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**The Biden Administration on a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East:
Implications for Israel**

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The Biden administration will be required to define its position on the establishment of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East before the fifteenth Review Conference (RevCon) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) scheduled for August 2021. This sensitive issue could once again pit Israel against the United States, in view of the support of previous Democratic administrations for resolutions to advance the issue. As the RevCon approaches, Israel should coordinate its positions with the US in the framework of a strategic dialogue, in order to avoid any crisis, while encouraging the new administration to recognize the official Trump administration document of 2018, which supported Israel's policy. Based on past experience, as well as new developments in relations between Israel and the Gulf states, Israel could propose a mechanism for a regional security dialogue that will be comprehensive in terms of participants and issues to be discussed.

In a speech at the [Munich Security Conference](#) (February 19, 2021), President Joe Biden referred to the risk of the global proliferation of nuclear weapons as one of the central issues of his administration, and stressed the need for diplomacy and cooperation on this subject at the international level. The White House's first official document (March 4, 2021), entitled "[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#)," defines nuclear weapons as an existential threat that must be countered by renewed American leadership.

In this context the administration faces two serious challenges – Iran and North Korea. Both will be discussed, along with issues relating to nuclear disarmament, at the fifteenth Review Conference (RevCon) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is scheduled for August 2021. In addition, the issue of a Middle East nuclear and weapons of mass destruction-free zone (WMDFFZ) will presumably be raised for discussion, and thus in advance of the Conference, the administration will have to formulate its position on the issue.

The issue of establishing a WMDFFZ in the Middle East could once again pit Israel against the United States, in view of the support of previous Democratic administrations

for anti-Israel resolutions on the subject. President Bill Clinton supported the final document of the NPT RevCon in 1995 with a resolution (presented by Egypt) for a nuclear and WMD-free zone in the Middle East – a proposal that since then has become a permanent fixture on the agenda of the conferences, held every five years. In 2000, the same administration agreed to an Arab League demand to single out Israel for inclusion in the resolution text. At the 2010 NPT RevCon, in view of the Arab demand for practical steps to promote the issue, President Barack Obama agreed to support the final document proposal calling for a conference in 2012 to discuss implementation of the resolution regarding the Middle East.

As soon as the resolution was passed in 2010, then-head of Israel’s National Information Directorate Nir Hefetz responded in the name of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that “The position of the Israeli government is that this resolution is fundamentally flawed and tainted with hypocrisy. The resolution ignores the reality of the Middle East and the real threats to the region and the entire world, and focuses on Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, and the only country in the world facing threats of destruction. On the other hand, Iran, which, is in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and openly declares its hope to erase Israel from the face of the earth, is not even mentioned in the resolution. As Israel has not signed the NPT, it is not bound by resolutions of the RevCon, and the conference is no source of authority for Israel. In view of the distorted nature of this resolution, Israel will play no part in its implementation.”

In spite of Israel’s determined announcement that it would not be part of the implementation of the resolution, however, after the UN appointed Finnish Ambassador Jaakko Laajava as a facilitator, Prime Minister Netanyahu empowered the diplomats dealing with the subject to take a different and unexpected approach. Rather than boycotting the process, they were authorized to meet with the Finnish facilitator and even propose a format for cooperation, based on the following principles:

- a. A direct regional dialogue under the auspices and with the participation of representatives of Middle East countries (and not under the auspices of the UN or any other international framework).
- b. The dialogue will include discussions of broad security issues, and will not be a framework for negotiations on a specific issue.
- c. Any decisions must be based on a consensus of all, and not by a majority of participants.

Some of these principles were formulated back in the 1990s as part of the discussions of the working group on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS). Israel presented these principles that enabled it to participate in the process, but clarified that these were also red lines, and any deviation from them would not allow it to continue in this process.

The Finnish facilitator agreed to accept these principles, which led to the postponement of the conference under UN auspices in 2012, followed by five rounds of talks “under the Israeli framework.” Held between October 2013 and June 2014 primarily in the town of Glion in Switzerland, the talks included the participation of representatives from Israel and about 15 Middle East countries. The meeting in October 2013 was also attended by representatives of Iran.

As in the ACRS talks, Egypt and the Arab League once again refrained from engaging with the “positive interchange” from Israel, and decided to stop the process. Consequently, Israel was perceived by the United States, the European Union, and Russia as the positive party promoting a process of dialogue and gained their support, while Egypt and the Arab League were isolated. At the 2015 RevCon, the United States, Britain, and Canada spoke out publicly against Egypt and refused to support a further resolution against Israel.

Donald Trump’s administration adopted the Israeli principles presented in the Glion process. At the 2018 preparatory meeting for the RevCon, the United States presented an official position paper that [stated](#) that “regrettably, efforts to bridge the difference in views were suspended in early 2015 after the Arab League Senior Officials Committee declined multiple invitations and requests for dates from the Facilitator to further rounds of consultations.” The document claimed that continuation of the process was the full responsibility of the countries of the region, without international auspices like the NPT conference, and must include discussion of broader issues of regional security and recognition of the principle of consensus. The document also states that for the process to succeed, countries of the region must build trust through direct regional dialogue with recognition of the security concerns of each country and recognition of Israel as a sovereign state.

In protest against the US position, that same year Arab states initiated a resolution at the UN ([Resolution A/73/546](#), December 22, 2018), which called to convene a conference to establish a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. The resolution, which called on the UN Secretary General to convene an annual conference until binding agreement was reached on establishing the weapons-free zone, was passed with the support of 88 countries, including Russia and China, opposition of 4 countries (the United States, Israel, Liberia, and Micronesia), and 75 abstentions, including all the European Union members. After the resolution was passed, Israel announced that as the conference was contrary to the concept of regional security and the principle of consensus, Israel would not support any UN resolutions concerning a

nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, and would not take part in regional events on this subject.

The first conference, based on the Arab states' resolution, was held in November 2019, without American or Israeli participation. The second conference is due to meet in late 2021. Before the next RevCon, the United States will have to lay out its position on the issue of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Will it adopt the same line taken by the Trump administration, and before that, by the Obama administration at the 2015 RevCon?

In recent decades, Democratic administrations in the United States have tended to seek a compromise position on the nuclear issue in the Middle East, which would be acceptable to Arab states and maintain the consensus among NPT signatories. The most meaningful change in the current period is the resolution passed in 2018 to convene an annual conference in the UN. This resolution effectively changed the rules of the game, by creating a mechanism to allow long-term engagement with the issue of a regional weapons-free zone under the auspices of the UN. Will this be enough to remove the subject from the agenda of the NPT Review Conference? At this time it is not clear how Egypt and the Arab League intend to act at the next RevCon. Some believe that having obtained the mechanism to convene the conference, they will be comfortable with mention of the subject in the final document.

As part of the RevCon preparations (assuming that it does take place in August), the US administration will presumably prepare its position on the issue of the weapons-free zone. Israel would do well to promote an intimate dialogue with the US administration on this issue, separate from the Iranian nuclear issue, in order to understand its policy and coordinate positions – while avoiding bilateral confrontation on each of these two sensitive issues. Israel should encourage the new administration to adopt the official US position paper of 2018, whereby the United States must clarify that it does not intend to participate in the conference announced by the UN in 2018 contrary to its position and contrary to the parameters agreed by all countries in the region. Once again, after coordination with the United States and later with the Gulf states as well, Israel should propose an initiative that includes a framework for direct regional dialogue on a broad range of security issues, which will be inclusive for all participants and comprehensive in terms of topics (conventional and unconventional weapons).

An Israeli initiative of this kind would help to present an Israeli narrative on issues of regional security and the spread of WMD in the Middle East, against the Arab call for the continuation of multilateral steps against Israel, including under UN auspices. A substantial difference between today and the atmosphere in the nineties, as well as during

the Glion meetings, is the regional normalization process that began last year, whereby Israel has established official diplomatic relations with a number of Arab states, particularly the Gulf states. In this context, Israel must strive to promote a regional initiative for direct talks between the countries on issues of regional security, and to blunt the Egyptian demand for continuation of conferences that focus on Israel and do not present the real problem of instability in the Middle East, namely Iran and its subversive activity against various countries in the region.