



Turn back the clock

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Moving toward a WMD-free Middle East

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Thirty-seven years ago, at the 1974 session of the UN General Assembly, Egypt and Iran introduced a resolution that called for a nuclear weapons-free Middle East. Today, Cairo and Tehran may be unlikely political bedfellows, warily eyeing each other for regional pre-eminence across a Sunni–Shia divide, but both countries continue to profess support for a Middle East without weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In fact, both countries were part of the compromise at the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, in which the final document called for a UN-appointed special Facilitator and a 2012 international conference to make progress toward exactly this goal.

The obstacles to a WMD-free Middle East are legion, of course. If anything, the security environment in the region is even more complex today than it was in the 1970s due, in part, to the following factors. While Israel remains the strongest military power in the region—with an “undeclared” nuclear arsenal of up to 160 weapons—its security is tested often by groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and their unorthodox military and political strategies. Iran’s ambitious drive to master the nuclear fuel cycle—and the

West’s uncertainty over Iran’s military goals—increases the threat of a new nuclear weapons state and whets the nuclear appetites of Middle East and Arab states. Iraq’s security remains unsettled, while that of Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. Turkey has emerged as a wild card, ostensibly a loyal member of NATO, but flexing its own political muscle as it deems appropriate. And never far from public consciousness is the instability of Islamic extremism and terrorism throughout the region—from Sudan to Yemen to Afghanistan and nuclear-armed Pakistan—and the corresponding “black swan” threat of an Al Qaeda nuclear device.

Nonetheless, there is modest political momentum behind the WMD-free zone concept, as the United States, UK, and Russia recognize that the credibility of the NPT framework stems in part from the 1995 bargain by which the Arab states agreed to an indefinite extension of the treaty in return for progress toward the goal of a Middle East WMD-free zone. Accordingly, some progress might be made in the next few years—in terms of confidence-building measures, transparency, International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, and

accession to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the chemical and biological weapons conventions—even if a formal WMD-free zone does not come into being. For such progress to be made, however, Israel must be part of the process, despite its non-NPT status. And for that to happen, Israel will need to abandon its long-standing policy of “nuclear opacity” (*amimut*, in Hebrew).

Although Israel’s nuclear ambiguity has lasted for decades, it is possible that its days might be numbered. In his recent book, *The Worst-Kept Secret*, Avner Cohen writes “The closer that Iran is perceived to acquiring nuclear weapons, the more urgent it will be for Israel to draw its red lines, including *amimut*.” Moreover, one wonders how long the United States can maintain the credibility of the NPT regime, while supporting the undeclared nature of Israel’s nuclear deterrent.

To be sure, there could be negative consequences if Israel—whether to reinforce deterrence against a nuclear-aspiring Iran or for other reasons—were to confirm the existence of its nuclear arsenal. The Arab League has announced that if Israel were to publicize its arsenal, this declaration would force many Arab states to withdraw immediately from the NPT in order to seek their own means of deterrence. On the other hand, it is not at all clear, as Cohen notes, whether Iran would openly declare its nuclear capability; so far, Iran’s Islamic equivalent of *amimut* has promoted its own security interests in the region. There are other considerations as well. If Israel and/or Iran were to declare their nuclear arsenals, how would deterrence then work between the two

countries, and how great would be the risk of miscalculation between the two? Or military preemption? What about the insecurities felt in the Arab world over potential nuclear instabilities between Israel and Iran? And, for states in the region, what are the more long-term consequences of nuclear proliferation, and how does this apply to terrorist groups?

Before reaching such a critically unstable situation, it behooves the parties involved to evaluate rigorously the components of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East and to consider how various norms and practices might be introduced into the region so as to strengthen WMD nonproliferation and the transparency of activities. Even if a formal treaty is not politically feasible in the near term because of current tensions and instabilities, every effort should be made to explore what policy tools are available to reduce the risk of catastrophic conflict in the Middle East—this means preventing states from using nuclear weapons in the Middle East *and* preventing terrorists from using them anywhere in the world. To be successful, the process must be based on the premise that countries in the region will be much more secure without nuclear weapons than with them.

Author biography

Jeffrey Boutwell is the former Executive Director of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. The organization received the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize with its founder, the late Sir Joseph Rotblat, for their work to reduce the threat of nuclear war and eliminate nuclear weapons. Currently, Boutwell is working on issues related to weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.