

Delegitimization of Israel: A Nuclear Dimension?

Emily B. Landau

Introduction

The delegitimization movement, whose aim is to launch an international boycott of Israel, justifies its actions on the basis that Israel has occupied Palestinian land and oppresses the Palestinian people. The movement's focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has over the past few years fostered the sense among some that if the occupation were to come to an end, then the delegitimization movement would disappear, or at least its core rationale would be severely weakened. But events in recent years have made it clear that some (it is not clear quite how many) of those who have jumped on the delegitimization bandwagon are far more anti-Israel than they are pro-Palestinian. Moreover, anti-Semitic under- and over-tones have been evident in their activities and rhetoric, especially during and since the events of Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014.

One need look no further than the UN organs to appreciate that the attempt to delegitimize Israel goes beyond the issue of the occupation. Israel is accused of being a serial violator of human rights, including gay rights and the rights of women, while the UN routinely adopts resolutions that single out Israel for condemnation with no mention of other states that have far worse human rights records. For example, in early 2015 Israel was the only country denounced for violating women's rights by a commission on the status of women.¹ In another notable instance of stark UN bias against Israel, a November 2015 resolution focused on the Golan Heights. Thus,

in the midst of the ongoing carnage in a bloody civil war that was already ripping through Syria for almost five years, the resolution stipulated that Israel was the problem: “the continued occupation of the Syrian Golan and its de facto annexation constitute a stumbling block in the way of achieving a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the region.”²² The blatant hypocrisy of such UN decisions underscores that there is something deeper and more pervasive at stake.

Delegitimizing Israel: Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian Context

It is no simple matter to capture the essence of the delegitimization movement – its underlying rationale as well as its make-up, organization, and basis of support. The amorphous nature of the movement – which is expressed in its grassroots organizations alongside official international organizations – and the fact that the anti-Israel discourse characterizing it takes place in the media, among prominent artists, and in institutions of higher learning makes it difficult to pin down. There seems to be a hard core of committed anti-Israel activists and enthusiasts and a broader, more diverse group that surrounds that core. The peripheral supporters might be just going along for the ride and therefore may be less committed to the cause; on the other hand, they might be using the movement as a convenient cover for their own deep-seated anti-Israel and/or anti-Semitic sentiments.

Even with these dilemmas about how to define the phenomenon, it is hard to miss the atmosphere of intense opposition and expressions of hatred toward Israel that are apparent in BDS demonstrations and boycotts, in social media, and on college campuses in the US and Europe. Considering how deeply entrenched the delegitimization trends have become, it is doubtful whether the movement would disappear even were peace to be achieved between Israel and the Palestinians. There is at least an equal probability that the determined and well-organized delegitimization activists would turn elsewhere, targeting other issues, such as the plight of the Arab minority living in Israel. Regarding the latter, while Israel can certainly do more to improve the situation, it is also true that as long as Israel is defined as a Jewish and democratic state, the tensions are not likely to disappear. It is indeed difficult to envision how the issue would be resolved to the satisfaction of Israel’s detractors, and it is far more likely that it will continue to provide fertile ground for their anti-Israel cause.

There are likely to be other areas, beyond the purview of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, where a profoundly anti-Israel stance might continue to solidify and reverberate. This article briefly considers the likelihood of Israel's policies and positions on WMD/nuclear arms control issues becoming a more central focus of anti-Israel sentiments and movements. It discusses current trends and poses the question whether the nuclear realm – in particular, Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity in the context of global nuclear nonproliferation efforts – could be the target of the ongoing efforts to delegitimize Israel. Two specific cases will be examined in which anti-Israel stances have surfaced in recent years: first, surrounding the twelve-year effort to stop Iran from attaining a military nuclear capability, and second, surrounding the efforts from 2010 to 2015 to convene a conference on a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) for the Middle East. The goal is to assess the likelihood of these trends congealing into a meaningful anti-Israel stance – namely, the delegitimization of Israel via WMD issues. Because there is a basis for such claims, as well as emerging trends, this is an interesting and largely unexplored aspect of the overall delegitimization phenomenon that is worthy of consideration.

Iran Nuclear Crisis and Debate

In the context of the debate over how best to curb Iran's military nuclear ambitions, a new trend has emerged over the past decade that pointed an accusing finger at Israel in the nuclear realm, no less than Iran, sometimes going so far as to assert that it is in fact Israel that is the problem and not Iran.³ For at least two decades, Iran has been trying to deflect attention from itself and from suspicions that it ever advanced a military nuclear program (a fact finally confirmed in the IAEA report of December 2015). One strategy has been to emphasize that it is Israel that is the sole nuclear threat in the region and that it is this threat that must be the focus of international attention.⁴ For years it seemed that no one was picking up on this narrative: Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity did not raise particular concern in nonproliferation debates, and there was a sense of widespread, albeit implicit, understanding that not only does Israel have existential concerns that justify maintaining a nuclear deterrent but that Israel has proven to be a very responsible and restrained (if assumed) nuclear player.

But more recently – and in the context of discussions focused on Iran – a shift has occurred, and Israel's nuclear stance is now up for debate. The

idea that Israel suddenly poses a nuclear threat has gained some traction in the wider international debate, although it is still not widespread. For the Israel critics, the differences between Israel and Iran in the nuclear realm boil down to the fact that Iran is a member of the NPT and does not possess nuclear weapons, while Israel remains outside the Treaty and is assumed to have an arsenal of nuclear weapons. This narrative either ignores or distorts other meaningful differences between the two states that provide essential context: for example, the fact that Israel is defensively oriented in the nuclear realm and has a solid forty plus-year record of restraint and responsibility, whereas Iran joined the NPT only to use it later as a cover for violating the commitment that it made when it joined, namely, never to work on a military nuclear capability. Iran has been deceiving the international community for decades, while aggressively provoking its neighbors and openly rejecting Israel's right to exist as a sovereign state in the Middle East. Ignoring these salient differences between the two states, detractors still ask why Iran is challenged by the international community when it is Israel that actually possesses nuclear weapons, making it the "true" regional menace.

What we see on the Iranian nuclear front is an emerging pattern that is quite similar to the one that fuels attacks on Israel regarding the Palestinian issue, namely, that Israel is presented as the guilty party, the Iranians (like the Palestinians) are blameless, and the complex realities on the ground are ignored. As in the Palestinian context, this comes down to an anti-Israel stance rather than genuine concern for nuclear disarmament. Even if people do not adhere to the view that Israel is a so-called nuclear menace, it has become quite commonplace to question why Israel is "allowed" to have what Iran is denied.

WMDFZ Conference for the Middle East

In the 2010 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) the idea emerged of holding a WMDFZ conference for the Middle East before the end of 2012. From the time of this conference to the time of the follow-up conference five years later (2015), attempts were made, unsuccessfully, to set an agenda and a date for this WMDFZ conference. But these discussions also turned into a new arena for raising complaints against Israel in the nuclear realm. In fact, the WMDFZ initiative has a much longer history, with the idea first introduced and included in the final consensus document of the NPT RevCon as early as 1995. The 1995 initiative was spearheaded by Egypt, following

its disappointment with the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks of the early 1990s. Egypt had hoped ACRS would focus on Israel's assumed nuclear capability, and when that did not happen, Egypt turned to the NPT framework. This was presented as a regional initiative, but for Egypt, the main concern was getting Israel to join the NPT and dismantling whatever military nuclear capability it had.⁵

From that time, Egypt continued to wage its diplomatic campaign against Israel in the nuclear realm. But the decision that was included in the 2010 RevCon final document created new impetus for this agenda, especially as the event dovetailed with President Obama's disarmament agenda, presented in a speech in Prague in April 2009.⁶ In the ensuing discussions over whether and when to hold a conference, Israel was increasingly singled out by Egypt and other states in the Middle East as the major obstacle to setting a date for the event, even though the resolution that was adopted had stipulated that the convening of the conference must be freely arrived at by the regional parties.

The focus on Israel fueled sentiments that Israel – the so-called nuclear state – was not cooperating with an agenda supported by all other states in the region. Significantly, however, after the parties had failed by late 2012 to convene a conference, the Finnish facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, worked tirelessly to hold informal discussions among the Middle East parties with the aim of setting an agenda for the conference.⁷ While Israel cooperated fully with this informal process of agenda-setting in a series of meetings that took place during 2013 and 2014, the Arab participants were less consistent and committed, and Iran came only to the first meeting. Still, it was Israel that was accused of not cooperating with the others and of defying this new regional WMD arms control dynamic.

Discussion

Having set forth the general parameters of the Iran nuclear crisis and the issues surrounding the discussion of a WMDFZ, and in particular the way Israel has been targeted in the nuclear realm, it becomes clear that Israel's nuclear program has of late become a topic of public debate in a way that breaks with past tendencies, especially vis-à-vis the Iran nuclear crisis. But how likely is it that these trends will turn into a more meaningful and widespread phenomenon? There is no single answer to this question.

Of the two main areas, criticism of Israel in the context of the Iran nuclear crisis has provided more fertile ground for delegitimization trends than the

WMDFZ issue. In fact, the major criticism of Israel regarding the WMDFZ has been voiced at official state levels and has been much less visible in unofficial, non-expert circles and discussions. Interestingly, while the WMDFZ dynamic unfolded in tandem with the intensification of the nuclear crisis with Iran, the process was, for the most part, discussed separately. Moreover, even though Israel was a direct participant in developments regarding the WMDFZ conference and could therefore have been assumed to become a more prominent target of criticism, this did not ultimately happen. The complaints that were leveled against Israel in the broader public debate were mainly confined to debate over the Iran nuclear crisis.

The relative lack of appeal of the WMDFZ initiative can be explained by the following three factors: first, it is a topic that is virtually unknown beyond the expert community; second, within that expert community it is well known that Israel actually took a positive stance toward Ambassador Laajava's efforts to initiate informal talks with the aim of carving out a conference agenda; and finally, at the 2015 NPT RevCon, Egypt overplayed its hand with a new and very harsh proposal that targeted Israel in a way that the previous document had not, and this led the United States, Britain, and Canada to withhold support for the RevCon final document.⁸ It also became clear that some of the other Arab states did not necessarily support Egypt's new proposal. As a result, the WMDFZ conference idea has been taken off the NPT agenda until at least 2020. While the Iran nuclear crisis has provided more opportunities for Israel's delegitimization, here too it is likely that with the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 and the reduction in attention to the Iran nuclear issue, the references to Israel will also lose their potency. The issue is partially dependent on Israel's actions; Israel should not be the one standing at the forefront against a nuclear Iran, as it is in the interest of all the global and regional powers to prevent this outcome. It is possible that the decision by Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to emphasize this struggle, for example in his speeches at the United Nations, has paradoxically contributed to putting Israel in the spotlight.

An interesting question remains whether delegitimization trends that emerged in the nuclear realm have been fueled and intensified by the delegitimization movement in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Here, the answer seems to be in the affirmative, as the different aspects of the overall phenomenon tend to feed off of each other. In other words, if it starts to

be politically acceptable to bash Israel in one context, it is therefore much easier to create and disseminate a damning case against it in another, and Israel becomes fair game for biased and hypocritical critique. Indeed, there is a dangerous normative dimension to the phenomenon when it becomes acceptable and even commonplace to harshly and often unfairly criticize Israel in any and all discussions – be it in the UN, the media, or “polite conversation” at respectable dinner parties.

As long as the Israel-Palestine question assumes center stage, there is no need for another full-blown anti-Israel campaign, and therefore, for this reason too, the nuclear issue is likely to remain relatively contained, at least for the time being. Nevertheless, the new trends that have emerged of late in nuclear debates should not be ignored or brushed aside. The seeds have been sown and will be easier to exploit if and when the issue resurfaces in the future.

Notes

- 1 “Israel Singled Out at the UN for Women’s Right Violations,” *Times of Israel*, March 21, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-singled-out-at-un-for-womens-right-violations/>.
- 2 UN Watch, “UN Adopts 6 Resolutions on Israel, 0 on Rest of World,” November 25, 2015, <https://www.unwatch.org/un-adopts-6-resolutions-on-israel-0-on-rest-of-world/>.
- 3 A good example is David Morrison, “The Elephant in the Room: Israel’s Nuclear Weapons,” *Electronic Intifada*, June 28, 2009. Morrison was described as “a political officer for the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign,” in an article that hinted at the possible shift from the Palestinian sphere to the nuclear one. See also Julian Borger, “The Truth About Israel’s Secret Nuclear Arsenal,” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2014; Lamis Adoni, “Israel: The Real Nuclear Threat in the Middle East,” *The New Arab*, April 3, 2015; Bruce Riedel, “Israel, Not Iran, Started Middle East Nuclear Arms Race,” *al-Monitor*, July 29, 2015; Kit O’Connell, “Iran Has 0 Nukes While Israel’s 80 Nuclear Weapons are Real Threat to Peace,” *MintPress News*, August 21, 2015; and Walter L Hixon, “Israel Says Iran’s Lying about its Nuclear Program? That’s Rich,” *History News Network*, October 7, 2015.
- 4 See Emily B. Landau, “If Iran Then Israel? Competing Nuclear Norms in the Middle East,” *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 3 (2009), especially pp. 98-100.
- 5 See Emily B. Landau, “Egypt, Israel, and the WMDFZ Conference for the Middle East: Setting the Record Straight,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 1 (2013): 13-16.
- 6 Ibid.

- 7 See Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, “NPT RevCon 2015: Considerations for Convening a WMDFZ Conference,” *INSS Insight* No. 691, April 27, 2015.
- 8 Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, “2015 NPT RevCon: WMDFZ Conference off the Table, For Now,” *INSS Insight* No. 705, June 3, 2015.