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# Israel, Nuclear Emerging Regional

# Weapons and Nuclear Dynamics



Israel is supposed to possess plutonium-based nuclear weapons. Dimona nuclear reactor was the key facility in nuclear weapons development of Israel. This plant was camouflaged as a 'textile plant'. This reactor, turned critical in 1963. Initially, its capacity was to produce fissile materials for merely one and a half bomb. Israel developed nuclear weapons by 1967. However, by 1970s, apparently, its capacity was increased to produce three bombs a year. Currently, Israel is believed to have more than 200 nuclear weapons. The 1969 Golda Meir-Richard Nixon understanding / agreement apparently led to the current Israeli nuclear posture. Under this arrangement the US would not put pressure on Israel to renounce nuclear weapons and Israel would not openly admit its existence. Israel would also not test any nuclear device and use the device for 'diplomatic' gains. The idea, it seems, was to ensure the survival of Israel and prevent nuclear arms race in the region. Quite obviously, if the WMD Zone does not materialise, the NPT will be further plunged into crisis. Countries like Egypt, Turkey and Iran would be more vocal than before. However, it will be too early to state that NPT 2015 Review Conference will meet the fate of 2005 Review Conference.

In the contemporary world, Israel is one of the three countries which never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). India and Pakistan are the other two countries, which stayed away from the NPT. Now, North Korea is also outside the treaty, but it first joined and later withdrew from it. In 1998, India and Pakistan declared themselves nuclear weapons countries and later, in 2006, North Korea also announced the nuclear test. However, Israel is acknowledged to have gone nuclear much before the three countries.

First question comes: What is the status of Israel in terms of nuclear weapons? As it is not a member of the NPT, it may claim to be outside the NPT divide created by cut-off date - January 1, 1967. Yet, unlike India, Pakistan and North Korea, it did not announce or publicly acknowledge its nuclear arsenals. Israel was the original proponent of the idea

of the bomb-in-the basement or near nuclear status. It created a deliberate ambiguity about its nuclear weapons status. One of the senior Israeli leaders once stated in its Knesset: "I know that this suspicion is a deterrent force. Why, then, should we allay these suspicions, why should we enlighten them?" The leader was basically referring to Arabs.

However, for decades, since the Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Israeli leaders have been making the very interesting statement: 'Israel will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East.' The current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, too has made this statement on different occasions. Once one leader commented: 'Israel will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East, but it would not be the second either.'

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In fact, the Israeli quest for nuclear weapons began with the advent of the nuclear weapons age. The end of the World War-II was also

a new beginning for the Jewish state. Its political and scientific leadership believed that nuclear weapons would prevent another gas chamber. They felt that Jews armed with nuclear weapons would no longer be available for slaughtering. Now, quietly and informally Israel informs that deterrence of lesser but still critical threats such as massive destruction of Israeli cities is the rationale for its nuclear weapons. On a number of occasions, nuclear weapon as a weapon of last resort was discussed. The last resort was referred to the situation to ensure survival of the Israeli state.

Technical, institutional and materials requirements for assembling the bomb took some time.

Israel had its own share of frustration over the indigenous development of its nuclear infrastructure and in the search of natural uranium. Initially, Israel was helped by France which apparently shared the same goal of pursuing the foreign policy autonomy. However, there are reports which inform the clandestine acquisition of nuclear materials from the US and some level of collaboration with South Africa. Many believe that the famous 1979 flash detected by the satellite was basically the joint nuclear test of South Africa and Israel. Of course, these facts are contested.

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reactor was the key facility in nuclear weapons development of Israel. This plant was camouflaged as a 'textile plant'. This reactor, it seems, turned critical in 1963. Initially, its capacity was to produce fissile materials for merely one and a half bomb. Israel developed nuclear weapons by 1967. However, by 1970s, apparently, its capacity was increased to produce three bombs a year. Currently, Israel is believed to have more than 200 nuclear weapons.

**The NPT may go through a different kind of crisis if Iran refuses to withdraw from the treaty and remains inside. This situation may seriously invite military strike on Iran. At the same time, in this situation, Iran may knowingly and willingly possess an illegal stockpile, but could put pressure on the NPT member states to resolve some of the pending issues**

The general understanding is that the US maintained a neutral position. It neither overtly or very actively supported the Israeli nuclear weapons nor opposed it as it does to other countries. The declassification of American archives and related writings informed the world a great deal on Israel's nuclear weapons making and the US policy posture. The WikiLeaks cables recorded the Israeli continuous acquisition of nuclear weapons related items from the US entities.

The widely believed 1969 Golda Meir-Richard Nixon understanding / agreement apparently led to the current Israeli nuclear posture which has been accepted and supported by the US. Under this arrangement the US would not put pressure on Israel to renounce nuclear weapons and Israel would not openly admit its existence. Israel would also not test any nuclear device and use the device for 'diplomatic' gains. The idea, it seems, was to ensure the survival of Israel and prevent nuclear arms race in the region.

### Israel and WMDs

This leads to the question: was the situation acceptable to its neighbours - Arabs and non-Arabs in West

Asia and North Africa? True, the region did not immediately witness any nuclear weapons race in the region. However, it is equally true that Israel's Muslim neighbouring countries did not keep quiet. There was no nuclear peace either in the region. Some of them continued to explore developing non-conventional weapons. Iraq developed chemical weapons and was on the way to become a nuclear weapons state. However, UN sanctions seemingly aborted the Iraqi programme. The Iraqi Scud attack on Israel is also seen as a failure of Israeli nuclear deterrence. An adversary could not be deterred by the unannounced but widely acknowledged nuclear weapons of Israel.

Iraq was not the only country in the region that tried to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Several of them adopted highly complex methods to acquire nuclear and other WMDs. Syria, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and so on were or are still believed to possess either WMDs or capabilities to produce them. Iran, Turkey and to an extent Saudi Arabia are currently being perceived moving towards nuclearisation of the region. Libya renounced its nuclear weapons a few years ago. Israel strongly reacts against even the very suspicion of its neighbours going nuclear. Israel had attacked nuclear facilities of Iraq earlier and of Syria recently. In recent months, news reports about attacking Iranian nuclear facilities have flooded global media. Already, Iran is accusing Israel of killing its scientists and releasing computer virus to destroy or disrupt Iranian nuclear activities.

One question keeps coming: Is Israeli nuclear weapon solely responsible for WMD arms build-up in the region? Most likely, Israel will not be the sole reason responsible for the arms build-up; the complex struggle for supremacy among Muslim countries fuels the arms build-up as well. A Shia-Sunni struggle inside the region is generally underplayed. In the same way, the clash of Arab and non-Arab identities is also a force to reckon with in the region. Israel has often emerged as the camouflage for militarisation of all kinds by the countries of the region.

The WMD Free Middle East is being discussed at the moment. Actually, in 1995, when the NPT got an indefinite extension, one of the instruments used to get the extension was the resolution on the establishment of the Middle East WMD Zone. However, like Article 6 of the Treaty, it remained basically unimplemented. In 2010 NPT Review Conference the state parties once again passed resolution to implement Middle East WMD Free Zone. Finland has become the host country and its official, Jaakko Laajava, as the facilitator. Before the selection of a host country and a facilitator had become major issues. The political unrest in the region was yet another problem to organise the meeting by 2012.

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Israel's approach to 2010 NPT proposal for WMD Free Zone is vacillating from anger to skepticism. Israel reacted angrily to the mention of Israel joining the treaty after abandoning its nuclear weapons in the summit document. It asked its member countries to comply the obligations of the treaty. However, later, it sent reconciliatory signals. After the Iranian episode, it is again showing skepticism about the WMD Free Zone. It wants to participate in the WMD Free Zone only when it is assured of comprehensive peace. However, even the US fears that the forum may turn into an Israel-bashing platform.

### Non-proliferation regime

Quite obviously, if the WMD Free Zone does not materialise, the NPT will be further plunged into crisis. Countries like Egypt, Turkey and Iran would be more



vocal than before. However, it will be too early to state that NPT 2015 Review Conference will meet the fate of 2005 Review Conference. The crisis may give immediate legitimacy to weaponisation of Iran. The enrichment level of Iran may increase towards weaponisation which will challenge the NPT.

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The real crisis for the NPT will come when Iran tests nuclear weapons and declares itself a nuclear weapon state. The conventional expectation is that after or just before declaring itself a nuclear weapon country Iran may come out of the treaty by invoking the Article 10 of the treaty which is for withdrawal. If it happens, it will join North Korea. The treaty may witness somewhat difficult days afterwards as it may open the Pandora's box. A few more members of the NPT may aspire to go nuclear and these countries may also give notice for withdrawal from the treaty.

The NPT may go through a different kind of crisis if Iran refuses to withdraw from the treaty and remains inside. This situation may seriously invite military strike on Iran. At the same time, in this situation, Iran may knowingly and willingly possess an illegal stockpile, but could put pressure on the NPT member states to resolve some of the pending issues. The process of disarmament may start by invoking Article 6 if unbridled proliferation starts taking place. The P-5 countries may apprehend a highly destabilised and volatile world with too many nuclear weapon countries. Already the world has experienced such a situation. The Chemical Weapons Convention was concluded only when too many countries were feared possessing chemical weapons in the world, especially in West Asia and North Africa. Before the US was quite resistant to the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

**What is the status of Israel in terms of nuclear weapons? As it is not a member of the NPT, it may claim to be outside the NPT divide created by cut-off date - January 1, 1967. Yet, unlike India, Pakistan and North Korea, it did not announce or publicly acknowledge its nuclear arsenals. Israel was the original proponent of the idea of the bomb-in-the-basement or near nuclear status. It created a deliberate ambiguity about its nuclear weapons status**

What is the highly likely scenario? The most likely scenario is that Iran will be put under pressure

either through the military attack or diplomacy. If the military strike is employed, quite obviously it will not be given any concession, nor will much movement on nuclear disarmament take place. Once diplomacy is used, it may be given some concessions and it would renounce its nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons will continue to exist for a few more decades even if nuclear disarmament is announced as a result of the diplomatic process.

The continued nuclearisation of Israel and other countries may have grave implications for other existing and future treaties. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty will receive a series of jolts. The Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty will take more time for negotiations and the final conclusion. The Chemical Weapons Convention has been signed but not ratified by Israel. Israel's ratification may be delayed and Egypt and Syria will refuse to sign the Convention.

The emerging tense situation will not be a healthy development for the world. Leave alone the order even security of the world may be adversely affected. The international community needs to reassure Israel about its survival and convince other countries to shed aggressive posture towards Israel. Israel should also be asked to restrain its aggressive policy. Israel, as has been rightly pointed out, is hardly an unambiguous nuclear power; it is basically an undeclared nuclear weapon country ready to exercise its Samson option. As for WMD Free Zone, it will elude the world till global nuclear disarmament is achieved. 