Nuclear Politics in the Middle East

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Mar 23, 1995

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Brief Analysis

On Thursday, March 23, 1995, Institute Senior Fellow Michael Eisenstadt and Visiting Fellow Shai Feldman delivered Policy Forum presentations on developments in nuclear proliferation and nuclear arms control efforts in the Middle East. The following is a rapporteur's report of their comments.

Michael Eisenstadt

Nuclear arms control is likely to remain a front burner issue in the Middle East even after next month's Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conference in New York. Egypt, for example, has raised nuclear arms control to a high priority for a number of important political and strategic reasons, including its search for a role in the new regional order created by the Arab-Israeli peace process. Thus, Egypt's motives for focusing on nuclear issues will remain even after the NPT conference.

On a wider scale, if Arab efforts to dismantle Israel's nuclear arsenal or international efforts to thwart Iraq or Iran from acquiring nuclear technology do not meet with at least some visible success, Arab states which until now have not seriously pursued a nuclear option -- e.g., Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia -- might decide to go down this path. The decision "to go nuclear" is primarily political; finances are not a major constraint, nor is know-how. The main technical constraint is acquiring fissile material (enriched uranium or plutonium), and this is likely to become easier in the coming years, with the growth of world stocks of fissile material from dismantled nuclear warheads and reprocessed spent fuel from nuclear power plants.

While momentum for nuclear arms control in the Middle East has grown, the incentive to "go nuclear" may have actually increased. First, countries that believe they are threatened by the United States (e.g., Libya, Iraq, Iran) might see a nuclear capability as the only way to deter U.S. actions in the future, since the U.S. was not deterred by Iraq's chemical or biological weapons during the Gulf War. Second, the high cost of conventional arms and problems of maintaining effective conventional forces may lead countries like Iraq and Iran to go nuclear. Both will need to spend tens of billions of dollars to rebuild their armed forces; even then, they cannot compete militarily with the U.S. However, for the price of one or two squadrons of modern combat aircraft ($1 billion-$2 billion), they could acquire a nuclear capability. Third, beleaguered and isolated countries might see acquisition of a nuclear capability as the only way to improve their bargaining position vis-a-vis the U.S. and the international community (as in the North Korean case). Fourth, countries that rely on U.S. security guarantees (Saudi and the Gulf states) may believe that because of

U.S. military downsizing and growing isolationism, nuclear weapons may become an increasingly desirable alternative to potentially uncertain U.S. security guarantees. And finally, increased opportunities for obtaining nuclear weapons -- due to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the growing glut of fissile material -- may in itself create incentives for nuclear proliferation.

Until now, every nuclear program has started with research reactors, which provided a pool of qualified manpower, the foundation for a clandestine weapons R&D and development infrastructure, and in many cases, fissile material. Thus, the acquisition of reactors and an overt nuclear infrastructure were primary indicators of potential nuclear intent. This may no longer be the case. The potential availability of fissile material on an international black market raises the possibility that the only infrastructure required by future nuclear aspirants will be a weaponization capability. The infrastructure and manpower base required for weaponization is quite limited, and much more difficult to detect than the infrastructure required to produce fissile material (this is true for both the plutonium or enriched uranium route to the bomb). Consequently, indicators of nuclear intent will be increasingly difficult to discern in the future. This will pose significant challenges for the intelligence community. Accordingly, collateral indicators -- such as the acquisition of strategic delivery systems (e.g., cruise or ballistic missiles) -- may be the main discernable indicators of nuclear intent in the future.

Finally, because of the heightened threat of nuclear proliferation, a growing number of countries in the region are likely to create a cadre of nuclear experts to study the potential policy, security, and operational implications of nuclear proliferation and to assess intelligence concerning programs in potentially hostile neighboring states. This could create a nucleus of nuclear expertise that could eventually provide the foundation for new nuclear programs in the region.

Shai Feldman

A serious debate has developed between Egypt and Israel on the question of NPT extension. At issue has been Egypt's insistence that it would not support the treaty's indefinite extension if Israel does not sign the NPT. While Egypt has taken the lead on this issue, the Arab states differ considerably in the importance that they attach to the subject relative to their other national priorities.

While political factors account for Egypt's decision to raise this issue now, it is important to note Cairo's serious concerns with respect to Israel's nuclear option. From Egypt's perspective, these include: the perception that Egypt and other Arab states are exposed to nuclear catastrophe; a fear that Israel might exploit its superior nuclear standing to impose its will on the Arab states; a concern that the size of Israel's perceived nuclear arsenal indicates a willingness to use battlefield nuclear weapons; a fear that Israel's nuclear option might be treated carelessly if it fell into the hands of "a less rational Israeli government"; and finally, a view that Israel's nuclear efforts are humiliating because the Arab states are incapable of matching Israeli achievements and because Western countries seem to tolerate Israel's nuclear option while placing every possible barrier to Arab efforts in this realm. For all these reasons, Egypt is likely to continue to push the nuclear issue to the top of the Israeli-Arab agenda.

On its part, Israel's ambiguous nuclear policy is embedded in a number of different contexts: a strategic objective to create uncertainty in the mind of Arab leaders as to whether they can hope to destroy Israel without risking their own demise; a preference to avoid encouraging Israel's neighbors to acquire nuclear weapons; and a desire to avoid confrontation with global and U.S. non-proliferation objectives, norms, and legislation. Also, there is a possibility that a policy of ambiguity was adopted as a compromise brokered in the late 1950s by Prime Minister Ben Gurion between those at the top of Israel's defense establishment who advocated nuclear deterrence and those who believed that deterrence cannot work under conditions prevailing in the Middle East and that, therefore, investments should instead be made in enhancing Israel's conventional forces.

Thus, just as Arab concerns about Israel's perceived nuclear option are considerable, Israel's nuclear policy seems equally ingrained in its national security concept. Whether Cairo and Jerusalem can bridge the gap between their respective approaches in the coming months and years is an open question. ❖

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