

## ISRAEL AND POISON GAS

The Chemical Weapons Convention now at an advanced stage of negotiation in Geneva is strongly in the national interest of Israel. The following analysis explains why.

The security of Israel depends on its ability to repel invasion. Israel is defended against invasion by strong, alert conventional forces. Israeli gas weapons would contribute little to this defense because the military forces of Israel's potential adversaries have already provided their forces with anti-gas protection and can readily make it still more effective.

It is true that the civilian populations of Israel's potential adversaries, lacking anti-gas protection, are highly vulnerable to gas. But an attack on civilians would do little or nothing to defeat a determined invasion. Israel has no security interest in being able to attack civilians with gas.

Yet Israel's own are seriously threatened by the possible spread of gas weapons to nations and dissident forces in the Middle East. Chemical proliferation would make Israel's civilians hostage to the threat of devastating attack, both by terrorists and by belligerent states. Partial protection of civilians can be achieved by universal provision of gas masks, protective shelters and anti-gas training. Still, these precautions would have to be constantly ready and routinely practiced in order to provide reliable protection. Doing so would impose additional psychological, political and economic burdens on Israel when such burdens are already high. In sum, having poison gas weapons would not benefit Israel, but gas weapons in the hands of her adversaries would pose a grave threat.

The most promising approach for preventing chemical proliferation is the prohibition by the Chemical Weapons Convention of the development, production, possession and transfer of poison gas weapons. The Bush Administration supports such a global ban on chemical weapons, as do all the members of the Atlantic and Warsaw alliances. The Convention would create strong international political incentives to refrain from acquiring or transferring chemical weapons and would provide a uniform legal and political basis for action against non-compliance. The alternative is a patchwork system of embargoes directed against certain nations, while other nations retain or acquire gas weapons. In the longer term, this approach is bound to be ineffective or even counterproductive. At best, selective embargoes delay but cannot prevent or reverse chemical proliferation. The most prudent policy for Israel is one of clear support for the successful negotiation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. Although Israel has not yet participated in the Geneva negotiations, her expression of support for them at the 1988 Paris Conference and also her proposal for a Middle East chemical-free zone indicates that the considerations outlined here are understood by the Israeli government.

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