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Gerald Steinberg

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A Part of the Multilateral Peace Talks

Discussion of regional security, arms control and confidence-building measures (CBMs) have become central elements in the Arab-Israeli peace process. The multilateral working group on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS), which is chaired by the United States and Russia, includes delegations from 25 states, including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco, China, India, and a Palestinian delegation (but the Syrians have refused to participate). In addition to periodic plenary sessions, there are workshops, seminars, informal conferences, and other activities involving Israelis and representatives from the Arab states.

As the activity in this area has increased, Israel and Egypt have hosted a number of informal academic workshops and conferences on arms control and CBMs. In January 1993, for the first time, an Egyptian official attended a conference in Israel, and in April 1993, two Israelis were invited to a similar conference in Cairo. The conference was

sponsored by UNIDIR, the United Nations Institute on Disarmament Research, and the Institute for Diplomatic Studies, which is linked to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. In addition to Egypt and Israel, other participants came from Jordan, Syria, Iran, Kuwait, Turkey, Tunisia, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

The Gap between Arab and Israeli Perceptions

Much of the conference discussion, like the meetings of the ACRS, was characterized by the sharply contrasting proposals and concepts of Israel and the Arab states. The Arabs, led by Egypt, emphasized the Israeli nuclear capability and sought unconditional Israeli acceptance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, while Israel sees this as the last step in the peace process. Instead, Israel emphasized Confidence and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs), including prenotification of large-scale military exercises, the development of crisis management mechanisms and hot-lines, and

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
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measures to prevent incidents at sea (particularly in the Red Sea area, where Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are active).

Although the conference was formally designated as an academic gathering, most of the participants had official functions in their respective governments, and many are linked to UN activities in Geneva. Most of the Egyptians were government officials, including ambassadors and members of the Foreign Ministry. Some participants, particularly the Iranian, noted that they were attending in their private capacity, and not as formal government representatives. However, in practice, the speakers with formal positions reflected the policies of their governments, and even the academics with no official role tended to explain government policies.

The mix of diplomats and academics created some tension. The diplomats, particularly from Egypt, read prepared texts (which were substantively very similar to one another), with an emphasis on United Nations documents, and avoided "sensitive issues," such as the implications of instability and fundamentalism for potential arms control agreements in the region. The academics, including the Europeans and Israelis, avoided discussions based on the UN, and used broad analytic concepts to describe the military balance and security perceptions.

The Egyptians dominated the formal proceedings, repeating the official policy (known as the "Mubarak initiative") and pressing for Israeli acceptance of the NPT. In general, the other Arab speakers echoed this theme. The Egyptian press gave the conference significant attention, describing the meetings as part of the government's policy to press for a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. It should be noted that the press coverage included mention of the presence of Israelis.

The conference demonstrated the large gap between Arab and Israeli perceptions on issues of security and arms control. In general, the Palestinians and Egyptians seemed to be somewhat better informed about Israel than the others, but showed little understanding of Israeli threat perceptions. The Israelis, in contrast, were well informed about Arab and Egyptian perceptions.

Egypt Seeks to Curb Israel's Nuclear Capability

The opening speech by the Egyptian Deputy Foreign Minister consisted of a restatement of the Egyptian position, with four major points: that arms control is closely linked to the peace process, that all states must

accept the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards system, that CBMs are a necessary part of this process, and that conventional limitations could be adopted after a peace agreement has been negotiated. The discussion of links between the peace process and non-proliferation, and the inclusion of limits on conventional weapons (although only after peace agreements), is somewhat closer to the Israeli position when compared to "traditional" Egyptian policy statements.

As was expected, the formal presentations were heavily geared to pushing the Egyptian agenda. The Egyptian position was repeated by the chairmen of the sessions, in lengthy interjections around the table, and in the greatest detail by Mahmoud Karem, who is a member of the Egyptian delegation to the ACRS working group. Karem's presentation was largely directed at Israel, with little mention of Iran, Iraq, and other threats to the region. He argued that arms control should be adapted to the political "realities" of the Middle East, rather than waiting for the Middle East to be ready for arms control. He rejected the U.S./Soviet model of arms control and argued that CBMs should not come at the expense of "real arms control." He asserted the universality of the NPT, and, in reference to the Israeli position, contrasted Egyptian acceptance of the NPT without demanding balance in other areas. He also attacked the Iranian acquisition of long-range missiles.

Karem expressed surprise that Israel remained concerned about the threat of a conventional attack. He described Israel's emphasis on technology as a "bargaining chip," both with respect to the Arabs and in relations with the U.S., and claimed that the Gulf War showed that Israel was not a strategic asset for the U.S. He also dismissed Israeli deterrence policy as unnecessary and dangerous, and ended by arguing that the Egyptian proposal for immediate acceptance of the NPT was in the interests of Israel and the entire region.

Other Egyptian speakers, including Nabil Fahmy, who heads the Egyptian delegation to the ACRS, made additional points. The Egyptian position is that Israel's nuclear monopoly provides it with military superiority that the Arabs, in general, and Egypt, in particular, cannot accept. In addition, from the Egyptian perspective, the Israeli nuclear program makes it more difficult to block the nuclear programs of other states in the region, including Iran and Algeria, and will eventually lead to a nuclear Middle East. Unless the Israeli program is curbed, the Egyptians warn that they will not support extension of the NPT in the 1995 Review

Conference. Egypt has also refused to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (which Israel signed), linking this to Israeli acceptance of the NPT.

Since 1974, Egypt has been a primary sponsor of United Nations resolutions calling for the establishment of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (MENW-FZ), in which all the states would ratify the NPT. This approach, in contrast to the Israeli view, is based on a global verification framework, such as the existing IAEA system, and includes an active role for the United Nations.

In April 1990, following Saddam Hussein's announcement of the development of binary chemical weapons, Mubarak announced support for a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone. This position has been repeated in the context of the multilateral working group on regional security and arms control, and in a variety of frameworks, and has formed the core of the declared Arab position on arms control.

The Arab position is that Israel must give up its nuclear capability, or at least take major steps in that direction, before the completion of or in the context of a peace treaty. How, they ask, can the Arabs be persuaded to make peace as long as Israel has a nuclear monopoly and is also holding "occupied territories"? Israeli concessions on the nuclear issue are seen as an inducement to bring the other Arab states into the peace process, and reduce the isolation of Egypt.

In formulating their position, the Egyptians also reject proposals for the creation of an independent regional framework for the establishment of a MENW-FZ, similar to the Latin American or Pacific regions, and continue to insist on a prominent role for the United Nations, the NPT, and the IAEA system. The speakers highlighted the need to ensure that "any regional arrangement or measure of disarmament" is consistent with "the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations" and with "the revitalization of the United Nation's role in the fields of disarmament and international security." Beyond the specific issues involved, and advantages which international organizations, in general, and the United Nations, in particular, give to the Arabs, for Egypt, the role of the UN has broader foreign policy implications. Since the 1950s, Egypt has often defined its international role in terms of the United Nations, and was a leader and co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement. This factor, and the Egyptian interest in maintaining a visible role for the United Nations, adds another complication to the politics of arms control in the region.

The Egyptian presentations dismissed Israeli fears

of conventional attack, arguing that the 1978 Peace Treaty has removed the primary threat to Israel, and the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have deprived Syria of a source of weapons. In addition, Egyptians point out that the defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War has removed another threat. According to the Arab position, the Israeli technological advantage also provides conventional superiority, and therefore the nuclear deterrent is unnecessary. Although acknowledging the need for improved safeguards, Egyptian spokesmen have not responded to criticism of the existing safeguards and inspection system, which Israel has rejected as unreliable.

Most other Arab speakers echoed the Egyptian view, although, in contrast to most of the Egyptians and Jordanians, they also expressed hostility toward Israel and Israeli policies. The presentation by a Saudi academic began with ad hominem attacks (including angry claims that Israel was importing tanks from former East Germany illicitly). The Syrian participant blamed Israel for the plight of Palestinian refugees, denounced the deportation of the 415 Hamas leaders, and emphasized the refugees from the Golan Heights, but he did not address arms control. The UNIDIR participants privately expressed the conclusion that his comments were "not helpful."

It should be noted that in their presentations, the Kuwaiti and Iranian speakers did not focus on Israel. The Kuwaiti contrasted the Arab rhetoric calling for independence from the West with the reality of dependence. He compared the Arabs to the West, with its armies of "minds and brains," based on science and technology, open, creative and democratic societies fostering tolerance and research. His remarks did not draw comments from the other Arab participants. The Iranian argued that the West tolerates activities in the Middle East until its critical interests are threatened. He complained that the U.S. is silent when some states purchase weapons from the West, but those who buy from North Korea are labeled pariah states. He further charged that some NPT signatories subject to IAEA safeguards are accused of developing nuclear weapons, while "non-NPT signatories" are allowed to do whatever they want. He called for a unified regional approach, based on the exclusion of extra-regional powers.

Israel Must Live with Regional Asymmetries

The presentation of Israeli views, although unofficial, marked the first time that many of the participants had listened to a detailed analysis of Israeli security

perceptions and the links between arms control and threat perception.

The presentations began with an analysis of basic imbalances (or asymmetries) that confront Israel: 1) geographic and demographic, and their implications for deterrence; 2) economic (the ability of oil producers to purchase a huge arsenal, as in the case of Saddam Hussein), and 3) political (the implications for verification given the contrast between highly closed societies in Iraq and Iran, and open societies such as Israel). As a result, Israeli political and military leaders have viewed efforts to reach arms limitation agreements outside the framework of an overall peace settlement with skepticism. Previous efforts, including the Tripartite Declaration of the 1950s, the NPT/IAEA regime, and other conventions, are viewed as failures from the Israeli perspective. At best, arms control was seen as an idealistic irrelevance to the Middle East; at worst, it was a means of weakening Israel militarily and isolating it politically.

The region continues to be highly unstable, and Israel continues to be vulnerable. Israelis fear that a significant reduction in their deterrent would increase the military threat and the probability of a major war in the region.

The Israeli presentation noted the broad domestic consensus that exists regarding the continued need for a nuclear deterrent, both within the political and military leadership, and in public opinion. (In 1991, just after the Gulf War and Iraqi threats to "incinerate half of Israel" with chemical weapons, 88 percent of Israelis agreed that the use of nuclear weapons under certain circumstances was "justified in principle".) Shalheveth Freier, who served as head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission for many years, described the nuclear deterrent as providing "a sense of reassurance to Israelis in times of gloom" and acting "to serve as a possible caution to states contemplating obliterating Israel by dint of their preponderance of men and material."

Israel's Arms Control Policy

In recent years, Israeli policy-makers have begun to examine and compare the potential impact of specific arms control proposals with respect to political and military requirements. The government created new institutions for arms control, and developed a policy based on three essential requirements. First, CSBMs and arms control are directly dependent on the peace process. Progress is closely linked to the negotiations, and any major limitations on Israel's nuclear capability will come only at the end, after all the states in the

region explicitly accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state and formal peace agreements are signed. Second, any regional arms limitation agreement must include a tangible reduction in conventional and unconventional military threats to Israel. Third, any arms limitation agreement must include realistic provisions for verification and solutions to the problem of "breakout," in which a country suddenly renounces the restrictions of a treaty and gains a sudden advantage. Each factor is seen as a necessary and independent requirement for arms control in the region.

The Israeli nuclear deterrent is designed to redress the region's imbalances and asymmetries, and it will not be relinquished until Israel's three requirements are met, based on formal peace agreements, an end to the military threat, and the creation of new mutual verification systems. This means that any discussion of limits on nuclear weapons, such as a shut-down of activities at the Dimona nuclear complex, is unacceptable in the absence of such conditions. Such measures, and Israeli acceptance of the NPT, can only come after peace treaties have been reached with all the other states, the threat (both conventional and unconventional) from all the states (from Algeria to Iran) is physically eliminated, and the verification systems that failed in Iraq are totally overhauled.

Until the threat to its national existence has been removed and the legitimacy of the Jewish state is widely accepted, Israeli policy-makers argue that a nuclear deterrent capability will remain necessary. Indeed, Arab efforts to force Israel to give up its nuclear option before the establishment of regional peace are interpreted by Israel as evidence that "the Arab states wish to retain the option of waging wars against Israel, with nothing to worry about."

Thus, in contrast to the Egyptian position, Israeli policy emphasizes the implementation of a number of CSBMs as a first step toward both peace and arms control, followed by limitations or even a freeze on conventional weapons stockpiles. Despite recent events, the possibility remains of a combined conventional attack on Israel's Eastern front, involving Syria, with potential support from Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. With the limited participation of Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Israel would face a disadvantage of 1:2 in tanks, 1:3 in guns and mortars, and 1:2 in combat aircraft. A surprise attack before Israel could mobilize its reserves would greatly increase the Arab advantage. In addition, the advanced weapons technology that the Americans continue to sell to Saudi Arabia diffuses quickly throughout the Arab world, leading to an erosion of the

Israeli technological advantage which has been used to offset the quantitative advantage of the Arabs. Thus, limits of conventional weapons are seen as inseparable from restraints on nuclear weapons and long-range surface-to-surface missiles.

Furthermore, the Israeli position is based on the fact that any peace agreements that involve territorial withdrawal, whether on the Golan Heights or the West Bank, could increase the dangers of military attack, requiring expanded Israeli deterrence and defensive capabilities. The geographic and demographic asymmetries that have characterized the Arab-Israeli conflict will become even more pronounced. Israel will always be a micro-state without strategic depth and with a relatively small population. If there are changes in its defense lines, Israel will again appear to be highly vulnerable to large-scale surprise attack. Thus, even with peace treaties, arms limitations measures must allow Israel to maintain sufficient military capability to deter and defend against attacks that threaten national survival. As long as the Arab states maintain significant advantages in conventional forces, the need for Israel's strategic deterrent will continue.

Problems of Verification

In addition to these requirements, verification of compliance is essential to any realistic arms control regime, and the Middle East has a poor track record in this area. With a few exceptions (such as Israel), most Middle Eastern societies are tightly sealed, making it easy to hide illicit programs, and making verification particularly difficult, as was seen in the case of Iraq. The Iraqi regime blatantly violated the 1925 Geneva Convention banning the use of chemical weapons, and ignored its commitments under the NPT. In Iraq, IAEA inspections and safeguards were a travesty, and even after the 1991 war, the IAEA was not able to destroy the Iraqi program. (The IAEA employs only 200 inspectors, and most of their time is spent on inspections in countries such as Canada and Sweden.) As long as this situation continues, and there is no way to insure "timely warning" of a nuclear program, such loose international regimes, that present the illusion but not the substance of verification, will be rejected by Israel.

Politically, the IAEA and NPT regime was and still is used for "Israel bashing," and Israel has no trust in such international organizations. For many years, the Arab states have introduced resolutions seeking to expel Israel from the IAEA.

Instead, when nuclear arms control is finally on the

agenda, Israeli participation is predicated on a regional framework, in the form of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Based on the model provided by the Treaty of Tlatelolco, such a framework would be negotiated directly between all the states, and verification would be conducted through mutual inspection. This would require the creation of a new and independent regional organization, similar to OPANAL, which was established for the Latin American nuclear free zone. There is no prospect of restraints involving Israel without acceptance of Israeli inspectors in Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and, of course, the reverse.

These positions contrast sharply with those presented by the Egyptians, and as a result, the Cairo conference was largely "a dialogue of the deaf." The gap between Israeli and Egyptian security perceptions, particularly regarding the conventional threat and the implications of worst-case analysis for Israeli policy, was emphasized and not bridged. The conference demonstrated the need to proceed on a step-by-step basis with CBMs before talking about nuclear weapons, and the importance of bringing Iran and Syria into the arms control process.

Impressions of Cairo

The Egyptians were very hospitable and seemed to make an extra effort to make us comfortable. However, many of the Arab speakers, notably the Syrian and Saudi (but in general, not the Egyptians), showed a high level of hostility toward Israel and made many references to the Hamas deportees, "the illegal occupation," human rights violations, etc. (The Israelis present decided not to turn this conference into an Arab-Israeli confrontation, and restricted their formal comments to arms control issues. Informally, they did confront the more vocal sources of hostility and responded to the attacks.)

It was noteworthy that none of the Arab participants showed any disinclination to talk to the Israelis privately or publicly, and even the Syrian, Saudi, and Iranian participants spoke at length with their Israeli counterparts in the hotel lobby or restaurants. Privately, the Syrian was not overly hostile toward Israel, but as a member of the Syrian elite, raised in Paris, he is removed from details in Damascus.

The Saudis were represented by a Western-educated academic, with no apparent role in the government. He repeated much of the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric of the past decades, including the myth of Israel as an "external colonial settler state." Both publicly and privately, he vehemently insisted that Jews

had no link to Israel or claim to Jerusalem, and expressed empathy with the "Palestinian cause." Nevertheless, he engaged in extensive private conversations with the Israelis and was personable. He did, however, request not to be sent materials from Israel, which might "get him into trouble."

The Iranian was also Western-educated and did not indulge in anti-Israel rhetoric. When questioned about official Iranian propaganda and threats against Israel, he replied that Iran has more pressing problems and that Israel is not high on the Iranian agenda at this time.

The threat of terror from Islamic fundamentalists was clearly in evidence in Cairo, and tourism, which is the major source of foreign currency, has dropped by over 50 percent. Many sites and shopping areas were empty, and taxi drivers were grateful for any business. Many Egyptians noted with appreciation the presence of Israelis when other tourists were cancelling their visits. There was a large and visible military presence in central Cairo, at the airport and train station, outside the major hotels, and around government buildings. The threat of terror is the primary topic of conversation among many of the Egyptians we spoke to.

One final observation: for a visitor from the industrialized West, the poverty in Cairo and surrounding villages, and the gap between the very wealthy and the hopelessly poor, is overwhelming. It is easy to understand how, from an Egyptian perspective, Israel looks technologically advanced, industrialized, rich, and militarily superior. This perspective will not change until a large number of Egyptian leaders and decision-makers are exposed to the realities of Israel, its fears and vulnerabilities.

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Gerald Steinberg is a Senior Lecturer in Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University, and is an Associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He has published widely in the areas of public policy and international relations, and is the co-author of *Resisting Reform: A Policy Analysis of the Israeli Health Care Delivery System* (JCPA and University Press of America, 1992).