

**Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture Special Edition**

**“A Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East: *Realistic or Idealistic?*”**

Discussion Report, 24 March 2010

**Summary**

To coincide with the launch of this special edition of the *Palestine-Israel Journal*, focused on freeing the Middle East from Nuclear Weapons, a workshop was held, under the Chatham House rule<sup>1</sup>, at the School of Oriental and African Studies. The following participated in their personal capacity:

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The workshop took as its two principal points of focus: 1) the Iranian nuclear programme and resulting issues within the international community; and 2) the Israeli nuclear weapons policy and regional ramifications. While these two issues were treated in separate sessions there was obvious overlap in discussion. The following is an attempt to synthesise the views, especially where agreement was found, and present an overview of the topics covered.

**Recommendations**

- The status quo is not an option: rather than move to a region where proliferation increases, all states must seek cooperative security solutions, primarily the weapons of mass destructions free zone (WMD FZ).
- Efforts toward the goal of a WMD FZ in the Middle East must be pursued in parallel to progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to a world free of nuclear weapons.
- Israel increasingly identifies non-state actors as the major threat to its security; in this context, work must be done to decrease the saliency of nuclear weapons as a useable tool of defence.
- Israel should make conciliatory moves towards Syria and show concrete signs of progress with the Palestinians, thereby “pulling the rug from under Iran” with respect to their nuclear programme.
- The Beirut Declaration of the Arab Peace Initiative and its endorsement at the Islamic Conference 2005 should be revisited as the most progressive and inclusive agreement for the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- A further round of sanctions against Iran before May 2010 should be avoided in order to foster goodwill at the Review Conference.

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<sup>1</sup> "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed".

- Track II non-governmental discussions between Israeli and Iranian members of civil society should be cultivated to reduce tensions and further understanding between the two nations.

### **Full report**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the most prominent issue in the Middle East, absorbing the majority of comment and thought. The development of the Iranian nuclear programme has served as a welcome distraction for successive Israeli governments, in particular the current Netanyahu administration. For the Palestinian people, however, this constitutes a digression from their legitimate grievances, namely the ongoing occupation and settlement expansion. In light of these issues, neither Iranian nuclear ambitions nor indeed Israeli nuclear weapons policy is of primary concern to them. The Israeli Prime Minister and his cabinet members have conducted a “megaphone war” in pointing to Iran as the major threat to the state of Israel and as the primary source of regional instability, in the expectation that this will diminish (or at least mask) domestic and international scrutiny of the faltering peace process. Using the media and public diplomacy, Netanyahu is “fanning the flames of fear” over an alleged ‘existential threat’ emanating from Iran. Although undoubtedly emphasised by the government for these wider purposes, it was also understood that for many Israelis, this is a very genuine anxiety.

It was agreed that, with respect to nuclear weapons, the fate of the Palestinian people was entwined with the Israeli population – Israeli use of nuclear weapons in the occupied Palestinian Territories or even neighbouring countries was considered impossible, both politically and militarily. Following this logic, Iranian use of nuclear weapons against Israel would inevitably affect the Palestinian population and was considered highly unlikely – indeed, it was considered that within the Iranian hierarchy there was recognition of the ‘un-usability’ of a nuclear device in this context, or even through the medium of a terrorist attack. Supposing the Iranians successfully developed a weapons capability, would this necessarily pose an existential threat to Israel? The presumptions that Israeli government officials make as to Iranian intentions must be critically assessed in the context of what deterrence Israeli and Iranian nuclear weapons actually provide.

It was pointed out that the Iranian leadership has a record of pragmatic choices and is in no way suicidal, recognising that use of nuclear weapons is not the logic behind the development of the nuclear programme. Rather, it was observed that, as in the case of Israel (and indeed this partially explains their nuclear cooperation before the Islamic Revolution), Iran also has a feeling of isolation and vulnerability. The current rivalry that exists between the two countries is neither geopolitical nor military; it is political and ideological, and psychological warfare and propaganda as practiced by both sides are detracting from the common points of interests that they share and could discuss.

In the case of Iran, sanctions are a “policy of desperation” which are not working and have not worked since their application. A military attack would unify the population behind the regime and indeed

reverse any progress made in negotiations or in integrating Iran into the international community. It was also agreed that an Israeli/US attack on Iran to prevent further nuclear development would not be limited – there was an assertion that, in retaliation, ‘sleeping cells’ throughout the Western world would be activated and within the region, terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah or even Hamas could be harnessed. One suggestion for dealing with the issue was that Israel could make conciliatory moves towards Syria and show concrete signs of progress with the Palestinians, thereby “pulling the rug from under Iran”.

In the short term, suggested approaches to ease the current impasse with Iran included pursuing the idea of multi-lateralising the nuclear fuel cycle – a fuel bank or enrichment facility in Iran must be part of a wider, global push to addressing the link between energy and proliferation risk. There should be an accompanying regime of safeguards beyond the current levels managed by the IAEA under the Additional Protocol. Iran could well accept this on the basis that they are currently pursuing diversification in their energy export portfolio, moving from their dwindling supply of oil to gas. It is also the case that it would meet their demands for full enrichment capability, permitted under the NPT article IV (which provides for ‘no impediment’), while also satisfying a sense of national pride in the mastering of nuclear technology with little outside assistance.

In the longer term, the goal of a nuclear weapon or WMD FZ should be sought by all players, especially in light of the fact that, since 1981, there is unanimity in the UN General Assembly resolution on this matter. However, it was noted that it seemed unlikely that such a goal would prove possible without a similar movement globally, toward a world free of nuclear weapons. However, that is not to say that no effort should be made to continue work on the Middle East WMD FZ; on the contrary, efforts in this regard must be pursued in parallel to both the goal of a nuclear weapons free world and progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The history of the Israeli nuclear programme shows implicit US support for the policy of opacity, or ambiguity, agreed in the late 1960s. This choice has served Israel well and, in fact, has served other states of the region to the extent that the Arab states could not have accepted an overt Israeli nuclear option. Israel could make a major move by declaring that this policy of opacity no longer serves either their interests or the interests of the region in the context of a nuclear weapons free zone. By decoupling the policy of opacity from the actual possession of nuclear weapons Israel has the opportunity to put this card on the table in negotiations for a nuclear weapons free world. However, noting the statement of the League of Arab States in 2008, which “reaffirmed that all Arab countries that are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) demand the international community to undertake immediate actions to free the world from nuclear weapons”, it was suggested that Arab states might not be able to live with an openly declared nuclear weapons capable Israel.

In NPT negotiations, Israel is the “elephant in the room” – not a formal member but implicitly discussed. It was observed that there is a great deal of hypocrisy, or double-standards, in these forums. For example, the history of the Iranian nuclear programme includes a good deal of assistance from the US, France and even Israel, yet these are now the states so intent on stopping it progressing beyond enrichment. However, were Israel to ‘open up’ according to the NPT (so implementing IAEA safeguards) there was no agreement as to how this could be done; the India model, following the US-India nuclear cooperation deal of 2005, may still be an attractive option to Israeli leaders concerned to retain the nuclear weapons capability but benefit from nuclear technology from abroad.

There was agreement that the status quo is not an option – either the region seeks cooperative security measures, foremost the WMD FZ, or there could be a cascade of proliferation. The NPT is on the brink of imploding and the Middle East could well play the pivotal role in the May 2010 Review Conference. Progress on the Middle East Resolution agreed at the 1995 Review Conference is likely to be a key demand of the Arab states, still smarting from a perceived sense of betrayal following their wholesale accession to the Treaty. Israel needs to view the dissolution of the NPT over the Middle East issue as not in their security interests. The previous attempt at a regional security dialogue, the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) track of the 1991 Madrid Conference, was not able to discuss the Israeli nuclear policy nor did it address disarmament *per se*, due to fundamental differences between the Egyptian and Israeli approaches – which comes first, a regional nuclear-free zone or comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace. The US was also reluctant to put forward the idea of a nuclear weapons free zone, and thereby any realistic hopes of accomplishing anything were dashed (leaving aside other notable problems of the ACRS process, such as inclusive and representative regional participation). The League of Arab States proposal to convene a general meeting (potentially under UN auspices) should be supported and the appointment of a special coordinator/rapporteur for Middle East nuclear issues should be welcomed.

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### Biographies of participants

**Mr Ziad Abu-Zayyad** is the co-editor and co-publisher of the Palestine-Israel Journal. He is a former Palestinian Authority minister and a former member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. He served as head of the Palestinian delegation to the Multilateral Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) group following the 1991 Madrid Accords.

**Mr Poul-Erik Christiansen** is research assistant at the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. He holds an MA from the University of London and has been researching the ME WMD FZ project at SOAS since 2006.



**Dr Avner Cohen**, the author of *Israel and the Bomb*, is a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Centre and Senior Research Fellow in the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland University. Formerly a Senior Research Fellow at the National Security Archive, Dr. Cohen was co-director of the Project on Nuclear Arms Control in the Middle East at the Security Studies program at MIT (1990-95). In 1997-98 he was a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), where he was working on issues related to arms control and the peace process in the Middle East.

**Mr Jacob Eriksson** is a PhD candidate in the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East, at SOAS. His thesis examines the role of mediation in the Israel-Palestine conflict, particularly that of small states such as Sweden and Norway.

**Dr Orit Gal** specializes in complexity-based strategy development. Over the past eight years she has concentrated her work on issues of complexity in conflict environments and the intersection between development economics and security. She is currently an Associate Fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) and the Director of the Complexity Hub - a newly established London-based think/do tank promoting the applications of Complexity Science to the public and private sectors.

**Hassan Hakimian** is the new Director of the London Middle East Institute and a Reader in the Economics Department at SOAS. Previously, he was an Associate Dean at Cass Business School, City University, where he led international business education programmes in China (Shanghai) and the Middle East (Dubai). He is the founder and Series Editor for the "Routledge Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa", which has produced a number of pertinent titles dealing with MENA's economies.

**Farhang Jahanpour** has been a part-time tutor at the Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford, for more than twenty years, and is a member of Kellogg College, Oxford. He is also a member of the Board of Advisors of Globalisation for the Common Good. He spent many years as Editor for Middle East and North Africa at the BBC Monitoring Service and is a former professor and dean of the Faculty of Languages at the University of Isfahan, and has also taught at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Reading.

**Dr Rebecca Johnson** is Director of the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy and editor of Disarmament Diplomacy. With a background in physics and disarmament activism, an MA in Far Eastern studies and a PhD in international relations from the London School of Economics, she has monitored nuclear developments, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty from 1994-to the present. She now acts as a periodic consultant for the United Nations, the European Union and other government bodies.

**Dr Tony Klug** is a special advisor on the Middle East to the Oxford Research Group and is vice-chair of the Arab-Jewish Forum. A veteran writer and analyst on the Middle East, he is also a board member of the Palestine-Israel Journal. For many years he worked at the international secretariat of Amnesty



International. In June 2007, The Fabian Society published his acclaimed essay 'How Peace Broke Out in the Middle East: A Short History of the Future', and in May 2009 his essay 'Visions of the Endgame: a strategy to bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict swiftly to an end'.

**Dr Dan Plesch** is director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS, London; a visiting senior research fellow at Keele University; and senior associate of the Foreign Policy Centre. He is the author of *The Beauty Queen's Guide to World Peace* (2004).

**Dr Jamil Rabah** is a public opinion research specialist. He was a participant in the Palestinian delegation to the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) discussions.

**Mr Hillel Schenker** is co-editor of the *Palestine-Israel Journal*. He is spokesperson for the Israeli branch of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), winners of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize. As editor of the Tel Aviv based *New Outlook* magazine he edited two issues on the nuclear question: "The Dangers of Nuclear Proliferation and Confrontation" (May 1982); and "The Middle East Approaching the Nuclear Edge" (September /October 1991).

**Dr Colin Shindler** is Professor of Israeli studies at SOAS, University of London. He specializes in the history and politics of Israel and the study of Zionism. His *History of Modern Israel* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2008.