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SCOPING STUDY OF A U.S.-ISRAEL SECURITY DIALOGUE

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Executive Summary

During the last six years, U.S.-Israel relations have come under increasing strain and pressure. Structural changes in the strategic environment facing both countries, as well as differences in the worldviews and leadership styles of American and Israeli leaders, have led to rare public discord. As of May 2016, the bilateral U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue, the highest formal level of coordination between the two countries, has not been held since September 2014. The current turbulence in U.S.-Israel relations, however, should be viewed within the broader context of the U.S.-Israel “special relationship.” While tactical differences between the United States and Israel have emerged in the past, the two allies have managed to find ways to work closely toward a greater alignment on shared security and strategic goals. The purpose of this paper is to determine for the incoming U.S. administration whether there is a need for a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue to address current policy gaps, with special emphasis on enhancing cooperation to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), strengthen nonproliferation norms, and prepare for regional security emerging threats.

The paper will present the results of a scoping study conducted by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) and the National Defense University’s Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWSMD) assessing the desirability, feasibility, and scope of a U.S.-Israel security dialogue to be implemented after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The project team conducted in-depth consultations with over 30 serving U.S. and Israeli government officials and experts, including a research trip to Israel on March 16-17, 2016.

The CNS-CSWMD project team included Dr. Chen Kane, Director of the Middle East Nonproliferation Program at the CNS Washington, DC, office, Dr. W. Seth Carus, Distinguished Research Fellow at CSWMD, and Mr. Nima Gerami, Research Fellow at CSWMD.

It was clear from the interviews conducted during this project that both the American and Israeli sides see value in conducting a bilateral security dialogue, preferably at a Track 1.5 (quasi-official) level. Many Israeli officials and experts expressed interest in holding such a dialogue as a means to restore trust and strengthen U.S.-Israel relations following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, regardless of who is elected.

In addition, both the American and Israeli sides identified the need for the support and loose sponsorship of their respective governments to provide legitimacy and seriousness to the dialogue. At the same time, many Americans and Israelis interviewed believed that in order to be productive, senior government officials should be present at the initiation of the dialogue, and presented with its written products, but should not be present during the discussions themselves. Israeli officials and experts also emphasized the importance of a continuous dialogue, rather than a one-time event, as an essential element to rebuild trust between the United States and Israel, as well as to allow subsequent discussions on sensitive national security issues.

The scope of a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue was identified as well. Both the American and Israeli sides identified specific topics that they believed would be important to explore in a dialogue in support of the formal U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue process. These topics fall under three broad categories: (1) regional threat landscape; (2) state actors of proliferation concern; and (3) the role and rise of non-state or sub-state actors. Each side also identified topics that they would not want to discuss in a future security dialogue, or at least not in the initial phase. These topics are further addressed in the paper.

Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), the leading research center in Israel, agreed to partner with CNS-CWSMD to host a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue.

Background

Under U.S. President Ronald Reagan, Israel became a strategic partner and a de facto ally of the United States. On November 30, 1981, the United States and Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on strategic cooperation, which coincided with the official visit to the United States of Israeli Prime Minister Yizhak Shamir.

The 1981 U.S.-Israel MOU established a framework for consultation and cooperation to enhance the national security of both countries. It created a series of bilateral groups in military, economic, and strategic areas, which have been proved central to the bilateral partnership.¹ One of the three groups, the Joint Political-Military Group (JPMG), was originally designed to discuss means of countering threats posed by the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East. Over time, greater emphasis was devoted to bilateral concerns regarding the proliferation of WMD. In addition, the JPMG coordinated military exercises and security planning between the two countries and allowed for the United States to stockpile military equipment in Israel for use by U.S. forces in the event of a crisis.

In January 1987, the United States designated Israel as a major non-NATO ally and in 1988, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed by U.S. President Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu institutionalizing strategic dialogue between the two countries.² The MOA was “designed to provide greater security for Israel against regional missile and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats” and obligated the United States to provide military aid in order to enhance Israel’s defensive and deterrent capabilities. A separate agreement, signed in October 1998, was designed to defend Israel against direct threats arising from the regional deployment of ballistic missiles of intermediate range or greater.³

Strategic cooperation between the United States and Israel has continued to evolve. For example, a hotline has been established between the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and the Israeli Ministry of Defense (MOD), joint military exercises are held on a regular basis, a Joint Anti-Terrorism Working Group has been established with a DOD-MOD dialogue on counterterrorism, among other bilateral military and intelligence exchanges. The latest joint military exercise,

¹ The Joint Political Military Group (JPMG), co-chaired by the Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense and the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, is a bi-annual high-level planning forum that assists in the initiation of joint military planning, prepositioning of U.S. defense material in Israel, and combined exercises with Israeli forces. The Joint Security Assistance Planning Group (JSAP), co-chaired by the Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense and the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, is an annual forum that oversees effective implementation of U.S. security assistance to Israel and reviews cooperative defense industrial issues. The Joint Economic Development Group (JEDG), co-chaired by the Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Finance and the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs, is an annual economic policy dialogue concerned with developing policies that promote a strong and self-sufficient economy in Israel.

² U.S.–Israel Memorandum of Agreement, 1988, <http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/Vol%2011-1/Israel.pdf>

³ Memorandum of Agreement Between the United States of America and Israel, October 31 and November 12, 1998, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/120311.pdf>

“Juniper Cobra,” was held on February 14 -March 9, 2016, and a U.S.-Israel Counterproliferation Dialogue took place in early April 2016 under the auspices of the Proliferation Security Initiative, led by the U.S. Department of State (DOS). In addition, the U.S. Department of Energy leads annual meetings with the Israeli Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy, and Water Resources, with participants across multiple agencies from both countries.⁴

In 1999, President Clinton and Prime Minister Ehud Barak established the Strategic Policy Planning Group (SPPG) and the Joint Strategic Planning Committee, senior consultative working groups which met every four months to bolster Israel’s defense and deterrence capabilities.⁵

Since 2001, a bi-annual Track 1 (official) interagency Strategic Dialogue has replaced the SPPG. Its purpose is to discuss long-term issues and includes representatives from the diplomatic, defense, and intelligence establishments. Through the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue, the two countries have engaged in a wide ranging discussion of regional threats, challenges, and opportunities. As the threat of WMD proliferation increased in the region in the early 1990s, the scope of the Strategic Dialogue began to include issues related to the proliferation and counterproliferation of WMD.⁶ This aspect of the official dialogue has grown increasingly important, particularly in the run-up to the July 2015 announcement of a comprehensive nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1, as well as significant transfers of major conventional weapons by the United States as a security assurance to Gulf Arab states.⁷

One unique aspect of the U.S.-Israel relationship is the United States’ commitment over the past 30 years to maintaining Israel’s military superiority over its regional neighbors—a policy known as Qualitative Military Edge (QME). This policy is intended to ensure that Israel is able to counter and defeat credible conventional military threats from any state or non-state actor, and that no other Middle Eastern country—including Gulf Arab states not necessarily hostile to Israel—receives advanced technological systems that have not yet been offered to Israel.⁸ The United States’ commitment to preserving Israel’s QME was formalized into law in September 2008 with the passage of H.R. 7177, commonly known as “The Naval Vessel Transfer Act of 2008.” Under this legislation, the U.S. president must update the Congress every four years

⁴ The U.S.-Israel energy relationship has a statutory underpinning, the Energy Independent and Security Act of 2007 (42 U.S.C. 17337), which applies to monies appropriated for the U.S.-Israel Binational Science Foundation and Binational Industrial R&D Foundation. See <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.682289?ts=1445825678373>; <http://energy.gov/ia/us-israel-energy-meetings>

⁵ Joint Statement by President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Washington, DC, July 19, 1999, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mid031.asp

⁶ U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue,” Washington, DC, September 11, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/231511.htm>

⁷ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Annex to U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement,” May 14, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>; and Ronen Bergman, “Washington is Waiting for Israel’s Demands on Iran,” *Ynet*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4657389,00.html>

⁸ For the QME definition, see U.S. Senate, H.R. 7177, 110th Congress, 2nd session, September 17, 2008, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-110hr7177rds/pdf/BILLS-110hr7177rds.pdf>

regarding any and all weapons systems that the United States has sold to the Middle East. As part of the maintenance of Israel's QME, the United States and Israel maintain a constant dialogue regarding the preservation of Israel's relative military advantage, particularly when major arms deals are signed between the United States and its Gulf Arab partners.⁹

Currently, the United States and Israel are in the midst of a contentious negotiation over a new 10-year military aid package, which will decide the nature of U.S. security assistance to Israel from 2018. Once signed, the MOU will reiterate a longstanding U.S. commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge to deter and defend against its regional adversaries. The gaps between the two states are significant, however, and it is possible that the Israeli prime minister will seek to postpone the MOU negotiations until after the 2016 U.S. presidential election.¹⁰

As observed by one former senior Israeli official, the gap between the United States and Israel on the military aid package is not limited to the final sum on the bottom line. Rather, it is symptomatic of the current crisis in U.S.-Israeli relations—the Obama and Netanyahu administrations are deeply divided by contrasting assessments of threats in the Middle East and the extent to which Israel is considered a strategic asset to the United States.¹¹ Prime Minister Netanyahu believes any incoming U.S. administration will change President Obama's reserved stance on the Middle East and take steps to strengthen ties with Israel as an integral part of an updated U.S. strategy to confront Iranian subversion, its state sponsorship of terrorism, and its nuclear ambitions.¹²

The CNS-CSWMD research trip occurred at a particularly turbulent time in U.S.-Israel relations. During the last six years, U.S.-Israeli relations have come under increasing strain and pressure.¹³ Structural changes in the strategic environment facing both countries, as well as differences in the worldviews and leadership styles of American and Israeli leaders, has led to rare public discord, particularly in regard to the comprehensive nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the P5+1, as well as the dim prospects for reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Israeli prime minister and his closest advisors believe the Iran nuclear agreement and other Obama administration policies herald a growing rift between the United States and its traditional

⁹ Qualitative Military Edge, <http://militaryedge.org/about/>; see also Amos Harel, "Washington, Jerusalem Discussing Massive Compensation for Iranian Nuclear Deal," *Haaretz*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.657276>

¹⁰ Ben Caspit, "Why Bibi Snubbed Obama and is Skipping Next Week's AIPAC Conference," *Al-Monitor*, March 14, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/israel-netanyahu-official-trip-cancelled-obama-aipac-us-aid.html#>

¹¹ Amos Yadlin, "Disagreement over Defense Aid: Bridging the Gaps," INSS Insight No. 818, May 3, 2016, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=11773>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Michael Steele, "Can U.S.-Israeli Relations Get Any Worse?," *MSNBC News*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/can-us-israeli-relations-get-any-worse>; Ian Bremmer, "The U.S. and Israel Are Divided—and That Won't Change," *Time*, April 2, 2015, <http://time.com/3768165/us-israel-relations-middle-east-iran-divide/>; and Michael B. Oren, "How Obama Abandoned Israel," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-obama-abandoned-israel-1434409772>

regional allies, a change in U.S. perception of Iran and its role in the region, and a broader policy of U.S. disengagement from the Middle East. This perception has been exacerbated by the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia and statements made by President Barack Obama suggesting that he does not consider the Middle East to be as important to U.S. national security as it once was, especially compared to Asia and the Pacific.¹⁴

Disagreements between the United States and Israel over the key parameters of the July 2015 nuclear agreement between the P5+1 and Iran, disagreement over the parameters of the U.S.-Israel MOU on maintaining Israel's QME, as well as the lack of progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace talks resulted in the halting of the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue since September 2014.

A week before the CNS-CSWMD research trip, on March 8, 2016, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Israel for a two-day visit to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. Vice President Biden's visit was intended to advance the negotiations over the 10-year MOU on U.S. military aid to Israel.¹⁵ A day before the visit, media reports suggested that Prime Minister Netanyahu had abruptly cancelled a meeting with President Obama scheduled later that month in Washington, D.C., ostensibly due to unresolved questions over the MOU negotiations.¹⁶ In the midst of this tension, *The Atlantic* published in its April 2016 issue a revealing interview with President Obama in which he recalled an incident when Prime Minister Netanyahu had lectured him on the Middle East, underscoring, yet again, the differences in style and temperament between the two leaders that had seeped into the public sphere in recent years.¹⁷

Meetings that took place throughout this study also coincided with growing tumult across the region, including a series of Iranian ballistic missile tests that the United States claimed were in violation of UN Security Council 2231. The missiles, capable of reaching Israel and the Gulf Arab states, were marked with a statement in Hebrew reading "Israel should be wiped off [the Earth]," according to Iran's semi-official *Fars News*.¹⁸ Other regional pressures, including the civil and proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, and Saudi Arabia's recent execution of Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr and the subsequent attacks against the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, have opened the door to new destabilizing competition between the Gulf Arab states and Iran. The decline of Egypt's regional influence, Russia's intervention in Syria, and its March 14

¹⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

¹⁵ According to media reports, Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected Vice President Biden's call to renew Israeli-Palestinian peace talks on a two-state solution along 1967 lines and to halt expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. See <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/netanyahu-obama-collective-diplomacy-force-gap-policeman.html#>

¹⁶ Rory Jones and Carol E. Lee, "Netanyahu's Office Ties Canceled Obama Meeting to Unresolved U.S.-Israel Aid Explanation Differs from One Offered Days Ago," *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/netanyahus-office-ties-canceled-obama-meeting-to-unresolved-u-s-israel-aid-1457648041>

¹⁷ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

¹⁸ "Iran Fires 2 Ballistic Missiles at Targets 1400 km in Distance," March 9, 2016, *Fars News*, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13941219000355>

announcement that it would partially withdraw from Syria have further added to the complexities of the Middle East's delicate and volatile balance of power.

The current turbulence in U.S.-Israel relations, however, should be viewed in the broader context of the U.S.-Israel "special relationship." While tactical differences have emerged before, the two allies have managed in the past to find ways to work closely toward a greater alignment on shared security and strategic goals. This project is aimed at finding ways where the United States and Israel can enhance cooperation to counter WMD proliferation, strengthen nonproliferation norms, and prepare for emerging threats to regional security given the evolving security environment in the Middle East. This report conveys key findings and recommendations based on consultations with current and former U.S. and Israeli officials by addressing three main issues: the desirability, feasibility, and scope of a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue.

Desirability: Is There a Need for Another U.S.-Israel Security Dialogue?

Sustainable and reliable government-to-government ties are an important component of the overall U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship. As opposed to other countries the United States seeks to engage diplomatically, U.S.-Israel relations are saturated with dialogues at multiple levels, including at the Track 1, 1.5, and 2 levels. In light of this, the underlying question is: is there a need for another dialogue to discuss WMD-related issues? If so, what will be its comparative advantages, and what gaps would it seek to fill?

The following section will explore existing Track 1, 1.5, and 2 security dialogues between the United States and Israel, and compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of each to identify whether another dialogue is necessary.

Ongoing Track 1 Dialogues

The highest level of regularly-scheduled diplomatic meetings between the United States and Israel is the Strategic Dialogue, a Track 1 (official) dialogue led by American and Israeli government officials at the deputy minister level. Most recently, the Strategic Dialogue was led on the American side by Deputy Secretary of State and on the Israeli side by the Minister of Strategic Affairs. Held on a semi-annual basis, the last U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue took place in September 2014 in Washington, D.C. However, due to increased tension between the two countries on the Iran nuclear negotiations and Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, as of May 2016, no additional Strategic Dialogue meetings have been held. Furthermore, the official dialogue held in September 2014 resulted in the uncharacteristic release of separate statements by the two governments, while past dialogues invariably produced joint statements on the issues

discussed.¹⁹ No date has been publicly announced for the next round of discussions; given uncertainties within the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs as well as National Security Council, it is unclear who will head the Israeli delegation once such a dialogue resumes.

Additional formal dialogues that include discussion related to the spectrum of countering WMD issues—nonproliferation, counterproliferation, and consequence management—have continued to take place. These include dialogues between the National Security Councils, DOD-MOD, and DOS-Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The senior-level dialogue at the National Security Advisor level has been less structured than the Strategic Dialogue framework and is more personality driven. The DOD-MOD formal dialogues are “too many to track,” according to DOD officials. These dialogues cover, among other issues, missile defense, interdiction, counterterrorism and intelligence sharing.

At least two additional bilateral dialogues are led by the U.S. Department of State and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One such dialogue is led by U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Vann Van Diepen, and the other by Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation Thomas Countryman. In both cases the Israeli counterpart is Jeremy Issacharoff, Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other dialogues focused on countering the proliferation of WMD also take place between and among the U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies and military establishments.

In early consultations during the initial phase of this study, several current Israeli officials maintained that the Track 1 dialogue(s) is robust and were not certain if there was added value in conducting an additional dialogue at the Track 1.5 or 2 levels. It should be noted that these consultations took place in May 2014, prior to the JCPOA and just after the last April 2014 Strategic Dialogue. Conversely, a number of former senior Israeli officials who participated in the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue overwhelmingly believed there are significant gaps in the dialogue process that could be overcome by increased contact between officials and outside government experts at a Track 1.5 (quasi-official) or Track 2 (unofficial) dialogue. The highest senior Israeli official that was interviewed during the March 2016 trip to Israel also held that such a security dialogue could be a means to restore trust and strengthen U.S.-Israel relations following the U.S. presidential election, regardless of who is elected.

While all individuals interviewed for this study agreed that the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue should continue, recently retired officials identified several deficiencies in the official dialogue.

First, according to multiple former senior Israeli officials who participated in recent Strategic Dialogue meetings, the dialogue is neither sufficiently robust nor comprehensive. They noted that the substance of the dialogue has significantly deteriorated over the last five years and

¹⁹ “U.S., Israel Differ on Emphases in Strategic Dialogue,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.jta.org/2014/09/14/news-opinion/united-states/u-s-israel-differ-in-emphases-in-strategic-dialogue>

focused primarily on political issues, rather than in-depth discussion of a narrower set of policy issues, including medium- and long-term aspects of regional security. One former Israeli official went so far as to describe the Strategic Dialogue as merely “ceremonious,” and highlighted the need to reinvigorate U.S.-Israel bilateral engagement and cooperation on regional security issues. Others similarly noted that the Strategic Dialogue framework has grown increasingly irrelevant and needs to be upgraded or improved. According to a former senior Israeli official, previous efforts spearheaded by the Israeli NSC to establish a complementary dialogue or improve the existing one have been rebuffed by U.S. officials who were dubious about the benefits of improving the Strategic Dialogue process.

Second, one of the problems identified by Israelis interviewed for this study was that the Strategic Dialogue has become less effective since the senior Israeli official appointed to lead the dialogue has become a political appointee, rather a career civil servant. Media leaks and increased politicization have thus undermined credibility of the dialogue.

Third, regardless of leadership personalities, there has been a growing mistrust between the United States and Israel, especially on nonproliferation issues, since 2010. The “singling out of Israel” in the final document adopted by the 2010 NPT Review Conference, without explicit reference to Iran’s safeguards transgressions, and the establishment of a process for negotiating a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) within the NPT Review Process—in contradiction to promises made to Israel by senior U.S. officials prior to the 2010 NPT Review Conference—remains a sore point for Israel.²⁰

Ongoing Track 1.5 and 2 Dialogues

In parallel with the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue, several dialogues take place at the Track 1.5 and 2 levels. Most notable among these is the U.S.-Israel Track 1.5 dialogue organized until not long ago by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy to discuss approaches toward Iran’s nuclear program. Since this dialogue focused on the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, the group has not convened since the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. Many of those who participated in the dialogue noted its utility due to the high level of participants involved.

Also of note is the dialogue co-hosted by Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and Tel Aviv University’s Institute for National Strategic Studies. This dialogue is broad and political in scope, addressing topics ranging from geopolitical trends, WMD proliferation, and the Middle East peace process. Due to changes in the individuals that

²⁰ Statement by the Government of Israel on the NPT Review Conference Middle East Resolution, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 29, 2010, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/pressroom/2010/pages/statement_government_israel_npt_review_conference_29-may-2010.aspx. See also Jayantha Dhanapala, “Evaluating the 2010 NPT Review Conference,” USIP Special Report, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR258%20-%20Evaluating%20the%202010%20NPT%20Review%20Conference.pdf>

lead the dialogue in both organizations, as well as funding constraints, the dialogue has only taken place a handful times since 2000. Another U.S.-Israel Track 2 dialogue, sponsored by NPS-PASCC/DTRA, took place in Jerusalem in 2011. This dialogue was a one-time event, and the general view of participants involved was that emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict detracted from serious examination of other security-related issues where more substantive progress could have been made, particularly on matters concerning the proliferation of WMD.

With regard to deficiencies in non-Track 1 dialogues, most Americans and Israelis interviewed for this study believed that too few of the existing Track 1.5 or Track 2 activities have been conducted to account for the transformation of the Middle East since the 2010-11 Arab uprisings and ongoing wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. With the notable exceptions of the Washington Institute's U.S.-Israel dialogue and a broad regional-based (as opposed to bilateral) security dialogues conducted by UCLA's Center for Middle East Development, the general impression of those interviewed is that past and existing U.S.-Israel security dialogues have not adequately covered the full spectrum of countering WMD issues and have either broadly focused on all topics related to security in the Middle East, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, or otherwise focused too narrowly on a single state actor of proliferation concern, such as Iran.

CNS-CSWMD project team observed that operational issues related to WMD proliferation and counterproliferation such as missile defense, interdiction, and intelligence sharing, as well as broad strategic issues, including chemical weapons use in Syria and implementation of the Iran nuclear agreement appear to be adequately covered in existing bilateral Track 1 dialogues.

Two important gaps were identified, however, across all tracks. The first is the lack of understanding (and discussions) on the other side's perspectives and regional interests. The second is a discussion on issues in the intersection of strategy and policy—that is, strategic topics that bear direct impact on the policy stances of both sides on WMD-related issues to include the changing Middle East landscape, the collapse of the state system in many Gulf Arab states, extended deterrence, the expansion of civil nuclear power in the Middle East, the persistent use of chemical weapons by non-state actors and its implications for the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In sum, based on interviews conducted by the CNS-CSWMD project team, a consensus emerged that an additional U.S.-Israel security dialogue could remedy perceived gaps in existing bilateral dialogues and serve as a platform for assessing the implications of increasing political turmoil in the Middle East, exchanging views on threat perceptions, and identifying further opportunities for strengthening U.S.-Israel security cooperation on WMD issues.

Feasibility: Can a Productive Bilateral Dialogue on WMD-related Issues be Conducted?

It was clear from those interviewed that a mutually agreed agenda, topics, and participants chosen for a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue will need to be handled very carefully. If not managed carefully, actions and statements during the dialogue could gradually further erode mutual trust between the two allies and the good relations established between officials at the working level.

Officials from both sides, especially Israel, emphasized the erosion of confidence and trust between the two countries on WMD-related issues stemming, in part, from the experience of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Many Israelis reiterated the traditional stance that WMD arms control can only proceed if regional security improves first and underlined the WMDFZ as a political non-starter, given the current security situation in the region. They further maintained that the 2015 NPT Review Conference was the public coup de grâce of the WMDFZ issue.²¹

The most senior Israeli official interviewed indicated willingness to help establish a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue at the Track 1.5 level, with the understanding that it would occur after the 2016 U.S. presidential election and focus on conceptual discussions related to preventing threats to regional stability. Israeli officials and outside government experts also indicated that, if WMD-relevant threats were framed in terms of improving regional security, Israel could be interested in such a dialogue as a means to restore trust and strengthen U.S.-Israel relations.

The following are topics identified by U.S. and Israeli officials and outside government experts as potential areas for discussions in a future dialogue. These topics are subject to change depending on regional and international developments in the coming year:

Regional Threat Landscape

- What are the implications of developments in the regional security environment for U.S. and Israeli political-military or strategic doctrines?
- What are current and emerging WMD threats, and how do U.S. and Israeli risk assessments differ? How can the two sides best cooperate and coordinate activities to address current and emerging WMD threats?
- In what ways do regional conflicts and sectarian tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia affect U.S.-Israel ties, and their respective alliances with Gulf Arab states? How might these relationships address current drivers of uncertainty and instability in the Middle

²¹ Andrea Berger, “Gangs of New York: The 2015 NPT Revcon, European Leadership Network, May 27, 2015, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/gangs-of-new-york-the-2015-npt-revcon_2790.html

East as part of a broader regional security process?

- In the aftermath of the Iran nuclear agreement, what opportunities exist for the United States and Israel to strengthen nonproliferation norms, particularly in the realm of monitoring and verification? In what ways should the United States and Israel plan for the next 10-15 years and beyond?

State Actors of Proliferation Concern

- How do the foreign policies of Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt shape or influence proliferation drivers and regional nonproliferation policies?
- In what ways can the United States and Israel drive relationships with the aforementioned states to reduce proliferation pressures, mitigate sectarian tensions, and shape a more stable and sustainable regional order?
- What is the role of missile defense in sustaining regional deterrence, and how can the United States and Israel sustain cooperation in joint missile defense programs? What are the implications of other regional states acquiring missile defense capabilities? Is there a basis for regional cooperation?

The Role and Rise of Non-State or Sub-State Actors

- What are the existing and future tools needed to address the potential acquisition and use of WMD by non-state actors? What are the possible consequences and implications of the large-scale use of chemical weapons in the region by non-state actors?
- What further steps can the United States and Israel take to counter the acquisition and use of WMD by Hezbollah, ISIL, and other non-state or sub-state actors?
- What role does the interdiction of WMD and their associated delivery systems play in preventing the risks of proliferation?

Scope: Timing, Participants, and Partner

Timing. The overall sentiment shared by many of Israelis interviewed for this study was that Israel could be interested in conducting a U.S.-Israel security dialogue as a means to restore trust and strengthen U.S.-Israel relations following the U.S. presidential election, regardless of who is elected. This was widely viewed by current and former Israeli officials as a feasible prospect and a potential opportunity to “reset” U.S.-Israel relations by injecting new ideas into discussions that could inform or complement the Track I Strategic Dialogue, likely to take place after the inauguration of the next U.S. administration on January 20, 2017.

Type of dialogue. Most experts interviewed believed that a Track 1.5 would be the ideal setting for such a dialogue. In contrast to Track 2 diplomacy, a Track 1.5 dialogue serves the useful role of establishing professional ties and personal relations within and across U.S. and Israeli entities involved in policymaking. A number of Israelis interviewed independently cited the Forum of Strategic Dialogue (FSD), an Israeli NGO that convenes bilateral dialogues between Israeli and European government officials and outside government experts, as an exemplary model for a future U.S.-Israel security dialogue. Although few bilateral European-Israel security dialogues have been conducted at either the Track 2 or Track 1.5 levels, the creation in 2013 of FSD has provided an important forum for informal consultations between Israeli and European government officials and academics to discuss emerging security issues and to identify priority items for bilateral discussion at the Track I level. Notably, FSD does not focus on countering WMD issues per se, but its annual bilateral meetings between Israeli and key European countries—France, Germany, Poland—has led to important collaboration and strengthened ties between European and Israeli research centers and government institutions by encouraging “out-of-the-box” discussions in the fields of defense, security, foreign affairs, and economy.²² At the same time, it would be best to avoid disproportionate senior-level government representation to allow for more open and candid discussion.

Israelis and many Americans believed Track 1.5 would be preferable to Track 2 for a future bilateral dialogue, with the important caveat that active senior government participation could constrain discussion and therefore senior government officials should be present at the initiation of the dialogue, show their support for it and be presented with its written products, but should not be present during the discussions themselves. Several former American and Israeli officials maintained that the involvement of high-level political appointees could potentially derail the dialogue process. A Track 1.5 dialogue was widely viewed as the most impactful.

Number and type of participants. A future Track 1.5 security dialogue should be limited to no more than 15 participants from each side with expertise in U.S.-Israeli diplomacy, Middle East policy, WMD counterproliferation, nonproliferation, and broader regional security and defense matters. As stated above, a dialogue would preferably be held at the Track 1.5 level over the course of 1-2 days to encourage serious participation and provide advice that could inform and complement the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue. Ideally, the dialogue should take place more than once to incrementally restore confidence and trust and allow for the discussion of more sensitive national security topics.

Whereas the U.S. national security community is relatively broad, in Israel this community is limited to a small cadre of experts. Additionally, practitioners of Israeli government bureaucracy tend to discount the influence of those that have no official positions. Israeli officials, therefore, urged that an effort should be made to identify those outside of government that do have

²² In 2014, FSD also hosted a NATO-Israel Cooperation event in partnership with NATO. For more background, see <http://f-sd.eu/about.aspx>

influence as well as to account for potential asymmetries in U.S. and Israeli participation and suggested inviting a broad spectrum of representatives from across the political spectrum. Some Israelis also underscored the importance of reaching out to new participants, including mid-level government officials and academics, to ensure a dialogue involves fresh voices and has enduring impact.

Should there be a decision to pursue a dialogue after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, participants will have to be carefully selected in consultation with Israeli partners and corresponding to the range of topics selected for discussion. Additional participants would be invited from other U.S. and Israeli think tanks, representing the broad spectrum of viewpoints in both countries. Senior government officials from the United States and Israel offered to serve as a keynote or sponsoring role for the dialogue. A senior Israeli official also indicated his willingness to help establish a dialogue, with the understanding that it would occur after the U.S. elections and focus on conceptual discussions related to preventing threats to regional security.

Israeli partner. Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), the leading research center in Israel, agreed to partner with CNS/CWSMD to host such a future dialogue. The project team met with the INSS Executive Director Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin who expressed an interest in hosting a dialogue and a desire to discuss issues specifically related WMD proliferation and policies. INSS members also suggested that there be a public component to the dialogue, including the possibility of a publicly releasable report (aside from a confidential report and briefings to senior government officials) and the inclusion of emerging leaders to bridge perspectives and foster sustainability.