From Nuclear Disarmament to "Strategic Stability": Implications for Israel of an Emerging Global Debate

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Introduction

Strategic developments in the Middle East that challenge Israel's security – most importantly, Iran's continued ambition to maintain a military nuclear breakout capability (despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA – announced in July 2015), and international interest in advancing a Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East – have over the past decade been accompanied at the global level by new developments with potentially far-reaching strategic implications. Of particular interest are the "Global Zero" movement in the nuclear realm and the strategic debates it has invited on arms control, deterrence, and "strategic stability," along with more recent developments that have rekindled superpower calculations on the nuclear level reminiscent of the Cold War years.

Movement either in the direction of further nuclear reductions or back to Cold War dynamics would have direct implications for the security of states across the Middle East. This article, however, discusses the more indirect influences on the Middle East that might emanate both from the evolving global debate on nuclear disarmament and from shifting notions of what is required in order to maintain deterrence and strategic stability in today's complex and still proliferating world. Attention will be directed to new thinking and attitudes that are emerging at the global level and their

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possible impact on how regional dynamics are regarded, with a particular view to Israel's security calculations.

The global disarmament debate carries with it an implicit message that the goal of a nuclear free world is across-the-board nuclear reductions, regardless of the specifics of particular cases – namely, the prominent threat perceptions and security concerns of particular states, whether states are defensively or offensively oriented in the nuclear realm, and their overall record of behavior toward nuclear issues. Although US President Obama stated clearly in 2009 that in striving for a world free of nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence would have to be maintained for the foreseeable future, the disarmament message that gained traction in the US and beyond is nonetheless that nuclear weapons must be eliminated, period. This weapons-based agenda could render states less sensitive to Israel's claim that it faces unique strategic challenges, especially vis-à-vis Iran in the post-JCPOA period.

Conversely, the new focus on the challenge of complex multipolar nuclear deterrence equations at the global level – characteristic of the post-Cold War world, and expected to come into sharper relief if the US considers more significant nuclear reductions – could harbor a different message. This challenge, together with new challenges from Russia and the poor results in efforts to dismantle North Korea's nuclear capability and prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state through negotiations, may make global actors more sensitive to the strategic dilemmas that Israel faces in the Middle East. Multipolarity seriously complicates states' security calculations, and this is certainly the case for Israel when it contemplates its strategic deterrence stance in the Middle East.

Global Zero: Nuclear Reductions, with Continued Deterrence

A global movement in support of ridding the world of nuclear weapons has taken shape in the new millennium. The roots of this movement lie in thinking that originated in non-official circles in the United States. Henry Kissinger, William Perry, George Shultz, and Sam Nunn – four distinguished former high level US statesmen – are largely responsible for codifying, if not initiating the movement calling for a world free of nuclear weapons in two highly influential op-eds published in the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2007 and January 2008.[1] The agenda that they advocated in these op-eds was thereafter adopted by President Obama early in his first term, when he

presented an official nuclear disarmament agenda in his first major foreign policy address, delivered in Prague in April 2009.

Kissinger et al advocated global nuclear reductions in 2007 because they believed that in the post-Cold War world, America's relationship with Russia had changed for the better, and that the real danger no longer emanated from the former Cold War rival. Rather, the biggest fear was that nuclear weapons could fall into the wrong hands, especially the hands of terrorists, and for this reason they must be eliminated across the globe. In this sense Kissinger's rationale for global nuclear reductions was far from a classic disarmament agenda – i.e., which viewed nuclear weapons as inherently evil and therefore called to eliminate them on this basis – and he remained keenly aware of the importance of upholding US deterrence and maintaining strategic stability along the way. From the outset, Obama's own disarmament agenda reflected similar thinking: the President emphasized that as long as nuclear weapons existed, the United States would maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal to protect the US and its allies.

Strategic Stability: Adapting a Cold War Concept to a Multipolar World

"Strategic stability," a concept that for years had been at the heart of the notion of mutual assured destruction (MAD) that supported the US-Soviet nuclear deterrence equation during the Cold War years, thus continued to figure high in US strategic thinking. Since the 1970s it had also been a guiding principle for pursuing nuclear reductions in the context of US-Soviet arms control agreements.[2] Indeed, for advocates of nuclear arms control – as distinct from nuclear disarmament – the goal was always to stabilize relations between the superpowers in order to mitigate the dangers of mis-escalation to nuclear war. Arms control as an approach thus focuses more on the state than the nuclear weapons per se. The logic of this approach is that if nuclear-armed states can begin to create lines of communication and agree on confidence building measures, this would gradually help them lower tensions and hopefully defuse hair-trigger alert situations. If they could create conditions for maintaining stable relations, with a heavy dose of verification and some trust thrown in, the superpowers could carve out rules of the game for their nuclear relationship. Adherence to these rules would lower the risk that they might find themselves on the brink of nuclear exchange, and thus enable them to coexist in a nuclear world.

Underpinning the stabilization of relations thinking in the Cold War superpower context was nuclear deterrence; and deterrence meant maintaining rough parity in nuclear capabilities. With the continued ability to destroy each other, stability in this context was clearly more about state perceptions and behavior than the very capabilities at the superpowers' disposal, although arms control agreements also involved symmetrical reductions in the nuclear arsenals themselves.

Although it was difficult to create mechanisms of stability between two superpowers armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, the Cold War challenge was nevertheless limited primarily to two powers. What happens when additional states come into the equation? How can deterrence be stabilized when the superpowers begin to reduce their arsenals to levels that might approach those of other nuclear states?

Obama's nuclear disarmament agenda, together with ongoing US-Russian arms control dilemmas, the rising influence of China, and the thorny debate over NATO missile defense plans for Europe, brought to the fore old debates – with new questions being asked about how strategic stability would continue to be maintained in changing global conditions. Indeed, when Obama began to consider deeper cuts in the US nuclear arsenal, Kissinger sounded the "strategic stability" alarm. In an op-ed written in April 2012 together with Brent Scowcroft, he asked what happens to strategic stability when the numbers go down well below the threshold of 1000 nuclear warheads.[3]

A major concern for the US in this regard was China.[4] The need to maintain strategic stability with both Russia and China, and to provide assurances and nuclear umbrellas to US allies, remained an important issue in the debate over nuclear weapons reductions. Russia too in 2013 emphasized that the disarmament thrust could not be limited to the US and Russia, and must encompass all nuclear states.[5] Moreover, for Russia, the debate on nuclear reductions could not be detached from NATO plans for missile defense systems to be set up in Europe.

A Shifting Concept and a New Complication

In light of these concerns, in Obama's second term the balance between nuclear reductions and the imperative of maintaining strategic stability (grounded in deterrence) tilted more toward strategic stability, which requires the US to maintain the safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent that Obama advocated in Prague.[6] Indeed, although the global zero narrative

was established and gathered strength in Obama's first term in office – and in particular in the first year of his administration, from mid-2009 to mid-2010 – by the time his second term began, it was apparent that the agenda was losing steam. Although some progress was made at the Nuclear Security Summits, the US 2015 budget proposal cut funding for nuclear security efforts; moreover, the CTBT – another of the prominent disarmament goals of the Obama administration – is still no closer to ratification. And although in his Berlin speech in June 2013 Obama revisited his earlier nuclear disarmament agenda, a comparison of the two speeches reveals that the relevant passages in the Berlin speech are a much curtailed and watered-down version of the dramatic Prague speech.[7]

The only significant disarmament message delivered by Obama in 2013 regarded further reductions in the US nuclear arsenal (up to a third) that he maintained could safely be made while still ensuring the security of the US and its allies, and maintaining a strong and stable nuclear deterrent. However, simultaneous (and costly) US plans for modernizing its nuclear weapons arsenal could not but raise questions as to whether the US indeed intended to move in the direction of deep nuclear cuts.[8]

Since 2014, the picture has gotten even more complicated: the one component in the increasingly complex nuclear equation of the post-Cold War world that was regarded by the US as relatively contained was Russia. However, Russia's intervention in Ukrainian internal affairs and its annexation of the Crimean peninsula in March 2014 presented a new challenge that elicited another shift in the nuclear discourse, even more in the direction of the deterrence pole. This was a reminder that nuclear issues cannot be discussed effectively outside the context of inter-state relations. The original op-eds of Kissinger et al calling for a nuclear-free world relied on the fact that America's relationship with Russia had changed for the better, but with this relationship looking potentially more fragile, nuclear arsenals and umbrellas were looking more attractive. Indeed, since the Ukraine crisis, the US and Russia seem to be favoring Cold War-like deterrence thinking over the pursuit of further nuclear reductions.[9]

Three issues in particular were (re)opened for debate: continued progress on bilateral US-Russian arms control agreements; the continued presence of NATO nuclear weapons in Europe, as well as plans for missile defense; and the fact that the Ukraine crisis underscored the vulnerability of a state

to attack when it relinquishes nuclear weapons, or other plans for WMD development.

The future of US-Russian bilateral arms control is currently unclear. While as yet there are no firm indications that Russia is not upholding its arms control commitments,[10] the current tension makes it difficult to see a path forward to further agreements.[11] With regard to NATO, new attitudes have been expressed, especially from Poland and the Czech Republic, about the need to maintain US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe as a deterrent against Russia.[12] And on the issue of non-nuclear vulnerability, the fact that Ukraine was the target of Russian aggression is a message that states like Iran are hearing loud and clear. When Ukraine decided to relinquish its nuclear arsenal to Russia after gaining independence, the US and Russia made an explicit commitment not to attack the new state. Indeed, according to the terms of the Budapest Memorandum, signed in December 1994, Ukraine was provided security assurances, including the commitment to refrain from the threat or use of force against Ukraine's territorial integrity.[13] The fact that Russia disregarded this explicit commitment further underscores the message – also apparent when NATO attacked Qaddafi's Libya – that giving up nuclear weapons (or, in the case of Libya, plans for WMD development) makes a state vulnerable to attack, and therefore it might be more prudent to hold on to them.[14]

The New Narrative and the Middle East

The question, then, is what the balance of these different messages is for the Middle East, and for Israel in particular. How do the different strands of debate that have emerged at the global level converge, and how are they expressed in attitudes and policies toward the Middle East?

The different themes that are prominent in the global debate – disarmament, proliferation, strategic stability, deterrence, and missile defense – are all reflected in developments and debates in the Middle East as well, although they take on quite different meanings because of the region's singular context. The Middle East, as a region, follows its own regional dynamic; multipolarity is ingrained in its geopolitics and is thus integral to discussions about deterrence and regional security.

The Middle East has also been characterized by a very different nuclear dynamic than the one that has played out at the global level in several important respects. For decades there has been one assumed nuclear state

in the Middle East – Israel – that introduced novel elements to the nuclear debate: most significantly, the concept of ambiguity; the notion of nuclear monopoly; and an Israeli nuclear stance that has a single aim: to deter an existential threat. This motivation does not come into play in scenarios that are short of existential. Although there were attempts on the part of additional states in the region to pursue the nuclear path, these were not in response to Israel, but to other perceived challenges. Oddly enough, at the strategic level, the situation in the Middle East was remarkably stable with the presence of one (assumed) nuclear state. Moreover, it is the prospect of the emergence of a second nuclear state – Iran – that would undoubtedly upset and undermine stability in the region, especially by encouraging further proliferation.

This proposition will no doubt seem counterintuitive to those who, drawing on global experience, have argued that a second nuclear state would (finally) introduce stability to the Middle East.[15] However, over the course of forty years, implicit nuclear understandings were established in the Middle East that played out quite differently than at the global level. Indeed, global zero thinking could, from Israel's point of view, upset this situation by opening more space for questioning not only Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity, but the very rationale for its nuclear deterrence. The embrace of a world-free-of-nuclear-weapons discourse – which puts the spotlight on the weapons, and removes the state from the discussion – could make it easier for people to buy into arguments derived from simplistic links drawn between what are actually very different and unequal cases. For example, with the focus solely on the weapons, and based on the assumption that states are normally defensively oriented in the nuclear realm, it might seem obvious to some that if Israel were not an (assumed) nuclear state, Iran would not have felt the need to go down the nuclear route. The history of the Middle East, of course, tells a very different story and leads to different conclusions – but any accurate narrative demands the serious integration of context into nuclear arms control thinking.[16] The disarmament agenda, however, encourages the exact opposite.

The Middle East is also characterized by a severe deficit of trust as far as states' adherence to their WMD arms control/disarmament commitments. Contrary to the global level, in the Middle East a culture of deceit became the norm following the blatant cheating by a string of states on their disarmament commitments. This was the case in Iraq (Saddam Hussein), Libya, Syria

(nuclear and chemical), and Iran. The actual use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in 2013 against its own population was a particularly horrific reminder that in the Middle East, the context of state relations and behavior cannot be left outside discussions of WMD disarmament, and that processes of trust-building have a very long way to go in this region.

The Balance of Messages from the Global Debate

When considering the strands of the global debate, it is difficult to assess which message rings loudest. Originally it seemed that the global zero agenda stood to become the dominant message, and when it was adopted by President Obama in 2009, the sense was that the implications for Israel in particular could be profound. From Israel's perspective, the 2010 NPT RevCon final document reflected the kind of difficulties that Israel would likely face. Egypt was successful in pressuring the Obama administration to agree to include the WMDFZ conference idea in large part due to Obama's embrace of a disarmament agenda that supported across-the-board nuclear reductions. The administration was constrained by its own adherence to the disarmament norm – a phenomenon known as normative entrapment. This weakened its ability to make the case for unique security concerns in the case of Israel. Moreover, commitment to the disarmament agenda meant that Obama was also keen on securing a consensus final document for the NPT RevCon (after the resounding failure to do so in 2005), which only increased his vulnerability to Egyptian manipulation.[17]

But the original disarmament agenda, which from the start recognized the continued importance of deterrence and strategic stability, has over the last few years become even more muddied, as stubborn nuclear challenges refuse to recede from the global scene. Whether it is determined and quite aggressive proliferators like Iran and North Korea, or Russia implicitly underscoring for these states that acquiring and holding on to nuclear capabilities is what might actually enable them to ward off external coercive measures, the global discourse is a mixed bag. It advocates nuclear reductions, but also missile defenses and modernization of remaining nuclear arsenals so that safety and security are maintained.

As for the WMDFZ conference for the Middle East, in the years since 2010, there were indications of increased understanding in the United States and among other conference conveners, most likely including the Finnish facilitator Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, that such a zone necessitates vastly

improved regional relations. This was reflected in the US decision to postpone the conference in November 2012, and in the rationale that was provided for this decision.[18] Moreover, it became apparent over the course of 2013 that Israel was willing to engage in preliminary direct discussions with its Arab neighbors over a conference agenda, while these states were reluctant to participate until a date for the conference was set. Arab resistance to discussions of regional security underscored that they were not genuinely interested in regional improvement, but rather focused on an agenda that would target Israel and the nuclear realm. For the conference conveners, this further underscored the importance of inter-state exchange and confidence building.[19]

Strategic Complexity in the Middle East Demands Regional Solutions

The Middle East is characterized by strategic complexity that demands tailored regional thinking and solutions. Iran continues to pose a nuclear proliferation challenge that at best will only be somewhat delayed by the terms of the JCPOA; this challenge is superimposed on Iran's aggressive regional policy toward Israel and additional Middle East states, a regional hegemonic agenda, and support for terrorist proxies. Iran engenders an acute lack of trust after years of blatantly deceiving the international community regarding its NPT commitment not to pursue a military nuclear capability. Moreover, the trust deficit regarding WMD commitments cuts across the region to additional states as well. For its part, Israel for years has based its most fundamental security – insurance against an existential threat – on a nuclear deterrent capability, yet Egypt continues to seek to strip Israel of this capability. Finally, bids for extended deterrence and missile defense systems are raised in many states in the region, in order to confront an entire spectrum of rocket and missile threats from different directions.

With these complex conditions, the global zero nuclear disarmament agenda – however worthy in and of itself – cannot simply be imposed on the region. But the new challenges at the global level might generate a better understanding of this conundrum, and of the regional predicaments that Israel faces in the Middle East. Indeed, although the disarmament agenda would seem to encourage greater focus on the need for Israel to join the NPT, the US is not pressing this issue. Nor is it pressing progress on the WMDFZ conference initiative following the 2015 NPT RevCon, which effectively

removed the issue from the NPT agenda due to lack of consensus on a final document. The US and Russia had displayed understanding for Israel's position even before the 2015 RevCon – both regarding the structural oddity of holding a conference according to a mandate that Israel was not a party to, as well as the more fundamental need to address the Middle East context in all of its complexity, rather than focus directly on a WMD agenda.

In conclusion, the strategic complexities that have emerged at the global level in recent years – and that reopened debates on arms control, deterrence, and strategic stability – could actually harbor a more reassuring message for Israel. These new post-Cold War challenges might help convince major powers to be more attentive to ongoing strategic dilemmas in the Middle East as well. This is likely to push further to the background ideas for embracing simplistic nuclear disarmament agendas that do not take very seriously the complex web of interstate threats and challenges that Israel faces in the Middle East, and underscore the need to address regional security challenges in a regional context.

Notes

1 George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, and George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World," *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008.

2 As Paul Nitze wrote when discussing the SALT talks in the 1970s: "My personal view is that meaningful reductions are highly desirable, and that the aim of reductions should be to increase strategic stability." See Paul H. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs* 54, no. 2 (1976), p. 221.

3 Henry A. Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, "Nuclear Weapon Reductions must be Part of Strategic Analysis," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2012.

4 See Lora Saalman and Alexey Arbatov, "Russia-US-China: Trilateral Strategic Stability," Carnegie Endowment, April 24, 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/24/russia-u.s.-china-trilateral-strategic-stability/bzha. For a later assessment on the same dilemma, see Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and US-China Strategic Stability," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 7-50.

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6 See for example the statement to the US Senate Armed Services Committee by Maj. Gen. Garrett Harencak, Assistant Chief of Staff, Strategic Deterrence and Nuclear Integration, March 5, 2014.

7 Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "From Prague to Berlin: The Decline of the US Nuclear Disarmament Agenda and Its Implications for the Middle East," *WMD Junction,* August 21, 2013, http://wmdjunction.com/1308021_disarmament_agenda_decline_mideast.htm.

8 Douglas P. Guarino, "US Sticks to Plan for Interoperable Nuclear Warheads, Despite Criticism," *Global Security Newswire,* April 16, 2014, and Aaron Mehta, "Pentagon Protects Nuclear Modernization Programs in FY17 Budget," *DefenseNews,* February 10, 2016.

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10 One exception regards ongoing debate over possible Russian non-compliance with the 1987 INF treaty. See Tom Z. Collina, "US Raises INF Concerns with Russia," *Arms Control Today,* March 2014, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_03/US-Raises-INF-Concerns-With-Russia; and Rod Lyon, "The Great Nuclear Guessing Game: Has Russia Violated the INF Treaty?" *National Interest,* September 25, 2015.

11 Douglas P. Guarino, "White House Expects Russia to Stick to Arms Treaties, Despite Ukraine Crisis," *Global Security Newswire*, March 12, 2014. There was concern that the crisis could also upset efforts to continue to secure vulnerable nuclear materials in Russia, in the context of what was known as the Nunn-Lugar agreement from the early 1990s, but the situation seems to be on track. On lack of progress on US-Russian arms control since 2010, see Steven Pifer, "The Future of US-Russian Arms Control," *Brookings Paper,* February 26, 2016, http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2016/02/26-future-us-russian-arms-control-pifer.

12 "Former Warsaw Pact States Value US Nuclear Arms as Deterrent to Russia," *National Journal,* April 15, 2014, http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/former-warsaw-pact-states-tout-importance-us-nuclear-weapons-europe/?mgs1=9ee1fucW0A.

13 See Steven Pifer, "Ukraine Crisis' Impact on Nuclear Weapons," *CNN Commentary,* March 4, 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/04/opinion/pifer-ukraine-budapest-memorandum/.

14 William Cohen made an explicit connection between Ukraine and Iran's likely conclusion: quoted in Gopal Ratnam, "Iran May keep Nuclear Program after Ukraine, Cohen Says," *Bloomberg,* March 18, 2014, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/print/2014-04-17/iran-may-keep-nuclear-program-after-ukraine-cohen-says.html.

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Assessment 15, no. 3 (2012): 27-37, http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan15_3cENG3%20(2)_Landau.pdf.

16 Landau, "When Neorealism meets the Middle East."

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18 Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "The Decision to Call Off the 2012 WMDFZ Conference: An Outcome Destined from the Start?" *INSS Insight* No. 390, December 5, 2012.

19 See Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "NPT RevCon 2015: Considerations for Convening a WMDFZ Conference," *INSS Insight* No. 691, April 27, 2015.