NARRATIVES OF THE MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE

DRIVERS, THEMES, AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

By Farzan Sabet

MIDDLE EAST WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION FREE ZONE SERIES

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACRS	Arms Control and Regional Security
BWC	Biological Weapons Convention
CBM	Confidence Building Measures
CBRN	Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear
CD	Conference on Disarmament
CEND	Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament
CSBM	Confidence and Security Building Measures
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CTBT	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
CWFZ	Chemical Weapon Free Zone
DoD	US Department of Defense
DNKV	Department for Non-proliferation and Arms Control
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
E3/EU+3	France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as China, Russia, and the United States
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HINW	Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons
HEU	Highly Enriched Uranium
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
INC	Israeli Nuclear Capabilities
ISU	Implementation Support Unit
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti
LAS	League of Arab States
ME NWFZ	Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone
ME WMDFZ	Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defense
NAC	New Agenda Coalition
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NNWS	Non-Nuclear Weapon States
NSG	Nuclear Suppliers Group
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
NPP	Nuclear Power Plant
NWFZ	Nuclear Weapons Free Zone
NWS	Nuclear-Weapon States
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PIR	The Russian Center for Policy Research

PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
QME	Qualitative Military Edge
SOC	Senior Officials Committee
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
TPNW	Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
TOR	Terms of Reference
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UN	United Nations
UNSCOM	United Nations Special Commission
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WMDFZ	Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone

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THE ISRAELI NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter of Israeli narratives provides a comprehensive analysis of drivers, themes, and historical accounts of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (ME WMDFZ or Zone) as seen from Israel. It is based on interviews conducted with former Israeli officials and experts who possess direct knowledge of the policies and events in question. The narratives reflect these accounts and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the state of Israel.[1]

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 explores Israel's security perceptions. Section 2 examines the drivers and themes of Israeli positions regarding the ME WMDFZ. Section 3 provides Israel's perspective on Zone-related historical processes.

Israel is very sceptical about its neighbours' willingness to engage seriously in ME WMDFZ negotiations that will also address Israel's security concerns. It participated reluctantly in past Zone-related processes like the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process (1992–1995) and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (2013–2014). Israel conditions its participation in such processes on three general principles: first, direct dialogue between Middle Eastern states; second, that all decisions be made by consensus; and third, that the process incorporates a broad range of security issues into the agenda.

The hesitation of Israeli leaders to participate in ME WMDFZ-related processes is based on its concerns about the "slippery slope": the fear that, once Israel enters a diplomatic process, it will come under pressure to make concessions that contradict its national security. Israel holds that any process that may eventually lead to a Zone needs to progress through a "long corridor": a step-by-step diplomatic approach in which Israel becomes confident to engage in arms control talks only after the resolution of the underlying causes of its insecurity, beginning with the Arab–Israeli conflict, Middle East-wide acceptance of Israel's right to exist, and a confidence-building process through security cooperation between Israel and its neighbours. The "long corridor" concept paves the way for the natural maturation of formal agreements over time, with a Zone only as the final endpoint of this process.

1. ISRAELI SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Israeli interviewees unanimously agreed that the Islamic Republic of Iran is Israel's main security challenge. They divided Iran's challenge to Israel into three main elements in order of importance: Iran's

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[1] The chapter does not reflect the official view of or analysis by the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project, its Reference Group, UNIDIR, the United Nations, or the United Nations Secretariat. All references to interviewees in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are to Israeli interviewees.

nuclear programme,[2] its means of delivery (i.e., its missile and uncrewed aerial vehicle programmes),[3] and its proxy non-state actor network. This network includes but is not limited to Ansarullah (also known as the Houthis) in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Shiite militias in Iraq.

One interviewee noted that, while these three elements were historically viewed as distinct security challenges for Israel, as Iran increasingly moved closer to the threshold of nuclear weapons, they became harder to manage separately. When Iran's nuclear and missile programmes combined into a prospective nuclear weapon and its means of delivery, it constituted Israel's top security concern, given the proclamations by Iranian officials calling for the destruction of Israel.[4]

Another interviewee compared the potential threat of Iran's advanced nuclear capabilities and the challenge posed by the Russian Federation to the West in the context of the war in Ukraine. The interviewee suggested that Iran's nuclear capabilities, which would enable it to weaponize quickly, could deter any state considering military action to stop Iran from engaging in malign activities in various domains across the Middle East.

> **Israeli leaders are reluctant to engage in ME WMDFZ-related processes due to their concern about a "slippery slope." They fear that entering a diplomatic process could result in mounting pressure on Israel to make concessions that contradict its national security.**

Iranian demonstrations against the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel by President Donald Trump (Tehran, Iran, 11 December 2017). Credit: Masoud Shahrestani / Tasnim News Agency.

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[2] Prime Minister's Office, "Statement by PM Lapid," 2 July 2022, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_statement020722.

[3] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "PM Netanyahu Addresses the AIPAC Policy Conference," 6 March 2018, https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/news/pm-netanyahu-addresses-the-aipac-policy-conference-6-march-2018.

[4] Benjamin Weinthal, "Iran Supreme Leader's Rep. Calls for Destruction of Israel," The Jerusalem Post, 2 October 2021, https://www.jpost.com/international/iran-regime-supreme-leaders-rep-calls-for-destruction-of-israel-680835.

Some interviewees also highlighted the potentially dangerous ripple effects of Iranian nuclear capabilities in the Middle East, especially in the light of the US pivot away from the region. They noted that, following the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), some states in the region are now considering acquiring their own nuclear capabilities. The region is thus potentially facing a new wave of nuclear weapon proliferation, most notably by Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. One interviewee felt that, from an Israeli perspective, Türkiye's nuclear aspirations were less problematic than those of Saudi Arabia, given its membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and that the United States has already stationed nuclear weapons on its territory.

Other interviewees expressed concern about the potential security vacuum created by the US pivot from the Middle East, as the United States might no longer be seen as a reliable security partner and guarantor. Some states in the region, particularly member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), could seek closer relations with China, Russia, Türkiye, and – in the worst-case scenario for Israel – Iran to ensure their security. Such a scenario could trigger competition for influence in the region, with US allies like Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia stepping in to fill the void, increasing regional tensions and conflict.

One interviewee compared the disadvantages of US allies in the Middle East facing a potentially nuclear-armed Iran to that of US allies in East Asia and the nuclear weapon programme of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In his view, US assurances were a key factor in dissuading Japan and the Republic of Korea from pursuing nuclear weapons in response to the DPRK's capabilities, but no such arrangements exist to protect US allies in the Middle East from Iranian threats. He speculated that even Türkiye, a NATO member state with US nuclear weapons, would rely on the US nuclear umbrella if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia does not benefit from formal US assurances, and the United States has failed to stop Iranian nuclear advances or respond to past aggression against Saudi strategic infrastructure.[5]

Therefore, Iranian nuclear weapons are a real concern that, unlike the case of the DPRK and its withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), could be the crack that shattered this treaty with a cascade effect in the region. Under this scenario, Saudi Arabia, which this interviewee suspected had an understanding with Pakistan, could acquire nuclear weapons, and Türkiye and Egypt would not be far behind.

Most interviewees agreed that the threat from nuclear proliferation factored most prominently in Israeli security perceptions, but they differed on the significance of chemical and biological weapons. One interviewee noted the potential scale of biological weapons as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic while downplaying the threat posed by chemical weapons. The interviewee pointed out that only a small portion of the nearly half a million deaths during the civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic have been attributed to chemical weapons,[6] and Syria had largely disarmed its chemical weapons arsenal.[7] Another interviewee, however, said that chemical weapons are a larger concern, citing their history of use in the Middle East by Iraq under President Saddam Hussein against Iranian troops and civilians and Iraqi Kurds

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[5] Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strikes, and U.S. Blames Iran," The New York Times, 15 September 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html.

[6] Sarah Haviland, "A Reflection on Accountability for Chemical Weapon Use in Syria," InterAction, 30 November 2021, https://www.interaction.org/blog/a-reflection-on-accountability-for-chemical-weapon-use-in-syria/.

[7] Organization of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, "Destruction of Declared Syrian Chemical Weapons completed," 4 January 2016, https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2016/01/destruction-declared-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed.

and by Syria.[8] These cases illustrated to him that the concerns about chemical weapons remained and, if authoritarian Arab regimes used chemical weapons against their own people, there was little question they would use them against Israel. In this context, a third interviewee questioned if the ME WMDFZ's focus on nuclear weapons overshadowed the threat posed by chemical weapons in the region.

As early as the mid-1990s, senior Israeli officials considered the potential use of massive bombs and missiles capable of indiscriminate damage and injury to civilian populations as WMD.[9] Interviewees agreed that missiles posed a serious challenge to Israel's security. One interviewee noted that missiles should be considered separately from WMD or conventional weapons, as advances in missile technology have made them more accurate and capable, which could cause "unacceptable damage" constituting an existential threat.[10]

Regarding the conventional military threat from Israel's neighbours, most interviewees did not view it as an imminent danger as in the past. This change was due to the decrease in direct state-to-state military confrontation and the reduced threat of conventional attacks by neighbouring Arab states or coalitions, given that Egypt (Israel's main neighbour with a high military capability) and Jordan were in a cold peace with Israel, Syria was in the midst of civil war, and Iraq had undergone regime change leading to a less overtly hostile approach to Israel. According to these interviewees, Israel enjoys high military capabilities and deterrence.

At least one interviewee, however, advised caution on downgrading the conventional military threat, given the vulnerabilities posed by Israel's demographics and geography. Some interviewees noted that, due to the history of Israelis living in fear of destruction by conventional war, a future agreement pertaining to a ME WMDFZ and regional security should include limits on specific categories of conventional arms and their quantities. In this vein, some interviewees noted the deficiencies of Zone discussions which excluded conventional arms, even though they have been the main instrument of "war and terror" in the region.

Interviewees agreed that terrorism by non-state actors inside Israel – using means such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car attacks, shootings, and stabbings – posed a significant threat to the country's domestic security. Counterterrorism measures and cooperation with the Palestinian Authority were seen as helpful to address this threat. However, non-state actors added another level of complexity to any ME WMDFZ negotiations, according to another interviewee, since they would not be bound by such agreements. Other internal security challenges mentioned included the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, internal cohesion, incitement to ethno-religious violence, and misinformation.

Some interviewees mentioned cybersecurity as a growing security challenge, with one interviewee even considering it a "new WMD category". While Israeli military infrastructure was relatively secure, critical civilian infrastructure, such as Israel's financial sector and water sources, remain vulnerable to cyberattacks.[11]

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[8] Ben Hubbard, "Syria used Chemical Weapons 3 Times in One Week, Watchdog Says," The New York Times, 9 April 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/middleeast/syria-assad-chemical-weapons.html.

[9] Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Statement issued by Israel at the conference on disarmament on 'Israel's Approach to Regional Security Arms Control and Disarmament'," 4 September 1997, https://unidir.org/node/6021.

[10] Udi Dekel, "A Multi-Arena Missile Attack that Disrupts Israel's Defense and Resilience Pillars," in Existential Threat Scenarios to the State of Israel, ed. Ofir Winter (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2020), 69–70, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/nothing-is-forever/.

[11] Joby Warrick and Ellen Nakashima, "Foreign Intelligence Officials Say Attempted Cyberattack on Israel Water Utilities Linked to Iran," The Washington Post, 8 May 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/intelligence-officials-say-attempted-cyberattack-on-israeli-water-utilities-linked-to-iran/2020/05/08/f9ab0d78-9157-11ea-9e23-6914ee410a5f_story.html.

Because of their country's wide range of challenges, most interviewees rarely viewed a Zone under its current narrow scope as being able to adequately address these threats, including those related to WMD proliferation in the region. They maintained that arms control arrangements had to be tools that served a state's national security, and the benefits of joining them had to outweigh the harm, which is not currently the case with a Zone. One interviewee further explained that the nuclear threat is now linked to a wider range of threats, such as missiles, terrorism, and cyberwarfare. As such, most interviewees felt that discussions on a Zone needed to be adapted to cover a broader and more contemporary range of WMD-related threats.

2. ISRAELI DRIVERS AND THEMES FROM ON THE ME WMDFZ

ISRAELI VIEWS ON WMD NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT PROCESSES AND REGIMES

Israel's position on a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (ME NWFZ) and a ME WMDFZ has evolved over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, Israel focused on a regional process and largely rejected multilateral engagement on this issue because it did not perceive global arrangements such as the NPT as meeting its security requirements. However, in the 1990s, Israel became more involved in international arms control treaties and forums.

According to Israeli interviewees, international and regional developments in the 1990s, such as Israel's participation in ACRS from 1992 to 1995,[12] compelled it to contemplate more serious engagement in multilateral arms control and regional security negotiations, which consequently changed Israel's mode of engagement with this set of issues. In efforts to bridge the gaps between regional and international engagement, Israel engaged more with international arms control treaties and forums, including joining the Conference on Disarmament (CD), and signing the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). These experiences were a departure from Israel's historical preference for direct bilateral negotiations. They demonstrated to the Israeli Government that it could join international forums and treaties, where appropriate, and, for example, affect the final language of treaties. While it continues to be engaged in these forums and treaties, Israel continues to hold that, while international arrangements can complement regional ones, they cannot substitute for them.

Some interviewees noted that Israel's policy on a ME WMDFZ has been consistent, as regularly outlined in official statements and documents. These include Israel's response since 1975 to the United Nations Secretary-General's requests for states' views on a Zone; Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1986, when he stated that, under the right conditions and with peace with all its neighbours, Israel could consider the creation of a Zone;[13] Shalheveth Freier's 1993 informal paper that articulated Israel's nuclear non-proliferation policy;[14] and the statement by Shimon Peres, Israeli foreign minister, when Israel signed the CWC in January 1993.[15] Israel also joined the

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[12] "Parties of the Madrid Peace Conference Create the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group," 1 December 1991, UNIDIR Timeline of Key Events in the History of Diplomatic Efforts for the ME WMDFZ (UNIDIR Timeline), https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7.

[13] "PM Shamir's Address at the 41st General Assembly PM," 30 September 1986, https://unidir.org/node/6906.

[14] Shalheveth Freier, "A Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East and its Ambience," 14 July 1993, https://unidir.org/node/6186, and United Nations Secretary-General, "Report on the "Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," 28 July 1975, https://unidir.org/node/5623.

[15] Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Statement Issued by Israel at the Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention," 13 January 1993, https://unidir.org/node/6022.

General Assembly consensus on creating a Zone between 1980 and 2018,[16] but its willingness to join this consensus was subject to statements clarifying the need for direct negotiations among the region's states.[17]

Along these lines, Israel believes that a ME WMDFZ can only be achieved by negotiations "freely arrived at" and cannot be imposed by other states, from either within or outside the region. As expressed in its explanation of the General Assembly vote on the Zone resolution, Israel aspired to a peaceful and stable region based on mutual recognition and full diplomatic relations between all states. Neither peace, stability, nor a Zone can be imposed from outside.[18]

> The establishment of a ME WMDFZ can only be accomplished through negotiations that are "freely arrived at" and cannot be imposed by other states, whether from within or outside the region.

Such a process can only be achieved gradually, emanating from within the region, reflecting its unique circumstances based on negotiation and coordination between Israel and its neighbours. While Israel supports the Zone as a concept, the way in which arms control processes, including a Zone, have been promoted regionally has led interviewees to believe that they are not designed to truly enhance the security of all states of the region; instead, they would enhance the security of all other states at Israel's expense.

Two concepts structure and inform Israeli policy and thinking on a ME WMDFZ: concerns over Zone negotiations becoming a "slippery slope"; and the vision of the required pathway for reaching it as a "long corridor". The term "slippery slope" refers to Israel's concerns over entering a diplomatic process and coming under pressure to make unacceptable concessions. These apprehensions are informed by the belief that the goal of Israel's counterparts in such processes is to disarm Israel's alleged nuclear capabilities and any other capabilities that give it military superiority over its neighbours as well as providing some Middle Eastern states with the opportunity to bash Israel and isolate it in international forums. One interviewee, for example, recalled that, when Israeli officials asked their Egyptian counterparts what would happen if Israel surrendered its alleged nuclear capabilities, the later responded that they would have to discuss Israeli conventional capabilities and an "endless" list of its other capabilities. This concern was also related to Israel's hesitation to allow any international dimension to the process, fearing isolation in multilateral or regional forums, where the Arab states have an automatic majority and Israel would be outnumbered by a coalition of regional and international players.

Israel's "long corridor" (or "step-by-step") diplomatic approach was adopted to partly address its concerns about entering a slippery slope process. This approach involves engaging in regional arms control, non-proliferation, or disarmament processes, including on a ME WMDFZ, only after the resolution of the ongoing regional conflicts such as the Arab–Israeli conflict, region-wide acceptance of Israel's right to exist, and a confidence-building process through security cooperation. In the Israeli

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[16] "Resolution on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East' is Adopted Without a Vote at the UN General Assembly," 12 December 1980, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/1980s/resolution-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region-middle-east-adopted-without?timeline=0.

[17] Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, "Israel Draft Proposal on Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," 24 October 1980, https://unidir.org/node/5625.

[18] Ofer Moreno, Israeli Explanation of Vote on UNGA Resolution "Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Division for Strategic Affairs, 1–9 November 2018, https://unidir.org/node/6161.

view, any regional process needs to reflect and address the regional dynamics by building confidence, peaceful relations, and political normalization as a prerequisite for any discussions on a Zone.

Nearly all interviewees agreed that the path to a ME WMDFZ was through the "long corridor", with a Zone as a final step. The "long corridor" concept paves the way for the natural maturation of formal agreements. Unless a track record of trust passes the test of time and pressure, most interviewees agreed that moving forwards on a Zone would not be possible.

One interviewee commented that, without trust, lingering tensions could undermine the stability of a ME WMDFZ, and any Zone treaty not built on trust would eventually collapse. Some interviewees further observed that lessons from other NWFZs (e.g., the Treaty of Tlatelolco) demonstrated that a Zone could only emerge based on peace and high confidence among parties.

Under the current regional dynamics and to pave the way for a ME WMDFZ, there was a belief among interviewees that the focus of region-wide diplomacy should be on regional security, given the hostility in the region where there were few peace treaties between Israel and other states. The exceptions are the Abraham Accords with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the treaties with Egypt and Jordan, with the latter seen as "cold peace".

A recurring Israeli concern regarding arms control agreements was on the risks associated with regime change or state collapse in neighbouring states, which could result in the new government reneging on previous commitments. One case that best illustrated this anxiety was the deterioration in Israeli–Iranian relations after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Similar concerns arose about Egypt after the Arab Spring, but the peace treaty with Israel remained intact despite the regime change. One interviewee noted that this could have been different had the Muslim Brotherhood-backed president of Egypt remained in power longer. But he acknowledged that Egypt did not walk away from its peace treaty with Israel even at the lowest points of bilateral ties.

In contrast to many Middle Eastern states, interviewees observed that the stability of Israel and its democratic institutions meant that Israeli governments felt bound by agreements made by their predecessors. When Israel signed a treaty, the obligations went through the Knesset, became law, and were generally respected, with implementation not considered "optional". Israeli interviewees highlighted the importance of the need to constantly assess the opportunities versus risks and to engage in security balancing to consolidate and maturate relations with Arab states. They emphasized the need to hedge bets on what is possible against the risk of a change in leadership that could undo or worsen ties, given the ever-changing regional landscape and evolving threats.

ISRAELI VIEWS ON THE EFFICACY OF WMD-RELATED REGIMES AND A ME WMDFZ

Israel supports the NPT, which it voted in favour of when it was adopted in 1968. It values its contribution to nuclear non-proliferation efforts. However, Israeli interviewees stressed the treaty is insufficient to address proliferation threats in the Middle East.[19] Therefore, signing the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) was a red line for Israel, according to interviewees, given its commitment to nuclear ambiguity, which provides it with deterrence against existential threats.

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[19] Merav Zafary-Odiz, "The Israeli National Perspectives on Nuclear Non-Proliferation," in International Cooperation for Enhancing Nuclear Safety, Security, Safeguards and Non-proliferation – 60 years of IAEA and EURATOM, ed. Luciano Maiani, Said Abousahl and Wolfango Plastino (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 117, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-57366-2_18.

Israeli interviewees cited several reasons why Israel did not join the NPT or the majority of other international WMD non-proliferation or disarmament regimes and related organizations and forums. Some interviewees cited historical events and regional factors that led to Israel's mistrust of international instruments and forums like the NPT. For example, many Israelis are Jews descended from Holocaust survivors who retained the historical trauma of being abandoned by the international community during the Holocaust. An additional example was the Israeli experience during the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when many Western states prioritized low and stable oil prices over defending Israel. One interviewee, reflecting on this history, stated that Israel's comfort zone was to be "left alone", even if it meant being isolated and singled out in the international arena.
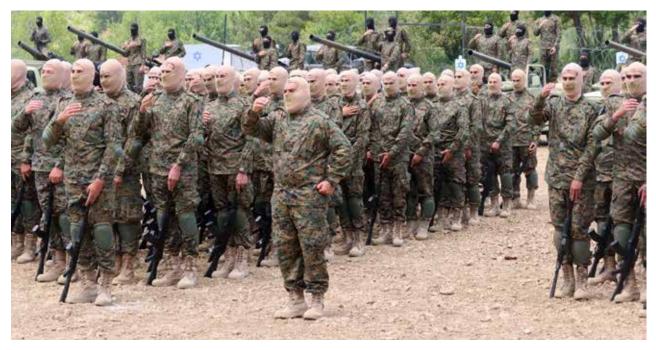
Interviewees outlined four factors related to the weakness of international WMD regimes that partly informed Israel's position on a ME WMDFZ and Israel's consideration of accession to the NPT as part of a Zone. First, some interviewees mentioned the history of breaches of international WMD non-proliferation or disarmament regimes in the Middle East, emphasizing that, of the five states recognized as having violated the NPT, four – by Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria – were in the Middle East, which was an indication of the ineffectiveness of the NPT in the region.[20] Thus, most interviewees did not consider international agreements sufficient for the region. In this context, Israel's position had been that it would only accept a ME WMDFZ arrangement that covered all WMD and other security issues and included all key states of the region since Israel's security could be affected even if only one state did not adhere to such an agreement.

Second, verification mechanisms in existing international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes were viewed as weak and ineffective in the Middle East and acted on only when, for example, Israel provided intelligence related to non-compliance. Therefore, an interviewee noted that Israel believed the Middle East required stricter verification arrangements within a Zone that went beyond the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and allowed Middle Eastern states to verify compliance for themselves. Another interviewee suggested that a regional verification mechanism should be set up for a Zone, with international organizations like the IAEA, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) Implementation Support Unit (ISU) playing advisory and observer roles.

Third, interviewees noted a gap in existing regimes regarding enforcing compliance after detection of a violation. "Serial cheaters" of international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes have shown that no viable mechanism exists to ensure compliance. In case of violation by Middle Eastern states, Israel does not possess enforcement power in these regimes, and the states that possess such powers (e.g., the United States) might not be sufficiently concerned to ensure compliance or to do so consistently and systematically. These interviewees thus concluded that relying on existing international regimes to ensure compliance with and enforcement of a ME WMDFZ was a flawed approach. If the intention was for a Zone to rely on such treaties, they believed that Israel could not place faith in the sincerity of its neighbours' commitments to non-proliferation. Joining such treaties might thus provide short-term political gains for Israel, but they could eventually become a smokescreen for covert WMD activities.

Finally, one interviewee observed that the accession of Israel to the NPT as part of a ME WMDFZ as conceived by Egypt, Iran, and others would not positively affect the normalization of relations

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[20] Moshe Edri, "Statement at the 66th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency," 4 September 2022, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/22/09/israel-gc66.pdf.

Hezbollah stages a military drill featuring parades of fighters and armoured vehicles, mortar artillery, anti-aircraft weapons, rockets, and drone offensives simulating attacks on Israeli military outposts on the occasion of the anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon on 25 May 2000 (Aramta, Lebanon, 21 May 2023). Credit: Elisa Gestri / Sipa USA.

and peaceful ties between Israel and other states in the region. He cited as an example of this the reservation submitted by Syria upon its ratification of the NPT in 1969 to the effect this act did not signify recognition of Israel or entailed entry into relations with it.[21] The Israeli Government characterized this at the time as incompatible with the treaty's spirit and a "grave obstacle" to establishing a Zone. This raised questions about the security value of a Zone for Israel and the sincerity of other Middle Eastern states to implement their obligations as part of a Zone treaty.

ISRAELI VIEWS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES, REGIONAL CONDITIONS, AND A ME WMDFZ

Egypt's diplomatic gambit on Israeli nuclear capabilities and a ME WMDFZ

Most Israeli interviewees agreed that the focus of Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on Israeli nuclear capabilities and a ME WMDFZ served Egyptian diplomatic interests, rather than being an Egyptian security priority. They believed that the Zone issue provided Egypt's MFA with a way to demonstrate its relevance and leadership on the regional and international stage. The interviewees also suggested that Egypt uses the Zone issue as a mechanism to attempt to "equalize" its status with Israel by requiring Israel to disarm its superior capabilities – WMD or conventional.

One interviewee believed that the Egyptian military has benefited from having Israel as a foremost "threat of reference", which has helped secure its budget and force structure. He suggested that Arab states continue to focus on the ME WMDFZ issue because it unites them, gives them the appearance of pursuing Israel's disarmament, and allows them to paint Israel as the "bad guy". The interviewee believed most Arab states now see Iran as a greater security concern than Israel.

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[21] Syrian Arab Republic, "Ratification with reservation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in Russian," 24 September 1969, https://treaties.unoda.org/a/npt/syrianarabrepublic/RAT/moscow.

Most interviewees believed that Israeli nuclear capabilities were not an obstacle to Israel–Egypt security relations, and that the Egyptian presidents viewed the Zone as an issue the MFA could pursue without making tangible progress or overly upsetting Israel. One interviewee claimed that, in every case that Israel went to the Egyptian president on this issue, he said the MFA could continue its "diplomatic game" because it did not affect security ties between the two states. Israel received a similar response from the Egyptian military, giving diplomats a free hand on a Zone but not allowing them to get involved in conventional arms control or disarmament. The military was said to have told the Israelis that the MFA had limited knowledge of the military's needs and capabilities, and they did not want the MFA to be at the negotiating table on conventional arms.

> Most interviewees believed that Israel's nuclear capabilities did not pose an obstacle to Israel-Egypt security relations or broader Israeli-Arab cooperation.

Most interviewees believed that the international community understood Israel's position on a Zone, which Israel regarded as strategically important. They noted that Israel's position had won support in international organizations, mentioning that a diluted version of the resolution on Israeli Nuclear Capabilities (INC) passed once at the IAEA General Conference, but subsequently failed with ever-widening vote margins that favour Israel.[22]

Israeli–Arab relations: Growing normalization and overlapping security concerns

Most Israeli interviewees concluded that the evolving relations between Israel and some Arab states have led to the formation of a group of "like-minded" states in the Middle East that approach regional security and WMD in a different sequence than in the ME WMDFZ process envisioned by Egypt. Bilateral diplomacy with Arab states has shown that, for most, disarming Israel was neither necessary nor desirable. One interviewee said that many Arab states considered such demands highly unrealistic and, for some, disarming Israel even contradicted their desire to have a Middle Eastern actor that Iran feared.[23]

Some interviewees characterized the transformation of relations between Israel and Arab states, as manifested publicly by the Abraham Accords with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE, as a paradigm shift. The agreements demonstrated that the Israeli–Palestine problem was not the only source of instability in the Middle East and that progress on the Palestinian issue was no longer a prerequisite for Israel to engage with Arab states. Unlike the cold peace with Egypt, the peace in the Abraham Accord is considered by interviewees as a "warm peace", demonstrating that Israel–Arab collaboration is possible and mutually beneficial. The agreements are a product of shared security perceptions and interests and major concerns about Iran, including its nuclear and missile programmes, Shiite proxy non-state actor networks, and Sunni Islamist non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaida, and Islamic State.

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[22] Jasmine Auda and Tomisha Bino, "The Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the IAEA General Conference," 93–96, and "Arab Group refrains from putting the draft resolution on 'Israeli Nuclear Capabilities' to Vote at the IAEA General Conference," 23 September 2011, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/arab-group-refrains-putting-draft-resolution-israeli-nuclear-capabilities-vote-iaea?timeline=7.

[23] Eran Lerman, "It was a good idea, it was a very bad idea: Israel's incentives and disincentives in the Middle East WMD-free zone process," in Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the ME WMDFZ: Voices from the Region, ed. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 60.

One interviewee observed that the three diplomatic breakthroughs between Israel and the states of the region – the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and the Abraham Accords – all occurred outside the United Nations framework. This led Israel to believe that, when national interests were at stake, the Arab states would deviate from the United Nations as their preferred venue for negotiations with Israel. Another observed that the number of states willing to engage with Israel outside the United Nations is increasing. Some interviewees, however, also commented that they did not expect relations between Israel and more Arab states to be further formalized until the Palestinian issue was resolved.

Interviewees did not expect Israel's improved relationships with some Arab states to alter its need to safeguard its security independently. Israel has a "self-defence" mindset and a widespread belief that it was cursed to "live by the sword" for the foreseeable future. Thus, Israeli security will always be based on the country's indigenous capabilities, rather than on any diplomatic arrangements or alliances, including with the United States. Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's cautious responses to Iran following its attacks against them[24] and their avoidance of publicly naming, shaming, and blaming Iran demonstrated to Israel that other states will not risk their security for Israel. Most interviewees assessed that GCC states were unlikely to "stand up to Iran" as long as the United States or Israel were "leading the charge". Yet, these ties symbolize recognition of Israel as a legitimate partner. One practical benefit mentioned by some interviewees was intelligence sharing, which had existed for decades between Israel and some Arab states, but now took place at a higher level. Overall, interviewees viewed the bilateral and mini-lateral cooperation with some Sunni Arab states as a more desirable and realistic form of diplomacy than Egyptian and other Arab initiatives at the United Nations, including on a ME WMDFZ.

ISRAELI VIEWS OF THE ROLE OF EXTRA-REGIONAL STATES IN ME WMDFZ PROCESSES

A set of understandings underpin the bilateral relationship between the United States and Israel related to nuclear ambiguity, non-proliferation, regional security, and a ME WMDFZ. From an Israeli perspective, the US role in Middle Eastern security and diplomacy revolves around the ongoing validity of US–Israel understandings on these issues and Israel's trust in US actions.

For Israeli decision makers, their room for manoeuvre on non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament processes – including Zone-related processes like ACRS and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (see section 3) – is based on the September 1969 agreement between US President Richard M. Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. According to at least one source, the Nixon–Meir deal is interpreted by Israeli leaders as effectively providing Israel with a US pledge not to pressure it to surrender its nuclear capabilities as long as it continues to face existential threats in the Middle East. For its part, Israel committed to not declaring, testing, or threatening to use its nuclear capabilities.[25] Each US president and Israeli prime minister has reaffirmed this understanding over the past half century, which has taken Israel's nuclear capabilities off the table in bilateral security discussions. Thus, Israel perceives pressure on it regarding its nuclear capabilities as a violation of the Nixon–Meir deal.

Although the commitment may not be explicit or binding from a US perspective, the bilateral understanding has persisted for five decades because it served both sides' interests and has

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[24] Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, "Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strikes, and U.S. Blames Iran," The New York Times, 14 September 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html, and Nada Altaher and Ban Westcott, "Four Ships Targeted in Mystery 'Sabotage Attack,' says UAE," CNN, 13 May 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/12/middleeast/uae-cargo-ship-sabotage-intl/index.html.

[25] Adam Entous, "How Trump and the Three Other U.S. Presidents Protected Israel's Worst-Kept Secret: Its Nuclear Arsenal," The New Yorker, 18 June 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-trump-and-three-other-us-presidents-protected-israels-worst-kept-secret-its-nuclear-arsenal.

President Nixon's meeting with Prime Minister Meir marked a pivotal moment in the formation of the 1969 US-Israeli nuclear understanding. Following the meeting, Meir pledged to exercise nuclear restraint, and in response, the Nixon White House chose to ease pressure on Israel. This understanding meant that as long as Israel maintained a restrained and discreet nuclear posture, Washington would refrain from scrutinizing its nuclear ambitions (Washington DC, United States of America, 25 September 1969). Credit: Golda Meir Collection, 1904-1987 / University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

contributed to regional stability. However, due to the informality of the commitments and changes in the US bureaucracy, knowledge, and policies between US administrations, some interviewees noted the complexity of maintaining these commitments and the need to repeatedly reaffirm them. Interviewees lamented that the US system allows for a high degree of latitude for incoming US presidents to experience foreign policy "amnesia" and "shaking loose of commitments and obligations". Incoming administrations often find themselves without files on what previous administrations had agreed, or a new administration might feel it was not bound by past agreements while expecting others to stand by their obligations. One example was President Ronald Reagan's consideration in November 1981 of an initiative to link Israel's accession to the NPT to the acceptance by the Arab states of Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.[26] The internal discussions in Israel surmised that a Zone initiative could not be advanced before substantial developments in the peace process occurred. Therefore, Israel has adopted an ongoing process of reaffirmation and recommitment, making it harder for the United States to shirk past commitments.

According to one interviewee, US assurances to Israel came with a *quid pro quo* pertaining to US demands in several areas, including Israel's nuclear posture, technology transfer from and to China, and advanced notification and consultations on delicate security matters. The interviewee said that US demands on Israel have evolved over time and have not always been consistent. One alleged example was a request for Israel to ratify the CTBT under the administration of President William J. Clinton, but the next administration told Israel not to ratify the treaty as the United States did not plan to do so.[27]

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[26] United Nations Peacemakers, "Security Council Resolution 242: The Situation in the Middle East," 22 November 1967, https://peacemaker.un.org/middle-east-resolution242#:~:text=The%20resolution%20calls%20for%20the,acceptable%20solution%20to%20the%20conflict.

[27] Alaïs Larioux, "The U.S. debate on the Ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty," (Prague, Peace Research Center Prague, 2021), 11, https://www.nonproliferation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Alais-paper-3.pdf.

Another example was encouragement of Israel by the administration of President Barack Obama to brief other governments on its military option against Iran's nuclear programme in order to get these governments to support US sanctions on Iran.

At several junctures in the US–Israel relationship, thought was given to formalizing some of the understandings between the two sides. Two interviewees mentioned that the United States and Israel discussed the possibility of a defence treaty in the 1960s. However, both states de facto concluded that it was better to leave their relationship uncodified, notwithstanding informal arrangements.[28]

Two reasons were mentioned for Israel's decision. First was its preference to exercise independent judgment on its security needs. A central pillar of Israel's security strategy relies on it being the ultimate arbiter of its own security regarding capabilities and how it exercises them. The interviewees believed that the United States respected this position and was committed to supporting Israel's capacity to "defend itself, by itself" and to support it while making US views known on how it thought security challenges should be addressed. The second reason to keep commitments informal was to ensure that Israel would not find itself in a situation where it needed to ask the United States to place US military personnel in danger to safeguard Israeli security. One aspect of US–Israel relations codified by the US Congress related to sustaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) against current and potential adversaries.[29]

Some interviewees highlighted the complex US role in the Middle East as another element in the US–Israel relationship. One interviewee noted Israel's preference for the United States to play a role in the region, but questions remained on where, when, and how Israel could act unilaterally. This was evident, for example, when the US Government was initially upset that Israel and Jordan made headway in their bilateral peace talks without US involvement. There were other instances when Israel preferred to deal with its security concerns without the United States, as the latter could try and dictate terms to Israel, for example, a planned Israeli pre-emptive strike on Egypt ahead of the Yom Kippur War, which the United States blocked under the threat of diplomatic and military isolation.[30]

Israeli interviewees had little to say about the roles of other extra regional actors (including international organizations) in the Middle East, especially regarding issues like a ME WMDFZ. Interviewees mentioned Israel's understanding with Russia, which applied to the freedom of action of Israel against the Iranian and Iranian-backed military presence in Syria. On other issues such as a Zone, Russia accepted that Israel would only engage in a Zone-related process and accept any resulting treaty based on arrangements "freely arrived at". One interviewee questioned Russia's long-term presence in the region, calling it an "old bear with health issues". He said that Russia's careful attitude to Israeli operations in Syria showed the fragility of its presence there from Moscow's viewpoint and how dependent its capacity to preserve this presence and advances were on understandings with Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and others.

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[28] Steven Simon, "Should the United States and Israel Make it Official?," Foreign Policy, 20 December 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/20/united-states-israel-allies-formal-defense-treaty-trump-netanyahu/.

[29] William Wunderle and Andre Briere, "US Foreign Policy and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge The Need for Common Vision," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 24 January 2008, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-foreign-policy-and-israels-qualitative-military-edge-need-common-vision.

[30] P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Revisiting the Yom Kippur War: Introduction," Israel Affairs 6, no. 1, (April 2007): 4–7, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537129908719544.

3. ISRAELI HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMDFZ-RELATED PROCESSES

ORIGINS OF A ME NWFZ AND ISRAELI ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ZONE PROCESS, 1970S–1990S

Since the General Assembly adopted the resolution to establish a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East, co-sponsored by Iran and Egypt in 1974,[31] Israel has expressed its general support for establishing such a Zone. In 1975 Israel stated that it was "a desirable further step towards a just and durable peace in the region". However, Israel also highlighted that the establishment of a NWFZ in Latin America (also known as the Treaty of Tlatelolco)[32] as a "notable" precedent cited in the resolution itself, which was "the result of negotiations and agreement between all the States of the regions concerned". This precedent and the "general international practice" meant that direct negotiations between all Middle Eastern states were the only means to establish a ME NWFZ.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and US President Bill Clinton walk along the Colonnade of the White House (Washington, DC, United States of America, 12 November 1993). Credit: White House Photograph Office.

The Israeli Government at the time confirmed its readiness to participate in a conference of all Middle Eastern states convened to create a Zone and expressed regret that the Arab states had not shown a comparable readiness to do the same, casting doubt on the sincerity of their support for a Zone treaty. Among other criticisms, the Israeli Government noted the contradiction between calls for creating a Zone and the threat of force against Israel and attempts to ostracize it from the international community.[33] Israeli engagement with the Zone process mainly focused on promoting engagement between states of the region by direct, face-to-face, regional processes.

Israel's largely regional approach to non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament treaties and other non-regional measures like export control regimes began to change in the early 1990s. Three developments led to Israeli efforts to bridge international and regional processes. The first was the ACRS working group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process (discussed at greater length below), which provided Israel with a regional forum to discuss arms control and develop a broad regional security agenda with many Arab states based on consensus for the first time. ACRS

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[31] "Iran and Egypt co-sponsor a resolution calling for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free-zone in the Middle East," 21 August 1974, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/1970s/iran-and-egypt-co-sponsor-resolution-calling-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone?timeline=0.

[32] Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco), opened for signature 14 February 1967, https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/treaties/treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons-latin-america-tlatelolco-treaty.

[33] "UN Secretary-General Report on the Establishment of A Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," 28 July 1975, https://unidir.org/node/5623.

> The Israeli government at the time confirmed its readiness to participate in a conference of all states of the region convened to create a Zone and expressed regret that the Arab states had not shown a comparable readiness to do the same, casting doubt on the sincerity of their support for such a treaty.

required Israel to engage in an intensive internal deliberation process to formulate its vision of regional security and arms control. Israel also held bilateral consultations with the US Government on its vision. While ACRS ultimately failed, this experience was seen by one interviewee as having helped shape Israeli thinking for the next decades and brought the United States and Israel closer.

The second development was the Clinton administration's arms control policy, which emphasized the need for tailor-made regional approaches in addition to international treaties. Israel found that it needed to begin exploring the role that international treaties and export control regimes could play in its policy, notwithstanding the difficulty of regional implementation of these frameworks. This development was facilitated by the exceptional relationship of trust between President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. US–Israel relations had reached unprecedented closeness and a high degree of mutual trust under these two leaders, including the mutual understanding that neither side would surprise the other on its critical national security interests.

The third development was the decision in 1995 by the CD in Geneva to accept Israel as a full member as part of its decision to expand its membership.[34] Israel was involved from the outset in the negotiations on the CTBT at the CD and subsequently signed the treaty when it opened for signature in 1996. It had also joined the ongoing negotiations on the CWC, which it signed in 1993. The decision to sign these treaties marked an evolution in the thinking of the Israeli Government regarding international WMD-related treaties.

MIDDLE EAST ARMS CONTROL INITIATIVE

Following the US military victory in the Gulf War in 1991, President George H. W. Bush launched the Middle East Arms Control Initiative, which sought to limit the stockpiles of fissile material (that only Israel possessed at the time) and ballistic missiles in the region. This initiative was a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the regional security challenges posed by Iraq's WMD programmes, its use of chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and troops and Iraqi Kurds in the preceding decade, threats of use of chemical weapons against Israel, and the use of ballistic missiles against it during the Gulf War itself.[35] The Israeli Government established an inter-agency committee involving the Ministry of Defence MoD and the MFA, among other bodies, to weigh the risks and benefits of engaging with this initiative. The committee's final report, according to one interviewee, reflected the majority view that opposed joining the initiative due to the perceived risks of a "slippery slope. It could then come under diplomatic pressure to make concessions. According to this interviewee, a second reason was the interest of the Israeli military industry in maintaining its capabilities in ballistic missiles and fissile materials for national security and maintaining its relevance and funding. A minority dissenting report favoured Israel's

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[34] United Nations, Conference on Disarmament, "Decision on Expansion of Membership of the Conference," CD/1356, 21 September 1995, https://undocs.org/en/ CD/1356, and United Nations, "Conference on Disarmament admits 23 new states as members," Press Release, DCF/266, 17 June 1996, https://press.un.org/en/1996/19960617.dcf266.html.

[35] "President George H.W. Bush Unveils his Middle East Arms Control Initiative," 29 May 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/president-george-hw-bush-unveils-his-middle-east-arms-control-initiative?timeline=3.

participation, arguing that, since there was little chance the Arab states would accept the initiative, Israel would appear cooperative and be seen positively. It also argued that Israel's powerful air force made it less affected by the initiative than its regional rivals, which relied more on ballistic missiles.

THE ARMS CONTROL AND REGIONAL SECURITY (ACRS) WORKING GROUP, 1992–1995

The international and regional context of ACRS: The shifting chessboard

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s birthed a unipolar moment, which allowed the United States to reshape the global order. This development caused a paradigm shift for Israel. A parallel change in the Middle East regional order occurred with the victory of the US-led coalition over Iraq under President Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. President Bush's speech on 6 March 1991 underscored the new vision for a security structure in the region,[36] reflecting an international and regional interest in the Middle East peace negotiations.

According to Israeli interviewees, there was a hope that favourable conditions had been created for Israel to engage with the region and that a breakthrough in the Middle East could occur. Interviewees mentioned two significant shifts that changed the international and regional balance of power in Israel's favour. The first was the collapse of the Soviet Union as the leading superpower sponsor of Israel's rivals in the Middle East. The Soviet Union was a major arms supplier to Israel's Arab rivals and had been involved in every inter-state war between Israel and these Arab states on the side of its adversaries.[37] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor state, the Russian Federation, was not capable of providing the same level of support to the Arab states, and later it also became friendly towards Israel.

The second major shift was the Gulf War, which further fragmented the Arab states and led some to side with the United States against Iraq. It also ended with the removal of Iraq as a major military threat to Israel and eased Israel's persistent concern that an Arab military coalition could form against it. Iraq's weakened military power also increased Israel's military edge in the Middle East. One interviewee believed that the legitimacy of establishing ACRS in the eyes of some Arab parties was partly because Israel did not retaliate to Iraqi missile strikes during the Gulf War.

The Israeli motivation to participate in ACRS

Israel's decision to participate in ACRS was not an easy one. Traditionally, Israel had avoided engaging in multilateral forums or signing international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament treaties, fearing it would lead to a "slippery slope". The main reason mentioned by some interviewees for the change and Israel's participation in ACRS, other than the change in international and regional circumstances, was US diplomatic pressure. According to one interviewee, the United States pressured both Israel and Arab parties at the Madrid Peace Conference and afterwards to join the multilateral talks in parallel to the bilateral peace talks between Israel and Jordan, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and Syria.[38] While there was an agreement between the United States and Israel on the need to tackle the outstanding security issues of the Middle East, Israel tried to assess each of the five suggested working groups to determine which served its national interest. Israel assessed that ACRS was the riskiest

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[36] "After the War: The President; Transcript of President Bush's Address on the Gulf War," The New York Times, 7 March 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/07/us/after-war-president-transcript-president-bush-s-address-end-gulf-war.html.

[37] For the Russian Perspective, see "Soviet Positions on an ME NWFZ" in the Russian Narrative in this publication.

[38] "Parties of the Madrid Peace Conference Create the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group," 1 December 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7, and "Fact Sheet: The Middle East Peace Process," US Department of State (Archived content), 11 March 1996, https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/nea/ispeace.html.

working group. Some interviewees mentioned that Israel (and other regional parties) needed external pressure to compel their participation. Given Israel's heavy dependence on the United States and the latter's hegemonic superpower status, Israel could not refuse to participate in the initiative.

Israel's primary goal in entering the Madrid Peace Process and ACRS, according to some interviewees, was to prevent the process from undermining its interests. Another goal mentioned by these interviewees was the hope of increasing Israel's interactions with the other Middle Eastern parties participating in ACRS. Moreover, according to one interviewee, even if Israel could not achieve these objectives, it could at least provide its input and influence the process.

Prime Minister Shamir was initially reluctant and uninterested in joining a multilateral negotiation, recalling his country's traditional stance that peace with an Arab state should be concluded bilaterally rather than through international processes and resolutions.[39] However, his decision to join under US pressure, once taken, was serious and reflected an Israeli desire to discuss peace, despite the controversial nature of the decision in Israel. On the other hand, one interviewee assessed that the Madrid Process only became serious after the election of Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister in mid-1992.

Structure of and dynamics within the Israeli delegation at ACRS

The structure and dynamics within Israel's delegation at ACRS were shaped by the country's bureaucratic politics. According to one Israeli interviewee, the decision to engage in ACRS built upon internal preparations in the late 1980s to develop a national policy on the CWC. Under Prime Minister Shamir, a Senior Committee on Arms Control was established consisting of members from the Prime Minister's Office, the MoD, the MFA, the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC), and the intelligence community, including the Mossad and military intelligence. The members were nominated based on their expertise, and their appointment was jointly approved by the prime minister and the defence and foreign ministers.

Israel's preparation for ACRS was very methodical, according to another interviewee. The inter-agency Senior Committee articulated Israel's positions and red lines. An interviewee mentioned that academic subject matter experts were hired to provide an overview of Israel's position and increase the bureaucracy's understanding of arms control.

The Israeli delegation at ACRS was co-led by directors from the MFA and the MoD, with the MFA leading the conceptual basket and the military leading the operational basket. One interviewee said that in practice the team was managed by David Ivry from the MoD, who was very much involved in Israeli policy on WMD non-proliferation and disarmament and related international instruments like the NPT, the CWC, and the BWC. Eytan Bentsur, who shortly after ACRS became the director general of the MFA, represented the MFA on the delegation. The team also included intelligence officers and technical experts from the military, the Mossad, and the IAEC who worked on WMD-related issues. Among them were Uzi Arad and Ariel Levite.

Reflecting on the internal dynamics of the inter-agency Senior Committee, some interviewees noted that the MoD was the most powerful component. At the same time, another mentioned that the coordination body reflected ongoing bureaucratic rivalry between the MoD and the MFA on who should lead on these issues. Yet, another interviewee felt there was significant trust between the MoD

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[39] Hanne Notte and Chen Kane, An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 6 December 2022, 15–17, https:// www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/acrs-oral-history-project-final-report.

and the MFA and contrasted this with what he perceived as the relatively poorer civil–military relations in the Egyptian delegation at ACRS.

The inter-agency Senior Committee met throughout ACRS. Its members met to learn the unique multilateral diplomacy terms used in the working group, share information, and discuss Israel's positions in the working group. One interviewee recalled that updates on the talks were communicated to the prime minister, the MoD, and the MFA, which provided instructions to the delegation. As the conceptual basket discussed the nuclear issue, a politically sensitive matter, elected officials and civilians retained firm control on decision-making.

The changing perspective around ACRS: From a possible threat to a potential breakthrough

Israel viewed ACRS as the most sensitive working group. Its primary concern was that its neighbours saw ACRS as a mechanism to disarm Israel's nuclear capabilities. One Israeli interviewee commented that the working groups were a balancing act for Israel between what it was more interested in cooperating about (economic development, the environment, and water resources and management) and the topics the Arabs cared more about (arms control and refugees). Another interviewee maintained that the Israeli Government was open to progress in the other working groups. It was not keen on agreeing on the WMD issue without a peace agreement with all the Arab states. According to him, the policy at the outset had thus been not to make any progress on nuclear disarmament.

Israel's strategy in ACRS built on Prime Minister Shamir's 1986 statement that, under the right conditions and with peace with all its neighbours, Israel could consider the creation of a Zone.[40] The Israeli strategy in ACRS incorporated his idea as a long-term goal for which the right conditions would gradually have to be built. This meant focusing on confidence-building measures (CBMs) and laying the framework for Iran, Iraq, and Syria to join the process later.

Some interviewees highlighted Israel's reliance on the United States in such sensitive negotiations, generalizing that if Israel had to engage in regional security and arms control talks, it had to do it with the United States in the room; otherwise, it was deemed too perilous. They also discussed the vital role of the United States as a key ally. The two held preparatory dialogues before each session to discuss constructive ideas they could advance in the plenaries. An interviewee said that they concluded that, since all proposals put forward by Israel met with Arab objections, if they wanted them to consider any proposal seriously, they were better off having the United States suggest it.

Israel's position on the region's delineation was that the larger a ME WMDFZ was, the more security it could provide Israel. Although some important states were not invited or declined participation in ACRS, Israel felt their absence should not prevent progress and concluding understandings with the other parties. Nonetheless, Israel was concerned over how arms control could be discussed when not all the main players were involved. It was also uneasy that some Arab parties, especially the PLO, might use the multilateral track to advance their bilateral track agenda.

Over time, Israel started to identify real benefits from the multilateral track. First, the overriding assumption of most ACRS participants was that, while the bilateral track was still considered the focus of the Madrid Process, one of the perceived advantages of the multilateral track and ACRS was creating a process to address the sources of regional instability. It was also a route to build relationships

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[40] "PM Shamir's Address at the 41st General Assembly PM," 30 September 1986, https://unidir.org/node/6906.

and cooperation with Arab states with which it had previously had little or no contact without prior resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian issue that was discussed in parallel bilaterally.

Second, during ACRS, Israel learned that the Arab parties did not have a united position or identical interests, which broke its monolithic view of the Arabs states and showcased their distinctions. In fact, an interviewee noted that some Arab parties in the working group (e.g., Morocco, Tunisia, and others) did not mention Israel as a threat in their threat perception papers, which were submitted by each state participating in ACRS. He recalled that some Arab states even shared more security concerns with Israel than with Iran, Iraq, or the Palestinians, to the extent that the name of the authoring state on the threat perception papers could be interchangeable with that of Israel in some cases.[41] A third interviewee commented that Israel learned to utilize these inter-Arab dynamics to form coalitions between Israel and some Arab states on specific issues. He claimed that this coalition-building enabled the operational basket to conclude five agreements, although they were not implemented.[42]

Israel, Egypt, and Jordan played the most prominent roles in the working group, likely because they were the most informed on arms control and interested in the outcome of the process. For most other Arabs, this was a completely new subject, and they were generally less concerned about the topics discussed in ACRS. They thus deferred to Egypt in many instances, except the Jordanian delegation, which the Israelis felt closer to because they both had a different agenda than Egypt.

Another interviewee mentioned that, at times, smaller Arab states like Jordan, Morocco, and Qatar agreed with Israel's conceptualization of a gradual regional security and arms control process and were less interested in Egypt's approach. These interviewees also recalled that most, if not all, Arab delegates other than Egypt were excited to meet Middle Eastern senior leaders to discuss these issues for the first time. Israel also used coalition building to try to force Egypt to reach a compromise. Particularly in the operational basket, some interviewees said that, from their recollection, not only did many Arab states prefer Israel's approach in ACRS, but they also resented being told what to do by Egypt, which perceived itself as the leader of the Arab states and as such thought it should lead the decisions with the other Arab parties. One interviewee recalled the example of Nabil Fahmy, head of the Egyptian delegation, and Abdullah Toukan, the head of the Jordanian delegation, clashing in ACRS over Egypt's opposition to Jordan hosting a crisis communication centre in Amman.

Israel identified early on that many of the smaller Arab parties in ACRS sought prestige and a role to play in the process; if one were found for them, that could increase their interest in and prospects for cooperation. Therefore, Israel focused on identifying different roles for these states to assume through the process. For example, hosting a communication or security centre meant that money would be spent in that state to create the facility and that state would gain prestige by playing a central role. This generated interest among states to implement CBMs, including Egypt's interest in establishing a regional communication centre in Cairo to facilitate crisis communications between regional members. One interviewee said that, the further ACRS progressed, the more regional parties gathered there supported the creation of these centres and implementation of other CBMs; except Egypt perpetually objected to many of these measures. It was harder, however, to secure cooperation from states not necessarily looking for prestige or a role, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Another interviewee recalled that, even in the personal relationships that formed between members of the Israeli and

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[41] Notte and Kane, An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group.

[42] Ibid, 42–44.

The 1996 Sharm el-Sheikh Summit of Peacemakers was chaired by US President Bill Clinton and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The purpose of the meeting was to show international support for the Oslo Peace Process. (Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, 13 March 1996). Credit: Gideon Markowiz / Israel Press and Photo Agency (I.P.P.A.), Dan Hadani collection, National Library of Israel.

Arab delegations in ACRS, the Saudi delegation remained hostile toward Israel almost to the end. An interviewee assigned this to the Saudi's financial and religious stature and position as a leader of the Arab states.

The complex relations with Egypt at ACRS
One of the major paradoxes in ACRS for Israeli interviewees was that Egypt, the only Arab state with a peace treaty at the time, proved to be its most significant strategic adversary there. One Israeli interviewee said that a critical question for the Israeli delegation became how to outmanoeuvre the Egyptian agenda on Israel's disarmament.

Interviewees commented that Egypt perceived Israel's nuclear capabilities as a challenge to its regional leadership, and it saw the multilateral track through the lens of the danger of other Arab states normalizing ties with Israel (similar to the Lebanese and Syrian views of the multilateral track). Egypt opposed any normalization without comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arabs. Despite its peace agreement with Israel, most bilateral relations were conducted through security channels, while diplomatic engagement remained limited. Another interviewee said Egypt was nervous in ACRS because Arab contact with Israel no longer exclusively went through Cairo. Egypt felt a loss of control, especially when it saw a broader normalization between Israel and the GCC states taking shape in the working group. To his recollection, Egypt tried to maintain its singular, leading, position in the Arab world in relation to Israel.

Some interviewees observed divergent opinions in the Egyptian delegation between the MoD and the MFA during ACRS. One interviewee said that the military did not prioritize Israel's nuclear capabilities and disarmament; perhaps due to their understanding that it was beyond their power to address, and it might be better to "leave things as they were". In contrast, the MFA was seen as "obsessed" with Israeli nuclear capabilities and brought up the topic at every opportunity. Another interviewee recalled times in ACRS when the Egyptian MFA wanted to impinge on issues linked to the MoD's interests, such as

> One of the notable paradoxes in ACRS, as perceived by Israeli interviewees, was that Egypt, the sole Arab state with which it had a peace treaty at the time, emerged as its most significant adversary in the working group.

conventional weapons, but was rebuffed. However, a third interviewee claimed the Egyptian MFA led the negotiations in the conceptual basket, and the military did not have the authority to act independently. He noted that, in contrast, the MoD mostly led the delegation in the Israeli delegation, enjoying a large degree of autonomy due to the significant trust between civilian decision makers and the military.

The educational approach and CBMs: An Israeli negotiating strategy at ACRS?

ACRS began with an "educational approach" whereby US, Russian, European, and other experts shared their experiences and lessons learned from Cold War negotiations at the first plenary meeting in May 1992 that took place in Washington D.C.[43] This approach was adopted because most Middle Eastern states lacked experience of negotiating arms control agreements. This approach also assisted Israel's inter-agency Senior Committee and delegation in better understanding the Arab states' positions.

Some interviewees found the European experience highly relevant since it demonstrated to them the utility of CBMs as a first step toward defusing tensions between states with a history of conflict. They maintained that the Israeli approach (and to some degree Jordan's) in ACRS was guided by the European example as formulated in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, today the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE). One interviewee equated the Helsinki process in Europe and ACRS in the Middle East to building a house: first comes the foundations, then the walls, and only at the end, the roof.

The educational approach aligned with Israel's step-by-step or "long corridor" approach that emphasized the goal of identifying common security interests, issues, and actions accepted by all the sides that did not impinge on their core security interests. This allowed them to build up a process that gradually created the confidence and trust between states of the region to adopt more ambitious steps. One interviewee also believed many Arab parties considered the dialogue around CBMs as an opportunity for valuable military-to-military interaction.

Israel welcomed the educational approach with some reservations due to the massive differences between the Middle East and other regions with a NWFZ, like Latin America. According to interviewees who spoke on the topic, the gradual European approach demonstrated that Egypt was pushing for a more ambitious enterprise like a WMDFZ when the region was not ready for it. Egypt attempted to implement what one interviewee called the "Rolls-Royce standard" in a region that had many more urgent security issues compared to other regions of the world, and even in these regions, only NWFZs were established. These interviewees commented that Egypt and several Arab parties only reluctantly accepted the educational approach because Egypt was mainly interested in what Israelis considered the "icing on the cake": Israeli nuclear disarmament.

Some interviewees indicated that the educational approach and holding discussions on CBMs was a

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[43] For the American perspective, see "Creating ACRS: A novel exercise in American leadership in a shifting regional and global order" in the American Narrative in this publication.

way to buy time for both sides to build trust. Two interviewees felt that, by highlighting the need to learn, Israel was "acting ignorant" on arms control and regional security in order to delay substantive discussions on the nuclear issue. But two other interviewees disagreed with this view. One of them mentioned that the Israeli delegation invested a lot of time in learning the new concepts of arms control, given that it was the first time Israel was involved in such multilateral talks. Another interviewee explained that the Israeli delegation was always working to keep talks going. They recognized that ACRS offered an opportunity to engage with Arab parties. They were interested in the process if they focused on a balance of issues and not just one issue in isolation. A third interviewee explained that, because Arab states were not interested in holding discussions on tangible issues at the outset of the process, the educational approach of looking through historical material and other experiences was the only way to continue to meet.

The development of interpersonal relations between Israeli and Arab officials at ACRS

According to Israeli interviewees who participated in ACRS, it was a new experience for most to be in the same room with Arab parties and to engage with them directly. One of these interviewees reflected that ACRS was not as important for the papers or declarations circulated and discussed, but rather for the relationships built and conversations had on the side-lines between Israelis and Arabs.[44] Interviewees shared several instances demonstrating the slow build-up of relations, trust, and socialization between the two sides over personal stories, coffee breaks, outside official sessions, and the convening of smaller groups. One interviewee said that the friendships formed with Jordanians, Omanis, Qataris, and others improved not only the dynamics in the multilateral track, but also the bilateral track. Many representatives involved on the Jordanian side in ACRS were the same people engaged in the bilateral Israel–Jordan negotiations, which helped achieve the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel.

Another interviewee asserted that most members of Arab delegations in the working group were friendly towards the Israeli delegation, and conflicts with Egypt in the process largely remained in the realm of policy. Some interviewees commented that what was said during the official discussions differed from what Israel heard outside the conference room. Arab delegations, including Egypt and Jordan, were said to have felt they had to take hard-line positions in front of fellow Arab states and the public. As a result, whatever was agreed during ACRS was concluded outside the main sessions and not during the sessions themselves.

An interviewee recalled that the Saudi delegation kept its distance from the Israeli delegation at ACRS until the Tunis plenary in December 1994. Israel–Saudi interactions in the working group began frigid, but by the Tunis plenary, David Ivry and Prince Turki bin Saud Al Kabeer, who headed the Saudi delegation to ACRS, had coffee together and comfortably spoke to one another.

The end of ACRS: Reasons for its collapse

Israeli interviewees offered various reasons for the failure of ACRS, but most agreed that the talks failed due to the fundamental difference between Israel and Egypt: the reluctance of each side to deviate from what they believe should come first: regional security or arms control. These interviewees felt that this difference remains to this day. One interview felt that under Amr Moussa, the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs, the nuclear issue became a higher priority for Egypt that it aggressively pursued. One interviewee recalled that Egypt suddenly withdrew its active participation during the discussions over

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[44] Notte and Kane, An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, 42.

the Declaration of Principles (DoP)[45] in the conceptual basket at the Tunis plenary, the last session of ACRS, where the sides were close to agreeing on the language of the declaration. It fell apart over one sentence: Egypt wanted to add a sentence that committed Israel to join the NPT; Israel would not commit to doing so as it went against its policy.[46] Israel was surprised and disappointed when Egypt did not accept the language it proposed on the nuclear issue.[47] Egypt thus decided it would rather not continue ACRS on this course, and Ambassador Fahmy departed the meeting and, in the words of one interviewee, "left his junior assistants to clean up". Reflecting on the lost opportunity at the Tunis plenary in the conceptual basket of ACRS, an interviewee recalled that Israel had formulated a response to what Egypt had demanded in this basket but never presented it because Egypt withdrew. Many of the other Arab states followed in solidarity with Egypt and as part of the joint Arab position.

Some interviewees lamented that the tragedy of ACRS was that each practical step that Israel proposed, including on the nuclear issue, was never enough for Egypt and was met with further demands. Egypt was only interested in discussing Israeli nuclear disarmament and considered the issues placed on the table by Israel at ACRS as a tactic to stall for time. Instead, there was a fundamental disagreement between Israel and Egypt on the sequencing of disarmament versus CBMs. Interviewees held that Egypt was willing to shift focus to CBMs and building relations between Middle Eastern states only after Israel disarmed.[48] Israel reversed this order of priority, seeing the process as "regional security and arms control" (RSAC, the title Israel had initially proposed for the working group). Some interviewees believed that, by including arms control, the mandate may have moved the discussions to an area with no practical possible outcome, bringing a sense of failure as it built expectations – primarily from Egypt but also other Arab parties – that arms control would be the focus of the negotiations. As a result, some parties blamed the breakdown of ACRS on Israel because it refused to commit to joining the NPT as a NNWS. In this vein, one interviewee thought the process would have been better served if it only looked at regional security, as he saw arms control as blocking progress in any other area.

Reflecting on what factors may have held Israel back from being more forthcoming in the conceptual basket of ACRS, most interviewees who spoke on this topic commented on the limits of ACRS in removing existential threats because key players like Iran, Iraq, and Syria were not present. Iran was already seen as a challenge to Israel with its nuclear programme and ideological commitment to the destruction of Israel.[49] Iraq under Saddam Hussein was also seen as a challenge, although its military capabilities had been reduced after the Gulf War and under international sanctions. Syria was considered a threat, including its chemical weapons stockpiles. With their absence from the process, Israel could not consider ACRS a means for threat reduction, unlike the US–Soviet arms control experiences in the 1960s and 1980s. The consequence of the absence of Iran, Iraq, and Syria was that regional WMD non-proliferation and disarmament agreements could not be discussed. Hence the need (from an Israeli perspective) to begin with finding common ground on CBMs that did not impinge on the security of Israel (and others).

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[45] The Declaration of Principles document was intended to give prominence to the WMD aspect of the working group. Despite a broad agreement on the language of the document, the paragraph surrounding the establishment of a ME WMDFZ remained contested. Egypt insisted to include a clause that all states must ascend to the NPT in the near future, but Israel disagreed.

[46] "ACRS Issues a Draft 'Statement on Arms Control and Regional Security'," 13 December 1994, https://unidir.org/node/6143.

[47] "Workshop of the conceptual basket holds a meeting to draft the ACRS Declaration of Principles (DOP) in Cairo," 31 January 1994, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/workshop-conceptual-basket-holds-meeting-draft-acrs-declaration-principles-dop-cairo.

[48] "Statement Calling on States in the Middle East to Pursue a ME WMDF," 28 November 1995, https://www.unidir.org/node/5644.

[49] Gareth Porter, "Israel's Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat," Journal of Palestine Studies 45, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): 45–47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378543.

The other reason for the failure of ACRS mentioned by some interviewees was the obstructionist role played by Egypt on CBMs because of the fundamental disagreement between Egypt and Israel about the sequencing of disarmament versus regional security. An interviewee recalled that Israel had bilateral meetings with its Arab counterparts before each session. During these meetings, they established some agreements on the language of specific texts. But when these understandings reached the conference room, Egypt successfully prevented progress by influencing the other Arab parties to stand behind the harsher Egyptian official position. Although Egypt accepted the concept of many of the proposed CBMs, and there was a good rapport between members of the Israeli and Egyptian delegations at ACRS, Egypt's official position seemed committed to preventing progress on CBMs if Israel did not agree to ratify the NPT as a NNWS. The Egyptians (and the Palestinians) were thus perceived as stalling and playing a disruptive role by delaying or blocking agreements on CBMs in the operational basket until a deal was reached on nuclear disarmament. One interviewee commented that a similar message was communicated in many bilateral talks with Egypt during ACRS that Israel found disturbing. According to an interviewee, the Palestinians were against any form of normalization with Israel before a peace agreement was reached in the bilateral track and, at times, acted behind the scenes to prevent the implementation of the CBMs.

Another mentioned reason for the failure was that Egypt was seen to have found itself isolated and was unhappy with the fact that Israel and other, smaller Arab states came to a consensus on how to proceed on some of the CBMs, taking steps that would be *de facto* normalization without going through Cairo. One interviewee believed that Egypt did not want to resolve the nuclear issue by accepting the DoP as it had a stake in keeping the issue on the table as a source of pressure on Israel and a source of prestige in the Arab world and on the international stage. Because Egypt made peace with Israel first, it felt a sense of ownership over the relationship between Israel and the Arab world and believed Israel was getting more from ACRS than it was. ACRS, in turn, became a burden for Egypt as it was not progressing on Israel's disarmament and, simultaneously, losing its primacy in the Arab ties with Israel. An example of the displeasure of Egypt with progress in normalization was from Amr Moussa, when he coined the term "Herwalla"[50] to denote the embrace of Israel by some Arab states[51] and the "sharp reaction" of the Egyptian government at the Casablanca Summit from 30 October to 1 November 1994.[52]

Some interviewees pointed to the connection between the timing of Egypt's decision in mid-1994 that ACRS did not serve its interests and the upcoming 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. They thought the timing of Egypt ending ACRS served Moussa by creating a crisis that could be capitalized on as a source of leverage for Egypt in time for the NPT conference. One interviewee believed that the 1995 conference served as an excuse for Egypt to stop ACRS.

Another reason most interviewees mentioned was the collapse of the bilateral track, which made it more difficult for the multilateral track to continue. The collapse of the bilateral track was a consequence of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli in November 1995, a wave of

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[50] The term Herwalla directly translates to "trot". The term was used by Amr Moussa to pejoratively describe how Arab states established official relations with Israel following the 1993 Oslo Accords.

[51] Katb Al Araby, "هرولة المثقفين الأسواني نموذجًا," Aljazeera Mubasher, 25 May 2022, https://mubasher.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/5/25/%d9%87%d8%b1%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ab%d9%82%d9%81%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%8a-%d9%86%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b0%d8%ac%d8%a7.

[52] Emily Landau, "Egypt and Israel in ACRS: Bilateral Concerns in Regional Arms Control Process," (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2001), 49, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/egypt-and-israel-in-acrs-bilateral-concerns-in-regional-arms-control-process/.

> Another benefit of ACRS mentioned by some interviewees was that it compelled Israel to contemplate arms control and regional security, changed its mode of engagement on these issues, and established a community of experts in its bureaucracy.

Palestinian terrorism in 1995,[53] and the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister in May 1996.[54] The bilateral track served as a foundation for the multilateral track and, once it broke down, contributed to ebbing interest in ACRS. Once the bilateral track failed, it diminished the hope of any breakthrough in the multilateral track.

It also removed the political cover for Arab parties to engage in multilateral discussions with Israel, preventing the implementation of the CBMs that had been agreed in the operational basket. While it was relatively easy to reach deals on CBMs like search and rescue at sea, one interviewee commented that it was hard to proceed to the implementation step because Arab parties did not want to be seen as normalizing relations with Israel before the Palestinian issue was resolved. While some Arab parties may have deemed the multilateral track more important than the bilateral track for their national interests, they still needed the bilateral track as a cover due to regional Arab and domestic political pressures. On the other hand, while acknowledging the complementary nature of the multilateral track to the bilateral track, one interviewee wondered if ACRS could have continued even without the latter. Pointing to the Water Resources Working Group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Process, which continued to operate despite the end of the bilateral track, he concluded that if ACRS had its own internal momentum, it would have continued.

Pointing to the limitation of the negotiating technique adopted in ACRS, "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed", an interviewee thought that the Arab states were not interested in reaching partial or interim agreements. Another interviewee agreed that a failure of ACRS was that none of the agreements in the operational baskets were implemented, as some Arab parties insisted that implementation of the deals made on CBMs in the operational basket would be voluntary and not mandatory until all other issues were resolved.

The positive legacies of ACRS and lessons for the future

Most Israeli interviewees agreed that ACRS, despite ultimately collapsing, was a positive experience with several good legacies and even achievements. Among these are helping to shape Israel's arms control community, pushing it to engage in regional and multilateral forums, building relations with some other Middle Eastern states, and acting as a proof of concept that negotiations on regional security issues are possible and desirable.

Some interviewees mentioned that most Arab parties at ACRS, other than Egypt, accepted Israel's desire to discuss regional security as a common strategic issue. Interviewees felt that WMD and Israel's accession to the NPT were not priorities for most ACRS participants. The conclusion of agreements on CBMs in the operational basket and the circulation of the threat perception papers, the definition of the region's boundaries, and the largely agreed upon DoP (besides one sentence) in the conceptual basket

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[53] "Chronology, April 16, 1995–July 15, 1995, Arab-Israeli Conflict", Middle East Journal 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 645–649, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328869.

[54] Don Peretz and Gideon Doron, "Israel's 1996 Elections: A Second Political Earthquake?," Middle East Journal 50, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 529–546, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328988.

were examples of this acceptance. This was the case even if implementing these items depended on the political environment and success in other areas. One interviewee recalled a sense of achievement among the Israeli delegation, even though it eventually became a hollow success, as Egypt stopped it in its track. Another interviewee did not consider the collapse of ACRS to be a failure because he believed it created an understanding between Israel and many Arab states; they could discuss serious issues and learn more about each other's perspectives. Most interviewees highlighted the value of meeting Arab counterparts for the first time and building a community. They formed relationships and even friendships, demonstrating the ability of states in the region to come together. Additionally, the Israeli delegation travelling to places to which Israelis had not been invited before (e.g., Moscow, Doha, and Tunis) was an important demonstration that Israel was welcomed and that there was a space for a meaningful dialogue.

Some interviewees believed that the serious conversations in the working group contributed to peace and stability in the region. The dividends of ACRS mentioned were bilateral contacts with GCC states, Jordan, the Maghreb states, and Türkiye, which was present there as an extra-regional state. This allowed for each to develop a better understanding of the others' security concerns. Israel gained diplomatic confidence and better ties with these states throughout the process. This mainly happened on the margins of the working group through contacts with security officials from the Arab states that participated in the meeting.

Interviewees differed on the durability of these benefits for Israel. One interviewee felt that these dividends were tactical, and it was unclear if they endured long after ACRS collapsed. In his view, the price Israel paid for them was a significant investment of personnel and, once the working group ceased to meet, disillusionment about the usefulness of such processes for Israel. But another interviewee remarked that the relationships built in ACRS benefitted Israel in both the short and the long run. In the short term, for example, the Jordanian officials who engaged in the working group (including Abdullah Toukan, who led the delegation) were also involved in peace negotiations with Israel. Thus, these officials involved in ACRS gained a sense of mutual trust, which helped shorten the length of the bilateral negotiations. A third interviewee agreed, saying that the seeds planted in the multilateral track bore fruit in Israel's improved relations with many Arab states today, notably Jordan and several GCC states.

Another benefit of ACRS mentioned by some interviewees was that it compelled Israel to contemplate arms control and regional security, changed its mode of engagement on these issues, and established a community of experts in its bureaucracy. One interviewee explained that, due to the working group, the Israeli Government concluded that it was better to engage in such processes rather than allow events to unfold contrary to its security interests without trying to influence them.

Interviewees did not know if a formal "lessons learned" exercise was ever performed by the Israeli government on ACRS. But they maintained that a certain "mythology" of this working group still circulated in Israel today and that they took away several lessons. A first lesson is that the success of a process should not be judged solely by the agreements reached there or the number of documents produced. Instead, the process itself can be valuable because it can foster relations between adversarial states and their officials, promote mutual understanding, and bridge gaps between the sides. In the case of ACRS, the interactions there changed the belief that the Arab–Israeli conflict was unsolvable. Although an overarching agreement was not a formal outcome, the process did facilitate discussions between Israel and the moderate Arab parties, demonstrating that there was something to talk about. This in turn can allow negotiators to identify issues where states share a common interest and can reach

an agreement. The process itself could, step by step, help build trust between the sides and facilitate further talks on more challenging issues as they advance.

A second lesson is the drawbacks of the "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" negotiation format. Some interviewees commented that parties should not be allowed to easily escape commitments. It was felt by most of them that, once there was an agreement on an issue, states should commit to implementing it. They noted that, in ACRS, they were left feeling that they achieved much in the operational basket, only to end up with nothing when the conceptual basket and bilateral track hit a dead end.

A third lesson is the importance of holding a multilateral dialogue in parallel to any bilateral negotiations, with one track potentially serving as a positive element to buttress the other more difficult and contentious track. One interviewee noted that the multilateral track positively affected the bilateral track. This interviewee contrasted the positive atmosphere in the multilateral track with the one that prevailed in much of the bilateral track and the narrowing aperture of what could be achieved there, which in turn negatively affected the multilateral track.

A fourth lesson is that a regional security process should be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. In other words, even Middle Eastern states to which the United States was hostile (e.g., Libya) could have participated in some fashion. Finally, the ACRS process demonstrated the importance of understanding the framework and format of multilateral negotiations. The Israeli delegation learned how important it was to know the relationships between the Arab parties in the working group to better build coalitions to outmanoeuvre Egypt.

THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE

Most Israeli interviewees did not mention the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and the Middle East Resolution adopted during the conference, probably because Israel is not an NPT member state and did not attend the conference. One interview with some knowledge of these events recalled that, between 1994 and 1995, the nuclear issue became a major point of contention between Egypt and Israel, influencing the bilateral relationship.

This culminated in an unprecedented proposal by the Israeli Government conveyed by Peres to President Mubarak and Moussa in Cairo on 23 February 1995 that Israel would strive for a Middle East free of nuclear weapons two years after bilateral peace treaties are signed by all states of the region. It would also consider, when regional WMD disarmament is introduced, joining international WMD-control regimes like the NPT.[55] The proposal was not new but harkened back to Peres's statement when Israel signed the CWC in January 1993.[56] In the speech, Peres stated that Israel would be prepared to submit to some form of international inspection of its nuclear facilities once peace is achieved in the Middle East. The speech suggested that all regional states should construct a "mutually verifiable zone, free of surface-to-surface missiles and of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons be constructed".

This idea was expanded on by Eytan Bentsur, Director General of the Israeli MFA, at the CD on 3 September 1997, when he said Israel would endeavour to establish a Zone after comprehensive peace in the Middle East and through direct negotiations by all states of the region based on mutual and

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[55] Shai Feldman, Extending the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty: The Middle East Debate, Research Memorandum 28 (Washington DC: The Washingon Institute, February 1995), 5, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3616.

[56] "Statement Issued by Israel at the Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention," 13 January 1993, https://unidir.org/node/6022.

Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor with the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Yukiya Amano at the First Nuclear Security Summit in Washington 2010 (Washington DC, United States of America, 13 April 2010). Credit: Republic of Korea.

effective verification.[57] Recalling a conversation on this proposal between Israel and Egypt in 1995, an interviewee said that this substance was exchanged in letters. He concluded that, while it was mentioned in diplomatic exchanges, it was never fully conceptualized or formalized.

The interviewee noted that Israel was probably not "greatly delighted" by the US decision to agree to and co-sponsor the Middle East Resolution that emerged from the 1995 conference.[58] But he noted that Israel's reaction in 1995 was nothing like its reaction to the Middle East section of the Final Document from the 2010 NPT Review Conference.[59] In 2010, some Israeli leaders felt betrayed by the United States and believed it had gone against its commitments.

THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE
Israeli concerns about the Obama administration's non-proliferation policies
The 2010 NPT Review Conference presented a new challenge for Israel regarding the ME WMDFZ issue. Prime Minister Netanyahu had been wary of the Obama administration's commitment to the Nixon–Meir understanding following President Obama's April 2009 Prague Speech, which set out "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons". The Nixon–Meir understanding was interpreted by Israel as a pledge by the United States not to pressure Israel to surrender its nuclear capabilities as long as it faces existential threats in the Middle East.[60]

Obama signed an updated version of the letter reaffirming the Nixon–Meir deal in May 2009. However,

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[57] "Statement issued by Israel at the conference on disarmament on 'Israel's Approach to Regional Security Arms Control and Disarmament'," 4 September 1997, https://unidir.org/node/6021.

[58] 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, "Resolution on the Middle East," 11 May 1995, https://unidir.org/node/5643.

[59] Wire Staff, "Israel Reject U.N. Conference resolution on non-proliferation," CNN, 29 May 2010, https://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/05/29/un.israel.nuclear/index.html.

[60] Entous, "How Trump and the Three Other U.S. Presidents Protected Israel's Worst-Kept Secret: Its Nuclear Arsenal".

in the lead-up to the 2010 conference, Netanyahu had reason to remain concerned that Israel would come under international pressure regarding its nuclear capabilities.

Ahead of the September 2009 IAEA General Conference, one interviewee recalled that Ambassador Israel Michaeli, the Israeli Resident Representative to the IAEA, was encouraged by Glyn T. Davis, his US counterpart, and Jennifer Macmillan of New Zealand, the president of the 53rd IAEA General Conference, to work closely with Ehab Fawzy, his Egyptian counterpart, to coordinate ahead of the General Conference.[61] In the past, Israel and Egypt had agreed that if, during the General Conference, the INC resolution – which Israel viewed as singling it out for criticism – was not put to a vote (it had not been formally adopted since 1991),[62] Israel would join the consensus on the resolution on "Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East". However, at the 2009 plenary, Egypt, supported by the other Arab states and Iran, tabled the INC resolution.[63] Israel was surprised by this move based on its long understanding with Egypt and other parties' encouragement, which further increased its mistrust in the United States and Egypt ahead of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Other incidents contributed to the mistrust between Israel and the United States ahead of the 2010 conference. One took place at the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit. Prime Minister Netanyahu was reluctant to send a delegation to the summit but was reassured by Gary Samore, White House Coordinator for Arms Control and WMD, that Israeli nuclear capabilities would not be mentioned. During the summit, President Obama reportedly asked Dan Meridor, the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, when Israel would join the NPT. Meridor, in line with Israeli policy, replied, "Someday". A third case that exacerbated Israeli suspicion of the United States was President Obama's perceived abandonment, before he entered office, of the written commitment that outlined a road map for a two state solution on the Palestinian issue that his predecessor, President George W. Bush, made on 14 April 2004.[64] A fourth case was Rose Gottemoeller's speech at the 2010 NPT Preparatory Committee, where she stated that the universal adherence to the NPT is a fundamental objective of the United States and named Israel alongside the DPRK, India, and Pakistan.[65]

A rupture point in the relationship came with the US decision to support the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which singled out Israel by name and called on it to join the NPT, in addition to mandating holding a ME WMDFZ conference by 2012.[66] In the eyes of the Israeli leadership, this amounted to pressure on Israel to join the NPT and thus violated the Nixon–Meir deal. Israel responded harshly by announcing that it would not participate in the conference as the language of the Final Document "singles out Israel, the Middle East's only true democracy and the only country threatened with annihilation" and failed to mention Iran, which was under United Nations Security

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[61] International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference, "Final List of Participants," GC(53)/INF/7, 16 September 2009, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc53inf-7_en.pdf.

[62] "IAEA Resolution on the 'Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East' is Adopted by Consensus," 20 September 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s?timeline=5.

[63] IAEA General Conference, "2009 IAEA GC Resolution On 'Israeli Nuclear Capabilities'," 18 September 2009, https://unidir.org/node/6077.

[64] Bernard Avishai, "Did Obama 'Abandon Israel'?," The New Yorker, 24 June 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/did-obama-abandon-israel; Ben Caspit, "Biden ices Netanyahu as differences grow over settlements, judicial overhaul," Al-Monitor, 17 February 2023, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/biden-ices-netanyahu-differences-grow-over-settlements-judicial-overhaul.

[65] Statement by Rose Gottemoeller at General Debate at Third Sessions of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 5 May 2009, https://unoda-web.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/assets/WMD/Nuclear/NPT2010Prepcom/PrepCom2009/statements/2009/05May2009/05May2009AMSpeaker-4-USA.pdf.

[66] "2010 NPT RevCon Final Document Outlines 'Practical Steps' Towards Implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0.

Council sanctions at the time over its nuclear programme.[67]

The broken US–Israeli understanding in the aftermath of the 2010 NPT Review Conference

The result of the 2010 NPT Review Conference left Israel "surprised" and "disappointed" with the United States, as some Israeli interviewees recall feeling that the United States had not lived up to its promise to Israel. Specifically, one interviewee said that, the day before the Final Document was adopted, the United States gave Israel the impression that it would not support the language on the Middle East based on the "Egyptian plan". When it did, Israel was shocked. The sense in Israel that the United States had committed a "limited breach" of the US–Israel understanding on Israeli nuclear capabilities was shared across the Israeli leadership. This included Tzipi Livni, leader of the opposition in the Knesset, who joined Prime Minister Netanyahu to convey a unified message of dissatisfaction with the Obama administration on the conference outcome.[68]

While another interviewee equally recalled the Israeli Government's disappointment with the US support of the Final Document language, he questioned whether the United States had "broken" an explicit commitment to Israel. This interviewee assessed that US actions undermined the traditional general principles embodied by the Nixon–Meir deal that characterized and "anchored" US–Israeli bilateral relations. He recalled bilateral engagement between the US and Israel before and towards the end of the 2010 conference. Given that the language adopted in the Final Document ignored Israel's concerns, it indicated broader disagreement between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government.

Despite generally "good" and "strong" US–Israel dialogue during this period on arms control and Iran-related issues, he mused that diplomacy is not perfect and expectations are not always "spelled to the letter". The gap between Israeli expectations and US guarantees may have been a lapse in understanding rather than one party misleading the other. While Israel had a clear position on what it did not want the 2010 NPT Review Conference to conclude, it could have perhaps been more detailed in its position. Whether it was a broken promise or a misunderstanding, he maintained Israel shared with the United States its concerns and the need to not accept anything on this highly sensitive issue before it had been agreed on between the two sides in bilateral consultations.

Interviewees provided various explanations for the US decision to support the Final Document at the 2010 conference despite Israel's objections.[69] It is possible that the United States was surprised by the Israeli response as it expected it to accept it, as it had in the case of the Middle East Resolution from the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. Israel was not overjoyed with that resolution, but was prepared for and accepted it. Some believed that the United States was simply pursuing its national interests and assessed that it could manage Israel's disappointment; others saw it as an extension of the Obama administration's non-proliferation policies as laid out in his Prague Speech. The United States

> The outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference left Israel surprised and disappointed with the United States, as several Israeli interviewees recalled feeling that the United States had not fulfilled its promise to Israel.

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[67] Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "Statement by the Government of Israel on the Middle East Resolution passed at the NPT Review Conference," 29 May 2010, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spokemes29052010

[68] Lerman, "It was a good idea, it was a very bad idea: Israel's incentives and disincentives in the Middle East WMD-free zone process," 57.

[69] For the American perspective, see "The 2010 NPT Review Conference" in the American Narrative in this publication.

faced a dilemma as it had to balance its understanding with Israel with President Obama's multilateral agenda, which entailed ambitious arms control and multilateral non-proliferation commitments. Others recalled US officials recounting that the Egyptian and Irish delegations outmanoeuvred the US delegation at the 2010 conference. Some in Israel accepted this explanation at face value, while others remained sceptical.

The disagreement over the 2010 NPT Review Conference had a significant impact on Israel's trust in US assurances, as it questioned other assurances. One interviewee observed that the 2010 conference became part of Israel's collective memory, demonstrating that even its closest ally could not be relied on. After the conference, James Jones, the US National Security Advisor, issued a statement criticizing the singling out of Israel, and President Obama reaffirmed the unchanged US policy and commitment to Israel's security, saying,

> "there is no change in U.S. policy when it comes to these issues. We strongly believe that... Israel has unique security requirements. It's got to be able to respond to threats or any combination of threats in the region. And that's why we remain unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security. And the United States will never ask Israel to take any steps that would undermine their security interests."[70]

These did little to change the NPT Review Conference's outcome in which the United States committed on Israel's behalf to a problematic process.[71] The perceived breach of trust was especially significant because the longstanding US–Israel relations have been based on discussions over decades and exchanges of letters and understandings rather than formal agreements.

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS AT GLION AND GENEVA
The consultations before the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2010–2013
Following the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Israel conducted an in-depth assessment to analyse the events during the conference. The assessment aimed to understand why the United States supported the language in the Middle East section of the Final Document, evaluate the potential consequences for Israel, and determine the appropriate future course of action. Israel's assessment spanned from 2010 to 2012, during which Israel faced various challenges, including resolutions promoted by Arab states in international forums, the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the international negotiations on Iran's nuclear capabilities. These circumstances significantly dampened Israel's enthusiasm for a potential ME WMDFZ conference.

At the IAEA, Israel has faced the INC resolution on a near-annual basis at the General Conference, depending on whether the Arab states opted to put it to a vote or not. A diluted version of this resolution was adopted in 2009 after an 18-year gap[72] (but subsequently it failed to pass from 2010 onwards, with increasingly wider vote margins favouring Israel).[73] In addition, Israel grappled with concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme and missile proliferation. The existence and use of chemical weapons by Syria were also heightened concern for Israel, prompting pointed discussions with Russia in 2010 on Syria's chemical weapons.

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[70] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Availability," 6 July 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-joint-press-availabilit.

[71] "US National Security Advisor Statement About the Middle East Section of 2010 NPT RevCon Final Document," 28 May 2010, https://unidir.org/node/5657.

[72] "2009 IAEA GC Resolution on 'Israeli Nuclear Capabilities'," 18 September 2009, https://unidir.org/node/6077.

[73] Auda and Bino, "The Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the IAEA General Conference: Is there a 'Grand Strategy' Behind the IAEA Track?," 93–96.

Ambassador Jeremy Issacharoff, the Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs served as the Israeli representative to the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (Berlin, Germany, 13 December 2017). Credit: Embassy of the United States of America in Berlin / Flickr.

The appointment of Ambassador Jaakko Laajava of Finland as the Facilitator of the 2012 Conference, as mandated by the Final Document of the 2010 conference, posed a challenge to the Israeli Government since it did not support the mandate.[74] Shortly after his appointment in October 2011, Ambassador Laajava requested a visit to Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu was initially averse to Israel engaging in the process. It was "nearly impossible" to convince him because of the sense of being "stung" by the Obama administration and the perceived risk of a "slippery slope".[75] Yet, he appointed Jeremy Issacharoff, the Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs (the highest-ranking MFA official dealing with non-proliferation, arms control, and regional security), to manage Israel's response to the mandate from the 2010 conference.

Those within the Israeli establishment who supported welcoming Ambassador Laajava to Israel argued against allowing the "slippery slope" argument to guide Israel's strategy in this case. They asserted that, as a sovereign state, Israel was free to engage in negotiations, disagree with counterparts, and withdraw from the talks at any point if they stopped serving its interests. Furthermore, they considered it inappropriate to "boycott" a senior European diplomat. Finally, they also warned that, by abstaining from the process, Israel would grant the Arab side an "easy victory". Israel approved the Facilitator's request to visit Israel but in his capacity as Under-Secretary of State in the Finnish MFA, rather than as Facilitator of the 2012 Helsinki Conference.[76]

Ambassador Laajava's visit to Israel for consultations with the government took place in late-2011 or early-2012, with the understanding that the visit did not imply Israel's concurrence with his mandate.

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[74] "Facilitator and Host Government of the 2012 ME WMDFZ Conference are Appointed," 14 October 2011, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/facilitator-and-host-government-2012-me-wmdfz-conference-are-appointed?timeline=8.

[75] For the American perspective, see "Challenges to gaining participation by states from the region in 'technical meetings'" in the American Narrative in this publication.

[76] Jeremy Issacharoff, "Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Multilateral Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference, 2013–2014," in The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View From the Negotiating Table (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), https://unidir.org/publication/jeremy-issacharoff-consultations-glion-and-geneva-view-negotiating-table.

During the visit, the Facilitator provided guidance to the Israeli Government on his mandate and outlined his intended approach to implement it as an objective interlocutor. Israel conveyed to the Facilitator that it was open to a conference that would enhance regional security and stability and address Israel's national and regional security concerns. In presenting their position on the conference, the Israeli side provided their overall assessment of the threats that their country faced.

Ambassador Laajava stressed to his Israeli counterparts that his mandate from the United Nations Secretary-General and the co-sponsors was his "Bible", to which he would strictly adhere, even as he gave the impression that he would consider their sensitivities where possible. The Israeli response was that they also had a Bible, a much older one, from which they had drawn inspiration over the centuries. Their message was clear: Israel felt that it was premature to hold a conference before addressing the large conceptual gap between itself and the Arab states. In presenting its position on the conference, the Israeli delegation provided three critical principles about the conference and Laajava's mandate.

First, Israel sought direct consultations among Middle Eastern states on holding the conference, rather than having it mediated by the United Nations or agreeing to a "para-United Nations" conference. By engaging in direct talk with its neighbours, Israel aimed to attain a higher level of recognition of Israel and its legitimacy. This was because many Middle Eastern parties refused to officially recognize and meet with Israeli officials outside the United Nations. This position was rooted in Israel's long-held belief that direct talks were the most effective means to develop mutual understanding and bridge gaps between them. Israel saw the objective of the consultations to agree on a mandate for the 2012 Conference as it rejected the mandate based on the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Second, Israel held that all substantive and procedural decisions should be adopted by consensus among all Middle Eastern states (similar to the approach followed in ACRS). Decision-making by consensus was crucial to assure Prime Minister Netanyahu that Israel would not be bound by the decisions or forced into decisions made by the other participants in the process, considering Israel would be outnumbered by the 22 member states of the League of Arab States (LAS).

Finally, Israel wanted the conference to have a comprehensive regional security agenda addressing the full spectrum of military capabilities and threats that the region faced, including not only WMD but also conventional weapons, missiles, non-state actors, and terrorism.[77]

The internal Israeli debate revolved around whether seeking "guarantees" on the three principles should be a precondition for engaging with the Facilitator. At the most senior level in Israel, it was decided that decision-making by consensus as a basis for decisions adopted in the process would serve as the ultimate guarantee to safeguard the principles of Israeli diplomacy. Interviewees noted that the principle of consensus was supported by the Facilitator and the co-conveners (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia), and even the Arab side did not fully oppose it. This eased Israel's concerns about the potential for "slippery slope."

With the acceptance of the consensus principle, Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed that Israel would participate in the talks to convene the 2012 Helsinki Conference. While the initial meeting with the Facilitator in Israel did not bridge the wide gap in the respective positions, it was evident to the Israeli Government

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[77] Isabel Kershner, Ronen Bergman and Ben Hubbard, "Hezbollah Fires Rockets at Israel as Risk of Escalation Looms," The New York Times, 6 August 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-rockets.html.

that the dialogue had not reached an impasse and discussions could continue. Interviewees felt that the first meeting with the Facilitator started a relationship based on trust, credibility, and transparency. It also marked the beginning of an "intense friendship" between ambassadors Laajava and Issacharoff. The Israeli side maintained frequent communication with the Facilitator, meeting for consultations in various capitals and on the margins of international conferences. The Israeli Government also held many meetings with Ambassador Thomas Countryman, the US representative to the consultations, to discuss Israeli sensitivities concerning the process and the 2010 mandate. According to one interviewee, through these conversations, both sides reached an understanding that mended previous lapses in coordination between them.

> Israel advocated for the conference to have a comprehensive regional security agenda that addressed wide range of military capabilities and threats faced by the region, which include not only WMD, but also conventional weapons, missiles, non-state actors, and terrorism.

Following the failure of Israel and the other regional states to agree on the mandate for the conference and whether separate conversations (which later became the informal consultations held at Glion and Geneva) were needed to hold the conference, on 23 November 2012 the United States stated that it was postponing the 2012 Conference. It did not set a new date for the conference.[78] The statement emphasized the existence of gaps between the Israeli and Arab sides and highlighting the necessity for direct engagement among regional parties to bridge these gaps. It also underscored that a mandate for a conference had to come from the Middle East states and that extra regional actors could not be impose this outcome on the region.[79]

Israel saw the US statement as an important sign that the United States took its concerns seriously. An interviewee felt it also reflected a growing implicit acceptance among the extra regional states in this process that the states of the region themselves should forge the mandate for the conference.

By the time of the postponement of the conference in November 2012, Israel was actively involved in exploring the potential basis for a conference and had become more comfortable with the discussions with the Facilitator. Yet, it still considered it premature to hold a conference.

At this juncture, the Facilitator invited Israel for a meeting in Vienna on 16 August 2013 with himself, the co-conveners, and the United Nations to prepare for consultations scheduled to commence in Geneva on 2–3 September 2013.[80] Israel accepted the invitation and sent a delegation to Vienna. The meeting in Vienna did not include a general gathering of all the regional and extra regional participants. One interviewee explained that the Israeli delegation preferred not to meet with the Facilitator and the co-conveners so as not to imply recognition of the NPT mandate. Similarly, the LAS was unwilling to have such a meeting to avoid direct contact with Israel. The interviewee added that Israel did not object to

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[78] For the American perspective on this topic, see "Challenges to gaining participation by states from the region in 'technical meetings'" in the American Narrative in this publication.

[79] Victoria Nuland, "US Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," Office of the Spokesperson, 23 November 2012, https://unidir.org/node/5693.

[80] Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, "Facilitator's letter to the Israeli MFA regarding preparations for the informal consultations on holding the postposed Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and All Other Weapons of Mass Destruction," 3 August 2013, https://unidir.org/node/5703.

the presence of the United Nations representative as it did not perceive it as conferring United Nations status on the meeting. While the Vienna meeting did not produce a breakthrough, it brought the parties closer to holding consultations in some form.

Israel communicated its willingness to hold informal multilateral consultations in Geneva on 3 September 2013.[81] This position echoed similar previous oral offers made in February and other occasions. The interviewee believed Israel was the first to provide clear-cut written acceptance of Ambassador Laajava's proposal to hold consultations, while the Arab Group took an additional eight months to agree to participate in the consultations.

Israeli motivation to engage in the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva

The first meeting of the informal consultations took place at the secluded Hotel Victoria in Glion in October, overlooking scenic Lake Geneva. It was the first such meeting between Israel and Arab states since ACRS in the 1990s. Israel preferred meeting in Glion over Geneva, where many United Nations offices are located, to minimize the link between the consultations and the United Nations. The informality of the meeting was strengthened as flags or other national emblems were not used.

Israeli interviewees offered various motivations for Israel's decision to participate in the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva. Some interviewees said one of the main reasons for Israel's participation was to prevent a repeat of the 2010 NPT Review Conference at the 2015 NPT Review Conference – aiming to prevent a "similar disaster" or at least mitigate potential damage. One interviewee went as far as to call the engagement with the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva "a diplomatic game" to secure a better outcome in the 2015 conference. Another interviewee further explained that Israel concluded following the events of the 2010 conference that the ultimate assurance for protecting its interests and achieving favourable results was to be "in the room" rather than relying on US guarantees. A third interviewee remarked that, beyond these two goals, Israel also sought to use its participation to influence the "rules of the game" of the informal consultations and explore the possibility of aligning the discussions onto an ACRS-like framework. Israel felt more confident and committed to the process once a preliminary understanding of the consultation rules was reached. A fourth interviewee compared Israel's decision to engage in the consultations to its decision to participate in ACRS because, in both cases, Israel judged that it would benefit more from showing flexibility and that could it not afford to ignore a process with US support behind it.

As the negotiations proceeded, the Israeli government became more confident that it could manage the flow of the negotiations. The Israeli delegation never felt that they were outnumbered or cornered by the Arab states, and over time they became increasingly invested in the process and worked towards identifying solutions to the problems the process encountered.

The five sessions of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2013–2014

A major issue that Israel faced in the first meeting at Glion on 21–22 October 2013 and the subsequent meetings of the informal consultations[82] was the mandate of the Helsinki Conference, according to an Israeli interviewee. The Arab side held that the mandate was agreed upon at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and all that remained was setting the conference date and location. The Israeli position

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[81] Jeremy Issacharoff, "Letter from the Israeli MFA to the Facilitator regarding the upcoming informal consolations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 September 2013, https://unidir.org/node/5704.

[82] "First Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMDFZ Conference is held in Glion, Switzerland," 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21.

was that the mandate was reached without their input as Israel was neither an NPT member state nor involved in the negotiations of the language of this mandate, and therefore it had to be agreed upon by all states of the region. Ambassador Laajava tried to find a compromise between the two sides by encouraging them to "think outside the box". But neither the Arab states nor Israel found it compelling: for Israel, there may have been a box, but not one it was obliged to remain in while the Arab parties responded that there is already a mandate.

A second major issue during the first Glion meeting and thereafter was the scope of the conference. The Arab position was that it should focus almost exclusively on establishing a ME WMDFZ. Based on its threat perceptions, Israel sought a focus on regional security as a holistic concept and a discussion of how an arms control arrangement could address all threats that caused insecurity and instability in the Middle East. According to the interviewee, the Arab side became agitated by the Israeli suggestion that the conference title should incorporate a reference to building regional security through CBMs. They opposed such CBMs as they were unwilling to discuss their overall military posture. Israel found this position highly concerning as CBMs were seen as a necessary step to establish trust and foster the relationships necessary for negotiating on regional security.

Following the first Glion meeting, Israel believed that it had maintained its position on a conference based on consensus decision-making and a regional security agenda. The second round of informal consultations at Glion in November 2013 did not bridge the gap between the two sides.

In February 2014, during the third round of informal consultations at Glion, the Israeli delegation submitted an informal paper outlining the ideas they discussed during the previous two meetings.[83] Israel's submission surprised the Arab states and the co-conveners. The latter were open to some of the Israeli ideas and a proposal was made to convene in a smaller format outside the plenary session to find a middle ground. Israel joined the discussion alongside one Arab counterpart, the Facilitator, and the co-conveners. The Arab representative, however, insisted on the presence of a LAS representative. When the latter did not appear, the Arab representative simply left the session, leaving his Israeli and extra regional counterparts behind.

By this time, Israel became increasingly frustrated with the Arab side's refusal to engage in smaller group discussions or in a direct Egyptian–Israeli dialogue to resolve disagreements. Ambassador Issacharoff made an "emotional speech" at the third meeting, which proved to be a critical moment for the Israeli participation in the informal consultations. He praised the progress made by both sides, reminded them that Israel had put ideas on the table, and said that, if the sides agreed on an agenda, Israel would be prepared to set a date for the conference. But he also expressed frustration with the rigidity of the Arab position on the conference's mandate. He felt it was increasingly clear to all that Israel was not the obstacle to holding the conference. But the facilitator and co-conveners were reluctant to attribute responsibility for the lack of progress to the Arabs.

Another prevailing factor that affected the consultations mentioned by an interviewee was the continued submission by Arab states of "intransigence" resolutions on Israel at the IAEA General Conference and the United Nations General Assembly. As described in a non-paper submitted by Israel to the 2015 NPT Review Conference, "that negative approach has reinforced the lack of trust and

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[83] 2015 NPT Review Conference, "Israel's Non-paper Submitted to the 2015 NPT RevCon," 30 April 2015, https://unidir.org/node/5671, and Issacharoff, "Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Informal Consultations on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference, 2013-2014".

confidence and prevented a meaningful dialogue between the States of the Middle East." Following the third Glion meeting, the Swiss funding to hold the informal consultations at this venue ended, necessitating a move to nearby Geneva. However, when the Israeli delegation arrived at the entrance of the meeting venue for the fourth meeting in Geneva in May 2014, they were confronted with United Nations flags and United Nations uniformed security personnel.

An interviewee remarked that this was disturbing and embarrassing for the Israeli delegation because the absence of a United Nations presence had been one of the conditions for Israel's participation in the consultations. Even though all the Arab delegations were already in the hall waiting for the discussions to begin, Ambassador Issacharoff informed the Facilitator that the Israeli delegation would not enter the venue until the United Nations flags and uniformed personnel were removed, which they were.

During the fourth meeting, Israel again proposed a formula under which it would support a conference if based on an agreed agenda covering all aspects of regional security and the principle of consensus. It even agreed to negotiate and conclude a joint declaration or final statement in time for the 2015 NPT Review Conference.[84] However, the gap between the rigid Arab demand to keep the mandate of the 2010 conference without any modification and Israel's requirement for a comprehensive agenda remained unresolved.

By the fifth round of the informal consultations, which took place in Geneva in June 2014, an interviewee said that the LAS representative stated that the Arab parties had not changed their position and they required new instructions. This effectively discontinued the talks. Ambassador Laajava subsequently attempted to convene a sixth meeting, which Israel agreed to attend in letters of 20 October 2014 and 7 January 2015. Despite Israel's positive response to continued engagement, the sixth round of consultations was repeatedly postponed and was never held, marking the end of the informal consultations.

The atmosphere between the participants at the informal consultations

According to an Israeli interviewee, the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, unlike ACRS, had no atmosphere of hope. Israel believed that Egypt intended to engage in adversarial talks rather than seeking a middle ground. However, another interviewee said that, throughout the process, the presence of the Facilitator and the co-convenors neutralized Israel's concern about being confronted and cornered by Arab parties not interested in holding serious discussions and concerns about how to deal with the mandate from the 2010 NPT Review Conference. An interviewee recalled that Israel's concerns gradually faded away as the consultations unfolded. He noted that the general spirit of the conversations was respectful and non-confrontational, and overall amicable. Despite many disagreements among "non-like-minded states", Israel never felt isolated, pressured, or outnumbered by the Arabs delegations. He believed that Israel knew where the Arab sensitivities lay and vice versa. It was a breakthrough for the Israeli delegation to be in the same room as their Arab counterparts for the first time since ACRS ended in 1995. Israel had expected a few Arab states to attend and was surprised when representatives from 11 states attended the first Glion meeting,[85] and 16 attended both the second[86] and third Glion meetings.[87]

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[84] 2015 NPT Review Conference, "Israel's Non-paper Submitted to the 2015 NPT RevCon".

[85] Ibid.

[86] "Second Informal Consultation to Hold the ME WMDFZ Conference are Held and Sandra's List is Shared," 25 November 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21, and Angela Kane, "Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Multilateral Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference, 2013– 2014," in The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View from the Negotiating Table (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2023/AngelaKane.

[87] "Third Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMDFZ Conference is Held in Glion Switzerland," 4 February 2014, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21.

Israel's nuclear capabilities per se were not discussed at the consultations, according to an interviewee, and it was subsumed into its broader positions. Israel was unwilling to focus on the nuclear issue because this put the focus solely on it. When Israel reminded its Arab counterparts of this position and referenced the principle that NWFZs should be "freely arrived at", the Israeli side felt that they were flustered, as for the Arab side "freely arrived at" did not apply to Israel.

When Israel reiterated its stance and emphasized the principle of NWFZs being "freely arrived at," they perceived that their Arab counterparts were flustered, as for them "freely arrived at" did not apply to Israel.

According to interviewees, the dynamics between Israel, the Facilitator, and the co-convenors were positive. Over time, a dialogue with Ambassador Laajava was established whereby Israel would always give him a clear answer on what it considered possible. One interviewee described the Facilitator's approach as optimistic, patient, and trying to make each side comfortable to engage while never attempting to make the Israeli delegation feel they were being cornered; Ambassador Laajava tried to mediate impartially between two very different conceptions of the process. A vital element of the Israeli engagement was that the proposals Israel made were ones it was willing to abide by. Israel never made suggestions assuming the Arab side would reject it or for the sake of appearances. An interviewee felt that the Facilitator respected the Israeli position and approach and its desire to be constructive by finding ways forwards instead of simply rejecting proposals.

As for the co-conveners, while the positions presented by the United States and the United Kingdom did not surprise Israel, the positions presented by Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian representative, were intriguing. Israel and Russia held discussions at the informal consultations that were sometimes tough and contained many disagreements. But Ambassador Ulyanov supported Israel's position on the mandate, emphasizing that the Arab states could not expect Israel to agree on a mandate it had no role in creating. Ambassador Ulyanov reportedly approached Ambassador Wael Al Assad, the LAS representative, at the first meeting at Glion to tell him how well Israel was "behaving" and that the Arab side should reciprocate this mode of engagement.

The interviewee concluded that Israel's conduct and constructive approach allowed it to "hold up a mirror" to the Arab parties. He believed the Arab side never imagined Israel would engage with them based on the NPT mandate and attempted to create a dilemma for Israel. If Israel did not engage, the Arab parties would have had an easy diplomatic "win" because of the Israeli Government's perceived intransigence. If Israel engaged, they imagined it would be on their terms, the 2010 NPT Review Conference's mandate. Once Israel did engage but proposed reasonable terms for a mandate in the eyes of the other participants, this presented a more difficult scenario for the Arab side, as they had to choose between agreeing to Israel's terms or opposing any change to the 2010 mandate. He concluded that the Arab side chose the latter at the price of not having a conference. This interview noted that the consultations could have helped usher in a new regional dynamic. The regional security agenda discussed at the consultations resonated with the parallel efforts to constrain Iranian nuclear activities and Syrian chemical weapons. These were just two of several areas in which Israeli and Arab interests converged. The process also coincided with the existing peaceful relations between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan and the (at that time) quiet bilateral contacts with some GCC states. The interviewee believed it could have become another dimension of the regional trend that culminated in the signing of the

President Donald J. Trump, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Minister of Foreign Affairs for the United Arab Emirates Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyani, sign the Abraham Accords on the South Lawn of the White House (Washington DC, United States of America, 15 September 2020). Credit: Shealah Craighead / White House Archived on Flickr.

Abraham Accords in 2020. He felt that Israel's experience in the informal consultations justified the Israeli conviction that it would be easier to engage with the Arab states directly, rather than through a United Nations process.

Reasons for the collapse of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva and lessons learned

The first perceived reason for the failure of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, similar to discussions at ACRS, related to the tension between Israel and the Arab parties over whether to prioritize regional security or arms control. When the Israeli delegation tried to introduce regional security and CBMs to the conference agenda, which had precedents, the Arab side vigorously protested and did not want to deviate from the 2010 NPT Review Conference mandate. Israeli interviewees contrasted Israel's relative flexibility during the negotiations with what they perceived as the uncompromising position of Arab states on the conference scope and agenda and their lack of interest in discussing regional security issues.

Israel always tried to find a way forwards instead of rejecting subjects for discussion. While Israel's response was not always a "yes", it was often "yes, but…". One interviewee noted that the Israeli delegation had clear instructions on how to proceed and did not reveal its entire bottom line at the start of the talks. They had the flexibility to make proposals based on Arab responsiveness. In contrast, the Arab side avoided making concessions and "pocketed" any concessions made by Israel, only to

return later with even more ambitious demands and conditions. According to this view, the Arab states simply followed the clear-cut and strict instructions from their capitals and the LAS that required them to proceed exclusively based on the 2010 mandate or not at all.

According to an interviewee, the rejection of discussing regional security was not across the board. He recalled that during one of the Glion meetings, an Egyptian representative mentioned that Egypt and Israel regularly held more sensitive bilateral security discussions, so he did not understand why regional security discussions linked to a Zone were a significant issue. However, such occasional signs of Arab flexibility were ad hoc, non-committal, occurrences. Overall, there was no real move from the Arab side to incorporate regional security and CBMs as part of the agenda.

A second perceived reason among some interviewees for the failure of the informal consultations was the unwillingness of the of the Arab side to shift from the large, multilateral format – which made negotiations and reaching agreement difficult – to a small format that was more manageable. A deal reached there could be reintroduced in the large format for adoption. The inability of the LAS representative to secure agreement on the Arab side on this shift to a small format was the proximate cause of the failure of the consultations at the second Geneva meeting.

A third perceived reason for the failure was the uneven level of diplomatic representation and the political commitment implied by it between the Israeli and Arab sides. The Israeli representative, Ambassador Issacharoff, was a senior MFA official experienced on these issues. He had strategic and tactical flexibility in the negotiation room and direct access to the prime minister for instructions and consultation. In contrast, most Arab delegations sent relatively junior or less experienced officials, often the second highest-ranking officials, from their missions to the United Nations in Geneva. The Arab delegations lacked instructions beyond the mandate, and the relatively low level of representation and lack of proximity to decision makers affected their leeway to negotiate beyond the 2010 NPT Review Conference mandate. Iran only sent a junior diplomat to the first day of the first meeting. There was also no consistent level of representation from the Egyptian delegation, despite being the most important Arab player. Unlike ACRS, Egypt was not the main day-to-day mover and repeatedly changed its senior representation throughout the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva. It was unclear to one interviewee what Egyptian objectives were there and if Egypt was genuine in its effort to establish a ME WMDFZ.

The interviewee believed that a consistent senior Egyptian representative could have facilitated progress. Ambassador Al Assad, the LAS representative, was the only person with whom Ambassador Issacharoff had consistent conversations. The two senior diplomats developed a close and respectful relationship. This interviewee believed that had it been left to Al Assad, who served as the coordinator of all the Arab delegations at the informal consultations, he would have been willing to find a middle ground with Israel. However, He was bound by the consensus of the Arab states in the LAS framework and, unlike Issacharoff, had no flexibility or access to the senior political levels of Arab governments. He was limited to the common denominator position of the LAS, which was the 2010 mandate.

Points were presented on both positive and negative aspects of this process by interviewees. On the one hand, the consultations, and past experiences, like ACRS, convinced Israel that the Arab parties were living in a "different world" and that nothing concrete would come out of the ME WMDFZ-related processes. One interviewee felt that Israel's engagement with the consultations resulted in only "tactical" gains and that concessions made by Israel, such as agreeing to join the consultations on a Zone, only

An overview of the IAEA high level event on How the Atom Benefits Life held at UN headquarters in the margins of the 2015 NPT Review Conference (New York, United States of America, 27 April 2015). Credit: Cia Pak / Scannews.

raised further expectations and demands on Israel. According to him, Israel's significant gestures were dismissed by the Arab parties, as indicated by the 2018 decision by the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly to hold a conference on a Zone without discussing the mandate with Israel (see below).[88]

On the other hand, the interviewee said that the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva contributed to broader regional security discussions by introducing a more rational set of issues into ME WMDFZ-related discussions, which were largely absent up to that point. The interviewee further noted that Israel arguably achieved its main goals at the informal consultations: a Zone conference that Israel was not enthusiastic about was not convened under parameters opposed by Israel, and Israel's positions were considered reasonable by the Facilitator and the co-conveners.

Interviewees highlighted the lessons learned from the consultations, including the ability of Israel to engage in a process, exchange ideas, and control the "diplomatic flow". There was merit to this strategy of engagement, including demonstrating that Israel was not the obstructionist party. This episode was a success for Israeli diplomacy, where an opportunity was identified and seized.

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[88] UN General Assembly Draft Decision on Convening a ME WMDFZ is put before the First Committee," 11 October 2018, UNIDIR Timeline," https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/un-general-assembly-draft-decision-convening-me-wmdfz-put-first-committee?timeline=31.

Another lesson learned was that arms control could be a good idea if approached carefully and intelligently, with a clear understanding of the ground rules. Adhering to Israel's three parameters – direct consultations with regional parties, agreement by consensus, and a broad-based regional security agenda – could help avoid the "slippery slope" that Israel is concerned about.

ISRAELI OBSERVER STATUS AT THE 2015 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

The events between 2010 and 2015 led Israel to attend the 2015 NPT Review Conference as an observer. According to an Israeli interviewee, despite the 2010 NPT Review Conference not being the finest moment of US–Israel coordination, it did result in a high level of consultation, coordination and mutual regard for each other's interests over the next five years. The decision to attend the 2015 conference as an observer was not easy. Prime Minister Netanyahu had to be convinced of the utility of Israel taking such action for the first time in 20 years.

Israel submitted a non-paper to the conference presenting the three key principles it saw as crucial for a meaningful process, outlined during the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva. These principles included direct regional dialogue, consensus-based decision-making, and the inclusion of a broad range of security issues in the agenda.[89] An interviewee remarked that the failure of NPT member states to reach a consensus on a Final Document at the 2015 conference, mainly due to the ME WMDFZ issue,[90] reflected a US commitment to retract the mistake it made at the 2010 conference.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY-MANDATED ME WMDFZ CONFERENCE

Israeli interviewees generally held a negative perception of the 2018 decision by the United Nations General Assembly to re-launch the ME WMDFZ process and the resultant Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (also known as the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference).[91] These interviewees described the conference as an "empty initiative", "surreal", "meaningless" "divorced from reality", "more a joke than a threat", and a "sideshow" with no bearing on the core interests of any Middle Eastern state. They believed that Israel had no imperative to join the conference. The interviewees identified various motivations behind the Arab Group's push for the conference. Some saw it as a way for Egypt to assert its leadership and showcase "diplomatic stamina", given there are few issues on which Egypt could play a leadership role internationally. Others noted that it could also be a way for Egypt to compensate for the lack of progress on this issue in the NPT.

Some interviewees linked the Arab position to diplomatic grandstanding and ideological rhetoric similar to those states and activists pushing for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) who cared little for realistic progress. Others observed that there was no united Arab position on the Zone, and many Arab states were uninterested or lacked expertise on the topic.

Interviewees believed that Egypt would have taken a different path if it was looking to make real progress. One interviewee felt that the Arab states intentionally chose a process under United Nations auspices because they knew it presented a fundamental problem for Israel. Israel perceives the United

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[89] 2015 NPT Review Conference, "Israel's Non-Paper Submitted to the 2015 NPT RevCon".

[90] "2015 NPT RevCon Ends without Consensus on a Final Document," 22 May 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2015-npt-revcon-ends-without-consensus-final-document?timeline=2, and Thomas Countryman, "Learning from the 2015 NPT Review Conference," Arms Control Today 50, no. 4 (May 2020), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-05/features/learning-2015-npt-review-conference.

[91] "UN General Assembly Decision 73/546 On Convening A Conference On The ME WMDFZ," 22 December 2018, https://unidir.org/node/5664.

> Israel's experience with Zone-related processes consistently reinforced the notion of a "long corridor," emphasizing that there are no quick fixes or shortcuts to progress. Israeli interviewees believed that the lack of progress on this specific issue did not diminish the potential for other forms of collaborative regional security engagements.

Nations as a biased forum where it is consistently outnumbered and targeted for criticism. Interviewees assessed that Israel would persist in not participating in talks under the United Nations auspices. Finally, interviewees believed Israel does not consider the conference or treaty drafting at the conference as posing significant political risks, nor did it feel pressured or isolated by it. They held that it would not contribute "one millimetre" to the realization of a Zone.

ISRAELI VISIONS OF HOW TO PROCEED ON REGIONAL SECURITY AND ARMS CONTROL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Israeli interviewees generally shared the view that, for Israel to actively engage in a regional security and arms control process, including on a ME WMDFZ, the primary focus should be on fostering peaceful relations among states of the Middle East. They believed that the durability of these relationships needs to be tested over time before progressing further.

Some interviewees suggested that US policy could facilitate a new regional process with a broad security agenda and an arms control forum separate from the NPT. This would be like the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process, with a Zone as the ultimate objective. In launching such a process, Israel was more likely to adopt a reactive rather than an initiating role, with Iran's involvement being a critical factor for Israel to seriously consider it. The interviewees emphasized that any such process must be well-structured, including being open-ended with clear exit strategies. However, they acknowledged that the political conditions that made such a process feasible in the 1990s, including the bilateral track for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, were unique and not easily replicated today.

Most interviewees were sceptical about the likelihood of Israel seriously considering participation in an arms control process without the initial steps mentioned above. There was little confidence in the feasibility or the desirability of arms control because of the low expectations that such a process under current circumstances could have a profound impact on regional stability, escalation, arms races or proliferation, or stop the carnage in the region.[92]

Interviewees drew these conclusions based on a combination of factors. First, the way Arab states had approached past ME WMDFZ processes like ACRS and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva played a role. Disillusionment with the JCPOA; the volatile nature of the region with ongoing conflicts; the refusal of many states to recognize Israel; security threats from non-state actors; and some states lacking full control over their territories, all made it challenging to assess the feasibility of establishing a Zone. Additionally, certain actors' lack of political will further complicate the situation.

Most interviewees concluded that Israel's experience with Zone processes consistently validated the need for a "long corridor", emphasizing that there were no shortcuts to progress. They believed that the

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[92] This was seen by many interviewees as likely the case before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and that the invasion only reinforced this mindset.

lack of progress in this particular issue did not undermine the potential for other forms of collaborative regional security engagements.

Interviewees suggested several avenues for progress on arms control and regional security. One suggestion was to initiate cooperation on essential and cross-regional issues like agriculture, medicine, and water conservation as a starting point, drawing on the growing awareness that no state can deal with issues, including Iran, on their own. This approach could foster interdependence and build trust, potentially laying the groundwork for future security agreements. Indeed, according to the interviewees, the perceived challenges posed by Iran's nuclear and missile programmes is a significant obstacle to arms control in the region and no progress could be made in an arms control process until they were effectively addressed. Overcoming historical animosities, cultural differences, and religious tensions to tackle these cross-regional issues would present challenges but were seen as necessary steps.

Another suggestion involved an informal process focused on regional CBMs, on which Israel had repeatedly demonstrated readiness to engage. Starting with CBMs could address concerns about ensuring commitment fulfilment even before a formal agreement is reached. Discussing CBMs, even without reaching a formal agreement, could gradually build trust and eventually gain support from the Arab publics for normalization with Israel. The maturation of relations between Middle Eastern states was seen as a potential catalyst for reducing acquisitions of military capability and for adopting arms control measures, leading to various regional benefits. An example from Israel–Egypt ties was mentioned: Israel's peace treaty with Egypt was initially made possible due to the involvement of the United States and a larger package that included internationally monitored provisions. Over time, the peace between the two countries proved durable, leading to increased trust, and culminating in Israel's acceptance of additional Egyptian troops deployed in the Sinai Peninsula beyond the limits agreed in the peace treaty.

Another example mentioned of how dialogue and trust building over time could change Israel's threat perception was that Israel did not oppose the provision of US F-35 aircraft and Israeli arms to select GCC states, which was previously inconceivable. Once peace was established, he surmised, security cooperation followed, creating an environment where Israeli engagement in a collaborative security architecture, including arms control, could be seriously considered.

Some interviewees also discussed the topic of a future Middle East security architecture. They highlighted that discussion on this matter could be divided into two types. The first type involved an inclusive approach, bringing together diverse states to address regional conflicts. The second type involved like-minded states cooperating to tackle common challenges. For the time being, most interviewees acknowledged that Israel only considered and discussed a regional security regime based on the second model – cooperation with GCC states to address shared challenges. This focus was primarily driven by Israel's goal of mitigating risks originating from Iran. One interviewee mentioned that an alliance of like-minded states was the most effective way to address nuclear proliferation concerns in the Middle East.

Finally, some interviewees emphasized the importance of defining the boundaries of the Middle East and maintaining flexibility in the definition based on the objectives of the process. They stressed the need to keep the definition broad enough to address different parties' legitimate concerns. The region could be defined differently depending on the specific subject and objectives, such as CBMs,

disarmament, or other strategically relevant issues. For example, while the ME WMDFZ discussions would be region-wide, CBMs could be subregional. Most interviewees even agreed that Iran as a regional actor had to be included in constructing Middle East-focused processes despite Israel's lack of faith in multilateral negotiations that included Iran.

NARRATIVES OF THE MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE

DRIVERS, THEMES, AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

The quest to establish in the Middle East a Zone free, initially, of nuclear weapons and, subsequently, all weapons of mass destruction, has spanned nearly 50 years. While notable milestones have been achieved, a Zone treaty still appears to be a far-off goal.

This study chronicles the narratives of key stakeholders closely involved with Zone-related processes at various critical junctures since 1974: the Arab states, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, the Russian Federation, and the United States of America. By distilling insights from these narratives, the study uncovers key drivers and themes that underlie the behaviour of these states toward the WMD-Free Zone. It also provides a comprehensive historical account of key Zone-related processes and events from all perspectives.

The study draws upon information gathered through more than 80 interviews with current and former officials, as well as experts from more than 20 states in addition to regional and international organizations that have played important roles in the Zone processes. It also incorporates primary sources from UNIDIR's Timeline of ME WMDFZ Milestones and Documents Depository.

The insights presented in the study offer a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of contemporary witnesses involved in the ME WMDFZ issue throughout its history. The narratives shed light on how historical events have been perceived and interpreted by various stakeholders, revealing their divergent motivations, objectives, and perceptions assigned to other stakeholders, emphasizing the complexity and multifaceted nature of the ME WMDFZ.

By highlighting discrepancies between factual information, historical events, and stakeholder perceptions, these narratives identify areas that require further dialogue and cooperation to bridge gaps and foster mutual understanding. The diverse perspectives provided in this publication could assist in bridging gaps between Middle Eastern states, uncovering points of convergence, divergence, and misunderstanding.