



Hello Israel, might we talk about your nukes?

[Nicholas Taylor](#) | 04 June 2010

8 Comments



The Rudd Government has joined international efforts to pressure Israel into signing up to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and to help form a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

While the Israelis have not in over four decades declared their possession of nuclear weapons, all expert analysts know they have around 100–200. This is one core reason why Israel remain outside the NPT and international safeguard regimes.

Last week at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York, Australia was among 189 states who agreed to press Israel to [join](#) the international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime, and to attend a UN-sponsored conference in 2012 about a denuclearised Middle East. For Iran and the Arabs, led by Egypt, it appeared a sweet victory. For Israel it is nothing but a proposition.

The prospect of a denuclearised Middle East, as utopian as it may appear, was tabled at the UN by Egypt and Iran in 1974. Despite early resistance from Israel, the negotiation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone remains the only non-proliferation initiative to have been accepted by all members of the region, including Israel, since 1980. Because of the



political and geographical climate in the Middle East, many states now argue a region free of WMD (chemical, biological and nuclear weapons) is the only way forward.

So why has it taken 30 years?

Crudely put, Egypt, Israel and Iran have competing reasons for promoting the idea. Egypt sees it as a way of removing Israel's nuclear superiority. Israel maintains that lasting peace agreements with its neighbours are a prerequisite to any formal negotiation. Iran uses it to exert pressure on Israel's policy of nuclear 'ambiguity', and to deflect attention from its own non-compliance with international safeguards.

There are precedents. Since the Antarctic Treaty in 1951, presently more than 100 states that comprise almost the entire southern hemisphere are stitched into a tapestry of individually agreed nuclear-weapon-free zones.

For its part, Australia has long advocated serious negotiations that will lead to such a zone in the Middle East. But in my view, over the three meetings held in 2007, 2008 and 2009 to prepare for last week's conference, it has changed its focus from Iran to Israel. At the 2009 preparatory meeting, Australia's representative John Sullivan called on Israel to 'join the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon state'. He did not mention concerns about proliferation in Iran, which had dominated his government's two earlier statements to the treaty body.



Predictably the United States sparred with Iran throughout the conference. But during the 2009 preparatory meeting, it carefully exerted pressure on Israel, without making it clear that it would demand that it register as a non-nuclear-weapon state (as is required by the treaty).

Following the NPT review conference last week, the US delegation said it 'strongly' and

'deeply regrets' the concern is reflected at the conference which singled-out as it has been. The Obama Administration chose to ignore this issue in its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, released earlier this year.

As in the three preparatory meetings, China stood alone. It opposed vilifying either Israel or Iran, preferring to facilitate some form of official dialogue between the international community and the region. The United Nations, supported by Russia, the US and the UK that will lead the preparations for the 2012 conference that will seek to negotiate a denuclearised Middle East.



There remains much to do if such dialogue is to take place.

Of the 44 ratifications needed for the treaty to ban nuclear testing to have force, neither Iran, Egypt, nor Israel have signed. Egypt has linked its ratification to Israel's status in the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. Israel has been active in the talks but has expressed disappointment at its role in the international system.

Despite relatively peaceful relations the for-tat game played between Egypt and Israel when ratifying treaties about WMD is sadly quite common. Egypt alone has ratified the nuclear treaty. Israel has only signed the chemical weapons treaty. Iran has ratified all three major WMD treaties, but has been heavily criticised for its lack of cooperation, especially in relation to the NPT.



In the Middle East, an estimated ten states have some form of WMD capability. The weapon most commonly used to deploy WMD – medium to long-range cruise and ballistic missiles – have proliferated throughout the region for decades. In the words of Mohamed El Baradei, former head of the international body that verifies compliance with the NPT, 'The use of nuclear weapons by any region like the Middle East means the destruction of the entire Middle East'.

Of the 35 or so countries with missile ranges of over 150km, more than a third are located within the Middle East, where they have often been used. But all three states remain outside the two international bodies that attempt to control the trade and production of missiles.

Despite this sombre picture there is some hope.

When Libya voluntarily handed over its WMD capability in 2003, it was the first case in

the Middle East where a state had done so without regime change or a move towards democracy. Libya was moved by fear of isolation and further international pressure.

Now the international community has indicated that it is losing patience, I have some small hope that Israel too may do the unexpected, and bring its nukes to the negotiating table. Israel have the trump card in this; may Iran and the Arabs respond in kind. Relations in the Middle East are tense enough without the need for WMD.



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"deflect attention from Iran's non-compliance with international safeguards" ...

Who's "deflecting attention" from Israel's immediate breeching of international safeguards? This is more propaganda from vested interests.

Greig Williams | 04 June 2010

The problem with Israel's democracy is that it only has two right wings and it can only fly

in circles which the whole world is obliged to follow. Without the rest of the world giving absolute support to the Palestinian underdog (who is absolutely in the right), there will never be an end to this conflict.

Greig Williams | 04 June 2010

I have just been to Iran (great place, wonderful people) on a completely non-political visit but Iranians are very keen to talk to westerners about their government (seemingly universally loathed) and the politics of the middle east. They are bemused that the West allows Israel to possess nuclear weapons but denies Iran the opportunity to develop nuclear power. I don't doubt that the present regime would like to also develop nuclear weapons but who could blame them? In their eyes Israel is a highly belligerent state that would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if they felt it necessary.

They are caught in a bind though because Israel would definitely use any means, including nuclear weapons, to stop Iran developing a matching capability.

I fear the worst may happen; Iran comes close to developing appropriate uranium enrichment facilities, Israel drops a bomb or two and sets off a disastrous war which will entrench the present military/Islamist regime in Iran for the foreseeable future. But who is going to bring Israel to the table? certainly not the USA, they won't even criticise them for the current fiasco.

chris gow | 04 June 2010

Can we also talk about Mordechai Vanunu who has been languishing in an Israeli prison for nearly 20 years after being drugged and kidnapped by Israeli authorities because he exposed Israel's dirty little secret of nuclear weapons.

Nathan Socci | 04 June 2010

I am sure it will be easier to make a snowman in hell before we see a nuclear free Middle East. Israel feels very much exposed to a threat of an all out war in the Middle East, which could involve Iran, Turkey and even Pakistan.

Pakistan has already a massive arsenal of nuclear weapons. Iran, Turkey, Syria and Egypt have the capability to develop such weapons or to buy them from North Korea. Sadly peace in the Middle East remains more a dream than any reality.

Beat Odermatt | 04 June 2010

By the way concerning Israel... is there another country in the world where the immediate neighbours all have a plan for it's destruction, either openly or covertly. Why is then Iran supporting aggression through third parties? Your small hope is unfounded. When will the Palestinians act responsibly and exert control over forces seeking Israel's destruction?

Stephen Coyle | 04 June 2010

Thanks Stephen, indeed the practical steps necessary to achieve the denuclearisation of the Middle East are far more complex than I have painted; it is 800 words.

But my intention was to make a simple point: all sides need to start changing their behaviour, to avert a situation where a single conflict has the capacity to bring down the entire region.

Go well,

Nicholas A.J. Taylor

<http://najtaylor.com>

Nicholas A.J. Taylor | 07 June 2010

Some time ago I published an op-ed on the issue of WMD in the Middle East, and specifically the proposal to form a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region - that will most likely include provisions to also cover biological and chemical weapons as well as their means of delivery. I titled the piece, 'Hello Israel, might we talk about your nukes?' In the past two months I have been approached by two or three high-profile members of the diaspora to clarify my comments. Rather than merely do so over on Eureka Street where the piece was published, I will repost the comments here. Simply put, whether it was clear or not, my central argument was that a number of members of the international community, including Australia, had shifted their policy position within the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in the following way: a continued broad base support for the negotiation of a WMD-free Middle East, by way of a formally agreed instrument as have previously been achieved in much of the Southern hemisphere for nuclear weapons; a continued push from a number of states for Iran to more fully comply with IAEA inspections so as not to develop nuclear weapons capability alongside a civilian programme; a shift by a number of states (including Australia) between NPT Preparatory Conferences in 2007, 2008 and 2009 as well as the actual Conference in 2010 from

singularly pressuring Iran to singling out Israel as needing to accede to the NPT and comply with IAEA safeguards and monitoring if regional negotiations are to take place; and interestingly it is China which advocates "dialogue" rather than pressing any individual state or states through international discourse. Thus, the evidence I see in my research is that Israel are no longer targeted by only the Arabs and Iran as is often believed - the United States and Australia have shifted their positions too. The title therefore refers to my observed development in international public policy on the matter of a WMD-free region. Now, that is not to say that I am of the belief that Israeli accession to the NPT and IAEA compliance is the only step necessary as is often the view taken in the media, but rather that, as I closed on Eureka Street: Now the international community has indicated that it is losing patience, I have some small hope that Israel too may do the unexpected, and bring its nukes to the negotiating table. Israel have the trump card in this; may Iran and the Arabs respond in kind. Relations in the Middle East are tense enough without the need for WMD.

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