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Israel, Iran talking war to ward off war?

By Jerrold Kessel and Pierre Klochandler
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JERUSALEM - Suddenly, the Middle East is awash with talk of war this summer. Or, is the talk of war merely meant to keep real war at bay?

Moshe Ya'alon, Israel's strategic affairs minister and a former chief of staff, declared that Israel was essentially in confrontation with Iran already.

War talk or soothing antidote, Ya'alon added his personal warning that Israel has the capability to strike at the Islamic Republic. Speaking at the Air and Space Strategic Studies Institute, north of Tel Aviv, Ya'alon said bluntly: "As far as I'm concerned, offence remains the best form of defense."

Israel rarely uses the term "war" in official statements on how to deal with Iran's "nuclear threat". However Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, while accusing Iran of trying to provoke a war between Syria and Israel, said, "Israel has no intention of going to war, no intention to attack its neighbors, despite false rumors."

Pointedly though, Netanyahu was speaking on a visit to a military training base in the north of the country. The abundant war talk of recent weeks has been most focused on the possibility of a flare-up there, involving not only Hezbollah and Israel, but also Syria.

According to Israel, the Syrians have stepped up a transfer of major rocket arsenals to Hezbollah.

The jitters are not only in Israel.

Visiting Damascus, [Russia's](#) President Dmitry Medvedev voiced fears about a looming "catastrophe" in the region. [Lebanon's](#) Prime Minister Saad Hariri expressed support for Hezbollah's right to have Scud missiles in its arsenal, and the speaker of the Iranian parliament threatened a "final and decisive war" against Israel.

All this stepped-up talk of war, or of the need to avoid war, comes amid the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference at the United Nations.

There, charging a "double standard policy" with regard to Iran and Israel, [Egypt](#) is again leading an initiative to equate the persistent international pressure on Iran to shelve its nuclear program with the lack of pressure on Israel to come clean on its nuclear program.

Iran is a signatory to the NPT. Israel is not.

Taking a cue from the NPT proceedings, the danger of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East was the focus of an international conference held last week at the [Notre-Dame](#) Center on the border between Israeli west Jerusalem and Israeli-occupied east Jerusalem.

Organized by the Palestine-Israel Journal, a joint media organization devoted to the advancement of a comprehensive Middle East peace, the conference was entitled, "A Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East: Realistic or Idealistic?"

It advocated the outlawing of all nuclear weapons in the region as the only win-win approach to avoid a military showdown with Iran.

However, Emily Landau, senior research associate at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies and director of its Arms Control and Security Project, reflecting Israel's long-held official "doctrine of ambiguity" that "Israel won't be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons in the region", said there were "worrying trends" in US policy directions.

"The official US position has not changed. But President [Barack] Obama has embraced a new disarmament agenda, and the NPT nuclear norms. He'll thus be in a weaker position to contest the Egyptian argument that [Israel](#) should join the NPT," Landau said.

"We'll see a serious US attempt to reach a compromise with Egypt," she predicted. "That's not good for Israel."

A nuclear-free zone must be incorporated into a wider weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone (including biological and chemical weapons), Landau insisted. A Middle East free of WMD could be achieved, she maintained, only after a prolonged dialogue which will bring about a sea change in relations between Israel and all its neighbors, including Iran.

Other Israeli experts did not share this "long corridor" view.

Fresh from the NPT deliberations, Avner Cohen, author of *Israel and the Bomb*, a reference book for new Israeli thinking on the issue, called for "unmasking the Israeli position".

"Under present circumstances, true, no Israeli government will give up its ultimate choice policy until the whole Middle East conflict has been resolved," Cohen reckoned. "But," he argued, "Israel's real interest is that no other state in the region acquires nuclear capability.

"On the other hand, Israel's own nuclear capability is a major factor in its acceptance in the region. It should be secure enough to move away from nuclear ambiguity," he advocated.

"Unless Israel dismantles its ambiguity doctrine, there's no way to move towards a nuclear-free Middle East. That's what aggravates current tension, and prompts talk of war," he warned.

A military option aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear quest would produce a reverse effect, Cohen concluded: "All it guarantees is that Iran will choose the same option."

Jamil Rabah, a former Palestinian delegate to regional talks in the 1990s on arms control, declared, "We'll accept Israel's nuclear capability provided it starts moving on the Palestinian question."

"If you want to move towards disarmament, don't start with the NPT," Rabah urged, "Start with genuine moves to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

"There is indeed an inherent connection between the possibility of making the region nuclear-weapon free, and progress towards Israeli-Palestinian peace," concluded Hillel Schenker, the Israeli co-organizer of the event