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The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT): Enhancing its Confidence-Building Role

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The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is an international arms control treaty that is little known in Israel, even though – in an important step in support of the global arms control regime – Israel signed the treaty in September 1996, one day after it was opened for signature. Yet as is the case with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) that it signed in 1993, Israel has so far withheld its ratification of the treaty. On the occasion of the April 2015 visit to Israel by Lassina Zerbo, Executive Secretary of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), Minister Yuval Steinitz noted that Israel's basic intention is to ratify the treaty, the question being when.

Israel also supports a moratorium on nuclear testing until the treaty enters into force, and its overall approach to the treaty and the CTBTO has been very positive, with good cooperation with the organization over the past 20 years. Significantly, as part of the CTBTO monitoring system, Israel hosts two auxiliary seismic stations – in Eilat and Mount Meron – and one radionuclide laboratory at the Sorek Nuclear Research Center. In 2004 Israel signed a Facility Agreement with the CTBTO to address issues relating to the monitoring stations, and this agreement entered into force in February 2014.

Discussion of the CTBT in Israel takes place almost exclusively in official circles, and has only rare and sporadic appearances in the media and/or public debate. This is most likely not a consequence of Israel's policy of ambiguity in the nuclear realm, because other aspects of Israel's nuclear posture and policy have been debated quite openly in the public sphere for at least 20 years. It is rather more likely attributable to the fact that nuclear testing seems distant and removed from Israel's ongoing security calculations and concerns, and is therefore not likely to find its way onto Israel's crowded security agenda, where so many pressing issues compete for attention.

To mark the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the CTBTO in late January organized a week-long symposium in Vienna entitled "Science and Diplomacy for Peace and Security," which focused on the current status of the CTBT, its achievements, and the challenges it still faces regarding entry into force. The conference was an important opportunity to assess how the different states view the question of the treaty's ratification and entry into force.

In her presentation in Vienna, Israel's ambassador to the IAEA and CTBTO, Merav Zafary-Odiz, did not focus on Israel's calculations vis-à-vis ratification, and instead emphasized the important confidence-building role that the CTBT already plays, before entry into force, due to the verification regime that is being established. The International Monitoring System (IMS) consists of monitoring facilities all over the world, to monitor for nuclear explosions, and 90 percent of the facilities – including in Israel – are already up and running. Once the CTBT enters into force, the treaty will also rely on On-Site Inspections (OSI), and exercises in on-site monitoring are already underway in order to prepare for the day the treaty enters into force. Moreover, an International Data Center was set up in Vienna, where data from the monitoring stations across the globe are processed and distributed to the CTBTO member states. Zafary-Odiz noted that the sharing of technical data from the monitoring stations and participation in OSI exercises are signs of positive cooperation generated by the treaty.

Israel's concerns regarding ratification seem to be rooted in regional dynamics, with both Egypt and Iran presenting obstacles. Generally speaking, Israel loses trust in the effectiveness of international treaties when it sees states in the Middle East join such treaties – like the NPT – only to later cheat on them, creating a serious trust-deficit in the region. Moreover, regarding the CTBT specifically, in order to have the full confidence-building effect of the treaty in the Middle East, all the necessary stations must be built and begin to transfer data. Egypt's unwillingness to have a monitoring station set up on its territory is to the detriment of this role of the treaty. Moreover, Egyptian insistence on linking the CTBT to Israel joining the NPT is unfortunate, and a clear non-starter for Israel.

The one aspect of nuclear testing that could elicit more attention in Israel is in connection to Iran. As Zafary-Odiz observed in her presentation on the treaty's entry into force, "ratification of the CTBT by Iran was natural to be included in the JCPOA, as it's another way to build the confidence of the international community in the supposedly peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program." It remains an open question why Iran was not required to ratify the test ban treaty, especially as Iran insists it is a member in good standing of the NPT and has no intention of ever working on a military nuclear

capability. Having not ratified the treaty itself, however, the US was not in the best position to demand this in the negotiation.

On the occasion of the Vienna conference, Executive Secretary Zerbo reportedly suggested that if Israel and Iran were to decide together to ratify the CTBT, this might jumpstart the process of ratification in Egypt as well, and pave the road for creating a Nuclear Test Free Zone in the Middle East. While such a joint decision to ratify is unrealistic, especially when the Iranians at the CTBTO won't even recognize Israel, the idea of a Nuclear Test Free Zone (NTFZ) in the Middle East is worth considering.

In suggesting a regional structure, Zerbo seemed to be taking his cue from other regional initiatives, like Nuclear Weapons Free Zones and the idea to hold a conference on a WMDFZ for the Middle East. Moreover, he evidently envisions ratification of the CTBT as an essential first step to creating such a zone.

But this is not the only way to think about the zone idea. Indeed, building on the confidence-building aspect of the CTBTO, regional discussions could perhaps be set up in parallel to efforts to have the relevant states ratify the treaty. After Assad used chemical weapons against his own population, killing hundreds of civilians in August 2013, some raised the idea of leveraging Syria's subsequent joining of the CWC as a platform for initiating regional discussion on a Chemical Weapons Free Zone (CWFZ) with an eye to encouraging both Israel and Egypt to join. The value of initiating discussion of a CWFZ or a NTFZ is in encouraging a regional approach to the disarmament issues that are at the heart of the relevant treaties, and thinking about regional trust-building mechanisms. This is an idea that could resonate with those interested in exploring new areas for regional security dialogue in the Middle East, perhaps beginning at the unofficial Track II level.

