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No to strategic suicide

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The 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference that ran for most of the month of May produced a final document adopted by the member states by consensus. Although the NPT was extended indefinitely in 1995, agreement on a final document--which must enjoy consensus--was widely regarded as a significant goal due to the serious challenges that today threaten the viability of the treaty. For US President Barack Obama in particular, to be able to declare this conference a "success" after the failed 2005 RevCon was especially important against the backdrop of his nuclear disarmament agenda and the steps he took in this direction in the months leading up to the RevCon.

Consensus was achieved, but at a considerable price. Egypt threatened to withhold its agreement--and that of the close to 120 non-aligned states that Egypt leads--to any final document if its Middle East agenda was not accepted. Egypt sought to exploit this conference, as it has attempted many times before, as a platform for singling out Israel and forcing it to join the NPT and negotiate a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East. Obama proved vulnerable to this Egyptian political blackmail due to his keen desire to secure a consensus document.

Thus the US conceded to Egyptian pressure; this led to Israel being named specifically in the section on the Middle East, as well as the inclusion of a call for a conference on a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone to be convened in 2012. Iran, on the other hand, was not mentioned by name in the final document. This was the outrageous result of all NPT member states bowing to Tehran's threat to single-handedly block consensus on the final document if Iran was specifically mentioned as a state in violation of its NPT obligations. The fact that Iran has been judged in non-compliance by the International Atomic Energy Agency sadly did not seem to bother the member states in agreeing to this stark omission.

Israel has chosen not to be a member of the NPT--and no state can be forced to join an international treaty--because the NPT is incapable of addressing the security concerns that underscore the rationale for its nuclear deterrent. As a broad-based global treaty, the NPT admittedly would have a hard time taking specific inter-state contexts into account. But Israel's security predicament is nevertheless inextricably linked to this context.

While the practical difficulty for the NPT to address specific regional configurations may be understandable, the underlying logic of targeting nuclear weapons without regard to the context of interstate relations cannot be accepted. In fact, the academic literature that probes the question of "why states go nuclear" always goes directly to context: security considerations, prestige factors and domestic-based imperatives, among others. And it is the security considerations that very often top the list.

So if the motivation for going nuclear is most often security considerations, can security be ignored when we relate to efforts to reverse the situation? Security is present even in the NPT itself, in the form of the basic compensation given to non-nuclear weapons states that join the treaty--compensation for the concession they made by forswearing nuclear weapons: cooperation on nuclear technology for civilian purposes, the commitment of nuclear weapons states to move toward disarmament and the right to exit the treaty if their "supreme interests" are jeopardized.

For Israel, the nuclear question cannot be approached before regional conditions are very much improved. The Obama administration has expressed strong support for this position. While conceding to Egyptian demands within the framework of the RevCon, outside the confines of the treaty conference government officials have clarified that no discussion can take place on a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone without movement toward comprehensive peace in the region. Moreover, it has been noted that singling out Israel in the NPT final document will not be conducive to securing Israel's consent to the 2012 conference.

It would nevertheless be a good idea to differentiate between the highly negative conditions under which the idea of a conference on a Middle East WMDFFZ was raised and pushed forward of late, and the idea itself--which is not necessarily negative. The challenge for all states in the region is to see how a regional security discussion that was already conducted for four years in the early 1990s could get back on track. At the very least, such dialogue would have to encompass all forms of WMD, include Iran in a


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meaningful way--sitting side by side with Israel--and focus on improving regional relations and stability before turning to capabilities.

Calls for Israel to join the NPT are a euphemism for calls for Israel to immediately disarm the nuclear capability it is assumed to have. There is no basis for expecting Israel to participate in such strategic suicide. Calls for arms control and regional security dialogue are a different matter. If construed correctly--namely, focus on the context within which weapons exist--these could be a way forward for the region.- *Published 24/6/2010 © bitterlemons-international.org*

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