambitions.

• The new director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukiya Amano, has sent letters to 151 states asking them how to implement an IAEA resolution demanding that Israel sign the NPT. The letter appeared to be highly discriminatory in that it singled out Israel, without mentioning the other states that have not signed the NPT, especially Pakistan and India.

• Israel has a strong case to make about the weaknesses of the NPT and why its entry into nuclear discussions should be put off until after a comprehensive peace is reached and proven to be reliable.

The Limits of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

At first glance, there appears to be very little that is new in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks about creating a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, which she discussed in her speech at the Review Conference for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), held at the UN on May 3, 2010.

Back in 1980, Israel itself proposed the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. The idea at the time was to present an alternative approach to signing the NPT, which had been concluded in 1968. The establishment of a nuclear-free zone would have required a degree of recognition and peaceful relations between all the countries of the Middle East as a prerequisite. This would have permitted direct negotiations between the parties to discuss its implementation. It was thought that the process itself of achieving a nuclear-free zone would also help to reduce regional hostility and the risks of conventional war as well.

Clearly the NPT alone has not prevented such conflicts. Iraq had been an NPT signatory and launched conventional wars by invading Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. Moreover, in the last ten years, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria repeatedly deceived the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and developed such programs, thereby contravening their obligations under the NPT, which they all had signed. Another signatory to the NPT, North Korea, even expelled IAEA inspectors and completed its secret nuclear weapons program, without any effective Western response.

Israel has been aware of the limits of the NPT for many years. It has recognized the danger that if it signed the NPT, along with many of the states that sought its elimination, then it would only increase the likelihood of its being attacked. The nuclear-free zone idea allowed Israel to take part in the global discussion about arms control without taking unacceptable risks. Throughout the 1990s, when a resolution for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East was raised in the UN General Assembly, it was adopted unanimously, with Israel's support.

The U.S. Joins Egypt to Push the Initiative

A critical aspect of the idea of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East was its timing: it was really a vision for the Middle East in the far distant future, much like the NPT's vision of a world without any nuclear weapons. It required a "fundamental and long-lasting transformation of relations between Israel and its neighbors."1 Yet Egypt and the Arab states have sought ways to bring the distant future into the present by initiating discussions about a nuclear-free zone now. In April 2010, the Egyptian ambassador to the UN, Maged Abdulaziz, sought to convene in New York a meeting of Middle Eastern states to discuss the creation of a nuclear-free zone. He circulated a paper calling on UN states to press Israel to sign the NPT and open its facilities for inspection. An Egyptian working paper reportedly called for Israeli disarmament "as soon as possible."

The Obama administration has reassured Israel that it will not support these moves. It has explicitly stated that its policy on the Israeli nuclear question remains unchanged. Yet Washington has begun to negotiate with Egypt in order to work out some sort of compromise in order to begin negotiations over the creation of a nuclear-free zone. A U.S. official involved in the talks told the Wall Street Journal that Washington's proposals "go beyond what the U.S. has been willing to do before" on the nuclear-free zone. In her UN address, Clinton spoke about the U.S. being "prepared to support practical measures to move us toward achieving that objective."2

Why is Washington even talking to Cairo about this and getting pulled into this discussion? The Egyptians have effectively manipulated the Iranian issue in order to advance their long-term nuclear objectives vis-a-vis Israel. For example, they have created a new linkage between Iran and Israel. The Egyptian ambassador at the UN, Abdulazziz, has been quoted in American newspapers as saying, "success in dealing with Iran will depend to a large extent on how successfully we deal with the establishment of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East."3

There are influential Americans who support this idea. For example, Bruce Reidel of the Saban Center at Brookings, who served on the National Security Council during the Clinton administration, said in 2009: "If you're really serious about a deal with Iran, Israel has to come out of the closet." It is Egypt's hope that the U.S. will feel compelled to pressure Israel on the nuclear issue in order to win Arab support for dealing with Iran.4

The Egyptian argument that there is linkage between Iran and Israel on the nuclear issue is, of course, completely baseless. Iran's drive for nuclear weapons emanates from its regional ambitions to become the main hegemonial power in the Middle East. It claims Bahrain, and sends weapons to Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Gaza. Even if Israel did not exist, Iran would still be racing to develop nuclear weapons to further its own ambitions.

The U.S. knows this but it faces a different problem. Should the Obama administration fail to stop Iran's drive for nuclear weapons, then Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey will all seek nuclear weapons of their own. Washington needs to bolster the NPT before this happens, and therefore is more open to Egyptian arguments than before.

As a result, Israel has to deal with a much more difficult diplomatic environment on nuclear diplomacy than it faced in the past. The new director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukiya Amano, has for the first time sent letters to 151 states asking them how to implement an IAEA resolution demanding that Israel sign the NPT. From an Israeli perspective, the letter appeared to be highly discriminatory in that it singled out Israel, without mentioning the other states that have not signed the NPT, especially Pakistan and India.5

Evaluating U.S. Policy

There is an Israeli perception that much of the international diplomatic activity on the Israeli nuclear file at the IAEA could have been more effectively blocked by Washington, as it was in the past.6 It should be remembered that the Obama administration has elevated the importance of nuclear non-proliferation in its overall foreign policy. Symbolizing his prioritization of the issue, President Barack Obama himself chaired a special meeting of the UN Security Council on September 24, 2009, when Resolution 1887 was adopted calling for ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Obama has spoken about renewing the "core bargain" of the NPT: nuclear weapons states must become more transparent about their capabilities and then reduce their nuclear stockpiles in order to provide an incentive to the non-nuclear weapons states to avoid crossing the nuclear threshold. For that reason, the administration disclosed last month that the U.S. possessed 5,113 nuclear warheads, and completed negotiations with the Russian Federation on new cuts in its nuclear stockpiles.

Whether the U.S. has 5,000 or 10,000 nuclear warheads in its possession will not alter Iranian determination to obtain nuclear weapons, for reasons alluded to earlier. Given the administration's approach to the non-proliferation issue, it becomes harder for U.S. diplomats to argue for Israel's special case in nuclear disarmament in comparison with what was said in the past.

Nonetheless, Israel has a strong case to make about the weaknesses of the NPT and why its entry into nuclear discussions should be put off until after a comprehensive peace is reached and proven to be reliable. But in present circumstances, Israel can no longer take for granted the degree of support it had in the past for its position.

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1. Ariel E. Levite, "Global Zero: An Israeli Vision of Realistic Idealism," Washington Quarterly, April 2010.

2. Jonathan Weisman, Jay Solomon, and Joe Lauria, "U.S. Revises Tack on Mideast Arms," Wall Street Journal, May 1, 2010.

3. Howard LaFranchi, "NPT: A Nuclear Weapons Free Middle East? Pressure on Israel Grows," Christian Science Monitor, May 4, 2010.

4. Eli Lake, "Secret U.S.-Israel Nuclear Accord in Jeopardy," Washington Times, May 6, 2009.

5. Ephraim Asculai, "The Limits of Wisdom?" Jerusalem Post, May 11, 2010.

6. Ronen Bergman, "A Nuclear Ambush for Israel," Yediot Ahronot (Hebrew), May 9, 2010.

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