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Israel's Imperative

From the Israeli perspective, the U.S. deployment of an NMD contains several strategic and technological benefits and a number of secondary drawbacks. Having just begun the deployment of its own national antiballistic-missile (ABM) defense system, the Arrow II, Israel cannot but welcome the NMD. To be sure, there is a fundamental difference between the two defensive systems. The U.S. NMD is designed to meet a limited tactical threat: for instance, an attack on a small number of U.S. cities by "rogue states" such as Iraq and Iran. Nonetheless, the strategic threat to the national security of the United States continues to be posed not by the rogue states, but by the great nuclear powers, notably Russia and China, and requires a wholly different range of military, technological, and political measures. By contrast, given Israel's minute size (approximately the size of New Jersey), the nonconventional threat posed by these very rogue states is of the highest strategic order, indeed, a matter of national existence. Given the concentration of Israel's social, industrial, technological, and economic heartland in the tiny triangle of some 30 kilometers long by 10 kilometers wide which comprises metropolitan Tel Aviv, the Jewish state is fatally vulnerable to a nonconventional, and particularly a nuclear, strike.

It is precisely these narrowest of security margins that makes the potential benefits of the NMD so appealing to Israel, regardless of the fundamentally different circumstances for the two countries. To start, there are the technological spinoffs, to be gained through acquisition or cooperation, that could help improve Israel's Arrow II defense system (e.g., upgrading of early

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warning satellite systems, computer software to deal with the most modern missiles, and so on). The Arrow II is the only operational ABM national defense system with a capacity to destroy warheads in the stratosphere. It has effectively been a joint U.S.-Israeli program, with the United States footing a substantial part of the $1.2 billion bill to date and Israel doing the lion's share of the research, thus serving as a backdoor platform for the testing of new technologies, weapons systems, and strategic concepts that could benefit the U.S. research and development program in general and the NMD program in particular. Once the U.S. NMD is launched, this symbiosis would be reversed, and Israel would become the beneficiary of a far more encompassing development effort than before.

Mutual gains would not be limited to the technological sphere. The political and strategic implications for the United States of the ups and downs of the Arrow II program have not been lost on NMD supporters or critics. Once the NMD is up and running, Israeli policymakers can be expected to exploit its operational success as a means to curb domestic skepticism regarding the Arrow's value and to curb opposition in the United States to further appropriations for Israel's strategic defense.

The importance to Israel of such technological and political benefits cannot be overstated, given the horrendous destruction that could be inflicted on the Jewish state by the strike of a single nuclear missile and the attendant operational requirements of its ABM defense system. Hence, it is of critical importance to Tel Aviv that all internationally available technological, doctrinal, and political resources be pulled together to readily give Israel a measure of added security.

Indeed, a major concern among many analysts over the past few years has been that the spread of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in the Middle East has not been accompanied by either practical steps or rigorous conceptual theories to prevent, or at least limit, the use of these terminally destructive weapons. Concern has been further compounded by the speed at which proliferation has taken place. This has meant that concepts of deterrence and strategies of restraint have failed to become firmly embedded in national decision making, injecting an added level of insecurity into the process. The extremist qualities of the policy aims of various regional protagonists mean that scenarios could well arise in which weapons of mass destruction are used in desperate situations.

This is what makes the NMD's strategic rationale so important for Israel, and indeed for the international community at large. Until the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990, the Western powers had been largely oblivious to the concept of "rogue states" or their increasing nonconventional threat to international security. The few warnings in this regard were cava-

lierly swept under the carpet as European (and, to a lesser extent, U.S.) companies lined up to sell Saddam Hussein the latest and deadliest technological know-how and materiel.

This fecklessness, seen all too clearly in the Bush administration's opposition to the Senate's attempts to enforce sanctions against Iraq just days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, is not difficult to understand. Support for Third World dictatorships has been more of a norm rather than the exception as Western countries have often subordinated their high ideals to pragmatic (if not purely venal) considerations of financial gain and political influence. The West is once again confronted with a familiar scenario: totalitarian regimes armed to their teeth with the most deadly and sophisticated weapons systems and harbouring far-reaching hegemonic designs on their neighbors. Now, however, it lacks a stable framework to structure its relations with these regimes. This combination of factors gives the rogue state a new and far more dangerous meaning than the old-fashioned style of Third World dictatorship, so instrumental in the realpolitik of the Cold War.

Sympathy for Israel's strategic predicament should be a major Israeli goal.

Some of these rogue states are well on their way to obtaining nuclear weapons, on top of their formidable chemical and biological weapons arsenals. Furthermore, their strategic rationale underpinning this nonconventional proliferation is diametrically opposed to that of the existing nuclear powers (or for that matter, Israel). The latter views nuclear weapons in purely deterrent terms, as a means of last resort; for the rogue states, by contrast, they are a perfectly usable instrument in both international hostilities and domestic strife. This is not due to these states' inherent irrationality—to the contrary! They have often acted in a perfectly rational way, albeit devoid of any moral inhibitions. Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons, as in the indiscriminate gassing of civilians in Kurdistan, was carefully calculated and took place where there was absolutely no risk of retaliation. It is precisely the ruthless rationality of these rogue states which makes their possession of nuclear weapons and ballistic capabilities all the more dangerous. In a political system where absolute leaders supersede state institutions and the notion of national interest is highly personalized; where power is concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority (e.g., the Alawites in Syria or the Sunnis in Iraq); where no orderly mechanisms for political participation or peaceful transfer of power exist; and where the goal of regime survivability supersedes everything else, physical force is the most eloquent mode of political discourse—

from civil strife, to interstate wars, to domestic repression. Should such rulers and/or regimes deem themselves to be in mortal danger, they would have no scruples about resorting to nonconventional means, including nuclear weapons, against their own population, let alone external enemies.

The more widespread the international recognition of these stark facts, the deeper the potential sympathy for Israel's strategic predicament; indeed, achieving such recognition should be a major goal of Israeli policy. A key potential benefit that may accrue to Israel from such an effort is the possible relaxation of pressures for nuclear disarmament. For quite some time, Israel's nuclear program has been singled out as the foremost catalyst of regional proliferation, a point eagerly canvassed by the Arab states. Yet the historical record shows no linkage between Israel's nuclear program and similar regional endeavors. Iran's nuclear quest, for instance, was in fact the offspring of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's imperial aspirations, and the Islamic Republic continued it after his demise as an integral part of its hegemonic worldview. Iraq's mid-1970s decision to embark on the same route came in direct response not to Israel but to the Iranian threat, and represented Saddam Hussein's stark determination to hold power whatever the cost.

Israel's Arrow II system cannot be expected to stop a nuclear missile attack on its own.

Now that the potential nuclear threat by Iraq and Iran has been recognized by the United States and other Western powers (as demonstrated *inter alia* by Britain's expressed interest in benefiting from the program[1]), the United States has little moral or strategic ground to pressure Israel into surrendering its nuclear program. For one thing, the threat to Israel by these two states is infinitely more direct and lethal than that they pose to the United States. After all, unlike Israel, the United States has never been threatened with national extinction by either Iran or Iraq; and, unlike Israel, the threat to the United States by these rogue states is tactical rather than existential.

The only conceivable drawback of the NMD from Israel's point of view revolves around the possible retreat of a more self-assured United States into isolationism, expressed among other ways in a decreasing readiness for international engagements such as support of local allies in distress or obstruction of rogue states' nuclearization.

The NMD is not likely to have a discernible effect on U.S. antiproliferation policies in the Middle East, for the simple reason that that battle has virtually been lost. Despite longstanding U.S.-Soviet unanimity on the need to control

the spread of nuclear arms, these powers have been unable to impose the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—the global nonproliferation regime agreed upon in 1969—on their Middle Eastern allies. The Middle Eastern states that joined the NPT, notably Iraq and Iran, have unscrupulously violated the treaty. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, far from stopping the Middle Eastern nonconventional arms race dead in its track, seems to have brought the region closer than ever to a nuclear threshold, not least due to the seepage of nuclear know-how and expertise, and possibly fissible materials as well, following the breakdown of central control over its nuclear arsenal.

Moreover, the unfortunate limits of verification and coercion have been vividly illustrated by the failure of the international community to dismantle Iraq's nonconventional arsenal following the 1991 Gulf War. Here was a longtime member of the NPT, which had consistently sought to develop nuclear weapons in flagrant violation of the treaty and under the very nose of the international organization that was supposed to prevent this from happening, confronted with an unprecedented international coalition made possible by a unique convergence of regional and international conditions. These conditions ranged from the brutal nature of the Iraqi regime, manifested in domestic repression and external aggression, to the astonishing occupation and elimination of Kuwait as a sovereign state, to the strategic and economic importance of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, to the momentous events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the consequent diminution of great power rivalry in the Third World. And yet, even this exceptional global cooperation, forged during the Gulf conflict of 1990-1991 and maintained—with great awkwardness and diminishing efficiency—in the wake of the war, has encountered formidable obstacles with disappointing results. Is it realistic to assume that a new international effort, operating under far less favorable circumstances, would be able to identify and monitor similar nuclear violations by members of the NPT, such as Iran?

Conclusion

The economic and political *cordon sanitaire* around Iraq has been decisively loosened to the point of total breakdown, even as the policy of "dual containment" has been effectively drained of real substance by international reluctance to participate in sanctions against Iran. This all occurs just as the attainment of nuclear weapons by these two states is in the offing. There should be no relenting in the effort to prevent this eventuality, or at least to slow it down—but it should now be apparent to all that its chances of success are meager. What is important now is to think through the strategic consequences and requirements of nuclearization. Given the regional mass

proliferation of long-range ballistic missiles, such a development would not only endanger Middle Eastern stability, but could also pose a real threat to Europe (including Russia) or even the United States.

Such dim prospects can hardly be expected to encourage the Israelis. Given Israel's two-pronged vulnerability—featuring prominently on the rogue states' "hit list" and of being an ideal nuclear target due to its minuscule size—Israel has long accompanied the development of its own ABM system with efforts to induce the U.S. administration to pressure Russia to contain the seepage of nonconventional technology and expertise to Iran. "The Americans have effectively given up the effort to obstruct the nuclear and missile capabilities of such states as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea," an unnamed senior Israeli official has recently complained. "This is best evidenced by the administration's plan to deploy a national missile defense against Third World countries."[2] This stark assessment is bound to be confirmed in Israeli perceptions by such acts as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's recent extension of an olive branch to Iran, regardless of the latter's continued quest for nuclear weapons.

The foremost line of defense should be a proactive foreign policy.

These frustrations notwithstanding, Israel is keenly aware of the formidable constraints attending U.S. pressure on Russia, not least the desire to avoid alienating the former superpower at this critical juncture of power transition in the post-Yeltsin area. Nor has Israel been oblivious of the voices in Washington advocating a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, some hypothetical advantages of which could conceivably benefit Israel as well. Given the extraordinary threat to its national existence from the Middle East's imminent nuclearization, Israel cannot but welcome NMD. It could follow the British, opting for participation in the development process, or it could seek to acquire the complete product.

There is no guarantee that nondeployment will lead to a greater U.S. effort to forestall rogue states' nuclear and missile programs or that such an effort would meet with practical success. On the other hand, NMD can potentially enhance the Arrow system through technological and scientific cooperation and support, greater financial assistance, and a more understanding approach in Washington to Israel's strategic needs, in particular the preservation of its nuclear deterrent posture—a complex, multifaceted combination of political and military efforts.

It should be clear that the NMD is not a solution in and of itself. It should not be conceived as an autarkic system but rather as a part of an integrated defensive package comprising the traditional components of

nuclear deterrence and preemption. Israel's Arrow II system cannot be expected to stop a nuclear missile attack on its own. An ABM defense system should be viewed as the nation's final, not primary, line of defense—a means of last resort when all other measures have failed. Hence, were Israel to surrender its nuclear program it would totally eviscerate its deterrent posture vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq. There would be nothing to prevent them from hurling their nuclear missiles with impunity at Israel, since it would not require more than one nuclear strike against metropolitan Tel Aviv to extinguish the Jewish state.

By contrast, the foremost line of defense should be a proactive foreign policy, whose aim is precisely to forestall the need to retreat, under duress, to a final protective line. From this point of view, the NMD, if anything, would expand the United States's room to maneuver rather than narrow it. Had Saddam Hussein been in possession of nuclear weapons at the time of his Kuwaiti misadventure, an effective NMD could have only strengthened our resolve to confront him or, better yet, dissuaded him from attacking in the first place. One can only hope that, in some similar crisis in the future, we do not have to learn this the hard way—again.

Notes

1. *Times* (London), January 31, 2000.
2. *Ha'aretz*, March 17, 2000.