



INSS Insight No. 478, October 22, 2013

Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity, Arms Control Policy, and Iran: Is the Time Ripe for Basic Changes?

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In recent discussions surrounding chemical weapons use in Syria and the subsequent agreement whereby Syria would join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and pursuant to international efforts to stop Iran's ongoing efforts to achieve military nuclear capability, Israel's name is not infrequently raised with demands for so-called "reciprocity" in the realm of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Some have called on Israel to ratify the CWC immediately, others have called for it to end its policy of nuclear ambiguity, and still others have noted that this is why the region must move to focused discussion of a WMD Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East.

What all of these calls have in common is their attempt to relate to weapons of mass destruction as if they can be detached from context – namely, from the (different) manner by which different states have conducted themselves with regard to these capabilities, and from the context of inter-state relations and threats.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with regard to Israel's stance of ambiguity in the nuclear realm,¹ whereby Israel neither denies nor confirms the various reports relating to its nuclear capabilities. This has been the situation for nearly half a century. The gap between what Israel has sought to achieve and has indeed achieved through its strategy of ambiguity, and what it is accused of doing under cover of ambiguity, is wide.

The following discussion considers the notions of transparency, secrecy, regional stability, and security/deterrence, all of which are relevant to the discussion of Israel's strategy but have often become skewed in the wider public debate.

¹ In fact, Israel's only declared policy is that of non-transparency (or opacity) of some of its nuclear facilities and activities. However, "ambiguity" is the term most commonly used.

Transparency tends to be regarded as an inherently positive value in international relations circles – to wit, the more transparent you are, the better. But is this true across the board? In Israel's case, not being transparent in the nuclear realm has enabled Israel to maintain a low profile, which has both served its interests and had advantages for the wider region. By virtue of Israel not talking, issuing threats, or taking other action with regard to its assumed nuclear capabilities, the result has been that most other regional states could (grudgingly) live with the situation and not seek their own capabilities. This is better for regional stability than if Israel were a declared nuclear state that could not be ignored. This is not to say that Egypt is happy with the situation; to the contrary, for years it has led a focused campaign to force Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Nevertheless, Egypt signed a peace agreement with Israel without demanding that it first join the NPT.

Once the rationale of maintaining a low profile is understood and Israel's notable restraint in the nuclear realm is taken into account, it should also be clear that the secrecy that Israel maintains in this regard is not designed to deceive potential enemies or necessarily to fool anyone. Israel adheres to an official policy of neither confirmation nor denial, saying only that it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region. Therefore, those who call on Israel to "drop the charade because everyone knows you're a nuclear state" are missing the point. At present, ambiguity is a strategic asset that provides Israel with a relatively stable and persistent situation.

Moreover, some calls for Israel to join the NPT are also based on erroneous assumptions, and assume that this would simply be a step in the direction of greater Israeli transparency – which they view as inherently positive – and cooperation with the international community. In fact, however, the only way that Israel (and India and Pakistan) could join the NPT is as a non-nuclear weapons state. Therefore, transparency and cooperation with the international community, as mandated by the NPT, are not the relevant issue; rather, this is a demand for disarmament. Indeed, when Egypt, the Arab League, or Iran has persistently called on Israel to join the NPT, these states are pursuing one goal only: to expose and then strip Israel of whatever capabilities, especially deterrence capabilities, it has. Israel maintains its low profile nuclear posture because it still faces self-declared enemies that challenge its very right to exist in the region as a sovereign state.

With respect to Israel's arms control options, the deciding factor concerning the pace at which Israel can adhere to global treaties or embrace possible new regional arrangements is the regional security situation. Israel not only lacks peaceful relations or significant political relations with many of its neighbors, but also lacks basic channels of communication with several of them. In such a situation, it is hard to imagine how

strategic assets can be done away with. Israel is open to joining international treaties when appropriate, but is highly concerned by the number of hostile states in the region that have joined WMD treaties and then proceeded to cheat on their commitments, while purposely deceiving the international community. Therefore, Israel's preference is to proceed with regional talks: the first step is to sit down together and discuss the issues directly, with a view to achieving a consensus on an agenda. As far as the WMDFZ conference idea (originally slated for 2012) is concerned, currently Israel is willing to engage in preliminary discussions, but the Arab states have reportedly refused to sit down with Israel in a non-NPT sanctioned framework (disregarding the fact that non-nuclear WMD are outside the purview of the NPT).

Finally, a word on Iran. Creeping into the debate on Iran's military nuclear potential is the question of Israel and regional WMD disarmament. If demands are made of Iran, some say, then what about Israel. Here it is essential to underscore what differentiates between Iran and Israel, and why Iran's nuclear ambitions must be curbed regardless of any regional arms control ideas. Iran, unlike Israel, is a prime example of a state that years ago, by ratifying the NPT, made a commitment to remain non-nuclear, for which it received benefits, but that then proceeded to defy that very commitment while lying to the international community. Iran has accordingly lost its moral right to preach to others to do something that it itself failed to do. In addition to its non-compliance with the NPT and its cheating, the current hostile regime in Tehran regularly issues severe threats that challenge the right of Israel to a sovereign existence and convey Iran's desire to change the face of the Middle East in the direction of an Islamic entity. These are goals that could be better advanced if Iran were to attain a military nuclear capability, and indeed, all evidence points in this direction. Clearly context matters. Without basic changes in Iran and in the region, there can be little expectation that the WMD situation will radically change.

