Change in Israeli Nuclear Policy?

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One of the most significant developments in Israeli society in recent years has been the exposure of many aspects of Israel's security policy to greater public debate. As part of this trend, the nuclear question has also been subject to increasing—although still limited—public scrutiny. Since the 1991 Gulf War, the context of the debate over Israel's nuclear policy has been three-fold: changes in Israel's strategic environment, including both the progress made in the Arab-Israeli peace process and the growing threat of nonconventional weapons; the demands that Israel begin to deal directly with its perceived nuclear capacity at both the regional and global levels; and, finally, the greater willingness that has been demonstrated by the Israeli government to join arms control negotiations and initiatives, both regional and global in scope.

Two separate but related questions emerge from this debate: whether certain statements by officials or actions by the government should be interpreted as indicating a change in Israel's long-standing policy of ambiguity in the nuclear realm, and whether, in light of developments in the region, there are grounds for such a change, and, if so, the nature of the change that should be introduced.

The debate over whether a change in Israel's nuclear policy has in fact occurred has related—at different times—to two different theses: that Israel has demonstrated a greater willingness to progress in the direction of arms control, including discussion of its nuclear potential, and, that there is evidence of a tendency to formulate a more explicit nuclear deterrent. Both theses rely largely on the interpretation of nuances, which is to be expected when official nuclear policy is characterized by deliberate ambiguity.

The first thesis was the subject of debate following intensified Egyptian demands that Israel sign the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) or begin discussions about the possible creation of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East as part of the arms control and regional security dialogue. Perhaps in partial response to these demands, then Prime Minister Shimon Peres remarked in late December 1995 that Israel, if given peace, would "give up the atom." This fueled speculation that Israel was moving in the direction of greater transparency. But subsequent explanations clarified that there was no change in Israel's official position.

Similarly, Israel's signing of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in January 1993 and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in September 1996 provoked some public debate about the implication of these actions, including whether they provided evidence of a greater willingness to join international arms control conventions and treaties. But upon signing the CTBT, Israel's UN representatives stipulated that Israel's support for the treaty did not reflect any change in its policy on the nuclear issue.

The opposite thesis—namely, that Israel has adopted a more explicit nuclear deterrent posture—has been stimulated by more recent regional developments: lack of further progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the suspension of the multilateral Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks, and an increase in reports of potential nonconventional threats to Israel emanating from Iran, Iraq and Syria.

A prominent example is an article by Joseph Fitchett ("Israeli Reaction to Iran's Buildup Is Heightening Nuclear Fears in Mideast," ***International Herald Tribune***, December 19, 1997), which argues that Israel, in response to Iran's buildup of material for weapons of mass destruction, "has started talking about its nuclear capability as a counterforce to enemy nations' advanced weapons. No longer does Israel conceive of nuclear weapons as a last resort. Israel has adopted the phrase 'nuclear capability'—still short of an outright acknowledgment of its nuclear weapons—as a deterrent, perhaps even a threat, to adversaries." Fitchett also argues that Israeli leaders have recently gone public about Israel's nuclear deterrent, and he cites public statements made by leaders from across the political spectrum that, in his view, demonstrate an escalation of Israel's "nuclear defiance."

Fitchett's assessment attributes too much novelty to certain nuances. In the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in publications by external sources that relate to Israel's assumed nuclear capability. Many western publications refer directly to "Israel's nuclear weapons" or "nuclear arsenal," and Arab states refer to this asserted capability as a ***fait accompli***. Thus, the fact that statements issued from Israel now employ the term "nuclear capability" rather than "nuclear option" is not very significant in itself. Clearly, the more important issue to be dealt with is whether Israel continues to regard its nuclear option as an option of last resort or

whether it views this option as a counterforce to attempts by Arab states to introduce weapons of mass destruction into the region.

In fact, Israel has made it clear over the years that it views the nuclearization of the Middle East as an existential threat, and a development that it must take strong measures to prevent. Thus, there is really no change in this respect. Moreover, in the ten months between Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's threat to "burn half of Israel" with binary chemical weapons if Israel attacked Iraq (April 2, 1990) and the first Scud attacks on Israel in mid-January 1991, members of the highest political and security echelons in Israel repeatedly attempted to deter Iraq's use of chemical weapons with phrases similar to those cited by Fitchett.

Fitchett cites Minister of National Infrastructure Ariel Sharon's November 1997 warning that Israel was "ready to respond with all [its] might" if Iraq or Iran used chemical weapons. But, already during the 1990-1991 period, then Chief of Staff Dan Shomron warned that Israel had the capability to "strike hard" against anyone who tried to strike Israel (*Ma'ariv*, August 10, 1990). In a similar vein, then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir warned Iraq that anyone who attempts to attack Israel "will be likely to bring upon himself a heavy disaster" (*Davar*, August 10, 1990). And then Defense Minister Moshe Arens stated that if Israel is attacked, its response "will not be low-profile" (*Ha'aretz*, November 7, 1990). Should Israel believe that it is threatened by weapons of mass destruction, it would not be surprising if it resorts once again to near-explicit deterrent statements, just as it did in the months preceding the 1991 Gulf War.

In fact, Israeli statements made in late January 1998, in the context of the recent Gulf crisis, are not materially different from those made in 1990. President Ezer Weizmann said that: "if there is a clash in the Gulf and Israel is attacked, the missile will not be one way." (*Ma'ariv*, January 30, 1998). The prime minister and minister of defense also made similar statements: Binyamin Netanyahu clarified that ìIsrael reserves the right to self defense and will act according to its security interests."(*Ma'ariv*, February 6, 1998), and Yitzhak Mordechai emphasized that while the chances of Israel being attacked are not high, "we reserve the right to respond and do everything that is necessary." (*Ma'ariv*, February 2, 1998). While there have been references hinting at what possibly went on behind the scenes in the nuclear sphere in this latest crisis, there was no change in Israelís declaratory policy.

Fitchett cites a speech delivered by the head of Israel's Atomic Energy Commission, Gideon Frank, as providing the "fullest statement" of Israel going public about its nuclear deterrent. By taking certain sentences out of context, Fitchett creates the impression that Frank intended to defend Israel's "increasing reliance" on nuclear capabilities.

Fitchett's interpretation is very problematic, not least due to the fact that Frank's statements were made prior to the last Israeli elections, in the context of the debate on arms control. Indeed, Israel's increased willingness to join international arms control initiatives, thereby strengthening international norms that oppose acquisition, development and use of weapons of mass destruction, seems to indicate that Israel is not interested in contributing to the creation of a balance of terror in the Middle East.

The second question—whether Israel should change its nuclear policy—has also provoked some debate in recent years. The issue to be addressed here is whether current regional developments warrant a change in Israel's nuclear posture. Israel continues to face challenges both from the direction of arms cóntrolóratification of the CWC—as well as evidence of growing strategic threats. The prospect of Iran becoming a nuclear power, as well as statements made in 1997 by senior Syrian officials hinting at a strategic equation between Syria's chemical weapons and Israel's assumed nuclear weapons, are serious developments. So is Saddam Hussein's warning, made immediately prior to the recent Gulf crisis (January 17, 1998), that unless sanctions were lifted, he would suspend all cooperation with UNSCOM weapons inspectors if they did not complete their activities in Iraq by May 1998.

While a full analysis of the implications of these developments for Israel's nuclear policy is beyond the scope of this article, Israel's best long-term strategy is to engage itself in a region-wide security dialogue that would deal with the threat of weapons of mass destruction. But until the conditions ripen for such a dialogue, Israel will continue to face nonconventional threats that it must deal with by means of deterrence. This again raises questions about the effectiveness of deterrence based on nuclear ambiguity, and whether Israel should adopt a more explicit deterrent in the face of more tangible threats.

On at least three counts, formulation of an explicit nuclear policy would be both unnecessary and undesirable at the present stage: (1) The perception of Arab states is that Israel already possesses nuclear weapons and that Israel would use them in a situation of last resort; (2) While successful deterrence is frustratingly difficult to prove empirically (deterrence failures are much easier to detect), it would seem that the deterrent effect of Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has thus far succeeded; and (3) Such a change would be interpreted, as Fitchett's article has already sought to do, as an escalation of nuclear defiance—unnecessarily and dangerously raising regional tensions.