

The de-nuclearisation of Israel and some steps forward in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: Pugwash in the Middle East

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Nuclear weapons should no longer be considered by those who possess them as assets, but as liabilities. They certainly constitute a negative factor in the Middle East conflict. It is a public secret that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Israel decided about 1955 to start a programme of building nuclear weapons in contacts of the Israeli prime minister Ben Gurion with nuclear physicists (private information HT) – understandable because of the threat of its neighbours (see also the books by Seymour Hersch [1] and Avner Cohen [2]). A long time the development, production, and storage of Israeli nuclear weapons in Dimona (near Beerseva) was a so-called ‘secret’ (a ‘public secret’) and its official negation was an obvious lie. Israel has not become a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In contrast, Iran does not possess nuclear weapons, according to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and ratified the NPT in 1970. Still, there is significant worry within the international community that the civilian nuclear fuel cycle that Iran is currently erecting may be diverted into military programmes. The fact that Israel has such weapons may indeed induce in other countries in the region a desire to acquire nuclear weapons too. Therefore the time now really has come to seriously start working on a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East [3].

We should implement all possible means to de-escalate the risk of a ‘clash of civilisations’. It would be better to have a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East, if not only for decreasing the risk that terrorist groups obtain nuclear weapons or the capability to produce them. There are many reasons that make a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East desirable. Particularly at this moment in time it could catalyse the peace process instead of waiting for the peace process to achieve results first. Israel should take the lead, is our claim. If Israel would decide to de-nuclearise, this would provide a great impetus to the Middle East peace process. Since the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East is part of a wider political setting, we also offer a few ideas for the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. Finally, some remarks are made about the Israel–Lebanon conflict and about the role of Pugwash in the Middle East in general.

The responsibility for Israel to de-nuclearise

Just before the NPT regime came into being in 1970, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and US President Richard Nixon reached an agreement in September 1969 that Israel would not declare its nuclear status, would not test its weapons, and would not use its nuclear capability for diplomatic gains. In return, the US stopped pushing Israel to give up its nuclear weapon, which it had developed with the help of French engineers in the 1950s and 1960s [2]. Thus Israel could continue its doctrine of 'nuclear opacity', defined by Cohen as 'a situation in which a state's nuclear capability has not been acknowledged, but is recognized in a way that influences other nations' perceptions and actions' [2, p. 2].

By keeping a low profile, Israel managed to keep the Arab countries at bay. It was believed that if the Arabs became convinced that Israel was developing nuclear weapons, they would launch a pre-emptive attack on its nuclear installations at Dimona [2, p. 5]. It was only in recent years, since the first Gulf War, that the Arabs 'have stopped playing their roles in the game of opacity' [2, p. 346]. For instance, Egypt now publicly considers Israel a nuclear-weapon state and has given new life to the discussions on a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Egypt has insisted that 'tangible progress in the nuclear discussions be achieved in parallel to progress in the peace negotiations' [2, p. 346]. Currently, it seems, however, that 'Israeli leaders consider nuclear weapons indispensable to Israeli security and to the architecture of peace' [2, p. 346].

The fact that there is censorship on these issues within Israel does not make it possible for Israelis to reach democratic decisions on the issue of nuclear weapons. In the current situation, the Israeli leaders should come to realise that nuclear weapons do not deter the groups that threaten their country. Nuclear weapons are not even of practical military use for Israel.

But how should the de-nuclearisation of Israel start? A first step could be to bring Israel, Pakistan and India (and possibly North Korea) into the international non-proliferation regime by way of a 'form of associate membership under a separate, free-standing agreement or protocol' [4, p. 44]. This would be a way of acknowledging the current nuclear status without amending the NPT itself, which is considered to be politically impossible. And this would make it possible for Israel to de-nuclearise *under international control*. We thus envisage that Israel's formal status as a nuclear-weapon state would be temporary until a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone becomes effective in the Middle East. These thoughts are offered here as a mere suggestion. Much work needs to be invested before such a scenario might become reality.

The larger context: some ideas for the Israeli–Palestinian–Lebanon peace process

The creation of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East should be considered as a part of a larger peace process. Of pivotal importance is a reconciliation between Israelis and the Palestinians, including Hamas, as well as between Israelis and Lebanese. Although we do not attempt to extensively analyse the situation in Lebanon, we would like to cite some passages from a letter by Professor Muhsin Harakeh, director of the Netherlands Nuclear Physics Accelerator Institute (KVI) in Groningen, who was born in Lebanon (Beirut). In his letter to one of us (HT), he writes:

This aggression of Israel on Lebanon had made the chances for peace in the Middle East again smaller. However, it is not only Israel which should be blamed. The

American Administration has more blood on their hands. They could have stopped the hostilities immediately, but they have chosen to provide Israel with heavier bombs, thinking that they could administer a deadly blow to Hezbollah in this way. This has not succeeded, the opposite has happened: Hezbollah has become stronger and obtains more support than before this war. . . .

The damage which was caused to the infrastructure in Lebanon is enormous, but I find much worse the large number of innocent victims (mostly children and elderly people) who were killed as a consequence of the bombardments on civil targets. The use of 'cluster bombs' by Israel still causes victims every day, and again mostly children because they cannot realise that these bombs are so dangerous.

It is heartbreaking to have watched how in the summer of 2006 the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon escalated to a humanly unacceptable level. It was right for Pugwash to protest. The Pugwash Council statement of 21 July 2006 called on all parties to arrive at a ceasefire. The Cairo Conference in November 2006 provided an opportunity to jointly define further actions that Pugwash should take vis-à-vis the problematique in the Middle East.

The violent conflict since 1948 between the Jews in Israel and the Palestinians is a shame for both the Jews in Israel as well as for their semitic brothers, the Palestinians. Both parties should strive for shalom=salam (peace). The recent escalations of the conflict are most regrettable causes of much misery for the affected populations. An analogous statement should be made about the conflict in Lebanon.

The United Nations, its Security Council and the highest authorities in the political and religious world should make an unprecedented effort to avoid further escalation of both these conflicts. A possibility would be the creation of a UN organisation for peace in Israel–Palestine. We advocate that those Pugwashites who are most competent in these matters participate in this effort. We think also that the top figures of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions should participate as well as Nobel Peace prize winners. The aim should be a two-state solution: Israel and a state for the Palestinians, with democratic parliaments, full memberships of the UN, and well-defined frontiers. The only exception might be Jerusalem; this city (with part of its surroundings) might become an international Peace region not belonging to either state.

In order to reach this goal and have permanent peace in the Middle East one should accomplish the enormously difficult process of reconciliation between Jews, Palestinians and Lebanese. This might be started by the proposed Pugwash–UN efforts. Possibilities to promote this process could consist, e.g., in mixed (Jewish–Palestinian) organisations to further this crucial goal. One might think of town-relationships between Jewish and Palestinian towns, etc. Most important would be mixed organisations for the problems of water and energy (oil, solar energy, etc.) in the Middle East.

Notes

1. Seymour M. Hersch, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy*, Random House, New York, 1991.
2. Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

3. Cf. the work on 'Nuclear Free Zones in Europe' carried out in Pugwash from 1960 onwards under the guidance of K.D. Lapter (Poland) and H.A. Tolhoek (Netherlands), the results of which were presented at Annual Pugwash Conferences in the mid-1960s. See also Arthur Petersen, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the Middle East and the Establishment of a WMD-Free Zone, Report on Working Group 2, 56th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs, 'A Region in Transition: Peace and Reform in the Middle East', Cairo, Egypt, 11-15 November 2006.
 4. Avner Cohen and Thomas Graham, Jr., An NPT for non-members, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 60 (3) (May/June 2004) 40-44.
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