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Realism, Politics and Culture in Middle East Arms Control Negotiations

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Abstract. The history of arms control efforts in the Middle East consists of numerous initiatives, but very limited results. From the first efforts to negotiate WMD limits and non-proliferation arrangements in the 1960s, through various regional initiatives, frameworks, proposals, discussions, and negotiations, the obstacles to agreement on mutual limitations remained dominant. Frequent discussions in the UN of a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone (MENWFZ), the multi-lateral Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks initiated during the 1991 Middle East Peace Conference, and the regional dimensions of global frameworks such as the NPT, CWC, and CTBT have all failed to produce results.

Detailed analysis of these efforts highlights the impact of realist security-based factors, the structure and process of the interactions, as well as the cultural and domestic political dimensions. The existential conflicts, reflected in protracted territorial disputes and denials of legitimacy and compounded by a fundamental asymmetry, created a zero-sum framework in the region. The region is characterized by a great deal of instability and competition; this situation, in turn, contributed to the efforts to acquire WMD. In terms of domestic politics, the regional cooperation required for arms limitation is often inconsistent with the dominant articulated political interests and regime perspectives. In addition, misunderstandings and misperceptions frequently occur due to the complexities of cross-cultural communications in the Middle East. Numerous dialogues have not narrowed the gaps or transformed the zero-sum frameworks into cooperative ones. Hopes for the creation of successful regional mechanisms for limiting arms depend on overcoming the obstacles encountered in past efforts.

Keywords: nuclear-free zones, chemical weapons, confidence building measures, military asymmetry, cultural differences, misperception.

The history of arms control efforts in the Middle East is rich in terms of initiatives, and largely barren with respect to results. The first efforts to negotiate non-proliferation arrangements and limits on weapons of mass

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destruction (WMD) began in the 1960s, when the U.S. government sought to prevent competition between Egypt and Israel in developing missiles and nuclear weapons, and some discussions were also held on mutual limitations regarding nuclear weapons programs. This initiative ended without substantive impact, as did subsequent regional initiatives, frameworks, proposals, discussions, and negotiations. This list includes UN discussions of a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone (MENWFZ), the multilateral Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks initiated during the 1991 Middle East Peace Conference, and regional dimensions of global frameworks such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

From a realist (Hobbesian) perspective, the failure of these efforts is readily attributed to existential conflicts, reflected in protracted territorial disputes and denials of legitimacy. With the exception of Egypt (following the 1979 treaty), and Jordan (in 1994), Arab states and Iran do not have diplomatic relations or conduct direct official negotiations with Israel, making any form of negotiation and agreement on central security issues extremely difficult. This situation is compounded by a fundamental asymmetry and a zero-sum framework expressed in terms of the “security dilemma” in the region. The Middle East is characterized by a number of overlapping conflict zones, including the very complex Arab-Israeli relationship, the Shia’a-Sunni division, Persian Gulf tensions, and cross-border Kurdish and North African issues, among others.¹ Decades of warfare and terrorism are the result of these religious and ethno-national conflicts, and the few existing regional political institutions, such as the Arab League, are strife-ridden and exclude key non-Arab actors, such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

As a result of these factors, the region is characterized by a great deal of instability and competition; this situation, in turn, contributed to various efforts to acquire WMD. In the following discussion, we will examine the degree to which the outcome of efforts to negotiate mutual limitations can be explained in terms of these “realist” variables. We will also analyze the role of domestic politics, and the extent to which regional cooperation is inconsistent with the dominant articulated political interests and regime perspectives.

In addition to the realist-based and domestic political explanations, negotiation outcomes are often influenced by factors related to the structure and process of the interaction, as well as cultural and other issues. Misunderstandings and misperceptions occur due to the complexities of cross-cultural communications in general, and in the Middle East, in particular (Cohen 1990). Differences in language, nuance, customs, symbols, and, perhaps most

importantly, historical perspective are all elements of the cultural dimension to diplomacy and the interaction between states (Ball 1993).

On this basis, these process-related and culturally based factors can be expected to have had an impact on Middle East arms control negotiations and discussions, such as the ACRS and MENWFZ debates. Many of these dimensions are difficult to define and measure in any reliable form, but their potential impact should not be ignored. Based on models and approaches from the social psychological literature on dialogue, including Pettigrew's (1998) adaptation of the contact hypothesis,² one could expect the intensive exchanges over WMD limitations in the Middle East to reduce the degree of friction, distrust, and hostility (Kaye 2001; Montville 1993). However, as will be shown in the following analysis, the wide-ranging discussions and negotiations in this region did not result in tangible progress, a reflection of the impact of the obstacles identified by realists, magnified by cultural and related factors. Whether these obstacles can be recognized and surmounted in future efforts remains to be seen.

The Barren History of Arms Control

The Kennedy Years

The first Middle East initiative to limit WMD involving Egypt and Israel started in the early 1960s. This grew out of the Kennedy administration's concern about the impact of the Israeli nuclear program, Egyptian use of chemical weapons in Yemen, Cairo's efforts to develop ballistic missiles with the aid of German scientists, and Egypt's growing interest in nuclear weapons. In response to this concern, a working group of U.S. officials formed to begin "quiet talks" with Cairo and Jerusalem on the possibility of a "tacit agreement to refrain from acquiring" advanced weapons (Bass 2003: 209).

They received little response. At the time, the "Arab Cold War," which included activity related to the creation of the United Arab Republic (consisting of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria) and a pledge to "liberate Palestine," captured Egypt's President Gamal Nasser's attention, and he showed no interest in arms limitation agreements with Israel. Under these conditions, the United States could not convince the Israeli leadership that Egypt could be restrained. In 1963, the Kennedy administration's intense pressure on Israel to allow inspection of the Dimona reactor (thereby halting Israel's effort to develop a nuclear deterrent) contributed to the resignation of Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, but did not convince the Israeli leadership that mutual limitations were at all

realistic. As Ben Gurion wrote to Kennedy, although Israel understood the U.S. concerns regarding the dangers of proliferation, “we in Israel cannot be blind to the more actual danger now confronting us . . .” The main danger came from the “destructive ‘conventional’ weapons in the hands of neighboring governments which openly proclaim their intention to attempt the annihilation of Israel” (Bass 2003: 218). To respond to this threat, Israel needed a credible strategic deterrent, rather than relying on unreliable and unrealistic promises of mutual arms limitations. This view was (and still is) widely shared by the Israeli security elite, and there is essentially no domestic opposition to the nuclear deterrent policy.

In parallel, the United States sought to convince the Egyptians of the need to develop a “practical course of action which might achieve an informal voluntary suspension of the Arab-Israel arms race” (Bass 2003: 223). According to Bass (2003: 224), this initiative sought to “lay the groundwork for more talks, and think of ways to induce both Egypt and Israel to sign onto a secret arms-limitation understanding.” John McCloy, Kennedy’s former special advisor on arms control, traveled to the region with the goal of negotiating separate secret agreements with Egypt and Israel – “since it was unthinkable for Nasser to sign an arms-control pact with Israel” – backed by unobtrusive American verification (Bass 2003: 225). As Spiegel (1985: 131) notes, the dispatch of a secret and private envoy “reflects poor relations with a country and little hope for genuine achievement.” Indeed, Nasser showed little interest in these efforts, was unwilling to accept any form of U.S. verification, and publicly ruled out any form of disarmament that would precede recovery of the “rights of the Palestine people” (Bass 2003: 230–234).

For Ben Gurion, the message was clear – Nasser had every intention of pursuing the conflict with the goal of eliminating Israel; in this environment, Israel could not relinquish its essential deterrence capability. A few years later, the tension erupted into the 1967 war, the first Israeli nuclear weapons reportedly became available, and this phase of Middle East arms control efforts ended in failure (Cohen 1998). In 1968, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty opened for signature; in 1970, it went into effect. Neither Israel nor Egypt joined the NPT at the time, and while Egypt ended its low-level weapons development efforts and signed in 1981, Israel continues to be one of the three non-NPT signatories.

The Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone

The next major phase of regional arms control discussions centered on the concept of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ), under discussion in the United Nations since 1974. Most of the states in the region have

declared support for the concept, although the terms of reference vary considerably. Since 1980, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted, by consensus, annual resolutions calling for the creation of an NWFZ in the Middle East (Karem 1988; Beker 1985a, 1985b). Most key states in the region have supported this consensus, including Egypt, Israel, and Iran. In addition, the leaders of these states have consistently voiced support for a MENWFZ in public statements (Prawitz and Leonard 1996, Freier 1993).

Discussion of this issue (as distinct from substantive progress) increased during the United Nations special session on disarmament in 1988, which included speeches by a number of leaders in the region, including Israeli Prime Minister Shamir and Egyptian Foreign Minister Abdel Meguid (Gold 1990). An expert group convened to consider the "Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," and issued its report in 1990. The report defined the requirements for "effective and verifiable measures" which would facilitate the establishment of a MENWFZ, to include the 22 members of the Arab League, as well as Iran, Israel, and perhaps Pakistan; the need for a system of "verification and control" to overcome the weaknesses of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards; and the need for "other measures to reduce the danger of hostilities and to strengthen Israeli confidence that a true and lasting peace was being built" (UNGA 1990).

The 1991 "Mubarak Initiative" called for establishing a region free of all weapons of mass destruction (including chemical and biological weapons – CBW), and included the requirement that all states in the region accept the NPT and adopt IAEA safeguards on all nuclear facilities (UN 1991). Israeli responses focused on the requirements for peace and mutual acceptance as conditions for discussing the details, and the need for mutual verification rather than reliance on international mechanisms, if and when the other conditions for a MENWFZ were in place. These differences formed the foundation for continued debate and disagreement at the annual discussions of the First Committee of the United Nations and other deliberative frameworks, including the meetings of the IAEA board of governors and the ACRS multilateral working group, and in the context of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference.

However, instead of focusing on substance – as Jentleson (1996) notes, the 1994 Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty calls for a Middle East free from WMD, without providing any details – these intense discussions and confrontations primarily reflected efforts to secure political and public relations advantages in the wording of declarations and resolutions, particularly in the First Committee of the United Nations and the meetings of the board of governors of the IAEA.³ Although the NWFZ concept is ostensibly regional, Egypt's leaders envision this structure as a local subset of the global regime and stress

the role of worldwide institutions such as the UN (UNIDIR 1993: 1, 6). Officials called on the Security Council and General Assembly to take active measures, including sanctions, to pressure states (i.e. Israel) to “relinquish and not acquire” nuclear weapons (Fahmy 1990). This position has been restated in the annual meetings of the UN General Assembly, including the First Committee, in the sessions of the board of governors of the IAEA, and in the NPT preparatory committee meetings and review conferences held every five years (Steinberg 1996; Shaker 1994: 22).

In contrast, Israeli officials reject proposals to rely on existing global mechanisms for verification in the region, and generally view global institutions, such as the UN and IAEA, as inherently biased and unable to provide the necessary level of security. Votes in these frameworks are seen less as expressions of universal norms of behavior and more as political exercises reflecting an automatic pro-Arab majority, regardless of the issue involved. Furthermore, Israeli policymakers argue that states that reject mutual inspection are essentially rejecting regional coexistence. To overcome these obstacles, Israel emphasizes the need in any potential MENWFZ for a regional monitoring system, similar to the Argentinean-Brazilian system known as ABACC.

These factors lead to the conclusion that serious negotiations on a regional WMD-free zone in the Middle East are still a long way off and face many fundamental obstacles. As will be shown below, the multilateral ACRS talks launched in the early 1990s constituted another initiative, but without substantive impact. While discussions are likely to continue, core conflicts and the absence of a generally accepted basis for cooperative security are likely to prevent significant changes in policy for the foreseeable future.

The 1991 Bush Initiative

Iraqi use of chemical weapons in the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein’s threats to use CBW against Israel, and the 1991 Gulf war all led to renewed interest in WMD proliferation in the Middle East. In June 1991, after a great deal of discussion, the Bush administration circulated a very broad initiative that included limitations on the transfer of conventional weapons, as well as missiles, chemical and biological weapons, and nuclear technology, materials, and components. This marked the first time that these elements had been linked in a single comprehensive security framework that encompassed the entire region, including the Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, North Africa, and the Gulf.

In the wake of Iraq’s use of Scud missiles to attack Israel and Saudi Arabia during the war (and following the strategic use of ballistic missiles against

cities in the Iran-Iraq war), the Bush initiative placed a particular emphasis on missile limitations. The proposal called for a freeze on the acquisition, production, and testing of surface-to-surface missiles, ultimately leading to their elimination. It also called upon the states in the region to join international agreements banning the acquisition or use of chemical and biological weapons, and to undertake confidence-building measures in these areas. With regard to nuclear weapons, the initiative called for a verifiable ban on the production and acquisition of enriched uranium and separated plutonium, adherence to the NPT, and acceptance of IAEA safeguards pending implementation of the longer-term goal of creating a MENWFZ. These proposals embodied a major effort to establish restraints in the Middle East, and were officially accepted by some of the governments, including Israel, as a basis for further discussions. Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Arens indicated that Israel would consider a comprehensive freeze on conventional weapons if it included credible verification.

However, Israel considered elements that might eventually impinge on the nuclear deterrent, such as a fissile material production cut-off, to be extremely remote options, to be considered only in the context of the conditions mapped out for a nuclear weapons-free zone (Steinberg 1995). In addition, the American proposal was more of a declaration of principles, leaving many unanswered questions and significant ambiguity.

In any case, events on the ground, including Syria's use of \$2 billion in aid from Saudi Arabia to purchase Scud-C missiles from North Korea, as well as accelerated Iranian efforts to acquire missiles and nuclear weapons, quickly undermined the proposal. The Iraqi obstruction of UNSCOM and defiance of UNSCR 687, which stipulated the supervised destruction of Iraqi missiles and chemical, biological, and nuclear materials and facilities, further decreased the slim prospects for voluntary restraint on the part of the other states in the Middle East. After a few months, the Bush initiative, like Kennedy's almost thirty years earlier, had disappeared.

1991–1995: The Multilateral Arms Control and Regional Security Talks

The Bush initiative gave way to an entirely different approach, in the form of the multilateral working group on arms control and regional security (ACRS). This framework (one of five regional working groups) took shape under the auspices of the Madrid Middle East peace conference that took place in October 1991, and the meetings began shortly thereafter. Although substantive in nature, the "multilateral track" also had a political objective, focusing on widening the scope of the Middle East peace efforts beyond the bilateral

negotiations, and involving nations such as Saudi Arabia and Algeria in direct and cooperative links with Israel. The concept was functionalist in nature, seeking to normalize relations through interaction and cooperation.

At the first session of the multilateral track in Moscow, 36 delegations participated, including 11 Arab governments and many external parties that sought to influence the process, including Canada, Turkey, India, and others. However, the absence of Syria, Libya, Iran, and Iraq immediately hobbled the discussions, as it was clear that any serious regional security and arms limitation framework dealing with WMD and deterrent issues would require their involvement and a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement.

The United States coordinated the ACRS talks with the assistance of a number of other nations from outside the Middle East, and the talks were explicitly and deliberately independent of the UN, IAEA, or any other international organization. Although formally also a "gavel holder," Moscow's involvement became increasingly ceremonial and its influence soon diminished. At the same time, the European role was very limited as a consequence of the Israeli distrust of the EU's perceived "pro-Arab" tilt (in a manner similar to the UN). The initial agenda was kept deliberately broad, recognizing the interactive nature of security, which required the integration of different weapons, including conventional arms and WMD, as well as confidence- and security-building mechanisms (CSBMs), in any regional framework. In addition, from the functionalist perspective, the United States and other third parties viewed the discussions, in themselves, as creating a climate for regional security cooperation and reduction in tensions.

This process lasted for four years, with numerous formal and informal (track-two) sessions and exercises. Initial meetings consisted of "seminar diplomacy" (Adler and Barnett 1998), focusing on the lessons provided by the U.S.-Soviet and the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) arms control experiences (both in terms of similarities and differences), and on CBMs and CSBMs. Later, the participants agreed to develop "conceptual" and "operational" baskets, with the former addressing norms and goals, including threat perceptions and deterrence concepts, while the latter dealt with crisis communication, information exchange, search and rescue cooperation, etc.

However, efforts to produce an agreed working agenda and declaration of principles broke down primarily over the differences regarding the NPT and Israel's nuclear deterrence policy. Egypt dominated the Arab side of these discussions, and the leadership in Cairo, particularly Nasserite foreign minister Amr Mousa, insisted on placing the Israeli nuclear capability at the top of the agenda, before the implementation of any CSBMs and the discussion or implementation of other regional arms limitations. In particular, the Egyptians

again demanded explicit Israeli agreement to language linking NWFZ discussions to the NPT, while Israel rejected this linkage.

When some other Arab participants adopted a policy of “convergence,” including an interest in confidence-building measures (Landau 2001) and a readiness to postpone consideration of the nuclear issue, the Egyptians moved to reassert their preeminence among Arab states with respect to contacts with the non-Arab world, including Israel and the West. For a period, some of the Gulf states, such as Oman and Qatar, ignored this opposition and pursued their own agendas, based on increasing economic ties to Israel through this framework, greater independence from the pressures of the local Gulf “superpowers,” and strengthening links with the Americans via active participation in the multilateral talks, including ACRS (Rosman-Stollman 2001: 63–64). In addition, planning began for a regional crisis management center in Jordan. However, the Egyptian and, later, Saudi opposition to such “independent” activities, particularly involving the smaller Gulf states, eventually led to their demise.

Egyptian domestic politics also played a role in the demise of ACRS, reflecting the broad support among different factions for policies that focused attention on the Israeli nuclear capability. By emphasizing this issue, the government was able to deflect criticism in other policy arenas. Foreign Minister Amr Mousa gained stature and visibility within the Egyptian internal political arena for leading the campaign against Israeli policy on the NPT, making it very difficult for any political figure, including President Mubarak, to accept a compromise position. This factor contributed to the radicalization of the Egyptian position, and thus to the failure of the ACRS process.

In addition, the looming presence of the 1995 NPT extension conference, which further emphasized the differences between the Israeli and Egyptian approaches and interests, highlighted the salience of this issue; it is possible that without this factor, the ACRS process might have lasted longer and made more progress. Other possible explanations for the failure of ACRS, such as linkage to bilateral negotiations involving Israel and the Palestinian Authority or the absence of a breakthrough in talks between Syria and Israel, are not supported by the evidence (Kaye 2001). Instead, in this as in other cases, the arms control framework was used to pursue and extend the regional conflict.

Global Arms Control Regimes in the Middle East

The relatively high degree of abstention from global regimes in this region reflects the obstacles facing negotiators of dedicated arms limitation frameworks in the Middle East. The NPT, which is the most universal arms

limitation framework, penetrated the region slowly; many Arab states joined reluctantly and under external pressure, while Israel has consistently remained outside the treaty structure. In addition, this is the region in which the number of states (Iran, Iraq, and Libya) that have been caught (belatedly) in violation of its terms is the highest, and other states may operate clandestine programs.

Israeli caution regarding the NPT also reflects a lack of confidence in the political and other dimensions that limit the ability of the IAEA to detect and prevent treaty violations. In the Middle East, in particular, this system has failed to provide the necessary assurances to justify acceptance of limitations and to minimize the potential for violation of and exit from the treaty. The various components and stages involved in verification, from the negotiation of the safeguards agreements (particularly the subsidiary arrangements) to the selection of inspectors and other personnel in the IAEA's safeguards division, varies from state to state, while the deliberations of the board of governors, and process of referral to the UN Security Council is deeply politicized. (In addition, while a number of Arab states are perennially elected to the IAEA board of governors, Israel is systematically excluded from participating in any of the rotating regional groups.) In the context of the Middle East, "timely detection" of diversions is far from certain and does not provide a reliable deterrent against abuses of nuclear material and facilities.

The impact of these factors extended beyond the NPT, and from the mid-1960s, when global arms control became a central part of the international security and diplomatic agenda, until the early 1990s, successive Israeli governments continued a policy of abstention from all such discussions and frameworks. Israel was not involved in the negotiation of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), or other global initiatives, reflecting the general view that the regional threat environment in the Middle East, in general, and for Israel, in particular, could not be adequately addressed by universal arms limitation frameworks.

Israeli leaders concluded that they would be less vulnerable to political attacks if they remained outside such negotiating and arms control frameworks. Indeed, the history of NPT review conferences, as well as other global arms control frameworks, substantiates this concern. From the Israeli perspective, the exceptionality of its political and security environment was not understood by most other states, including the Europeans, who often joined the efforts to force Israel to relinquish its nuclear deterrent. In this environment, the benefits of staying out seemed to exceed any benefits from participating in global arms control negotiations.

This policy began to change in the early 1990s, in part reflecting the political transition marked by the election of Prime Minister Rabin and the Labor Party in 1992, but also due to regional security developments following the

1991 Iraq war, which contributed to a more self-confident diplomatic and security outlook in Israel. These changes led to the decision, taken after a great deal of internal debate, to sign (but not yet ratify) the Chemical Weapons Convention. Israel also increased its involvement in the activities of the Conference on Disarmament, becoming a full member in 1997, and participated actively in the negotiation of the CTBT. However, as noted, policy with respect to the NPT did not change.

The CWC in the Middle East

As noted, the arsenals of many Middle Eastern countries include chemical weapons (CW), and the use of CW by Egypt in the 1960s and by Iraq in the war with Iran highlights the dangers posed by these weapons. As a result, verifiable limits on them emerged as important elements in the discussions over arms control in the Middle East, and this region is central to the global chemical weapons limitations effort (Limone 2004).

In 1989, a number of Middle Eastern states, including Iraq, Libya, Jordan, and Syria, requested observer status in the context of the Ad Hoc Committee on Chemical Weapons of the Conference on Disarmament (CD). These states, as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco, and Israel, participated in the Paris Conference on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. While Israeli delegates emphasized the dangers posed by proliferation of chemical weapons in many Arab states, Arab policymakers countered by claiming that chemical weapons are “a poor nation’s equivalent of nuclear weapons.”

In the end of 1992, the negotiations at the CD resulted in a completed text, including very detailed and intrusive verification and inspection procedures, with major economic penalties for states refusing to accept the provisions. The treaty opened for signature in January 1993, and entered into force in April 1997 (180 days after the deposit of the 65th instrument of ratification).

The CWC has received a mixed reception in the Middle East, with few enthusiasts to set an example. Hoping to create international pressure on Israel to link the CWC to the NPT, the Egyptian government attempted to persuade all the Arab states to reject the treaty until Israeli policy changed. Some key states, including Syria, adopted this policy, but others, such as Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, and Libya (in 2004) signed and ratified the agreement (Shoham 1998 and 1995; Cordesman 1999).

Iran’s accession – its signature and ratification – to the CWC took place in 1997 following an extensive debate; since then, Iran has been a major presence in CWC-related activities. Iran is a member of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council, allowing the government in Tehran to play a major role in the development of OPCW

institutions and procedures for inspection and verification. In 1998, the United States vetoed an Iranian national on the list of proposed OPCW inspectors (*CBW Conventions Bulletin* 1998).

However, critics note problems with Iranian compliance, including a late declaration of holdings, and many analysts claim that, as in the case of the NPT and nuclear weapons development, Iran is likely to maintain a chemical weapons capability (Shoham 2001). Concerns also emerged that, as in the case of the NPT, Iran might be attempting use its membership in the CWC regime to gain privileged access to dual-use and weapons technology. Iranian government officials repeatedly complain that the United States and other countries have imposed limitations on access to technologies and materials, even to CWC signatories (Alborzi 1998).

In a bipolar framework, despite these concerns, the Iranian accession might have led to a comparable Israeli move, partly as a confidence and security building measure. But with other key states remaining outside the CWC framework, including Egypt and Syria, (plus Libya until 2004 and, of course, Iraq under Saddam), this has not happened. Although Israel was among the first signatories of the CWC in 1993, quick ratification did not follow. Contributing factors include changes in the regional security situation, questions regarding the effectiveness of the CWC and its impact on the chemical industry, fears regarding the possible abuse of the highly intrusive inspection system, the unresolved debate over the efficacy of renouncing the deterrent value of a CW option, and the positions of key states such as Egypt, Syria, and Libya with respect to the treaty.

The prospects for Israeli ratification diminished further as the events in Iraq unfolded during the 1990s, including the collapse of UNSCOM. These events showed that even the most intrusive inspection and verification system ever implemented could not ensure that prohibited weapons would not be developed (Makovsky 1998).

In 1997, following the treaty's entry into force and the establishment of the OPCW, the question of Israeli ratification of the CWC reemerged as a priority on the foreign policy agenda, and Israeli delegates attended the First Conference of States Parties. By then, however, the perceived urgency of this issue had diminished significantly. As a result, in 2004 Israel remained one of 21 states that have signed but not ratified the convention (Limone 2004).

Thus, in general terms, the experience with global arms control regimes in the Middle East has not been significantly different from the various regional initiatives and negotiation frameworks. The issues, as well as the security and political concerns, are constant across the different settings, and the outcome is similar. As will be discussed in the following section, the overwhelming predominance of the conflict's core issues and of realism, as reflected in zero-sum

conceptions of security requirements, are the central determinants of these outcomes. Other variables, including those related to the negotiation process, culture, and domestic politics, often reinforce the centrifugal forces that have blocked progress towards a regional security framework.

Analysis

Realist Approaches and the Zero-Sum Environment

The centrality of realist approaches and factors to the analysis of arms control and regional security policies in the Middle East reflects the region's environment of intense conflict, the emphasis on national security, and the impact of the security dilemma in this region. The instability, history of warfare, and the continuing threats, as well as high levels of asymmetry and the extreme imbalances of resources, geography, and socio-political structures, all contributed to the zero-sum framework that overwhelmed the various initiatives. While an outsider can discern shared security interests – particularly the need to avoid mutual destruction in the context of zero-sum frameworks – the very divergent interests, history of intense conflict, multiplicity of actors, and extreme asymmetries all contribute to the obstacles to regional security and agreed WMD limitation frameworks in the Middle East.

Despite the idealist framework of the disarmament agenda, arms control agreements and regional limitation zones (as distinct from bilateral treaties such as those between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War) are in reality dependent on the management, amelioration, or resolution of existing conflicts, regardless of the region. In Europe, the success of the Helsinki process that contributed to the Stockholm agreement, the development of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the CFE all resulted from the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. In Latin America, a series of low-level conflicts, particularly between Argentina and Brazil, delayed the entry into force of the Treaty of Tlatelolco for thirty years. In the case of the Treaty of Rarotonga, the absence of significant conflict in the South Pacific region greatly facilitated the treaty negotiation and ratification process.

In contrast, the Middle East has been and remains one of the most unstable and war-prone regions in the world. Post-colonial boundaries there are often arbitrary, state structures are weak in comparison with tribal or religious frameworks, and ethnic, national, and religious hatreds are particularly intense. While the U.S.-Soviet conflict during the Cold War was based primarily on ideological conflict between elites, the Middle East identity and existence

conflicts are far more intense and extend to entire populations. The hatreds between different religions (Moslem, Jewish, and Christian), sects (Sunni, Shia'a, etc.), and ethno-national groups are very intense, as are the fears of national annihilation. Syria does not recognize the legitimacy of an independent Lebanon; Iraq under Saddam rejected the independence of Kuwait; and, with the exception of Egypt and Jordan, the Arab states and Iran continue the state of war with Israel and refuse to recognize its legitimacy. And there are many other examples.

These deep nationalist, ethnic, and religious antagonisms have resulted in many wars, as well as terror campaigns throughout the region, with limited scope for compromise and negotiation. Such conflicts, and the complex relationships resulting from the multipolar regional structure (in contrast to South Asia, South America, and other regions) are substantial obstacles to any form of negotiation and conflict amelioration, including arms control.

These structural factors also obscure common interests in avoiding the high costs and destruction of warfare or accidental war, and the dangers of unlimited arms races. In a region characterized by "jihad" and "holy wars," in which religious leaders and mass media preach that martyrdom provides the "key to heaven," and in which domestic political tensions are directed outwards in a centrifugal fashion, the prospects for arms control are very limited. In this realist-based framework, the importance of avoiding mutual destruction and catastrophe resulting from a cataclysmic exchange involving WMD are not readily recognized or turned into rational cooperative policy.

Similarly, the perceived economic benefits of arms limitation agreements, particularly with respect to WMD, in a region where extreme poverty is widespread and growing, are not readily realized. In 1988, Israel proposed to negotiate a reduction of forces agreement, based on reducing "the burden of the arms race" that "is devastating to the economies of all the countries in the region – and . . . is getting worse." Similar proposals have been made from time to time by officials from other countries, but without significant impact (Shamir 1988).

In the effort to overcome these political realities and limitations on direct negotiations and formal treaties, efforts initiated by outsiders were channeled towards beginning with informal and gradual "confidence-building measures" (CBMs). Such informal steps do not require elaborate political ceremony, or explicit and formal changes in political relations. CBMs in Europe, as developed in the Stockholm and Vienna agreements, provided the basis for more formal U.S.-Soviet arms control measures. These CBMs included direct adversary observation on the ground, exchanges of information regarding deployments, challenge inspections, and pre-notification for military exercises.

Indeed, Israel and Syria have implemented CBMs and “rules of agreement” with respect to the conflicts in Lebanon and the Golan Heights, as have opponents in other sub-regions of the Middle East. However, the ACRS process demonstrated the difficulty of creating a regional system of CBMs, particularly with respect to WMD. Substantial limitations and other measures require a degree of mutual recognition, communication, and civility that do not exist. In the zero-sum environment, there is little prospect of agreement upon the implementation of measures such as prior notification of missile launches or the creation of crisis centers designed to prevent escalation and the use of ballistic missiles during a war (Steinberg 2004). Such measures would, by definition, require a spillover process in which the transformation to a positive-sum or “win-win” situation is recognized. And without progress towards resolution of the endemic conflicts in the region, the prospects for arms control are limited.

The impacts of such realist-based factors are reflected in the intense conflict over approaches to verification in the Middle East, as demonstrated by the history of Middle East arms control initiatives, particularly with respect to the MENWFZ and ACRS efforts. In a zero-sum environment, characterized by distrust, a great deal of suspicion, and with no room for risk-taking, verification receives a great deal of scrutiny. Furthermore, experiences with IAEA verification and inspection systems in the cases of the nuclear programs of Iraq, Libya, and Iran have highlighted this problem.

This background is reflected in the Israeli position that in an environment characterized by the absence of transparency in closed and non-democratic regimes, effective safeguards against “breakout” require the development of specialized institutions. Given the propensity for dual-use approaches (exploitation of civil technological development as a cover for illicit military programs) in the region, international agencies are considered unreliable, as they are subject to political or other influences and sort and “filter” unprocessed data, and there is little trust or confidence that vital national interests would be protected.

In sharp contrast, Egyptian policy on NWFZ verification emphasizes the role of international institutions such as the IAEA, and rejects independent regional or bilateral frameworks. This position reflects Egypt’s strong political influence and power in international frameworks, and its national interest in maintaining the centrality of these institutions. Similar policies and explanations apply to other Arab countries active in these discussions, such as Syria, as well as to Iran. In contrast, bilateral or regional inspection and verification frameworks would require far more contact with Israel, and would have an impact on central political and ideological dimensions of foreign policy.

Realists also note the impact of extreme asymmetries in the geopolitical situation and military forces in the Middle East, which exacerbate the other obstacles to cooperative approaches to security. In the Arab-Israeli conflict zone, geographic, demographic, military, and economic asymmetries have played a central role in the development of security policies and strategic culture. Israel's very small population (under 6 million) and geographic area (20,000 square kilometers within the 1949 armistice lines, compared to 1 million square kilometers for Egypt and 186,000 square kilometers for Syria), led to a major emphasis on advanced technology and an offensive strategy. This small size, and the extremely narrow area between its eastern border and the Mediterranean (15 kilometers in the 1949 lines), leave Israel without the strategic depth necessary for absorbing armored and air attacks, and without the ability to recover and respond.

Various regional arms control efforts repeatedly emphasized the impacts of these factors, beginning with the Kennedy initiative in the 1960s and extending to the UN discussions of a NWFZ and the ACRS talks. Each of these frameworks highlighted the centrality of Israel's nuclear deterrent and the policy of deliberate ambiguity as direct responses to this asymmetry and the resulting threat to national survival in an environment of intense Arab hostility. In recent years, this hostility has not changed significantly (or sufficiently), and many regimes have added WMD capabilities to their arsenals. In addition, terror groups are also believed to be seeking WMD, and Israel is considered to be a major potential target. Under these conditions, Israel perceives the maintenance of an ambiguous nuclear potential to be essential for deterrence and national survival against existential attacks. This policy is supported by a consensus of the Israeli decision-makers and by the vast majority of public opinion, and is linked to the perception that this option is necessary to national survival (Arian 1993: 12). The late Shalheveth Freier, who served as the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, described the nuclear deterrent option as providing "a sense of reassurance to Israelis in times of gloom" and "as possible caution to states contemplating obliterating Israel by dint of their preponderance of men and material" (Freier 1992). And although there are some dissenting views that refer to the nuclear option as a "mixed blessing" or even a liability, the arguments depend on a narrow interpretation of deterrence, and they have not affected policy or public opinion in support of this core strategy to any discernable degree (Maoz 2003).

Fundamental asymmetry is also a core factor in the security policies of other countries in the region. The small Gulf states, including Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, are vulnerable to the threats posed by their much larger and more powerful neighbors – Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. And Saudi Arabian leaders see their oil-rich but relatively sparsely settled country as threatened by the major

Arab powers in the region. In response, the Saudis obtained long-range ballistic missiles from China (matching the capabilities of Iran and Iraq), and are reported to have explored paths towards obtaining nuclear weapons (Asculai 2003; Henderson 2003). For Egypt, in contrast, the asymmetry resulting from the possession by a rival and neighboring state – Israel – of a nuclear weapon capability is also highly disturbing, thereby contributing to Cairo's constant efforts to alter this situation.

Thus, any realistic regional security and arms limitation regime would have to overcome the obstacles posed by these fundamental asymmetries. The various efforts to date – including the MENWFZ discussions, the ACRS process, the NPT regime, and other frameworks – have not succeeded in overcoming this basic substantive obstacle. Furthermore, security, arms control, and the development of peaceful relations are perhaps more closely inter-related in the Middle East than in other regions characterized by intense conflict. From the realist perspective, the various regional arms limitation initiatives that depended on fundamentally improved political relations had little chance of success.

Cultural Differences and Misperceptions in Middle East Arms Control

The overwhelming presence and influence of the realist-based factors in Middle East arms limitation efforts often obscure other important analytic frameworks, including those related to the structure and process of the negotiations, (mis)communications and misperceptions, and cultural differences. These factors exert a very strong impact on this region, and even if the salience of the realist model is reduced, and a non-zero sum security framework emerges, misperceptions and cultural differences could conceivably block agreement on, and implementation of, regional security arrangements.

In the Middle East, national strategic cultures are very strong and have a major impact on all issues related to security, including arms control discussions. (The framework of strategic culture is not inherently divorced from "realist" factors, but rather provides the cognitive framework through which these factors – such as national interests and external threats – are perceived and policies are developed.) The Israeli strategic culture was formed through 2000 years of Jewish insecurity, culminating in the Holocaust, and has led to a strong emphasis on self-reliance and defense, and a self-image of a small and beleaguered nation surrounded by implacable enemies. In contrast, the historical memory for the Arab and Islamic world is based on the legacy of the Crusades, Western colonialism, the loss of sovereignty, and the ongoing religious challenge (Sivan 1988). In this conceptual framework, Zionism (seen by Jews as their national liberation movement) represents another Western wave

of conquest and humiliation (Ben-Dor 1983 and 1997). These entirely dissimilar approaches, often expressed in language that threatens annihilation (a strong theme in the rhetoric of the Islamic regime with respect to Israel following the Iranian revolution in 1979), do not foster the transition to a problem-solving approach and cooperation on regional security threats. This deep hostility is coupled with the absence of clear communication channels and of the empathy and other elements generally associated with successful conflict resolution and the negotiation of agreements.

The impact of strategic culture can be discerned in inter-Arab relations that spill over into regional arms control discussions. For example, Egypt often sees itself as “the natural leader” of the Arab world, and competition in this framework has added an extra obstacle to the discussion process. On most arms control and security-related issues, Egypt asserts this leadership role, demanding that other Arab nations fall into line and accept its policy leadership; this sometimes results in inter-Arab competition that is expressed in increasingly uncompromising positions, particularly with respect to Israel. Perceived efforts by “usurpers” such as Jordan to play an overly visible role in such processes, to work too closely with the United States, or to be overly eager to normalize relations with Israel through a series of CBMs, spurs a strong reaction from Cairo, as occurred in the ACRS process (Kaye 2001, Landau 2001). Similarly, in the Persian Gulf region, Saudi Arabia’s self-image and perceived national interest includes political and diplomatic dominance over the smaller Gulf states. Thus, when the Saudis feared a breakthrough in the ACRS process was about to be reached in Doha, Qatar, they moved to block further discussions, asserting the hierarchical relationship and their disapproval of the visibility of the smaller GCC members in the normalization process with Israel (Kaye 2001, Rosman-Stollman 2001).

Middle East arms limitation discussions, whether in the UN and the Conference on Disarmament or the multilateral discussions such as ACRS, are also affected by the acute problems of national legitimacy in the region, which in turn, prevents direct communications between the parties. Even during the darkest periods of the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union maintained diplomatic relations and open channels of communications, but this is not the case in the Middle East, where post-colonial boundaries resulted in conflicting claims of historic rights and denial of legitimacy. Neither Syria nor Iran – the most vociferous opponent of “the Zionist entity” – have diplomatic representation in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.

Under these conditions, difficult negotiations become even more complex. The major adversaries in the Middle East have little experience of interacting with each other, and often fail even to recognize vast differences in culture, language, and perceptions. As a result, intercultural factors, which generally

play a major role in the conduct of negotiations, are very pronounced in this region. These aspects increase the complexity of the exchanges, and create, or deepen the importance of, misunderstandings and misperceptions. Important examples include problems resulting from translations between different languages, divergent analyses based on the complex negotiating behavior (including verbal and body language) between representatives of high-context and low-context cultures, as well as questions of honor and status differences, real or perceived (Cohen 1990; Mollov & Lavie 2001; Ben Dor 1997).

The impact of these process-based and cultural dimensions can be discerned in the Kennedy administration's effort to negotiate mutual self-limitations involving Egypt and Israel, which immediately ran aground on the rocks of historical memory and strategic culture. Israel's fear of annihilation (periodically heightened by Nasser's threats to seek just that) and Egypt's perception of neo-colonialism proved to be insurmountable obstacles. Subsequent Egyptian demands that Israel relinquish its nuclear deterrent, expressed during the NPT extension talks, the MENWFZ debates, and the ACRS process, also reflected inter-Arab competition. According to Ben-Dor (1997), Egypt, having broken ranks with other Arab states to make peace with Israel, used this pressure to "score points and settle accounts." Taking a somewhat different approach, Landau explains the intense Egyptian strategy of "divergence" in the bilateral relationship with Israel as a reaction, in part, to the "convergence" resulting from the wider multilateral framework (Landau 2001). But from the Israeli perspective, Egypt's campaign appeared to be the antithesis of the spirit of peace, aimed at stripping the Jewish state of its weapon of last resort and its ultimate defense against destruction.

Similarly, cultural dimensions can be seen in the ongoing and often bitter exchanges over threat perceptions and verification requirements in the context of MENWFZ discussions, debates in the UN and other international bodies, and conferences dealing with NPT issues. In a manner somewhat similar to the U.S.-Soviet conflict over this issue during Cold War negotiations, the Israeli position emphasizes the verification component, with little confidence in trust-based approaches, while the Egyptian version highlights the centrality of trust. According to Ben-Dor (1997), the Israeli perception of events related to the 1970 ceasefire agreement, when the Americans responsible for verification ignored Egyptian violations, thereby creating the conditions for the 1973 surprise attack, "has become part of the cultural legacy of the conflict." Third parties, including the United States, are not able to adequately respond to violations; therefore, inspections must be mutual (Ben-Dor 1997).⁴

In this environment, the multilateral negotiation frameworks established in the 1991 Madrid conference, including the ACRS meetings, provided a unique setting for direct communications between many of the participants.

The initial refusal of some participants to shake hands and speak directly to other delegates was an important symbol of the legitimacy problem, while a change in these policies in some cases demonstrated progress towards opening up communications channels (Kaye 2001). For example, the first time a Saudi official directly addressed the head of the Israeli delegation, in December 1994, marked a particularly important change. In addition, Israeli attendance at meetings in North Africa and the Gulf broke down barriers and established important precedents that were largely independent of usually minimal substantive discussions.

But cultural factors and misperceptions also often played a negative role in the various Middle East arms control initiatives and negotiations discussed above. For example, the many instances in which Israeli policy was attacked (often in very hostile terms) by the vast majority of participants in such frameworks reinforced the strong Jewish historical experience of being “a nation that dwells apart,” to use the frequently quoted Biblical phrase. The greater the pressure to sign the NPT, to agree to an as yet non-existent ban on the production of fissile material (FMCT), and to accede to other similar demands, the more Israeli leaders, backed by public opinion, tend to withdraw from such venues (Steinberg 1995).

Cultural factors and tensions also contributed strongly to the breakdown of the ACRS discussions and bilateral exchanges between Israel and Egypt in 1994–95. These meetings and exchanges were generally rancorous, such as the August 1994 visit of Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mousa to Israel to discuss possible compromises regarding the NPT review conference. This was a highly charged and conflictual visit, beginning with Mousa’s departure from the accepted diplomatic protocol by initially refusing to visit the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Mousa explained that his visit was focused solely on Egypt’s demand that Israel sign the NPT, but Israeli analysts commented on Mousa’s insensitivity in avoiding Yad Vashem and recognition of the Holocaust and its impact on Israel (Beker 1995: 6). The ceremonial or cultural issue also dominated the press conference held by Peres and Mousa (Peres 1994). Another incident took place in December 1994, when the Egyptian government pressed visiting Israeli President Weizman to depart from standard Israeli policy and make a statement on the NPT issue, although the position of president is constitutionally devoid of policy-making powers. Such incidents provided the background to the end of the ACRS process and also to the rancor surrounding Israeli-Egyptian discussions of the NPT extension and review conference of 1995.

The history of intense efforts and meager outcomes in Middle East arms control and regional security initiatives also reflects the region’s failure to form

a “security community.” The core of this paradigm is based on the assumption that the participants recognize at least some shared objective (such as survival and avoidance of a devastating war), which, in turn, generates or is reflected in a specialized language and a common approach. Adler and Barnett (1999) argue that this dynamic developed in the U.S.-Soviet arms control approach; other examples include the the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the CFE, and other security communities. In addition, frequent meetings and informal links (including numerous track-two sessions) between leading members of the security communities in these countries took place with the goal of generating personal bonds that would promote a cooperative atmosphere and a transformation to cooperative positive-sum relationships.

The United States, as the gavel holder of the ACRS process, along with other eager mediators (Canada, in particular), followed the standard path for creating such communities. The ACRS process, as well as the parallel track-two meetings, began with a heavy emphasis on “seminar diplomacy” and other measures designed to create seeds of dialogue and a “pedagogical process.” In this spirit, and drawing on the “contact hypothesis” of social psychology, analysts such as Dalia Kaye (2001) and Emily Landau (2001) argue that the process and discussions themselves are a form of community, and that the very creation of ACRS, plus the meetings attended by participants from a number of key regional players, are all evidence of the formation of such a community.

However, a close examination of the evidence does not support such an optimistic conclusion. There were indeed many meetings, and regular participants in the Middle East arms control discussions over the years report that a sense of camaraderie and a common vocabulary evolved; however, there are no visible indicators pointing to a security community moving measurably towards joint positions and mutual benefits. In this case, as in many others in international relations and high-level diplomacy, the required spillover from the level of personal relationships to high politics and major security issues did not take place. On the contrary, all of the efforts and cases cited above – the Kennedy initiative, the MENWFZ talks, the bilateral and multilateral discussions of regional aspects of the NPT, and ACRS – ended with no visible changes in policies. Similarly, there is no evidence of progress towards the acceptance of a joint problem-solving approach to Middle East security (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991).

Assessment and Implications

As highlighted in this analysis, the numerous attempts to reach agreements and to settle on mutual limitations related to WMD proliferation in the Middle East were largely the product of external pressure, primarily from the United States and Europe. From the first such effort in the early 1960s through the demise of ACRS three decades later, the external factors have been central. The few and partial exceptions to this pattern, such as the Mubarak initiative, largely reflected the efforts of political leaders to gain political and diplomatic advantage through the appearance, if not the substance, of arms control. In contrast, the pursuit of joint benefits resulting from mutual restraint and a transition to a positive-sum framework based on cooperative regional security is not discernable in this history.

Furthermore, the evidence clearly indicates the primacy of the realist model in explaining the behavior of the major parties in these regional security and arms control efforts. National security interests, defined unilaterally, dominated decision-making in each of the regional arms control initiatives and frameworks, from the Kennedy initiative in the early 1960s through ACRS and continuing discussions of a MENWFZ. The impact of factors such as the strong asymmetry in territory, population, resources, and resulting force structures; the strengths of the perceived threat environment; and different requirements for verification in the event of agreed mutual restraints are reflections of the importance of the realist explanations in the Middle East.

Similarly, the record demonstrates the failure to create a “critical mass” among representatives of the different states that have participated in many of these efforts, as well as the failure to create a “security community,” is also due to realist factors.

On this basis, it appears that explanatory models based on strategic culture, high context/low context theories, and poor communications links between key actors play a lesser role in the Middle East. According to Ben-Dor (1997), “culture matters when the parties negotiate via relatively low-level delegations, and less when the negotiations are conducted on very high or the highest levels.” However, in contrast to this explanation, which is based on the claims that high-level officials share a “global culture of world leaders,” the evidence from the Middle East indicates that the key factor is the substance of discussions, rather than the level. Arms control and regional security talks in the region have been conducted at all levels, with no noticeable variation in process or content. Discussions of core security and national survival, as “high-politics” agenda items, focus on the substance and reflect realist explanations, in contrast to “low-politics” negotiations where the stakes are not as critical.

It is possible that in a hypothetical scenario in which the threats and conflicting interests were reduced, and non-zero-sum approaches to security were to gain influence, cultural and other process-related factors would then become central and might even lead to transformative outcomes (Mollov & Lavie 2001). But this has not been the case in the past four decades, leading to the conclusion that new regional arms control initiatives that are based primarily on non-realist factors are unlikely to make significant progress until the impacts of core security issues are reduced significantly. Or, to put the conclusions in a positive light, the best way to promote cooperative arms control in the Middle East is to focus on the substance of the threat environment and on transforming the zero-sum framework.

Notes

1. In a political sense, the definition of the Middle East is fluid and changes depending on the time and issue. The core region consists of Egypt, Israel, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Politically and militarily, it is also necessary to include Iran, Turkey, and Libya. In the Arab-Israeli context, countries that are geographically located on the periphery in North Africa, such as Algeria and Morocco, have sent aid and troops to join in the warfare. This wide and shifting definition of the region adds significant complexity to efforts to negotiate arms control agreements.
2. The contact hypothesis was originally developed to promote racial integration and mutual acceptance in the United States. This approach is based on the claim that through dialogue, interaction, and cooperation projects, people from different cultural and ethno-national groups can overcome negative stereotypes and hostility, transforming their relationship into a positive framework.
3. The political conflicts in these international organizations resemble the types of activity that took place in the UN between the United States and the USSR during the 1950s and 1960s, as they sought to obtain support from other participants.
4. Ben-Dor also admits that other, realist-based factors also explain this Israeli policy.

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