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## Understanding Risks of Nuclear Use in the Middle East

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### Introduction

This chapter seeks to explore how a nuclear risk reduction framework relates to the Middle East. In doing so, it fleshes out and examines the dynamics of possible nuclear use by regional and extra-regional states. In assessing each, the chapter identifies the key actors, political interests, physical capabilities and the potential for escalatory spirals. Collectively, this aims at producing a contextually rich overview of the nuclear risk profile of the region through attention to both regional and extra-regional dynamics.

In applying this framework to the Middle East, the study acknowledges that the term 'Middle East' evolved as a social construct and is not based on clear geographical boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Therefore in defining the region, the chapter follows the same approach followed by the 1990 UN study that explored measures to facilitate the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> That definition of the region includes Israel and Iran in addition to the members of the League of Arab States.

In understanding nuclear risks emanating from within and from without the region, it is important to highlight some general characteristics of the nuclear landscape in the Middle East. The region has only one nuclear possessor state. This means that while nuclear dynamics can play a role in regional security dynamics, unlike South Asia, the region does not have nuclear-armed rivals bordering one another. This setup renders some of the traditional nuclear strategy concepts, such as nuclear balance or strategic stability, much less relevant to the realities of regional nuclear politics. The nuclear landscape is also different in another aspect. While states in the region have built multiple alliances with nuclear actors from outside the region, to date there has not been a formal or explicit nuclear guarantee

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<sup>1</sup> K. Culcasi, "Constructing and Naturalizing the Middle East", *Geographical Review*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2010, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25741178>; R. Khalidi, "The 'Middle East' as a framework of analysis: Re-mapping a Region in the Era of Globalization", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1998, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-18-1-74>.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, *Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East*, UN document A/45/435, 10 October 1990. This was also the basis on which regional invitations were issued to the 2019 Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction.

extended to the region. This marks the Middle East as distinct from other regions, like Europe or East Asia, whose nuclear politics are partly shaped by nuclear umbrellas through formal structures and force deployments.<sup>3</sup> The combination of these two factors colours nuclear dynamics in the region with a different shade.

The chapter is divided into two sections. It starts by looking into indigenous nuclear risks by examining Israeli nuclear policy and how it sits within the strategic context of the region. It does so through examining Israel's nuclear arsenal as well as the ideas animating its doctrine and potential for escalation. The second part investigates the role of nuclear-armed extra-regional states in shaping the risk profile of the region. It does so by examining the military footprint of external nuclear powers in the region and their alliances. Here, it points to some enduring patterns as well as new evolving trends in regional security that carries implications for nuclear risks in the region. The chapter ends with a conclusion that reflects on how risk reduction can be approached in the region.

### **Risk of indigenous nuclear use in the Middle East**

Israel is the only nuclear possessor state in the region. There are several features that make its nuclear status unique and remarkable. Israel holds a policy referred to as nuclear opacity (or *Amimut* in Hebrew). Under that policy, Israel neither declares itself to be a nuclear weapon state nor does it actively deny possession of nuclear weapons. Israel has also resisted pressure to join the NPT. Whatever Israel's declaratory policy is, its possession of nuclear weapons is widely known even if that possession is not publicly acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> This set up is key to understanding how the only nuclear weapon state in the region approaches the question of nuclear use but also how that status is perceived regionally.

#### *The opaque arsenal*

While Israel's nuclear status is in no doubt, relatively little is known on its nuclear arsenal. Israel has maintained the capacity to build nuclear weapons for many decades through a closed fuel cycle.<sup>5</sup> Its reactor in Dimona is capable of producing plutonium; Israel is also suspected of having an enrichment capacity. Data about the operational history of its key nuclear facilities and its fissile material production and holdings are patchy and remain unconfirmed. Knowledge of Israel's capacity is largely derived from assessments based on partial information, leaks, intelligence reports and defector testimony. These make for a considerable margin of uncertainty and a limited ability to track over time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the US nuclear umbrella cover the 28 other countries mainly in Europe as well as Japan and South Korea in Asia as well as Australia.

<sup>4</sup> H.M. Kristensen and R.S. Norris, "Israeli Nuclear Weapons, 2014", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F0096340214555409>.

<sup>5</sup> A. Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, Columbia University Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> A. Glaser and M. Miller, "Estimating Plutonium Production at Israel's Dimona Reactor", Princeton University, 2011, <https://www.princeton.edu/~aglaser/PU056-Glaser-Miller-2011.pdf>.

In terms of Israeli warheads, research institutes that track nuclear weapons holdings provide heavily caveated estimates of the size of the Israeli arsenal. SIPRI's survey of world nuclear arsenals estimates that Israel has between 80-90 nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup> In terms of delivery platforms, Israel is assessed to have delivery capability across at least three platforms. This includes air-dropped gravity bombs, indigenously built land-based ballistic missiles, and through the sea via German-supplied Dolphin class submarines.<sup>8</sup>

There are broadly two postures frequently associated with the status of Israel's nuclear arsenal.<sup>9</sup> The first is the 'nuclear option.' Here, all the components of a functioning nuclear device are available but are un-assembled. When needed, and in a relatively short time, a device could be assembled and ready for deployment. The second is the 'bomb in the basement'. This indicates that the devices are assembled but not operationally deployed. When needed, they would be rolled out of the metaphorical basement and deployed. Both postures refer to a capability that is only ready to launch after a specific lead-time. That lead-time is longer in the former (nuclear option) than the latter (bomb in the basement). In either case, being a short step from full functionality fits with the frequent statement by officials that Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region.<sup>10</sup>

### *Nuclear doctrine under opacity*

Analysis of Israel's nuclear profile suggests a strong commitment to building a nuclear capability but to what end? What role do Israeli strategists and decision makers envision for its nuclear arsenal? As with assessments of the status of Israel's nuclear arsenal, the policy of opacity permeates any assessment of official doctrine. By virtue of its *Amimut*, Israel does not openly admit to nuclear possession. By extension, this means that a government-sanctioned nuclear doctrine that would both indicate conditions of use and communicate them does not exist.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, following the coded debate among Israeli analysts can suggest at least two doctrinal use scenarios.

### The Samson Option

The first considers nuclear weapons as the ultimate national insurance policy. Under this view, Israeli nuclear weapons are the ultimate protector and guarantee for the survival of the Jewish state in the Middle East. In the case that Israel's existence is put under threat through an overwhelming conventional attack, nuclear weapons can be used to secure the survival of

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<sup>7</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: in the Shadow of Iran*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> S. Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence: A Strategy for the 1980s*, Columbia University Press, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> O. Israeli, "Israel's Nuclear Amimut Policy and its Consequences", *Israel Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2015.1076185>. The term 'introduction' here is left ambiguous but is understood to mean making Israeli possession of nuclear weapons public or visible.

<sup>11</sup> A. Cohen and B. Frankel, "Opaque Nuclear Proliferation", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1990, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399008437417>.

the state against any possible aggressor.<sup>12</sup> This scenario is often referred to as the ‘Samson Option’, reflecting the act in the mythology of destroying the temple on everyone. The scenario reflects the apocalyptic conditions that would trigger use but also its consequences. In practical terms, this would involve a threat of Israeli nuclear use in a conflict where the state is overwhelmed militarily, and its survival becomes at stake.

How likely, in the current security landscape, is the realisation of the triggers for a ‘Samson option’? The starting point of analysis should be recognition of the radical changes in the security environment that have taken place since early thinking about nuclear options started in Israel. An overwhelming conventional Arab attack is no longer a credible security risk. First, Israel maintains a military edge vis a vis its bordering states.<sup>13</sup> Second, Israel signed peace agreements with Egypt (which has the biggest Arab military force) in 1979 and then with Jordan in 1994. While Israeli borders with Lebanon remain tense, the threat from across that border is asymmetric and non-existential. The border with Syria has been effectively pacified since 1973 and with the civil war in Syria ravishing its military and resources, the balance of power weighs heavily towards Israel.

When it comes to Iran, the lack of a common border limits the ability of the latter to mount an overwhelming conventional attack of the style that had worried an earlier generation of Israeli leaders. Instead, the dominant security narratives in Israel emphasise threats from non-state actors, as well as from proxy and asymmetric warfare. This drove the authors of the 2018 Israel Strategic Survey to note that despite the turbulent region, ‘Israel is strong and stable and enjoys quiet borders.’<sup>14</sup> Despite that change in security environment, an element of ‘existential’ security might be at play that confers value to Israel’s nuclear arsenal as an ultimate guarantor even if the conditions underpinning a ‘Sampson Option’ appear far-fetched in the current security environment.

### A Tool for Deterrence in a Nuclearized Middle East

The second rationale ascribes value to nuclear weapons as a tool for deterrence in a nuclearized Middle East. Under this view, Israeli nuclear weapons are a safeguard against falling behind a regional adversary in the nuclear field.<sup>15</sup> This is frequently captured in the mantra repeated in different variations that Israel is not going to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region but it is also not going to be the second. While Israel was the first regional state to embark on a nuclear weapons programme, the possibility of another

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<sup>12</sup> U. Bar-Joseph, Uri, “The Hidden Debate: The Formation of Nuclear Doctrines in the Middle East”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1982, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398208437109>

<sup>13</sup> *The Military Balance*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> A. Yadlin, *Israel’s Strategic Environment: Elements, Challenges, and Policy Recommendations*, The Institute for National Security Studies, 2018, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> E. Eiran and M.B. Malin, “The Sum of all Fears: Israel’s Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2013.825551>.

state crossing that threshold gives value and utility to Israel's nuclear status.<sup>16</sup> In this view, nuclear weapons would be announced and revealed to establish an open deterrence relationship with a regional nuclear adversary. The primary aim here would be to establish mutual nuclear deterrence.

How can such a risk be assessed? Several states historically considered nuclear weapons in the region, but none went as far as Israel did. Current concerns focus on a possible Iranian 'break out' capability that could allow it a nuclear option in the future. In fact, Israel has been one of the key countries openly hostile to Iran's nuclear activities and engaged in several sabotage operations to undermine Iranian nuclear progress. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) established verified time-limited controls over Iranian nuclear capabilities, but with its disintegration the future of Iran's nuclear programme is held in doubt. It is the fear of a nuclear Iran that presents the most serious challenge to the long-standing opacity policy in favour for an open declared nuclear policy.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Escalation, miscalculation and accidents under opacity*

Escalation, miscalculation and accidents can all provide pathways for nuclear use. But even here opacity is an important factor in understanding the risk landscape. It can be argued that Israel's opacity policy places an extra layer that lengthens the pathway for possible nuclear use in an escalatory dynamic. A change in declaratory policy to an overt posture can be used as a signalling tool and therefore extends the escalatory ladder. Yet while Israel's nuclear opacity or ambiguity may dampen escalation potential, it could have the contrary effect on miscalculation or accidental use. The lack of transparency domestically can lead to lower levels of accountability creating an environment more prone to accidents. Lack of declared or open deterrence policy also gets in the way of clear signalling to an adversary and opens the door for possible miscommunication.

The region's history of conflict and war provides some interesting historical insights about the potential and propensity for nuclear escalation in situations of active combat. Two examples here are worth mentioning. The first was during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The early phases of war saw a successful surprise attack by an Egyptian-Syrian military coalition that rolled back Israel's control over Sinai and the Golan. The fast collapse of Israeli defences in Sinai and the Golan led to real anxiety in Israel. Israeli policy makers feared that the Arab armies would be encouraged to take their advances deeper into Israel. Within this context, some Israeli voices, most notably the Moshe Dayan then Israel's Minister of Defence, suggested that it might be time for Israel to consider using its nuclear weapons to hold back

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<sup>16</sup> This is assumed in various analyses including: Yair Evron, *An Israel-Iran Balance of Nuclear Deterrence: Seeds of Instability* Memorandum No. 94, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, July 2008 and Louis René Beres, "Nuclear deterrence and nuclear conflict" *Jerusalem Post*, January 16, 2018

<sup>17</sup> D. Kraft, "How demise of Iranian Nuclear Deal Rekindles Israel's Dilemma", *Christian Science Monitor*, January 2020, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2020/0113/How-demise-of-Iranian-nuclear-deal-rekindles-Israel-s-dilemma>

the advancing Arab armies.<sup>18</sup> Had that proposal been followed, it would have reversed Israeli opacity policy.

However, despite the dire military situation Israeli leaders found themselves in, the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir showed no interest in bringing nuclear weapons out of the basement and using them either as a deterrent or as a tool to blackmail the United States to provide military assistance for Israel.<sup>19</sup> The Israeli focus instead was on continuing to fight that war conventionally rather than move the conflict to a nuclear domain. A nuclear escalation remained a theoretical proposal that was not seriously entertained or acted on despite the seriousness of the conflict.

Another test of opacity took place during the Israeli-Iraqi conflict close to the 1991 Gulf War. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 1990 had made a threat to ‘burn half of Israel’ implying the use of chemical weapons.<sup>20</sup> Israeli response remained outside the realm of nuclear and instead threatened Iraq with a harsh response using ‘the same merchandise.’<sup>21</sup> The threat of a chemical attack took a bigger dimension in the run up of the 1991 Gulf War when Saddam fired ballistic missiles towards Israel (and also Saudi Arabia), further triggering fears that they would carry a chemical payload.<sup>22</sup> Yet, despite the spectre of possible chemical warfare, Israel did not break its opacity policy and kept the conflict within the conventional domain.

The key takeaway is that the history of conflict in the Middle East contains several instances where a nuclear escalation seemed possible but in all the grip of the policy of opacity prevailed. To this date, Israel has only fought conventional wars.

### *How enduring is the opacity policy?*

If opacity is a key paradigm to understanding Israeli nuclear policy and has a key impact on our understanding of doctrinal, escalatory and other forms of nuclear risks, it is important to consider how solid and enduring that policy is and some of the arguments put against it. The starting point of this assessment is that this policy appears rather stable and resilient in the current circumstances and its supporters were able to defend it against some calls for an open declared nuclear doctrine or temptations for a nuclear escalation in different conflict situations.

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<sup>18</sup> O. Israeli, “Israel's Nuclear Amimut Policy and its Consequences”, *Israel Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2015.1076185>.

<sup>19</sup> E. Colby et al., *The Israeli “Nuclear Alert” of 1973: Deterrence and Signalling in Crisis*, CNA, 2013; A. Cohen, “When Israel Stepped Back from the Brink”, *New York Times*, 3 October 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/opinion/when-israel-stepped-back-from-the-brink.html>.

<sup>20</sup> H. Brands and D. Palkki, “Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?”, *International Security*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2011, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41289691>. The threat was accentuated through the frequent use of chemical warfare in the Iraq-Iran war.

<sup>21</sup> A. Levran, *Israeli Strategy after Desert Storm: Lessons of the Second Gulf War*, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Z. Maoz, “The Mixed Blessing of Israel's Nuclear Policy”, *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2015.1076185>.

It is perhaps easy to see why that policy has endured. First, it seems to have worked reasonably well for Israel. Second, it managed to accommodate US reactions to Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons. The United States has worked to contain nuclear tensions in the region and promote the NPT. Opacity allows Israel to avoid openly antagonising US policy, therefore preserving its relationship with the United States. This is arguably one of the most influential reasons behind opacity. Finally, in keeping its nuclear capabilities in the shadow, Israel has tempered reactions by other regional states to its nuclear status.

That said, the policy of opacity has also been under pressure on several grounds. The most pressing has been speculation about a change in Iran's nuclear status with questions about that re-emerging with the disintegration of the JCPOA and Iranian threats to withdraw from the NPT.<sup>23</sup> This fuels arguments that the answer for such an eventuality can be a move to an explicit nuclear doctrine and an establishment of an open deterrence relationship.<sup>24</sup> But so long as Iran remains non-nuclear, this argument seems to lack a compelling edge. The other challenge to that policy comes from Israeli liberals who oppose nuclear opacity on democratic grounds. For example, Avner Cohen argues that the lack of public discussion over nuclear policy and the high degrees of governmental secrecy, including a very active censor, is corrosive of liberal and democratic values.<sup>25</sup> Yet, these arguments have not managed to mount a serious challenge to the dominance of Israeli opacity/ambiguity.

### **Nuclear risk in a heavily 'penetrated' region**

In 1984, a leading Middle East scholar Professor Carl Brown famously described the region as uniquely 'penetrated.'<sup>26</sup> This has come to be used frequently by regional specialists to refer to a mode of interaction characterized by the significant influence of foreign powers in regional affairs. This influence is sometimes resisted locally and in other times invites other external balancing influences. These dynamics reflect both investment by key international actors in regional affairs but also complex alliance dynamics that can lead to entanglement and, subsequently among nuclear allies, higher risk of nuclear escalation.

That frequently used 'penetration' paradigm is qualified when it comes to regional nuclear relations with the outside powers. The region appears rather shielded from nuclear dynamics prevalent in other regions. None of the external nuclear armed states deploys nuclear weapons in the region. While nuclear targeting lists are classified, it is assumed that the absence of externally placed weapons might have reduced the nuclear targeting footprint of the region. Furthermore, practices common in other regions like extended deterrence or

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<sup>23</sup> K.L. Afrasiabi and N. Entessar, "Iran's Impending Exit from the NPT: A New Nuclear Crisis", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 28 January 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/01/irans-impending-exit-from-the-npt-a-new-nuclear-crisis/>.

<sup>24</sup> Louis René Beres "Israel Must Reevaluate Its Policy of Nuclear Ambiguity" BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,023, December 2, 2018 and D. Kraft, "How demise of Iranian Nuclear Deal Rekindles Israel's Dilemma", *Christian Science Monitor*, January 2020, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2020/0113/How-demise-of-Iranian-nuclear-deal-rekindles-Israel-s-dilemma>.

<sup>25</sup> A. Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, Columbia University Press, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> C.L. Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 3-5, 16-18.



military alliances with a nuclear dimension do not exist in the region. Defence and security arrangements exist between regional actors and external powers (nuclear armed) but these have no explicit stipulations for nuclear protection or for nuclear deployments.

Considering this set up, it can be posited that the risk of nuclear use by external powers derives from two key factors. The first is through alliance entanglement where an ally threatens to use nuclear weapons in defence of a regional ally despite that not being part of a formal security commitment or arrangement. The second is direct military conflict in the region involving external nuclear states. The widespread presence of foreign military forces, bases and installations in the region and the participation of those states in active military operations might lead to direct clashes escalating to a nuclear level.

### *Nuclear posturing and entanglement by external powers*

During the Cold War, conflicts in the Middle East frequently drew in the United States and the Soviet Union, exacerbating nuclear tensions. For example during the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Soviet Union issued a thinly veiled nuclear ultimatum to the invading British, French and Israeli forces to withdraw from Egyptian territory and warned of a 'third world war.'<sup>27</sup> In 1973, the United States staged a Defcon 3 nuclear alert in response to tensions with the Soviet Union over the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.<sup>28</sup> Some of this legacy shows dynamics of entanglements in action where great powers found themselves resorting to nuclear threats and signalling on the back of regional wars. But with the end of Cold War, a new regional security landscape emerged in the Middle East involving different actors and carrying different risks.

The United States remains a key player in the region despite its strategic re-positioning with a pivot to Asia and the decreasing appetite for military involvement in the Middle East post the 2003 Iraqi invasion. It remains the most influential external actor in the region with a significant military footprint and access to regional waterways, infrastructure as well as a web of political alliances that supports its regional posture.<sup>29</sup> The point of gravity for US regional involvement is clearly to the East and particularly in support of the Arab Gulf states where it is tied to a series of formal and informal security commitments that currently play into tensions between Iran and Arab Gulf states.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the United States also has a longstanding tradition of supporting Israel.

The United Kingdom and France both have security relations including through significant arms deals with regional actors and both recently played a role in an air campaign to oust

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<sup>27</sup> R.K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance*, Brookings Institution Press, 2010, pp. 62-63.

<sup>28</sup> B.M. Blechman and D.M. Hart, "The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis", *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1982, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538692>.

<sup>29</sup> M. Zenko, *US Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal*, Chatham House, 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/us-military-policy-middle-east-appraisal>.

<sup>30</sup> T. Gibbons-Neff, "How U.S. Troops Are Preparing for the Worst in the Middle East", *New York Times*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/middleeast/troops-iran-iraq.html>.

Gadhafi in Libya.<sup>31</sup> Yet, their ability to independently project power in the region is far less pronounced than the United States. Russia on the other hand has, since the start of its decisive air campaign in Syria in 2015, introduced itself as an important regional player and the key patron for the Assad regime. It is also important to note the special relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that might have implications on the latter's ability to provide nuclear protection to the former. It is widely understood that Saudi Arabia made significant financial contributions to the Pakistani nuclear weapons programme leading to speculation that this could be in return for some form of future nuclear protection.<sup>32</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, these nuclear powers have refrained from bringing their nuclear status to bear in a regional security dynamics. Yet the above overview demonstrates how key nuclear powers are engaged in a web of security alliances in the region that provide the basis, at least theoretically, for nuclear entanglement.

### *Growing military footprint & the challenges of de-confliction*

In addition to this web of alliances, the past few decades saw a significant expansion in the number of foreign military installations and bases in the region. An assessment by the Washington-based Middle East Institute estimates that the Middle East has the 'highest concentration' of international military installations in the World with at least 41 such facilities in the region.<sup>33</sup> This has created an overcrowded military space that poses additional risks particularly when forces are engaged in active combat in the same military theatre; as in the case of the Syrian civil war and the campaigns against Daesh.

These bases or facilities belong to a number of nuclear actors including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and also China. The United States by far contributes the highest number of such facilities. For example, the number of US military bases and installations in the region has increased from two following Operation Desert Storm (Gulf War 1990/1991) to 29 known installations in 2018.<sup>34</sup> Both the United Kingdom and France have gained a foothold in the region and, in doing so, reversed earlier military withdrawals that accompanied the process of de-colonization in the last century. Now the United Kingdom operates a permanent naval facility in Bahrain, the HMS Jufair, in addition to access to facilities in Oman and Qatar.<sup>35</sup> France operates military bases in the United Arab Emirates (since 2009) and in Djibouti and has deployments in Iraq and Lebanon as part of UNIFIL forces.<sup>36</sup> The Russian government now maintains influential military presence in Syria

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<sup>31</sup> J.W. Davidson, "France, Britain and the Intervention in Libya: An Integrated Analysis", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2013.784573>.

<sup>32</sup> M. Fitzpatrick, "Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the Nuclear Rumour Mill", *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1068562>.

<sup>33</sup> *Foreign Military Presence in the Middle East*, Middle East Institute, 5 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psUa6cFeIR0>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> L. Brooke-Holland, *UK Forces in the Middle East Region*, Briefing Paper Number 08794, UK Parliament, 14 January 2020, <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8794#fullreport>.

<sup>36</sup> M. Lafont Rapnouil, "Alone in The Desert? How France Can Lead Europe In the Middle East", Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 2018; [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/alone\\_in\\_the\\_desert\\_how\\_france\\_can\\_lead\\_europe\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/alone_in_the_desert_how_france_can_lead_europe_in_the_middle_)

through two bases (Naval base in Tartous and Air base in Hmeimim) as well bolstered its force projection in the region by sealing access agreements with several countries.<sup>37</sup> Even China, which has so far played a minor role in regional alliances, has established its first overseas military base in Djibouti since 2017.<sup>38</sup>

In 2020, there are three on-going active military conflicts in the region: Libya, Syria and Yemen. Of these, the Syrian war perhaps provides the most relevant example demonstrating how a combination of regional alliances and military deployments can lead to increased risk of escalation. While the spark for the conflict was the Syrian uprising in 2011, it evolved in a way that drew in a variety of regional and international actors and engulfed them in a dense web of political and military interactions with an ever present potential for escalation. The Assad forces were supported by Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, and then later through a decisive 2015 intervention by Russian airpower. Meanwhile anti-Assad forces were supported by Turkey (NATO member), Saudi Arabia and Qatar with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France lending political support and light military assistance to the rebels.

Significantly, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the international campaign led by the United States to defeat the organisation led to a crowded military theatre that included Russian and US forces in active combat but with different priorities, targets and operating through different networks of local alliances. The risk of accidents or miscalculation leading to a mutual confrontation between the two nuclear-armed states was acknowledged by officials from both countries.<sup>39</sup> So despite the souring of relations between Washington and Moscow, both governments agreed a new measure that aimed to reduce the risk of fighting between their forces or allies on the ground or in the air. The result was a ‘de-conflicting’ hotline where the United States and Russian military leaders communicate their intended military operations to avoid unintended clashes.

Information available in the public domain can help us understand how this risk reduction measure operated. The demand for such a line took a serious turn with the start of Russia’s air campaign in support of Assad in 2015. The line was established in 2016 and connected the forward headquarters of the US Central Command in (Al-Udeid in Qatar) with their Russian counterparts in Syria. The frequency of its use reflects the scale of potential clashes. According to US Maj. Gen. David S. Nahom, the line was used ‘15 to 20 times’ a day.<sup>40</sup>

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east; Service d'Information du Gouvernement (SIG), “French Military Forces Deployed in Operations Abroad”, 2014, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/french-military-forces-deployed-in-operations-abroad>.

<sup>37</sup> “Well Protected Military Bases to Remain in Syria – Kremlin Spokesman”, RT, 21 March 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/336445-syria-russian-military-bases/>; R. Thornton, “Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and Its Strategic Deterrence Role”, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2019.1552655>.

<sup>38</sup> D. Sun, *China’s Soft Military Presence in the Middle East*, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> G. Taylor, “U.S. Military uses Russian ‘Deconfliction’ Line 20 Times a Day to Separate Jets over Syria”, *The Washington Times*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/oct/5/us-russia-use-military-deconfliction-phone-20-time/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Some of these calls were scheduled while others were triggered in quick response to military action and the situation on the ground. The line helped, in at least one incident, to avert escalation when Syrian and Russian air force targeted the Syrian Democratic Forces who are backed and trained by the United States.<sup>41</sup> Despite the value of such measure as reflected by the frequency of its use, it ultimately fell victim to the ups and downs of relations between the United States and Russia. It was terminated in 2017 as Russia protested US protested punitive military strikes against its ally Assad following allegations of renewed use of chemical weapons in Syria.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter examined key aspects of the nuclear risk profile of the Middle East. In doing so, the analysis captures a region caught between some enduring patterns and evolving trends. Israel's nuclear opacity means the regional nuclear politics operate on multiple levels between public and secret. Israel's current security environment is a far cry from the early fears of an overwhelming conventional attack that, in part, animated the drive for the bomb in the early days. Under these conditions, the Israeli bomb might appear redundant but that can easily change if fears of a nuclear Iran materialised and the need for open deterrence is established. More broadly, the region's relationships with the nuclear powers has been in flux. The region is, perhaps borrowing Brown's description, more 'penetrated' than ever before and the proliferation of military bases and the shuffling in military alliances is a clear indicator of a risk profile that can potentially turn nuclear.

Efforts to address regional risk reduction related to Israel's nuclear capabilities will inevitably be tied to the unique nature of nuclear discourse in the region and faces two key challenges. On the Israeli side, the entrenched policy of nuclear opacity would forestall any direct discussion of nuclear risks. On the side of the Arab states and Iran, the issue will be intrinsically tied to their contestation of the legitimacy of Israel's nuclear arsenal. Like Israel, they too do not openly acknowledge the Israeli arsenal and their fear of legitimizing or rewarding Israeli possession is entrenched. The combined effect of these two factors presents formidable obstacles to any risk reduction exercise conducted under the nuclear banner.

The Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group that emerged from the Arab-Israeli Madrid Peace Process in the 90s tried but failed to build a common concept for regional security. Arab states wanted to use the process to rid Israel of nuclear weapons while Israel saw the process as a way to manage, rather than alter, the status-quo and rejected any formal de-nuclearization commitments. Different views about the ultimate destination hindered adoption of any interim measures. If anything, the experience highlights the challenges in building regional consensus over the nuclear state of play. While a frontal approach on nuclear risks can be challenging, a backdoor approach to risk reduction might prove more

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<sup>41</sup> A.S. Weiss and N. Ng, *Collision Avoidance: Lessons from US and Russian Operations in Syria*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2019, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Weiss\\_Ng\\_U.S.-Russia\\_Syria-final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Weiss_Ng_U.S.-Russia_Syria-final1.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> J. Gambrell, "AP Explains: What is the US/Russia "Deconfliction Line?", *Associated Press*, 7 April 2017. <https://apnews.com/9147aa068855466386cf19ddab5bc827>.

fruitful. This can instead focus on general confidence and security building measures as well as cooperative methods that ultimately could side-line and downplay the role of nuclear weapons while building trust and common expectations of regional security risks.

When it comes to external actors, the trend of an expanding foreign military footprint in the region as well as the growing entanglement with regional actors will likely complicate security calculation and their conduct of military operations in the region. So far, the region has not witnessed any nuclear deployments or the extension of nuclear umbrellas to states within it. Risk reduction efforts involving external powers should aim at resisting any temptation to reverse this state of affairs or introduce a nuclear component to their regional security relations. The growing number of foreign bases and installations and direct involvement in regional wars highlight the value of establishing clear communication lines, including on the operational military level, to avoid unintended clashes and contain them when they occur. The US-Russian de-confliction line can provide an example to methods that can be developed to ensure that any crowded battlefield in the region remains free of nuclear conflict.

#### **Recommendations to Reduce Nuclear Risk in the Middle East**



##### **Maintain nuclear weapons-free nature of foreign military presence**

- No deployment of nuclear weapons in the region
- Prevent extension of nuclear umbrellas



##### **Engage in a backdoor approach to risk reduction**

- Commit to general confidence and security-building measures
- Explore cooperative approaches to downplay the role of nuclear weapons



##### **Establish communication channels to prevent escalatory dynamics**