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## Nuclear fallout traps Washington and Jerusalem

By GERALD STEINBERG AND DAVID LEITNER  
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The outcome of the latest NPT review session will result in even greater reluctance to take major risks for an elusive peace.

With relations between Washington and Jerusalem already severely strained, the outcome of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference late last month was more bad news.

In a surprise move, the Obama administration accepted most of the Egyptian plan that seeks to impose its version of a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone (MENWFZ).

Negotiations, and thus intense pressure on Israel, are set to begin in 2012, according to the agreed text.

This outcome undermines 40 years of quiet Israeli exceptionality with respect to nuclear weapons.

In theory, a MENWFZ is a good idea, and for many years such international gatherings have endorsed the concept, with support from Egypt, Iran and Israel. But each state supports a very different approach for how to achieve this goal.

For Israel, the idea of a MENWFZ without the prerequisite peace agreements, an end of conflict with all regional opponents, including Iran, and mutual, rather than global inspection, is a nonstarter. In contrast, for Egypt, its partners in the Arab League and Iran, the goal is to isolate Israel internationally, and to eventually force the surrender of its undeclared "weapon of last resort." Egypt and the others have no problem with the thin system of nuclear inspections run by the International Atomic Energy Agency, which took far too long to find and publish Iran's violations, and was unaware of Syria's secret North Korean facility.

But for Israeli security, this is another nonstarter.

IN THE recent NPT review conference in New York, as in past rounds, Egypt, Iran and the other states again demanded that the US choose between accepting their position or risking a failed conference. In previous cases, the US forced Egypt to abandon most of its plans, and in some instances allowed for dispersal without agreement.

This time, however, the Obama administration decided that the goal of creating a world free of nuclear weapons could not be squared with failed outcome.

Although Obama and other officials attempted to distance themselves from the outcome a few hours after supporting it, this was not at all convincing.

Once again, the White House appears to be either incompetent or duplicitous in its repeated claims of guaranteeing Israeli security.

Thus, the 2010 NPT review conference ended with a significant victory for Egypt and Iran, and a sharp setback for Israeli policy. Although Israel is not an NPT signatory and has not violated any agreements or commitments (unlike Iran, Libya and Syria), it was singled out for special condemnation in the final declaration.

In blatant contrast, Iran and Syria, which have been caught violating their treaty commitments by pursuing nuclear weapons, were not even mentioned.

In addition, the US decision to support Egypt's demand for a UN special coordinator on these issues adds more pressure. This special envoy's primary activity will be to highlight what has until now been an almost invisible Israeli nuclear deterrent.

These events will also complicate the pursuit of peace agreements. History and logic demonstrate that efforts to press Israel to take simultaneous risks on both territory (in peace talks) and on the "last resort" deterrent end in failure. The center-right majority and the coalition elected last year are willing to consider territorial withdrawal as part of a two-state solution.

But the security risks are considerable, involving the loss of the already very small buffers that have provided protection since 1967. In such scenarios, the entire leadership, without exception, as well as public opinion polls, consistently show support for maintaining the unspoken but omnipresent "ultimate deterrent" to guarantee national survival.

By failing to support Israel's unique position, Washington has effectively undermined this guarantee and has highlighted the existing concerns regarding the credibility of America's commitment to Israel's survival.

The outcome of the latest NPT review session will result in even greater reluctance to take major risks for an elusive peace.

While the Obama administration's goals of a non- (or at least less)-nuclear world reflect good intentions, its acquiescence to the NPT conference's final document is likely to be counterproductive. Rather than preserving the already slim chances for slow progress toward a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, the more likely outcome is an all-out Middle East nuclear arms race.

*Gerald Steinberg is a member of the political science department at Bar-Ilan University, and David Leitner is completing his doctorate in this faculty.*



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