

# Nuclear War Comes to the Mideast

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**T**his is a story about how nuclear war came to the Middle East. Events are fictitious. Description of nuclear capabilities and effects are actual. The sequence of events, however, is quite probable if peace negotiations should break down totally in the next few years. This story is told in an effort to gain some foresight into how a nuclear calamity might be prevented in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Beyond its ramifications for the Middle East this story may also be helpful for exploring ways to slow down or halt nuclear proliferation in the wider international community. It is assumed here that whatever the necessities that compel nations to go to war, atomic warfare should be avoided at all costs. The burden for this control of nuclear proliferation cannot rest solely on the fragile foundation of national decisionmaking, particularly where nations are engaged in regional conflicts of long duration. Yet only by national initiatives will the world community become a more active force in preventing further use of atomic weapons in combat. My story is divided into four parts: (1) crisis; (2) nuclear attack; (3) aftermath; and (4) prevention.

## Crisis

Less than a year after the U.S. presidential election the Middle East found itself in its darkest crisis since Israel's independence. Fulfilling a campaign promise to achieve a breakthrough for peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict, a new administration in Washington issued a call for full-dress peace negotiations in Geneva to be attended by all the disputants, plus the Big Four, China, and the U.N. secretary general. This summons to a dramatic conference aimed at a comprehensive settlement came in the wake of widespread criticism of earlier efforts to achieve

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conciliation through more modest, step-by-step approaches. By making this expansive effort, a new group of American policymakers sought to improve a dangerously stalemated situation that threatened new hostilities.

The call to conference came too late. For a variety of reasons, ranging from shifts in Israeli domestic politics to superpower competition resulting from the decline of détente relations, the Arab states and Israel began to move their foreign policy priorities from Herculean efforts at peacemaking to more familiar (and to some more congenial) realms of military preparation for a fifth and definitive round of warfare in the Middle East. The concept of a "definitive" war is significant: Movement of detailed, step-by-step negotiations into the noisy forum at Geneva would bring the coup de grace to quiet efforts at conciliation. For the Arabs this shifting perception of priorities carried with it the ominous view that true peace in the Eastern Mediterranean would come only with Israel's extinction. With Israelis there was both fear of Arab designs to achieve such a definitive settlement and at the same time a belief that Israel might finally settle matters its own way by annexing occupied territories through its superior military power. Growing coolness in relations between Moscow and Washington also found its own armed expression in the Middle East, through buildup of forces that could move into direct confrontation should another round of regional warfare erupt.

Under these circumstances it was not surprising that seasoned observers of the Middle East anticipated that the overpublicized and underprepared talks at Geneva would be in trouble from the start. Although it began with fanfare, the Geneva conference collapsed under recriminations about bad faith—to no one's real surprise. Such a finale to almost a decade of American initiatives for peace in the region brought with it unmistakable signs from Israel and the Arab states that the time for talking had finally—and mercifully—ended. Extremists had won the day in every major Middle East capital. War was imminent. But what kind of war?

## Nuclear Attack

A new year opened to the drums of war in the Middle East. Arab leaders warned the United States that their economic and military positions, fully supported by the Soviet Union, had never been stronger, and their resolve to punish Israel never more determined. For its part Israel announced that any military attack would be met with severe countermeasures far more impressive than any it had used against Arab states in the past. Such countermeasures would include attacks against cities and civilian populations should Israel's own home front be threatened by Arab forces. Statements from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv indicated that Israel's military forces would use all means at their disposal to repel aggression, and hints that nuclear weapons were among these means came from high authorities.

Evidence that Israel possessed a nuclear capability—and even possessed nuclear arms—had been confirmed by military experts. Of the two nuclear reactor centers in Israel, the one near Dimona in the northern Negev Desert, built secretly in the late 1950's with French assistance, was thought particularly well suited for producing fissionable plutonium necessary for nuclear bombs. Reports of Dimona's plutonium output had been variously estimated, but there appeared some agreement that the reactor's capacity to produce at least one twenty-kiloton bomb (roughly the size dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945) per year since 1966 was not in doubt. While Israeli capacity to produce nuclear weapons was fully authenticated, the question of a decision to actually build them was not, at least in public sources. Yet in the mid-1970's there were reports that Israel had nuclear weapons in its arsenal, including apparent testimony by the CIA that there existed ten to twenty such bombs, as reported in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* on March 15 and March 16, 1976. April, 1977, reports raised the possibility that two hundred tons of uranium ore disappeared from Europe in 1968, quite possibly diverted to Israel. Various analysts had discussed possible Israeli nuclear deterrence strategies, and there was even some discussion of scenarios where atomic weapons might be used in the Middle East.

Actual use of nuclear weapons by Israel was highly conjectural in any case, but some experts considered the nuclear option a possible course of military action were Israel pushed to the extreme point of defending its very survival. At just what point, under dire circumstances, such use would occur was unclear. Would Israel strike its enemies with nuclear weapons before these enemies attacked on all fronts (in a preemptive move), or would it wait until it could retreat no farther (in a last-ditch survival effort)?

Toward the end of the new U.S. administration's second year in office massive movements of Arab military units were plainly evident along all of Israel's borders: Joint Syrian-Palestinian units in Lebanon and on the Golan Heights, Jordanian forces coordinating their moves with Syria along the Jordan River, and massive Egyptian armed crossings of the Suez Canal into the Sinai demilitarized zone had brought full-alert in

Israel and the initiation of large-scale Israeli air operations against these massed armies. Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the Sudan were moving troops and supplies into the states surrounding Israel. Fighting had begun, but the outcome was still far from clear. Arab intentions, however, were ambiguous: Spokesmen declared their resolve to liberate territories occupied by Israel in 1967 and to reduce Israel's military potential to minuscule proportions in order to humiliate its defense forces. A peace dictated by Arab interests would be made following Israel's unconditional surrender. The United States could no longer be relied upon as mediator, but the Soviet Union stood ready to support the fight for justice by the Palestinians and Arab states. Any American intervention, the Arabs warned, would be met by total oil embargoes from the oil-producing states at a time when the United States was far more dependent on Saudi Arabian oil than it was in 1973.

Israel's decision to use nuclear weapons in response to a massed military attack was made quickly, before the Arab forces had fully committed themselves to battle and before the U.S. was able to fashion any kind of response to this new war. Targets had already been selected as possible options for an atomic bomb. The weapon would be a twenty-kiloton bomb dropped by an F-4 or Kfir fighter-bomber so as to achieve the same destructive effect as that device dropped on Hiroshima: Over a relatively flat city of some 250,000 people the bomb would be exploded as an air burst at 1,850 feet above the central point of impact ("ground zero"). As in Hiroshima, the maximum effects would be felt in the city's most densely populated sector. Only one plane would be used; the target would have to be located in an Arab country with little or no air defense. The distance from Israel was no obstacle, since Israel possessed air-to-air refueling capabilities. What was important, however, was that the city be a major Arab urban center so that dropping this bomb would make a drastic impact on the calculations of enemy forces. A "defenseless" civilian population center, rather than a military facility or infrastructure target (such as a dam), was judged more appropriate for accomplishing this end, since the whole point of using an atomic weapon against a country that could not retaliate in kind would dramatize how vulnerable the opponent was; and in no place is an opponent weaker than in ordinary civilian life. Of course, further nuclear destruction could be expected from Israeli forces if the first attack were not shocking enough. In a word, a decision as extreme as using nuclear weapons in warfare against an enemy without such capacity would spread sufficient terror to justify the magnitude of that decision.

During the morning hours on a bright early summer day a twenty-kiloton atomic bomb was dropped on an Arab city as part of Israeli retaliation against the start of a massive, well-coordinated Arab attack along its frontiers. Whether the massing of Arab forces would actually lead to Israel's destruction became a moot question for Israeli decisionmaking. A death blow to Israel was perceived as imminent, and thus the nuclear attack was launched.

## Aftermath

In the Arab city, as in Hiroshima, some 70,000 people were killed and another 75,000 injured within the three-mile radius extending outward from ground zero. In the immediate half-mile vicinity of impact, also the most densely populated section of the city, around 85 per cent of the population was killed and most others injured. Fatalities were divided evenly among three major causes of death: several thermal radiation burns, nuclear radiation, and general destruction. Medical services had been largely disrupted so that there were many more fatalities beyond the half-mile radius than might otherwise have occurred.

The high casualty potential of nuclear weapons was made manifest. First, because the explosive energy yield of an atomic bomb is so much higher than in conventional explosions, destruction is greatly increased. Second, with high energy yields the overpressures and winds associated with a nuclear blast wave are so intense and of such long duration that many more injuries occur than in conventional attacks. Third, the great amount of thermal radiation released by a nuclear weapon creates a large incidence of flash burns. And fourth, nuclear radiation injuries—both immediate and delayed—are totally absent from conventional explosions.

Within a radius of some two miles from ground zero all structures underwent some damage, with severe destruction of buildings in a zone up to one mile from the blast center. Contamination of persons by immediate nuclear radiation was significant. Even if all medical service had remained intact, no skill in therapy for nuclear radiation existed in the city or in the country as a whole. Indeed, within the Arab world there were not enough capabilities to treat many of the severe burns or nuclear radiation injuries.

While publicly and privately astonished by Israel's use of a nuclear weapon against an Arab city, the United States found itself in something of a policy dilemma in the aftermath of this attack. American strategic forces had been raised to worldwide alert status with the start of hostilities along Israel's frontiers; in this alert special attention was paid to Soviet activities regarding Israel. In other words, the initial U.S. reaction to Middle East conflict was a typical one: A nonnuclear friend, Israel, was being extended America's nuclear umbrella according to past commitments. Within a few short hours Israel's nuclear retaliation changed its status behind the American shield, thus causing in Washington acute embarrassment and perplexity. Arab powers charged angrily that the United States had collaborated with Israel in this bombing, and threatened to retaliate immediately against Israeli civilian targets "in a similar unconventional manner"—thus raising the specter of either atomic or chemical weapons. By its first employment of a nuclear device, of course, Israel intimated that much more atomic destruction would occur in the Arab world if circumstances required. The United States denied all charges of complicity in Israel's attack but found it hard not to admit that it had known for some time about Israel's nuclear weapons program.

In keeping with its earlier warnings that it would react most strongly to any use of atomic weapons by Israel, and making matters worse for the American policy of nuclear protection of Israel, the Soviet Union threatened action—direct or indirect—against the Israelis. Jerusalem, in turn, drew attention to its long-range aircraft armed with nuclear bombs, an unsubtle reminder to Moscow that not even southern Russia was immune to Israeli atomic attack. Faced with Arab recriminations and dire threats to sever all relations (economic as well as political) and by Soviet warnings of draconian punishment for Israel, the United States had reached the point of possible nuclear war with the Soviet Union in defense of an Israeli attack it could not possibly approve on strategic grounds (though morally it was more ambivalent).

On the brink of war with the Soviet Union and faced with disintegration of NATO before a shot could be fired, the United States agreed to a summit meeting with the USSR to discuss an imposed peace settlement in the Middle East. Among the provisions of the final settlement, rigorously enforced by the superpowers, would be an arms embargo for the Middle East that eventually reduced military capabilities in the region to something more appropriate to the general size and economic capabilities of countries in the eastern Mediterranean.

## Prevention

How might this nuclear attack in the Middle East have been averted? A third city victimized by an atomic bomb could well be only the start of a new chapter in the nuclear era, one where powers other than the two nuclear giants might arm themselves with atomic weapons to achieve political goals against opponents not similarly endowed in their military establishments. This might lead to rapid nuclear arming by every nation threatened by even the slightest danger that its opponents would so equip themselves, thus causing unprecedented instability in the world order. Not everyone agreed, however, that widespread nuclear arms would be destabilizing.

Most experts seemed to agree, however, that whatever the positive outcome of the use of an atomic bomb in the Middle East (marginal as this was through an imposed peace), the costs in human lives and bad precedents outweighed the benefits. Hence, it was important to find out how this catastrophe could have been prevented. At least three avenues seemed worth exploring: (1) better prior cooperation between the U.S. and USSR in settlement of regional disputes; (2) more careful control of the supply of conventional arms; and (3) more realistic approaches to nuclear proliferation.

*Better prior cooperation between the U.S. and USSR in settlement of regional disputes.* A notion of international peacekeeping in which the United States and Soviet Union would play leading roles was not part of the détente relationships between the two countries prior to the fifth round of Middle East warfare. Pressed to the brink of war with each other, the superpowers did cooperate in a peace settlement that they jointly imposed and policed. Before this point, however, rivalry was the

central feature of U.S.-USSR relations in the eastern Mediterranean, an extension of rivalry elsewhere.

The first recommendation for preventing future nuclear wars in conflict-prone regions such as the Middle East might be the following. Combined with more genuine concern for regulating conventional arms assistance and with more realistic arrangements for controlling the spread of atomic weapons, better diplomatic cooperation between Moscow and Washington might avert nuclear tragedy in the Middle East and beyond. No less a standard than cooperative behavior between the U.S. and USSR in helping to settle regional disputes should be considered a measure of détente's effectiveness as a foreign policy.

*More careful control of the supply of conventional arms.* By any yardstick the Middle East had overarmed itself with sophisticated conventional weapons supplied mainly by the U.S. and USSR and to a much lesser extent by Great Britain and France. A number of reasons were given for the vast influx of sophisticated arms in the Middle East. Even some friends of arms control could see a certain value to large-scale assistance in conventional arms to the region, since it was argued that this would make Israel and the Arabs less likely to resort to nuclear weapons. Such an approach was actually encouraged by certain parties in the Middle East, who warned that if their demands for conventional assistance were not met by the world's major arms suppliers, they would resort to unconventional military means.

Some experts argued, however, that whether large numbers of impressive, sophisticated weapons encouraged war or were only symptomatic of underlying causes made very little difference as far as dangers from armed conflict were concerned. The presence of expanding arsenals could only make military options more attractive, and the more advanced these arsenals the more advanced would be the forms of war. Rather sophisticated military means are required to deliver a twenty-kiloton atomic bomb on target and explode the device at 1,850 feet. A good deal of the arms supplied to the Middle East in recent years had been "dual capable"—conventional *and* nuclear—in the arsenals of the U.S. and USSR. While most such equipment was disarmed before delivery of certain elements that would make it nuclear capable, these weapons were supplied to nations that had great potential for adding atomic arming devices of their own.

Although not all experts would agree on what policies in the field of conventional arms might have prevented nuclear war in the Middle East, a second recommendation is made here. Major suppliers of weapons, especially the United States and Soviet Union, should strive to control arms assistance at levels that will not bring countries to the point at which they can plan for or threaten definitive settlement of their disputes by military force, even if their force be conventional in nature. Outside military assistance should resist the appeals of regional clients for preponderant armed strength over adversaries, and should discourage ideas that would seek

to use military force in order to achieve the unconditional surrender of opponents. As a corollary to this recommendation, the quality of arms supplied should be as closely monitored as their quantity, with special attention paid to regulation of sophisticated weapons falling into the "dual capable" category.

*More realistic approaches to nuclear proliferation.* The United States had known for some time that Israel had a nuclear capability, and even that Israel possessed nuclear weapons, but did nothing through bilateral channels to control the development of such arms. This prevention of tragedy was not so much a matter for world community action as for American policy. How many times in the course of the proliferation of nuclear arms would one of the superpowers or other nuclear powers detect such a development in a friendly country and make no move to restrain it?

Another aspect of responsibility for nuclear catastrophe in the Middle East is shared by the world community beyond the United States and Israel. Certain nations with the capacity to export nuclear technology have encouraged the expansion of national capabilities for "peaceful uses" of atomic energy. It was the French, after all, who assisted Israel in secretly constructing the Dimona reactor.

The international supply of nuclear technology has been approaching the same kind of frenetic competition that now exists in the field of conventional military sales. Hence, in the wake of the nuclear disaster in the Middle East no more consensus could be found on how to prevent such future catastrophes than could be reached in the realm of arms assistance. Nonetheless, a third recommendation could be made about how to prevent future use of nuclear weapons, this one pertaining to the export of nuclear technology by countries that have atomic capabilities. The recommendation consists really of two parts: On the one hand, national means of surveillance should be alert to intelligence that indicates the existence of nuclear weapons development programs in nonnuclear countries; and on the other hand, international means should be developed to supply, as well as safeguard, the transfer of nuclear technology.

Both parts of recommendation three would require that national states sacrifice part of their selfish interests to the welfare of a world community in which they have no small stake. In keeping an intelligence watch on national nuclear developments, a power such as the United States should feel an obligation to help control this program through its own bilateral relations with that country, no matter what the political cost. And by delegating to an international body national responsibilities for exporting nuclear technology, various states would of necessity be sacrificing possible competitive advantages. In no other way than by national initiatives, however, will the world community become a more active force in preventing further use of atomic weapons in combat. The story of this nuclear calamity in the Middle East, fictitious as it is, shows why such steps are necessary.