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ELBARADEI'S MESSAGE TO ISRAEL: REGIONAL SECURITY DIALOGUE

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International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei's two-day visit to Israel last week generated much speculation as to his purpose. Was he seeking to pressure Israel or simply to exchange views and ideas? Would he focus on the need for Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), open its nuclear facilities to inspection, and depart from its current nuclear policy, or was he coming to advance the long-term goal of negotiating a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East? Was the timing of the visit directly tied to recent international pressure on Iran to cooperate with the IAEA? Was the Director General seeking to create a sense of equality in the treatment of Israel?

While ElBaradei commented on all these issues during the course of his visit, his major emphasis was on the need to initiate security dialogue in the Middle East, parallel to peace efforts, with the ultimate goal of creating a NWFZ in this region. In an interview with *Haaretz* during his visit, ElBaradei stressed that Israel should be thinking about creating a new regional security concept for the Middle East because the non-proliferation regime is facing serious challenges; additional states, and even terrorist

organizations, may very well acquire nuclear weapons by means of the nuclear network, and if this happens, the deterrence that has worked in the past may prove to be irrelevant.

In one sense, by emphasizing the crisis that the non-proliferation regime is facing and the prospect that it may fail to stop additional states in the Middle East from going nuclear, ElBaradei has actually underscored the grounds for Israel's basic rationale for a continued nuclear deterrent. In another sense, however, ElBaradei's message about the changing realities in the Middle East is more far-reaching and deserving of close consideration.

In response to Israel's specific concerns regarding Iran's nuclear advances, ElBaradei played down the threat during his visit, noting that Iran's true intentions remain unclear and that no smoking gun has been found. But by placing the more general threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East squarely on the table, he reinforced Israel's basic threat assessment. For even if Iran's ambitions do not extend to nuclear weapons, some other Middle Eastern state may have benefited from the nuclear network, which, as ElBaradei noted, involved no less than 20 states and companies. And the IAEA and

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international community seem to be at a loss in terms of confronting that reality. From Israel's point of view, ElBaradei confirmed the legitimacy of its concerns and strategic calculations, expanding the focus of concern to additional (but as yet unidentified) regional states.

This would imply that there are even less grounds at present for expecting Israel to join the NPT and open its facilities to inspection or to take any other steps that could be perceived as weakening its nuclear deterrent. There would be no reason for Israel to place its trust at this time in international non-proliferation efforts and mechanisms. And judging from his public remarks, ElBaradei seemed to recognize this. He expressed an awareness of Israel's security concerns and noted that, while he would welcome a change in Israel's policy of ambiguity, he had no illusions that this would happen in the short term.

If ElBaradei's call for regional security dialogue takes into account the unlikelihood of any imminent change in Israel's policy, his suggestion becomes quite compelling. While proposals that Israel take a decision to join the NPT and change its policy of ambiguity are today non-starters, ElBaradei's message of regional dialogue has, in contrast, the potential of being a "starter." It can provide the framework for action by all states in the Middle East, based on their recognition that only they can create the understandings and mechanisms to ensure their mutual security. The fact is that realities are changing, and given the time needed to create new concepts of security in the Middle East, ElBaradei stressed that there is no time to lose in initiating dialogue. Over the past year, he has made several statements in which he has emphasized the need to hold a strategic dialogue on "building a security declaration" in the Middle East, balanced with the efforts to work

toward peace. In an interview with *al-Arabiya* on February 25, he noted that "weapons of mass destruction are highly related to the feeling of insecurity, and it is essential to always deal with the reason and not only with the symptoms of this observable fact." In other words, security concerns should be brought to the fore in such discussions. Controlling arms is not enough. States must come to common understandings about what security entails and how it can be ensured.

Many questions remain open with regard to the initiation of such dialogue, including who will take on the role of convener, which states will participate in the dialogue, how will the process be carried out, and, of course, what will the agenda be. Will dialogue be focused primarily on the goal of creating a NWFZ, or will the idea of enhancing mutual security be developed as an essential goal in its own right? How will the prospect of Iran moving in the direction of nuclear weapons be factored in, and how will deterrence be treated in this context? Most importantly, how will the difficulties that plagued the previous round of regional arms control talks (the Arms Control and Regional Security working group of the early 1990s) be overcome?

New rules of the game for dealing with new regional realities need to be created, and ElBaradei's emphasis on initiating dialogue that takes security concerns seriously is a step in this direction. Most significantly for Israel, ElBaradei is clearly looking at the long term and focusing on what is feasible at this time, taking into account what Israel's security concerns are and what they are likely to be. These are important ideas to be considered and they constitute an interesting arms control message to Israel from the head of the IAEA.