

# Egypt's Nuclear Dilemma

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## Introduction

Ever since Egypt first came to perceive Israel as having launched a nuclear program, and later (some time in the early 1970s) as having most likely crossed the nuclear threshold, Egypt has been struggling to come to terms with the regional implications of this development. Concerned with the new dimension to Israel's potential, Egypt has adopted a range of strategies in its attempt to restore a sense of balance with its northeastern neighbor. It has at various times attempted to actively reverse, diminish the impact, or rhetorically dismiss the ramifications of Israel's nuclear development. However, especially since the 1979 peace treaty, it has been careful not to press the issue to the point where it might seriously jeopardize its relations with Israel or with the United States. As far as entering the nuclear arms race itself, the consensus in Israel today is that Egypt continues to uphold its strategic decision of 1981 (when it ratified the NPT) not to pursue this option.

Dominating Egypt's efforts over the past two decades is its pursuit of an intense and ongoing diplomatic process to bring Israel to sign the NPT

and place its nuclear facilities under the IAEA safeguard regime. In the first half of the 1990s, in the context of the Arms Control and Regional Security working group, Egypt put its full weight behind adopting an arms control agenda designed to focus the talks on the creation of a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ), which would also target Israel's assumed nuclear capability. These talks, which never progressed to discussing the latter nuclear issue, have been suspended since 1995. Furthermore, in 1995, despite Egypt's vigorous campaign, the NPT was extended indefinitely, without Israel's signature having been secured.

Egypt's concern with Israel's assumed nuclear capability has been consistently evident. Over the past decade, however, two parallel developments have served to sharpen Egypt's nuclear dilemma. Growing evidence of additional regional states' intentions of developing WMD capabilities, and assessments of the actual progress they have made in this direction, has increased the regional challenge that Egypt perceives, while the failure of regional arms control efforts (as well as the indefinite extension of the NPT without Israel's

signature) has limited its range of options for dealing with WMD in the region. Regarding Iran and Iraq, reports of nuclear developments in these states clearly demonstrate the limits of the NPT in any case, as both states are signatories to this agreement. The combination of a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the evolving regional status quo in the nuclear realm, together with a lack of viable means for dealing with the situation, is the essence of Egypt's current nuclear dilemma.

Understanding Egypt's dilemma provides a context for evaluating suggestive statements made by high-ranking Egyptian officials and various media reports on the nuclear issue. Analysts outside Egypt who merely brush aside the quandary based on their assessment of Egypt's lack of ability (or desire) to develop its own nuclear capability, or, conversely, those who conclude based on a lone statement that Egypt is actually likely to take action to redress the imbalance with Israel, do not accurately reflect the complexity of Egypt's considerations. Instead, a comprehensive approach that includes the subtleties and nuances of the situation is preferred. From this perspective,

initial hints of an emerging Egyptian tendency to rely increasingly on the cultivation of a sense of doubt regarding its true nuclear intentions as a means of managing its current dilemma will be examined.

## Israel and the Principle of Equality

The decline in the number of statements by Egypt on nuclear concerns from the unusually large volume in the months leading up to the NPT Review and Extension Conference of 1995 does not necessarily reflect decreased interest or concern. Along with advancing certain issues related to the regional arms control talks, Egypt strove – albeit unsuccessfully – to use the conference to achieve a significant breakthrough and pressure Israel to adhere to the NPT. A review of the published literature since 1995 charts the ongoing frustration that Egypt has sensed with regard to nuclear developments, especially in terms of the implications for its regional standing.

Official Egyptian statements on the nuclear issue over the past five to seven years have repeatedly relayed a message to Israel that advocates balance and equality among states in the Middle East as the primary determinant of their security. Egypt maintains that for effective arms control, no state can be exempt from the obligation to control its non-conventional capabilities. The absence of a regional arms control arrangement (WMDFZ) that includes Israel would result in mounting

pressures on other regional states to enter into a dangerous but inescapable weapons race.

Egypt rejects Israel's claims to have unique security needs. Former Foreign Minister Amr Musa has stated on more than one occasion that Israel's signing of the NPT and the creation of a WMDFZ is the only way to ensure security and safety in the region; Israeli security should be part

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and parcel of an all-out security arrangement that includes all Arab states. Egyptian official statements (primarily by Amr Musa; Mubarak's senior political advisor, Osama al-Baz; and Mubarak himself) indicate that as long as Israel retains its undeclared nuclear capability, there is no reasonable basis for challenging other potentially dangerous WMD programs in the region. The principle of equality between states thus overrides any potential objections to other states' attempts to redress the imbalance in the Middle East by acquiring non-conventional weapons. Indeed, this principle is presumably even stronger than the obligations of

these same states to their adherence to previous arms control treaties (most significantly, the NPT).

While Egypt itself has remained a strong advocate of a regional WMDFZ, the failure of the multilateral arms control process (ACRS) to foster significant advances in this direction has on occasion led to statements applying the equality principle to Egypt's behavior as well. For example, regarding the question of suspected Egyptian missile acquisition from North Korea in 1996, Musa said that if any party wants to discuss weapons in the Middle East, Egypt is ready, but the discussion must be founded on a comprehensive review: from the Israeli nuclear program to the missiles and anti-missile systems of all states in the region. Mubarak has also defended Egypt's right to acquire SCUD missiles. When in May 1997 Syrian President Hafez al-Assad declared that whoever has nuclear weapons has no right to criticize others for whatever weapons they have, and that Arabs would destroy their chemical weapons when Israel gave up its nuclear ones, he was speaking in Egypt, with Mubarak at his side. Finally, in late 1998, Osama al-Baz stated that the existence of nuclear capabilities in the Middle East will lead to insecurity and will give rise to alternative weapons, such as chemical or biological. The following year he noted that if the Arabs felt threatened by Israel, they could obtain a similar nuclear program or develop their own chemical or biological weapons. The message was that all WMD must be

eliminated from the region, but there was implicit justification for the arms race precisely to “achieve equality” if this goal was not attained.

## Regional Considerations

Statements made by high-level Egyptian officials and various media reports overwhelmingly target Israel as Egypt’s major concern in the nuclear realm. Embedded in these statements, however, are clear hints of Egypt’s broader regional considerations, which make its agenda on nuclear issues more varied and complex. Egypt is particularly concerned how nuclear development and potential proliferators in the Middle East impact on its own regional prominence.

Egyptian officials have cited the principle of equality as justification for Iran’s possible nuclear ambitions and activities, but the message has been intertwined with the perceived danger or at least challenge to Egypt itself. In 1996, Musa noted that Israel’s policy makes it hard to argue with Iran. If Egypt questions Iran’s intentions and motives, Iran can point to Israel, and this constrains Egypt’s ability to argue strongly against the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region. More recently, al-Baz expressed the hope that Iran would drop its regional ambitions, and behave as a sisterly state that maintains good ties with all Arab states. Accordingly, he noted that “it is in our interest to free the region, even Iran, of mass destruction weapons.”

Thus, in broader regional terms,

and even if Israel is blamed for the arms race, the fact that Iran may become a nuclear state is in itself a challenge to Egypt’s regional standing. Moreover, it is worth recalling that Mubarak’s original (and extensively cited) proposal of April 1990 for the establishment of a WMDFZ in the region actually came in the wake of *Iraqi* deterrent threats against Israel. Egypt was concerned

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by Iraq’s threat to burn half of Israel with the binary chemical weapon, if attacked by Israel.

## What Are Egypt’s Options?

Egypt’s options in approaching regional nuclear proliferation are limited. As an avenue towards a solution, arms control discussions have proved to be both tricky and slow, and the prospects for renewing regional discussions that would address the nuclear issue are not high. The possibility of achieving peace agreements, which would presumably reduce the incentives to maintain and further develop WMD

programs, seems at present to be quite remote as well.

As far as developing its own military nuclear capability, there are clear technological and economic hurdles that Egypt would have to overcome in order to achieve this. While the intent of this article is not to examine these issues in depth, it is reasonable to assume that if Egypt were to make the political decision to go nuclear, it would find the means of overcoming these obstacles, as other proliferators have done. But there are additional constraints that Egypt would face. Not only does Egypt have obligations according to the NPT, but it has built itself up as the major regional advocate of a WMDFZ, and even sought to enhance its leadership role by promoting this agenda. True, Egypt could conceivably reverse its position (due to its failure to advance its arms control agenda), and begin to base its leadership on the development of an Egyptian/Arab military nuclear option. But Egypt would then have to take into account its relationship with the U.S., which Mubarak has most recently described as “strategic and strong.” Becoming a suspected nuclear proliferator would seriously jeopardize Egypt’s strategic relations with the U.S., and this would be a very high price for Egypt to pay.

Regarding Egypt’s relations with the U.S., there is an additional dimension to the dilemma. On the one hand, Egypt’s ratification of the NPT in 1981 occurred in the context of its strategic decision to align itself with the U.S., which was a major decision



with important implications. Egypt acknowledged thereby that the U.S. was very much concerned with stemming nuclear proliferation in the region. On the other hand, however, looking at what has happened more recently with India and Pakistan since they became declared nuclear states, Egypt could conclude that the implications of going nuclear might not be that serious, especially in light of American-Pakistani cooperation since September 11. In this context, Egypt will most likely be very interested in U.S. policy toward North Korea in the coming months, even though the situation in the Middle East is undoubtedly different, and it seems that the U.S. would look very unfavorably on additional nuclear proliferation in this region.

### Cultivating Doubts on the Nuclear Issue

While Egypt remains without a viable option for confronting the nuclear challenge, the debate on the nuclear issue continues. The experience of ACRS underscored for Egypt the difficulties of applying pressure on Israel in the nuclear realm, as well as revealing the regional dynamics that would have to be juggled in order to maintain regional leadership. Most of all, however, it seems to have been the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests of May 1998 that sparked a greater debate in Egypt over the dangers of proliferation and the appropriate nuclear policy for Egypt. Fears were fueled primarily due to the possible implications of these tests for Iran, as evident in statements by Mubarak

following the tests. The tests, he noted, open the door to nuclear proliferation for additional states such as Iran, and therefore Egypt will continue to press for the creation of a WMDFZ, an essential answer to the threat.

Statements cited above include the justification that Egyptian leaders were lending to possible regional arms races, if Israel did not take steps

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to curb its nuclear capability. Following the tests in South Asia, the seeds of doubt regarding Egypt's own nuclear intentions were planted somewhat more explicitly within Egyptian policy statements. Thus, in July 1998, Mubarak stated unequivocally that Egypt's decision was *not* to go nuclear. As if to underscore this message to Israel, he told a visiting delegation of Israeli "Peace Now" activists that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he had been offered to buy nuclear materials and knowledge, but that he had declined the offer because he did not want to enter the nuclear race. However, several months later

Mubarak significantly qualified this statement by clarifying that Egypt would only develop nuclear weapons if it became necessary. Thus, while he had no intention of proceeding in this direction at the time, he said that "when the time comes and we need nuclear weapons, we will not hesitate." He added that the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons had become easy; India and Pakistan have tested, and talk is that Iran is on the way. Significantly, the *Al-Ahram Strategic Report* of 1998 referred to the persistent inability of the Arab states to decide once and for all whether or not they are prepared to contemplate the nuclear option in order to redress the balance of power that is tipped largely in favor of the Israeli nuclear arsenal. The report noted that Egypt made an "unusual move" when it suggested that it might ultimately adopt the nuclear option if it had to.

Doubts regarding Egypt's nuclear status have also been planted through hints of a possible linkage between the civilian and military nuclear realms. As far back as 1995, it was suggested that significant progress in civilian nuclear power in Egypt was a means of narrowing the technological gap with Israel and working toward the restoration of balance with it. More explicit hints that civilian nuclear technology could provide the basis for military applications in the future appeared in an article by Mounir Megahed, general manager of feasibility studies at Egypt's Nuclear Power Plant Authority, published in Egypt's *Al-Ahram* in June 1998.

Megahed maintained that the non-nuclear option has become a luxury that Egypt can no longer afford. He equated an invigoration of the Egyptian nuclear program to Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal as a measure of reviving feelings of national pride. While noting that the peaceful utilization of nuclear energy differs from and does not necessarily lead to military applications, "a mastery of nuclear technologies... cannot be reversed or compartmentalized; under certain conditions, it could facilitate the production of nuclear weapons." He noted that nuclear weapons can always be developed when there is a political will.

More recently, in an article in *Al-Ahram* in May of this year, Dr. Mustafa al-Fiqi, a former Egyptian representative to the IAEA who is also identified as a friend of Mubarak, questioned whether it might not have been better for Egypt to have proceeded with obtaining nuclear arms not for actual use but for deterrence purposes. He pointed out that narrowing the technology and economic achievement gap can insure a degree of strategic balance that brings peace, boosts stability, and serves as a deterrent. In addition, he noted that nuclear usage for peaceful

purposes can lead to other development if the funds and know-how are available. According to al-Fiqi, Egypt has both; what is lacking is the political will. In other words, if and when a decision is made, Egypt will be able to implement it.

## Conclusion

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declared development, or of possession of nuclear or other non-conventional capabilities. The example of Israel, and to a certain extent Iran and Iraq as well, has demonstrated the significance of *perceived* capabilities or options. When perceptions dominate, evidence of

technological capabilities, even for civilian applications, takes on an added significance.

Egypt's leadership interests are such that it will find it increasingly difficult not to be on equal standing in the non-conventional realm with other regional powers. It has managed to live with the Israeli nuclear deterrent over the past decades, while devoting much energy to finding a way, primarily through diplomatic channels, to redress the imbalance. The diminishing prospects of success through diplomatic and arms control efforts in the non-conventional realm, coupled with increased nuclearization of the Middle East, will dramatically increase Egypt's motivation at least to be perceived as capable of participating in the regional non-conventional weapons race. Egypt is likely to increase its efforts to capitalize on the element of doubt as a means of enhancing its regional image. Thus, even if Egypt does not make a clear decision to go nuclear, it will most likely take steps to convince others that the decision exists as a viable option, and that Egypt is indeed a credible contender for creating some kind of balance in the region if the nuclear race continues.