

Worthy, but unworkable

It would be highly dangerous to construe a NWFZ discussion as a replacement for concerted efforts to confront Iran's ongoing deception in the nuclear realm.

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In a recent op-ed piece in the New York Times, Shibley Telhami and Steven Kull suggested that a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) is the best option for Israel to pursue in order to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions. Rather than focusing on the "false" choice between a military strike and living with the bomb, Israeli decision makers are urged to consider a third choice: advancing a plan that would rid the entire region of nuclear weapons. According to the authors, this option is more feasible than most assume.

But is it? In truth, the feasibility of this option is highly questionable. More important, however, is that it is not the proper way to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions, which constitute not only a security challenge to the entire Middle East, but a potentially devastating development as far as the nuclear non-proliferation regime is concerned. Indeed, focusing on pursuit of a NWFZ, rather than on Iran's deception in the nuclear realm, could end up providing this dangerous proliferator with a convenient cover for pursuing ongoing ineffectual talks that enable it to deflect all attention from its own nuclear ambitions onto Israel.

When considering Iran's ongoing nuclear defiance, there are, from Israel's point of view, two major problems with the NWFZ idea. The first is that Iran has been deceiving the international community for years, while at the same time directing its harshest rejectionist rhetoric toward Israel. Thus Tehran has proven itself not only to be extremely hostile, but totally unreliable, when it comes to upholding its commitment, according to the NPT, not to work on a military program. What grounds are there for believing that this situation would change in the context of regional dialogue on a nuclear-free zone? The need to build trust is admittedly always a part of arms-control efforts, but in this case the problem is compounded by Iran's proven track record of deceit and open hostility.

The second issue is that Israel's own nuclear deterrence serves as an overall insurance policy against any threat posed to its very existence, and not an issue that relates to Israeli-Iranian relations per se. Therefore, even in the unlikely scenario that an understanding could be reached with the Islamic Republic, Israel's future security in the Middle East is still not ensured.

And what about Iran? Why would Iran be more credible with regard to a NWFZ than it is regarding its NPT commitments? And what is the basis for the claim that Israel's denuclearization would be a game-changer as far as Tehran's nuclear ambitions are concerned? If anything, it might change the game in the opposite direction, and keep Iran even more focused on nuclear progress. This is because Iran's primary goal in seeking nuclear weapons is not to deter Israel; the only threats the latter ever issued vis-a-vis Iran have been with regard to its nuclear program. Rather, Iran has a broad-based regional hegemonic agenda in the Middle East, and from its point of view, Israel is only one part of the picture. Israel was never the motivation for Iran's military program in the nuclear realm, and therefore focusing on Israel is not the solution. Indeed, were Israel to join the NPT tomorrow, this would not alter Iran's nuclear ambitions.

A NWFZ in the Middle East is a worthy long-term vision, but it is at present a very distant goal. It is worth pointing out that the international discussion today is focused on a Mideast zone free of weapons of mass destruction, rather than just nuclear weapons, reflecting the need to deal with the full range of arms and threat perceptions in the region rather than singling out nuclear weapons. Moreover, pioneering regional arms control talks were held in the early 1990s in the context of the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process. These talks - the Arms Control and Regional Security working group - demonstrated that there are many additional constraints, beyond the Israel-Iran issue to arriving at such an ambitious regional arrangement. Before deeming a NWFZ to be more feasible than normally assumed, this salient experience must be scrutinized in depth.

It would be highly dangerous to construe a NWFZ discussion as a replacement for concerted efforts to confront Iran's ongoing deception and cheating in the nuclear realm. It would also be misguided to think that the Iranian nuclear issue is connected specifically to Israel. Israel's real third choice is the same choice as that of the international community as a whole: to support the ongoing and increasingly determined efforts of the United States, the European Union and others to get Iran to back down from its nuclear goals.

Tehran's march to nuclear capability is a threat with global reach and implications, and the international community has a responsibility to stop it.

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