

Global Zero: An Israeli Vision of Realistic Idealism

Trying to portray the Israeli outlook on a nuclear-free world presents a formidable challenge. The issue is not merely the inability to access the inner thoughts of the government, considering that no official statements on the issue are available. More fundamentally, the challenge is to validly portray a national view on an issue that has not really captured the attention of the Israeli government, let alone yielded a coherent policy formulation on it. It is, however, feasible to reflect on some factors that may explain why the renewed international interest in a nuclear-weapons-free world has thus far failed to register in Israel.

To this end, it is useful to pull together some of the basic tenets that underlie the core Israeli outlook on disarmament and, from them, infer some propositions that would probably factor in any Israeli consideration of arms control and disarmament initiatives, including Global Zero. The ultimate result is, nevertheless, bound to be both tentative as well as very personal and should be treated as such. Ultimately, the key questions are: what are Israel's views on a nuclear-weapons-free world? And what role, if any, would it be likely to play in the Global Zero campaign presently underway?

Why Global Zero Has Had Little Traction in Israel

Since ancient times, the Israeli outlook on disarmament has had a global and universal character. The Jewish prophets have repeatedly articulated a vision of world peace in which global and complete disarmament figure very heavily. Nowhere has this prophecy appeared formulated more eloquently than in the vision articulated by the Prophet Micah: "They shall beat their swords into

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The Washington Quarterly • 33:2 pp. 157–168
DOI: 10.1080/01636601003674038

plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift a sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.”¹

Furthermore, Jewish prophets have always believed that it was Zion’s role to spread such a vision to the entire world. Consequently, leaders of modern-day Israel have consistently embraced this vision and role, and since the 1960s especially, have repeatedly articulated this goal of world peace intertwined with that of global and complete disarmament in various settings for both domestic and foreign audiences. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the more recent articulations of a vision of disarmament centering on a world free of nuclear weapons, such as the one made by President Barack Obama in his April 2009 speech in Prague,² have not been seen in Israel as manifestations of either novel or original thinking that merit any special attention.

Even more fundamentally, the disarmament vision articulated by Micah has clearly been anchored in the context of enduring and uninterrupted peaceful human relations. That disarmament could be envisaged outside this context did not register even with the Jewish prophets, daring and far-reaching as they may

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have been in their thinking. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that this contextual conditioning is also uppermost in modern-day Israeli thinking, a nation and society where a long sense of history often permeates serious debate of any and every issue, especially security.

The proclivity to view the disarmament vision in this context is obviously reinforced by the ever more cynically pragmatic Israeli political culture of the day, where visions often give way to pressing reality. Faced with the challenges of the present, this vision is commonly brushed aside as no more than well-meaning aspirational thinking, rather than as a concrete action plan or even as an inspiration or basis for one. At times, those articulating such a far-reaching vision can be cast as dangerously naive. Nowhere is this more apparent recently than in the political treatment of the sacred national vision of peace and security based on coexistence with the Arab world, which came to its apex in the 1990s with the onset of the Madrid peace process.

The vision for regional peace and integration, articulated most cogently in the course of the 1990s by then prime minister Shimon Peres, raised high expectations domestically as well as internationally. But these ultimately crashed against the sobering reality of the collapse of the Oslo process, Palestinian violence, and subsequent dramatic cooling off of budding Israeli relations with the Arab world. The domestic political repercussions of this collapse within

Israel have subsequently dampened any political enthusiasm for embracing lofty visions that stand in such stark contrast to present-day reality. Israeli politics have shifted to the right, more visionary leaders have been castigated as reckless illusionists, and others have taken the cue from these developments that it is all but certain political suicide for them to be associated with such visions.

This brings the final reason that Israel has for treating Global Zero with indifference and perhaps even implicit skepticism. Since its inception, Israel has been preoccupied with nuclear proliferation, and since the late 1950s has regarded the threats posed by nuclear weapon capability and acquisition by its regional foes as having existential dimensions. Israel has often found itself facing the acute dilemma of either reconciling itself with proliferation concerns or resorting to extreme measures to prevent them from coming to fruition—which held true in the early 1960s when Egypt seemed to be racing toward the nuclear bomb; when Iraq appeared to be developing a nuclear weapon program in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; more recently with Iran and Syria; and to some extent with Libya as well.

In all of these cases, the Israeli perception is that it was either the threat or actual use of coercive measures that yielded a favorable result for Israel, not the normative suasion of nonproliferation and disarmament. This does not bode well for initiatives like Global Zero. The realization that, in most of these cases, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was either cavalierly disregarded or cynically abused, and that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) proved either complacent or limited in its ability to warn of ominous developments presents even bigger problems for the nuclear-weapons-free world campaign. Worse still is that most Israelis have come to the conclusion that the international community, with the partial exception of the United States (which twice stopped Iraq from realizing its nuclear weapon goals), was reluctant to take effective corrective action, creating even less fertile ground to take disarmament initiatives seriously.

Much of the Israeli security outlook in recent decades is inspired by U.S. thinking on issues of global importance and extensively assessed in the context of U.S.-Israeli relations. Israeli elites, therefore, would have been naturally inclined to take the current U.S. administration's sincere advocacy in favor of global disarmament seriously. That this is not the case attests to the existence of some serious doubts in their mind regarding the credibility and viability of the U.S. approach. How come the same U.S. administration that is actively promoting nuclear disarmament simultaneously appears to drag its feet on taking tougher measures toward Iran, whose nuclear program continues to expand and grow ever closer to the nuclear threshold, and North Korea that continues to grow its nuclear weapons program and also acts as a proliferator? That the administration further holds back on pursuing more effective measures

against Syria for refusing to allow the IAEA to conduct more intrusive inspections to check on serious suspicions of noncompliance further diminishes the credibility of the U.S. stance on pursuing Global Zero in Israeli eyes.

Israel's Core Outlook on Nuclear Disarmament

Israel's declaratory policy has always embraced nuclear disarmament as a coveted end-state. The current formula was anchored in a 1992 cabinet decision, in response to a collective decision by all the regional participants in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group of the multilateral Madrid process to formally enunciate such visions. It was subsequently reflected in Peres's speech, while he served as foreign minister, on January 13, 1993 at the signing of the Chemical Weapons Convention and later reiterated in the Foreign Ministry's Director-General Eytan Bentsur's speech to the Conference on Disarmament on September 4, 1997.³ This rhetoric formally committed Israel to a vision of a Middle East free from nuclear and all other nonconventional weapons of destruction and ballistic missiles. This vision and its rhetoric provide the best available insight into Israeli thinking and is relevant to Global Zero for two mutually reinforcing reasons. First, because it has become a consistent official policy, and second, because this vision was initially enunciated not in a UN-type debating forum, but rather as a practical guide for priorities and requirements for a negotiating process between Israel and its regional neighbors.

So what are the core tenets of this vision? First is the distinction between disarmament as a goal unto itself and disarmament as an end result of a long political process producing a fundamental and long-lasting transformation of relations between Israel and its neighbors. Put differently, while seeing disarmament (including nuclear disarmament) as a desirable outcome, Israel nevertheless believes that it could and should not be pursued independently. Progress toward nuclear disarmament is clearly seen not only as secondary to attaining other more pressing goals of comprehensive peace and normalization, but is in fact explicitly defined as something that is a byproduct of attaining these goals. Implicit in this conception of disarmament is a strong preference for a regional anchor of any such arrangement to which Israel becomes party, an approach that has since been manifest in the Israeli decision to sign but not ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention (and subsequently, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) unless and until all states of the region do likewise. Israel has consciously not ruled out joining pertinent global instruments, but it has all along maintained that, when it comes to disarmament (as distinguished from arms control) and possibly nonproliferation arrangements, regional considerations reign supreme.

One specific concern that has reinforced this fundamentally regional outlook has been the complete absence in global treaties of any link between one state's obligations to the regime and those of other states which it may be most concerned about. Israel finds itself in an even more difficult spot because it has always been denied the stature of becoming a member of the UN Security Council. Unlike the United States (which withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002) and Russia, Israel also wields limited political clout to withdraw from conventions it enters willingly or even out of necessity, or even to interpret their provisions liberally as the United States often does through its Senate's advisory procedure.

Israel has always felt that its narrow security margins, coupled with the grave threat it faces, requires mechanisms to link any obligations it undertakes in arms control or disarmament regimes to compliance by its neighbors to the same duties. This consideration has shaped the Israeli view that the NPT, which it has otherwise supported, is detached from the realities of security in the Middle East. The dismal compliance record of neighboring states and their potential suppliers with the NPT only reinforces Israeli skepticism. International failure to enforce compliance with nonproliferation obligations does not inspire optimism on either the deterrence value of such treaties or the corrective mechanisms in place to address serious nonproliferation concerns when they arise.

Nuclear disarmament is seen as a byproduct of peace and normalization, not the other way around.

For Israel, the emphasis on the regional context shapes the political context in which disarmament occurs, the parties that must join and remain bound by any such arrangement, and it also shapes verification issues. Mutual verification has been and remains central to Israeli thinking about any disarmament arrangement. While Israel has been willing to relax the requirement for regional reciprocity in verification for lesser obligations—such as by allowing Arab IAEA inspectors to partake in agency inspections of its safeguarded Soreq Nuclear Research Center amidst outright Egyptian opposition for reciprocity in this regard—it remains steadfast about the centrality of such a requirement for any disarmament measure in which it enters.

The emphasis here derives from three mutually reinforcing considerations. One is the limited trust in the efficacy of existing global verification schemes. Second is the desire to have reciprocal inspections serve as an extra deterrent against either cheating or abusive inspections. And third has been the skepticism about entering into highly meaningful security obligations with parties that

would not otherwise even contemplate tolerating Israeli presence on their soil, let alone in an inspection capacity.

Inherent in the Israeli approach has thus been a strong preference for what can be called sequentialism. Disarmament is not fundamentally a technical discussion but rather a political transformation. Political accommodation would have to precede any serious discussion of disarmament. And vigorous confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) that could be negotiated and entered into, in parallel with the conflict resolution process, would have to be agreed upon and implemented before truly restrictive arms control measures would be contemplated. The time for disarmament would only come after such CSBMs have been applied and tested over time, followed by arms control arrangements, and accompanied by comprehensive political transformation in the attitude of the Arab world and Iran toward Israel.

Sequentialism also has one more central feature that is absolutely germane to the Israeli perspective on a nuclear-weapons-free world, namely the linkage between conventional as well as other nonconventional threats and the nuclear disarmament agenda. Here, the position long maintained by Israel has been that the nuclear issue should be the *last* to be resolved, after the discussion of conventional force issues, as well as those of ballistic missiles and chemical and biological weapons. And while Israel has occasionally shown modest tactical

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flexibility regarding the nature of early nuclear discussions, it is doubtful that the core position on resolution of this issue would be seriously compromised. This is because Israel continues to face serious security threats from all of these other domains. Israel, therefore, remains wedded to its nuclear image as the ultimate

existential hedge against serious encroachment of its security interests and an indispensable tool for reassuring its population, allies, and partners of its guaranteed viability in the midst of its hostile and turbulent environment.

Even more fundamental to this attitude toward nuclear disarmament is the Israeli outlook on its nuclear image as the ultimate embodiment of its *indigenous* capacity to defend itself, by itself, and deter aggressions of all kinds. Israel has long been skeptical and wary that any external security guarantees would actually safeguard its core security interests, and is fearful of mistakenly relying on such guarantees. It has been skeptical that others, even its closest allies of the day, would actually risk their own interests in an effort to bail out Israel in great distress. It has been wary of promises previously made to that effect, which have proven elusive or hard to cash in at times of need, such as the U.S. commitment to guarantee Israeli freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Eilat that facilitated the

Israeli withdrawal in 1967, and is fearful that even if the reverse were to hold true, Israel would inevitably lose much of its freedom of maneuver were it to compromise on its capacity to defend itself by itself.

This attitude has not translated into any eagerness on Israel's part to inject the nuclear dimension into any confrontation with its foes. Quite the reverse—precisely because it was deemed such a central pillar of Israeli security, it was considered absolutely essential to reserve it solely for the most dire of consequences. This has manifested itself in an exceptional Israeli self-restraint in every aspect that pertains to its nuclear policy. But the extension of such logic has been and remains that Israel is equally reticent to compromise or otherwise downplay its nuclear image further in the absence of a fundamental and irreversible transformation of its security environment.

Finally, Israel has limited confidence in its ability to shape global negotiations of any arrangement in which it is ultimately expected to take part. It realistically assesses that its ability to influence discussions of global treaties, even ones in which it has vital interests, is modest at best. And it fears that even partaking in such discussions enhances their prospects of success, exposes Israel to pressures to compromise on its vital interests, and worse, still binds it to eventually accept outcomes that it may profoundly dread because they do not address its core security concerns. This has been manifest in Israel's reluctant tacit support for a fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) proposal in the Conference on Disarmament, notwithstanding its belief that a treaty allows for continued enrichment under the loose veil of a peaceful nuclear program is fundamentally flawed. And on balance, it sees little opportunity costs in foregoing participation of negotiations whose fate is deemed highly uncertain. This explains a strong—though not entirely consistent—Israeli bias in favor of avoiding such discussions in the first place, in the hope that they either never materialize or conclude, or at the very least, do not bind Israel by their results.

A Few Educated Guesses

How might Israel respond if a global nuclear disarmament process did somehow take off? This is by far is the most speculative part of the analysis, given that the circumstances in which this might occur are far from clear, and there is no public evidence to suggest the Israeli government has even begun to consider how it might respond to such an eventuality. Still, a few educated guesses might be in order here.

First, it is reasonable to expect that Israel would not actively enter discussions unless and until it was convinced that all the other major players with significant vested interests have indeed committed themselves to this process.

Second, Israel might at that point advocate a highly cautious approach toward generic nuclear disarmament: gradual, phased, conditional, and up to a very late stage, also reversible. It would probably emphasize the need to measure actual progress made at every step of the way, and proceed further only upon assessing that the process was actually yielding tangible security benefits, or at a minimum not undermining its security equilibrium.

In line with such an approach, one may expect Israel to resist any interim measures which constrain or otherwise downplay the nuclear contribution to its own security, absent either a proper substitute for it or a significant parallel process of peacemaking and normalization between it and its neighbors. One specific domain that might cause Israel special heartburn is any requirement for it to undertake premature transparency measures in support of the Global Zero process. Such pressured transparency could create unintended consequences with neighboring states that might either seek to leverage the Israeli declarations to elicit further concessions from Israel or could face political pressure to mount countervailing programs.

A likely third hallmark of the Israeli input might be a conditionality Israel would seek to introduce into the generic process regarding required parallel

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steps in the areas of nonproliferation. Israel is likely to demand that every step toward zero be accompanied by far-reaching parallel steps toward tighter verification and enforcement measures on nuclear nonproliferation obligations, and clearer linkages between compliance with the nonproliferation obligations and the

rights to develop (and receive assistance toward the development) of a civilian nuclear program, especially fuel cycle facilities. Israel might also seek to introduce a ban on parties' freedom to withdraw from the treaty before surrendering the benefits one derived while being in the treaty, while insisting that the withdrawal of one of its neighbors from the process treaty would constitute sufficient legitimate grounds for disengaging from the process and reversing course itself.

Fourth, one may envisage an Israeli effort to introduce a regional dimension into a global disarmament treaty, governing both issues of accession and verification. Israel, probably alongside some other countries already party to nuclear-weapons zone arrangements, might insist that a Global Zero treaty recognize such arrangements as one possible modality under which some parties might partake in the treaty, with the regional arrangement having some requirements that go beyond the core tenets of the global new regime. Such a

regional leg to the treaty would have to anchor the rights of accession, withdrawal, and mutual inspections for regional parties.

Fifth, it seems reasonable to expect Israel to demand that the payoff from embarking on such a path toward a nuclear-weapons-free world be material assistance toward a civilian nuclear energy program and a nuclear fuel program. Here, Israel might not only be inspired by the original bargain contained in the NPT (predominantly in Article IV), but also by the U.S.–India deal of 2005 and 2007 approved by the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Finally, it would not be unreasonable to expect Israel to demand some external security guarantees also outside the treaty in addition to all of the above (and certainly with even greater vigor in the event that it would be forced to compromise on some of the above). Feeling that whatever enforcement mechanisms might exist within the treaty would prove weak and unreliable at a moment of truth, Israel may well desire ironclad guarantees from the United States and other champions of the disarmament cause for its security, in the event that its security is seriously challenged after it has made significant concessions toward global disarmament.

Is Global Zero Ultimately a Desirable Prospect?

A nuclear-free world is undoubtedly a lofty goal. How can an idea that aims to rid the world of the most destructive category of weapons ever designed by mankind, and for which there truly are no defenses, be opposed by any state? Yet, the effort to translate the noble vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world into a practical process and outcome is replete with problems and challenges. Indeed, the difficulties are so diverse and severe that they cast serious doubt that such a vision could ever be realistically attained in anything less than several decades.

The real question one must address, therefore, is whether the world is better off trying to launch the process of ridding the world of *all* nuclear weapons or trying to cope differently with the current nuclear predicament? This question does not lend itself to any easy answer. And nowhere is this question more difficult to answer than in Israel. On one hand, Israel has subscribed all along to both the vision of nuclear as well as regional disarmament and to limit nuclear proliferation by supporting the NPT and committing to exercise the utmost restraint in its own nuclear endeavors. But on the other hand, Israel has found it impossible to join the NPT, has felt incapable of moving ahead on establishing a nuclear-weapons-free zone absent a genuine transformation of relations with its neighbors, and has become wary of indicators that the NPT is losing its relevance and perhaps even becoming counterproductive in today's world.

Israel sees many risks in raising expectations about Global Zero that would be near impossible to fulfill (certainly in the foreseeable future), and acute danger

Israel fears that further diminishing the global role for nuclear deterrence will actually abet aggression.

in linking any desperately needed progress in nonproliferation to parallel progress on nuclear disarmament. Worse still, Israel remains skeptical that a process to wean the present nuclear powers of nuclear deterrence would actually help make the world into a safer place, especially during the transition phase. Nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945. The prospects of their future use are, if anything, diminishing. And the numbers of nuclear

weapons have been and remain on the decline, even if the pace and scope of that process leave much to be desired. Under these circumstances, Israel sees a limited upside in curtailing the ability to deter, to reassure, and to provide extended deterrence any further. Conversely, it sees these mainly as a recipe for undermining confidence and security, rather than as a sure means for enhancing either.

Israel harbors few illusions about the prospects for significantly tightening the nonproliferation regime, if present realities are any guide. It is also truly pessimistic about the resolve of the world community to redress acute cases of nuclear proliferation like Iran, North Korea, and Syria. But perhaps the greatest worry Israel harbors is that further diminishing the global role for nuclear deterrence will actually abet aggression and an expensive and destabilizing arms race, unleashing wars rather than the other way around. Nuclear weapons have many profound vices, but deeply ingrained in their very nature has been the virtue to breed exceptional caution in handling or confronting them for fear of bringing about catastrophic consequences. Conventional weapons evidently lack such a compelling logic.

Israel is not alone in fearing the consequences of foregoing or further circumscribing its nuclear option in the context of a universal process of giving up entirely on nuclear weapons or otherwise diminishing their role and visibility. These concerns pertain even if the process could miraculously be done comprehensibly and reliably. They center on the assessment that such a process will not reduce the security anxiety that has led to their acquisition (or to seeking their umbrella by ones' allies) in the first place, and in fact might even heighten it.

It may bring the world back to the business of calculating conventional military balances, a notoriously unreliable and risky business. It could unleash new security anxieties that in turn might generate a highly expensive conventional arms race, one that Israel could ill afford if it wishes to remain a prosperous and appealing society. Worse still, it might diminish the barriers to

military confrontations, as well as to dangerous escalations in wars when they occur, now that their consequences could no longer be guaranteed to be horrific and the price of miscalculation unpalatable but nonetheless tolerable. And in the process, it might further diminish the public confidence in the continued viability of Israel in the face of the threats it faces, first and foremost among Israel's own population, but no less significantly with the Jewish Diaspora for whom Israel has always projected itself to be a secure home.

Theoretically, the prospect of reliably and irrevocably ridding the region—and world—of nuclear weapons could still have some appeal for Israel that might offset some of the above concerns by virtue of its conventional military superiority over its neighbors. But once again this benefit might seem doubtful to Israel. This is mainly due to the high likelihood that the process of nuclear abolition will also whet the appetite of the less formidable military powers to simultaneously curtail other military capabilities of an asymmetric type or those best embodying the qualitative edge of these (former) nuclear powers.

Suspicion already abounds in the international community that the mighty powers are supporting Global Zero only in order to deprive or deny their otherwise asymmetric adversaries the unmatched nuclear equalizers they already possess (North Korea), are acquiring (Iran), or might elect to pursue. These have already set off the prospects that the nuclear disarmament process will only prove politically viable if accompanied by a parallel process that checks the existing advanced conventional and space assets and the research, development, and industrial base to develop and acquire them. For Israel, this is hardly a theoretical fear, given that in the 1990s Egypt eagerly pressed for such restrictions to accompany a proposed regional nuclear-weapons-free zone in the context of the ACRS Working Group of the Madrid peace process. It is rather difficult to envisage at this time what it would take to dissuade those, such as Brazil, Egypt, and South Africa, who are already flagging these linkages or harboring these intentions, from pressing ahead.

This situation also breeds an intense preoccupation with the reliability of extended deterrence in a post-nuclear world since renouncing one's nuclear option deprives its possessor of the ultimate indigenous guarantees for its security. Yet, this very process of disarmament also inevitably casts doubt on the ability to substitute one's indigenous nuclear option for external security guarantees, because heading for Global Zero ends up also depriving the external guarantor of the most compelling instrument for reassuring allies and deterring potential aggressors. Moreover, the guarantor must now assume that the prospects for confrontation in which he would be expected to intervene would be significantly higher, and would have to find ways to convince his allies that resources for backing up such security guarantees not only exist but that the will to use them remains unshakable.

Israel's Vision of Realistic Idealism

The vision of global and complete disarmament, and its context of nuclear disarmament long anchored in Jewish and Israeli thought, continues to have traction in modern day Israel, no matter how utopian it may sound. But for now, it sees the Prague vision as viable solely if translated into an operational agenda to pursue the political accommodation, nonproliferation measures, and even nuclear arms control arrangements as interim steps and necessary precursors to the ultimate goal of serious disarmament. Under the current circumstances—when this is not certain to be the case—Israel's approach toward a nuclear-weapons-free world is bound to remain fully sympathetic to the vision, agnostic about its prospects, and hard-nosed realist about the process leading to its realization.

Notes

1. Micah 4, pp. 3–4.
2. See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/.
3. See Shimon Peres, “A Farewell to Chemical Arms” (speech, Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention Treaty, Paris, January 13, 1993), <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Archive/speeches/FM%20PERES-%20A%20FAREWELL%20TO%20CHEMICAL%20ARMS%20-%202013-Jan-93> and Eytan Bentsur, “Israel's Approach to Regional Security, Arms Control and Disarmament” (Speech, Conference of Disarmament, Geneva, September 4, 1997), http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1990_1999/1997/9/Israel-s+Approach+to+Regional+Security+-+Arms+contr.htm.