



## *Eleventh Cooperative Idea*

# A Comprehensive Israeli Concept for a WMD/DVs-Free Zone in the Middle East/Gulf:

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*Attempts to achieve a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD-Free Zone) in the Middle East have become even more complicated than in the past. This POLICY FORUM issue provides a fresh look at the topic in order to offer common ground for positive discussions on Middle East disarmament. Its main novelty is to look at the security threat as perceived by Israel in the context of an Israeli-Egyptian-Iranian triangle that complements the old paradigm of an Israeli-Egyptian dyad. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or agreement/accord) with Iran is a challenge for some regional actors but at the same time could form a basis for bridging the disarmament gap, especially with its unprecedented robust verification regime. From a purely strategic angle, the JCPOA is beneficial to Israel's national security interests. It is therefore to be hoped that this multilateral agreement will withstand the Donald Trump administration's attempts to dismantle it.*

### Background, Context, and Central Task: Bridging the Crucial Gap between Differing Security Concepts and in View of the Perceived Threat from Iran

Attempts to achieve a nuclear zone, in fact and even more comprehensive zone free of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs) in the Middle East (WMD/DVs-Free Zone) have become even more complicated than they were in the past. In the wake of the stagnation in the global disarmament and non-proliferation arena, the main obstacles that regional players will have to contend with are in the political, strategic, and conceptual dimensions. Mainly due to diverging views on the zonal issue, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in May 2015 did not produce a consensual document, while the plan to convene a conference in Helsinki to discuss such a zonal arrangement could not be implemented. In this regard, the Donald Trump administration, which has downgraded the traditional US policy on nuclear disarmament, adds one more negative factor to the Middle East equation.

In addition, regional factors do not encourage the relevant players to join the

process. They include the intense rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for dominance in the Middle East/Gulf, the Arab Spring that led to the breakdown of several Arab states, and the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace process. This POLICY FORUM will focus on the threats as perceived by Israel, in the framework of the Israeli-Egyptian-Iranian triangle. The preservation of the JCPOA is a pivot for arms control gains in the Middle East. While it is a challenge for regional actors, at the same time it could form a basis for bridging the gaps between them.

Taking some important – and yet-to-be-concretised – Israeli regional security concerns into consideration, this POLICY FORUM issue will address nuclear-related questions and confidence-building measures in order to offer common ground for a positive discussion of disarmament. It is hoped that these new and modest elements might contribute to removing obstacles to progress along the bumpy road to a Middle East WMD/DVs-Free Zone.

### Three Dimensions of a Comprehensive Israeli Security Approach

*First Dimension: Bridging the Israeli-Egyptian Gap – Priorities of Regional Security Concerns/ Common Ground*

The failure to achieve a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East/Gulf (a major component and for some Arab actors, actually even a 'fourth pillar' in the NPT process since the 1995 indefinite extension of the treaty) was one of the main reasons for the failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. For decades, Israel and Egypt were on a confrontational course on this issue. Cairo, which played an important role in the international arena in advancing nuclear disarmament in the framework of the NPT, demanded a speedy and full application of the NPT to Israel. The Israeli response has come through the 'Long Corridor' doctrine: a long series of preliminary confidence-building measures in a slow, step-by-step process.

But in the last few years there has been some change in the tone of this disagreement. This was clearly felt in Egypt's low-profile and less-vocal approach during the 61st General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in September 2017. The explanation for such a detente in the bilateral nuclear sphere might be traced to recent political-military developments outside the narrow nuclear realm. The main development was Israel's agreement in 2015 not to apply to the Egyptian security forces the restrictions contained in the 1981 Military Protocol of the 1979 Peace Treaty. It thus allowed the Egyptian Army to deploy thousands of

troops (including armoured vehicles and helicopters) to defeat the terrorist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and remove its terrorist bases from the Sinai Peninsula (Miller, 2015). In this recent atmosphere of cooperation, Israel might raise some of its regional security concerns and expect a positive Egyptian response. The common ground may be found in the following areas:

1. *Terrorism.* The specific Israeli-Egyptian security cooperation in the Sinai Peninsula could be extended to other areas such as preventing terrorist access to WMD materials.
2. *Intelligence sharing.* Intelligence could be shared on regional developments and Iran's foreign policy activities in the Middle East.
3. *Conventional weapons.* The need for disarmament in this area is traditionally a condition in Israel's declared doctrine on nuclear disarmament. The Arab states, led by Egypt, have always opposed discussing conventional weapons, claiming that this was an Israeli stalling tactic. But it is possible that the Arab side could agree to talk about Israel's conventional arsenal. This could be due to the positive mood between Israel and Egypt, on the one hand, and the disintegration of organised military power in some of the Arab countries (Syria and Iraq), on the other. (The latter factor presented a serious military threat to Israel's 'eastern front' in the past.)
4. *Peace processes.* Since the 1960s Israel's declared doctrine closely links the concept of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ) to peace treaties with Israel's Arab neighbours. In the past US governments took the idea of "Peace first; an NWFZ later!" seriously. US support for Israel's 'unique status' in international disarmament forums was based on progress towards peace. Peace and the nuclear issue were interrelated, but it is unclear if this is still valid as part of the Trump administration's approach. The peace process is deadlocked. Yet the newly assertive Saudi Arabian foreign policy and the emerging strong ties between Cairo and Riyadh may bring some silver lining to the discussion. During his US tour (April 2018), Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia showed a new tone of cordiality towards Israel and gave a new push to the Arab (Saudi)

Peace Initiative of 2002, which was renewed in 2007: a 'Two-State Solution' based on the 1967 lines, with the recognition of Israel and that country's establishment of normal relations with all Arab states. In the Saudi view, diplomatic recognition and the normalisation of relations with Israel are conditional on resolving the Palestinian issue. This might bring a new impetus for Egyptian diplomacy in its efforts to narrow the gap between Israel and the Palestinian leaders.

As far as the Iranian factor – especially as it relates to Saudi Arabia – is concerned, the following observations are important. Iran signed the December 2017 final communiqué of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul, which included support for the 2002 Arab (Saudi) Peace Initiative. Secondly, although the Saudi Crown Prince referred to Iran as a "common enemy" of his country and Israel, he played down the Iranian nuclear threat. In his view, Tehran is a problem, but not a threat. Saudi Arabia will not start to develop nuclear weapons "until we see Iran announce that they have a nuclear weapon" (Time, 2018).

#### *Second Dimension: Dealing Constructively with the Iranian Challenge/Threat*

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has supported President Trump's efforts to tear up the JCPOA, and he welcomed Trump's ultimatum to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. But influential Israelis in the defence community do not share this position: Netanyahu's perception of the Iranian threat in general and of the JCPOA in particular is not the whole story. In contrast to him, leading Israeli defence officials have taken a moderate approach by focusing on the positive aspects of the multilateral accord. The Israel Defence Forces' (IDF) Chief of Staff, Lt Gen Gadi Eisenkot told the Ha'aretz newspaper that he knows of no violations of the nuclear accord, and despite its faults, it is working (Harel and Kubovich, 2018). The important point for him is that it would delay the Iranian "nuclear vision" (his vague term) by ten to 15 years. This is based on military intelligence's analysis, which assesses the country's security situation.

From a purely strategic angle, the agreement with Iran is beneficial to Israeli se-

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curity and thus must be safeguarded. It removed the existential threat hovering over the country. The agreement blocked Tehran's paths to nuclear weapons and prevented the emergence of an arms race in the Middle East in this area. Without an Iranian nuclear weapon, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have no incentive to obtain this category of WMD themselves, thus preventing a domino effect. The JCPOA also removed the threat of preventive strikes and reduced the risks of an unintended regional war. Against all odds, this analysis may lay the ground for some positive outcomes in the arms control and disarmament arena. In the long run it is possible to build in principle on the JCPOA model and to adopt on a regional scale its intrusive monitoring and inspection system and some of the innovative limitations it imposes on nuclear programmes.

#### *New Accents in the Strategic Triangle*

In the present situation the JCPOA in principle (endangered as it is) brings a new dimension to the disarmament discussion in the Middle East. The debate is no longer a duel between Israel and Egypt, but within a new strategic triangle that involves Iran. In this regard, it is important to note, first, the Iranian emphasis on its pioneering role in the 1974 initiative (together with Egypt) for a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone. This is a clear sign of continuity and stability in the Islamic Republic's security concept. Second, Iran – in spite of Foreign Minister Zarif's article in *The Guardian* a few days after the signing of the agreement ("now it's Israel's turn") (Zarif, 2015) – appears to see the disarmament issue as a process that will take years and not as a demand for achieving symmetry immediately. During the 2015 NPT Review Conference, contrary to the antagonistic Egyptian posture, the Hassan Rouhani government presented a moderate line. Its position paper emphasised the willingness to renew the Glion/Geneva Process – a position that was close to that of the US and the other co-sponsors regarding the conference on a WMD/DVs-Free Zone Conference for the Middle East. Iran implicitly distanced itself from Egypt's effort to set specific deadlines (Meir, 2015).

#### *Assessing Ballistic Missiles*

Many see ballistic missiles as an integral component of nuclear weapons. Therefore, discussion of the missile problem may be significant in the context of arms control and nuclear disarmament in the

Middle East, especially now that Iran's ballistic missiles have become a burning issue through which the Trump administration (with Prime Minister Netanyahu's encouragement) plans to thwart the JCPOA.

But there is another aspect of ballistic missiles that could point in a positive direction and put this issue on the negotiation table. Following the multilateral agreement with Iran, which blocks Tehran's nuclear weapons programme, and following the reaffirmation of the Iranian obligations under the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state, Iranian missiles can be regarded as having conventional warheads only, i.e. they are conventional weapons.

Surprisingly enough, and in order not to single out Iran, there is an Israeli contribution to this issue. Two important Israeli military thinkers – Yigal Allon and Israel Tal – laid an intellectual foundation for a deterrent force of conventional, accurate, long-range missiles as a substitute for nuclear deterrence (Allon, 1959: 63-64; Tal, 1996: 222). Allon, who was inspired by British studies and his friendship with military theorist Liddell Hart, wrote in the early 1960s (and in the wake of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's ideas) about the increasing importance of deterrence based on conventional missiles. In the mid-1990s Tal called for Israel to develop "an alternative conventional strategic deterrent capability" based on missiles in the framework of a new security doctrine for the 21st century.

Interestingly, in recent months an Israeli military correspondent with good access to the IDF's higher echelons has published reports that the IDF plans for the first time in its history to build a long-range conventional ballistic missiles arm. One might say that this would be to adopt in part the line of thinking that Yigal Allon and Israel Tal presented and thus provide common ground for regional discussions on this issue to include Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

#### *Third Dimension: Nuclear/Conventional Arms-related Issues*

Confidence-building measures in the arms control process do not have a good reputation in the Middle East. The Arab side tends to see them as Israeli tactics to gain time and to deflect attention from the nuclear issue. In order to overcome past failures, it is proposed to concentrate on

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significant WMD-related steps that Israel could live with and some measures with distinct military characteristics. The main initiatives that could serve as a basis for discussion are strengthening both the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), as well as reintroducing the *Cooperative Idea* of establishing Communication Centres on Military and Arms Control/Reduction Issues.

#### *Universalizing the Chemical Weapons Convention*

The dismantling of the Syrian chemical arsenal created a new situation in the Middle East. According to an IDF intelligence assessment, only a “residual capability” remained: not more than two to three tons of the 1,300 tons of the old arsenal. In the Middle East, only Israel (which signed, but did not ratify the CWC) and Egypt (which did not sign it) remain outside the international norms of the non-possession and non-use of chemical weapons. Yet the other Arab states and Iran have ratified the CWC and thus become full members of it. Giving up chemical weapons in this way will represent a great step forward towards a Middle East WMD/DVs-Free Zone and would not harm Israel’s deterrence capability. The rationale for its strategy should be to prevent other actors from possessing chemical weapons – not to balance arsenals. Iran’s and the Arab states’ accession to the CWC has already achieved this goal.

#### *Universalizing the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*

The establishment of a zone that would prohibit nuclear tests in the Middle East (Nuclear-Test-Free Zone) might be con-

sidered as a first real step of a confidence-building process in the nuclear domain. Israel, Iran, and Egypt have signed, but not ratified the CTBT. As signatory states, they are already obliged to carry out in good faith the ban on nuclear testing. The ratification by these three leading states in the Middle East will prohibit nuclear testing within their borders. This might in turn encourage Saudi Arabia and Syria to sign and ratify the Treaty and Yemen to ratify it. Regional players often see the Israeli proposal to proceed in gradual steps as a delaying tactic. The ratification of the CTBT by all Middle East states, however, would be a substantial step towards creating a Nuclear-Test-Free Zone (see on this in greater detail POLICY FORUM No. 6).

#### *Creating Communication Centres on Military and Arms Control/Reduction Issues*

- A Military Communication Centre could be established in which all the countries in the region would participate and which would be led by a European country acceptable to all sides (Germany, for example). A hotline would be set up to clarify immediate questions, and give advanced notice of large military exercises and exceptional aerial activity (suggested location: Jordan).
- Together with the Military Communication Centre, it would be possible to establish a Regional Security Centre. This would be a forum to clarify issues related to the proliferation of non-conventional weapons (see on this in greater detail POLICY FORUM No. 5).

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## The Way Ahead: Putting Cooperative Ideas into Practice and the Role of Track II Initiatives

- *At the organisational level.* Workshops and seminars on military and technical issues should be held with the participation of researchers and scientists from the Middle East/Gulf, in cooperation with colleagues from the major powers and European countries. Discussions should be held of regional disarmament models from around the world with an emphasis, for instance, on the Treaty of Tlatelolco for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America, which integrates regional and global aspects.
- *At the conceptual level.* Ideas should be promoted for regional arms control and disarmament initiatives based on the work carried out by the Finnish Facilitator Jaakko Laajava regarding the Glion/Geneva Process. In addition, these informal meetings could work on the draft text for a treaty on a WMD/DVs-Free Zone in the Middle East/Gulf initiated by the Israeli Disarmament Movement, an Israeli civil society group led by Sharon Dolev. ■

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