

# The Middle East

## Free of nukes?

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Hardly a week goes by without an Israeli top official threatening to attack Iran so as to disrupt or destroy its nuclear programme, which is suspected of moving in the direction of acquiring nuclear weapons. Shamelessly, as well, the extreme right think-tanks in the Washington Beltway and many faithful followers of Israel echo these dangerous sentiments. They send Tel Aviv a signal that it has a green light to launch an attack on Iran at the time of its choosing, along with the reassuring message that the United States Government will step forward in support, whatever the adverse economic and diplomatic consequences for the region. True, there are occasional expressions of interest in continuing the search for a peaceful outcome coming from the White House, but the drift toward a military solution seems to be gathering an alarming momentum.

On the level of responsible international behaviour, it is disturbing because any non-defensive recourse to force violates international law and the UN Charter. Force is only lawful in international conflict situations if used as self-defence in response to a prior armed attack. The core Charter commitment in Article 2(4) prohibits threats as well as uses of force, and by that standard both Israel and the United States must be counted as law breakers. When the United States flaunts the Charter it was so instrumental in drafting after World War Two it sets a negative standard for others to follow.

On a more material level, there are a series of likely very heavy costs associated with carrying out an attack on Iran. Iranian leaders have a variety of instruments

available for retaliation, and there is little reason to think that these would not be used. It is highly probable that Israel would be attacked in response by Hezbollah and Hamas, both of which have the capabilities to inflict serious damage. Even more damage could be done by Iran itself, which is developing long-range delivery capacities by way of advanced missile technology and a type of bomb-carrying drone aircraft. Then there exists the Iranian option to block passage through the Strait of Hormuz, through which two-thirds of the world's imported oil travels, undoubtedly producing supply shortages, a spike in prices, long petrol queues in countries around the world, and global economic chaos. Beyond this, there are a variety of unresolved conflicts in the region that could be easily inflamed by Iranian interventions, most obviously Iraq, and there remains the ominous possibility that the entire region would be transformed into a war zone.

What may be the most troubling aspect of this dreary picture is the failure to explore alternatives to the confrontational diplomacy, sanctions, and threat tactics so far relied upon to dissuade Iran from moving closer to the nuclear weapon threshold. The most attractive of these alternatives would be the attempted negotiation of a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone. There is widespread awareness and support for this initiative among the governments in the region and the world. It was a priority goal agreed to by consensus at the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. But there is one large catch that has so far been a decisive inhibitor: Israel is unalterably opposed, as the establishment of the zone would require Israel to dismantle its own nuclear weapons arsenal.

Obviously, the idea of a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone has little regional appeal if it does not include Israel. Israel's insistence on retaining nuclear weapons while being ready to wage a war, with menacing repercussions, to prevent Iran from ever acquiring such weaponry, is expressive of the deeply troubling double standards that are an overall feature of the non-proliferation regime. When India went ahead and became an overt nuclear weapons state in 1998, it was rewarded by the United States rather than punished. The United States has directed much outrage at the allegedly undisclosed and officially denied Iranian nuclear ambitions over the years, but done its best to shield Israel from any criticism, or even from an obligation of full disclosure.

Such discriminatory nuclear diplomacy incurs high costs in the present global atmosphere of a questionable economic recovery and a stalled war in Afghanistan. The United States has so far been self-foreclosed from following the much more promising path of exploring the negotiability of

a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone that would immediately improve overall regional stability and, as well, take account of the prospect of many Arab countries poised to embark on nuclear energy programmes of their own. Indeed, without such a zone, there is a substantial possibility of a regional nuclear arms race that would tempt countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran, to have the supposed deterrent benefits of a nuclear arsenal.

A Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone that includes all the countries of the region is an issue that demands US leadership. The stakes are high. It offers the United States an extraordinary opportunity to redeem its tarnished reputation in the region and regain its claim to provide responsible global leadership. Only the United States has the leverage and stature to bring the diverse cast of regional actors to the negotiating table to make the needed effort to avert war. There can be no advance assurances that such a diplomatic initiative would succeed, but to fail to try would be lamentable.