

# Israel's Opposition to a Nuclear-Free Middle East: Rationale and Repercussions

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## **Abstract**

Israel began its nuclear weapons program in 1958. Ever since the state of Israel has pursued a consistent policy of nuclear ambiguity, and has amassed over time a huge nuclear arsenal. The United States, as Israel's strategic ally, and despite some initial misgivings in the early 1960s, has actively supported this policy of nuclear ambiguity. Faced with such a situation, other countries in the region have tried, since 1963, to work towards the establishment of a nuclear- and WMD-free Middle East, which has failed to materialize up to now. The present article looks into the development of the nexus between the Israeli nuclear ambiguity policy and regional efforts towards the establishment of a nuclear- and WMD-free Middle East. The article will discuss the rationale of the Israeli outlook and policy and their implications and repercussions for the countries in the region, and the region at large. The article argues that the Israeli nuclear policy and the categorical refusal to join the NPT have as a matter of fact served as a source of national security threat for others in the region, led some to seek to acquire nuclear capability, and forced arms race on a regional scale. The article concludes that issues of interest and concern to all the parties involved would, in the final analysis, have to be addressed within the context of and in relation to other issues, including in particular, the nexus between regional peace and the nuclear issue. The authors' final conclusion is that meaningful movement in such a direction will require and depend on the emergence of a realistic outlook on the part of all parties concerned.

**Keywords:** Israel, Nuclear Ambiguity Policy, NPT, Nuclear-Free Middle East, United States, Iran, Peace Process

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## **Introduction**

### **I- The Israeli Nuclear Programme**

As is widely known, Israel's nuclear weapons program began in 1958 with the construction of Dimona Nuclear Power Plant in the Negev Desert. Most non-proliferation experts, e.g., David Albright, estimate Israel's current nuclear arsenal between 100 to 200 warheads which have been built with the reprocessed plutonium at Dimona. Despite numerous revelations on its nuclear capability, including by a nuclear technician, Mordechai Vanunu (The Sunday Times, 1986), Israel has, as a matter of state policy, refused to confirm or reject the possession of nuclear weapons, hence pursuing a systematic policy of ambiguity.

Israel was expected to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 after it went into effect as of 12 June 1968. However, as it turned out, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August the same year delayed the Israeli decision and strengthened the position of the forces opposed to the Treaty. Subsequently it became clear that Israel had serious problems with the Treaty, but was extremely cautious in specifying them (Cohen, 2006: 449-453).

Despite a high-profile policy of objection to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the United States has, as a matter of fact, chosen to ignore Israeli efforts at towards developing [secret] WMD programs, including in the nuclear field. While the United States has pressured many countries to join the NPT, it has hardly – if at all – pursued the same approach and policy vis-a-vis Israel. The only practical exception to this long record of official



connivance goes back to the days of the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960s, which appeared to be concerned about the Israeli nuclear ambitions and its weapons program at the Dimona research site. The Israeli government, despite repeated earlier denials on the nuclear program and obvious reluctance to allow access for visits and inspection, ultimately relented. On 17 May 1962 two researchers from the American Atomic Energy Commission arrived in Israel and visited the Dimona site on 20 May. As it came to light later, while Israel had felt the need to allow the visits, but every effort had been made to ensure that the inspectors would not find anything implicating.

A second American visit to Dimona took place On 26 December 1962. It was so short that even made the American ambassador Walworth Barbour to complain: "It was limited to 45 minutes for no reason." The visit was intended to be presented as a voluntary Israeli gesture to the two American nuclear researchers who had been visiting Israel for a regular inspection of the Sourk reactor. The gesture was designed as a means to ameliorate U.S. pressures concerning Dimona (Ibid., 166-167).

Increasing the American pressure in 1963, Kennedy corresponded frequently with Ben Gurion and his successor Levi Eshkol, and called for a biennial visit according to international standards. He is reported to have even warned that if the United States' technical concerns regarding Israeli nuclear ambitions were not removed, the U.S. commitment to the protection of Israel would be seriously jeopardized. Kennedy's warnings seem to have convinced the Israeli leaders to allow further visits, which, in any event, did not amount to any admission. According to Avner Cohen in his detailed study of the Israeli nuclear program, after Levi Eshkol received Kennedy's letter of July 1963, he is reported to have said to his colleagues: "What do I fear? Kennedy's envoy can come and will be told that he can visit anywhere." He goes on to add that if the envoy wants to "open something," in which case Manes Pratt (Director of



Dimona facilities) will tell him: “not there”! (Ibid., 252).

American authorities remained suspicious of the Israeli nuclear program, but the Israeli trick appeared to be working; neither Kennedy nor Johnson would have seriously considered cutting off the U.S. support for Israel. Consequently, as Cohen has explained, Israelis were able to determine the terms and conditions for American visits. The Johnson Administration was not willing to react harshly to the Israeli severe restrictions and feared that they might end these arrangements. Contrary to Kennedy’s threats that Israel’s infringement of the agreements could endanger U.S. commitment to Israel’s security, Johnson did not want to risk a crisis between the two countries on this issue. Warren Bass writes that instead of six-month visits agreed previously, Johnson settled down for annual visits. When the then director of CIA Richard Helms went to the White House in 1968 to inform Johnson that the CIA had reached the conclusion that Israel had acquired nuclear capability, Johnson told him to ensure that the evidence would not be disclosed to anyone else including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (Mersheimer and Walt, 2007).

According to the well-known investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, Johnson’s intention in making such a statement to the CIA director - and his intelligence team - was clear; he simply decided to ignore what the CIA had told him, for if he accepted receiving the information, he had to act on it, one way or another. And in 1968, the U.S. president did not intend to do anything to stop the development of the Israeli bomb (Hersh, 1991: 188-189).

It is noteworthy that the Johnson Administration tried to “bribe” Israel into signing the NPT in exchange for the sale of 50 F-4 Phantoms. But following a deadlock in negotiations, Johnson gave up linking the two issues together, and instead decided to go ahead with the Phantoms’ deal without any conditions. Cohen believes that at the end of the negotiations, then U.S. Defense Undersecretary Paul Warnke was convinced that Israel had already possessed nuclear



weapons (Cohen, 2006: 473-479). As far as it is publicly known, it appears that this was the last instance of the U.S. pressure on Israel to join the NPT, which it has neither signed nor ratified.

## II- Nuclear Free-Zone in the Middle East

Calls for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East region go back to 1963. At the 17<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1963, Egypt for the first time proposed the establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East, which lay dormant for a decade. In 1974, at the 29<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly, a resolution on the same proposal, then spearheaded by Iran and supported by a wide range of countries, was adopted with 138 votes in favor. Israel and Burma [Myanmar] abstained. Since 1980, the resolution under the same title has been adopted at every session of the Assembly. In 1990, Egypt further proposed to extend the original concept to include Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as well. In 1991, the UN Security Council endorsed the idea of nuclear weapons and WMD free zone. A resolution adopted at the NPT Review and Extension Conference in May 1995 called for the creation of WMD-free zone in the Middle East (Kadry Said, 2010). A year later, a UN General Assembly resolution also called for the establishment of a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Moreover, the Arab states members of the Governing Council of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have on various occasions stressed on the imperative of the application of IAEA's safeguards and creation of a nuclear weapons free Middle East. In more recent years they have also expressed dissatisfaction with the Agency's use of double standards in criticizing Iran's nuclear program and ignoring Israel's (Pincus, 2005: 24). According to a communiqué issued by the foreign ministers of the Arab League in early March 2008, it was declared that if Israel admitted to having nuclear weapons, they would call on the UN Security Council to pressure Israel to destroy its nuclear arsenal and



bring its other atomic installation under international inspection. The communiqué went on to add that “If this did not happen, Arab countries would leave the treaty and not sign any new one until Israel itself joined.” (The Associated Press, 2008)

The question of Israel’s nuclear capability has in recent years received increasing international attention, as reflected, among others, in a call by the IAEA general conference in September 2009 on Israel to open its nuclear facilities to the Agency's inspection and join the NPT. Israel, in line with its traditional policy, rejected the call. In a statement at the preparatory session of the NPT Review Conference (2010), held in May 2009, the U.S. representative reiterated the consistent policy of supporting the adherence of all states to the NPT, thus placing Israel – implicitly though - among the four states that have refused to join the Treaty. Israel, in response, rejected the offer to join the NPT as valueless and called into question the very value and effect of the Treaty. The American statement appears to represent some sort of a departure from the earlier long tradition of secret U.S.-Israel understanding in which the United States prevented international investigation of the Israeli nuclear weapons program (Lake, 2009: 1).

#### *Arab Reaction to Nuclear Israel*

As already indicated, the Arab countries, all parties to the NPT, have been concerned with the Israeli nuclear program for quite a long time and paid special attention to Israel's failure to join the NPT. The Arab League has even threatened to withdraw from the NPT if Israel admits that it has nuclear weapons. Pursuing a consistent policy of ambiguity on its nuclear arsenal, Israel has declared, on various occasions, that it would not be the first country to deploy nuclear weapons in the region. The December 2006 statement by the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in the interview with the German Television appeared to be a departure from the official policy of ambiguity; his words were widely interpreted to be an admission of



possession of nuclear weapons. Later, apparently under domestic political pressure, he retracted his earlier allusion and accused others of misinterpretation of his words.

The Arab support for the proposal of the establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East should also be seen within the specific context of their serious concern with the Israeli nuclear weapons. Whereas there is no confirmed report that Arab countries are seeking nuclear weapons, indications are that some Arab countries have expressed their interest in starting a peaceful nuclear program with foreign help. In the course of negotiations on creating a nuclear-free Middle East, the Arab nations have consistently argued that Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is the main cause of the proliferation of such weapons in the region. Furthermore, in their view, the United States has pursued a discriminatory policy in this regard *via-a-vis* Arabs and Iran on the one hand, and Israel on the other. Some of the Arab nations have been critical of the U.S high-profile policy of pressure on Iran for its nuclear program and simultaneous purposeful connivance of Israel's nuclear capability and non-adherence to NPT. Mohamed ElBaradei, former Director-General of the IAEA, is on record to have expressed the concern that Israel's failure to come forth on its nuclear arsenal provides an impetus for other countries in the region to arm themselves with equal or similar weapons capability (Pincus, 2005: 24). Notwithstanding all international concerns and declarations, the government of Israel has chosen to continue its policy of ambiguity, which, in the words of Ariel Sharon, former Prime Minister, has been a valuable policy and would continue (Pincus, 2005: 24).

It is interesting to note that while Arab countries, including Egypt, have been trying to draw international attention to the Israeli nuclear capability and the threats to the region there from, Israel has instead tried to focus its attention on the urgency of peace and democracy in the region. Benjamin Netanyahu, then Prime Minister, stated in 1996 that sustained peace is possible only between



democracies and as long as the region has not become democratic, Israel is forced to preserve its “strategic deterrence.” Ehud Barak, who succeeded Netanyahu, also believed that Israel needed to keep its nuclear option for an indefinite period of time (Kadry Said, 2010). It appears that Israelis across the board, despite disagreements on other policy issues, tend to consider the nuclear option essential for the Israeli security, and not disposed to waiving it until a comprehensive peace accord is achieved in the region. The Arabs, to the contrary and needless to say, do not share this understanding and view; they look at and perceive the Israeli nuclear capability as a source of threat and intimidation and, of course, for use in a possible future preemptive strike (Ibid.). Moreover, Israel has been trying to link all major regional issues together and predicate any possible change in its [nuclear] policy on progress in the peace process. The United States, as Israel’s strategic ally, also happens to share the same outlook and regard security issues and arms control closely related to the attainment of peace in the Middle East – as an important American strategic objective in the region (Maleki, 2007: 48-50).

As for the idea of a nuclear-free Middle East, Israeli officials tend to present a generally positive posture; while they welcome the idea in general and consider it a subject that merits to be discussed, they nonetheless link it to the bigger question of peace in the region. Israeli arguments on this issue have focused, among others, on the fact that their “small country” is surrounded by 22 Arab countries - most of whom are hostile to Israel. The Israeli outlook, as already mentioned, has placed central emphasis on the peculiarly deterrent aspect of their capability against possible military attacks by “much larger” neighboring states, with particular emphasis on Iran – which does not recognize Israel as a state. Considering Iran as an irreplaceable enemy, Israelis have elevated in their official propaganda Iran's acquisition of nuclear capability as an “existential threat.” The U.S. official ambivalence in this regard has helped the Israeli position; while Washington supports in principle the idea of a nuclear-free





Middle East, but, as already discussed, has been unwilling to pressure Tel Aviv to abandon its policy of nuclear ambiguity and join others in the region – most notably, Iran, Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia - for a meaningful collective endeavor towards this objective. The report a few years back by the powerful and influential Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Pincus, 2005: 24) represents the existence of political voices supporting the establishment of nuclear-free zones, including in the Middle East. The report called, inter alia, on the United States and other nuclear powers to heighten their efforts towards a chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons- free Middle East. Emphasizing the intensified state of conflict and rivalry in the region at the time, the report was quite explicit in ascribing the situation to Israel's ambiguous nuclear position as well as to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict.

#### ***Recent Criticisms of Israeli Nuclear Program***

The preparatory process for the NPT Review Conference (2010) provided another propitious context for intensified criticism of Israel's nuclear policy and more forceful demands for adherence to the NPT. These criticisms, which culminated in the NPT Review Conference (June 2010, New York) have also helped to accord a higher profile to the calls at the IAEA General Conference for a review of Israel's nuclear program. An overview of recent developments reflects the extent and intensity of such criticisms.

#### **1- Washington Nuclear Security Summit (2010)**

The Nuclear Security Summit in Washington D. C. (12-13 April 2010) was organized and held with the stated objective of exploring the ways and means to increase the safety of nuclear material in order to preclude nuclear terrorism. The conference' agenda was focused on "safety of nuclear material and equipment and prevention of their transfer to terrorists." High-level delegations from 46 countries, inclusive of 38 heads of state, along with the representatives of the



United Nations, European Union, and the IAEA, attended the conference. The Summit was held shortly after the new START had been signed by the U.S. and Russian Presidents in Prague in early April.

American authorities described the Washington Nuclear Security Summit as one of the most important gatherings of heads of states during the preceding decades. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, apparently concerned about the possible discussions on Israeli nuclear program, in particular demands from certain quarters for adherence to the NPT, chose to cancel his plan to attend the Summit. It had been indicated earlier that Turkey and Egypt intended to take advantage of the opportunity at the Summit in order to exert pressure on Israel to join the NPT, even though it had also been reported that American authorities had assured Israelis that they would prevent such a discussion at the Summit (Walker, 2010). At the conclusion of the Summit, a non-binding statement was issued according to which the participants described nuclear terrorism as “one of the most challenging threats to international security.”

## **2- Tehran International Conference on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation**

A few days after the Nuclear Summit in Washington, D. C., the “International Conference on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation: World Security without Weapons of Mass Destruction” was held in Tehran on 17-18 April 2010. The major theme of the conference, generally described in the international press as a rival initiative to the Washington Summit, was “nuclear energy for all and nuclear weapons for no one.” At the opening session of the conference, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for tougher measures in comparison with the steps proposed in the Washington Nuclear Security Summit towards elimination of nuclear weapons. In the run-up to the NPT Review Conference, the Tehran gathering was intended to highlight Iran's position on nuclear weapons, with particular emphasis on the



imperative of the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

The conference discussed a range of issues such as challenges to disarmament, international obligations of states to disarmament and non-proliferation, the consequences of continued existence of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD), as well as the practical steps to materialize disarmament. Israel's nuclear program also received attention at the conference. Many participants in the conference, including the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and a number of Arab foreign ministers, not to mention Iranian officials, while criticizing the age-old policy of nuclear ambiguity, called on Israel to join the NPT.

The gathering also had in mind to further highlight, at the level of and through an international conference, Iran's position on nuclear weapons in general and, at a more specific level, on Iran's nuclear dossier. The gathering served to provide Iranians with the opportunity to share with a large number of foreign delegations, mostly from developing and non-aligned countries, the details of the Iranian case intended to refute the allegations against the nuclear activities which Iran has systematically emphasized pursue solely peaceful purposes. As is widely known, all IAEA reports since 2003 have failed to implicate Iran for any diversion in its nuclear and enrichment activities to the military track (Westall, 2009); they have kept raising questions and doubts in successive IAEA reports, both under ElBaradei and now under Yukio Amano, as to the possibility of a military aspect in these activities which has not come to light. The same concern was repeated in the Agency's report for the June 2010 meeting of the Board of Governors, which in the words of Amano, is an issue to be clarified, and in his view, through increased cooperation and transparency on the part of Iran.

### **3- NPT Review Conference (2010)**

The NPT Review Conference (2010), held every five year, took place at the UN Headquarters in New York from 3-28 May 2010. The



conference agenda included such issues as nuclear disarmament involving particular practical measures; nuclear non-proliferation including the promotion and enhancement of safeguards; actions for the development of peaceful use of nuclear energy; safety and security; regional disarmament and non-proliferation; implementation of Resolution 1995 regarding the Middle East; actions concerning withdrawal from the treaty; and measures for enhancing the review process.. The 2005 Review Conference ended without agreement on final document, which is generally attributed major disagreements between the parties concerned three major issues - Iran's nuclear program;, Egyptian focus on Israel's nuclear program; and implementation of the NPT Resolution 1995 with respect to the WMD-free Middle East.

The 2010 Conference opened with the statements of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and IAEA Director –General Yukio Amano. Both of them called for expanded use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and cooperation in technical fields, and disarmament and non-proliferation. Having started his statement with a reference to the nuclear tragedy in Hiroshima, Ban Ki-Moon went on to call for further actions by the nuclear weapons states towards disarmament, including measures respecting the universality of NPT, development of framework legal instrument complementing the NPT, and move towards a nuclear-free Middle East, as well as a host of other important regional issues. Yukia Amano, for his part,

Also emphasized the necessity of more intensive efforts towards the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East..

A wide range of representatives from the developing countries and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), most notably, Iran's Mahmood Ahmadinejad, the only head of state at the ministerial conference, underlined the necessity of halting cooperation with the states outside the NPT and expressed strong support for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Ahmadinejad also proposed a set of ideas for nuclear disarmament on a global scale



– inclusive of the same themes emphasized by the fellow NAM delegates.

The final document of the Conference, arrived at after weeks of intense negotiations and routine diplomatic give and take, represented a major difference with the situation five years earlier. This time around, the Review Conference managed to produce a consensus agreement – quite a significant achievement in itself when compared with the 2005 conference. The final document, as expected, covered a wide range of issues, but what is of strict relevance to the discussions at hand, the Conference called for organizing an international conference on the nuclear-free Middle East – which as mentioned earlier, has been long pursued by Arab states in general, and Egypt and Iran in particular. Within this context, the document underlined the importance of implementing the NPT 1995 Resolution concerning the Middle East, considered to have positive impact on the Middle East peace process, and be in turn affected positively by progress in that process. Towards this end, the document persuaded all regional states to engage in constructive actions in order to actualize the goals of the 1995 resolution on the establishment of a WMD-free Middle East. The document also contained a specific provision calling on Israel to sign the NPT and open its nuclear facilities to international inspection.

In another part of the final document it was stipulated in very clear terms that the establishment of nuclear-free zones in line with the free consent of the regional nations concerned would contribute to regional peace and security, enhance nuclear non-proliferation regime, and actualize nuclear disarmament objectives. Emphasis in the document on the creation of such a zone, particularly in the Middle East, is cited as an example to this end. Recalling the universal character of the NPT, the final document calls on all non-party states, including Israel, to immediately and unconditionally join the Treaty and commit themselves to the full elimination of all nuclear weapons. Moreover, the document has requested the states to avoid any acts



that might adversely affect the universality of the Treaty.

While the UN membership, despite differing particular concerns with various provisions of the final document, chose to join the hard-won consensus in New York, Israel was the only country to break ranks and reject the document provisions. Israel openly rejected adherence to the NPT, including placing its nuclear facilities under UN inspection. Moreover, the Israeli authorities went on to declare that they did not feel bound to implement decisions made by the Conference – a quite unacceptable conduct vis-a-vis a UN consensus document. Describing the final document of the Review Conference as hypocritical, Israel claimed that the document fails to take into account the Middle East realities and the threat the world and the region are faced with – an allusion apparently to Iran and its nuclear program, which in the Israeli view, poses an “existential threat” (Somfalvi, 2010) to the only “democracy” in the region. It should be added, though that lack of any reference to the Iranian nuclear situation in the final document came as a result of Iran’s full-fledged participation in and intense negotiations at the Conference and, more importantly, the shrewd political decision to join the consensus, despite a number of serious reservations – a major difference with the 2005 Conference.

As indicated in an earlier part of the article, the outlook and positions of Israel and its detractors in the Middle East – both Arabs and Iran – are diametrically opposed. Israel, a proven nuclear power, has an established record of attacking nuclear facilities of other countries in the region, beginning with the attack on Iraqi Osirak reactor in 1981 and a similar operation, although on a smaller scale on the Syrian facilities in 2007. Moreover, it is already a number of years that Israel has been threatening full-scale military action against the Iranian nuclear facilities, and has been exhorting the American to do so unilaterally or in collusion with Israel. While pursuing such an active hostile military approach and threatening the national security of other states in the region, Israeli authorities continue to blame



other countries in the region for the existence of WMD in the Middle East. In their rather confounding line of argument, the problem is not related to Israel as a non-NPT member with proven nuclear capability but with the countries who are parties to the NPT and yet violate it blatantly – as claimed by Israel; Iraq under Saddam, Libya (prior to 2004 and the dismantlement of its facilities), Syria (prior to 2007), and Iran. Coming to the aid of Israel, the U.S. has also expressed dissatisfaction with the efforts made at singling out Israel for its nuclear program and capability. Almost similar to the Israeli argument, the Americans also tend to link progress towards a WMD-free Middle East to progress, on the one hand, in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and on the other, on suspension of uranium enrichment in Iran. Notwithstanding recent expressions of strong American support for the Israeli position, including by Barack Obama in the wake of the 2010 Review Conference promising to stand by Israel in all circumstances (Nasr, 2010), the IAEA Governing Council decision at the June 2010 session to place the question of Israel's nuclear capabilities on the agenda - for the first time, as a matter of fact – is indeed a welcome development. Given the bigger picture and the cumulative weight of the proponents and opponents of the discussion of the issue at IAEA, one might expect that the discussion may take some time to bear fruit.

### **Why Israel Refuses to Join the NPT**

Israel's consistent policy over the past few decades, despite continuous and at times quite serious mounting pressures, in the region and at the international level, to refuse joining the NPT has been found unacceptable, both to the region at large and to the international community. The internationally-unacceptable refusal, however, has enjoyed the solid support of the U.S. throughout the period. Israel, on her part, has tried to link its nuclear policy of ambiguity to what it has always considered “existential threat” to its very existence; a “small country” surrounded by hostile Arab nations,



some of whom do not even have political-diplomatic relation with the Jewish State, and also the Islamic Republic of Iran, though not an Arab country, but a large country with an active anti-Zionist platform and strong support for the Palestinian cause and Islamic solidarity. As argued by Israelis, normalization of relations with a number of Arab states since late 1970s [Camp David Accord], including neighboring Egypt and Jordan and some in North Africa as well as in the Persian Gulf, has not fundamentally changed their security environment. Given what has been viewed as a dangerous and threatening external security environment, the Israeli leaders have tended to view nuclear deterrence a central component of their overall defense-military capability.

Considering that the still on-going nuclear policy will not be changed under the circumstances of external tension and conflict with the neighboring countries – societies - Israelis appear to regard deterrence – nuclear deterrence, to be specific -- as indispensable for compensating for the Jewish State's small size, lack of strategic depth, structural imbalance in the region, and vulnerability to conventional and non-conventional attacks. As analyzed by Steinberg, failure in achieving comprehensive peace with the Palestinians and the Arab world counts for Israel's continued insistence on this approach and policy – which has in fact affected the country's strategic culture (Steinberg, 1997). The strong propensity on the part of the Israeli decision-makers, across the political-ideological spectrum, to accumulate enormous retaliation capability as an effective deterrence against possible new attacks can be viewed as a consequence of this perpetual sense of fear and siege mentality.

While it can be ascertained that there has been partial progress in the state of relations between Israel and its neighbors – and even to some degree with Palestinians – which would have necessitated a less-stringent policy on the part of Israel, insistence on an age-old immutable policy by the Israeli leaders has indeed been baffling – and certainly counter-productive. Back in February 1995, even after the





Oslo agreements, Simon Peres emphasized the role and importance of deterrence in the following words: "The reason why Israel does not sign the NPT is that Israel is the only country in the world whose existence is constantly threatened by other countries. In my view, this threat comes mainly from Iran, Iraq and to some degree from Libya. Their fear is considered as deterrence. In addition, the states that have signed the NPT do not respect their signatures at all. I mean Iran and Iraq, which have signed it. Whom do they want to deceive?" (Nuclear Proliferation, 1995). Ehud Barak, also Prime Minister of Israel, has been equally open and categorical in this regard: "In the absence of reliable regional peace settlement, Israeli nuclear policy has not changed and will not and cannot change, because this policy is a fundamental issue for the survival of the Jewish State that can affect future generations of Israel." (Renn, 1995: 102)

Moreover, Israeli authorities believe that the existing international order consisting, *inter alia*, of the NPT regime and its inspection system/mechanisms, undermine the concept of regional security structures and nuclear arms control in the Middle East (Steinberg, 1997). From their point of view, development of regional security has to be based on progress in achieving regional peace as well as on the establishment of vast security networks and confidence-building structures and measures, and more importantly, as long as such conditions are not provided, Israel's policy of maintaining nuclear ambiguity will continue (Steinberg, 1996: 17-29).

The reality, however, is that Israel's insistence on maintaining military superiority, including through the development and strengthening of its non-conventional capabilities and continued nuclear ambiguity policy, supposedly as a deterrent posture and policy, has been used to camouflage its intractable and recalcitrant approach to the question of peace process. The U.S. full concurrence with and unflinching support of this approach and policy has in fact facilitated – and justified – the Israeli resort, as clearly reflected in the State Department's frequent pronouncements linking the issue of



Israel's nuclear weapons to the question of comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

### **Regional Repercussions of the Israeli Policy**

Given the long history of conflict and war in the Middle East, especially the continuing Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the one hand, and the proliferation of WMD particularly nuclear arms in the region on the other, there appears to be increasing serious concern in the area as to the possibility of the deployment of such weapons in the future (Amini, 2003). Extensive use of chemical weapons in the past in the region, most notably by Iraq in the course of the 8-year Iran-Iraq War, both against Iranians as well as Iraqi Kurds, have in fact provided an alarming background to such concerns and fears (Barletta and Jorgensen, 1999). Israel's possession of nuclear arsenal in a traditionally conflict-ridden Middle East, made worse due to its non-adherence to the NPT and non-compliance with its safeguards regime, have all but lent credence to and further heightened such security concerns. The net result has been that serious security concerns on the part of the Israeli neighbors have served to deepen their doubts and sense of insecurity and uncertainty, leading, among others, to the perpetuation of a state of tension and the consequent stalemate in the negotiations towards peace (Amini, 2003).

It has been argued, by analysts of various persuasions, that the main factor leading Israel to pursue a policy of nuclear ambiguity, inclusive of the assertion that it will not be the first country to deploy nuclear weapons in the region, has been that pursuit of an explicit nuclear deterrence policy on the part of Israel would have encouraged an open nuclear arms race in the Middle East region. While such a policy might have succeeded in not openly provoking regional states to seek and acquire nuclear weapons, it has, nonetheless, caused enough doubts and concerns in the region encourage some in the region to ponder such a course of action. The acquisition of nuclear capability by India and Pakistan - out of sheer rivalry between the two



neighboring states who have engaged in three devastating wars since their independence in 1947 and who continue to defy joining the NPT – has certainly added to the sense of insecurity throughout the whole region. The possession of nuclear weapons by these two countries in the sub-continent; that is, to the east of the Middle East, and Israel on its western flank, has as a matter of fact persuaded a number of countries, in a position to do so, to move in the direction of seeking nuclear capability, whether for peaceful purposes or otherwise.

The case of Iraq's efforts in the 1970s to acquire nuclear weapons is already part of history, especially in light of Israel's devastating preemptive attack in June 1981 on Osirak nuclear reactor (Hersh, 1991: 188-189). Equally so has been the case of Libyan pursuit of the development of WMD and ballistic missiles also dating back to the early 1970s, which in addition to Colonel Ghaddafi's political-military ambitions in Africa and the Arab world, had an unmistakable anti-Israeli dimension. As is fully known, the process of Libyan-Western rapprochement earlier in the decade appears to have convinced the Libyans to waive in December 2003 its WMD program in its entirety (NTI: Research Library: Country Profiles; Libya, 2010). The reported Israeli attack in early September 2007 on Syrian nuclear facilities – albeit rejected publicly by Syria – points, on the one hand, to the interest and effort on the Syrian part to acquire nuclear capability, and simultaneously on the other, to Israel's determination to prevent its Arab neighbors from moving in that direction (Kessler, 2007: 12).

As is already widely known, a number of other countries in the region also appear to have been thinking about developing nuclear capability in the face of and a result of the Israeli nuclear arsenal, and the intrinsic threats involved. Among the Arab countries, Egypt, an important player with traditional claim on Arab leadership and still a major power to counterbalance Israel, is known to have endeavored to acquire WMD (Amini, 2003), including chemical weapons as far back as 1960s (Herby, 1992: 21-22) and a relatively advanced missile



program in more recent years. As discussed earlier, Egypt has also been quite active in promoting the idea of a WMD-free Middle East, and has been openly critical of Israel's nuclear weapons program. It is of note that Egypt has linked its refusal to adhere to such arms control agreements as the Chemical Weapons Convention and the NPT to the Israeli situation; arguing that it will not join the Chemical Weapons Convention as long as questions on Israeli nuclear weapons are not answered (NTI: Research Library: Country Profiles; Egypt, 2009). Saudi Arabia, another major Arab country with huge oil revenues, along with some of the smaller oil sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf, while supporting the idea of a nuclear-free Middle East, have shown interest in recent years in acquiring nuclear capability, which, as argued by analysts, appear to reflect the dual concern about the Israeli nuclear weapons and Iran's still unfolding and disputed nuclear program (MacAskill and Traynor, 2003).

Turkey, not an Arab country and traditionally pursuing a non-hostile approach and policy towards Israel, has also been developing its nuclear research program. It is reported to be planning the construction of three nuclear power plants by 2015. While a NATO member and enjoying its military-deterrent cover and support, Turkey has shown keen interest in acquiring advanced ballistic missiles – which could reflect its new nuanced foreign policy as well as the changing circumstances in the bigger region surrounding it (NTI: Research Library: Country Profiles; Turkey, 2009).

And finally, Iran, a non-Arab country whose record of seeking nuclear capability goes back to the 1970s under the Shah, and whose current and on-going efforts in this field have proved quite contentious, has also been an advocate of a nuclear-free Middle East. While a party to the NPT and its safeguards regime, Iran has been developing its nuclear program for peaceful purposes during the past two decades, including full enrichment cycle (low-enriched uranium), which the Western countries accuse of possible military orientation (NTI: Research Library: Country Profiles; Iran, 2010). This seemingly



irresolvable dichotomy, as is fully known, has led to a collision course with the Western powers [U.S. and EU], first at the IAEA and subsequently at the UN Security Council. The reported failure in the latest round of negotiations between Iran and 5+1 in Istanbul, Turkey, in late January 2011 clearly points to the wide gap between the respective demands of the two sides. On the one hand, the Western powers demand for suspension of all enrichment activities as a precondition for meaningful negotiations, and on the other, Iranians demand the recognition of Iran's right to enrichment along with the removal of security Council sanctions.

The foregoing brief review of the policies pursued by a number of countries in the Middle East with regard to seeking nuclear capability demonstrate that a host of reasons – national security concerns, regional policies, trans-regional and international pressures, and also domestic politics and commercial and economic incentives – are at work.. It should be emphasized, though, that the Israeli nuclear arsenal and its insistence on maintaining nuclear ambiguity and categorical refusal to join the NPT, despite consistent international calls to the contrary, have played the most significant role in threatening the region with its nuclear “Damocles Sword.” The outcome of such a situation has been the perpetuation of a state of mutual distrust and consequent tension (Amini, 2003) and also a gradual and yet increasing tendency of the countries in the region to turn towards seeking for nuclear capability, with dangerous potentials for intensified arms race in the region – and possible ultimate conflagration.

### **Conclusions**

This article has looked into Israel's nuclear ambiguity policy and discussed its rationale and repercussions. It has traced the development of the Israeli approach and policy since its inception in the 1950s. The role of the U.S. connivance at times and concurrence with and active support at other times of this Israeli policy has also been discussed.



As argued in the article, Israel's development of nuclear capability at Dimona facilities and acquisition of a huge nuclear arsenal over time has led other countries in the region to call on Israel to join the NPT and place its facilities under the IAEA safeguards regime, which has been consistently rejected up to this very moment. Having faced with such an Israeli rejection – and concomitant American support – countries in the region have proposed the establishment of a nuclear-free Middle East, which dates back to early 1960s and pursued more seriously since 1974. This proposal which has received the support of the UN General Assembly resolution since 1974 has, however, failed to materialize, as has been the case in a number of other regions of the world. The rather quizzical aspect about this long overdue failure in the region is that the very idea of a nuclear-free Middle East, and its closely-related proposal of a WMD-free Middle East, appear to enjoy the support of all involved actors - both regional and supra-regional. Even Israel has gone so far as to endorse the ideas, in principle, even if linked to the seemingly illusive objective of comprehensive peace in the Middle East. Israel's most recent pronouncement in May 2010 on linking participation in negotiations on a nuclear-free Middle East and adherence to NPT to the achievement of sustained peace with its neighbors is clearly indicative of the thrust of the not-so-hidden Israeli strategic policy in this regard.

As discussed, deadlock in the negotiations within the UN framework on the nuclear- and WMD-free Middle East, and the serious national security threats felt by other states in the region from Israel's nuclear arsenal and the categorical refusal to join the NPT, have in fact led a number of other countries in the region to undertake efforts towards acquiring nuclear capability. Israel's two pre-emptive attacks on nuclear facilities in the region – Osirak in Iraq in 1981 and Syrian facilities in 2007 – along with frequent and ongoing threats of military action against Iranian developing nuclear facilities, clearly point to Israeli determination to maintain its unique nuclear position in the area. Even if considered as the final guarantor



of Israel's physical survival as a small state without strategic depth and less-than-friendly relations with the neighboring states, Israel's nuclear arsenal has come to be viewed by its neighbors and in the Greater Middle East as an element of military-strategic superiority and hence, intrinsically threatening and destabilizing in every sense. The Israeli nuclear posture and policy have, among others, forced a costly arms race in the region surrounding it and further dimmed the prospects for peace and tranquility in the area.

Concluding on a positive note despite what appears to be quite a gloomy current picture, the authors tend to believe that in spite of fundamental differences in the positions, interests, outlooks, and priorities of the parties concerned, including in particular on the nuclear and arms control issues, movement towards reaching some form of a compromise at the regional level is still possible. The overall contours of such a regional arrangement requires that all states in the region move in the direction of placing all questions on the table with the implicit understanding that the questions involved; that is, genuine concerns of all the parties engaged in the process, cannot be addressed in a vacuum, independently, or on their own merits as perceived or viewed by each party or group of parties. Rather, all issues would have to be addressed within the context of and in relation to other issues, including in particular, the nexus between regional peace and the nuclear issue. The authors' final conclusion is that meaningful movement in the Greater Middle East in such a direction will, in the final analysis, require and depend on the emergence of a realistic outlook on the part of all parties concerned.

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