



Pugwash Workshop
“The Unchangeable Middle East”

Herzliya, Israel
5–6 June 2015
Summary of Main Points¹

Pugwash convened its 13th workshop in Israel, in cooperation with the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University. Discussion focused on specific regional developments as well as longer-standing themes.

Below are some conclusions and observations as seen by the rapporteurs: all the arguments in the report were made by individuals, yet not necessarily shared by all the participants; due to the composition of the group, the arguments quoted in the report represent mainly (but not exclusively) viewpoints expressed by the Israeli participants and as usual no attempt was made to have a consensus.

1) Iran and the nuclear agreement: Israelis are concerned that the opening of relations with Iran following a nuclear deal will encourage Iran to expand its influence and activities throughout the region, yet there is an opportunity for greater communications.

- a) The nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, if agreed upon and respected, would allow for greater communications and build confidence among regional states in Iran's intentions. It should be seen as ‘relatively good for Israeli strategic interests’ and that if there is no deal then ‘tension in the region will rise exponentially.’
- b) It was felt that the overwhelming majority of people in Iran want better relations and economic ties with the US, but that some conservative forces such as the IRGC have vested interests in blocking progress.
- c) It is understood from the US factsheet that the deal would go a long way in preventing both the uranium and the plutonium route to the bomb, as well as in making sure there is no undisclosed program, thereby giving ‘relative assurance that Iran won't be able to produce nuclear weapons.’ If there is a deal on the basis of the framework, it must be recognized that Iran will have gone ‘way beyond’ any existing safeguards agreements. It was noted that the two factsheets coming from Iran and the US are different but compatible; they should both be seen as sales documents to public constituencies.
- d) However, the perception is that loopholes in the agreed framework are still present. Voluntary implementation and managed access are a problem for Israel given the lack of

¹ The rapporteurs for this report were Poul-Erik Christiansen, Projects Assistant, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs and Roberta Mulas, GEM Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctoral Candidate at Warwick & LUISS Universities. Please note that the views presented here represent a range of opinions expressed in the meetings, and they do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the rapporteurs, nor of the Pugwash Conferences as an organization. The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed can be attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus.

trust. Inspections ‘anytime, anywhere’ would be preferable but these were also seen as unrealistic as ‘there is no procedure to give 100% assurance for verification.’

- e) There continued to be concern within Israel that the issue of possible military dimensions has still not been adequately addressed by the P5+1 process; yet, it was pointed out that the world at large does not have such intense focus on this issue.
- f) Procedures for violation are also crucial and must be fleshed out in advance, as part of the deal. Because some people still retain the assumption that ‘nothing has changed in Iran’s nuclear ambition and regional hegemony’, there must be clear mechanisms for deciding how a violation is determined and consequent steps to follow.
- g) While it is understood that Israel will do all it can to prevent states that threaten its existence from acquiring nuclear arms, bombing nuclear facilities should not be an option. Any attack on a nuclear facility is a contravention of IAEA decisions and would further erode the global non-proliferation regime.
- h) It is crucial to ensure that Iran would not take the decision to go nuclear, thus sanctions relief should be tailored to integrate Tehran into the regional and global arenas. One participant asked ‘what can do we to ensure that Iran does not *want* to have a bomb?’
- i) In terms of outlook for a deal, it was pointed out that this has not been a bilateral negotiation (something ‘easily forgotten’) and the unity of the P5+1 remains a very important factor.
- j) There were worries that with better economic circumstances following a deal with the P5+1, Iran might scale up activities in the region, particularly military activities. In Israel and some Gulf States the perception of Iran is as an imperialist country wanting to ‘reconstruct the Persian empire’ through creating a situation of influence but not responsibility in various regional countries. There was concern that already the Iranians are interfering in countries’ internal politics, particularly surrounding Israel, and fueling instability more widely.
- k) However, it was pointed out that in a more historical view, over the course of the last 35 years, Iran has not successfully exported a Shia revolution to the region to become the ‘leaders of the Islamic world’; indeed, it might be seen that the Sunni states have been the ‘winners.’
- l) There was a strong feeling that the rhetoric that came from Tehran with respect to Israel is unacceptable and must be toned down if there is to be any kind of dialogue or official talks. However, one participant felt that the rhetoric pushed by Ahmadinejad within Iran has dissipated and Iran is regionally the least anti-Israel in terms of public opinion.

2) Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction free zone and the NPT: The failure of the NPT Review Conference to agree a final document is damaging to the credibility of the treaty; however, vital and positive communications were forged between Israel and regional countries during the process of consultations on a WMD Free Zone.

- a) The engagement with the WMDFZ facilitator and the ‘highly coordinated diplomacy’ with the US and other states was a very positive experience for Israel. It was said that ‘many people did not recognize how much the Israeli position evolved’ in this time. Israel’s involvement in the talks organized by the facilitator should be seen as an important step, as was its participation at the NPT Review Conference (as an observer), and submission of a

paper. This engagement shows the seriousness with which Israel approaches the issues and its willingness to discuss with its neighbors. Yet there is still a fundamental conviction in Israel that the NPT auspices are not the location to deal with a regional WMD Free Zone.

- b) There still remains a significant difference in how Israel would like to address the issues as compared to its neighbors: via a regional discussion on all aspects of security including conventional and other WMD balances as well as non-state threats. Arab states should understand that Israel is willing to discuss the WMDFZ as long as it is in a forum that promotes dialogue on all these associated topics, given that a free zone would not be sustainable if war and conflict still dominate the region. There was pessimism regarding the proposed March 2015 conference for this very reason.
- c) There is 'no trust, no goodwill,' between Israel and most Arab neighbors on the WMDFZ issue. A suggestion therefore was to get 'all countries in the same room to see where any overlap is and build from underneath.'
- d) It was noted that Israel has the dubious distinction of not being a member of any of the four major WMD treaties (NPT, CWC, BTWC, CTBT) and that this sends a bad message to its neighbors and the world in general.
- e) Some concrete arms control measures could be put in place, as it is in the interest of the whole region that certain weapons are eliminated. Examples include a regional chemical weapon ban, a regional fissile material cut-off treaty, and joining WMD treaties other than NPT.
- f) Establishing regional dialogue is necessary to create the zone as well as for security; it should ensure that it proceeds even without the NPT mandate in order that the 'good baggage from the inter-sessional meetings' is not lost. Similarly, bilateral discussions can help but should not replace the regional process.

3) Gaza, the West Bank, and the Peace Process: With respect to Palestine, there was real concern that in the current situation nothing is changing in a positive way: Gaza is in a ruinous state and the West Bank is being slowly eroded as Palestinian territory.

- a) The current situation was seen as 'profoundly negative': the peace process 'does not exist any more' and there are few actors who are about to change this reality. Participants viewed three possible scenarios given the current circumstances:
 - i) Many still believe it is possible to achieve two states but that 'time is running out.' Israel 'will not be able to occupy the territories for the next 48 years' and should take the initiative now; otherwise 'Israel would pay a price.'
 - ii) Others, however, felt that Israel is 'on a slippery slope to a one state reality'; if this does become a reality, Israel will be 'less Jewish and less democratic' than it is today.
 - iii) A third possibility was seen to be that while Israeli rule in the West Bank becomes institutionalized, Gaza will be left as an 'Islamic Emirate' and a *de facto* two state reality will be created.
- b) It was said that both sides recognize that it is in their mutual interest to 'regenerate the negotiations' but the basic problem is how to go about this. From this perspective, any attempt to renew peace talks based on Oslo will be 'doomed,' as the reasons for its failure have not been properly analyzed and a better paradigm of how to move ahead has not been developed.

- c) The Palestinian government was seen as uninterested in negotiations at this time and ‘reluctant to commit to anything’; within Israel, there continues to be concern at who might succeed Abu Mazen and what this would mean for future negotiations.
- d) If Israel and Palestine cannot do this bilaterally, many believe that the international community will step in.
- e) Most Israelis do not view the Palestinian push for internationalization of the process as helpful. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement was not considered to be an existential threat (some viewed it as the latest form of ‘economic warfare’) and many believed it would not have the deep impact hoped for by the Palestinians.
- f) One suggested approach was to ‘try to lower the temperature and use other means of persuasion to overcome the threats’ posed by BDS, rather than the confrontational direction taken by some. However, a number of participants felt that this ‘quiet approach’ underplayed the seriousness of the BDS movement, which requires a political initiative.
- g) There was a strong sentiment that the academic boycott should be detached from the business side of the BDS.
- h) In addition to the more pronounced European sentiment it was seen that US constituencies (including the Jewish diaspora) are increasingly receptive to the analogy of the Palestinian plight as a civil rights movement.
- i) In the West Bank, there remain enormous obstacles to movement within the land and reaching the outside, as well as problems of moving goods. Settlements are creating connectivity problems as well as absorbing resources, e.g. water.
- j) On Gaza, the situation is ‘heartbreaking’: 17,670 families (100,000 individuals) are still displaced, 12,620 housing units were totally destroyed and 6,455 housing units were severely damaged in the Gaza war of 2014.² Yet not one demolished home has been rebuilt nor have any new houses been built; focus has been on repairing homes only slightly damaged.
- k) It is reckoned that 70 trucks per day are currently getting in to Gaza with materials but by one calculation 735 per day are needed to do the reconstruction. It is recognized that there is dual use problem in electrics and materials, but there was surprise that wood has now been added to the dual use list.
- l) The reasons for aid not getting through are complex: some see Israeli ‘goodwill’ for allowing the current flow, while others think there are structural reasons that prevent a greater rate. Egypt has yet to reopen its border with Gaza, which shuts off an additional route. There is enough blame on all sides while the people of Gaza continue to suffer. More must be done by all sides to increase the pace of reconstruction, particularly by the pledged donors and European states.

4) ISIS/Daesh: Daesh is a threat to what remains of the Arab states, at least ‘by way of inspiration if not invasion’; Israel must clarify its own thinking and policy options in order to deal with potential threats in the mid-term.

- a) With respect to the threat of Daesh, it was said that everyone needed to ‘step down from generalities and deal with practicalities.’ For example, the complexity and fluidity of the

² Data provided is drawn from the *Shelter Cluster Factsheet* (May 2015)
<http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/761e7e8a-aecd-4638-b901-97ebeb315ae.pdf>

situation means that, in fact, in fighting Daesh, Israel's 'biggest ally in Gaza is Hamas', and in Lebanon is Hezbollah.

- b) Addressing Daesh could be an opportunity for regional cooperation, given that it is a 'contagious, cross-border' shared threat; but perceptions vary across the region in how to actually address this.
- c) Jordan and Egypt are key strategic assets to Israel and in fact their strategic interests overlap on the issue of Daesh. With the Daesh-affiliated "Sinai Province" already threatening Israel to the south, a real problem is arising for Israel at its borders. Israel must give serious thought to how to address and prevent such a scenario in the medium term.
- d) Israelis must be 'very careful that Daesh does not come to Israel.' If there is continued and magnified disaffection among the Palestinians, it could prove 'big trouble' for Israel. Strategically, keeping people 'blocked in boxes' is not the way to deal with it.
- e) The fight against Daesh creates a complicated configuration of forces in the region. While the jihadists are mainly supported by private funds from Gulf states, its opponents include strange bedfellows: the Iraqi government is backed by both US and Iran, whereas in Syria the Assad government is opposed by Western states and supported by Iran and Russia. This complicates the strategic choices of Israel, which sees Daesh as a threat yet is seemingly even more concerned about Iran.
- f) Syria is in suspended animation and 'all options are bad': it does not 'properly exist as a country at this moment,' with different factions controlling small territories. One participant felt Israel should still be in favor of the Assad regime over Daesh: 'on balance, both are terrible' but Assad represents the lesser of two evils, insofar as he is a relatively known factor that Israel had relative stability with in the past.
- g) In Iraq, the fall of Ramadi to Daesh humiliated the leadership and army in a terrible way. Furthermore, it was seen that there is now a 'political battle in Baghdad' concerning who will have control: it will be a crucial turning point if *de facto* command moves to the Shia militias, because it was argued that this would imply Iraq is slowly becoming a satellite for Iran.

5) Regional security: The region as a whole remains in turmoil. There is no trust among states and cooperation is poor; yet the issues and threats remain urgent and complex.

- a) Positively speaking, there has not been a time in which 'Israel and moderate Arab states' strategic interest was so overlapping.' It was recognized that many Arabs have come to see that the biggest problem is not Israel.
- b) However, misperception and hostility is strong and consistent between all states, however you define the categories of analysis: Arab/Persian/Jewish, Sunni/Shia, monarchy/republic.
- c) The Shia-Sunni divide is a great source of concern regionally, and is surprisingly extending beyond it, to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some said it is not a religious conflict *per se* but is being employed to foment hostility between people who identify with the labels.
- d) The Egyptian coup d'état has given a clear sign to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic groups that they can be democratically elected but it won't matter. US policy in this regard is not just unhelpful but damaging. This echoes previous policy with respect to Hamas' election in 2006 and only serves to reinforce the message of Daesh, with the risk of multiplying their effect in the region.

- e) The Turkish elections were predicted to serve up interesting results, with an ascendant pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party perhaps gaining seats for the first time. It was highlighted that this could strengthen calls for an autonomous Kurdish region in southeast Turkey, while also providing the impetus for removal of the Turkish veto of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq – and could include northern Syria as well.
- f) Israel will have to adjust its threat assessments of the evolving regional dynamics, in particular as to whether it has a responsibility toward certain minorities (e.g. the Druze).
- g) Israel wants direct dialogue with its neighbors:
 - i) Israel wants direct discussions with Palestinians.
 - ii) Track 2 dialogue between Israel and Hamas might be timely.
 - iii) Israel-Iranian Track 2 dialogues would be useful.
 - iv) Dialogue is needed between the Arab world and Iran.



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