A Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone
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Introduction

Following a public conference on the possibility of establishing a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East, Pugwash, in collaboration with the SOAS Disarmament and Globalisation Project, convened a private workshop on the same theme. The workshop took place on June 16-17 2008 in London. It gathered regional participants from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Syria and Sudan and extra-regional participation from Canada, Germany, Italy, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as representatives of key regional and international organizations, such as the Arab League.

The objectives of the meeting were to assess the state of compliance with major arms control agreements in the region; to gain insight into the causes behind the refusal of many Middle East states to adhere to some of the non-proliferation treaties; and to examine ways in which the goal of a WMD-Free Middle East could be achieved. The participants devoted particular attention to the NPT and the current debate about the prospects of nuclear weapons elimination in the Middle East.

The profound political differences that underlie the lack of compliance with arms control treaties and prevent the emergence of a new security architecture were immediately apparent. As noted at the beginning of the meeting, the Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones (NWFZs) that have been established around the world have been relatively ‘easy’ ones where no nuclear powers were present beforehand and all states extended diplomatic recognition to each other. Even so, the case of the NWFZ in Africa had to await changes in South Africa’s political system before it could be finalized after many years of negotiation.

The status of Non-Proliferation Agreements in the Middle East

Prima facie, the status of compliance with non-proliferation agreements in the Middle East is not dismal. Most Arab states have signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the earlier Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) and have deposited the instruments of ratification with the relevant international bodies. The countries that have not signed are Sudan,
Syria, Somalia, Lebanon, Libya and Egypt with regards to the CWC. With regard to the BTWC, all member states of the Arab League have signed. However four of them, Syria, Somalia, Egypt and the U.A.E. have not deposited the instruments of ratification. In the case of Syria and Egypt this last act has been explicitly linked to the behavior of Israel. For its part, Israel has signed the CWC but has not deposited the instruments of ratification and it has not signed either the NPT or the BTWC.

The focus of the meeting, and of much of the world’s diplomatic activity and media attention, is of course the tension surrounding Iran and Israel over the question of nuclear proliferation. Israel has not signed the NPT and it is believed to have an extensive nuclear arsenal that crucially includes second strike capabilities. Israel has stated that it will sign, ratify and abide by all WMD treaties some time after the achievement of full peace in the region. Iran, as was remarked at the meeting, both in terms of declaratory policy and in terms of verified activities has signed and ratified all existing non-proliferation agreements. However, questions have been raised by the IAEA and others over its compliance, and some in the international community do not trust that the final goal of Iranian activities is an exclusively peaceful nuclear program.

This demonstrates how the obstacles to a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East, far from being legal or technical, are political. Therefore, the discussion during the meeting kept constantly focusing back to the political disputes in the region, chiefly the Arab-Israeli conflict, whose resolution was seen as a precondition for the establishment of a Middle East WMDFZ. This indicated the primacy of politics in the realm of non-proliferation agreements in the region, which too often is disingenuously tied to issues of international law or technical verification. In other words, it transpired clearly from the meeting how a technical infraction by Iran is treated by relevant international bodies in a wholly different manner from a technical infraction by South Korea. The same way as possession of intermediate ballistic missiles by North Korea is treated differently from the same British capability.

**Regional Arms Control in the Middle East**

This intermingling of political and technical issues was quickly recognized by most participants at the meeting, and an interesting discussion ensued on the reasons behind the lack of a regional arms control regime. What transpired is that most Arab states, not to mention Iran, would consider the establishment of a multilateral arms control regime in the Middle East as a sign of “normalization” with Israel. This is considered unacceptable before a comprehensive political agreement is reached. Meanwhile, as noted previously, Israel is determined not to give up its nuclear capabilities until it has enjoyed an unspecified period of full peace with all regional states.

The first proposal for a Middle East NWFZ was formulated by Iran in 1974 and received the immediate support of Egypt. Although Israel has formally expressed support for the concept of a WMDFZ, after full peace is achieved in the region, it tends to view existing proposals for such a Zone as diplomatic maneuvers aimed at creating pressure on it without fundamentally altering the security situation of the region. Not surprisingly, more than thirty years later, the actual implementation of a NWFZ in the region is still a remote possibility and the attention of the international community is focusing on the chances of additional proliferation.
As noted during the discussion, the Israeli nuclear posture is regarded domestically as a success. Furthermore, the leaders who advocate territorial concessions and a return to the 1967 lines are the ones who always leaned towards maintaining the nuclear option for some period of time after a peace deal is signed with the Arab states. This is in stark contrast to the Israeli political leaders who frame the issue in terms of “defensible borders”. Therefore, in Israel it is the people who are pushing for a peace deal who are highlighting the strategic value of retaining for some period a nuclear deterrent as a hedge against such a deal going wrong.

The Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) multilateral working group, which met between 1992 and 1995, was then discussed. ACRS made some good progress in the discussion of regional CBMs. However, ACRS collapsed due to differences over the nuclear issue and concerns over “normalization,” thereby demonstrating the sensitivity of discussions over a new security architecture in the region. And yet a new regional security compact is a necessary precondition to expand membership and ratification of existing non-proliferation agreements. The collapse of the multilateral talks in the 1990s, though, is an indicator of the fact that a political resolution of current regional conflicts is a necessary but perhaps not a sufficient condition to achieve a WMDFZ in the Middle East. In fact, the retention of a strategic option by Israel could be an important card in trying to sell a peace deal to the Israeli public until it is clear that a peace deal will be durable. This is especially the case for those in Israel who see their country’s qualitative edge in conventional capability eroding as other regional states gain access to sophisticated Western weaponry. Therefore, even if we conceive of the creation of a WMDFZ in the region as a process and not as a cathartic event, the workshop participants made it very clear that a resolution of current political disputes is the key to initiate this process.

**Conclusion**

There can be no progress in the direction of a NWFZ in the Middle East without a comprehensive political settlement. As of now, many regional states do not extend diplomatic recognition to each other. In this context, agitating for a WMDFZ will likely only be seen by some in the region as diplomatic maneuvering. Even after a comprehensive peace is reached, Israel will probably decide to retain a strategic deterrent capability for some period as an insurance policy against bellicose regimes coming to power in the neighboring states. Until this perception is reversed, it is difficult to foresee dramatic steps in the direction of a WMDFZ.

In fact, if we were to base ourselves on the discussions during the workshop, and to venture a prediction regarding nuclear proliferation, we could not possibly be optimistic. In addition to the much scrutinized Iranian nuclear program, Egypt and the UAE have approached the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to jumpstart peaceful nuclear programs under the agency supervision, which they have a right to do, of course. Other regional states are sure to follow leading to a more volatile situation in which as one participant remarked “these programs start off as peaceful but you are never 100% sure of what is going to happen 15 years from now”.
The picture is a little rosier when it comes to other WMD non-proliferation treaties. Significant work could be done with regards to the CWC and the BTWC. This provided that: the states in the region adhere to the notion that non-proliferation should be conceived as a collective good; and that they come to the conclusion that the normalization of relations, and communication between countries for the purpose of discussing regional security can be treated as analytically and diplomatically distinct. These two principles are essential to further progress.

Communication does not mean that you agree on everything; a nominal state of hostilities can be maintained even as new approaches to regional security are discussed. Thus, to analytically decouple communication from normalization would be very beneficial to non-proliferation efforts. Similarly, diplomatic steps could be taken and incentives could be offered to encourage states in the region to stop conceiving of adherence to non-proliferation treaties as a tit for tat issue. If this approach were to prevail we could have some concrete progress. Israel could sign and ratify the BTWC and deposit the instrument of ratification of the CWC, thereby building confidence without much prejudice to its security posture. Likewise, Syria and Egypt could theoretically deposit the instruments of ratification of these two treaties without waiting for Israel to sign the NPT (although it seems clear that at least Syria regards its CW capabilities as a deterrent to Israel’s nuclear capabilities). The message would simply be that chemical and biological weapons are considered unacceptable instruments of war by all the states in the region.

The consensus of the meeting seemed to be that these (discussions of regional security frameworks and unilateral, but reciprocal arms control steps) are the two avenues to be explored in further discussions and on which some concrete progress could be achieved. Given the absence of a political deal over the wider differences in the region, nuclear proliferation is regarded as too sensitive an issue to be tackled head-on at an official level before a comprehensive political deal is reached, or, at the very least, before diplomatic recognition is extended by all states in the region to each other. However, work could go forward on nuclear issues in terms of discussions over such technical questions as a verification regime for a future NWFZ in the region.