Abstract

While Israel has succeeded in developing functional nuclear weapons and Iran has successfully employed a strategy of hedging to win over the international community to accept its nuclear ambitions, this sanctioned policy of opacity is perhaps the single most destabilizing force in the effort to establish a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East. Furthermore, although opacity may be a useful strategy for both Iran and Israel to pursue for their own security goals and political ambitions, it presents a number of unique challenges to the international community and tests the limits of diplomacy in the effort to achieve worldwide nuclear disarmament. Although recent efforts achieved a limited number of concessions from Iran in exchange for the lifting of sanctions, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action amounts not only to a tacit approval of the Iran’s nuclear ambitions, but also an endorsement for clandestine nuclear programs throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. As such, Israeli and Iranian nuclear opacity must be confronted and, to the greatest extent possible, the veil of secrecy and subterfuge lifted.

Introduction

First used in the 1960s with respect to Israel’s emerging nuclear policy, the expression “nuclear opacity” generally refers to undeclared nuclear arsenals and/or capabilities. As such, nuclear opacity is both unsettling and frustrating, since it is premised on ambiguity and, in some respects, deception and a lack of transparency. For some observers, this intentional vagueness (“we won’t admit that we possess nuclear weapons, but we won’t confirm that we don’t have them either”) is nothing more than a clever means of cheating the system and exploiting gaps in
international law; while for realists, it is an effective way to gain credibility and security, as well as leverage over rivals.

These conflicting views on nuclear opacity are not new. For the past forty years, however, the issue itself has not received too much attention, largely due to the fact that the Cold War was defined by declared nuclear capabilities and the acknowledgement by both sides that each had the ability to obliterate the other. Recent developments in the Middle East suggest that this obscurity is unlikely to persist, however, and that nuclear opacity may soon come to define the region. Specifically, Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and the international community’s response has led not only to increased attention to Israel’s longstanding policy of opacity, but has also raised the prospect that Iran itself will remain opaque regarding its nuclear ambitions and abilities, and that other Middle Eastern countries will attempt to follow suit. The implications of this development on the Middle East peace process are, of course, still unfolding, but an examination of both current and past negotiations indicates that nuclear opacity presents considerable challenges to effective diplomacy, particularly with respect to current efforts to establish a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Nuclear opacity is, therefore, a policy that needs to be questioned and challenged more vigorously, for it represents an affront to international law and, ultimately, one of the most significant obstacles to disarmament.

**Nuclear Opacity as an Insurance Policy: The Case of Israel**

Despite the fact that Israel has never officially acknowledged that it possesses nuclear weapons, virtually nobody would dispute that Israeli nuclear bombs exist and that Israel has been a member of the “nuclear club” for at least four decades. As a non-party to the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), Israel has managed – in the face of international condemnation – to develop nuclear capabilities that it refuses to acknowledge, even though the Israeli nuclear program itself is one of the world’s best known secrets and has been the subject of both concern and censure
since its inception. As a result, opacity with respect to its nuclear capabilities has become one of the defining features of Israeli domestic and foreign policy, while Israeli leaders have continued to resist transparency. Israel has remained defiant in the face of accusations that a double standard is being applied vis-à-vis its nuclear opacity (mainly by the U.S), rejecting demands by the rest of the world that Israeli leaders stop hedging, admit to the country’s nuclear program and reveal its nuclear capabilities, and agree to transparency. As such, opacity of nuclear capability has become engrained in Israeli policy, even as Israeli leaders have uniformly condemned the nuclear ambitions of all of other states in the region.

The Israeli nuclear program, which has variously been described as “the bomb in the basement,” the “Samson Option,” or nuclear opacity, serves both political and psychological ends (Rajiv 2010). With respect to national security and regional politics, the Israeli nuclear program is the ultimate guarantor of the country’s survival; it is the means by which Israel ensures that none of its local enemies will dare to threaten or kill large numbers of its citizens (Samaan 2013; Miklos 2012:44). On a psychological level, Israel’s nuclear program helps to alleviate Israeli’s “existential anxiety” regarding past and potential persecution (Ben Ami 2009:5). Avner Cohen, a scholar and critic of Israeli nuclear opacity has described the policy as the “nation’s sacred insurance policy” (187). Thus, the driving force behind the Israeli nuclear program is the idea – either real or imagined – that Israel is, ultimately, on its own to fend for itself, and that the state’s mission is to ensure, at any cost, the survival of its people. Israel views this as its sacred right and duty, but it also does not want to provide the impetus for a nuclear arms race in the Middle East (and, in general, proliferation elsewhere around the world), nor does it want the rest of the world meddling in its affairs (and especially in its security efforts). Understanding the implications of becoming a declared nuclear state, Israel thus became the
“exceptional” undeclared nuclear state, flying below the radar while the rest of the international community either shook its head in disbelief or turned away in tacit approval.

As a means of providing a sense of comfort and security to Israeli citizens, Israel’s opaque nuclear capability appears to have succeeded: most Israelis cannot conceive of Israel dismantling its nuclear weapons and would consider it an act of suicide to give them up (Cohen 2011:188). Furthermore, Israel has made it quite clear that its unique policy of nuclear opacity must be singular: Israel will not tolerate another nuclear capable country in the Middle East, especially a country that it perceives as an immediate threat. This policy of “enforced non-proliferation” was made evident by Israel’s surprise 1981 air strike against a nuclear reactor under construction outside of Baghdad, which sent the explicit message to other countries in the region that Israel was to remain “exceptional” and would not tolerate attempts by neighboring countries to manufacture or obtain nuclear weapons. In what would become to be known as the “Begin Doctrine,” Israel made clear its commitment to take preventative action, including military action, against any hostile neighbor in proximity to the bomb (Cohen 2011:192).

This policy of enforced non-proliferation, which runs alongside Israel’s own policy of nuclear opacity, is predicated on the belief that Israeli security depends upon the state’s singular status as the sole nuclear power in the region, and that any threats to this exceptionalism must be met with immediate and decisive force. Quite simply, Israel will not countenance another nuclear state in the Middle East, because, as Uzi Arad explained, “[Israel] cannot live with a nuclear Iran because a nuclear Middle East would not be the same as the Cold War stalemate. A nuclear Middle East would become a multi-nuclear Middle East, with all that entails” (Cohen 2011:189). Israel, then, must take seemingly contradictory positions with respect to proliferation: on the one hand, Israel must rely upon nuclear opacity to avoid interference with its
own nuclear program, while on the other hand Israeli foreign policy dictates that all potential nuclear threats in the region – whether declared or undeclared – must be eliminated, regardless of their legitimacy or legality within the international framework. This seeming hypocrisy which is condoned by the United States and others, is a central destabilizing force in the Middle East WMDF zone negotiations, and will be discussed later; however, it is important to understand that Israel’s reliance on nuclear opacity depends upon Israeli singularity, and that a “nuclear opaque” Middle East cannot and will not be tolerated in the Israeli paradigm.

Moreover, as insurance against external threats, the effectiveness of Israel’s policy of nuclear opacity is debatable. While Israel and its citizens may believe that having nuclear weapons has improved state security and even prevented an all out conventional attack against Israel, no evidence exists to support the claim that Israel’s policy of nuclear opacity served as the motivating factor / deterrent in any actual or contemplated attacks against Israel. No nation has publically or officially let it be known that it would have attacked Israel, but was deterred by the prospect of nuclear retaliation.

Further, Israel’s unstated but well known nuclear capability did nothing to prevent attacks in the past, such as Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973, Iraqi air strikes in 1990, and the 1996 missile strikes by Hezbollah. Though it could be argued that Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons may have limited the level and scope of aggression in these instances, the fact remains that Israel was and remains vulnerable despite its opaque nuclear capabilities. Moreover, the very idea of using nuclear weapons as a deterrence in such a contained and contiguous geographical area against the relatively modest conventional forces of neighboring countries is neither realistic nor logically sound (Khalil 2013: 28). Indeed, what sort of behavior from a regional neighbor would merit a nuclear response from Israel? How many Scud missiles would it take to merit such an
asymmetric reaction? Simply put, no conventional attack – except the highly improbable outright invasion of Israel – would justify the use of Israel’s nuclear weapons, and even in these extreme instances Israel could certainly rely on its European and American allies to inflict the desired retaliation. Thus, while Israeli nuclear capability certainly has figured into the political calculations of its enemies, whether Israel’s unverified nuclear arsenal has actually served as the sole deterrent to an attack is questionable. Indeed, considering the strength of Israel’s conventional forces, its internal security apparatus, and the near unconditional support it receives from its closest ally, the United States, even an Israel without nuclear weapons is a formidable target of aggression. Therefore, the fact that Israel has nuclear weapons is an element of its overall security, but by no means is it the armor that has kept Israel safe and sovereign for the last fifty years.

What is more certain, however, is that Israel currently has no interest in changing its policy of opacity of nuclear capability, regardless of whether it has been truly effective and despite persistent calls to become more transparent and cooperate in disarmament talks. Indeed over the past several decades, Israel’s opaque nuclear capability has been the subject of international attention a number of times (for example U.N. Resolution 487, which demanded that Israel open up its nuclear facilities for inspection and verification under IAEA safeguards), and more recently Israel has been under increasing pressure from other nations and international bodies to be more transparent and to submit to inspections of the IAEA. In 2009, an IAEA resolution entitled “Israeli nuclear capabilities” (INC) expressing concern about Israeli nuclear

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1 Some Israeli leaders, however, such as Prime Minister Netanyahu, believe that Israeli deterrence must be fully explicit and crystal clear. In Netanyahu’s words: “Against lunatics, deterrence must be absolute, perfect, including second strike capability. The crazies have to understand that if they raise their hands against us, we’ll put them back in the Stone Age.” (Cohen 2011:203 n.15) (quoted in Bergman, R. (2008) The Secret War With Iran. New York: Free Press p.344).
capabilities and calling upon Israel to accede to the NPT and place all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards, was adopted by a narrow margin following nearly two decades of not being tabled based on a tacit agreement to allow Israel to continue its opaque nuclear program unchecked (Lewis 2013:440). Nearly three years ago in December 2012, Israel publically dismissed a United Nations resolution calling on it to adhere to the NPT and open its nuclear program to inspections, saying that it was a “meaningless mechanical vote” and that the UN General Assembly “has lost all its credibility regarding Israel.” Not surprisingly, Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu publically lauded and thanked the United States and Great Britain for blocking an Egyptian-led initiative to work towards a comprehensive ban on the possession of nuclear weapons in the Middle East region, stating that such an agreement would “ignore [Israel’s] security interests and the threats posed to it by an increasingly turbulent Middle East” (The Guardian 2015).

Such defiance and dismissiveness towards calls for transparency has characterized Israel’s response when challenged about its policy of opacity with respect to its nuclear capabilities. This attitude is likely to continue in the immediate future and beyond. As Cohen has noted, Israel views any international attention to its own nuclear program as a dangerous distraction from the urgent need to focus on the threat of Iranian nuclearization (2011:200), and therefore it is unlikely that the veil will be lifted any time soon.

Emerging Nuclear Opacity: The Case of Iran

As a non-nuclear party to the NPT, Iran is legally bound to refrain from developing nuclear weapons; however, it is permitted to engage in peaceful nuclear activities, such as constructing nuclear power plants. Accordingly, Iran’s stated intentions have followed this line, with the Iranian leadership insisting that the country’s nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only and that the government has no intention of building a nuclear bomb. Despite these
assurances, the international community is convinced that Iran’s true goal is to obtain at least the *ability* to build a deliverable nuclear weapon. Numerous analyses have concluded that Iran’s intentions cannot be otherwise, noting that the country’s efforts to develop its nuclear capabilities track closely with a nuclear weapons program, despite the absence of any “smoking gun” that proves it (Cordesman 2013:64). Iran’s recent concessions to limit its nuclear program under the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) make this intent even more clear, since one of the key facets of the JCPOA is that it grants Iran the ability maintain a low level of nuclear latency that is sufficient to keep both the hard-liners in Iran and most of the international community satisfied for the time being. Essentially, the JCPOA allows Iran to continue its strategy of nuclear hedging, which is somewhat akin to “nuclear opacity light,” but lifts the sanctions that have crippled the economy and allows Iran’s leaders to claim victory.

In this sense, Iran’s chief goal appears to be to achieve the *ability* to build a nuclear weapon rather than necessarily possessing one; the Iranian regime wants the bragging rights of a nuclear state, but understands that that the actual construction and deployment of a nuclear weapon may not be required, especially if it can keep the international community satisfied with the prospect of Iran maintaining a low nuclear latency over the next fifteen years. Thus Iran may not have a clear vision of where it wants to end up with respect to nuclear weapons, but its leaders do know that the country would be content with the strategy of nuclear hedging, particularly since full-blown nuclear opacity appears to be the next step. As such, while Iran currently appears to have adopted a policy of opacity similar to that of Israel, the Iranian strategy is based not on opacity of capability, but instead currently relies on opacity of *intent* to project power through ambiguity.
The question, however, is whether Iranian leaders will remain content as a latent nuclear power with everything in place but the bomb itself. Noting the advantages to this course of action, some suggested even before JCPOA that Iran’s nuclear hedging may very well be the newest challenge in the region, as well as a threat to the integrity of the NPT:

It is likely that we will face a different sense of nuclear Iran, in which Iran develops a full latent nuclear-weapons capability opaquely, under the guise of it peaceful program within the NPT, and this ultimately would blur the difference between possession and non-possession (Cohen 2011:195).

This “blurring of the lines” between possession and non-possession is precisely the strategy that Israel has capitalized on for the past forty years, so Iran is in some senses simply following the lead of its enemy, but is doing so at a point much earlier in the game (before actually taking the final step to weaponize its nuclear material, as Israel did many years ago).

Additional reasons exist for Iran to continue along the path of nuclear hedging, many of which involve domestic rather than international considerations. In many respects, latent nuclear weapons capability offers the best of both worlds, since it provides the prestige of having mastered nuclear technology, while at the same time creates a potent deterrent to would be aggressors. Given these forceful motives to choose a path of nuclear opacity, as well the model provided over the past four decades by Israel, the balance must appear to Iranian regime to weigh in favor of maintaining a latent nuclear program, no matter how many concessions it must make under the terms of the JCPOA. This is not to say that nuclear opacity for Iran requires no thought or consideration – if circumstances change, it may make more sense for Iran to declare its weapons rather than to continue hedging – but the ramifications of making its program transparent are certainly more unattractive than any other option, especially when Israel itself provides all of the justification Iran needs to remain undeclared.
The significance of Israel as a model for Iranian behavior with respect to its nuclear program also cannot be overstated. After all, Israel has been able to maintain an undeclared nuclear arsenal for decades, largely due to its unique status and history in the region, in addition to shrewd political maneuvering that has allowed Israel to remain “exceptional” while at the same time refusing to engage in any practical talk about disarmament (Cohen 2011:188). In some respects, Iran can thus look to Israel and see itself: as the only large Shi’ite nation in the region, Iran has only a few allies (with the exception of war torn Syria) and has nuclear armed Sunni Pakistan as an immediate neighbor. Like Israel, Iran sees itself as threatened on a number of fronts, largely on religious grounds, and faces one particularly hostile enemy, the United States (here, the comparison becomes convoluted because while Iran is perhaps Israel’s greatest enemy, the United States is its strongest ally). Accordingly, Iran cannot help but to look toward Israel as an example of what can be accomplished by a nation under siege when it maintains nuclear opacity. On multiple levels, Iran can justify a program that will undoubtedly lead to nuclear opacity, particularly when all other options risk the possibility of humiliation both at home and abroad. Hedging and opacity over clarity, it seems, are Iran’s most attractive options.

Despite the appeal to Iran of a policy of nuclear opacity, both in respect to intent and to capability, whether the regime will actually be able to enjoy the same exceptionalism as Israel is highly doubtful. As a party to the NPT, Iran is required to disclose the full details of its nuclear program, which distinguishes it from Israel and will make opacity much more difficult to achieve. In the event that the Iranian government refuses to comply with its obligations under either the NPT (or for that matter the JCPOA), it is almost guaranteed that the ramifications – in the form of economic sanctions and political isolation – will be swift and severe, and Iran would have few options other than to comply with the terms of the NPT or to withdraw from the treaty.
all together, which is the route that the Iranian government has thus far appeared unwilling to pursue. Thus considered, the feasibility of an Iranian policy of opacity with respect to nuclear capability is questionable, which makes opacity of intent all the more attractive and the JCPOA a victory for the Iranian regime.

**Nuclear Opacity and a WMDF Middle East**

In the event that Iran joins Israel and adopts a policy of nuclear opacity within the next two decades, which the JCPOA makes an even more likely possibility, a unique situation will arise in the Middle East. With two nations possessing undeclared/unacknowledged nuclear weapons, the political dynamic will change and it is likely that tensions in the region will increase. This increase in regional tensions will, have a significant effect on current efforts to realize a WMDF zone in the Middle East. Such an objective, which envisions an agreement by all states in the Middle East to destroy WMD stockpiles and to discontinue their development, has long been a goal for regional diplomats and leaders, as well as the international community. As Patricia Lewis explains:

A WMDF zone in the Middle East addresses many pressing security issues. While it is certainly no panacea, it could be a useful complementary route to containing whatever nuclear ambitions are mounting in Iran. Dismantling Israel’s nuclear programme would also be part of the solution, providing serious relief for what has become an unspoken regional threat for the majority of states in the region and a forbidden topic within Israel itself (Lewis 2013:449).

The problem, then, is that any vision of a WMDF zone is wholly incompatible with the policy of nuclear opacity, and therefore the entrance of Iran onto the scene as another undeclared nation will undoubtedly only serve as a disincentive for diplomatic engagement rather than an impetus to pursue the goal with more rigor.
With respect to Israel, the stated Israeli “existential anxiety” is bound to grow as Iran moves toward nuclear opacity under the terms of the JCPOA, and this will have a ripple effect on relations with all its neighbors and allies. Further, Israel will definitely lose some of the benefits and authority that it previously enjoyed as the sole nuclear power in the region (that is, if Israel allows Iran to maintain an opaque nuclear program). In the shadow of an Iranian policy of nuclear opacity, Israel will certainly need to reassess its own security and will likely respond by increasing its effort to develop a “shield” to defend itself against a potential attack. Whether other Arab nations will feel emboldened by Iran’s undeclared nuclear weapons is unclear, but it is probable that their attitude toward Israel will change and, as a result, more demands will be made on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians. With continued American support, Israel may be able to reject such demands, but it will do so with a new sense of vulnerability and fear, which may undermine its willingness to engage in any substantive negotiations regarding a peaceful solution to current problems, particularly the plight of Palestine.

As outlined above, Israel will not be alone in its reaction to Iranian opacity. Arab nations throughout the region will likely view Iran’s undeclared nuclear capability as a direct threat to their own security and, despite their unified hostility toward Israel, will consider the “dual threat” of two regional nuclear powers to be an insurmountable obstacle to achieving any sort of agreement on the creation of a WMDFZ in the Middle East and the peace process in general. Indeed, many commentators have already noted the inherent difficulty faced by states in the region as they discuss the prospect of a zone free of nuclear weapons without some basic transparency from Israel (Lewis 2013:444), and it is therefore safe to assume that these difficulties will only multiply with the entrance of Iran as an undeclared nuclear state. Already, Iran’s track record of a complete lack of transparency and unwillingness to give a straight,
credible answer regarding its nuclear program has prompted disbelief and uneasiness with regard to its intentions with respect to the JCPOA, as well as increased skepticism about the feasibility and desirability of pursuing a WMDFZ in the Middle East. As a result, even if Iran’s nuclear program was always meant to be peaceful, a policy of secrecy and opacity will undoubtedly have “a profound impact on regional stability and, indeed, international peace and security as a whole” (Persbo 2012).

The incompatibility of nuclear opacity with the quest to establish a framework for a Middle Eastern WMDFZ has been made evident repeatedly in the comments of various Arab diplomats, both before and after the emergence of the JCPOA. For example, the government of Kuwait has repeatedly expressed its concerns regarding both Israeli and Iranian nuclear opacity, particularly with respect the damaging effects of this policy on WMDFZ efforts, making it clear that Israel’s current policy of nuclear ambiguity is unacceptable and stands as a major barrier to negotiations regarding a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Indeed, many Arab nations view Western powers as complicit in Israel’s policy, as evidenced by the comments of Ambassador Jassem Al-Mubarki, the Director of the International Organizations Department within the Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who stated that “Kuwait is dismayed at the complacency by some Western powers towards Israel’s abstention from cooperating with the international community on banning nuclear arms” (Abul-Ainain 2013). Echoing the sentiment of the entire Arab region with respect to Israel’s position, one commentator noted,

Arab states have three options for responding to Israel’s nuclear capability: acquiescence, counter-balancing, or regional elimination of WMD. The consistent attitude of Arab states has been to work within the confines of international forums to pursue regional elimination. The most significant obstacle has been Israel’s unwillingness to engage (Al Assad 2013: 46)
For the Arab world then, Israel, with its intractable stance and seeming lack of interest in committing to the dialogue, is truly a “rogue” state within the Middle East. The addition of Iran as an undeclared nuclear power will only serve to exacerbate the frustrations of other countries and increase their unwillingness to participate in negotiations without more clarity from the new duo composed of Iran and Israel.

Unfortunately, neither Israel nor Iran appears to be too concerned with the damaging effects that their policies of nuclear hedging and opacity have had and will continue to have on WMDFZ efforts. For its part, Israel has always been skeptical of these efforts, particularly since demands for Israeli transparency are almost always at the forefront of any discussion, and Israel wants to avoid any discussion of its “national insurance program” at all costs. Commentators are split regarding Israel’s refusal to come to the table regarding a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Some believe that the very notion of a WMDFZ is incomprehensible to Israel, which views such efforts as nothing more than a means to undermine Israel’s exceptional status or an idealistic fantasy detached from the real world. For others, Israel’s apparent disdain for a WMDFZ in the Middle East is not contempt at all, but rather an expression of Israel’s singular view of how the process needs to unfold in order to be legitimate and lasting. In this view, Israel has repeatedly taken the position that current efforts towards a WMDFZ in the Middle East are a case of “putting the cart before the horse,” and that the process will only be worthwhile once certain others conditions are met. Specifically, Israel has stated that there must be a regional peace agreement before it even considers joining the NPT or begins discussions on creating a WMDFZ in the Middle East. What this view does not consider, however, are the potential ramifications of Iranian nuclear opacity. Would Israel be interested in security agreements/peace first and Iranian nuclear disarmament second in this scenario? Given that Israel has repeatedly stated that it
cannot and will not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran (even if undeclared), it seems unlikely that Israel would not insist on Iranian disarmament as a prerequisite for any discussions about peace. Such a demand would only serve to draw attention to Israel’s own policy of nuclear opacity, and lead other nations – not only Iran – to question Israel’s authority to call for “peace first, zone second” on the one hand, while simultaneously making one nation give up its WMD as a pre-condition for the peace process to begin.

A dilemma of this type would certainly arise if Iran adopts a policy of nuclear opacity, and solutions to overcome the impasse that would follow involve sacrifices that Israel is not likely to accept. Writing about the effects of “dual opacity” on the current balance in the Middle East, Avner Cohen commented and asked:

> During the Cold War, as the world learned to live under the balance of nuclear terror, as in mutual assured destruction, the theory and practice of arms control were developed to provide measures of stability and robustness. But those dialogues took place against the explicit and declared presence of nuclear weapons. Would it be possible to have such an arms-control dialogue in a context of opacity on both sides? (2011:193)

Based on the analysis above, which is largely dependent on Israel’s response to another undeclared nuclear power in the region, the answer appears to be “no.” Accordingly, while Israel’s policy of nuclear opacity is already a barrier to efforts to establish a WMDFZ in the Middle East, the introduction of Iran as an undeclared or latent nuclear power would likely be the deathblow to negotiations.

**Moving Towards Clarity: A Possible Approach to Overcoming Opacity**

Given that all indicators point to a complete breakdown of negotiations to secure a lasting peace in the Middle East if Iran and Israel pursue a policy of nuclear opacity, attention must be focused on the means to avoid the realization of such a scenario. As noted previously, any solution to the dilemma created by nuclear opacity will involve painful sacrifices, particularly for
the two countries – Israel and Iran – that have adopted the policy. The ramifications of attempting to maintain or simply to “tweak” the status quo (by allowing Iran to exist as a latent nuclear power) are both undesirable and dangerous, however, making the benefits to decisive action far greater than the costs. Further, although opacity has appeared to be an effective and safe public posture for Israel over the past four decades, particularly in times of strategic insecurity and risk, it has also been an obstacle to change (Cohen 196). This obstacle will only grow with the entry of Iran into the picture as an undeclared nuclear power, and it is possible that the barrier created by such a development will be so great that it will be insurmountable. Accordingly, all alternatives must be considered, including those that require a redefinition of Israeli national identity and a new adherence to international law.

Having enjoyed the status and benefits of an exceptional state for several decades, Israel would likely be the most effected and offended by demands for greater transparency. Indeed, previous attempts to coerce Israel into abandoning its policy of nuclear opacity – either through U.N. resolution, IAEA demand, or public outcry – have been dismissed by Israel as either illegitimate or a direct assault on Israeli sovereignty. Few Israelis can conceive of themselves dismantling their nation’s sacred national insurance (Cohen 2011). Therefore, in order to persuade Israel to come to the table, the international community – including Israel’s chief ally, the United States – needs to rally around other Arab countries to persuade Israel that its policy of “peace first, WMDFZ second is not in its best interests and, with arrival of the JCPOA, is

2 Others disagree with this assessment, instead believing that Israel’s nuclear opacity has allowed neighboring Middle Eastern countries to punt on the issue of whether to obtain arms. See, Bowen at 703: “It should also not be forgotten that Israel’s opacity has for years given many of its Arab neighbours the room to avoid taking political decisions related to nuclear weapons acquisition. Indeed, Israel going overtly nuclear in response to Iran would place additional pressure on Arab capitals to respond by investing in their own weapons efforts.”
unsustainable. Specifically, Israel needs to accept that, rather than posing a risk to Israeli national security, a nuclear free zone in the Middle East will serve as a confidence building measure that will open doors for cooperation and security dialogue among all states in the region, which, in turn, will create the atmosphere of trust that is necessary to work towards regional peace agreements. In other words, Israel needs to understand that “Peace and the [WMDFZ] are mutually re-enforcing and that neither should be a precondition for the other” (Al Assad 2013: 48-49).

This is not to say that Israel needs to make unilateral concessions to the Arab world with nothing “real” in return except the promise of regional peace in the distant future. Indeed, such a demand would be both unrealistic and unreasonable. After all, if Israel’s policy of nuclear opacity and its refusal to discuss a WMDFZ in the Middle East has worked thus far, an argument exists that little incentive exists to make an about face at this time, even despite the looming prospect of a nuclear Iran made possible by the JCPOA. Israel will need more, and so will Iran. Accordingly, the prospects of a WMDFZ in the Middle East depend on the establishment of a comprehensive framework that will provide necessary assurances, including ramifications for non-compliance. Although the parameters of such a framework would need to be negotiated by all stakeholders, Prince Turki Al-Faisal sketched out an idea of what such an agreement would entail when he observed:

Such a zone must be accompanied by a rewards regime that provides economic and technical support for countries that join, as well as a nuclear security umbrella guaranteed by the permanent members of the UN Security Council. This should mitigate Israel’s professed fears that they use to justify their holding of a nuclear arsenal. It should include a sanctions regime that puts economic and political sanctions on countries that don’t join, in addition to military sanctions against those countries that try to develop weapons of mass destruction, also guaranteed by the permanent members of the Security Council. This should prevent any unilateral action by any country to use military means for that purpose. It should also forewarn any
country with such ambitions that it will face joint military action if it goes that route (Al Faisal 2013:36).

While lacking in detail about execution and enforcement, this description of a WMDFZ in the Middle East presents a viable solution that addresses Israeli concerns and, more importantly, lays the groundwork for an environment where regional peace can be achieved. Expressing similar logic and optimism about the prospect for an Israeli change of heart, Paolo Foradori wrote in a piece that concluded a series of papers presented at the Belfer Center on the prospects for a WMDFZ in the Middle East by noting:

Although many observers believe that Israel will never give up its nuclear arsenal, which is considered a life insurance against neighboring hostile countries—some of which do not even recognize its right to exist—there are reasons to argue that even Israel may come to consider the WMD-free zone proposal as an new fact is that the nuclear status quo in the Middle East is no longer sustainable and Israel’s nuclear monopoly is under threat due to Iran’s advancing nuclear capability.... In response to the changing strategic environment, one could argue that Israeli leaders may come to see entering into negotiations with their neighbors to establish a WMD-free zone the least unpalatable option, while also considering that alternative security strategies—i.e. prevention through sabotage, assassination, and military strikes; or deterrence, initially aimed at Iran and, eventually, perhaps other states in the region—appear to be less sustainable, attractive, and effective options (2013: 53).

This sentiment, which echoes the reasoning and hopes of many in the Middle East, reflects both a realistic and a progressive view of what can be achieved if Israel abandons its policy of nuclear opacity and takes the first step of coming to the negotiating table not with a set of demands and prerequisites, but a willingness to compromise its “insurance” for the surety of a lasting regional peace. Pressure therefore needs to be exerted upon Israel to change its position with respect to participating in WMDFZ talks, emphasizing the possibilities contained in the proposal outline above, as well as the futility of the current stalemate that has been the status quo for the past several decades.
Concurrent with efforts to bring Israel to the table, Arab nations need to work collectively to engage Iran and to offer its leadership similar assurances by committing to certain prerequisites that address Iranian concerns over its own security, prestige, and stability. As noted previously, in some respects Iran and Israel both share certain common external and internal pressures (making their common drive to obtain nuclear weapons understandable), and therefore the international community’s approach towards Iran needs to recognize that many of the same motivating factors exist for Iran as with Israel. Obviously, Iran’s cooperation is essential for Israel’s acquiescence to the WMDFZ outlined above (especially since Iran is one of the leading sources of funding for anti-Israeli groups), and Iran will be called upon to make sacrifices equally as painful to those required of Israel. Nevertheless, if each country is willing to step back and to consider these sacrifices in the context of the larger picture, where the ultimate goal is lasting security and a WMDFZ in the Middle East, logic may prevail and these first steps taken.

While the actions outlined above go a long way in setting up the framework for peace, they nevertheless would be undertaken under the shadow of nuclear opacity. Accordingly, a level of distrust and suspicion that is incompatible with diplomacy will still exist, making the prospects for a lasting peace no stronger than they were before these measures were taken. It is within this framework, however, where both sides have reached a certain comfort level regarding their own security, that Israel and Iran should be compelled to fully dismantle their nuclear programs forever. In this scenario, which is much more comprehensive and far reaching than what is called for in the JCPOA, complete transparency on both sides would simultaneous, and each country – as well as the entire world – would know the other’s nuclear capability. In other words, they would know the full extent and nature of their enemy.
With this knowledge, *real* negotiations could begin, for the path to zero would no longer be overshadowed by shadowy nuclear programs. Indeed, with opacity taken out of the picture, the entire process of negotiating a WMDFZ in the Middle East will be reconfigured and given a new energy. In this sense, a move toward nuclear clarity by both Israel and Iran makes sense not only for these two countries and the region, but also for the world as a whole. Because nuclear opacity can ultimately only serve as a hindrance to peace and is on its face incompatible with the concept of a WMDFZ, complete clarity by all parties is the best and only solution for peace in the Middle East.
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