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**The Agreement on Syria's Chemical Weapons:
Should Israel Reassess its Arms Control and Disarmament Policies?**

Shimon Stein

Even before the ink was dry on the Russian (American) proposal that called on Syria to divest itself of its chemical weapons, a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, in response to a question from *Haaretz*, asserted that Israel would not ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) as long as other states in the region that do not recognize Israel's existence and threaten to destroy it are in possession of chemical weapons. He added, "The chemical weapons threat against Israel and its civilian population is neither theoretical nor distant. Terror organizations, acting as proxies for certain regional states, similarly pose a chemical weapons threat. These threats cannot be ignored by Israel, in [its] assessment of possible ratification of the convention." It is puzzling why the spokesman was in such a hurry to make such a categorical statement on Israel's position even before it became clear how the proposal would be received.

Since this statement was made, the Geneva agreement, which is supposed to lead to the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, has been signed. The significant differences of opinion between the United States (and France and Britain) and Russia during the decision making process in the UN Security Council on the relevant resolution that was approved indicate that there are still numerous obstacles to implementation of the historic decision and that it is too early to consider the task completed. Yet even if a US recourse to military action if Syria fails to fulfill the agreement is ostensibly still on the table, it is clear that a diplomatic process of disarmament is beginning. It is as yet difficult to assess how this process will unfold, and its implications depend to a large extent on the way the Syrian issue is handled.

Crises – and wars – upset the status quo and create opportunities that did not exist previously. This is what happened in the wake of 1991 Gulf War: American recognition of the need to take advantage of the results of the war to start a regional process led to the launching of multilateral talks as part of the Madrid process. The multilateral working group on arms control and regional security, which was established in that framework, was part of the American attempt to create a security architecture for the Middle East.

Two decades later, assuming that the agreement on Syria's chemical weapons is implemented despite the anticipated difficulties, will the crisis succeed in spawning a diplomatic process that will offer new opportunities in the regional arms control and disarmament process? Will the United States under President Obama wish to promote an arms control agenda in the Middle East with Russia as its partner? Will a US-Russian understanding be sufficient to promote a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis and consequently lead to the continuation of the regional arms control process?

Against this background, the question is whether Israel can make do with a response of the sort given by the Foreign Ministry spokesman. At the recent Valdai conference President Putin claimed that Syria acquired its chemical weapons in response to Israel's nuclear weapons, and that Israel, because of its technological superiority, does not need to have nuclear weapons, which only make it itself a target. This suggests that some will see the chemical weapons agreement as an opportunity to jumpstart a regional disarmament process in which Israel will need to do its part. Indeed, Putin added that ultimately Israel would have to dismantle its nuclear weapons, just as Syria is giving up its chemical weapons, and that Israel is not one of the five nations entitled to possess nuclear weapons. One Russian Middle East analyst, interpreting Putin's remarks, noted that the Russian president prefers for the Middle East to become a nuclear-free zone, an idea that Russia has long supported. According to this expert, the dismantling of chemical weapons is not conditional on Israel's dismantling of its nuclear weapons. As others presumably share his basic position, the question is whether Russia will act to jumpstart the process. A possible platform could be the "2012 Conference," which was supposed to convene under the umbrella of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in order to discuss measures to implement the decision to turn the Middle East into a weapons of mass destruction-free zone. Russia, which has criticized the (American) decision to postpone the conference, could renew the pressure to convene it.

What might this mean for Israel, which could find itself involved in a process in which it is forced to be on the defensive and is required to address questions similar to those posed to the Foreign Ministry spokesman? Instead of focusing on the risks, perhaps attention ought to be turned to the opportunities that the Syrian crisis and ensuing dynamic may well create. The US actions in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War forced Israel to formulate a vision for regional security and arms control that steered its participation in the working group on arms control. One outcome was the radical change in Israel's willingness to be involved in the process of disarmament and arms control in the 1990s, and in which – in contrast to the prevalent approach until then – involvement created an opportunity to influence the content of the arms control and disarmament agreements, thereby helping to maintain national interests. Two striking examples of the new approach were the involvement in drafting the CWC and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In its

dealings on the two treaties, Israel combined two approaches, supporting global disarmament processes when their implementation (that is, ratification) is subject to regional developments. For this reason, Israel decided not to ratify the two treaties. Are the considerations that guided it at the time still valid regarding ratification of the CWC? Or does the Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process change the situation? Does Israel's joining the convention harm or strengthen Israeli deterrence? Does Israel's participation help the effort to prevent spillover of chemical weapons to terrorist organizations and thus remove a potential danger that these weapons will be used against Israel? Or is it better to maintain the status quo because the security risk and a potential slippery diplomatic slope do not justify a risk, even if it incurs temporary support because for Israel given the change in its position?

These and other questions come to the fore in the new situation. The current focus on the issue of disarmament may not be consistent with Israel's position, which makes discussion, and certainly, implementation, of the disarmament agreements conditional on a radical change in the political situation in the region. However, with the crisis in Syria, Israel can focus on the issue of chemical weapons and propose that after the Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process is completed, it will enter a regional discussion on establishing a chemical weapons-free zone in the Middle East. The discussions on establishing a regional verification mechanism and reciprocal regional monitoring mechanism could start a process of confidence building as a basis for continuation of the process.

In conclusion, the US initiative in the 1990s forced Israel to formulate a doctrine on regional security and arms control, which in turn changed Israel's approach and encouraged its diplomatic involvement in arms control processes, in the effort to serve Israeli interests. The crisis in Syria and potential subsequent developments require Israel to reexamine its positions on these topics. It is doubtful that adopting a defensive/passive position due to the risks in the Middle East arena is the best approach. Instead, the opportunities that arise should be examined, and then, Israel should consult with the United States and a number of other Western countries and make its positions clear. It is better to set the parameters for shaping the agenda on regional security and arms control than to be dragged into a defensive position.

