

# Israel and Strategic Stability in the Middle East

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When Thomas Schelling wrote a foreword to a collection of articles on strategic stability published in 2013 by the Strategic Studies Institute and the US Army War College, he briefly described the development of the concept of “strategic stability” during the nuclear era, and added:

Now we are in a different world, a world so much more complex than the world of the East-West Cold War...Now the world is so much changed, so much more complicated, so multivariate, so unpredictable, involving so many nations and cultures and languages in nuclear relationships, many of them asymmetric, that it is even difficult to know how many meanings there are for “strategic stability.”<sup>1</sup>

Reading this text, a veteran Middle East observer might say: Welcome to our world of an unpredictable Middle East! Indeed, Israel has faced such a complex environment since its establishment, and its predicament is in many ways the story of the search for strategic stability. This story includes the attempt to avoid surprise attacks through deterrence, followed by the need to deal with the consequences of a failure of deterrence, first in a non-nuclear context, later in the same environment with some limited nuclear elements, and currently, while preparing for the possibility of an era in which Israel will have to achieve strategic stability in a full nuclear context.

The ideas that underpin the concept of strategic stability date as far back as the early 1950s, when both the United States and the Soviet Union began

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to build a nuclear arsenal.<sup>2</sup> The goal was to address the incentive provided by nuclear weapons to initiate a surprise first attack when two nuclear powers face one another. This scenario is not yet relevant to the Middle East, and there is currently a general assumption that only one state in the region, Israel, is a nuclear weapon state. However, the concept of strategic stability was deeply embedded in Israeli strategic thinking since the inception of the State of Israel, albeit in a wider context of the existential threats Israel faced and without the explicit term “strategic stability.” At an early stage of the development of Israel’s national security doctrine there was some thinking that was connected to the nuclear era. Since the late 1970s, when Iraq’s Saddam Hussein launched his nuclear program, Israel was compelled to take seriously the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons in Middle East states, examine the implications of such proliferation, and devise counter strategies, while reconsidering strategic stability. In recent years Iran succeeded in achieving a status of a nuclear threshold state, and this will presumably motivate further thinking on the subject.

Since 1969 Israel has embraced a doctrine of “nuclear ambiguity,” and therefore there is no official public discourse on nuclear subjects other than nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. In striving to understand Israeli thinking on nuclear issues, one can infer that the limited discussion of nuclear subjects in Israeli academia and think tanks reflects the discussion that takes place in the official circles – assuming that such a discussion takes place. This also explains why it is important to examine Israeli thinking on strategic stability in non-nuclear contexts. Moreover, future nuclear strategies and doctrines in Israel will, to a great extent, evolve from previous perceptions and concepts.

### **The Early Years**

Israel’s War of Independence ended in July 1949, and armistice agreements were signed with the neighboring Arab states that participated in the war. Yet while the Arab attempt to destroy the new Jewish state failed, it soon became clear to Israel’s leaders that the Arab world was not prepared to accept this reality. Consequently, the basic assumption was that there would be further attempts against Israel’s very existence, which meant that Israel had to prepare for the next rounds. The person who dominated Israeli strategic thinking during these years was David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister. In

the early 1950s he formulated an Israeli security doctrine to deal with this Israeli predicament, and it remained valid in subsequent decades.

In essence, the challenge that this security doctrine addressed was very similar to the challenge that led US thinkers to develop the concept of strategic stability. The main threat was the threat of a surprise attack waged by a coalition of Arab states, whereby the Arab states could optimize their advantages due to the large asymmetries between them and Israel. Israel's small territory, small population, and limited resources implied that it could maintain only a small standing armed force, while the Arab states could keep large standing armies. By initiating a surprise attack with armored and mechanized forces supported by airpower, the Arab armies could overcome the small Israeli standing army and advance throughout the territory of Israel in a very short time. That was the existential threat Israel had to face during these years. Translating the Israeli predicament into terms of modern strategy, the main question was how to achieve strategic stability by deterring the Arab states from launching a surprise attack that would pose an existential threat to Israel.

As could be expected, the debate was about the two main types of deterring threats, denial and punishment. In the superpowers' nuclear context, denial was rejected as a viable strategy because it seemed not feasible, and at a later stage when BMD technologies were ripe, it seemed to be a very expensive option that could incur a destabilizing effect that might hurt strategic stability. In contrast, it was believed that punishment threats of near annihilation of the other party in a second strike would be highly credible. In the Israeli case both kinds of deterrence threats were adopted, because it seemed that there was no way to assure that punishment threats would be credible enough to deter any thought of a surprise attack, mainly because of the wide asymmetries between the two sides. What followed was an understanding that Israel might suffer some surprise attacks, but could not afford to lose significant parts of its territory. The assumption was that every successful denial would contribute to the credibility of Israeli deterrence, create what was termed accumulated deterrence, increase the time between subsequent rounds of war, and eventually convince the Arab states to give up the option of a massive surprise attack aimed at destroying Israel as a way of dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The doctrine Ben-Gurion formulated was based on the following elements:

- a. Building a large military force based mostly on reserve forces that can be mobilized quickly when needed, as a way of balancing the Arab quantitative edge.
  - b. Retaining a qualitative edge in technology, manpower, training, and command and control, as another way to offset the Arab quantitative edge.
  - c. Building intelligence capabilities that assure early warning of a coming surprise attack, which will enable prompt mobilization of the reserve forces.
  - d. Preparing for a short phase of defensive operations followed by an early transition to counterattack, in order to avoid lengthy operations on Israeli territory and the ensuing destruction, and transferring the fighting as soon as possible to enemy territory.
  - e. Achieving a clear decisive outcome of the war, by destroying the enemy's forces and capturing pieces of its territory, leading to an early ceasefire.
- This strategy was supposed to deny the enemy any achievements and punish it through the damage caused by loss of its forces and loss of territory.

In retrospect the strategy developed by Ben-Gurion was highly successful, but when it was devised there was a high level of uncertainty as to its credibility. Can Israel indeed balance the huge asymmetries between it and its opponents? At a very early stage during the 1950s, the development of the nuclear option was linked with this basic strategy. It seems that the nuclear option was perceived as the ultimate insurance policy, if the strategic doctrine that was chosen failed to prevent the materialization of an existential threat. Based on this thinking, the planning of the Dimona nuclear research center began in the mid 1950s, and construction began in 1959.

Although some elements of the Israeli strategic doctrine failed the test on different occasions, the doctrine as a whole proved highly successful. In 1973, for example, the Israeli intelligence community failed to give prompt early warning of the surprise attack by Egypt and Syria, but the other elements of the doctrine proved valid and allowed Israel to defend itself and end the war with great damage to enemy forces and portions of enemy territory. It may be that the nuclear option also played a role, because it affected the nature of the Arab surprise attack: Egypt and Syria planned a limited attack that would not pose an existential threat to Israel. However, this theory is not generally accepted because these two states had other good reasons to limit the objectives of their attack, stemming from a realistic appreciation of the conventional balance of forces and political reasons.

As a result of the success of the Israeli strategic doctrine, strategic stability was actually achieved after the 1973 war. The Arab governments understood that if the Arab militaries cannot defeat the Israeli Defense Forces even when they succeed in achieving strategic surprise, they should abandon war as a way to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. This led in the first phase to conclusion of an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. For some time Syrian President Hafez Assad made a feeble – and unsuccessful – attempt to achieve what he defined as strategic parity with Israel, and in any event, it seemed then that the purpose of the Syrian strategic parity was more to establish a kind of mutual balance of terror than to acquire a credible option of attacking Israel.

This period was also characterized by Arab attempts to balance Israel's assumed nuclear capabilities. The inability to develop their own nuclear capabilities led Arab states to efforts to develop other asymmetric responses to the perceived Israeli capabilities; chemical and biological weapons were chosen as “the poor man's nuclear weapons.” Indeed, this concept has some validity. To achieve strategic stability based on credible deterrence, it is not necessary to convince the other party that your retaliation will be even in kind and in scope. It is sufficient to convince the other party that retaliation will inflict intolerable damage on it. With the asymmetries between Israel and the Arab states, it seemed that such a strategic concept could work, and Israel could be deterred by chemical and biological weapons. Egypt was the first to pursue this route and launch chemical and biological weapons programs as well as ballistic missile programs as the preferred delivery means.

One can argue that this strategic stability that was based on asymmetric deterrence stood the test of time. The Middle East was probably the only region of the world in which chemical weapons were used after the World War I, but chemical weapons were never used against a state that was perceived as having weapons of mass destruction in its arsenal. The best example is Egypt, which used chemical weapons in Yemen during the 1962-1967 civil war but did not use these weapons against Israel in the 1967 war, although it sustained a humiliating defeat.

### **The Era of Nuclear Proliferation**

Although there were some indications that the Shah of Iran made the first steps to embark on a nuclear program already in the early 1970s, the Islamic regime that came to power in 1979 after the Khomeini revolution decided

to dismantle the nuclear program. The present era of nuclear proliferation started in earnest when Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein followed the Shah's ambitions and in 1976 procured from France a nuclear reactor capable of producing plutonium, probably with the intention to use it for production of nuclear weapons. This reactor was destroyed by an Israeli attack in 1981, but its destruction led to an Iraqi decision to start a full blown redundant nuclear program that was aimed at producing nuclear weapons. This program was dismantled following the 1991 Gulf War, but by then Iran already decided to resume its nuclear program, this time with the help of the Pakistani A. Q. Khan network.

The dawn of this era of proliferation demanded Israeli consideration of proper responses. The Israeli decision was to do the most to prolong as much as possible the strategic stability that from its point of view was achieved while perceived as the only nuclear power in the Middle East. Israel was not willing to follow the US example, accept that hostile states in the Middle East become nuclear powers, and search for ways to achieve strategic stability under these new conditions. To be sure, this was a very one-sided outlook, because from the point of view of the Arab actors and Iran it was not a situation of strategic stability but a situation of Israeli military supremacy that allowed Israel to take the military initiative whenever it saw fit. To them, it was the opposite of a stable situation and was probably one of the motivations for nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. This decision in turn led to the development in Israel of the "Begin Doctrine" that outlined the Israeli choice of a strategy of counter-proliferation. Israel will make any effort to prevent further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, including through military action.

To date the so-called Begin Doctrine has been implemented militarily twice: first in the 1981 air strike that destroyed the Iraqi reactor, Osirak, and second, according to information leaked to the media in the US, in the case of the secret Syrian reactor at al-Kibar (North Syria) that was attacked and destroyed in 2007. There is no general agreement on the efficacy of this doctrine, and the debate focuses mostly on the effects of the Osirak attack. While the proposition that the attack delayed the Iraqi military nuclear program for years is cogent, it did not stop the nuclear program, and perhaps may have strengthened the Iraqi resolve to continue with the program, this time with a more ambitious and redundant program and more investment of resources than Israel could stop by use of force. It was fortuitous that

Saddam Hussein decided to invade Kuwait, which led to the 1991 Gulf War and the forced WMD disarmament of Iraq. Surprisingly there may be some similarities in the Syrian case. It is possible that after the attack that destroyed the reactor the Syrian leadership entertained ideas to restart the nuclear program, albeit in another, less vulnerable form, but the civil war that erupted in Syria in 2011 will delay any realization of this idea for many years. The Syrian regime may also change as a result of this civil war, and a new regime might view the issue differently.

These cases and overall global experience with nuclear proliferation indicate that a nuclear program is stopped when the leadership of the state makes the decision to do so. This cannot be achieved only by military strikes aimed at nuclear installations. However, proponents of the Begin Doctrine could well argue that there is no contradiction, because the delay in the nuclear programs increases the chance of buying time to change the approach of the proliferating state and prompt it to decide to give up its nuclear program.

Along with attempts at nuclear proliferation, the era was characterized by a change in the military balance in the Middle East and the nature of military threats. This change is the result of regional and global political developments as well as changes in the nature of modern conventional war. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world, the Middle East ceased to be a battleground for superpower rivalry – with ensuing implications for strategic stability. That meant, for example, that a regional state that starts war could not rely on the help of its superpower patron, and if defeated in this war, it could not trust that superpower to help it to recover rapidly from its defeat. The cost of war became higher, making it easier to achieve strategic stability among the states of the region.

In the region itself the pan-Arab idea lost steam and the probability of formation of military alliances against Israel ebbed, lowering the probability of Arab states posing existential threats to the State of Israel. Most Arab governments internalized that the Arab-Israeli conflict can be settled only politically and not through the use of force, that they had to accept Israel as part of the Middle East, and that it was possible to negotiate peace agreements with Israel. Two states have already concluded peace agreements with Israel, and others negotiated peace, so far without results. This has made the Arab world even less of an existential threat to Israel.

At the same time, changes in the nature of modern conventional war increased the military disparity between Israel and its potential Arab rivals. The Revolution in Military Affairs that embeds information dominance, long range precision guided munitions, and computerized command, control, and communications systems with the necessary changes in structure of the fighting forces, operational doctrines, and training gave the IDF a clear edge over its opponents and enabled a quick defeat of large scale armored and mechanized attacks. That also made the classic existential threats Israel had to face since its inception irrelevant, and traditional threats were replaced by asymmetric violent conflicts that erupted in the Middle East. Some of these conflicts are internal conflicts between a government and a non-state actor or among different non-state actors. Some are conflicts between a state and a non-state actor that operates from a neighboring state, for example, between Israel and Hezbollah, which operates from Lebanon. In the case of Israel, these non-state actors do pose a substantive – though not existential – threat because of their ability to disrupt normal life.

Perhaps the concept of strategic stability has less relevance in the case of these conflicts, but in essence, the struggle is indeed a quest for stability. The state engaged in this kind of struggle must assume that as long as there is no political resolution of the conflict that bred the non-state actor's violence, the state will have to live with it, like a chronic disease. Stability is achieved when the symptoms, namely, successful enemy operations, are kept to a tolerable minimum. In this case too, deterrence based on the combined threat of denial and punishment is one of the more effective instruments. The best example is the ability of Israel to keep stability on its border with Lebanon (namely Hezbollah) in recent years.

### **Looking to the Future**

The P5+1 states negotiated an agreement with Iran intended to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. If Iran violates the agreement, Israel may operate according to the Begin Doctrine and attack the Iranian nuclear program. This program is vast, redundant, dispersed, and well-defended, and therefore Israel must prepare for a scenario in which Iran becomes a nuclear weapons state either because Israel acknowledged the Begin Doctrine is not implementable in this case or because the attacks on Iran's nuclear program failed to achieve a sufficient delay. In that scenario Israel will have to deal with a nuclear environment that epitomizes Schelling's description – “so



much more complicated, so multivariate, so unpredictable, involving so many nations and cultures and languages in nuclear relationships, many of them asymmetric” – and complicates the challenge of achieving strategic stability.

### ***Dealing with a Number of Nuclear Actors***

First, it is assumed that the success of Iran’s nuclear program will prompt other states in the Middle East to follow suit. The first candidate for further nuclear proliferation is Saudi Arabia. The Middle East is now the scene of a multi-dimensional struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with ethnic (Arab vs. Persian), religious (Sunni vs. Shiite), and strategic (competition on hegemony in the Gulf area) roots. It takes place in the Gulf area, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. As Saudi Arabia perceives Iran under the Islamic regime as an existential threat, it is difficult to assume that Saudi Arabia will be willing to accept a situation of Iranian nuclear monopoly at the Gulf. Saudi Arabia has the financial means and the allies, especially Pakistan, that allow it to have a successful nuclear program. Presumably states such as Turkey and Egypt will follow suit. Keeping a credible deterrence balance in a situation of a number of nuclear actors is not easy, especially when they have respective adversarial relationships. The larger the number of nuclear actors, the greater is the probability of mistakes, miscalculations, and accidents. Likewise, there is greater probability that some of these actors will have only rudimentary command and control of the nuclear weapons without strong mechanisms that can prevent erroneous operation of these weapon systems.

Sending nuclear deterring signals will be very complicated. A signal aimed to deter state A may be misinterpreted wrongly by nuclear weapon state B as a signal that is aimed at it, causing unnecessary tension and possible escalation. Even during the time of the Cold War, of course, the nuclear reality was not purely bipolar because of the appearance of China as an independent nuclear player, but these players played on the global theater and it was easier to identify who threatened whom. The Middle East is much smaller and the states are geographically closer to each other, and therefore these distinctions are much more difficult. When a missile is launched from China it is easy to determine whether it is aimed at the US or at Russia and vice versa. When a missile is launched from a state at the Middle East, it is not always easy to determine its target.

### ***Asymmetric Nuclear Relationships***

Israel is perceived as a mature nuclear power, which means that for a relatively long period the nuclear relationships between Israel and the other powers will be asymmetric. There will likewise be other asymmetries. Some states are more vulnerable because of smaller territory and smaller populations concentrated in fewer cities. All these asymmetries may make achieving strategic stability more difficult.

The assumption is that with two asymmetric nuclear powers, both may be tempted to initiate a first strike. The stronger party would wish to make use of its superiority as long as it exists, and the weaker party may think that the only way it can overcome its weakness is by striking first. A perception of more vulnerability of one of the parties may again tempt the other parties to strike first, assuming that they can absorb the counter strike more easily.

All these considerations do not necessarily mean that it is not possible to achieve strategic stability under asymmetric conditions. However, they may imply that more resources should be invested in building a credible second strike capability and convincing the other parties that whatever the asymmetries are, they cannot avoid a second strike that will cause them intolerable harm.

### ***So Many Nations, Cultures, and Languages***

Whether deterrence efficacy is based on the cultural context is a recurrent question. Sometimes in the Israeli discourse the question that is raised is: are the leaderships of the region's potential nuclear states rational? The assumption behind this question is that those leaderships are less driven by rational considerations than by religious beliefs, like the idea that initiating a strike that will destroy the infidel Jewish state will bring about the return of the Messiah (the Hidden Imam, according to Shiite Islam) and salvation. If that is the case, then such a leadership might well be willing to pay a very high price to serve a transcendent religious purpose.

The problem becomes even more complex when Israel has to deal with several actors of different cultural backgrounds, from Shiite Muslim Persians to Sunni Muslim Arabs, each with its own brand of religious extremism. The former is willing to make sacrifices to bring back the Hidden Mahdi, while the latter is prepared to make sacrifices to create a global caliphate. Strategic stability from this vantage point looks decidedly unattainable.

Examining the conduct of some of these “extreme” regimes more closely, however, may lead to different conclusions. The decisions that Iran made on different occasions suggest they were perfectly rational and based on Iran’s perceived national interests. When the Nagorno-Karabakh war broke out in 1994 between Christian Armenia and Shiite-Muslim Azerbaijan, Iran sided with Armenia because Azerbaijan, with its irredentist ambitions for areas in the northern part of Iran inhabited by Azeris, was considered a threat. When Russia ruthlessly suppressed the rebellion of the Muslim Chechens, Iran’s relations with Russia were not hurt at all, because the strategic relationship with Russia was perceived by the rulers of the Islamic Republic as very important. Religious considerations were pushed aside and strategic interests were given a clear priority. That of course should bring us to question whether Iran’s rulers would be willing to endanger the survival of the state and the regime for religious purposes, especially when religious commands can often be interpreted in a way that will serve the interests of the moment. Iran is not supporting the Assad regime in the current civil war in Syria out of brotherly love for fellow Shiites (the Alawites of Syria are not exactly Shiites) but because it is its strategic interest, and religion serves only as a tool that can be used to explain its policy and mobilize the masses.

In any case, cultural and religious differences breed distrust among conflicting parties that is difficult to overcome. Disbelief in the rationality of the others may lead, first, to a very strong motivation to prevent acquisition of nuclear weapons by the other parties, even at a high price, and second, to overestimation of the steps that should be taken to establish credible deterrence if attempts at preemption fail.

There is a sense in Israel that because of cultural differences, strategic stability should be examined in cases that are outside the case of the superpowers’ nuclear rivalry. An interesting case is the nuclear race in the Indian peninsula, which poses an opportunity to test different theories of strategic stability. It is, for example, an opportunity to test Kenneth Waltz’s theory of nuclear peace, whereby nuclear weapons induce stability and decrease the chances of crisis escalation. On the one hand, it can be argued that since India and Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons there was no major war between them. On the other hand, there were some serious crises. In one significant crisis in 1990, the situation in Kashmir prompted a limited military confrontation that escalated with the potential to become a major war, and in 1999, immediately after the two states performed nuclear tests,

Pakistani forces invaded a disputed area at Kargil held by India, threatening a major escalation. Eventually there was no escalation and a nuclear war was avoided in both cases, but they indicate that nuclear weapons did not prevent the two sides from taking other military steps that may even be considered as provocative and irresponsible.

Cultural variance and language variance may also cause difficulties of a more technical nature, because signals made by one of the parties can be interpreted in various cultures and languages differently from the original intention of the party that issued the signal. That may cause misunderstandings and miscalculations.

### ***Short Distances***

Another element particular to the Middle East reality is the relatively short distances between the states. Short distances mean short reaction times, which makes it impractical to launch the second strike before the enemy missiles launched in the first wave of the surprise strike hit their targets. That implies that all essential parts of the second strike capability should survive the first strike. That includes the delivery systems, the command and control system, and the national decision making apparatus, namely, the element of government that must take these decisions. Perhaps Israel's reported construction of a new deeply buried bunker for the national leadership is connected to the need to assure the survivability of this apparatus.<sup>3</sup>

### **Strategic Stability for Israel in this Possible Future Reality**

Israel of course prefers to avoid a situation in which it will have to try to establish strategic stability in a Middle East with a number of nuclear weapons states. However, it must consider the possibility that attempts to stop proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East will fail, and therefore, prepare for this eventuality.

### ***Second Strike Capability***

In such a reality the most important question will be how to build a credible strike capability that will dissuade nuclear opponents from considering a first strike because they would not succeed in preempting an Israeli second strike. According to media reports, Israel has already started taking concrete steps to build this second strike capability. According to these media reports, the main component of this second strike capability would be diesel electric

powered submarines equipped with nuclear tipped cruise missiles.<sup>4</sup> These weapon systems were added to the nuclear Jericho missiles Israel is reported to have,<sup>5</sup> creating a credible nuclear dyad. But usually the first capability that a new nuclear weapon state acquires is the capability to carry nuclear bombs by attack aircraft, and therefore it may be assumed that if this future reality is realized Israel will have a full nuclear triad. These second strike capabilities will also likely include a command and control system and a national decision making apparatus that can withstand a first strike.

### ***The Nuclear Ambiguity Policy***

Should Israel continue with its policy of nuclear ambiguity, whereby it does not discuss whether it has a military nuclear capability?<sup>6</sup> There is a strong global and regional perception that Israel is an advanced nuclear power, and it can be assumed that if Israel makes nuclear threats, those threatened will believe that Israel has the capabilities necessary to realize them. Doubts would probably relate to Israel's resolve in realizing its threats. On the other end of the debate, however, is a widely accepted view that for credible nuclear deterrence the other parties should have a clear knowledge of your second strike capabilities, and therefore the parties of such deterrence equations should expose their capabilities. This does not mesh with a policy of nuclear ambiguity.

In addition, if/when there are other nuclear powers in the Middle East, Israel would presumably not pay the same political price it would pay now, if it acknowledged its status as a nuclear power.

### ***The Role of Extended Deterrence***

There is likewise a debate in Israel on the role of US extended deterrence in providing for strategic stability in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Trusting extended deterrence contradicts the Israeli ethos of "only we can defend ourselves," and that argument joins the vast debate on the credibility of extended deterrence. The question here is, will the US be willing to sacrifice New York to protect Tel Aviv? It seems reasonable that because of the combination of these considerations Israel will look at US extended deterrence as something that can be only partially trusted and comes on top of its own deterrence capabilities, and is not the main component of its deterrence posture. There will also be very limited willingness to pay any price, political or other, for US willingness to extend its deterrence to Israel. In this context there is

much opposition in Israel to the idea of a US-Israel defense treaty, because it may limit Israel's freedom of decision and operation.

### *Missile Defense and Strategic Stability*

In the bipolar context, ballistic missile defense was considered destabilizing and a threat to strategic stability. This led to the conclusion in 1972 of the ABM treaty that actually forbade the deployment of missile defense systems by the US and the Soviet Union other than some limited deployment. In the Middle East, ballistic missiles with conventional warheads were often used as a terror weapon against cities. The last striking example is the use of ballistic missiles by the Assad regime in Syria in the framework of the civil war to attack cities that are under rebel control. In light of this recent experience, missile defense is commanding new attention in the military buildup of the states of the region. Israel is pioneering the use of missile defense systems, and is currently deploying a national missile defense based on the indigenously developed and produced Arrow 2 system. Gradually other systems aimed at protection against shorter range missiles and rockets are deployed. That is significant because due to the short distances in the Middle East, when it comes to missiles and missile defense, the lines between the tactical and the strategic are blurred. The concern of the growing ballistic missile capabilities of Iran and its nuclear program are causing other states to consider deployment of missile defense systems. The recent examples are some Arab Gulf states and Turkey, which is procuring a Chinese-made missile defense system.

Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East will probably not lead the region's states to give up their missile defense out of theoretical considerations that it may be harmful to strategic stability. Most likely, it will lead to an even greater focus on enhancing missile defense. States in the region distrust each other and they will be reluctant to be completely exposed to nuclear or other ballistic missile attack based on an abstract concept such as strategic stability. What can be expected in the regional discourse would be rationalization of deployment of missile defense systems in a nuclear environment. The main argument would probably be that missile defense is one of the components needed to safeguard the survivability of second strike capabilities,<sup>8</sup> and in any case, as no missile defense system can protect completely against a nuclear attack, its perceived damage to strategic stability is exaggerated.

### ***Communication among the Nuclear Parties***

The Middle East is characterized by a lack of communication between the states. Sometimes even diplomatic relations are beyond reach, and that is especially true in the case of Israel. Lack of communication may inhibit strategic stability among nuclear powers. The international community will have to play a major role in pushing the nuclear states in the region to establish credible channels of communication in this future reality.

### ***Dealing with Sub-Nuclear Conflicts***

Israel must assume that the regional states armed with nuclear weapons will be more similar to Pakistan than to the superpowers. That means that it will not cause them to be more cautious and avoid sub-nuclear conflict that may escalate to nuclear conflicts. Israel will have to take into account situations in which some states will be even more willing to initiate sub-nuclear conflicts because of a feeling of immunity. They may also try to extend their nuclear umbrellas to their allies and proxies, for example, Iran giving extended nuclear deterrence to Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. That will complicate Israel's engagement in sub-nuclear conflicts because of the need to contain further escalation.

### ***Arms Control***

In a multi-nuclear Middle East the region's states will have to consider arms control arrangements as a way of augmenting strategic stability. This will also depend on the general political developments in the Middle East – whether these developments facilitate progress toward a cooperative security regime in the region or only inhibit such progress.

### **Conclusion**

Schelling has been proven correct, and certainly proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East will make it very difficult, if at all possible, to establish strategic stability, assuming that we understand the meaning of the concept in such a complex environment. That provides a strong reason why the international community and the relevant actors should take any possible means to prevent such proliferation.

If proliferation occurs, however, Israel will probably take all necessary steps to achieve strategic stability as much as possible through establishing

a credible second strike capability, and other supporting means such as an enhanced national missile defense system.

All the parties may eventually find that it is time to start negotiating arms control agreements to try to manage the inherent instability that results from nuclear proliferation in this region. That will likely be a long and not easy process.

## Notes

- 1 Thomas C. Schelling, "Foreword," in *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*, eds. Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson (Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2013), p. vii.
- 2 Michael S. Gerson, "The Origins of Strategic Stability: The United States and the Threat of Surprise Attack," in *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*, p. 1.
- 3 "That's How the Bunker of the Prime Minister Looks," *Channel 2 News*, February 15, 2009, <http://goo.gl/DwYGlX>.
- 4 "Israel Submarine Capabilities," Nuclear Threat Initiative, <http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-submarine-capabilities/>; "Operation Samson: Israel's Deployments of Nuclear Missiles on Submarines from Germany," *Der Spiegel Online*, <http://goo.gl/XfUXO>.
- 5 Alon Ben-David, "Israel Tests Enhanced Ballistic Missile," *Aviation Week*, July 29, 2013, [http://www.aviationweek.com/Article.aspx?id=/article-xml/AW\\_07\\_29\\_2013\\_p36-598763.xml](http://www.aviationweek.com/Article.aspx?id=/article-xml/AW_07_29_2013_p36-598763.xml).
- 6 See for example Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean and What Can be Done*, Memorandum 88 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007), p. 79.
- 7 See, for example, Yair Evron on the possibility of a US-Israel defense treaty that may enhance extended deterrence aimed at Iran, in Yair Evron, "An Israel-Iran Balance of Nuclear Deterrence: Seeds of Instability," in *Israel and a Nuclear Iran*, ed. Ephraim Kam, Memorandum No. 94 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2008), p. 61.
- 8 Indeed that was the line of argument made by Uzi Rubin, the former director of the Israeli MOD missile defense program, in a presentation at a conference on missile defense conference in Tel Aviv at INSS: "Missile Defense: Asset or Liability for Regional and International Stability," January 15, 2014.