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# The evolution and future of Israeli nuclear ambiguity

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**ABSTRACT**

Israel's posture of nuclear ambiguity has achieved a high level of consensus among its security elite, but are there any alternative approaches and what circumstances could facilitate change? This article argues that the longevity of ambiguity has been buttressed by three external factors that may change in the future and lead to a reassessment: the lack of another nuclear state in the region, bipartisan support in the United States, and the lack of a well-established peace in the region. To gain insight into the ideas that would inform a broader reassessment, I outline the strategic logic of three alternative approaches that have existed continuously in Israel's security discourse. Nuclear advocates seek to move toward an open posture; nuclear skeptics seek to prevent proliferation by joining international treaties; and nuclear pragmatists support maintaining ambiguity under a US umbrella. Based on interviews with former officials, primary sources of Israeli elite discourse, and a broad survey of previous research, this article provides new insights into the making of Israel's nuclear strategy by highlighting the continuity of the basic predispositions of each approach over the past 70 years, demonstrating how external factors have upheld the core elements of the policy of ambiguity while allowing room for changes on its margins, and outlining the possible future scenarios that may facilitate a more substantial policy shift.

**KEYWORDS**

Israel; nuclear policy; nuclear ambiguity; Iranian nuclear program; nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ); Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)

Israel's nuclear posture of ambiguity is a long-standing element of its security strategy that has achieved a uniquely high level of consensus and become deeply entrenched. The policy is characterized by pragmatism and restraint, and it rests on three elements. First, when Israel formulates its military strategy, the nuclear realm, for all intents and purposes, is not part of the equation. In other words, Israel's nuclear capabilities are kept as an insurance policy in the face of an existential threat and not as an explicit pillar of its military strategy. Second, although Israel admits to possessing various nuclear capabilities such as research reactors and fuel-cycle capabilities, the government does not publicly reveal or declare the precise extent of its nuclear capabilities—including whether it has ever completed weaponization. Lastly, Israel refrains from conducting a nuclear test.

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Although Israel's nuclear posture is unlikely to change in the immediate future, in the coming decades some potential developments may lead to a reassessment. This article highlights that the longevity of this posture has been buttressed by several important international factors: the lack of a nuclear-armed adversary in the region, the support of the United States for the continuation of ambiguity, and the absence of a broad and well-established regional peace. Accordingly, significant change to any of the above dimensions could prompt a reassessment.

The first and most plausible possibility is a nuclear-armed Iran. Even though Israel seeks to prevent such a scenario, Iran has already acquired all the capabilities necessary to produce nuclear weapons, and it is possible that, despite Israel's efforts, it may do so in the coming decades.

The second scenario is rooted in US–Israel relations. The lasting success of Israel's approach can be attributed in large measure to the fact that it represents a bilateral policy coordinated with the highest levels of the US government. But, while the pillars of the strategic relationship remain in place, the American bipartisan consensus on Israel shows signs of fraying.[1] Even though the mainstream of the Democratic Party still supports the status quo on issues relating to Israeli security, this stance is increasingly challenged by progressive elements within the party. The latter call for a fundamental change in relations with Israel and also are deeply committed to an agenda of global nuclear disarmament.

The third scenario is rooted in regional developments. Israel's official policy is that it cannot give serious consideration to nuclear-arms-control initiatives until a stable regional peace is established. Presently, the hostility of the Iranian regime toward Israel poses a formidable obstacle to such a state of peace. Although a counterrevolution in Iran does not seem to be likely in the immediate future, the long-term stability of the current regime is not a given either. If Iran were to undergo a fundamental change in leadership, the two countries could possibly remake their relationship. Admittedly, such a scenario is highly optimistic—but not without precedent. The prerevolutionary period demonstrates the potential for cooperative relations between Iran and Israel. In the decades preceding the 1979 revolution in Iran, Israel and the Pahlavi regime enjoyed a cooperative relationship, even an unofficial security alliance against the Arab states on Israel's borders.[2] If Tehran were amenable to building a truly normalized relationship with Israel, this could open the door to arms-control discussions. As any serious talks of this sort would require a broad regional peace between Israel and its neighbors, the 2020 Abraham Accords have removed another major obstacle to their realization.

Any one of the above possible international developments would have implications for Israel's nuclear posture and for strategic thinking in Israel. Contrary to the idea that there is a taboo on discussing nuclear matters in Israel's public sphere, Israel has witnessed over the decades several public challenges to ambiguity in the discourse among the security elite and prominent intellectuals from varying directions. To gain insight into the

[1] Amnon Cavari and Guy Freedman, *American Public Opinion toward Israel: From Consensus to Divide* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Jonathan Rynhold, *The Arab–Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[2] David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society, and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 261.

ideas that would inform a policy reassessment, this article surveys these challenges to nuclear ambiguity from the outset of Israel's nuclear program until today.

Three basic approaches can be identified in the discussion of Israel's nuclear policy from the country's founding decades to the present day. What I term the approach of *nuclear pragmatism* has been the basis of the long-standing policy of ambiguity. However, nuclear pragmatism and the resulting policy of strategic ambiguity have been challenged from one side by what I term *nuclear advocacy*, a stance that is disposed toward a move to an openly declared nuclear posture, and from the other side by what I call *nuclear skepticism*, a stance that is disposed toward the establishment of a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ). However, despite the persistence of these alternative approaches, the presence of strong international pressures reinforcing ambiguity has meant that the influence of these approaches on actual policy has been marginal. Still, an appreciation of the dynamics of these debates provides insight as to what alternative ideas may be put forth when external factors change.

Furthermore, although the core of ambiguity has remained untouched for five decades now, there have been changes to secondary elements of the policy. Understanding this slow evolution in the diplomatic and physical contours of the posture is also crucial to any attempt to look forward.

Most previous research on the debates surrounding Israel's nuclear program has focused on the formative period in the 1950s and 1960s.[3] This article provides a broad survey of previous research and then, based on interviews with former officials and primary sources of Israeli elite discourse, builds on and expands this literature in two ways. First, it breaks new ground by extending the chronology of the debates up to the present while showing the continuity of the basic predispositions and strategic logic that underpin the different arguments. Second, taking a broad view of the past 70 years, the article highlights how external factors have upheld the core elements of the policy of ambiguity but also have allowed room for changes at the margins. This broad view also brings into focus the considerations that will inevitably inform the debate in Israel in the years ahead. I proceed chronologically, breaking Israel's nuclear era into three periods: 1950–69, 1970–90, and 1991 to the present. For each period, I identify the external material factors that have buttressed ambiguity, discuss any shifts that have occurred on the margins of this policy, and survey the various strategic arguments that were made in government and then in the broader discourse of security and intellectual elites. Finally, I revisit the three future scenarios mentioned above and apply the insights gained from the historical survey to assess how they may facilitate a more substantial shift in Israel's nuclear posture.

[3] For background on Israel's nuclear program and accounts of the internal debates of the first decades, see Shlomo Aronson, *The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: Opacity, Theory, and Reality, 1960–1991, An Israeli Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992); Uri Bar-Joseph, "The Hidden Debate: The Formation of Nuclear Doctrines in the Middle East," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1982), pp. 205–27; Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Yair Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma* (London: Routledge, 1994); Lawrence Freedman, "Israel's Nuclear Policy," *Survival*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1975), pp. 114–20; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel, America and the Bomb* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991); Peter Pry, *Israel's Nuclear Arsenal* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Adam Raz, *The Iron Fist Regime* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2015); Zaki Shalom, *Israel's Nuclear Option: Behind the Scenes Diplomacy between Dimona and Washington* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2005). Dima Adamsky points to three contemporary approaches but does not refer to specific actors, and he covers a more limited time frame. Dima Adamsky, "The Morning After in Israel," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90 (2011), pp. 155–68.

## The emergence of ambiguity (1950–69)

### Early domestic debates

The 1950s and 1960s were the formative period for Israel's nuclear posture. The posture of ambiguity was not envisioned initially, but rather evolved as the result of pressures arising from contradictory external pressures in interplay with domestic ones. Avner Cohen locates these domestic factors in "the dispositions of individuals, elite groups and societal and cultural attitudes toward nuclear weapons."[4] Indeed, the same societal and cultural predispositions that animated the debate during the formative years have continued to do so ever since. They underlie the three distinct predispositions toward nuclear policy identified in the preceding section: nuclear advocacy, nuclear skepticism, and nuclear pragmatism.

### Nuclear advocacy

Nuclear advocacy was led by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and supported by his security protégés, Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan.[5] Ben-Gurion's nuclear advocacy was part of his broader strategy for strengthening the security of the Jewish state. This strategy, forged in the aftermath of the Holocaust, reflected a determination to never again be defenseless, which led to a doctrine of self-help and skepticism toward external security guarantees.[6] Although Menachem Begin was not involved in the decision making, after the public disclosure of the Dimona reactor in December 1960 the future prime minister declared his full support for Israeli possession of nuclear weapons.[7]

Ben-Gurion had adapted a strategy called the "Iron Wall," first laid out in 1923 by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of Revisionist Zionism.[8] According to this view, the Arab hostility toward Israel was fundamental and would not disappear in the near future. Therefore, Israel's path to security could only be through a long-term strategy aimed at compelling the Arab world to accept that its attempts to wipe the state of Israel off the map were utterly futile. For nuclear advocates, this could be accomplished only if Israel possessed military superiority, in the form of a nuclear deterrent. Initially, Ben-Gurion had sought the formal guarantee of a superpower in addition to an independent force. But by the mid-1950s, he had begun to doubt the feasibility and desirability of such a guarantee and from then on focused on attaining an independent deterrent. He was not necessarily committed to an open posture.[9] But he believed that, given the vast asymmetry in conventional power between the combined Arab forces and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the ability to threaten devastating force granted by an independent Israeli nuclear-weapons arsenal would be the only guarantee against further attempts by Arab armies to destroy the Jewish state.[10]

[4] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p. 3.
[5] Raz, *The Iron Fist*, p. 204; Zaki Shalom, "Israel's Nuclear Option Revisited," *Journal of Israeli History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2005), pp. 267–77.
[6] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p.10.
[7] *Al Hamishmar*, "Begin Supports Manufacturing an Atom Bomb in Israel" [in Hebrew], December 23,1960, p. 2.
[8] Isaac Ben-Yisrael, *Israel's Defence Doctrine* [in Hebrew] (Ben-Shemen, Israel: Modan, 2013), p. 27.
[9] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb,* p. 66.
[10] Raz, *The Iron Fist*, p. 204; Shalom, "Israel's Nuclear Option Revisited," p. 269.

### Nuclear skepticism

During the 1950s, before the nuclear program was publicly acknowledged, it met with resistance from many within the security establishment and from much of the scientific community. Once Ben-Gurion acknowledged the existence of the Dimona facility in December 1960, this internal resistance was strengthened by additional actors within the political leadership and the public intelligentsia. Within government, including even within Ben-Gurion's Mapai party, Yigal Allon, Israel Galili, Moshe Sharett, and others were opposed to the enterprise, as were Mapam party leaders.[11]

Sharett was opposed at the highest level of strategy, as he did not accept the basic premise of the Iron Wall. He believed that a resolution to the Arab–Israeli conflict was indeed possible in the near term and could be furthered not by the threat of Israeli force but rather by its limitation. He sought a dialogue with Israel's primary adversary, Egypt, underwritten by a guarantee of Israel's territorial integrity by the United States.[12] For Sharett no positive role could be played by an Israeli nuclear arsenal. In fact, rather than leading to an eventual peace, he believed that nuclearization would become an obstacle to peace.[13] From the security elite, Knesset members Allon and Galili argued against Israel adopting a strategy of nuclear deterrence. Their arguments were focused on military strategy, claiming that a conventional army backed by a strong air force would provide sufficient deterrence and that, if Israel developed a nuclear weapon, a nuclear arms race would ensue.

Outside of government, the most prominent opposition came from the "Committee for Denuclearization" led by Mapai politician and journalist Eliezer Livneh and prominent scientists and intellectuals. They too assessed that the existence of an Israeli nuclear arsenal would inevitably lead the Arab states to attain nuclear weapons. Therefore, they proposed, Israel should pursue a political agreement whereby all the regional states would agree not to pursue nuclear weapons.[14] After making their case directly to government officials, they published a collection of articles in 1963 laying out their arguments against the program.[15]

Strategically, they argued that, if Israel attained nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union would provide nuclear warheads in short order to Israel's adversaries, or at least extend a nuclear guarantee. Then the asymmetry in conventional forces would be matched by an asymmetry in the nuclear realm.[16] They further made the point that because Israel lacked a second-strike capability, a nuclear standoff would be uniquely unstable.[17] They also maintained that the resources invested in nuclear development would be better invested in strengthening conventional forces.[18]

Politically, it was argued that Israel's nuclear program was a strain on its relations with Western powers and would lead to its international isolation, especially given the priority

[11] Raz, *The Iron Fist*, p. 204; Alan Dowty, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Israeli Case," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No.1 (1978), p. 85.
[12] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p. 48.
[13] Raz, *The Iron Fist*, p. 205.
[14] *Al Hamishmar*, "Group of Scientists Call for Middle East Denuclearization" [in Hebrew], March 3, 1962, p. 1.
[15] Amos Natan, ed., *Atom Armed or Atom Free* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1963).
[16] Eliezer Livneh, "The Dimona Reactor: Achievement or Mistake" in Amos Natan, ed., *Atom Armed or Atom Free* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1963), p. 154.
[17] Livneh, "The Dimona Reactor," p.155; Amos Natan, "Nuclear Weapons: Resilience or Despair," in Amos Natan, ed., *Atom Armed or Atom Free* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1963), p. 129.
[18] Livneh, "The Dimona Reactor," p. 156.

that the administration of US President John F. Kennedy gave to nonproliferation.[19] It further would undermine any potential that existed for a warming of relations with the Soviet Union,[20] whereas, it was claimed, an Israeli initiative for a regional NWFZ would significantly raise Israel's international prestige.[21]

In the moral realm, leading academic Ephraim Urbach argued that Israel had, out of despair, come to overemphasize the importance of hard power to maintaining its existence. Because Israel's coming into existence was dependent on the agreement of the superpowers, it was incumbent on Israel to do all it could to attain their agreement regarding the future of the region, he said. The NWFZ, he asserted, could be the basis of an agreement that had the potential to "solve our problems for good."[22] Prominent public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz argued that, beyond arousing resentment toward Israel among other nations, the program was undermining Israeli democracy. He decried the secrecy and lack of oversight that surrounded its development, saying that the military censor, instead of being used to protect security interests from being exposed to the enemy, was being used to protect government interests from being exposed to the people. He warned that maintaining the secrecy surrounding the nuclear program was likely to undermine the foundations of Israel's democratic rule.[23]

## *International pressures: conventional asymmetry vs. US nonproliferation agenda*

During the period 1950–69, various opposing external factors applied pressures that eventually led to the formation of the policy of nuclear ambiguity. Pushing in the direction of developing nuclear capabilities was the extreme asymmetry of conventional military power between the Arab world and Israel. The desire to counterbalance this Arab advantage was the primary factor motivating Ben-Gurion to pursue nuclear capabilities. This was compounded by the knowledge that, with the assistance of German scientists, Egypt was already developing an arsenal of missiles that were suspected of being capable of carrying chemical or nuclear weapons.[24]

On the other hand, there were external factors pushing Israel away from pursuing nuclear capabilities. After the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Kennedy began to pursue a nonproliferation agenda and heavily pressured Israel not to develop nuclear weapons. Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, insisted on regular inspection visits by American technicians to the Dimona site and pressed Israel to join nonproliferation initiatives.[25] In addition, the prospect of the Soviet Union supplying Israel's adversaries with their own capabilities in response to Israeli nuclearization was a strong argument against such a step by Israel.

[19] Livneh, pp. 150, 159; Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Nuclear Weapons from a Domestic Policy Perspective," in Amos Natan, ed., *Atom Armed or Atom Free* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1963), p.138; Efraim Urbach, "Security, Power and Reason," in Amos Natan, ed., *Atom Armed or Atom Free* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1963), p. 161.
[20] Leibowitz, "A Domestic Policy Perspective," p. 138.
[21] Amos Natan, ed., *Atom Armed or Atom Free* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1963), p. 7.
[22] Urbach, "Security, Power and Reason," p. 161. All translations from Hebrew sources are by the author.
[23] Leibowitz, "A Domestic Policy Perspective," pp. 140–43.
[24] Owen L. Sirrs, *Nasser and the Missile Age in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 57.
[25] Or Rabinowitz and Nicholas L. Miller, "Keeping the Bombs in the Basement: US Nonproliferation Policy toward Israel, South Africa, and Pakistan," *International Security,* Vol. 40, No. 1 (2015), p. 51.

It was in response to these opposing pressures that, during the 1960s, nuclear pragmatism and the associated policy of ambiguity eventually emerged. Nuclear pragmatism was led by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, followed by Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin.[26] On the one hand, Eshkol allowed the reactor at Dimona and the smaller research reactor at Sorek to continue development under limitations, and he refrained from pursuing any NFWZ initiatives, as the nuclear skeptics would have liked. But he also went further than Ben-Gurion in order to accommodate US pressure and avoid a crisis over the issue of the American visits to Dimona.[27] Meir argued for a more open discussion with the Americans: if the United States had been willing to offer a formal security guarantee, she might have been willing to trade Dimona for it.[28] As the Israeli ambassador in Washington from 1968, Rabin became another key actor in forming and promoting the approach of pragmatism.[29]

Thus, the more ideologically coherent camps of the strategic debate in this period consisted of the poles of nuclear advocacy and nuclear skepticism. Nuclear advocates promoted pursuing nuclear technology with an eye to an eventual open posture, while skeptics were opposed to even having a significant nuclear infrastructure and instead promoted an NWFZ initiative. The external factors of great asymmetry of conventional power between the Arab states and Israel, on the one hand, and US diplomatic pressure alongside the specter of a Soviet umbrella, on the other, resulted in the eventual emergence of nuclear ambiguity by the end of the 1960s.

## The entrenchment of ambiguity (1969–90)

### *International pressures: more defendable borders and US acquiescence*

By the 1970s, external factors served to reinforce the emerging pragmatic position, and through the 1980s there was a broad consensus supporting ambiguity. The first of these factors was that, as a result of the 1967 and 1973 wars, the risks to Israel's territorial integrity vastly diminished. Before the two wars, Israel's narrow width and undefendable borders were a strong motivator for pursing a nuclear deterrent against an existentially threatening invasion. But, as a result of the wars, Israel gained reasonably large territorial buffer zones on the Sinai Peninsula, in Judea and Samaria, and in the Golan Heights, which made the country less susceptible to a swift invasion. It had not overturned the conventional asymmetry between it and the Arab armies, but it had significantly improved upon its previous precarious position. Thus, relative to the previous decades, the reduction in risk to Israel's territorial integrity weakened the case for moving to an openly declared nuclear posture.

The second external influence was that the US position on the matter shifted. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson had been strongly committed to a universal nonproliferation agenda, but, once Richard Nixon came into office, he and his close adviser, Henry

[26] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p. 72.
[27] Cohen, p. 153; Zaki Shalom, *Ben-Gurion's Political Struggles, 1963–1967: A Lion in Winter* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 42.
[28] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p. 327.
[29] Netanel Flamer and Arnon Gutfeld, "Israel Approaches the Nuclear Threshold: The Controversies in the American Administration Surrounding the Israeli Nuclear Bomb 1968–1969," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 5 (2016), p. 725.

Kissinger, did not see this as a strategic imperative.[30] Accordingly, they ended the policy of pressuring Israel to join the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and came to an agreement with Prime Minister Meir under which the United States accepted Israel's perpetual nuclear ambiguity.[31] This led to an understanding between the United States and Israel whereby the former provides the latter with conventional military technology and Israel maintains nuclear ambiguity. This understanding became the reference point for subsequent US presidents. It allowed a reduction in the decade-long tensions over Dimona and lowered the diplomatic price that the nuclear skeptics in Israel had emphasized. It signified a transition from a unilateral policy in tension with the United States to a coordinated bilateral policy anchored in mutual understandings at the highest level.

## Domestic challenges under Labor governments (1969–77)

Throughout the 1970s, the Meir and Rabin governments strengthened ambiguity as a central fixture of Israeli strategy. Rabin was committed both to retaining the capabilities Israel already possessed and to maintaining a close relationship with Washington. Though Peres had played a key role in developing Israel's nuclear infrastructure in the 1950s and 1960s, serving as defense minister under Rabin he was satisfied with ambiguity.[32]

### Nuclear advocacy

The highest-level challenge to ambiguity during this period came from Dayan. As defense minister until 1974, he publicly asserted the advantages of a shift to a posture of open declaration. This call was in response to the perceived failure of conventional deterrence that had allowed the Yom Kippur War to happen, as well as the perceived overdependence on the United States that resulted.[33] Dayan emphasized two points. First, he argued that the conventional-arms competition was too costly for Israel, whereas shifting to a strategy of balancing the conventional dominance of the Arab countries with an Israeli nuclear advantage was more fiscally feasible. Second, he said that, even if the Arab countries then attained nuclear weapons themselves, the situation would be more stable than the current imbalance of conventional power.[34] It is also believed that, during the initial stages of the Yom Kippur War, Dayan argued to the cabinet that Israel must take steps to prepare for nuclear use, or at least signal to its adversaries that it was capable of doing so if desperate.[35]

[30] Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 105.
[31] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Defending Frenemies: Alliances, Politics, and Nuclear Nonproliferation in US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 91.
[32] Efraim Inbar, "Nuclear Weapons since October 1973," in Louis Rene Beres, ed., *Security or Armageddon: Israel's Nuclear Strategy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986), p. 65.
[33] Dowty, "Nuclear Proliferation," p. 112.
[34] Inbar, "Nuclear Weapons since October 1973," p. 63.
[35] See Adam Raz, "The Significance of the Reputed Yom Kippur War Nuclear Affair," *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2014), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-significance-of-the-reputed-yom-kippur-war-nuclear-affair/>. An extensive report on the issue utilizing declassified US documents was published in 2013 and concluded that "Israel likely did take some steps associated with the readying of its nuclear weapons and/or nuclear weapons delivery forces in the very early stages of the Yom Kippur War, but that these steps were defensive or precautionary in nature." See Elbridge Colby, Avner Cohen, William McCants, Bradley Morris, and William Rosenau, "The Israeli

Outside government, some experts made similar arguments publicly—most prominently, popular historian Shlomo Aronson. From the mid-1970s, Aronson argued that a nuclear Middle East was inevitable and Israel therefore had to be prepared for this situation and ready to deal with a nuclear balance of terror.[36] But, as the shock of October 1973 gradually subsided, so did any serious consideration of changing the core of Israel's nuclear posture.[37] Dayan's and Aronson's calls for a more explicit form of deterrence did not lead to any change in policy; the significance of these calls lay primarily in generating debate, in response to which the pragmatists intensified their commitment to ambiguity.

### Nuclear skepticism

Although they were of marginal influence, skeptics did not disappear from the scene entirely during these decades. As foreign minister (1974–77), Yigal Allon was the highest-level official willing to discuss the NWFZ idea, although he was not convinced that this could be pursued in practice. In September 1975, addressing the UN General Assembly, Allon announced that Israel was willing to engage in multilateral discussions on a Middle Eastern NWFZ, which he stressed could be established even prior to a comprehensive peace agreement.[38] This proposal had apparently been approved by the Rabin government, but largely as a diplomatic gambit to reduce tensions with the United States and highlight the unwillingness of the Arab countries to negotiate.[39] It seems that, despite his initial reservations, Allon had by this time come to accept the pragmatic position. Staunch nuclear skeptics were to be found only on the margins of the Labor Party and in the political parties to its left. After the Likud electoral victory in 1977, skeptics were further distanced from decision-making bodies.

## Domestic challenges under Likud governments (1977–90)

During the 1960s, Begin had argued that Israel was fully justified in seeking a nuclear arsenal:

> In its unique situation, doesn't Israel require the type of deterrence that is developed in order not to be used? There is no doubt as to the necessity. It is a product of the balance of forces, existing and in development, between us and our enemies. If the West's moral justification for the necessity of developing and maintaining atomic weapons was the superiority of the East in terms of manpower, how much more so in Israel's case vis-à-vis its enemies? … We require a deterrent force against the explicit hostility and aggression of our enemies. … From where is the moral right to claim that a nation that faces such enemies and threats does not have the right to have such defensive deterrence weapons?[40]

By the time he became prime minister in 1977, he too embraced the status quo of ambiguity, but a noteworthy event occurred in September 1979, known as the "Vela incident,"

'Nuclear Alert' of 1973: Deterrence and Signaling in Crisis," *CNA Strategic Studies*, April 1, 2013, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2013/israeli-nuclear-alert-of-1973>. The report also notes that Dayan advocated going even further but, consistent with the overall consensus during this period, Meir and the other decision makers rebuffed his more far-reaching proposals.

[36] Inbar, "Nuclear Weapons since October 1973," p. 63; Shlomo Aronson, "Israel's Nuclear Options: Dangers and Chances" [in Hebrew], *Ha'aretz*, April 1976.

[37] Inbar, p. 75.

[38] Inbar, p. 69.

[39] Inbar, p. 70.

[40] Menachem Begin, "Nuclear Capacity and its Restraint" [in Hebrew], *Hayom*, March 11, 1966, p. 3.

in which sensors on a US satellite detected in the South Atlantic Ocean a signal that was characteristic of an atmospheric nuclear explosion. Speculation continues as to what actually occurred. A high-level scientific panel commissioned by the White House and headed by Jack Ruina, a professor of electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former director of the US Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency, concluded that it "was probably not from a nuclear explosion."[41] But this conclusion has since been called into question in reports by other US government institutions,[42] as well as by researchers and scholars outside government. Although they too lack conclusive evidence, they have argued that it was indeed a nuclear test, and that it was most likely undertaken by Israel, in cooperation with South Africa.[43] Though there remains a lack of hard evidence, given Begin's favorable predisposition to Israel's nuclear program and his long-standing connections with South Africa, it seems plausible that he would have approved a test. If he did, that approval would signify the first change in the margins of Israel's posture.

During Begin's premiership, another external factor arose that led to the adoption of an additional strategic principle in support of ambiguity. Skeptics and advocates were in agreement that other states in the region were likely to eventually pursue their own nuclear-weapons capabilities. They disagreed, however, over what would facilitate this and what Israel should do about it. Skeptics argued that Israel's possession of such capabilities would be a strong motivator for other states to pursue them and that Israel therefore needed to prevent this by initiating an NWFZ. Advocates, on the other hand, argued that other states would pursue nuclear capabilities regardless of Israel's decisions, and that Israel therefore would benefit from being the first and attaining superiority. By the late 1970s, the prediction that other states would pursue nuclear programs seemed to be coming to fruition when Iraq contracted to acquire a nuclear reactor, which could have allowed the production of weapons-grade fissile material either directly, through diverting the highly enriched uranium (93 percent uranium-235) that was originally meant to fuel it, or using the depleted uranium to conduct blanket irradiation to produce plutonium.[44]

But, rather than changing its posture in either direction, Israel instead adopted a policy that would come to be known as the "Begin Doctrine," meaning Israel would forcefully prevent its adversaries from attaining nuclear weapons. This policy reached its culmination in 1981 with the strike on Iraq's Osirak reactor.[45] It should be emphasized that this principle is a prerequisite for the continued adherence to ambiguity. The emergence of a nuclear-armed adversary would greatly strengthen arguments for either a mutual disarmament agreement or a move to an open posture, whereas only if Israel's

[41] Christopher M. Wright and Lars-Erik De Geer, "The 22 September 1979 Vela Incident: The Detected Double-Flash," *Science & Global Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2017), p.101.
[42] David Albright and Cory Gay, "A Flash from the Past," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 53, No. 6 (1997), pp. 15–17.
[43] For a detailed review of the various investigations, see Jeffrey T. Richelson, *Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 283–316. For further details of the various sides of the debate, see Albright and Gay, "A Flash from the Past"; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 280–81; Leonard Weiss, "Israel's 1979 Nuclear Test and the U.S. Cover-up," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2011), pp. 83–95; Wright and De Geer, "The 22 September 1979 Vela Incident."
[44] Shai Feldman, "The Bombing of Osiraq—Revisited," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1982), pp. 116–18; see also Uri Sadot, "Osirak and the Counter-Proliferation Puzzle," *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2016), p. 657.
[45] Feldman, "The Bombing of Osiraq."

regional monopoly on nuclear capabilities could be maintained—by force, if necessary—would the ambiguous posture continue to be sustainable.

In 1982, the next challenge in the elite discourse arose when Shai Feldman argued for an open posture, but with a new twist. He argued that Israel could withdraw from the territories conquered in 1967 and then adopt an explicit nuclear posture to make up for the lost territorial buffer.[46] Although his work was much discussed in academia, the proposal did not gain any real traction among government officials.

Nuclear skepticism did not disappear either; it was promoted by Knesset members from the far left such as Uri Avneri and Meir Pa'il. Avneri consistently called for a regional NWFZ initiative underwritten by the superpowers and not dependent on a prior general peace agreement. To his thinking, an NWFZ would itself be a step that might lead to a regional peace agreement, and he criticized the Rabin and Begin governments for paying lip service to the idea while undermining it by insisting that a full peace be in place first.[47] The Vanunu affair in 1986, though demonstrating the resonance of nuclear skepticism in some parts of Israeli society, actually had the effect of leading the government to double down on ambiguity out of the conviction that it would not allow itself to be compelled to a change in policy by a renegade activist.

### *Pragmatism prevails in policy and elite discourse*

A window into thinking in the halls of government at this time can be found in the writings of Yuval Ne'eman, a prominent scientist and politician who had been involved in the nuclear program since its inception. Among other roles, he was a trusted adviser to Begin, and to the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC).[48] Reflecting the consensus in the commission, Ne'eman opposed the calls for a move to an open posture and rejected the idea that a stable deterrence regime could be established with the Arab states:[49] "There is no alternative to a conventional deterrent. Not in the current borders, nor in other borders, including Feldman's proposal. There is no room to 'economize' the defense budget by relying on nuclear deterrence, as Aronson proposes."[50] Israel's strategy, he argued, should be to have nuclear infrastructure without an open nuclear posture and then do everything possible to prevent the region's states from attaining their own nuclear capabilities.[51]

Israeli academics writing during the 1980s also made the case for ambiguity. A collection of articles by Israeli security experts was published in 1986, with the overall message affirming the strengths of ambiguity and the weaknesses of either an open posture or an NWFZ.[52] Avi Beker highlights the differences between the NPT and the NWFZ treaty signed by Latin American countries. He argues that this agreement, the Treaty of Tlatelolco, includes a more comprehensive system of verification by establishing a permanent

[46] Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence: A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
[47] Uri Avneri, "Pearl Harbor" [in Hebrew], *Olam Hazeh*, July 17, 1981, pp. 41–42, <https://thisworld.online/1981/2285>.
[48] Yuval Ne'eman, "Israel and Nuclear Deterrence: Israel's Nuclear Policy 1948–1986" [in Hebrew], *Ma'arachot*, Vol. 308, April 1987, p. 19.
[49] Yuval Ne'eman, *Jews, Israel, and the Nuclear Issue: An Anthology of Articles Written by Professor Yuval Ne'eman*, ed. Shmuel Sabag [in Hebrew] (Ariel, Israel: Ariel University Press, 2007), pp. 81, 170.
[50] Ne'eman, p. 83.
[51] Ne'eman, pp. 84, 165.
[52] Louis Rene Beres, ed., *Security or Armageddon: Israel's Nuclear Strategy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986).

organ—the Organization for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America, commonly known by its Spanish acronym, OPANAL—to ensure compliance and to perform inspections.[53] He concludes that any proposal for a Middle Eastern NWFZ would also have to go well beyond NPT safeguards in order to strengthen the ability to prevent diversions of weapons-grade material.[54] Avner Yaniv agrees that, while Israel's conventional deterrence with nuclear ambiguity has not provided an "airtight" deterrent against all aggression toward the country, it has been a cumulative success in altering its adversaries' calculus in the long term.[55] The most skeptical among academics during this decade, Yair Evron, argues that conventional deterrence has worked for Israel while nuclear deterrence has not. But he nevertheless accepts ambiguity as the best alternative.[56]

Finally, prominent strategist Yehezkel Dror argued in 1989 in favor of continued ambiguity. He affirmed that Israel's nuclear capabilities had forced the Arab states to limit their war aims in 1973 and continued to deter those states from attempting to threaten Israel with total destruction.[57] Israel's nuclear capabilities, he said, also contribute to the country's international prestige and prevent superpowers from pushing Israel into a corner. He argued that the NWFZ approach would sacrifice the benefits of the current posture in return for minimal gain and would leave Israel helpless if a hostile country attained weapons later.[58]

One can summarize this period by saying that ambiguity was solidified and affirmed by the Israeli government and gained broad support throughout the security elite. It was further entrenched by the addition of the doctrine of counterproliferation by force and the possible clandestine nuclear test in 1979. The calls from advocates to move to an open posture and from skeptics to pursue an NWFZ unconditionally remained marginal and did not significantly affect the policy.

## Post-Cold-War era (1991–2010)

### *International pressures: America's unipolar moment and renewed regional proliferation*

Since the 1990s, a number of opposing international trends have brought new challenges to the consensus on ambiguity. Whereas between 1970 and 1990 ambiguity enjoyed dominance both in policy and in the strategic discourse, the post-Cold-War period has seen a retention of the core of the policy but modifications of its contours as well as a strengthening of both advocates and skeptics in the discourse.

Several international factors over this period served to strengthen the case for renewed nuclear diplomacy and openness to an NWFZ. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the global power structure was unipolar, and the sole superpower, the United States, was

[53] Avi Beker, "A Regional Non-proliferation Treaty for the Middle East," in Louis Rene Beres, ed., *Security or Armageddon: Israel's Nuclear Strategy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986), p. 126.
[54] Beker, p. 130.
[55] Avner Yaniv, "Israel's Conventional Deterrence: A Reappraisal," in Louis Rene Beres, ed., *Security or Armageddon: Israel's Nuclear Strategy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986), p. 59.
[56] Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma*. This work was first published in Hebrew in 1987.
[57] Yehezkel Dror, *A Grand Strategy for Israel* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Academon, 1989), p. 141.
[58] Dror, *A Grand Strategy for Israel*, p. 144.

Israel's ally. The Soviet Union, which had been the other superpower during the Cold War and which had supported Israel's adversaries, had ceased to exist. The new Russian Federation was, in the 1990s, in no position to extend the same level of support, nor was it hostile to Israel as the Soviet Union had been. This relative growth of American power served to strengthen Israel's overall security, and the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations both displayed a renewed interest in nuclear-arms control, urging Israel to participate in their initiatives. As countries moved toward the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, Egypt, seeking to place renewed diplomatic pressure on Israel to shift away from deep ambiguity, threatened to undermine the treaty's extension.[59]

Another factor was that one of Israel's main enemies, Iraq, had just been delivered a military defeat, while another, Iran, was also still recovering from its eight-year-long war with Iraq. More broadly, the Arab world was witnessing the decline of the idea of pan-Arabism, which had served as the ideological rallying cry for a coordinated Arab invasion of Israel. Further strengthening the nuclear skeptics' arguments was what seemed to be a new opening for peace with Israel's closest neighbors.[60] Israel signed a peace deal with Jordan in 1995 and was hopeful that US-mediated negotiations with Syria might bear fruit. Thus, the growth of American power along with the weakening of hostile forces in the region lowered Israel's threat perception and reawakened hopes that conditions for peace might arise[61] and allow progress toward an NWFZ.

But, during this era, there also were countervailing trends that served to strengthen the case for a shift to open posture. First, the fall of the Soviet Union also strengthened the advocates' case. Once Israel's adversaries, particularly Syria, lost their primary great-power patron, the argument that the Soviets would swiftly extend nuclear deterrence to Israel's adversaries in response to a declaration no longer held water. If regional states were to respond to an Israeli declaration by developing a nuclear arsenal, they would now have to do it on their own.

In addition, despite a decline in the conventional power of Israel's adversaries, the 1990s also saw renewed efforts to develop nonconventional capabilities. Although the Iraqi nuclear program had been set back by the strike on the Osirak reactor in 1982, during the 1990s it seemed that Iraq had recovered and was ready to make new progress. Furthermore, by the mid-1990s Israel had assessed that Iran had begun the pursuit of a nuclear-weapons program,[62] and Iraq, Syria, and Libya were believed to possess chemical or biological weapons (or both).[63] Pakistan's nuclear test in 1998 further strengthened the sense in Israel that nuclear capabilities in the broader Middle East were becoming inevitable. While not necessarily perceived as a direct threat to Israel, Pakistan was seen as a proliferation threat. The concern was that it might share its knowledge with core Middle

[59] Gerald M. Steinberg, "Middle East Peace and the NPT Extension Decision," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1996), <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/steinb41.pdf>.

[60] Ariel E. Levite and Emily B. Landau, "Confidence and Security Building Measures in the Middle East," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 20, No.1 (1997), p. 156.

[61] Benjamin Miller with Ziv Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 45.

[62] Raphael BenLevi, "From Supporting Actor to 'Whipping the P5+1': Assessing Material and Ideational Influences on Israeli Policy toward the Iranian Nuclear Program (1996–2015)," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2021), pp. 563–84.

[63] Yair Evron, "Weapons of Mass Destruction on the Middle East," Henry L. Stimson Center, March 1998, pp. 5, 16, <https://www.stimson.org/1998/weapons-mass-destruction-middle-east/>.

Eastern states willingly or that its nuclear know-how would be spread through illicit proliferators such as the A. Q. Khan network.[64]

A final factor was the perception that Iraq's Scud-missile attacks during the Gulf War exposed the limitations of Israel's deterrence. This was amplified by a feeling that the United States had not taken these attacks on Israel seriously enough and that this indifference was a reflection of Israel's decreasing status as a strategic asset to the United States in a post-Cold-War Middle East. Therefore, there was concern that the United States, despite being the only global superpower, could not be relied upon to intervene on Israel's behalf in an existential crisis.[65] So, even though America's rise in power in broad terms strengthened Israel's security, the Gulf War also raised doubts as to how much Israel could count on Washington in an actual crisis and whether it therefore should pursue a stronger independent deterrent.

Although none of these trends led to an abandonment of the core of ambiguity, they did have a secondary influence on Israel's policy. The secondary changes can be categorized as being both in the diplomatic contours of the policy—that is, Israel's greater willingness to discuss the issue in multilateral forums and cooperate with international treaties on arms control—and the physical contours of the policy. Examples of the latter are Israel's acquisition of a submarine fleet, which significantly bolstered its potential for a second-strike capability, and its development of a ballistic-missile-defense system.

## Changes in the diplomatic contours of the nuclear posture

The first of the diplomatic changes was a greater openness to participation in arms-control initiatives. In 1992, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir agreed to participate in such talks under immense pressure from Washington, establishing the Arms Control and Regional Security working group (ACRS), one of a number of multilateral working groups established at the Madrid Peace Conference.[66] From 1992 to 1995, six full sessions of the ACRS were held, along with numerous informal discussions and exercises. Israel's willingness to participate in such discussions constituted a shift from its previous position, which had been to avoid even being present in the room at various diplomatic meetings on nuclear issues, such as the NPT preparatory and review conferences, UN debates, and the Conference on Disarmament.[67] One outcome of the ACRS talks was Israel's declaratory commitment in 1992 to the vision of a Middle East free of nuclear and other nonconventional weapons and ballistic missiles.[68]

Throughout these talks, Israel demonstrated a greater willingness than ever before to discuss its thinking in the nuclear realm, including the theoretical conditions under

[64] P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Beyond the Veil: Israel–Pakistan Relations," Memorandum No. 55, Jaffee Center for Security Studies, March 2000, p. 43, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/(FILE)1190278291.pdf>; P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Nuclear Pakistan and Israel," *World Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2002), pp. 126–34.

[65] Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 203.

[66] Hanna Notte and Chen Zak Kane, "An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group," Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, 2022, p. 19, <https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ACRS-Combined-Report-PDF-web.pdf>.

[67] Gerald M. Steinberg, "Examining Israel's NPT Exceptionality: 1998–2005," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2006), p. 119.

[68] Ariel E. Levite, "Global Zero: An Israeli Vision of Realistic Idealism," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2010), p. 160.

which it would consider some sort of regional treaty.[69] Until then, there had been no Israeli involvement in any effort even to establish a formal framework for discussion, much less to participate in actual discussions with other regional states. Although these talks were exploratory in nature and therefore did not affect the core of Israel's policy, they were unprecedented at the diplomatic level. They also led Israel to articulate publicly its justification for nuclear ambiguity under the concept of "exceptionality," according to which Israel's policy was exceptional because its circumstances were exceptional.[70]

Another secondary-level change was conveyed by Israel's decision to sign (but not ratify) the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1992 and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996.[71] Both steps departed from what had been the official policy that placed all arms-control treaties in the same boat and held that signing any of them would be a slippery slope that would bring pressure upon Israel to sign the NPT. Israel had also previously refused to sign the CWC without prior agreement by the neighboring Arab countries to do the same.[72]

This change of outlook was expressed in a speech by Foreign Minister Peres[73] at the signing ceremony for the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993, where he stated,

> In the spirit of the global pursuit of general and complete disarmament, and the establishment of regional and global arms control regimes, Israel suggests to all the countries of the region to construct a mutually verifiable zone, free of surface-to-surface missiles and of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.[74]

This new declarative policy was reiterated by the Foreign Ministry's director-general, Eytan Bentsur, in his speech to the Conference on Disarmament in 1997,[75] and again by the head of the IAEC, Gideon Frank, addressing the International Atomic Energy Agency's General Conference in 2003.[76]

It should be noted that, in committing itself to the idea of an NWFZ after full regional peace, the Israeli establishment emphasized that any negotiations toward this end must be undertaken within a region-specific format, whereby the verification mechanisms would be implemented and enforced directly by the states involved. Israel consistently rejected the idea that such matters would be negotiated and enforced by a global regime.[77] This was given public expression by the head of the diplomacy team of the IAEC, Shalhevet Freier, who wrote in 1993,

[69] For details on the talks, see Emily B. Landau, *Arms Control in the Middle East: Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Constraints* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2006).
[70] Steinberg, "Examining Israel's NPT Exceptionality."
[71] Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and its Cold War Deals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 97.
[72] Efraim Inbar, *Israel's National Security: Issues and Challenges since the Yom Kippur War* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 100.
[73] For an explanation of Peres's shift from foreign-policy hawk to dove, see Guy Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves: Shimon Peres and Foreign Policy Change in Israel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014).
[74] Shimon Peres, "A Farewell to Chemical Arms: Address by the Foreign Minister of Israel, Mr Shimon Peres, at the Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention Treaty," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1995), pp. 186–88.
[75] Eytan Bentsur, "Israel's Approach to Regional Security, Arms Control and Disarmament," *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, September 4, 1997, <https://tinyurl.com/9cbp2eks>.
[76] Steinberg, "Examining Israel's NPT Exceptionality," p. 125.
[77] Gerald M. Steinberg, "Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security," *Survival*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1994), pp. 126–31.

> Even as the peace process is underway and all issues are on the agenda of the bilateral and multilateral talks, I am perturbed … by the Arab insistence to have the nuclear issue lifted out of context and arrogated by the UN and the IAEA, where they dispose of majorities [that is, where Arab states have automatic majority support], and where majority resolutions take the place of negotiations, envisaged in the multilateral talks. It reinforces my opinion that Israel should not allow this item to be either arrogated by international organizations or be pushed to the top of confidence-building measures. There is no confidence for Israel in such stratagems [that is, Israel has no confidence in such stratagems].[78]

Accordingly, when faced with the Egyptian-led attempt to force Israel's accession to the NPT at the 1995 extension conference, Israel strongly resisted.[79] The diplomatic pressure did, however, result in Israel's taking further diplomatic steps, including indicating that it would enter negotiations to join the NPT and to establish an NWFZ within two years of establishing a comprehensive peace. That commitment was notable for marking the first mention of a concrete timeline for establishing an NWFZ.[80]

### Changes in the physical contours of the nuclear posture

As noted above, international pressures also led to secondary-level changes in the physical contours of Israel's posture. They supported the acquisition of submarines that would significantly bolster Israel's potential for a second-strike capability. Consistent with the core policy of ambiguity, the Israeli government has never confirmed what types of missiles and warheads are aboard the vessels, although the vessels are considered capable of carrying nuclear warheads.[81] This acquisition, initiated in the early 1990s, constitutes a concrete step that lays the groundwork for a shift to a declared posture:[82] if Israel were to decide to move to an open posture, it must have second-strike capabilities in order to implement it. Though Israel was already understood to have a land-based, and possibly an air-based, second-strike capability, the addition of a sea-based leg would complete its triad of delivery systems and constitute a significant step.

The acquisition of nuclear-capable submarines continued to expand over the next two decades. In 2001, Netanyahu reportedly stated that, if Iran attained nuclear weapons, Israel would have to end its policy of ambiguity and establish "a military command for second-strike capability."[83] Upon his return to the premiership in 2009, he approved the expansion of Israel's submarine fleet to acquire a sixth and potentially seventh vessel. The head of his National Security Council (NSC), Uzi Arad, relates that both he and Netanyahu had been positively inclined toward acquiring a submarine fleet since the idea was first discussed in 1991.[84]

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[78] Shalhevet Freier, "A Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East and Its Ambience," Archived by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, July 14, 1993, <https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/1993%20Shalhevet%20Freier%20paper.pdf>.

[79] Steinberg, "Middle East Peace," p. 18.

[80] Inbar, *Israel's National Security*, p. 100; Steinberg, "Middle East Peace," p. 22.

[81] Walter Pincus, "Israel Has Sub-Based Atomic Arms Capability," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/06/15/israel-has-sub-based-atomic-arms-capability/4adbda7b-d5e8-4631-a008-bc0ce8625f8c/>.

[82] Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, p. 199.

[83] Shimon Shifer, "Sharon: Netanyahu Will Be Dealt with Like Vanunu" [in Hebrew], *YNET*, September 7, 2001, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-1094628,00.html>.

[84] Uzi Arad and Limor Ben-Har, *NSC: The Struggle to Create and Transform the National Security Council* [in Hebrew] (Modi'in, Israel: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2016), pp. 211–12.

The second change to the physical contours is Israel's development of a ballistic-missile-defense (BMD) system. This process was initiated with the signing of a memorandum of understanding in 1986 between Israel and the United States to jointly develop an indigenous Israeli capability to defend against ballistic missiles. Israel conducted preliminary test of the Arrow BMD system in 1990.[85] However, the Iraqi Scud-missile attacks on Israel during the Gulf War provided the impetus to raise the development of BMD systems to a high priority. Defense Minister Moshe Arens prioritized the full-scale development of the Arrow BMD system, a step that was affirmed by Prime Minister Rabin, who gave it budgetary priority.[86] By 2000, the Arrow system had achieved initial operational capability, and it has since become fully operational and integrated into the Air Defense Command.[87] BMD is conceived of as providing not only a last-resort defensive measure against incoming missiles, but also an increase in deterrence by ensuring the survivability of land-based second-strike capabilities. By lowering the chances of a successful nuclear attack and by strengthening the survivability of second-strike capabilities, it serves as a deterrent against an adversary who might consider a nuclear attack.[88]

## Discourse focuses on Iranian threat

Although international pressures facilitated shifts on the margins of Israeli nuclear policy, the core of the posture remained unchanged. This broad consensus on the success of ambiguity was expressed in the conclusions of two high-level governmental reports, one from the NSC in 2002 and one from the Meridor Committee in 2006.[89] Similarly, on the level of discourse among security elites, virtually all accept that, for the time being, the considerations in favor of ambiguity are stronger than those favoring change. However, Iran's growing nuclear capabilities have fostered a wide-ranging discussion of what Israel's response should be if, despite Israel's efforts, a nuclear-armed adversary emerged in the Middle East.

Today's alternative visions of the appropriate response draw on the same fundamental assumptions that underlay the thinking of the nuclear advocates and skeptics of the 1950s and 1960s. One vision, closer to nuclear advocacy, argues that in such a scenario, Israel should take steps in the direction of an open posture. Another, closer to nuclear skepticism, has renewed the call for an NWFZ as a solution to the Iran nuclear crisis, alongside an emphasis on the detrimental effects of ambiguity on democratic principles. A third position affirms the continuation of ambiguity even in the scenario of a nuclear-armed Iran and raises the prospect of seeking an American nuclear umbrella to strengthen deterrence.

[85] Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel," CRS Report RL33222, Congressional Research Service, February 18, 2022, p. 26, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33222>; Israel Air Industries, "IAI and the Security of Israel," <https://www.iai.co.il/about/history>. See also Uzi Rubin, *From Star Wars to Iron Dome: The Controversy over Israel's Missile Defense* [in Hebrew] (Makkabbim-Re'ut, Israel: Efi Melzer Research and Publishing, 2019).

[86] Uzi Rubin, "Missile Defense and Israel's Deterrence against a Nuclear Iran," in Ephraim Kam, ed., *Israel and a Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence, and Defense* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2008), p. 67, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/(FILE)1216203568.pdf>.

[87] Rubin, p. 67.

[88] Rubin, p. 66.

[89] Aluf Benn, "National Security Council: Israel Must Unilaterally Set Its Borders," *Haaretz*, August 22, 2002, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5012840>; Ze'ev Schiff, "The Meridor Committee's Report: Concern that Middle-Eastern States Will Nuclearize after Iran" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, April 24, 2006, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1100503>.

### Nuclear advocacy

In 1997, Yuval Ne'eman, now outside government, argued that, if an enemy Arab state or Iran were to attain nuclear weapons, the only way to deter it would be by the threat of overwhelming force in retribution and Israel therefore would require a nuclear deterrent, including a second-strike capability.[90] In 2003, a group of Israeli and American experts submitted a report to the Ariel Sharon government in which they concluded that, if a hostile Middle East state were to attain nuclear weapons, Israel's best course would be to declare its own arsenal and disclose details that proved the survivability and penetration capability of its nuclear forces, with the goal of strengthening the enemies' perception of Israeli willingness and capability to carry out its threats of nuclear retaliation.[91]

A number of influential Israeli academics and policy analysists have made similar assertions. Eyal Zisser, the vice rector of Tel Aviv University, has stated that, as more regional states attain their own capabilities, Israel should be prepared to lift the veil on its precise nuclear capabilities.[92] Other analysts agree that a move to an open posture would be the best response to a nuclear Iran, but there is disagreement as to how stable a state of mutually assured destruction (MAD) would be. To be sure, establishment figures such as Netanyahu, Arad, and Ne'eman all have argued strongly that Israel must do everything in its power to prevent such a situation, including the use of overt force. On the other hand, academic analysts such as Dima Adamsky and Reuven Pedahtzur have argued that MAD is a reasonably stable situation and may even be preferable to carrying out a preventive counterproliferation strike.[93]

In 2009, Uzi Arad, then national security adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu, stated that, if Israel ultimately faced a nuclear-armed Iran, "mutual armament is safer than mutual peace." This, he argued, is because a state of mutual disarmament cannot be enforced, as one side can cheat and then leave the other with no deterrent. Instead, he cited the necessity of possessing an overwhelming deterrent against a nuclear-armed adversary, constructed in a way that guarantees retaliation even if the enemy has successfully attacked: "Our defensive force must be enhanced to become so powerful that no one will dare attack us. And if they do, we would undertake such a maximal response that the attacker would not survive."[94]

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[90] Ne'eman, *Jews, Israel, and the Nuclear Issue,* pp. 95–97.

[91] The Project Daniel Group was chaired by a US-based academic, Louis René Beres, and included Naaman Belkind, former assistant to the Israeli deputy minister of defense for special means; Professor Isaac Ben-Israel, a major general in the Israel Air Force Reserves; Dr. Adir Pridor, former head of military analyses, RAFAEL—Advanced Defense Systems Ltd.; and Yoash Tsiddon-Chatto, former Knesset member and former colonel in the Israel Air Force. Its final report was published as Project Daniel, *Israel's Strategic Future* (Shaarei Tikva, Israel: Ariel Center for Policy Research, 2004).

[92] Aviel Magnezi, "Should Israel End Nuclear Ambiguity?" *YNET*, April 15, 2010, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3876261,00.html>; Leslie Susser, "Israel's policy of ambiguity comes under fire," *Jerusalem Post*, May 25, 2010, <https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/israels-policy-of-nuclear-ambiguity-comes-under-fire>.

[93] Reuven Pedatzur, *The Iranian Nuclear Potential—Is it Really So Threatening?* [in Hebrew], *Nativ*, Vol. 109, March 2006; Reuven Pedatzur, "The Iranian Nuclear Threat and the Israeli Options," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2007), pp. 513–41; Reuven Pedatzur, "From Ambiguity to Open Deterrence" [in Hebrew], *Ha'aretz.* October 11, 2006, pp. 39–47, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/1.1144452>; Dima Adamsky, "Why Israel Should Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2012-03-31/why-israel-should-learn-stop-worrying-and-love-bomb>.

[94] Ari Shavit, "The National Security Adviser: Uzi Arad" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, July 10, 2009, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1271206>. Although Arad's comments in this interview seem to echo Kenneth Waltz's position of complacency in the debate on the stability of nuclear deterrence (see Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate* [New York: W.W. Norton, 2012]), it would be a mistake to see Arad as fully in support of Waltz's position. Arad is referring to a situation in which, despite Israel's best efforts, a

More recently, at the ceremony for the renaming of the Dimona reactor installation as the Shimon Peres Negev Nuclear Research Center in 2018, Netanyahu made comments that were relatively explicit, given the context. In his speech, which discussed the necessity of military might in the Middle East, alongside Israel's efforts to prevent an Iranian presence in Syria and to cancel the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program, he said,

> But our enemies know very well what Israel is capable of doing. They are familiar with our policy. Whoever tries to hurt us—we hurt them. … I am not spouting slogans. I am describing a persistent, clear, and determined policy. This is our policy. It is backed by appropriate deployment, equipment, preparedness and—in the hour of need—appropriate orders. Whoever threatens us with destruction puts himself in similar danger, and in any case will not achieve his goal.[95]

### *Nuclear skepticism*

Arguments arising out of the fundamental assumptions of nuclear skepticism were made as well. Reminiscent of Yeshayahu Leibowitz's perspective, Avner Cohen has led the trend criticizing ambiguity as undermining democracy and posing a civilian hazard owing to its lack of proper safety mechanisms.[96] Cohen does not necessarily call for unilateral disarmament before a breakthrough in regional peace, but he is a leader in emphasizing the problems with continued ambiguity.[97] He has argued that Israel should consider combining a move away from ambiguity with a peace deal for a two-state solution and a special arrangement under which Israel would roll back any deployed nuclear weapons without forfeiting its ability to bring them back if necessary.[98] In 2010, he argued that Israel should consider a commitment to a Middle Eastern zone free of "all proliferation-sensitive nuclear facilities, that is, uranium-enrichment and fuel-reprocessing plants as well as large research reactors fueled with either natural or weapons-grade uranium," as part of a deal to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran from emerging.[99] In the immediate future, he asserted, it is in Israel's best interests to participate in arms-control initiatives when it can do so without sacrificing ambiguity, and it should therefore move to ratify the CTBT, the CWC, and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.[100]

The 2000s also saw an attempt to renew the Israeli disarmament movement in the public sphere. Although this viewpoint has virtually no support within the security

nuclear-armed Iran were to emerge. In such a scenario, he argues, mutual deterrence would be a better option than mutual disarmament. Arad, however, is anything but complacent. He makes very clear that Israel must do everything in its power to prevent this scenario from occurring, including preventative military strikes if necessary (Arad and Ben-Har, *NSC*, p. 209). Indeed, Waltz's optimistic view of nuclear proliferation has gained negligible support among actual government policy makers (Francis J. Gavin, "Politics, History and the Ivory Tower-Policy Gap in the Nuclear Proliferation Debate," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 [2012], p. 577).

[95] Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "PM Netanyahu Attends Ceremony at the Shimon Peres Negev Nuclear Research Center," August 29, 2018, <https://embassies.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2018/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-attends-ceremony-at-the-Peres-Nuclear-Research-Center-19-August-2018.aspx>.

[96] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p. 345; Avner Cohen and Marvin Miller, "Bringing Israel's Bomb out of the Basement," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2010-09-01/bringing-israels-bomb-out-basement>.

[97] Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p. 347.

[98] Avner Cohen, *The Last Taboo* [in Hebrew] (Or Yehuda, Israel: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2005), p. 263.

[99] Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 238.

[100] Cohen and Miller, "Out of the Basement," pp. 37, 42.

establishment, support is found among Knesset members from the Meretz and Hadash parties,[101] as well as some senior Israeli academics. These new nuclear skeptics argue that, since the announcement of the Arab Peace Initiative (API) in 2002, a path has been opened for Israel to attain both regional normalization and disarmament. If, these skeptics argue, Israel would join the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state and pursue a territorial settlement along the lines proposed by the API, it could gain regional normalization and greatly improve its image among Western European powers. Furthermore, because, in their assessment, Iran is pursuing nuclear capabilities only because Israel has them,[102] Israel could use this move to come to an agreement with Iran and thereby end the latter's nuclear progress by diplomatic means.[103] A former officer in the IDF's Planning Branch, Shmuel Meir, has argued that maintaining nuclear ambiguity will become an obstacle to progress on regional peace talks and should therefore be reassessed.[104] Professor Uri Bar-Joseph adds that because it is Israel's *conventional* superiority that has been the real deterrent in recent decades, such a move would allow Israel to retain its current abilities to deter conventional threats while at the same time eliminating the prospect of nonconventional threats, by Iran or other regional states.[105]

### *Pragmatists consider US guarantee*

Some Israeli leaders and analysts see a US security guarantee as a potential alternative to an open posture were a nuclear-armed state to arise in the Middle East. At Camp David in 2000, Ehud Barak sought to sign a formal defense treaty with the United States to provide a nuclear umbrella against Iran.[106] More recently, he has argued that Iran has essentially become a nuclear threshold state and that, for Israel's strategic calculus, this situation should be considered equivalent to being a nuclear state. In this context, he calls for Israel to continue to nurture and rely on its close relationship with Washington and the widespread assumption of Israel's nuclear capabilities.[107] Former deputy national security adviser Chuck Freilich calls for Israel to initiate a defense treaty in any case—and especially given rising nuclear threats.[108] Among analysts, Ephraim Kam and Yair Evron have raised the idea of a defense treaty with the US as an important avenue to be explored

[101] "Proposal [submitted by Hadash party MK Issam Makhoul] for Israel's Nuclear Policy" [in Hebrew], Knesset Archives, February 2, 2000, <https://knesset.gov.il/tql/knesset_new/knesset15/HTML_28_03_2012_09-20-03-AM/20000202@080-00FEB02@011.html>.

[102] Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land: A Critical Analysis of Israel's Security and Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 348.

[103] Sharon Dolev, *Nukes, Israel and the Middle East* [in Hebrew], Israeli Disarmament Movement, 2013; Akiva Eldar, "Peace for Nukes" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, September 2, 2011, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/1.1283639>; Moshe Raz, "According to Foreign Sources," Israeli Disarmament Movement, October 9, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktoplqbEz3g>.

[104] Shmuel Meir, "Peace and the Missing Link" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, September 8, 2004, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/1.997698>.

[105] Uri Bar-Joseph. "Why Israel Should Trade Its Nukes: Stop Iran's Centrifuges by Accepting a Nuclear-Free Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, October 25, 2012.

[106] Arad and Ben-Har, *NSC*, p. 210.

[107] Ehud Barak, "Looking at the Iranian Reality Directly in the Eyes" [in Hebrew], *Yediot Ahronot*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-6001882,00.html>. Former prime minister Ehud Olmert responded to Barak's statement with an article of his own, in which he argued that Iran should not yet be considered a threshold or nuclear state and that Israel must continue its struggle to prevent such a scenario by close cooperation with Washington. Ehud Olmert, "Clarifying Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, September 26, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/.premium-1.10243022>.

[108] Charles D. Freilich, "Can Israel Survive without America?" *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2017), p. 143.

in a scenario of a nuclear-armed Iran,[109] and Adam Raz comes out strongest in favor of such a move.[110]

## Looking ahead

As in past decades, Israel's future nuclear posture will be affected by international pressures. A move toward an open posture, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, serious consideration of formal limitations or rollback on current capabilities could come about only in the context of a significant change in the international factors that have produced and upheld ambiguity: the lack of the emergence of a nuclear-armed adversary in the region, US support for the continuation of ambiguity, and the lack of a broad and well-established regional peace. These three factors are discussed in turn below.

First, the most likely candidate for the emergence of a nuclear-armed state in the region is Iran, although it could be Turkey, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia as well, and Syria and Libya have already tried. Although the JCPOA postponed Iran's ability to progress toward such a goal, it also had the effect of acknowledging Iran's status as a nuclear threshold state by granting international approval to its vast nuclear infrastructure, including thousands of advanced centrifuges for uranium enrichment. This vast nuclear infrastructure had been considered illegitimate since the first UN Security Council resolution in 2006 called for an end to all uranium enrichment in Iran. Furthermore, the deal itself contains sunset clauses that will make it obsolete 10 to 15 years after its signing. In the past few years, since the United States left the JCPOA, Iran has accumulated larger amounts of highly enriched uranium than ever before,[111] and it is unlikely that any future arrangement attained by diplomatic means will roll this progress back any further than the original deal. So, even though Iran is not yet a nuclear-armed state and may never become one, it is certainly the closest that a Middle Eastern state hostile to Israel has come. The future of the Iranian nuclear program will be the primary factor that will influence the future of Israel's nuclear posture.

Second, the position of the United States will continue to play a major role in the future development of Israel's nuclear posture. Although the Nixon–Meir understanding has proven surprisingly robust over the decades, it is not unchangeable. Obama showed a certain willingness to deviate from it in 2010 when the United States allowed the initiative for a special conference on a Middle Eastern WMD-free zone to be approved at the NPT review conference, in contrast to previous administrations that had taken care to block such initiatives.[112] Subsequent to this episode, however, Obama restated and reinforced his commitment to the status quo and committed to Israel that the conference would not move forward without Israeli approval.[113] In any case, it is not inconceivable that a future

[109] Efraim Kam, speech delivered at the Conference on Israel and a Nuclear Iran, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, December 12, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Si6CVQSeLnA>; Yair Evron, "An Israel–Iran Balance of Nuclear Deterrence: Seeds of Instability," Memorandum No. 94, Institute for National Security Studies, July 2008, pp. 59, 61, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-iran-balance-nuclear-deterrence-seeds-instability/>.

[110] Adam Raz, "The Value of Nuclear Ambiguity in the Face of a Nuclear Iran," *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2011), p. 29, <https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/(FILE)1320323666.pdf>.

[111] David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Iran Nears an Atomic Milestone" *New York Times*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/13/us/politics/iran-nuclear-fuel-enrichment.html>.

[112] Ben Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, trans. Ora Cummings (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017), p. 300.

[113] Arad and Ben-Har, *NSC*, p. 232; Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, p. 301; Dan Williams, "Interview: Israel Sees Nuclear Vindication in Obama Comments," Reuters, July 7, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLDE666052>.

US administration with a strong commitment to nuclear arms control may attempt to pressure Israel to show more flexibility or may refrain from blocking the convening of a future conference on an NWFZ. When he was running for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Bernie Sanders stated his commitment that, if he were president, he "would pledge never to start a nuclear war and work to get the other nuclear-armed countries to make similar declarations. But that is just a first step. We need to bring the United States and the rest of the world together to do everything we can to rid this world of nuclear weapons."[114] He has also stated his preference that Washington put greater pressure on Israel regarding elements of the latter's foreign policy. As the left wing of the Democratic Party continues to call into question the rationale for conventional US military assistance to Israel[115] and promotes the idea of leveraging the security cooperation to pressure Israel diplomatically, it seems conceivable that a future president may deviate from the current understandings.

Third, a more optimistic scenario could possibly emerge, whereby Iran may undergo a counterrevolution and a new regime might abandon the policy of overt hostility to the Jewish state. While it is not clear how likely this is in the near future, it is likewise not certain that the current regime will remain indefinitely, as signs of instability abound. Moreover, if a new regime were to emerge, Israel and Iran do have a precedent of decades of positive relations from the pre-Khomeini period that could serve as a basis for a reimagining of the current hostility. In this context, the normalization agreements reached in 2020 between Israel and Arab Muslim states—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—are a trend that is reducing a significant obstacle. If reform in Iran occurs, that obstacle will have been further reduced. Although Israel's immediate neighbors have yet to agree to a similar level of peaceful relations—as the agreements with Egypt and Jordan do not entail fully normalized relations between the countries—progress toward regional peace serves to remove long-standing obstacles in the way of Israel's participation in arms-control discussions. At the same time, the Abraham Accords have demonstrated that neither the resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians nor Israel's ambiguous nuclear posture is an obstacle to broad normalization of Israel's relations with the Arab world, as Israel is not perceived as a security threat. In fact, Israel's nuclear capabilities may have even been an inducement for the Gulf states to align with Israel against the common threat of Iran.

Israel's nuclear policy is the product of the interaction between compelling external pressures and disparate internal viewpoints on issues of security strategy and nuclear weapons. Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity emerged as a result of the opposing external pressures and the ideological debates arising from the differing approaches among its political and military leadership. Since its emergence, ambiguity has become entrenched as a result of continued compelling external pressures, but changes have been made on the margins, both toward laying the groundwork for a shift to an open posture and toward adopting a greater openness to discussing future arms-control agreements if a stable regional peace were to take hold. These shifts on the margins in opposing

[114] Bernie Sanders, "Presidential Candidates: Bernie Sanders," Council for a Livable World, n.d., <https://livableworld.org/presidential-candidates-bernie-sanders/>.

[115] Aluf Benn, "Iran Becoming a Threshold Nuclear State Challenges Israel's Policy of Ambiguity," *Haaretz*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/as-iran-nears-a-nuclear-warhead-israel-might-have-to-reveal-its-own-atomic-power-1.10233347>.

directions are the product of the disparate internal viewpoints within Israel, representing nuclear advocacy and nuclear skepticism. Nuclear pragmatism has remained the dominant view, however, given the external pressures working against more drastic moves to either an open posture or a regional nonproliferation agreement.

However, if any of the above three scenarios were to come to fruition, the external pressures that continue to make pragmatism the strongest policy argument would be changed, and Israel might reconsider its posture of ambiguity. In this context, the basic logic underlying the three approaches outlined in this article—nuclear advocacy, nuclear ambiguity, and nuclear pragmatism—would form the basis of the debate on a change in Israel's nuclear policy. Appreciating the long-standing continuity of these approaches in Israel's internal debate is the key to gaining insight into Israel's thinking as we look ahead.

## Notes on contributor

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## Disclaimer

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