

The First Two Steps to Cope with Military Asymmetries in the Middle East (I) Listing Security Concerns and Motives behind Weapon Programs in Egypt, Israel, and Syria

Christian Weidlich and Bernd W. Kubbig

in Cooperation with Gawdat Bahgat, Uri Bar-Joseph, Marc Finaud, Judith Palmer Harik, and Aviv Melamud

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs) do not exist in a vacuum: they are embedded in a social – domestic, regional, and international – context. Despite their destabilizing features, these weapons are not a threat in themselves. Yet, they become so and are perceived as such, once countries factor them into their overall foreign policies, reflecting the conflict structures, alliances, as well as domestic power constellations and motivations for military activities. Specific weapons matter more in some political contexts than in others: Israel fears Iranian missiles that can reach its territory, especially if they were nuclear tipped. But it does not fear Tehran's weapons across the board. Conversely, in Syria the Bashar Al-Assad regime regards Iranian missiles not as a threat but as an asset against its adversary Israel.

Analyzing Threat Perceptions, Motives, and Interests as a Way Out of the 'Jungle' of Military Complexities

These insights are of utmost importance in adequately conceptualizing and analyzing an arms control/disarmament process. If the Middle East is to get rid of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems and to establish a WMD/DVs Free Zone, a cooperative, 'give and take' approach to arms control, reductions, and disarmament must be found. However, a comparison among different categories of weapons is difficult. Static comparisons by category can be misleading if a numerical balance in one category ignores large disparities in other sectors. In addition,

while soldiers and weapons may easily be compared quantitatively, perhaps more relevant factors such as motivation, loyalty, skills, and training of the fighters as well as command, control, and communication capabilities are hardly quantifiable. The same holds true for technical and organizational quality as well as for the availability and reliability of warheads and/or delivery vehicles.¹

Without presuming to provide a blueprint for experienced negotiators, we suggest a strategy for coping with the danger of getting lost in the 'jungle' of military complexities by initially avoiding a debate on WMD/DVs in terms of 'objective' data reflecting military capabilities. Instead, it is more productive as a first step for the participating countries at the Middle East Conference (MEC) to present their lists of security concerns. Hence, in this POLICY BRIEF we will initially analyze the perceptions of foreign policies and military arsenals. Addressing these factors constitutes a core condition of success for any arms control/reduction process. For our analysis it will be relevant to give rough assessments of the degree of tensions and intensities of conflicts and their potential for escalation, based on the assumption that relationships among actors at the country level differ, and that they vary over time.

As a second step, we propose to identify the motives and interests behind weapon programs in the WMD and DVs area because threat perceptions and security concerns, expressed by the representatives of the regional participants, are not

Abstract

In order to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs) in the Middle East, a cooperative, 'give and take' approach to arms control, reductions, and disarmament must be found. Without providing a blueprint, we suggest a strategy for coping with the 'jungle' of military complexities by presenting the lists of security concerns of the participating countries at the Middle East Conference as a first step. As a second step, we propose to identify the motives and interests behind WMD and DV programs, which additionally reflect domestic factors such as historical experiences, military-industrial bureaucratic interests, and broad domestic power constellations.

Taken together, these security concerns, motives, and interests constitute the stumbling blocks on the gradual way towards a WMD/DVs Free Zone. The dialectical, yet asymmetrical relationship between conflict formations and weapons is also relevant for assessing confidence- and security building measures (CSBMs). Hence, the conclusion is to build both upon the lists of concerns and the motives and interests by conceptualizing weapon/DV-related CSBMs as the next step along the incremental path towards a WMD/DVs Free Zone. While this issue covers Egypt, Israel, and Syria, the following one will consider Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the United States vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. ■

This POLICY BRIEF draws on a number of contributions from participants of the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA workshop held in Alghero, Italy, from May 23–25, 2012. Members of the working group came from Germany, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

the entire story. Motives and interests additionally reflect domestic factors such as historical experiences, military-industrial-bureaucratic interests, and broad domestic power constellations including media and public opinion. To be more specific: we will include indigenous factors in our analysis of the build-up or procurement strategies for WMD/DVs whenever possible. Taken together, the lists of security concerns and these motives and interests constitute the stumbling blocks on the gradual way to the ultimate objective of a WMD/DVs Free Zone. Nevertheless, it is of special importance to ask each regional state *what it can do* to make the WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East a reality.

Structure of This Policy Brief

Based on the above outline, we have identified major conflict formations. In this POLICY BRIEF we will analyze the security concerns, motives, and interests as the essential driving forces behind WMD/DVs build-ups of:

- Egypt vis-à-vis Israel and Iran;
- Israel vis-à-vis Iran and Arab countries; and
- Syria vis-à-vis Israel and Arab states.

In our view, examining threat perceptions constitutes a promising starting point and a first step for the complex agenda of the Middle East Conference with its ambitious goal of creating a WMD/DVs Free Zone. Our analysis will provide an overview of the regional conflict constellations and identify the most important and urgent security concerns. Based on these insights, it will be possible, in a third step, to conceptualize confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) as elements along the incremental path towards the envisaged WMD/DVs Free Zone.

This POLICY BRIEF constitutes the first of two which deal with lists of security concerns and motives as well as interests behind weapon programs. While this issue covers Egypt, Israel, and Syria, the following one will consider Iran vis-à-vis the U.S. and Israel; the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) vis-à-vis Israel and Iran; and the United States vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. Taken together, these POLICY BRIEFS (No. 13 and 14) will present a fairly comprehensive picture of the security concerns, motives, and interests as the major driving

factors behind WMD/DVs programs in the Middle East.

Egypt's Security Concerns towards Israel and Iran

The relationship between Egypt and Israel has never been an easy one. Despite their peace treaty, Cairo still perceives Israel as its main regional antagonist.² Egypt considers its neighbor's nuclear weapons, missiles, and superior air power the primary (potential) threat, especially to its status and role as the self-proclaimed leader of the Arab world.

The peace treaty between the two states has been domestically controversial since its conclusion and this has not changed after Hosni Mubarak's ousting. Although the Egyptian military and President Mohamed Morsi have so far declared that the treaty will not be rescinded, the attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September 2011, increasing border instability, and the termination of the gas supply to Israel illustrate why bilateral relations have reached their lowest level since 1979. The situation between the two countries can only be described as a 'cold peace' in terms of low tensions. The Arab Spring has had a significant effect on domestic issues and in the long term could lead to changes in the country's foreign policy, including its relations with Israel (see POLICY BRIEF Nos. 9/10 by Erzsébet N. Rózsa et al.). Since any new government will presumably be more accountable to its people, it is reasonable to expect that its foreign policy will be more in line with domestic aspirations and popular sentiments. For the moment, however, Morsi has stated that Egypt "will preserve all international treaties and charters."³ In his first speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2012, he ruled out any changes to the peace treaty with Israel, although he has so far avoided invoking the word 'Israel' itself.

A Nuclear Iran as a Threat to Egypt's Status and Role in the Arab World

As for the relationship between Cairo and Tehran, the Islamic Revolution in Iran led to the severing of the diplomatic ties between the two countries. Although relations were resumed in 1991 at the level of interest offices accompanied by several high-level contacts over the last years, there are a number of conflicting interests and Egyptian fears towards the

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Islamic Republic. So far, Cairo has been concerned with how to position Tehran in the regional order. Mubarak developed a culture of sensitivity towards the double standard between the treatment of Israel and the non-nuclear Arab states in the region. Egypt shares the assessment that Israel remains the only existing nuclear menace in the entire region. A nuclear Iran would be an additional threat to the status and role of Egypt in the Middle East – and this prestige factor cannot be overrated in understanding Cairo's foreign policy behavior. However, it remains to be seen how a post-Mubarak Egypt will position itself in the region. A first indication was President Morsi's visit to Iran in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement summit, the first by an Egyptian leader since 1979. In his speech he was unequivocal in his criticism of the Assad regime in Syria, Iran's closest ally, thereby distancing himself from Tehran: "Our solidarity with the struggle of the Syrian people against an oppressive regime that has lost its legitimacy is an ethical duty as it is a political and strategic necessity."²⁴

Furthermore, it is unclear how the American-Egyptian relationship will develop in years to come. Cairo is a major non-NATO ally and the country received an average of \$1.3 billion in annual military aid from the U.S. during the Mubarak years. However, Egypt is expected to maintain its existing close relations with Washington because of the influence of the Egyptian military and the economic exigency the country faces. During her visit in July 2012, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reaffirmed "the strong support of the United States for the Egyptian people and for [the] democratic transition."²⁵

Motives and Interests behind Conventional and Non-conventional Weapon Programs in Egypt

In the past, Israel has been Cairo's major point of reference for military decision making in the area of weapons of mass destruction and delivery vehicles, notably ballistic missiles. In recent years, as stated above, the possibility of a nuclear Iran has become an additional concern for Cairo. After the defeat in the 1967 War, Egypt realized that it could not match Israel's military capabilities, since it lacked the resources needed to continue or even expand its nuclear programs. Instead, the projects were frozen and the Anwar Sadat



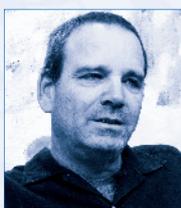
Christian Weidlich is a Graduate Research Assistant at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and on the staff of the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST as a Co-Editor of the POLICY BRIEF series. He holds an MA in International Studies/Peace and Conflict Studies from Goethe University, Frankfurt, and a BA in Political Science from Münster University. His research interests include arms control in the Middle East and the automation of warfare.



Bernd W. Kubbig is a Project Director at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and Adj. Professor (Privatdozent) at Goethe University, Frankfurt. Since 2006 he has been coordinating the international expert groups "Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East" and the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST. He specializes in U.S. Foreign and Security Policy, especially on the Middle East, missile defense, and space.



Gawdat Bahgat is a Professor at the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. He holds a PhD from Florida State University and an MA from the American University in Cairo. His areas of expertise include energy security, counterterrorism, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially for the Middle East and the Caspian Sea/Central Asia, as well as American foreign policy.



Uri Bar-Joseph is a Professor at the Department for International Relations at Haifa University, Israel. He concentrates on strategic and intelligence studies, especially focusing on the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israeli security policy. He is best known for his studies of the intelligence failure of the Yom Kippur War and his book "The Watchman Fell Asleep" won the Israeli Political Science Association Best Book Award in 2002. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Stanford University, CA.



Marc Finaud is Senior Advisor of the Emerging Security Challenges Programme of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). He joined the French Foreign Ministry in 1977 working mainly on issues related to the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and to disarmament. In 1996 he was appointed Deputy Head of Mission at the French Embassy in Tel Aviv and joined the Team of Negotiators of the EU Special Envoy to the Middle East.



Judith Palmer Harik is a Political Analyst and President of Matn University, Beirut. She holds an MA and a PhD from the University of Iowa and was Professor of Comparative Politics at the American University in Beirut from 1981 until 2003. She has studied Lebanon's Hezbollah movement since its emergence in the early 1980s and is further an expert on civil war-related issues and post-war conflicts.



Aviv Melamud is a Research Associate and PhD candidate at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), working on compliance in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Her further interests include justice in international relations, arms control negotiations, and Israeli politics and society. She holds a BA in Politics, Government, and Israeli Studies from Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba, and an MA in International Relations from Tel Aviv University.

government signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1968 in order to receive technical assistance to establish a civilian nuclear program. Yet it delayed ratification of the treaty until 1981 as a bargaining tactic to induce Israeli cooperation on nuclear disarmament. In addition, the signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 showed that Egypt does not believe it faces an external security threat significant enough to embark on a costly nuclear program. Yet, Israel has remained the most important point of reference for Cairo's policies in the WMD realm. Although Egypt is known to have employed mustard gas in the Yemeni Civil War from 1963 to 1967, it mainly uses its reported but officially unconfirmed chemical weapon program to put pressure on Israel for a comprehensive regional WMD ban. Again, Egypt's policies are primarily driven more by its quest for status and prestige in the Arab world than by its security concerns.

Throughout the years, the mentioned role of the United States as Cairo's most important supplier of weaponry has had a restraining but also reassuring effect on Egypt. This generalization also applies to delivery vehicles, especially missiles. Although very little is reliably known about its missile and rocket arsenal, it is safe to assume that Egypt's capabilities are rather limited, and for the time being they will not constitute a vital part of its military posture. So far, Cairo has hardly ventured beyond the 450 km range of its Project T short-range ballistic missile. It remains to be seen whether the prestige and status factor will be more important for the new leadership in Cairo – a nuclear-armed Iran would continue to underscore Egypt's inferior position with respect to nuclear technology in general and nuclear weapons in particular. However, it is unlikely that such a development would trigger an Egyptian nuclear project.

To sum up, Egypt, which has been highly affected by the events of the Arab Spring, is in a state of flux with respect to its list of concerns, which are mostly focused on Israel and Iran. Yet it remains to be seen how and to what extent these worries translate into the intention to acquire and develop arsenals which are relevant to the agenda of the Middle East Conference. Overall, Egypt's arms control commitment and its readiness to play a leading role at the Middle East Conference seem to remain intact. Since the fall of Mubarak,

Egypt has spared no effort to clarify its undiminished interest in a regional WMD/DVs Free Zone.

Israel's Security Concerns towards Arab States and Iran

Generally speaking, security issues are of paramount importance to Israel. For more than six decades, it has repeatedly been involved in armed conflicts with regional state and non-state actors. Israel has heavily relied on deterrence and preventive force, both to anticipate the emergence of new challenges to its security and to contain existing ones. Israeli perceptions of the Middle East before the Arab Spring dichotomously differed. On the one hand, there have been radical states and movements, including Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah, who aspired to change the current situation in the region and who defied Israel's position in the Middle East and U.S. influence. On the other hand, there have been moderate states, primarily Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the members of the GCC.⁶ However, the Arab Spring has probably made this simplistic distinction obsolete with Arab governments becoming more attuned to their public and thus less predictable.⁷

Israel and the Arab Spring

Israel attempted to remain on the sidelines during the Arab Spring, but the developments prompted much concern and anxiety within the country, due to the hostility towards Israel in the Arab world expressed in anti-Israeli sentiments and mass protests. Israel's central concern is the rise to power of radical Islamist regimes following these popular revolts. Israel is very worried that its relations with Egypt and Jordan, the only Arab states at peace with Israel, could dramatically change for the worse. In addition, it is unclear how the Syrian foreign policy would change should the Assad regime in Damascus be ousted. Israel and Syria are officially in a state of war. However, the common border has so far remained calm despite limited clashes.

Diminished state control over certain areas of the countries in transformation, which can already be witnessed in the Sinai region, could allow a growing freedom of operation for terrorist organizations – including an increase in the supply of illegal arms and missiles and as regards

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Syria, the access to chemical weapons. Currently, and possibly aggravated by the Arab Spring events, one of the major challenges to the Israel's deterrence involves threats by Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Islamic organizations, amounting to a permanent escalation potential. Though their resources are limited (compared to those of state armies), such groups can cause major disruptions to daily life in Israel, while denying their opponent the opportunity for a decisive counter-blow. Their growing inventories and extensive use of high-trajectory weapons has created a new type of menace, which regards both the Israeli ability to protect its citizenry and its reputation for military effectiveness.

Israel and the Iranian Nuclear Threat

Currently, the possibility that the Islamic Republic of Iran would become a nuclear power is central to Israeli threat perceptions. This is the focal point of Israel's strategic thinking, and it dominates the national security discourse. Relations between Israel and Iran have not always been as bad as they are today. In 1950, Iran de facto (though not de jure) recognized the State of Israel.⁸ Following the Islamic Revolution, however, Iran turned into Israel's strategic nightmare, combining extreme anti-Israeli rhetoric, massive support of anti-Israeli militia – primarily Hezbollah and Hamas –, denial of the Holocaust, and the rapid development of a large-scale nuclear program.⁹ The bilateral relationship can generally be described as mutually hostile with an explosive escalation potential.

Israel has never faced a real threat to its existence except for the first weeks of the Arab armies' invasion in May 1948. According to the Israeli government, in the past several years this situation would change dramatically if Tehran became a nuclear power, because the Islamic Republic would then have the capability to destroy Israel. In addition, there is a serious concern about Israel's freedom to respond to Hamas and Hezbollah acting under the protection of an Iranian nuclear umbrella. The Israeli fear is that every military action against these groups will be construed as provoking Iran which could use its capabilities to constrain Israeli actions.

It is widely publicized that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu favors a military

strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. The threat of a nuclear Iran is considered far more dangerous than the possible response to an Israeli airstrike, even if Hezbollah and Hamas joined Tehran in retaliating. However, statements by the former chief of Mossad, Meir Dagan, and the former head of Shin Bet, Yuval Diskin, have voiced objections to Israeli air strikes and this has created the image of a gap between the assessment of the 'professionals' and the ideas advanced by some 'politicians.'¹⁰ Although these experts do not question the severity of the Iranian problem, they point to the fact that it is not exclusively an Israeli-Iranian matter and should be resolved by the international community.

Public opinion on this issue is difficult to assess due to the abundance of surveys which differ in their focus. Yet it is clear that Jewish Israelis perceive the Iranian menace as both imminent and significant. While a survey from 2009 found that only 21 percent of Israelis believed Iran would attack Israel with nuclear weapons, still 59 percent supported an Israeli attack against Iran's nuclear sites if it learned that Tehran has nuclear weapons.¹¹ A poll in March 2012 assessing Israeli public perceptions of the Iranian threat revealed that an absolute majority, 77 percent, believed that a nuclear Iran poses an existential threat to the country, and that the only way to stop its nuclearization is a military attack. Two-thirds found that the price Israel would have to pay for living in the shadow of an Iranian bomb is greater than the cost of attacking its nuclear facilities. Furthermore, 75 percent believe that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, the Palestinians and Hezbollah will become more aggressive against Israel.¹² In a later poll, however, a majority of Israelis opposed an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities without U.S. cooperation, and thought it was unlikely that Israel will soon launch a unilateral strike against the Islamic Republic: 61 percent of those questioned opposed an Israeli strike, compared to 27 percent in favor.¹³

Finally, the continuing decline of Israel's international image is cause for much concern, mainly because it is understood that legitimacy is a critical component of national security. It is important to note that to many, the "phenomenon of delegitimization" is considered not only a strategic threat, but an unwarranted

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Table No. 1: Security Concerns/Threat Perceptions of the Middle East States Analyzed

	Towards	Degree of Tensions/ Potential of Escalation	Security Concerns/Threat Perceptions	
			Foreign Policy	Weapons
Egypt	Israel	'Cold peace'	Israeli-Palestinian conflict; inflexible insistence on "Peace First!"	Regional monopoly of nuclear weapons as a challenge to Egypt's role and status; military supremacy across the board and considerable offensive capabilities
	Iran	Low tensions; no full diplomatic ties	Status-related factors; current clash over Assad regime	Possible status as a nuclear weapon state as a challenge to Egypt's role and status
	Saudi Arabia	Low tensions	Status-related factors and (at times) rivalry for Arab leadership	–
Israel	Iran	Mutually hostile relationship with explosive escalation potential	Aggressive rhetoric and foreign policy; quest for regional leadership; support of hostile regimes (Syria) and non-state actors (Hamas and Hezbollah)	Suspected nuclear weapons development and missiles
	Syria	Officially in state of war; calm border (despite current limited clashes)	Change of foreign policy after Assad's ousting; political instability; radical anti-Israel government	Chemical weapons, missiles
	Egypt	'Cold peace'	Insecure borders; unraveling of peace treaty; political instability; radical anti-Israel government; uncontrolled terrorist activities; inflexible insistence on "Disarmament First!"	Missiles and probable chemical weapons
	Other Arab States	Traditional tensions with regard to Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict	Uncertainty; unraveling of peace treaty with Jordan; emergence of radical anti-Israel governments	Conventional capabilities
	Non-state Actors	Permanent escalation potential	Basic anti-Israeli attitude; terrorization of Israeli citizens; fear of foreign policy restraints while responding to threats by non-state actors under the Iranian nuclear umbrella	Missiles and rockets of Hamas and Hezbollah
Syria	Israel	Highly adversarial; officially in state of war	Aggressive foreign policy; occupation of Golan Heights	Monopoly of nuclear weapons; military supremacy across the board and considerable offensive capabilities
	U.S.	Basically hostile	Regional dominance; fear of intervention	Strong military presence across the board in the Middle East

one. Delegitimization is, for instance, considered "a type of asymmetric warfare" through which "attempts to defeat Israel both militarily and through terror have failed, Israel's enemies are now trying to pull the ideational ground from under its feet."¹⁴ This challenge appears at times to be insurmountable, and while most criticism of Israel focuses on its continued occupation of the West Bank, the roots of its lack of legitimacy, some claim, are deeper and would not be restored by a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Motives and Interests behind Israel's Nuclear Program

In the history of Israel's nuclear project it is useful to distinguish between the powerful presence of the 'operational milieu' (reality) and the 'psychological milieu' (perception of this reality) that has motivated Israeli leaders to initiate and expand activities in this area. The latter category reflects the moral imperatives arising from the collective memory of Jewish history and experiences – which



can, however, be instrumentalized – and the former category refers to more recent military and political factors.

The roots of the ‘psychological milieu’ are 2000 years of Jewish life in exile and the experience of the Holocaust during World War II. These experiences encouraged a fundamental distrust of non-Jews (‘Goyim’) as well as a push for Jewish self-reliance, and a national commitment to prevent, by all means necessary, another Holocaust (‘never again’). By contrast, the ‘operational milieu’ refers to Israel’s quantitative disadvantages vis-à-vis the Arab states in terms of size of its territory, as well as population and national resources. The main stages in which Israel’s nuclear arsenal was built up during the last 60 years and the way the Israeli nuclear doctrine was shaped reflect the impact of the psychological and the operational milieus.

The Early Years of the Nuclear Project

The rise of pan-Arabism under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the mid-1950s, together with an Israeli perception of international isolation, contributed to a sense of existential insecurity and to a felt need to balance the rise of Arab power via the so-called ‘great equalizer.’ French readiness to build a nuclear reactor in Dimona got the project underway in secret. An internal debate about its necessity – the first and the last debate of its kind in Israel’s history – started at the beginning of the 1960s and ended in 1967.

The crisis of May/June of 1967 initiated by Nasser’s blockade of the Straits of Tiran, the deployment of Arab armies along the border, and public Arab threats created a real fear that Israel was on the eve of destruction. Under these circumstances Israel crossed the nuclear threshold and assembled a few nuclear devices. At the same time, the decisive military victory in the following Six Day War showed that fears of defeat were groundless and that the conventional superiority of the Israel Defense Forces made its nuclear capability redundant.

The shock of the successful Arab surprise attack in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which, as Defense Minister Moshe Dayan famously said, threatened ‘the Third Temple,’ prompted proposals to use Israel’s WMD capabilities to prevent additional Arab gains. Although Prime Minister Golda Meir vetoed such moves,

the trauma of the Yom Kippur War pushed Israel to a major quantitative and qualitative build-up of its nuclear arsenal and delivery vehicles in the decade following the war. Eight years later, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin justified the Israeli raid on Iraq’s nuclear reactor Osirak (June 1981) by claiming it was necessary to avert “a mortal danger to the people of Israel.”¹⁵ In the aftermath of the operation Israel officially announced what became known as the ‘Begin Doctrine’: “Under no circumstances will we allow an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction against our people. We shall defend the citizens of Israel in time and with all the means at our disposal.”¹⁶ The doctrine added another layer to Israel’s defense policy by aiming at preserving a regional nuclear monopoly.

In the 1990s, the Oslo Peace Process and the prospect of reaching a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict eased Israeli apprehensions about threats to its existence and was followed by Israeli statements about possible WMD disarmament at the end of the peace process, once regional mutual trust had been achieved. Ariel Sharon affirmed that “in the context of peace [...] Israel will be looking for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East.”¹⁷ The Dimona project, moreover, was presented as a means to facilitate peace. Israel “built a nuclear option, not in order to have a Hiroshima but an Oslo.”¹⁸

The Return of the ‘Holocaust Syndrom’

As was stated above, currently the most important Israeli threat perception is the likelihood that the Islamic Republic of Iran becomes a nuclear power. Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu’s predecessors, ranked the nuclearization of Iran as the main menace to Israel’s existence but acted mainly behind the scenes to stop it. Since coming to power again in March 2009, Netanyahu, however, instituted a policy which can be characterized as a return of the ‘Holocaust Syndrome.’ It consists of (a) taking a high-profile lead in the struggle, thus framing a nuclear Iran primarily as a threat to Israel’s existence rather than an international problem; (b) threatening that Israel will act unilaterally in order to destroy the Iranian project; and (c) creating a messianic environment for policy making by drawing an analogy between the threat of a nuclear Iran and

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Nazi Germany.¹⁹ In this atmosphere other wider possible solutions to the problem – such as a more active peace process or formal negotiations for a regional WMD/DVs Free Zone – are not linked with the Iranian nuclear issue in Israel.

As in the case of nuclear weapons, Israel also does not publicly comment on its biological and chemical weapon capabilities or intentions. There are indications that Israel has developed offensive chemical and biological warfare capabilities in the past; however, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the extent of these programs or whether they still remain active today.²⁰

Syria's Security Concerns towards Israel and the Arab League States

In the case of Syria, one needs to distinguish between the period before and after the popular uprisings. Over the last decades, Israel, which is located only 40 miles southwest of the capital Damascus, has generally been perceived as the greatest external threat to Syria – it was seen as the scion of imperialism, an aggressive, expansionist, and settler-colonial state. Syria, along with other Arab states, has gone to war against Israel several times. Since the 1967 War, Israel has occupied the Syrian Golan Heights and the Syrians have been perceiving themselves as victims of an enormous injustice and Israeli aggression. Damascus' goal has been to achieve a 'strategic parity' with Israel by a build-up of military capabilities aimed at absorbing an Israeli attack and inflicting as many casualties as possible in return.²¹

Syria's Traditional Threat Perceptions

Despite the continuity of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a major shift in Syria's security alliance took place after the collapse of its superpower patron, the Soviet Union. The Hafez Al-Assad regime turned towards Iran, and away from its increasingly pro-Western Arab allies; since then Damascus has remained Tehran's major regional ally. The Syrian regime found common cause with its mightier partner on four major issues: a desire to halt American hegemony in the region; support of the Palestinian resistance; identification of Iraq's Saddam Hussein as a mutual enemy; and agreement on the creation of a frontline fighting force in Lebanon – Hezbollah – to confront Israel and serve

each country's distinctive, yet congruent foreign policy goals.

Syria's feeling of vulnerability as a result of its U.S.-dominated regional security environment was heightened when American troops entered Iraq to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein and establish a politico-military presence on its border. Feeling U.S. pressure at the time, Damascus quickly pulled its troops out of neighboring Lebanon following the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005.

Compared to the highly adversarial Syrian-U.S. relationship, Damascus has maintained an uneasy relationship with Jordan in large part because its leadership is among America's closest Arab partners. Failing any open hostility between the neighbors, there is a feeling of no need to exacerbate tensions with the United States, especially since the U.S. Sixth Fleet is firmly anchored off the Syrian coast. A cautious rapprochement started between Washington and Damascus until the popular uprisings against the Assad regime began in January 2011. The mass protests, initially aimed at government reform, quickly evolved into an armed conflict in which the Assad regime took brutal action against the opposition using its military and security apparatus, and drawing in international and regional actors (see POLICY BRIEF Nos. 9/10 by Erzsébet Rózsa et al.). In one sense, the Syrian Civil War can be interpreted as part of a proxy war between Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, who support the Sunni-led opposition on the one side – and Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon's Hezbollah, who are backing the Alawite Assad government on the other. Some have also viewed Russia's strong diplomatic and military support of the Assad regime as a replay of U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War when Moscow assisted Arab regimes as a means of countering Washington's support of Israel.

Survival as the Overriding Goal of the Assad Regime

The outcome of the internal power struggle in Syria is unforeseeable at this time of writing and it is difficult under these circumstances to define exactly the Syrian security concerns towards Israel and some members of the Arab League. From Assad's point of view, regime survival is the only goal at the moment.

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Table No. 2: Motives and Interests for WMD/DVs Build-ups of the Middle East States Analyzed

	<i>Quest for Regional Leadership</i>	<i>Power of the Past</i>	<i>Political Culture</i>	<i>Domestic Setting</i>
<i>Egypt</i>	<i>Quest for Arab leadership by diplomatic means</i>	<i>Experience of not being able to match Israeli military superiority</i>	<i>Status in terms of claim for Arab leadership</i>	<i>Limited indigenous capabilities; procurements mainly by imports; policy tradition of nuclear restraint</i>
<i>Israel</i>	–	<i>Experience of the Holocaust and Arab-Israeli wars</i>	<i>Strong sentiment of self-defense</i>	<i>Network of the military, industry, bureaucracy, and the universities, especially in the nuclear and missile sector</i>
<i>Syria</i>	–	<i>Experience of wars in the context of overwhelming Israeli superiority</i>	<i>Strong and continues anti-Israeli attitudes</i>	<i>Very limited indigenous capabilities; procurements mainly by imports</i>

That is why – for the time being – Israel is not considered a menace as long as it is not involved in the Syrian Civil War. With regard to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, Syrian threat perceptions have increased. Not only the diplomatic actions taken by the Arab states have increased the pressure on the Assad regime, but also their arming of the opposition and their official call for regime change. That is why any direct military intervention in the conflict, be it by Western countries, Turkey, and/or by Arab states, is currently seen by the Assad regime as the most serious external threat. It remains open whether the regime in Damascus will be seen as a legitimate participant at the Middle East Conference or how Syria would be represented after Assad.

Motives and Interests behind Conventional and Non-conventional Weapon Programs in Syria

The motives of the Assad dynasty in acquiring and developing weapons of mass destruction as well as delivery systems (foremost missiles), are simple, intense, and constant: they are concerned, in the first place, with its arch enemy Israel and, in the second place, with the military presence of the United States in the region. In September 2007, Israel reportedly destroyed a secret facility built by Damascus (probably with the help of North Korea) by alleging it was in fact a plant designed to produce nuclear weapons. Syria is also believed to have biological and chemical weapon programs, and the government itself has indirectly admitted to possessing “weapons of mass destruction.”²² As for its delivery systems, the regime decided in the early 1980s after its defeat by the Israeli Air Force in air

fighters over Lebanon to shift its focus from air power to surface-to-surface missiles that can be armed with chemical warheads. They have become the centerpiece of the Syrian strategy. This provides Damascus with a deterrent capability which can inflict an intolerable number of Israeli casualties. In this sense these weapons have served as a substitute for nuclear weapons. However, although chemical warheads are seen as a force multiplier by the Syrian regime, the regional experience of such weapons in the Iraq-Iran War and the civil war in Yemen largely contradicts this viewpoint.

While the traditional driving force behind Syria’s WMD and delivery systems programs has been the perception of an Israeli threat, this menace has been trumped by internal upheavals and civil strife. Today, the major threat to the government is domestic, albeit exacerbated by the support provided by foreign actors to the opposition. At the moment, it is unclear what impact the ongoing civil war will have on Syrian participation in the Middle East Conference or for Damascus’ official status on the Helsinki agenda.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this POLICY BRIEF, we have suggested two complementary steps for dealing constructively with the complex military asymmetries: first, by listing the security concerns and external threats that each potential participant may express at the Middle East Conference (see Table No. 1); and secondly, identifying the motives and interests which mainly drive the military projects relevant to the MEC mandate (see Table No. 2).

Our conflict- and coalition-centered approach on the state level has provided insights into the structural and dynamic elements of the WMD problématique. However, it should be mentioned again that this POLICY BRIEF constitutes the first of two which cover lists of security concerns as well as motives and interests behind weapon programs. This issue has dealt with Egypt, Israel, and Syria. The following one will analyze Iran, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the United States vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic in a similar way (see POLICY BRIEF No. 14 by Christian Weidlich and Bernd W. Kubbig et al.). Taken together the two issues will present a fairly comprehensive picture regarding security concerns, motives, and interests as the major driving factors behind WMD/DV programs in the Middle East.

Security Concerns of Egypt, Israel, and Syria

Egypt's relationship with Israel can be described as upholding the existing 'cold peace.' It is concerned about the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Israel's inflexible insistence on "Peace First!" when it comes to arms control and disarmament issues. Israel's regional monopoly on nuclear weapons is seen as a challenge to Egypt's role and status. Cairo is also worried about its neighbor's military supremacy across the board. With regard to Iran, Cairo is concerned about Tehran's possible emerging status as a nuclear weapon state, however, not in terms of a military threat but as a challenge to Egypt's regional role and status. The relation between Egypt and Saudi Arabia is also overlain by status-related factors indicating a rivalry for Arab leadership.

Israel regards Iran as the major threat to its security within the Middle East. Tehran's suspected development of nuclear weapons is seen by the Israeli government as an existential menace to Israel. In addition to the nuclear dispute, Iran's aggressive rhetoric and foreign policy as well as its support of hostile regimes and non-state actors has worsened the relationship between the two countries which can only be described as mutually hostile with a great potential for escalation. Furthermore, Israel is concerned about the situation in its direct neighborhood. It regards the Arab Spring through the prism of uncertainty, fearing insecure borders, unraveling of the only two existing peace treaties with

Egypt and Jordan, political instability, the emergence of radical anti-Israel governments, and possibly increasing terrorist activities. Although superior by all military means, Israel is especially concerned that Syria's chemical weapons, initially designed to counter Israel's nuclear arsenal, could fall into the wrong hands.

The outcome of the civil war in Syria is unforeseeable and under these circumstances it is difficult to exactly define the Syrian security concerns, since from Assad's point of view, regime survival is the paramount goal at the moment. Traditionally (and assuming that this holds true even after the ousting of the Assad regime), the relationship between Syria and Israel is highly adversarial, indeed they are officially in state of war. Damascus describes its neighbor's foreign policy as aggressive and condemns Israel for the occupation of the Golan Heights. Syria regards the Israeli monopoly on nuclear weapons, its superiority of aircraft and missiles and general military supremacy along with Israel's considerable offensive capabilities as a threat to its security. Furthermore, Damascus is concerned about the United States' strong military presence in the Middle East and has traditionally feared American intervention.

Motives and Interests for WMD/DVs Build-ups in Egypt, Israel, and Syria

Egypt's policies with regard to weapon programs are driven by its quest for status and prestige in the Arab world more than by its security concerns. Status and prestige are of special importance in explaining Cairo's diplomatic way of dealing with Israel's nuclear monopoly – especially against the backdrop that Egypt was not able to match Israeli military superiority. However, it uses its reported but officially unconfirmed chemical weapon program to put pressure on Israel for a comprehensive regional WMD ban. Generally, Egypt's indigenous production capabilities both in the conventional and non-conventional realm are limited – procurements have been mainly organized by imports.

In Israel, the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli wars are major factors behind its weapon programs across the board, and these events have been instrumentalized for military and political purposes by the current Israeli government. Moreover, the Israeli example shows that traditional motives for pursuing nuclear activities



have become moot. Arab inferiority in the area of conventional arms is a case in point. In fact, even in the past, the importance of the nuclear monopoly has been questionable in view of Israel's conventional superiority. Israel has developed a strong sentiment of self-defense and was able to set up a network of military, industry, bureaucracy, and universities, especially in the nuclear and missile sector

in order to secure its regional military supremacy – of course with the backing of the United States.²³

Syria has experienced the Arab-Israeli wars especially in the context of overwhelming Israeli superiority. The build-up of its chemical weapons arsenal, mostly with surface-to-surface missiles as means of delivery, has served as substitute for nuclear

Endnotes

1. This Policy Brief draws heavily on Bernd W. Kubbig et al. (2012) 'Taking overall military asymmetries into account: Objections from the Arab world and Iran', in *ibid.* and Sven-Eric Fikenscher (eds) *Arms Control and Missile Proliferation in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 65–88.
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6. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between the GCC states and Israel, see Policy Brief No. 14 by Christian Weidlich and Bernd W. Kubbig et al.
7. Shlomo Brom (2011) 'Israel and the Arab World: The Power of the People', in Anat Kurz and *ibid.* (eds) *Strategic Survey for Israel*. 2011, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 43–55.
8. During the era of the Shah, the two countries enjoyed a close political alliance and even started discussing a number of bilateral military programs, including the 'Flower Project' to jointly develop a missile.
9. See Uri Bar-Joseph (2012) 'Taking Israel's security interests into account: Deterrence policy in a changing strategic environment', in Bernd W. Kubbig and Sven-Eric Fikenscher (eds) *Arms Control and Missile Proliferation in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 89–105, here p. 99.
10. 'The Spymaster: Meir Dagan on Iran's threat', *CBS 60 Minutes*, March 11, 2012. Online, available at http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-57394904/the-spy-master-meir-dagan-on-irans-threat (August 4, 2012).
11. Yehuda Ben Meir and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky (2010) 'Vox Populi: Trends in Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2004–2009', INSS Memorandum, No. 106, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies.
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15. 'Statement by the Government of Israel on the Bombing of the Iraqi Nuclear Facility', June 8, 1981. Online, available at <http://www.jewishvirtual-library.org/jsource/History/BombingJune81.html> (October 29, 2012).
16. Quotations in Yehuda Avner (2010) *The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership*, New Milford, CT: The Toby Press.
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22. Marc Finaud (2012) *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Force of Law or Law of Force?*, Policy Paper No. 10, Geneva Centre for Security Policy. Online, available at <http://www.gcsp.ch/Emerging-Security-Challenges/WMD-Disarmament/Publications/GCSP-Publications/Policy-Papers/Syria-s-Chemical-Weapons-Force-of-Law-or-Law-of-Force> (October 20, 2012).
23. Uri Bar-Joseph (2012) *op. cit.*



Further Reading

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weapons, providing a deterrent capability. The political culture in Damascus includes strong and continues anti-Israeli attitudes. Generally, Syria's indigenous production capabilities especially in the delivery vehicles' realm are limited. That is why Damascus felt compelled to import complete systems or related technology.

The Next Steps to Cope With Military Asymmetries in the Middle East: Properly Conceptualizing Confidence- and Security-building Measures

Taken together, the lists of security concerns as well as the motives and interests we have analyzed constitute the stumbling blocks on the gradual way to the ultimate objective of a WMD/DVs Free Zone. The lists of concerns also enable prioritizing the category of threats. The conference 'managers' will decide whether it makes sense to start with the relatively low-key concerns or with the most troublesome threats and weapons.

Our conflict- and coalition-centered approach on the state level has provided insights into the structure and dynamics

of the region. It has also made it possible to qualify the degree of tensions between and among the relevant states as well as to roughly assess the conflict potential. These conflict formations explain to a high degree arms dynamics and the phenomenon of military asymmetries.

The dialectical, yet asymmetrical relationship between conflict formations/coalitions and weapons plus their delivery vehicles is also relevant for conceptualizing and assessing confidence- and security-building measures as a promising next step in dealing with the asymmetries problématique. Hence, the immediate conclusion from our two initial steps is to build both upon the list of concerns and the identified motives and interests by conceptualizing weapons/DVs-related CSBMs properly as measures along the incremental path towards the ultimate goal of a WMD/DVs Free Zone. In any case, the zone cannot be achieved without cost: each participant in Helsinki will have to give something in order to gain something. Hence, it is of special importance to ask each regional state *what it can do* to make the WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East a reality. ■

About the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST (APOME)

The ORCHESTRA is the follow-up project of the "Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East". The ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST is a classical Track II initiative: it consists of some 70 experts – mainly from the Middle East/Gulf, one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. The ORCHESTRA is meeting regularly in working groups (CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS) on specific topics in the context of a workshop cycle from 2011-2014. The main goal of this initiative is to shape the prospective Middle East Conference on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles agreed upon by the international community in May 2010.

For this reason, these experts develop ideas, concepts, and background information in a series of POLICY BRIEFS which are the results of intense discussions within the CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS. In this framework, the broader normative Cooperative Security Concept will be further developed, embedded, and institutionalized in the region. At the same time, the ORCHESTRA meetings serve as venues for confidence building among the experts. The networking activities of PRIF's Project Group are documented by the ATLAS on Track II research activities in or about the Middle East/Gulf region.

Editor/Project Coordinator: Adj. Prof. Dr. Bernd W. Kubbig
Co-Editors: Hannah Broecker, MA, Mag. Michael Haas, and Christian Weidlich, MA.
Peace Research Institute Frankfurt,
Baseler Straße 27-31, D-60329 Frankfurt am Main,
Phone: +49-69-95910436, Fax: +49-69-558481,
E-Mail: kubbig@hsfk.de,
Internet: www.academicpeaceorchestra.com



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