

President Mubarak's Visit and the Middle East Nuclear Debate

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Brief Analysis

As Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak opens his talks in Washington, his government's approach to the extension of the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) is likely to be high on the agenda. Egypt's position is that it will not support the NPT's indefinite extension if Israel does not sign the treaty. During the past few weeks, however, U.S. diplomacy has scored considerable success in toning down the Middle East nuclear debate and its potential effects on the NPT's renewal.

Egypt, the U.S. and NPT Renewal

In mid-April, the month-long NPT review conference is scheduled to meet in New York, to decide whether the 25-year old treaty would be extended indefinitely or for "a fixed period or periods." The Clinton administration launched a major effort to obtain the NPT's indefinite extension, calling this a high foreign policy priority. In order to obtain this goal, at least 87 countries must vote in favor of indefinite extension.

By late 1994, Egypt announced that it would not support the NPT's indefinite extension if Israel does not sign the treaty. Some Egyptian statements made earlier this year were interpreted to imply that if Israel would continue to avoid NPT membership, Egypt might withdraw from the treaty. Other Egyptian statements, however, indicated that Cairo would settle for an Israeli "statement of intent," provided that it contain a commitment to sign the NPT within a specific and reasonable timetable. Meanwhile, Israeli leaders have made it clear that as long as their country continues to face potentially existential security threats from "rogue" states like Iran and Iraq, it would adhere to its policy of ambiguity -- refusing to confirm or deny its nuclear potential -- and will not sign the NPT.

This presented U.S. policy with a number of challenges: first, the danger that Egypt's decision to withhold its support would diminish the odds of obtaining the absolute majority needed for the treaty's extension. Second, that Egypt would mobilize the 22 members of the Arab League to reject the NPT's indefinite extension, as it did in 1992 when it orchestrated a League refusal to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) as long as Israel does not sign the NPT. Third, the possibility that if a majority of states support the treaty's indefinite extension despite Egypt's negative vote, Cairo would then suspend its membership or withdraw from the NPT altogether.

Addressing these challenges, the U.S. launched a three-way effort to assure support for the NPT's indefinite extension among as many Arab League members as possible. First, it exerted pressure on Egypt to avoid mobilizing the entire Arab world to support its position and to refrain from withdrawing from the NPT if a majority of the treaty's signatories support its extension. Second, Washington made considerable efforts to persuade its Arab allies -- primarily Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states -- to refrain from joining an Egyptian-led campaign. Finally, senior U.S. government officials urged Israel to produce a "statement of intent" that might satisfy Egypt at least partially, hoping that this might make America's first two efforts more likely to succeed.

Implementing these efforts involved an extensive U.S.-Egyptian dialogue, conducted partly during the visit of Egypt's Foreign Minister Amre Moussa to Washington in mid-February, and in large part in talks held in Cairo over the past

two months by senior U.S. officials, including Secretary of Defense William Perry and Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and culminating with Vice President Al Gore's visit to Egypt two weeks ago. Perry, Christopher and Gore also visited Israel and suggested that it make some statement of intent, without eroding its nuclear ambiguity. Indeed, U.S. officials continued to make clear that while Washington's goal is universal adherence to the NPT, it understands that conditions in the Middle East do not permit Israel to join the Treaty at this time. Thus, Vice President Gore stated bluntly that the U.S. does "not believe that [the NPT's] extension should be linked to whether other countries join the treaty or to a specific time-frame for achieving our broadly supported non-proliferation goals in the Middle East."

Prelude to Mubarak's Visit

Following complex internal deliberations, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres presented Egypt with a proposed 'statement of intent,' reportedly committing Israel to enter discussions on the possible transformation of the Middle East into a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) some two years after comprehensive Middle East peace is achieved, including peace with Iraq and Iran. Israel was also said to have promised that once such a zone is created, it would consider joining all global arms control instruments, including the NPT.

Following Peres' trip to Cairo, Egypt submitted a counter-proposal that included a requirement for the immediate launching of discussions between Israel and the Arab states on the weapons of mass-destruction free-zone proposal, to be held in the framework of the Multilateral Talks on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS). Early last week, Israeli deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin held talks in Cairo on the new Egyptian demands. It became clear, however, that Israel had not yet formulated its response to these Egyptian ideas.

Concurrently, the Arab League foreign ministers met in Cairo ten days ago to determine the Arab states' position on the NPT's extension. Instead, the foreign ministers decided not to adopt a unified League position on the matter, thus releasing various the members of the League to decide independently whether they would support the treaty's extension. While Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya are likely to vote against the NPT's indefinite extension next month, the League's decision would permit most Arab states to side with Washington on this matter.

Also, Cairo seems to have withdrawn its implied threat to withdraw from the NPT if Israeli concessions do not meet its minimal requirements and a majority of NPT signatories nevertheless approve the treaty's indefinite extension. Yet Egypt may well attach conditions to its continued membership in the NPT, and this may be part of Mubarak's agenda in Washington.

Finally, U.S. encouragement appears to have persuaded Cairo to tone down its public debate with Israel by using less inflammatory language as well as by shifting emphasis from public statements to quiet dialogue. Even more important, a possible spill-over from this debate to other facets of the Arab-Israeli peace process has been averted, at least temporarily. Hence, while the nuclear issue remains high on the U.S.-Egyptian agenda, President Mubarak's visit takes place after considerable efforts were made to lower the tone of the Middle East nuclear debate and to remove it as a thorn in the U.S.-Egyptian relationship.

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