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Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: The Israeli perspective

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Executive Summary

Nuclear weaponry and the debate about non-proliferation continue to be a central driving force in international affairs. Israel's drive for nuclear capacity, however, has never been about status or regional hegemony. It has been, rather, a response to a genuine, even if at times exaggerated, existential anxiety. Since Ben-Gurion, the nuclear option was Israel's "weapon of last resort" and a vital strategic equalizer, permitting "science" to give Israel what nature had deprived it of—"numbers".

"Opacity" & Past Management

Israel's behaviour as a widely recognized nuclear weapons state has been distinct from other nuclear powers. While others have publicly declared their nuclear status, Israel has endorsed a policy of "nuclear opacity" based on the formula that it "will not be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East". The United States was a close partner in shaping this policy on condition that Israel committed itself to keeping its bomb "in the basement", meaning non-testing and non-declaration.

Furthermore, Israel was always ready to adhere to the norms of global non-proliferation and would join pertinent global treaties provided these did not compromise its overall nuclear policy. Therefore, consistent with its commitment to opacity, it signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

But, Israel never hid its disdain for the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), for joining such a treaty, especially if it includes verification mechanisms, would undermine beyond redemption its policy of opacity, and indeed its entire national security strategy. The Israeli claim is that those who want Israel to join the FMCT are in fact trying to circumvent its refusal to join the NPT by applying to her a comprehensive safeguards regime through a different treaty. Israel's claim is that the FMCT would at the present moment even be counterproductive to non-proliferation, because it will give states like Iran the ultimate legitimacy to produce fissile material, ostensibly for peaceful purposes, since the treaty would only ban fissile material production for weapons purposes.

President Obama has pledged in his Prague speech "to seek a new treaty that

verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in nuclear weapons". Such a treaty would be the first step toward limiting the Israeli nuclear program, and Israel is not expected to make the president's life easy on that score.

But nor would Mr. Obama be as complacent as his predecessors. If Prime Minister Netanyahu would not move as expected on the peace front, he would expose Israel to very serious pressure over the nuclear issue. For Israel cannot expect to have the best of all worlds, condition nuclear disarmament on a comprehensive peace while at the same time conducting a policy aimed at stalling the peace process. The president would not ask Israel to disarm, but he definitely might ask her to freeze the production of fissile material if only as a way of enhancing the credibility of his disarmament agenda and as an incentive to Egypt and Saudi Arabia not to follow the Iranian example.

Israel never really trusted the global instruments of non-proliferation. Its focus has been on inter-state and regional relations and on regional arms control arrangements, not on global treaties, as the basis for policy in the non-conventional domain.

Israel's official policy favours the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East (WMDFZ). Its conditions are, however, that this is wholly dependent on a regional comprehensive peace. Unlike the Arab position that a WMDFZ should be established prior to a comprehensive peace settlement, for Israel peace comes first, and denuclearization last. Unfortunately, today, setting up a regional arms control dialogue may be too late to convince Iran to desist from developing nuclear weapons. Nor is Israel's stance in favour of regional arms control talks vindicated by past experience. Not even one single agreement emerged out of the intense arms control talks in the early '90's.

A New Context: Iran and American Policy Shift

Today, Israelis believe they are faced with a new context where Iran has practically crossed the technological threshold. They believe that Iran will have enough fissile material for a bomb by the end of 2009, making a suspension of Iranian uranium enrichment moot.

Israel believes that opacity has proved in the past vital in preventing Arabs from moving to a nuclear path. An Israeli low nuclear profile made life easier for Arab leaders not eager to engage in a costly nuclear competition with Israel. However, if Iran ends up becoming a full-fledged nuclear power, this would mark the collapse of the NPT regime, and the decline of the region into nuclear proliferation as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey move to counter the Shiite 'nuclear empire'.

In this circumstance, Israel is sceptical of President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons, and concerned that his administration is moving away from previous understandings with Israel, i.e. that America's diplomatic umbrella for Israel's unique nuclear status might be coming to an end. Israel would fight the emerging American doctrine of equality among states in the nuclear realm, which has been supported by America's Arab allies in the region. Its principled position would be that if the international community fails to stop Iran, then it will have no choice but

to eliminate the threat and uphold its role as the refuge of the Jewish people.

Israel's response to President Obama's noble vision of a world without nuclear weapons would be inevitably sceptical. After all, not even the president, or any of the other Nuclear Weapons States committed to cutting back their stockpiles, advocate a move to zero any time soon, and they all continue to recognize the need for a credible nuclear deterrent. Impressed though they might be by the recent advances made by the agenda for global disarmament, the Israelis view the current wave as less about "disarmament" and more about "arms control".

After all, the Israelis would claim, the reduction in nuclear arsenals by the big powers is not presented in the context of the vision of a world without nuclear weapons—the reductions are not intended to have any real impact on their total nuclear deterrence—but as a response to the changing strategic environment, as well as a device aimed at curtailing the nuclear ambitions of rogue states and organizations. The vision about the intrinsic immorality of nuclear weapons has not yet become the accepted discourse on nuclear disarmament.

Israel and a WMDFZ in the Middle East: Opacity Revisited?

The conventional wisdom in Israel is that nuclear opacity has been a formidable success, but the fact is that although Israel's strategy has succeeded in preventing existential attacks, it has not worked as a deterrent against conventional attacks, nor as a warning to rivals against developing nuclear weapons.

Israel's view is that the real solution remains not in a futile attempt to force NPT members like Iran and Syria to comply with commitments, but in the creation of a broader regional security and cooperation architecture in the Middle East. This is precisely what makes an Arab-Israeli peace so central in the difficult march to a Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Israel's strategy of nuclear ambiguity was born out of an apocalyptic mood of pessimism, but an Israeli-Arab peace, such as that proposed in the Arab Peace Initiative, can create the conditions for a WMDFZ in the region. This can only be created through a broad regional structure that would include the robust involvement of outside powers in the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and offering security guarantees to all states in the region.

Israel is then not expected to enter into serious discussions on nuclear disarmament or accept the application of IAEA safeguards until a comprehensive Middle Eastern peace agreement has been reached and rogue states like Iran have been either disciplined or integrated into a regional security system. Even then, Israel says, it would aspire to keep a strategic deterrent potential "for as long as necessary in terms of geography and time" (Prime Minister Ehud Barak in *Haaretz*, 5 October 1999). Moreover, any discussion of a nuclear weapon free zone would have to be intimately tied to a regional verifiable disarmament of other weapons of mass destruction, both chemical and biological, and to downsizing the number of missiles in every country's possession.

A status such as that of India would have been ideal from the Israeli point of view. An attempt was indeed made by Israel in 2007 to upgrade the nature of its understandings with the U.S. In the wake of the U.S.–India deal of 2007, Israel asked the Bush administration to lobby on her behalf the Nuclear State Governments (NSG) to allow her to conduct nuclear trade for peaceful purposes without being subjected to full-scope safeguards. The request was rejected by the president on the ground that the India deal was no precedent for other non-NPT states.

Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has remained practically unchallenged for almost 50 years, not least within Israel itself, where the issue has been a sacred taboo. But the changing international environment, the threat of uncontrolled nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, and the new policies being worked out in the US might all be good reasons for Israel to consider revising its nuclear doctrine. After all, though the current strategy has succeeded in preventing existential attacks, it has not really worked either as a deterrent against conventional attacks (which persisted throughout the years that Israel supposedly developed its nuclear arsenal) or as a warning to rivals (such as Iran) against developing a nuclear weapon.

Has then the threat of a nuclear Iran brought home to the Israelis the message about the failure of opacity to deter its enemies from challenging its very existence? Has opacity then outlived its usefulness? To Israel's leaders, not yet, but some experts maintain that if a preemptive military strike against Iran's nuclear installations is ruled out, Israel will have to reconsider its nuclear policy. In order to enhance dramatically its deterrence, it will have to consider lifting some of the secrets of its nuclear capabilities. President Obama's idea of holding a nuclear summit in March 2010 with the aim of promoting his vision of a world without nuclear weapons might serve as an opportunity for Israel to cautiously start getting out of the closet. Israel's attendance might not be a bold admission of the end of opacity, but it would be a step in the right direction.

By abandoning ambiguity and taking its own bomb out of the "basement", Israel might be able to affirm more convincingly its deterrence and, more importantly, enhance a serious debate regarding the urgency of a Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East.

I. A Weapon of Last Resort

Sixty four years since its first appearance, and in spite of the considerable ground gained in recent years by the policy of arms control and nuclear disarmament, nuclear weaponry has anything but lost its centrality as a driving force in international affairs.

Struggle for global or regional mastery with the benefit of a tie-breaking weapon, a quest for prestige and status, and the search by dictatorial regimes for a way to acquire immunity from attack have all been motives behind the drive of nations to reach military nuclear capabilities. France and Britain could not expect to recover their past hegemony by developing their own bomb, but it did help them maintain their pre-eminence in Europe and a certain status in world affairs. A crumbling empire with an archaic economy, a rapidly declining population, and a poorly equipped army, Russia can no longer be seriously considered a superpower. But its colossal non-conventional capabilities make it a major player in international affairs and a power to reckon with.

A nuclear India capable of deterring China was able to reach with the U.S. the kind of strategic partnership that America accorded in the past to its sworn enemy, Pakistan. But the current fear that the Pakistani bomb would fall into the hands of the Taliban is the reason for America's massive aid to the regime in Islamabad, whose bomb is the strategic response to that of India. And a poverty-stricken North Korea can allow itself the luxury of being the *enfant terrible* of the international community only because of its nuclear and ballistic capabilities. Even the remote chance that Libya might go nuclear was enough to allow her back to the fold of the international community provided it gave up its nuclear pretensions.

The Israeli case is totally distinct. It is not about status or regional hegemony, not even about the assumption that the bomb would make it immune to conventional attacks by its enemies. It has to do with a genuine, even if arguably exaggerated, existential anxiety. The origins of Israel's nuclear project lie deep in the way its leaders interpreted the lessons of Jewish history and the challenges surrounding the incipient Jewish state. The territorial answer to the Jewish atavistic fear, Israel was from its very inception unable to break the walls of a Jewish heritage of persecutions, pogroms and Holocaust. It therefore almost invariably tended to take, or to avoid, decisions only on the basis of worst-case scenarios.

Israel's pre-emptive strategy throughout the 1950s, the pressure of its generals for an early strike in 1967, General Dayan's hysterical reaction to the 1973 coordinated Egyptian–Syrian attack as being “the end of the Third Temple”, and even the vociferous rejection of the Clinton peace parameters by Chief of Staff General Mofaz as “a threat to the very existence of the State of Israel”, are all consequences of an Israeli outlook that Prime Minister Levi Eshkol defined with typical Jewish humour as that of “Shimshon der Nebechdeiker” (Samson the nebbish). Israel could never really decide whether she was an intimidating regional superpower or just an isolated and frightened Jewish ghetto waiting for the next pogrom to happen.

Israel's nuclear option was conceived as the “weapon of last resort”, the ultimate response, to the ultimate worst-case scenario. The late Shalheveth Freier, the head of Israel's Atomic Energy Commission, described it “as a possible caution to states contemplating obliterating Israel by dint of their preponderance of men and material”. However convincing Israel's 1948 victory against the combined onslaught of the Arab armies might have been, the Jewish state was to David Ben-Gurion an intrinsically fragile entity surrounded by sworn, mortal enemies who could never forget or forgive their humiliating defeat.

An almost apocalyptic fear of physical annihilation, a fatalistic pessimism as to the chances that the Arab world might ever reconcile itself to the existence of a Jewish state in its midst, and the ever-present Holocaust complex, was then the context for Ben-Gurion's seemingly Quixotic quest for a credible nuclear option. To him, the nuclear option was a vital strategic equalizer. The Arab “preponderance in men and equipment” could only be countered by Israel's qualitative edge. “Ben-Gurion believed that science could compensate us for what Nature has denied us”, this is how Shimon Peres, Ben-Gurion's aide in the execution of Israel's nuclear project, put it.

Israel's nuclear strategy was not, however, endorsed without internal debate in the utmost internal circle of the security and political establishment. Arguably, there existed schools in this matter. The “Young Turks” around Ben-Gurion, such as Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan, as well as the main leaders of the party (MAPAI), represented the pro-nuclear view. Israel, they believed, would never be able to challenge the Arab preponderance in men and equipment, and it would only be through its nuclear edge that it could force its enemies to abandon the military way. Achdut Haavoda, the more activist party of Yigal Allon and Israel Galili, warned against embarking on an apocalyptic nuclear path. They believed that Israel's conventional capabilities were sufficient both as a deterrent and as a tool for decisive victories in case of war.

This debate has an interesting relevance to Israel's attitude to the dilemmas of war and peace. The pro-nuclear school was surprisingly opposed to war and to the occupation of territories—this was the reason that Ben Gurion would send his disciple Peres on a mission of preventing the decline to war in 1967 even at the price of exposing Israel's (at the time) rudimentary nuclear capabilities—because they believed in nuclear deterrence. Being utterly pessimistic as to the prospects of an Arab–Israeli peace, they saw no point in acquiring Arab territories as bargaining chips for peace. Indeed, immediately after Israel's enlightening victory, David Ben-Gurion was the first to call for an immediate withdrawal from all occupied territories.

The anti-nuclear school was, again surprisingly, more militarily activist and expansionist. They trusted Israel's conventional capabilities to conquer and hold Arab territories both for the sake of expansion—Achdut Haavoda believed, at least until the death of its historical leader Yitzhak Tabenkin in 1971, in Greater Eretz Israel and in an active policy of settlement in occupied Arab lands—and as a possible bargaining chip for peace under Israel's conditions. Unlike the nuclear school, they also believed in the concept of “defensible borders” (that would imply a change by force of the 1949 Armistice Lines) as a conventional deterrence against Arab armies.

These differences between the two schools have been blurred, however, over the years as Israel's nuclear strategy of opacity became the conventional doctrine for all. This has to do with both the Iran factor and the introduction of new weapons to the region, such as ballistic missiles, and chemical and biological weapons, all of which require a formidable enough deterrent.

Israel's unacknowledged introduction into the nuclear club was a gradual process that started with French help in the mid-50s. On the eve of the 1967 war, the scientists in the Dimona nuclear reactor were already able to improvise a rudimentary nuclear device. By 1970, the U.S. intelligence community considered Israel to be a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). Forty years later an estimate by the Federation of American Scientists puts Israel's arsenal at around 200 nuclear warheads, which would make it the sixth-largest nuclear power in the world. Israel also developed the necessary delivery systems, both airborne and ballistic.

The Begin doctrine, which asserts Israel's fundamental need to prevent any of its enemies from obtaining nuclear weapons—the destruction of the Iraqi Osiraq reactor in 1981 only reinforced the doctrine—made it for a while unnecessary for Israel to develop a second strike capability. But the post-Gulf War nuclear developments in the region, especially in Iran and Iraq, the persistent failure of the international community's intelligence and of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in detecting nuclear programs in the region and beyond, as well as the biological and chemical weapons in the hands of Arab regimes that have shown no reservations in using them, were critical in Israel's strategic decision to develop its own sea-based second strike capability. The existence of such capabilities has been lately acknowledged by Uzi Arad (*Haaretz*, 9 July, 2009) Prime Minister Netanyahu's national security advisor.

II. Opacity

However, Israel's behaviour as a widely recognized NWS is distinctly different than that of the other nuclear powers. While all the others have publicly declared their nuclear status, and want the world to recognize them as such, Israel, which has adamantly refused to join the NPT, has endorsed a policy of "nuclear opacity" based on the formula that it "will not be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East". Furthermore, Israel has never conducted nuclear tests, and has also accepted the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) guidelines that seek to stem proliferation through the control of nuclear exports.

Opacity and "weapon of last resort"—these are then the two pillars of Israel's nuclear policy. The United States was a close partner of Israel in shaping the policy of opacity as one that would reconcile Israel's existential anxieties with America's non-proliferation policy. Opacity could not be allowed to prevail without America's diplomatic umbrella for Israel's unique nuclear status. Such an umbrella, however, was granted only after attempts to dissuade Israel from pursuing a nuclear option had failed.

It was not until 1969 that President Richard Nixon reached, against the advice of almost the entire national security bureaucracy, an understanding with Prime Minister Golda Meir that the U.S. would de facto acknowledge Israel's nuclear capabilities and protect her against the international pressure to join the Non Proliferation Treaty, so long as Israel maintained a low profile, did not reveal its capabilities, did not conduct nuclear tests, and did not use its nuclear status for diplomatic gains. The Israeli bomb was to be kept "in the basement". Israel would not join the NPT, but it would not defy it either. These understandings were reconfirmed by President Clinton to both Prime Minister Netanyahu in 1998 and Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 1999.

Levi Eshkol's pledge that Israel would not to be the first to "introduce" nuclear weapons into the region is of course closely linked to the pledge of not conducting nuclear tests, for the test would be tantamount to a political affirmation that Israel has indeed "introduced". In other words, Israel never made a pledge to the Americans of not producing nuclear weapons; it committed itself to keeping its bomb "in the basement", and not "introducing" it either by conducting nuclear tests or by moving to an overt nuclear policy where it openly uses its nuclear capabilities to advance its regional policies. "Non-introduction" means, then, non-testing and non-declaration.

There are a number of considerations that can explain the United States' exemption of Israel from its non-proliferation strategy. One is the conviction that Israel's quest for an existential deterrent is justified, with the Holocaust certainly having an important emotional role in the formulation of America's attitude. Another is that, given America's moral commitment to the Jewish state, Israel's nuclear deterrent diminishes America's need to intervene if an existential threat to the Jewish state emerges. And there was also the sense of cultural affinity between the two countries, two pluralistic democracies sharing a pioneering spirit and tradition. Israel, the Americans trusted, is a Western style democracy that can definitely handle a nuclear option in a responsible way.

Israel's claim that the international community accepts its unique opaque nuclear status draws strength from the responsible way it has behaved throughout. It resisted the temptation of displaying its nuclear capabilities even during the most dire

moments in its conflict with the Arab world. As early as on the eve of the 1967 war, years before the Nixon–Meir understandings, Israel considered, and ruled out, a proposal by Shimon Peres to conduct a nuclear test as a way to deter the Arab armies that were concentrated on what Abba Eban defined as Israel’s “Auschwitz borders” (Shimon Peres, *Battling for Peace: A Memoir*, New York, 1995, p. 145).

Opacity survived also the dire conditions of the 1973 War. Defence Minister Moshe Dayan interpreted the initial advances of the Arab armies as potentially leading to the end of the Jewish state. Prime Minister Meir disciplined the hysterical general, and no display of nuclear weapons was allowed. Golda Meir definitely raised the bar with regard to the concept of “last resort” as a uniquely extreme condition where the very survival of the Jewish state is at stake.

Given the changing nature of the threats facing Israel from ballistic missiles and non-conventional weapons, and the increasing sense of vulnerability of its home front as shown during the first Gulf War and later in the 2006 war against Hizballah, many observers wonder if Israel is still committed to a nuclear “last resort” strategy or, in addition to developing a second strike capability, it has also built up tactical nuclear weapons with an offensive orientation that defies the “last resort” philosophy. Given the absolute lack of parliamentary oversight or public debate, it is extremely difficult to answer this question. Some believe that it is not entirely far-fetched to assume that the “hermetic nuclear bureaucracy” might have made the move out of institutional inertia.

Opacity is a unique Israeli contribution to the nuclear age. It affects both the nature of its international discourse and the self-imposed taboo over nuclear issues at home. Although Israel’s bomb is, in the words of Avner Cohen, “the world’s worst-kept secret”, the question of Israel’s nuclear policy is for all practical purposes out of the public domain. Furthermore, opacity is so tight a concept that Israel is unique among nuclear democracies where no parliamentary control over its nuclear affairs is allowed, and no legislation concerning the nuclear program has been ever passed. Nor is there any legal document assigning responsibilities or defining areas of jurisdiction. Not even questions such as the safety of the storage of nuclear waste and the effect this is having on the environment are open to public or parliamentary debate. Indeed, Israel’s nuclear policy is one major black hole of Israeli democracy.

III. The Arabs: Partners of Israel’s Opacity

America was not alone as a partner in shaping Israel’s nuclear opacity. The Arab world contributed to it as well. For Israel believes opacity proved to be vital in preventing the Arabs from moving to a nuclear path, and helped keep at bay their Soviet allies who might have been tempted to be involved in a regional nuclear escalation. An Israeli low nuclear profile made life easier for Arab leaders who were not especially eager to engage in a costly nuclear competition with Israel.

However, for the Arabs, Israel’s nuclear capabilities represent a major strategic and cultural challenge. They perceive the Israeli bomb as a major asset of the Jewish state that makes it not only more robust but also allows it to blackmail the Arabs in crisis situations. Israel’s nuclear edge, and its determination to prevent the Arabs from

mastering nuclear technologies, all this with America's backing, are seen by them as a humiliating conspiracy, a scheme aimed at keeping them in the Middle Ages.

Egypt stood throughout at the forefront of the Arab pursuit of bringing Israel to sign the NPT, and place its nuclear facilities under IAEA inspection. Israel's supposed nuclear status has been the driving force behind Egypt's firm advocacy of a WMDFZ in the Middle East. More than a physical threat, Israel's nuclear capabilities represent an imbalance in the Egyptian-Israeli equation that Cairo has throughout tried to redress, not by developing its own nuclear option but by forcing Israel to join the relevant global treaties. Egypt maintains that by ignoring the principle of equality between states, the world would lose the moral and political legitimacy to challenge additional states in the region trying to redress the unjust imbalance by acquiring non-conventional weapons.

A major regional power, Egypt faces a difficult dilemma over the nuclear issue. She is not interested in joining the nuclear club, but she is also seriously concerned that by not joining the trend of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East her regional pre-eminence is severely eroded. Hence, when the Egyptians uphold the principle of equality between nations, they do not necessarily pretend to defend Iran's nuclear ambitions, which represent to Egypt's regional standing a very serious challenge, but to allude to the Egyptian predicament. If Egypt's advocacy of a WMDFZ fails and the principle of equality between nations is not respected, Egypt might be forced to recover its regional pre-eminence by developing its own nuclear option.

This is a path Egypt does not want to be forced to embark on if only because of the risk of putting in jeopardy her strategic relations with the U.S. If forced, the Egyptians might, however, reach the conclusion that their centrality in America's regional strategy is such that, as in the case of Pakistan, the U.S. might acquiesce to Egypt's nuclear status so long as it offers the U.S. the vital strategic services it needs. Indeed, more than once in recent years President Mubarak has proclaimed that "when the time comes, and we need nuclear weapons, we will not hesitate..."

IV. Israel's Arms Control Agenda

Prime Minister Shimon Peres went as far as saying in December 1995 that if given peace Israel "would give up the atom". However dramatic this pronouncement might sound, it represents Israel's traditional policy with regard to a WMDFZ being dependent on a regional comprehensive peace. Indeed, the promising years of the Oslo peace process witnessed a greater readiness than ever before by Israel to join arms control negotiations with its neighbours. In 1994, it signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and two years later it joined the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Essentially, Israel's core attitude to the global disarmament regime reflects a sincere adherence to the norms of global non-proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and a commitment to the prevention of the transfers of relevant technology. To reach these goals, Israel would join the pertinent global treaties providing, however, this does not compromise its overall nuclear policy.

Israel then is not expected to enter into serious discussions on nuclear disarmament or accept the application of IAEA safeguards until a comprehensive Middle Eastern peace agreement has been reached and rogue states like Iran have been either disciplined or integrated into a regional security system. Even then, Israel says, it would aspire to keep a strategic deterrent potential “for as long as necessary in terms of geography and time” (Prime Minister Ehud Barak in *Haaretz*, 5 October 1999). Moreover, any discussion of a nuclear weapon free zone would have to be intimately tied to a regional verifiable disarmament of other weapons of mass destruction, both chemical and biological, and to downsizing the number of missiles in every country’s possession.

Israel would then be ready to join a regime of WMDFZ “in due course and in the proper context”, as Gideon Frank, the Director General of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission put it at the 43rd IAEA General Conference in Geneva. What Israel would never do is to give up its deterrent of last resort unilaterally, as Egypt has been asking insistently, without drastic reductions in the Arab conventional capabilities and the elimination of their non-conventional weapons. The Arab position that a WMDFZ should be established prior to a comprehensive peace settlement, and would in fact serve as a major contribution to peace, is utterly unacceptable by Israel. To Israel, peace comes first, and denuclearization last. In a way, this very concept is embedded in the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty that speaks of a WMDFZ as a goal “to be achieved in the context of a comprehensive, lasting and stable peace.”

Israel is highly sceptical of global arms control instruments; it prefers regional arms control arrangements. Instruments such as the NPT and the IAEA are inadequate—according to Mohamed El Baradei, the IAEA chief, even “shamefully insufficient”—they constantly fail in verification and in forcing compliance. The Biological Weapons Convention, as well as the CWC, are also widely regarded as unverifiable. To Israel, the Tlatelolco Treaty, which transformed Latin America into a NWFZ, is a model to follow because it allows the parties to adopt a more robust verification regime in which international monitoring can be supplemented by regional compliance verification mechanisms, and bilateral on-site inspections.

The move towards such a regional regime would have to be accompanied by Confidence Building Measures and an accepted regional framework within which the states of the region could discuss all issues pertaining to arms control. Israel, however, makes the distinction between negotiations and understandings on arms control on the one hand, and implementation on the other. The latter would be possible only in the context of a comprehensive regional peace that would include also countries not actually involved in the Arab–Israeli peace process, such as Iran.

Israel’s policy has been throughout based on the premise that inter-state relations, not global treaties and not a purely weapons-based emphasis, are the basis for determining policy in the non-conventional domain. The regional states have a much larger stake in the assurance of compliance than global organizations, and they also have a better capability of knowing when a member state is in default of its obligations. Arms control as a means of improving regional security, the Israelis would say, is an urgent task given the fact that disarmament looks more and more as a vision for the fullness of time. Until the moment when more comprehensive arms control agreements can be reached, such dialogues would have to focus on the easing

of tensions, the stabilization of relations and the creation of accepted rules of behaviour with regard to existing arsenals.

The weakness of the Israeli argument lies in that the attempt in the early 1990s to pursue a regional security arrangement for the Middle East in the context of the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS), though a refreshing novelty, failed to produce even one single agreement. Moreover, today, setting up a regional arms control dialogue may be too late to convince Iran to desist from developing nuclear weapons. Yet the Israelis believe that a regional focus might still be vital for integrating national interests into a strategy for dealing with a nuclear Iran.

V. Israel and the Global Instruments of Non-Proliferation

V 1. Non-Proliferation Treaty

Israel's nuclear policy of ambiguity meant that it could not sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty or accept IAEA safeguards on all its nuclear facilities. Israel is also extremely sceptical as to the effectiveness of the NPT/IAEA system. Determined proliferators have consistently exploited the weaknesses of the system to develop military nuclear capabilities. Dictatorships such as Iraq, Syria, Iran and North Korea, all signatories of the NPT, managed to outsmart the safeguards and inspection regime.

Israel does not believe that everything depends on just improving the NPT regime. She believes in addressing nuclear proliferation through arms control outside the scope of the NPT, and by incorporating state interests and concerns into arms control negotiations in a much more focused manner than this is normally done in the framework of the NPT.

Israel is not alone, of course, in criticizing the NPT for the inherent inconsistency in its structure, for it legitimizes the nuclear capabilities of the NWS, and imposes limitations on those that are not. The message to the potential proliferators is then that nuclear weapons are not necessarily illegitimate; they even have a security purpose that under certain conditions can be condoned. The nuclear powers do reach from time to time agreements on the reduction of their stockpiles, but at no moment is this done with the notion that nuclear weapons are irrelevant to their national security. Moreover, the NPT's message is that all nations have a right to acquire nuclear weapons for their defence, and it also accepts the right of states to withdraw from the treaty if they reach the conclusion that for reasons of national security they are forced to develop nuclear weapons.

That the growing legitimacy of the international norm of non-proliferation has been gaining ground in recent years by no means vindicates the ability of the NPT to control a determined proliferator. The proof, the Israelis would argue, is that by the end of the 1990s troubles started: Iraq and North Korea, the Indian and Pakistani explosions, Syria and Iran. The latter has been developing all the necessary facilities under the pretext of developing a peaceful nuclear program, produce the necessary fissile material and then when convenient withdraw from the NPT under article X(1). On the global scale there have been serious setbacks. The BWC is slowly being recognized as unverifiable; the CTBT did not enter into force; the FMCT discussions

are stalled in Geneva; and many countries that are not members of the CWC are known to possess chemical weapons.

The problem of safeguards is a major flaw in the NPT and IAEA, and not even the IAEA's Additional Protocol solved that. The idea of an Additional Protocol Plus is most welcome, but the chances of achieving it are very slim. The existing Additional Protocol does not give access to suspect sites and is not compulsory for all members of the NPT—about half do not adhere to it—and although Iran promised initially to abide by it, it later reneged on its promise. Nor is Syria bound by the AP, and is thus free to deny the IAEA any in-depth inspection of suspect sites.

V 2. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)

As early as 1963, Israel was among the signatories of the Partial Test Ban Treaty, and, consistent with its commitment to opacity, it later signed also the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty calling for a ban on all “nuclear weapon test explosions or any other nuclear explosion”. It has also agreed to participate in the international seismic monitoring. So far, however, Israel, like Russia and the U.S., has not ratified the treaty. Its reservations have to do with the credibility of the verification regime, and its impunity to abuse of on-site inspections. Israel would also like to see other regional powers in the Middle East joining the treaty.

In all probability, President Obama, according to a statement of 8 June 2009 by his ambassador, Gregory Schulte, to the International Organizations in Vienna, would make the move to ratification. It is not improbable that Israel would follow suit in an effort to get the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to lift its trade embargo on her. Israel has an interest to prove that her non-proliferation credentials are stronger than those of India on which the NSG embargo has been lifted. By ratifying the CTBT, Israel might think she is making stronger her non-proliferation credentials.

V 3. The Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT)

The Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty relates only to the future production of fissile material, and does not stipulate placing the current stockpiles under international supervision. The whole concept of international supervision has always been extremely difficult for the Israelis to digest. Israel is as a whole adamant not to allow an inspection precedent that might end up invading other sensitive areas.

The Egyptian position calling for the treaty to be applied also to existing stockpiles of plutonium is of special concern to the Israelis. Egypt's proposal is especially subtle for it is aimed at making the NPT, and hence the question of Israel's refusal to join it, a practically redundant issue. For if the inclusion of stocks in an FMCT is universally accepted, then the NPT becomes a body of simple declarative value on issues such as universal nuclear disarmament, the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy, and the interim right of NWS to hold nuclear weapons.

It was only under strong American pressure that Israel finally agreed in the late '90's to enter negotiations on the FMCT, while making it clear, however, that this should by no means be seen as an indication that it would eventually join the treaty. Israel never hid its disdain for the FMCT, for joining such a treaty—especially if it includes

verification mechanisms—would undermine beyond redemption its policy of opacity, and indeed its entire national security strategy. Those who want Israel to join the FMCT are in fact trying to circumvent its refusal to join the NPT by applying to her a comprehensive safeguards regime through a different treaty.

It was then not surprising that Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected President Clinton's pressure that Israel sign the FMCT. "No pressure will help... we will not sign the treaty because we will not commit suicide", he wrote to him. Israel advanced, through its representative at the UN during a debate on 19 April 2006, a more elaborate position that essentially reflects Israel's vision on the conditions for nuclear disarmament. Israel, he said, cannot view the FMCT outside the context of the regional and global realities.

The FMCT does not address the challenges of nuclear proliferation posed by the spread of nuclear fuel cycle capabilities in the region—he had of course the cases of Iran and Syria in mind—in spite of the existence of safeguards mechanisms both by the NPT and the IAEA. Israel's claim is that the FMCT would at the present moment even be counterproductive to non-proliferation, because it will give states like Iran the ultimate legitimacy to produce fissile material, ostensibly for peaceful purposes, since the treaty would only ban fissile material production for weapons purposes.

To Israel, the FMCT is entirely unnecessary as a means of preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and whatever can be achieved in the field of non-proliferation can be done without it. A good example, the Israelis would say, is North Korea. The agreement with Pyongyang in February 2007, which goes even further than the proposal of discontinuing the production of fissile materials, was achieved without the proposed FMCT. Israel's claim would be that instead of creating the appearance of moving forward in the field of non-proliferation through the creation of yet another Treaty, it would be more effective if the UN Security Council addressed more effectively the more pressing issues, such as that of Iran.

Not even an American proposal of 2007 of an FMCT without verification changed Israel's attitude. The American proposal allowed for any Party to the treaty to bring to the attention of the other Parties any suspicions it might have with regard to the non-compliance with the treaty's provisions by any particular Party. As a consequence the Parties to the Treaty would convene to discuss the matter, and even the UN Security Council might be asked to consider these suspicions. This mechanism proved its effectiveness, for it resembles the way the violation of Iran and North Korea of their commitments as members of the NPT were brought to the attention of the international community.

President Obama has pledged in his Prague speech "to cut off the building blocks needed for a bomb" and "to seek a new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in nuclear weapons". Such a treaty would be the first step toward limiting the Israeli nuclear program, and Israel is not expected to make the president's life easy on that score.

But nor would Mr. Obama be as complacent as his predecessors. If Prime Minister Netanyahu would not move as expected on the peace front he would expose Israel to very serious pressure over the nuclear issue. For Israel cannot expect to have the best

of all worlds, condition nuclear disarmament on a comprehensive peace while at the same time conducting a policy aimed at stalling the peace process. The president would not ask Israel to disarm, but he definitely might ask her to freeze the production of fissile material if only as a way of enhancing the credibility of his disarmament agenda and as an incentive to Egypt and Saudi Arabia not to follow the Iranian example.

V 4. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

Israel has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention of August 1992, but has not yet ratified it. Its reservations have to do both with the intrusive mechanisms of inspection of military and civil chemical facilities, and with the concern that such a treaty might erode its strategic deterrence, especially as those Middle Eastern states known for possessing, and some of them even using, such weapons refuse to join the convention.

Trapped in a Catch 22, Arabs and Israelis cannot agree on the CWC. Since Israel regards chemical and biological weapons as near-nuclear weapons, it is unlikely to accept any erosion of its ambiguous nuclear deterrence as long as it faces the danger of chemical and biological attacks. Conversely, key Arab states view chemical and biological weapons as a strategic counterweight to Israel's nuclear capabilities and are therefore unlikely to sign the CWC until Israel signs the NPT.

VI. The Iran factor

Iran's nuclear program is ingrained in the national psyche. It reflects a wide national consensus, the result of a deep-seated sense of vulnerability and betrayal. The Iranians remember how the international community remained indifferent when Saddam Hussein attacked it with chemical weapons. Nor is the presence of America's formidable might along its borders a source of comfort for the Iranians. Iran's conviction of the international community's double standard by accepting the nuclear status of Israel, Pakistan and India, only fuels its sense of discrimination and its resolve to pursue its ambitions. The nuclear endeavour, and its resistance to Western pressure, are crucial to Iran's stature in the region.

There are those who see Iran's nuclear ambitions as being a response to Israel's bomb, but the Israelis would not accept that, and would claim that Iran's motivation essentially lies in the prestige in acquiring the status of a nuclear power, and in it being the ultimate protection for the Islamic revolution. Tehran views Israel as an ideological threat not as a military rival, for there is no tangible territorial dispute between the two countries.

The Israelis believe that the Iranians have practically crossed the technological threshold, or are extremely close to crossing it. They utterly reject the U.S. assessment about Iran not being able to produce a bomb before 2013. To them, at the end of 2009 Iran would have enough fissile material to produce its first atomic bomb. And, if this is the case, there is no longer any logic to insisting on suspension of uranium enrichment activities, for once it has mastered the know-how the whole thing is just a matter of time. When in 2007 Mohamed elBaradei admitted that one of the purposes of uranium enrichment suspension—keeping Iran from attaining nuclear knowledge—

“has been overtaken by events”, what he essentially meant was that the world has now to face the reality of a nuclear-capable Iran.

The record so far of attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with Iran is very bleak indeed. Iran played very shrewdly and successfully for time. By selectively cooperating with international institutions and selectively revealing information, it has so far defeated the effectiveness of international controls.

What the Iranians could learn from the case of North Korea is that blunt defiance of the international community over the nuclear issue can go unpunished. They exploited the divisions within the international community over the approach to Iran’s nuclear defiance either because of economic and strategic interests (Russia, and China are certainly in that category, and to a certain degree even Germany), or fear of terrorist retaliation.

The prophets of doom in Israel see a nuclear Iran in apocalyptic terms. Israel’s position in the region would be severely compromised, foreign investors would flee the country, and so would many Israelis (according to an opinion poll, 27% of them). The promise of Zionism to create a Jewish refuge will have failed, and Jews will see the Diaspora as a more trustworthy option for both personal and collective survival. Also, no Arab peace partner would make concessions with a nuclear Iran effectively threatening the very existence of the Jewish state.

Ahmadinejad, the prophets of doom argue, represents a new activist strain of Shiism, which holds that the faithful can hasten the return of the Hidden Imam (al-Mahdi), the Shia Messiah, by destroying evil. Ahmadinejad’s pronouncements about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the imminent destruction of Israel are not regarded as merely aimed at domestic consumption; they are, rather, glimpses into an apocalyptic game plan.

Would the Begin Doctrine be applied then to Iran the way it was applied to Iraq and more recently to Syria? Israel’s principled position is in no doubt: if the international community fails to stop Iran, and fails to uphold the post-World War II order that was built on ‘never again’ Hiroshima or Auschwitz, then Israel will have no choice but to uphold its role as the refuge of the Jewish people. A Jewish State that allows itself to be threatened with nuclear weapons by a country that denies the genocide against Europe’s six million Jews while threatening Israel’s six million Jews, will forfeit its right to speak in the name of Jewish history.

The Israelis believe that their desperate urge to convince the international community to curtail what a recent assessment by the country’s military intelligence described as Iran’s “galloping toward a nuclear bomb”, is definitely not getting the expected response. With an inadequate sanctions regime being utterly ineffective, and with international diplomacy completely futile in its attempt to prevent the Iranians from mastering the technology for enriching uranium, Israel is being boxed into the corner it never wanted to be in. What was supposed to be a major international endeavour is dangerously declining into an apocalyptic Israeli–Iranian show down.

That this should be so is an intriguing anomaly, for notwithstanding President Ahmadijhad’s vile anti-Semitic rhetoric, the real implications of Iran’s emerging

power go far beyond the Jewish state. They affect the entire Arab world, particularly the vulnerable Gulf countries, and even Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Alas, the Israelis know only too well that a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities is too dangerous, and its results uncertain. The risks involved might outweigh the opportunities. A military strike might rally the population around the current Iranian leadership, and even though this would hurt Iran, the Iranians might retaliate by blocking the Strait of Hormuz where most of the oil going to the West goes through. Nor should a war on Israel's Northern front be excluded, with Syria and Hizballah backing an Iranian missile attack on Israel.

A military attack would also not be especially welcome by America's European allies. And, the US itself would be extremely concerned about the impact of such an attack on the stability of Iraq and Afghanistan, two extremely vital strategic priorities for the Americans. Nor would even the U.S. Arab allies be particularly happy with an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear installations. Such an attack will inevitably be regarded by them as a joint Israeli-American operation, and it will reflect in their eyes America's determination to uphold Israel's hegemony and nuclear monopoly in the region at all costs.

Iran will not abandon its nuclear program as a prerequisite for negotiations as the Bush administration wrongly expected. Now, the Israelis believe it is too late that they might do so even as a result of negotiations with the Obama administration. Furthermore, reaching a settlement with the U.S. goes against the very spirit and rationale of the Islamic revolution, especially now that the revolutionary purists have imposed themselves. Despite the heavy price Tehran might have to pay for its alienation from the United States, abandoning this key symbol of the revolution is tantamount to regime change.

Nor is there any reason to believe, say the Israelis, that Iran's negotiating tactics with the Obama administration would be any different than the one they used with the EU. They will seek to gain time in order to further their nuclear program, gain American recognition of their status in the Gulf, and reduce the American threat without foregoing a nuclear option. After all, most of the incentives the US can offer Iran in the economic and technological domains were already offered by the Europeans in negotiations to which the US was a behind-the-scenes party, to no avail.

If, as is probable, the US-Iran dialogue fails, or does not even start until the end of the September 2009 deadline, the possibility that the Obama administration would move to a military phase is extremely remote. The mood in the US national security establishment, does not support military action. The president might therefore opt for tightening the sanctions regime, preferably with Russian support, or alternatively with a coalition of the willing.

The failure of the international system to address effectively Iran's challenge lies mostly in the Russia-US divide, and in China's adamant refusal to join a sanctions regime that would put at risk its privileged energy deals with the Theocrats in Tehran. Russia certainly cannot be interested in a nuclear Iran, but in its quest for leverage against what it perceives as American hostile policies, and as way to bargain for a more acceptable security framework with the West, the Russians have refused so far

to join America's leadership in the international endeavour of curtailing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The Israelis therefore fear that the administration might reach a settlement with Iran that legitimizes its nuclear status. Secretary Clinton's offer of a nuclear umbrella to America's allies in the region is being interpreted in Jerusalem as an indication that the U.S. is resigned to live with a nuclear Iran. If this is the outcome of the negotiations, the Israelis assume that the US would then direct its efforts to "classic" deterrence dialogue, where it will try to create clearly defined ground rules with regard to Iran. Another possible outcome of the negotiations, Israel fears, is that the US would settle for the lesser of the evils and allow Iran to continue enriching low quality uranium under close international supervision. To the Israelis this is a very dangerous outcome, for the Iranians would exploit every loophole to maintain their objective of obtaining nuclear weapons.

If indeed the Obama strategy with Iran fails, and the Islamic Republic ends up becoming a fully-fledged nuclear power, this would mark the resounding collapse of the NPT regime, and the region will decline into nuclear anarchy. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey would all aspire to develop their own Sunni bomb to counter the calamity of the emergence of a Shiite nuclear empire on their doorsteps. Israel—they all know—might be an ideological, not a physical, challenge to the Arab world. Iran is a different matter. Interestingly, countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and, most recently, Jordan, have declared their interest in acquiring nuclear power, a policy they never embarked upon in response to Israel's supposed nuclear capabilities.

General John Abizaid, the former commander of the U.S. Central Command, belongs to a list of experts who believe the world can live with a nuclear Iran. After all, in every place where nuclear weapons were introduced, large scale wars between their owners have practically disappeared. But the problem with the General's sanguine attitude to Iran becoming nuclear is that he envisages nuclear deterrence in an Israel–Iran bilateral context, whereas a nuclear Iran would unleash a nuclear race in the region. The spread of nuclear weapons would definitely result in far greater problems of policy control. The doubt about new nuclear states is that they normally lack the "safety culture" that is embedded in the more advanced nuclear states, not to mention the inherent domestic instability in these countries that could affect their control of nuclear weapons.

VII. Towards a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone?

VII 1. Israel and the Obama Factor

President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons, and the recent agreement he signed with Russia aimed at cutting back both countries' nuclear stockpiles, certainly enhance the president's moral and political claim in his commendable campaign against nuclear proliferation. How would this affect Israel, widely seen as the sixth Nuclear Weapon State in the world, and so far the only one in the Middle East?

However ritualized might have been Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller's urging of Israel in early May 2009 to join the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),

which would require it to declare and relinquish its nuclear arsenal, it inevitably created fears in Jerusalem that America's diplomatic umbrella for Israel's unique nuclear status was coming to an end, and that the US is bound from now on to call for equality among states in the nuclear realm, regardless of their respective political contexts.

Ms. Gottemoeller is certainly not out of tune with the disarmament agenda of President Obama as spelled out in his Prague speech. In a paper she co-authored in 2005 (*Universal Compliance: A Strategy for Nuclear Security*) she wrote that instead of consistently ignoring Israel's nuclear status, the US should proactively call for a regional dialogue that would specify the conditions for a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Weapons. In that context, Israel, she claims, needs to take steps towards nuclear disarmament in exchange for her neighbours getting rid of their chemical and biological weapons programs.

Israel is especially concerned with the possibility that President Obama might be ready to address Iran's nuclear ambitions by equating it with Israel. That the Arab regimes, however concerned they certainly are with the emerging Iranian nuclear power, should lead the call for an end to Israel's nuclear monopoly is expected and understandable. A different matter are the voices coming from Washington.

The intellectual foundations of the new American attitude to the nuclear question were laid down in the January 2007 famous *Wall Street Journal* article ("Toward a Nuclear-Free World") by Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, George Schultz and William Perry . By calling upon the nuclear powers to preach by example and dramatically reduce their nuclear arsenals, this article was in fact also a call for equality among nations in the nuclear domain.

Bruce Reidel, who until very recently headed the Obama administration's strategy review of policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, and who is by no means known as hostile to America's unique relations with Israel, was quite explicit on this. "If you are really serious about a deal with Iran, Israel has to come out of the closet. A policy based on fiction and double standard is bound to fail sooner or later. What is remarkable is that it has lasted so long".

But it was a recent statement to Congress of no less than Secretary of Defense Gates that was especially shocking to the Israelis. He expressed understanding for Iran's desire to acquire nuclear weapons because, as he said, the Iranians are surrounded by nuclear powers such as Pakistan, India, Russia, and Israel. Neither did the Secretary mention Iran's drive for nuclear weapons as a means to reach regional mastery in the Middle East, nor did he address its threats to eradicate Israel out of existence as a context through which its nuclear ambitions need to be seen.

Israel would fight this emerging new American doctrine, which has been supported throughout by America's Arab allies in the region, equating it with Iran. Yet some in the Israeli establishment are ready to acknowledge that if the president would be capable of stopping the Iranian nuclear program in time, thus preventing the collapse of the entire non-proliferation system, the legitimacy of his demands that Israel follow suit would be difficult to challenge. But if the nightmare of a nuclear Iran

materializes, Israel would be free of any international pressure. The debate would then be how to strengthen Israel, not how to control its nuclear program.

Meanwhile, to those who equate Israel with Iran, Israel would say that political contexts *do* matter, as do domestic conditions. Pakistan's internal disintegration on the one hand, and Iran's fanatic regime on the other, make the possession of nuclear weapons in the hands of such countries an especially dangerous affair indeed, and there should be no comparison with the responsible way Israel has treated its nuclear status. Not only did Iran develop its nuclear capabilities while party to the NPT, the Israelis would say, but it also has put high on its agenda the very destruction of the Jewish state, precisely the kind of existential threat that Israel's nuclear deterrence is supposed to deal with.

Israel would then expect the Obama administration not only to appreciate the unique *context* of its ambiguous nuclear status, as well as the utmost sense of responsibility with which it observed its understandings with the U.S., but also to assume that it cannot be forthcoming in advancing assurances regarding Israel's nuclear program unless the Middle East political environment has changed in a radical way, and a change in Iran's pattern of behaviour vis-à-vis the Jewish state becomes an unquestionable reality.

Israel's response to President Obama's noble vision of a world without nuclear weapons would inevitably be sceptical. After all, not even the president, nor any of the other Nuclear Weapons States committed to cutting back their stockpiles, advocate a move to zero any time soon, and they all continue to recognize the need for a credible nuclear deterrent. President Obama would certainly be advised against a leap into the heavenly future by the same national security establishment and Energy Department agencies in Washington that opposed Ronald Reagan's idea to abolish nuclear weapons during his 1986 summit with Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland.

The *Wall Street Journal* article is not aimed at challenging the deterrent value of nuclear weapons. It is the change in the strategic environment of threats after the end of the Cold War and the improved U.S.–Russian relationship that the four distinguished authors believe make it possible for these two powers to cut back dramatically their nuclear stockpiles. The argument that *détente* can be an appropriate platform for arms reduction, however, is not an entirely new argument.

The real trigger of the article has to do with the fear of rogue states and terrorist organizations going nuclear. The co-authors' main concern is to avert the possibility "that the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands". The new sense of urgency comes then not from the fact that the five major nuclear powers possess colossal nuclear stockpiles, but from the fear that proliferators like North Korea, Syria and Iran, not to speak of terrorist organizations operating under their umbrella, might have access to the deadliest weapon of all.

Impressed though they might be by the recent advances made by the agenda for global disarmament, the Israelis view the current wave as less about "disarmament" and more about "arms control". The reduction in nuclear arsenals by the big powers is not presented in the context of the vision of a world without nuclear weapons—the

reductions are not intended to have any real impact on their total nuclear deterrence—but as a response to the changing strategic environment, as well as a device aimed at curtailing the nuclear ambitions of rogue states and organizations. The vision about the intrinsic immorality of nuclear weapons has not yet become the accepted discourse on nuclear disarmament. Sam Nunn, one of the co-authors of the *Wall Street Journal* article, was quite explicit on this: “...While the threat environment has changed, the psychology of nuclear weapons for the nuclear powers in most cases has not changed.”

Israel would certainly not be impressed by the superpowers’ stockpile reductions that do not affect the core doctrine concerning nuclear deterrence. It would also argue that the current reduction in nuclear stockpiles would by no means affect the determination of would-be proliferators, some of whom represent a mortal threat to the Jewish state, to pursue their nuclear agenda. Israel would also claim that the support of equal standards for all in the nuclear domain makes little sense when the main challenge of non-proliferation comes from countries that are party to the NPT. To Israel, the way to address the threat emanating from these states is by confronting them directly, either militarily or through effective economic and political sanctions.

President Obama has seemingly promised Prime Minister Netanyahu recently to continue to fulfil past understandings with Israel over the nuclear issue. But the Israelis are nonetheless concerned, for as they have seen in the question of the settlements, the Obama administration seems to be definitely moving away from an automatic endorsement of Israel’s understandings with previous administrations. A revision of its policy towards Israel’s nuclear status can by no means be discarded. Gottemoeller’s declaration, as well as the explicit recognition by Secretary Gates of Israel’s nuclear status, should be interpreted within the broader disarmament agenda of the administration.

VII 2. The Iran Challenge – A Prelude to a Middle East WMDFFZ?

By exposing the inadequacy of the NPT as a non-proliferation tool, Iran, an NPT party, has signalled to Israel that the regional order can no longer be based on its nuclear monopoly as a non-NPT member. To Israel, the failure of the international community to cut short Iran’s nuclear ambitions would have a devastating effect on the future direction of non-proliferation efforts. Hence, the real solution lies not just in forcing NPT members like Iran and Syria to comply with their commitments, but in the creation of a broader regional security and cooperation architecture in the Middle East.

Such an architecture will have to be based on the Middle East becoming a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons—the Middle East retains the infamous distinction of being the only region in the world where such weapons have been used since the end of World War II—as well as nuclear arsenals. In 1993, Israel joined the treaty banning chemical weapons, but did not ratify it because of the Arab states’ refusal to join the treaty so long as Israel maintained its nuclear edge.

The solution, even according to Israel’s own imperatives, passes through an Arab-Israeli peace. The Arab 2002 peace initiative can be seen as one central instrument

that could lead, through the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, to a system of collective regional security based on a Middle East free of nuclear weapons. Israel's strategy of nuclear ambiguity was born out of an apocalyptic mood of pessimism with regard to the possibility of ever achieving an Arab-Israeli peace. But an Israeli-Arab peace needs to create the conditions for Israel to go back to Shimon Peres' strategy of peace in exchange for the bomb.

Israel's vision of a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone as something that lies only in the very distant future might be challenged with some effect if the Arab side advances creative regional policies. The Arab peace initiative of 2002 is indeed such a policy. Another was advanced recently by the Saudi foreign minister, suggesting that a nuclear-weapons-free Gulf might precede a region-wide nuclear-weapons free zone. This is an interesting departure from past Arab insistence that regional arms control cannot begin without Israel's denuclearization.

Indeed, the paradox of the Bush administration's pernicious policies in Iraq is that they have created favourable conditions for an Arab-Israeli peace, as the emergence of Iran and the threat of a fundamentalist tsunami have focused Arab minds on the urgency of a settlement with Israel.

This underlines even further the need of the current Israeli government to go beyond Prime Minister Netanyahu's lukewarm endorsement of the two-state solution. It is high time that Israel returns to the "Rabin doctrine" which upheld the urgency of making peace with the Arab world before Iran attained nuclear capabilities. Rabin believed that the isolation of Iran in an Arab Middle East living in peace with Israel was a major strategic objective, for it would prevent an Israeli-Iranian nuclear showdown. He also maintained that if Iran became nuclear before Israel had reached peace agreements with its neighbours, the politics of the region would become more radical, and the position of Israel's Arab peace interlocutors would be far less conciliatory.

However, the political foundations without which no broad Middle East WMDFZ would be possible lie also in the solution of other major conflicts in the region, for the notion that the security equation is Israel versus the Arab world is one of the major misconceptions of the Middle East. Arab states have developed and used chemical and biological weapons against each other. Iraq did it in Iran, Egypt in Yemen, and Iraq against its own Kurds. The nuclear weapons of the poor, chemical and biological weapons are developed also as a deterrent inside the Arab world, and also of course against Israel's vulnerable home front, and against US forces in the region.

However, though the Palestinian issue is not the source of all the Middle East's ills, its resolution would dramatically improve America's standing in the region. More importantly, it would deny Iran the ability to link popular Islamic and Arab causes with its own hegemonic ambitions. It is to a large extent the threat of a nuclear Iran that has triggered Arab peace policies. A nuclear Iran will have devastating consequences for Sunni Arab states, and they want to be free from the burden of the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to address the Iranian challenge.

A system of regional security in the Middle East has been for years stymied by the Arab perception of Israel, a country without fixed borders and therefore perceived as

possessing an irresistible propensity to expand, as a “high-tech crusader state” ruled by a technological and intellectual elite committed to hindering Arab development. The Arabs do not feel secure with their quantitative edge; they fear Israel’s qualitative advantage, especially as it is coupled with America’s unqualified support for the Jewish state. Inevitably, the perception of Israel’s nuclear capabilities assume a central role in the Arab view of Israel’s qualitative threat. It is therefore highly improbable that the Arabs will agree to the creation of a regional security system so long as Israel refuses to address the nuclear issue.

But a regional security system will require a change of mind in Israel too. Israel might not be capable of moving abruptly from a security doctrine of self-help and independent deterrence to one of collective security. Israel will certainly like to explore cautiously to what extent its military doctrine can be transformed from offensive defence to defensive defence, and to what extent it can base its security on arms control in a region where, thus runs the Israeli argument, treaty compliance and the attitude to legal obligations are highly conditioned by cultural differences.

A WMDFZ can only be created within the context of a broad regional structure. A prerequisite for such a broad regional security system is a robust involvement of outside powers in the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in responding to Iran’s concerns both with Israel and with the US presence in the region, and in offering security guarantees to the states in the region. It is also important that nuclear states bordering on the region, such as India and Pakistan, give assurances that they would respect and support a Middle East WMDFZ.

This does not mean that the states of the Gulf sub-region should not begin, as proposed by the Saudi foreign minister, to examine the idea of such a WMDFZ. The states of the Gulf can become the catalyst of a broader WMDFZ endeavour. Iraq is of course no longer an obstacle. None of the GCC states, or Yemen, have WMD programs or aspirations, so far as is known. Nobody expects that the Gulf countries would be able to convince Iran to renounce its nuclear ambitions; this is a task for a broader regional arrangement.

A Gulf WMDFZ can serve as a catalyst but would not be able to achieve the historic task of building a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. One major contribution to the vision of a regional order has already been made by the Saudi peace plan inherent in which is the promise of an entirely different set of relationship between the entire Arab world and Israel.

VII 3. Opacity Revisited?

Israel’s policy of nuclear ambiguity has remained practically unchallenged for almost 50 years, not least within Israel itself, where the issue has been a sacred taboo. But the changing international environment, the threat of uncontrolled nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, and the new policies being worked out in the US might all be good reasons for Israel to consider revising its nuclear doctrine. After all, though the current strategy has succeeded in preventing existential attacks, it has not really worked either as a deterrent against conventional attacks (which persisted throughout the years that Israel supposedly developed its nuclear arsenal) or as a warning to rivals (such as Iran) against developing a nuclear weapon.

The conventional wisdom in Israel is that nuclear opacity has been a formidable success, for it has both deterred the Arabs in war, and drew them to a peace process with Israel, thus abandoning the dream of “throwing the Jews into the sea”.

But, the reality is that the deterrence factor of Israel’s “weapon of last resort” is stronger only when and if “last resort” situations are created by an Arab attack. That has not happened so far. President Nasser challenged Israel’s deterrence in 1967, and though he might have been engaged in diplomatic brinkmanship and did not really want to decline into war, the fact that Israel launched a preemptive strike against his army is tantamount to an Israeli acknowledgement of the failure of deterrence.

True, there is a possibility that it was Israel’s nuclear deterrence that stopped Saddam Hussein short of arming the Scud missiles he launched against Israeli cities with chemical warheads. But, it is not entirely impossible that what really deterred Saddam was the threat of America’s retaliation, less so that of Israel. The Egyptian army did not advance deeper into the Sinai peninsula in 1973 not because of Israel’s nuclear deterrent, but because of the limited political objectives of the war, and because it was afraid to expose itself to Israel’s air force without the umbrella of its surface-to-air missiles.

It is also far-fetched to claim that Israel’s nuclear deterrent was key to bringing the Arabs to peace negotiations with Israel. That President Anwar Sadat did indeed mention to his hosts in Jerusalem, in 1977, that Israel’s nuclear capabilities were an important trigger for his peace initiative was his way of affirming what he believed was his “conventional victory” in the Yom Kippur War. Already in 1949, an Arab coalition was defeated by the conventional capabilities of the incipient Jewish state. Arab states—Egypt, Jordan and Syria—not only proceeded then to negotiate Armistice agreements with Israel that ratified the expansion of Israel’s borders far beyond what had been approved by the United Nations, they also conducted peace negotiations with the Jewish State well into the mid-1950s. The 1967 War displayed for all to see Israel’s overwhelming conventional superiority. Such a superiority was evident in the 1973 war as well, but the initial setbacks suffered by the Israelis taught them a lesson about the limits of what military power could achieve.

The Palestinian Intifadah in the late 1980s was to the Israelis a reminder about the moral and security burden of the territories, while Saddam Hussein’s missile attacks in 1990 exposed the vulnerability of Israel’s home front and brought home the message that in the era of ballistic warfare the concept of strategic depth given by the occupied territories became irrelevant. This, and the Arabs’ need to recover the occupied territories, was what finally brought the parties to the negotiating table.

Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union as the main military provider of the Arabs and the emergence of the U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, coupled with the Arabs’ conviction about the strength of Washington’s commitment to Israel, was a decisive consideration for the Arabs to attempt a change of alliances, and this could be done only through peace with Israel. Peace with Israel was the pre-condition without which there was no way the Arabs could expect an alliance with Washington.

Has opacity then outlived its usefulness? To Israel's leaders, not yet. President Obama's peace drive has yet to stand the same tests that wrecked the peace efforts of previous presidents. But the president's idea of holding a nuclear summit in March 2010 with the aim of setting up a code of nuclear behaviour, and promoting his vision of a world without nuclear weapons, might still be an opportunity for Israel to cautiously start getting out of the closet.

Israel would be reluctant to participate in a summit that might compromise its strategy of opacity. But it would be inconceivable to hold such a summit without the participation of a country considered to be the sixth nuclear power. President Obama would certainly like to see Israel as an integral part of a new nuclear world order, and also spare himself the accusations of double standards with regard to Israel's nuclear capabilities. Israel needs to be convinced that the summit is an ideal way for her to join the new world nuclear order without having to be a member of the NPT and other international agencies. Israel's attendance at the summit might not be a bold admission of the end of opacity, but it would certainly be a step in the right direction.

A status such as that of India would have been ideal from the Israeli point of view. An attempt was indeed made by Israel in 2007 to upgrade the nature of its understandings with the U.S. In the wake of the U.S.–India deal of 2007, Israel asked the Bush administration to lobby on her behalf the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to allow her to conduct nuclear trade for peaceful purposes without being subjected to full-scope safeguards. The request was rejected by the president on the ground that the India deal was no precedent for other non-NPT states.

The Israelis are convinced that Iran would not be stopped by negotiations or sanctions. Israel's national security establishment is not there yet, but some Israeli experts maintain that if a preemptive military strike is ruled out, Israel would have to reconsider its nuclear policy in order to enhance dramatically the effects of its deterrence through the lifting, perhaps selectively, of some of the veils of secrecy over its nuclear capabilities. After all, some say, if the worst case scenario materializes and Iran becomes an openly genocidal nuclear power, Israel would anyway have to get out of the closet if an effective balance of fear is to be maintained between the two countries.

By abandoning ambiguity and taking its own bomb out of the "basement", Israel might still be able to affirm more convincingly its deterrence and, more importantly, enhance a serious debate about the urgency of a Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East.