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## The International Atomic Energy Agency and Israel: A Realistic Agenda

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- There is no foundation for a change in Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity under present circumstances, and the topic is not on the agenda.
- Under the terms of a 1969 agreement with the U.S. government, Israel has refrained from making any declarations about its nuclear weapons capability, or from testing devices.
- The threat to Israel has not diminished much in the past five decades and hatred of Israel in the Arab and Moslem worlds remains intense. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenai has emphasized that "the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region" and that "the perpetual subject of Iran is the elimination of Israel."
- As long as Jewish sovereignty and Israel's right to equality as a state among the nations is denied, the need for a credible deterrent will not end.
- The goal of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone will become essentially unfeasible if Iran crosses the point of no return in its development of nuclear weapons.

The upcoming visit to Israel (July 6-8) of Dr. Mohammed el-Baradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), will receive a great deal of media attention but is unlikely to produce much hard news. Israeli analysts will repeat that there is no foundation for a change in the country's policy of nuclear ambiguity under present circumstances, and the topic is not on the agenda. The other focus of headlines - the IAEA's efforts to stop Iran's accelerating pursuit of nuclear weapons - is not merely an Israeli concern but rather a global threat. While both issues are important, neither will come closer to a resolution as a result of this visit.

Instead, discussions will include more mundane and long-term issues - possible confidence-building measures toward a realistic Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction; new Israeli technology export regulations in line with the Nuclear Suppliers Group; cooperation in the area of radiation safety and research in the medical field; and cooperation to safeguard and prevent terrorist use of radioactive materials ("dirty bombs"). Israel, as a member of the IAEA since its founding in 1957, has a great deal to contribute and also to gain from collaboration in these areas.

## **Universal Goals vs. Middle East Realities**

For Dr. el-Baradei, who made an official visit to Israel in 1998, shortly after being elected to head the IAEA, the "universality of nuclear non-proliferation norms" is high on the agenda. Indeed, the Director General's mandate includes continuing discussions with the three important non-signatories to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) - India, Pakistan, and Israel. Most Israeli officials will agree that the goal is noble: a world free from the threat of nuclear and other kinds of arms, and without the need for such weapons of "last resort."

But when the subject is raised, Israeli officials will explain once again that a "universal" treaty such as the NPT is incompatible with a region that remains far from peaceful and secure. They might quote officials from other countries, such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Foreign Minister Jack Straw, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and many others who have publicly recognized the uniqueness of the threat to Israel's national survival. These threats have not changed fundamentally from those perceived by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who began to develop a nuclear option after the 1948 Arab invasion in order to deter further attacks. As public opinion polls demonstrate, the vast majority of Israelis are convinced that the Dimona reactor and the other elements of this virtual capability remain necessary to convince neighboring states that any attempt to destroy Israel will result in a parallel destruction on the other side. For this reason, Mordechai Vanunu's self-delegated and anti-democratic efforts to tear down Israeli deterrence policy have received miniscule support from Israeli citizens.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Israeli nuclear policy during this long period has been particularly careful and responsible. In sharp contrast to Pakistan, whose chief nuclear scientist, A. Q. Khan, ran what the IAEA referred to as a "nuclear supermarket" for states such as Libya, Iran, North Korea, and perhaps Syria and Saudi Arabia, Israel has avoided any contribution to nuclear proliferation. Recent changes in Israeli export regulations have brought these into line with the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Australia Group (with respect to preventing proliferation of chemical and biological weapons), opening the way for greater cooperation in these frameworks.

Furthermore, under the terms of a 1969 agreement with the U.S. government, and in order to avoid accelerating the rate of proliferation in the region, Israel has refrained from making any declarations about its nuclear weapons capability, or from testing devices. In 1998, India and Pakistan became the sixth and seventh nations to test atomic weapons, while Israel has continued to demonstrate self-restraint, and maintains a policy of deliberate ambiguity in this area.

## **The Threat to Israel Has Not Diminished**

The threat to Israel has not diminished much in the past five decades - the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan have helped set important precedents, but the hatred in the Arab and Moslem worlds remains intense. During this visit, Dr. el-Baradei and his staff will be reminded that officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran continue to declare their rejection of "the Zionist entity," while supporting and working closely with terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hizballah.

In December 2001, former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani called the establishment of the Jewish state the "worst event in history," and declared, "In due time the Islamic world will have a military nuclear device, and then the strategy of the West would reach a dead end, since one bomb is enough to destroy all Israel."<sup>2</sup>

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenai told the Syrian premier during his visit to Tehran in November 2000 that "the destruction of Israel will certainly occur."<sup>3</sup> Khamenai

further emphasized in a Friday sermon "that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region."<sup>4</sup> In January 2001, he noted: "The foundation of the Islamic regime is opposition to Israel and the perpetual subject of Iran is the elimination of Israel from the region."<sup>5</sup>

Hard-core Arab anti-Semitism is widespread, and although Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi has decided to repair his shattered relations with the West, he continues to call for the replacement of Israel with a binational (meaning Palestinian-dominated) state. As long as Jewish sovereignty and Israel's right to equality as a state among the nations is denied, the need for a credible deterrent will not end.

It is true that Israel's security environment has improved in the past few years, particularly after Saddam Hussein's arsenal of Scud missiles and other weapons were destroyed as a result of the U.S.- and UK-led war. In addition, after the Libyan government was caught attempting to import components for the production of enriched uranium, it relinquished major WMD-related components, including chemical weapons materials. This is another direct benefit of the Iraq War. The threat of massive conventional attacks against Israel has also diminished with the end of the Cold War and the parallel decline of Syrian and other forces that had been aligned with the Soviet Union.

However, the fundamental asymmetry that has always characterized Israel's strategic position in the Middle East remains unchanged. In the regional turbulence which has increased as a result of the war in Iraq, Israel's miniscule territorial size and small population could present an irresistible target of opportunity for yet another Arab leader seeking to divert attention from internal pressures. From this perspective, Israel's nuclear deterrent option is given credit for preventing catastrophic miscalculation, even in the case of Saddam Hussein. As Egypt's leaders understood after paying the huge costs of the 1973 War, Israel is not going to be destroyed, and the only rational alternative is mutual acceptance.

Under these circumstances, if Israel were suddenly to give up its nuclear "insurance policy," it would actually make the region more unstable. Thus, scenarios that include an Israeli decision to sign the NPT and close the Dimona reactor complex are unrealistic in the foreseeable future.

Even if the IAEA, under the leadership of Dr. el-Baradei, and with the backing of Washington and the hesitant Europeans, were able to halt Iran's march to nuclear weapons before it crosses the point of no return, this would reduce but certainly not end the threat to Israel's survival. As a result, there is no basis for considering a tradeoff linking Iran's illegal nuclear program with pressure on Israel to abandon its deterrent. The IAEA leadership would be ill-advised to try to link these two complex issues into a simple but unrealistic "package deal."

### **Moving Toward a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction**

The realistic path to gaining Israel's agreement to relinquish its deterrent and accept the NPT is to radically change the Middle East threat environment. The establishment of a network of regional peace agreements, extending from North Africa through Saudi Arabia and Iran, would provide the necessary foundation for far-reaching changes in Israel's threat perception, making a "last resort deterrent" unnecessary.

The nature and conditions for a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (MENWFZ), or, in some versions, a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction, have been subjects for discussion in the United Nations and other frameworks for almost thirty years. Israel has joined the other countries in the region in endorsing this concept, although there are wide differences in approach and details, such as regarding the inspection provisions. Nevertheless, a MENWFZ remains the only consensus-based framework within which negotiations on this issue can proceed. Efforts to short-cut the process, and to use threats of

isolation to try to gain Israeli entry into the NPT framework in the absence of peace and regional stability, are counter-productive. When the subject comes up in talks with Dr. el-Baradei, this is the response he is likely to hear from his Israeli interlocutors.

In order to pave the way toward this goal, a series of confidence-building measures (CBMs) can be considered that would not impinge on Israel's policy of deliberate ambiguity. One important measure in this direction was taken a few years ago, when Israel signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and established a station near the Dead Sea as part of the international network to monitor compliance.

Additional CBMs and measures to reduce instability, increase regional security cooperation, and reduce threats of war extend into the area of conventional weapons. United Nations reports highlight the importance of negotiations to decrease the arsenals of tanks, missiles, and other offensive weapons in the region, as well as agreements to prevent possible surprise attacks in the prelude to a MENWFZ. Discussions of the implementation of these and other preliminary steps in the region are important to create conditions necessary for more ambitious objectives.

Within the IAEA structure itself, the discrimination against Israel by virtue of its being excluded from the system of regional groupings (as was the case in the UN until recently) is being addressed, but slowly. An effort by the Director General to accelerate ratification of the proposed changes allowing Israel to be elected to the Board of Governors and hold other positions would mark an important change in the relationship and contribute to mutual acceptance in the region.

### **The IAEA and Iran's Drive for Nuclear Weapons**

At the same time, it is also clear that a MENWFZ, however distant, will become essentially unfeasible if Iran crosses the point of no return in its development of nuclear weapons. The Iranian leadership's repeated statements of hostility and demonization toward Israel, including declarations of intent to destroy the "Zionist entity," and its support for terrorist groups such as Hizballah and Hamas, make the prospects of a nuclear-armed Iran particularly dangerous.

However, the impact of Iranian nuclear weapons is certainly not confined to Israel, and the response to Iran's violations of its commitments under the NPT is a global responsibility. Following earlier attempts to cover up and downplay the clear evidence of Iran's nuclear weapons development efforts, the IAEA's latest report, issued on June 1, 2004, demonstrates the professionalism with which the agency's verification and safeguards teams are approaching this challenge.<sup>6</sup>

After having ignored the evidence of Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program in the late 1970s (leading the Begin government to act unilaterally to destroy the Osiraq reactor in 1981), and failing to detect Libya's illegal technological imports, including centrifuges for uranium enrichment, the IAEA under Dr. el-Baradei has apparently realized that a failure in the case of Iran will destroy the organization's credibility.

The IAEA reports of March and June 2004 include many "smoking guns." These include blatant inconsistencies in Iranian explanations for traces of fissile materials used in making bombs that were detected by the inspectors, long delays in granting access to key sites, violating assurances under the recently signed Additional Protocol; failure to report advanced enrichment equipment such as thousands of advanced P-2 centrifuges; and construction of plants to prepare large amounts of uranium for enrichment. A recent satellite image of the Lavizan-Shiyan Technical Research Center (taken by the GlobalDigital satellite on request from the Institute for Science and International Security) shows that this site has been totally demolished and "scraped clean," apparently reflecting major efforts to hide traces of nuclear weapons activity from the inspectors. At the same time, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme

National Security Council, Hassan Rohani, declared that "the world must accept that Iran has [nuclear] fuel cycle [capabilities], and has enriched uranium within Iran's [territory]."<sup>7</sup>

While Iran is likely to be included in discussions between Dr. el-Baradei and Israeli officials, the focus of efforts to halt Teheran's race to a nuclear capability is now in Vienna, where the IAEA will hold its most critical meeting in September, and in Washington and Europe. The Bush Administration is committed to act to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, and Europe - led by Britain, France, and Germany - has threatened to impose massive economic sanctions on Iran if the weapons production program continues. Whether they are able to act effectively remains to be seen, but if they do not, Israel could be forced to convert its ambiguous minimal nuclear deterrent option into an open second-strike capability in order to deter Iranian threats. Such a development would not enhance regional stability, to understate the case. Thus, although measures to address these concerns may not be at the center of the Israeli-IAEA bilateral discussions, their presence in the background will shape discussions on other issues.

### **Other Agenda Items: Safety and Research Cooperation**

While of lesser interest to the general public than these core security issues, the discussions between the IAEA delegation and Israeli officials will include an effort to expand technical cooperation with the agency. Under the long-standing safeguards agreement with Israel, IAEA inspectors regularly visit and report on the status of the Nahal Sorek research reactor and related scientific facilities and activities. (The Dimona reactor complex is not included in this framework.) Israeli experts also participate in IAEA technical assistance programs in other parts of the world.

Health care applications of radiation constitute another important area of IAEA activities, and will be a major item on the agenda during this visit. Although Israel is a world leader in medical research, including nuclear applications, local hospital practices, including calibration of instruments, can be improved through cooperative programs between the Israeli Ministry of Health and the IAEA.

Returning to the security dimension, the IAEA has become centrally involved in the effort to prevent terrorists from obtaining radioactive materials in order to produce "dirty bombs," and Israel is an active participant in this effort. This is another area in which Israeli technical assistance to the IAEA can be expanded, with world-wide benefits.

Thus, although media attention during Dr. el-Baradei's visit will focus on areas of contention and disagreement - such as the uniqueness of Israel's status and Iran's quest for nuclear weapons - the discussions themselves are likely to be characterized by a cooperative atmosphere.

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### **Notes**

1. See Gerald M. Steinberg, "The Vanunu Myths and Israeli Deterrence Policy," *Jerusalem Issue Brief* 3:22, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, April 2004; <http://www.jcpa.org/brief/brief3-22.htm>.
2. Douglas Frantz, "Iran Closes In on Ability to Build a Nuclear Bomb," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 2003.

3. Iranian TV in Persian, November 23, 2000, as quoted in "Iran Calls for the Destruction of Israel," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies (C.S.S), Special Information Bulletin, November 2003;  
[http://www.intelligence.org.il/eng/bu/iran/shihab\\_11\\_03.htm](http://www.intelligence.org.il/eng/bu/iran/shihab_11_03.htm).

4. Iranian TV, December 15, 2000, C.S.S.

5. Meeting with the organizers of the International Conference for Support of the Intifada, Iranian TV, January 15, 2001, C.S.S.

6. "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Director General's Report to the IAEA Board of Governors, June 1, 2004;  
<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/iaea0604.pdf>.

7. "Iranian Leader: The World Must Accept Iran's Membership in World Nuclear Club," MEMRI No. 678 Special Dispatch - Iran, March 11, 2004;  
[http://www.memri.org/bin/opener\\_latest.cgi?ID=SD67804](http://www.memri.org/bin/opener_latest.cgi?ID=SD67804).

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