

# Where Do We Go From Here? A New Israeli Approach to Tension-Reduction in the Middle East

*Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein\**

This article recaps Israel’s position on the idea of holding a WMD-free zone conference and sets forth, in broad strokes, the rationale and essence of an approach that we believe would address not only Israel’s concerns, but has the potential of advancing stability and security for the region as a whole: establishing a Regional Security Dialogue Forum in the Middle East.

## Israel’s Position on the WMD-Free Zone Idea

We can succinctly summarize Israel’s position on the WMD-free zone conference idea from four perspectives: procedure, arms control “ideology”, culture, and current political realities. In purely procedural terms, Israel found it quite difficult to support the WMD-free zone idea given the fact that, as a non-member of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), it was not party to the defining resolutions that were adopted under the NPT umbrella. Not only was Israel not present at these discussions, but the way in which the issues have been framed by successive NPT review conferences would not allow the space for Israel to lay out its critical security concerns. Clearly, in any arms control and disarmament discussion, all understandings and agreements must be reached by consensus.

From the perspective of arms control “ideology”, Israel and Egypt have presented diametrically opposed approaches – these approaches have accompanied regional discourse on this issue since the Arms Control and Regional Security talks of the early 1990s (part of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process). Israel strongly advocates an incremental approach that views arms control as a long process of confidence building and gradual political transformation, leading eventually to successful negotiations and the establishment of a WMD-free zone. By contrast and in line with its preferred focus on the weapons per se, the Egyptian position views Israel joining the NPT as the first confidence building measure to be taken.

Cultural issues also cast a long shadow over the likely success of a conference: Israel is highly concerned about the ingrained institutional culture of deceit that has been revealed in a number of Middle East states over the past 25 years. This refers to a disturbing tendency to violate commitments to WMD non-proliferation and/or disarmament. This was evident in Saddam

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Hussein's Iraq, Qaddafi's Libya, Syria, and Iran.<sup>1</sup> States that joined the NPT and then proceeded to work on a secret military nuclear program have rendered the starting point for regional discussion of these strategic capabilities—a discussion which critically hinges on mutual confidence and trust—extremely poor. The situation is no better in respect to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention, which are not universally accepted in the Middle East. Indeed, several states have actually used chemical weapons in the past, with the most recent case being Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, from a political perspective, the current Arab awakening and the transformation in the region has created opportunities that Israel would be well advised to explore. The paradigm shift that we are currently witnessing in the region changes the working assumptions that determine inter-state relations. This could be an auspicious time to carve out a new approach to arms control in the Middle East. The Southeast Asian model could have relevance in this regard: a suitable regional forum to promote discussion of regional security should be inclusive in terms of membership and comprehensive in terms of agenda, in order to deal properly with all asymmetries.

## The Rationale for a New Approach

The overt goal of a Middle East WMD-free zone is to eliminate WMD, but also at stake in the current debate over this idea are conceptions of regional stability and security. Indeed, the overriding factor that is precluding movement toward a WMD-free zone is the very different views among the various regional states on the sources of security threats and regional tension in the Middle East. When regional security dialogue is reduced to an exclusive focus on negotiating a WMD-free zone, this encourages a tendency to place sole emphasis on the destabilizing effect of *weapons* as such, which also enables Arab states to highlight the current advantage that Israel maintains in this regard. For Israel, however, security is primarily a function of its highly problematic relations with its neighbors; while there is no shortage of tensions and conflicts that cut across the Middle East, Israel is the only state that is subject to ongoing rhetoric that negates and denies its very right to exist as a sovereign state. This creates a severe security asymmetry in the region that works to Israel's detriment, and has, for over 40 years, fueled Israel's perceived need to maintain a strategic deterrent capability as insurance against existential attack.

One could conclude that this constitutes an irresolvable zero-sum situation: one side is focused on the weapons and the other on inter-state relations. But the fact is that while Egyptian-led insistence on singling out Israel and targeting it in the nuclear realm precludes any chance of moving forward on the WMD-free zone idea, collectively working on security relations in the Middle East would have clear benefits for *all* regional parties. Moreover, if the regional atmosphere did improve, this could create the basis for beginning to move forward on a more ambitious arms control agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> See the speech of Shaul Chorev, Head of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, to the 56th IAEA General Conference in September 2012: <http://iaec.gov.il/About/SpeakerPosts/Documents/IAEA%20statement%20Sep2012.pdf> (accessed 25 May 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For information on past use by Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Libya see chronology compiled by James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) at: <http://cns.miis.edu/wmdme/chrono.htm>. On Syria, see for example: Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Michael R. Gordon, "Saying Syria Used Sarin Gas, Kerry Makes Case for Attack," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2013.

Rather than trying to force onto the regional agenda an idea (the WMD-free zone) that is not working—thereby creating false expectations that can only engender further disappointment and frustration—we propose to instead work seriously on an idea that not only would make sense for the region, but could more easily be tailored as a win-win proposition. Setting up a forum for regional security dialogue in the Middle East draws on the same underlying rationale as the WMD-free zone idea—namely the need to reduce regional tensions and lower the chance of escalation that could lead to mass destruction—but equally addresses the problematic conditions the region faces in this regard: inter-state tensions and conflicts, and the debilitating lack of trust that has been engendered by years of states systematically cheating on their international disarmament commitments.

Indeed, the Regional Security Dialogue Forum idea goes much further. The Middle East stands out in its stark lack of an inclusive regional institution where security issues can be discussed. The region sorely needs a forum for regional interaction. The discussion should focus on a comprehensive agenda, determined by the regional parties, and the NPT-sanctioned, one-dimensional WMD-free zone idea does not offer a solution. As noted, the WMD-free zone has one objective: to eliminate a category of weapons. The objective of the forum would be much broader, and it could ultimately serve as the venue for discussing a WMD-free zone, emanating from a regional process.

The idea would be to advance this idea in its own right, and on its own merits. If regional states are truly serious about reducing tensions and threats in the region, it is difficult to envision substantive—rather than political—grounds for objecting to setting up a forum for regional security dialogue. As noted, we envision two guiding principles for this forum: inclusiveness with respect to invitation to participate, and comprehensiveness with respect to the topics on the agenda.

## **Regional Security Dialogue Forum: What Would it Entail?**

### *Initiative, framework, and structure*

The initiative for setting up such a forum—which is meant to improve relations among regional states—should logically emanate from the region. However, given the state of current relations among regional states, extra regional support will be essential for setting up the forum. This should not be understood in the sense that the idea would be imposed from the outside; rather, we envision something along the lines of the Madrid multilateral track of the early 1990s: the United States took the initiative, consulted regional parties, and raised the stakes for not attending. This of course necessitates the presence of a strong party (or parties) that accords this goal high enough priority to take on this challenging role.

The forum's agenda (topics to be discussed) should be agreed upon before the first meeting, but another possibility would be to use initial meetings as a venue for discussing the agenda, structure, and format. We propose to begin discussions on agreed topics, even if not all of the essential parties are present. Any positive outcome of such a forum could serve as a benchmark for others to join in. Still, there will be a need to identify a group of states whose presence is central to the discussion, although no state should be able to prevent the forum from convening and meeting.

In envisioning such a forum, states can draw encouragement from the numerous Track II discussions that have been ongoing in various formats and locations (mainly outside the region,

but also within) since the early 1990s, with participants coming from many states, including those that we might imagine would be hesitant to send official representation. Some Track 1.5 meetings have even included officials from antagonistic states. Moving such discussions to the official level should not pose an insurmountable obstacle. Although official participation would be necessary, media coverage is certainly not, and it would be best to keep discussions out of the limelight. An additional point regarding the format of dialogue is not to insist on agreements as the final outcome of every discussion; rather, the parties should engage in drafting guiding principles for the process and for relations among participants. In looking for relevant regional models, the Asian Regional Forum could be a source of inspiration. This model is relevant because it provides an example in which unresolved political conflicts were not a precondition for establishing a framework to address security issues of mutual concern, or to agree on confidence building measures.

### ***Substance***

The agenda of such a forum should be comprehensive, with security broadly defined so as to include issues that have the potential to cause instability if not addressed regionally. The discussion should include both soft security as well as the classic hard security concerns, including the issue of WMD. Such an agenda will entail adjusting attitudes in Israel, since until now Israel has only agreed to discuss very soft confidence and security building measures and/or conventional weapons, and has only been willing to discuss WMD at a final stage. It is important to emphasize, however, that comprehensive dialogue of all security concerns—including those related to WMD—would take place in a framework that is explicitly defined as regional security dialogue.

### **Policy Recommendation to Israel: Place a Proposal on the Table**

The conference on a WMD-free zone for the Middle East that was slated to take place in Helsinki during 2012 was called off in late November, with no new date having been set. Polar positions among potential regional participants regarding the mandate, content, and agenda of such talks, exacerbated by political upheavals in some Arab states, made it impossible to push the initiative forward at this time.

There can be no doubt that a regional security dialogue, with the prospect of positive outcomes in the form of agreements that encourage regional cooperation and reduction of regional tensions, is in Israel's interest. Our recommendation to Israel is to draft a proposal—fleshing out the ideas included in this article—which it could set before the conveners of the postponed WMD-free zone conference. This could serve as the basis for the reappointment—by the conveners or whichever entity assumes the lead on setting up the proposed forum—of the Finnish facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, with a mandate for facilitating the setting up of a Regional Security Dialogue Forum, and a letter of invitation to all regional states to partake in this endeavor. Keeping Laajava in the role of facilitator in his personal capacity – not as a function of the NPT frame – makes sense because of the vast experience that he has accumulated over the past two years with all regional parties in his attempts to convene the now-defunct conference, and the measure of trust that he has inspired across the region.

# Ridding the Middle East of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Jordanian Perspective on Untapped Options

*Ayman Khalil*

This paper considers the two opposing preconditions for establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, namely “peace first” or “security first” It discusses key obstacles facing the zone and explores a number of options that could creatively address central impasses. The paper ends with a discussion of the Amman Framework, an initiative created to support the process of implementing the WMD-free zone proposal.

## Background

The creation of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East has proven to be a very complicated concept. Despite the declared willingness of all members in the region, including Israel and Iran, to establish a zone free from nuclear weapons and other WMD, the Middle East is far from achieving this objective and the zone remains unattainable thus far.

Historically, it was Iran in 1974, supported by Egypt, which first called for the creation of a nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ). The decision was reaffirmed in 1990 by former Egyptian President Mubarak who called for establishing a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, namely chemical and biological weapons. Ever since 1980, the UN General Assembly regularly adopted resolutions stressing the importance of creating a NWFZ in the Middle East. However, one of the most significant developments came in the early 1990s when the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) process was launched as part of the Madrid peace conference. A specialized multilateral dialogue process began to discuss the future and the features of a regional security regime, including the prospect for creating a WMD-free zone. ACRS was the first multilateral process of its kind in the region, publicly bringing together Arabs and Israelis face to face to discuss security arrangements.

Participants in these discussions identified two opposing views on arms control and regional security. The first was the “peace first” approach, stressing that security arrangements could be best determined “if and when” peace and normalization prevailed. The second was the “security first” approach, stressing that peace could only be achieved via security arrangements which would include defining the features of a WMD-free zone. The clashing perspectives ultimately led to the collapse of ACRS discussions.<sup>3</sup> Optimism surrounding the launch of ACRS process faded and by 1995 the process was widely considered to have collapsed, a failure that coincided with the negotiation of the resolution on the Middle East at the 1995 NPT review and extension conference, which some participants hailed as a remarkable accomplishment, while others considered it a radical concession and failure of Arab diplomacy.

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Yaffe, “An Overview of the Middle East Peace Process Working Group on Arms Control and Regional Security”, *Confidence-Building and Security Co-operation in the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East*, (Malta: University of Malta 1994); and Peter Jones, “Arms Control in the Middle East: Is It Time to Renew ACRS?” *Disarmament Forum*, no. 2 (1995), available at [www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-article.php?ref\\_article=2278](http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-article.php?ref_article=2278)

Arab intellectuals have consistently questioned the validity of the “peace first” approach. Israel enjoys two peace treaties, with Egypt and Jordan, as well as a number of bilateral understandings with other countries in the region. Yet these agreements have not contributed to building confidence, nor resulted in any tangible results for creating a WMD-free zone. Experts have also debated the “security first” approach. People were aware that resuming security talks may result in discussions taking place indefinitely and to roadmaps resulting in non-tangible outcomes.

## Obstacles Facing the Zone

Among the numerous challenges facing the creation of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, three issues are worth considering: the impracticality of nuclear deterrence in the Middle East, geographical boundaries of the proposed zone, and the scope of prohibition.

First, it should be noted that deterrence has been the driving force and key motivation behind the development and acquisition of nuclear capabilities in the region. However, this position is neither realistic nor logical. Unlike the Indian subcontinent, where nuclear weapons are designed to maintain bilateral deterrence between India and Pakistan, the Middle East is in a unique situation where Israel’s nuclear capabilities have been acquired to maintain unilateral deterrence and nuclear superiority. The evidence supporting the Israeli argument of achieving deterrence through the possession of unconventional capabilities has not been convincing.<sup>1</sup> Historical events indicate that Israel’s capabilities failed to deter attacks in 1973 (Sinai war), in 1990 (Iraqi strikes on Israel), and in 1996 (the Lebanon war and Hezbollah missile retaliation). Furthermore, the notion of deterrence in this geographically defined area seems quite unrealistic, the credibility of nuclear deterrence against modest conventional capabilities in the region seems highly questionable.

Second, regarding the boundaries of a zone, according to the IAEA and a related 1990 UN study group, the Middle East is considered to include the member states of the League of Arab States along with Iran and Israel, but excluding Turkey. Throughout the ACRS process there were views that these perimeters should be expanded to include other states. For example, during the ACRS Track-II discussions there were calls to consider the inclusion of Pakistan and some former republics of the Soviet Union to become part of the zone. Attempts at expanding the region provide a clear illustration that the Middle East is no longer defined on geographical or strategic merits, but rather on an ideological basis.

A third issue is the scope of prohibition of the zone. Attention has traditionally focused on the NWFZ idea, as this was seen as a step towards achieving a WMD-free zone. However, establishing a NWFZ as a precursor was not seen as a practical approach since it lacked comprehensiveness and meant singling out some countries. Moving from partial to comprehensive prohibition, from the general to the specific, has added to the complexity of achieving the zone, but was needed to maintain a balanced approach, taking into consideration all states in the region. Recently, the Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) created a precedent whereby delivery systems were directly linked and attached to the scope of the free zone. This, of course, is yet another complicating factor. The 2010 RevCon called for a conference, to be held in 2012, to discuss these issues and others related to establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. The organizers planned to hold the conference in Helsinki

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein “Deterrence: The elusive dependent variable” *World Politics* 42, no. 3 (1990): 336-69

but cancelled the meeting at the minute. Efforts to hold a conference in Helsinki are continuing.

## Untapped Options

The Helsinki conference is in great need of “non-conventional” proposals, creative reasoning and out-of-the-box thinking. Take, for example, the debate about the necessity of all states to join treaties prohibiting WMD and the need for Israel to become a member of the NPT before creating the zone. On the one hand, an argument is made that the commitment of all zone members to the NPT is a legal precondition for the creation of the zone. Thus, Israel’s failure to accede to the Treaty represents a barrier in the quest of creating the zone and weakens its chances. On the other hand, the same principle would entail the commitment of all regional states to all relevant arms control treaties that treat other weapons of mass destruction (chemical and biological) as well as their delivery systems. Careful consideration of international models and treaties reveals that this is a condition that is neither mandatory nor necessary. Hence, NPT membership or accession to other relevant arms control treaties should not be a precondition for countries wishing to establish or join the zone.

Should peace and normalization come first or should we start with the zone? Between the “peace first” and the “security first” approaches, there exists a third option, namely, dealing with a WMD-free zone as a stand-alone concept. By doing so, there is no need to link the zone issue to security agreements or to the fate of a peace process. The creation of a NWFZ in Latin America provides a very useful example that the prohibition of nuclear weapons may be used as an effective tool preceding the resolution of conflicts and as an incentive to settling pending territorial disputes. With the absence of a dynamic peace process and with a lingering Arab-Israeli conflict, confidence and security building measures are needed.

A number of intermediate measures could be introduced on the bilateral or multilateral level. Practical steps include the development of regional cooperation schemes that consider conducting joint inspection visits to nuclear sites; the introduction of non-intrusive monitoring activities and information sharing; cooperation on strengthening nuclear and radiological security measures as well as in developing peaceful uses of nuclear energy; and the promotion of ideas similar to “Security without Nuclear Weapons” or “Non-Offensive Defense,” which would prove to be beneficial to the Middle Eastern context. The application of confidence-building measures based on technical cooperation would positively affect the regional situation and ease current tensions. Overall, these measures would significantly lower the psychological barriers and help resolve outstanding issues.

## The Amman Framework

An important mechanism dedicated to supporting the Helsinki process and its facilitator is the Amman Framework, which was established by the Arab Institute of Security Studies and sponsored by the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. One of its first achievements was the creation of an independent international commission that aims to support the outcomes of the 2010 NPT RevCon, including the key decision to hold a conference on the Middle East WMD-free zone. An essential objective is the provision of full backing and assistance to Finnish Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, the appointed facilitator of the conference, before, during, and following the meeting in Helsinki.

To invigorate the process, the Amman Framework has initiated the “State of the Resolution,” a mechanism for reviewing and monitoring the status of the 1995 NPT Review Conference resolution on the Middle East and the subsequent outcomes of the 2010 NPT RevCon. The “State of the Resolution” engages regional parties, UN representatives, co-sponsors of the 1995 NPT Middle East resolution, as well as civil society representatives. Progress toward a WMD-free zone is a collective process. It benefits from positive contributions and inputs from all stakeholders, including non-governmental and academic sectors. The Amman Framework members share the deep belief that a bottom-up approach is needed to trigger greater progress towards establishing the zone. In this regard, governments should be encouraged to rely not only on their own expertise and capacities, but also to seek and consider contributions and ideas from civil society, academia, and non-governmental organizations. The primary intention should be aiming for a coordinated and complementary approach toward achieving the mutual goal, rather than replicating or competing with one another.

Recent political turmoil in the Middle East must not alter or delay the course of action. Political changes experienced within regional political structures are likely to raise expectations that newly emerging leaderships make progress on this issue. The Amman Framework underlines that the Helsinki conference is not intended to target a specific country, nor to create political embarrassment. The goals outlined in the 2010 NPT Review Conference are undeniably in the mutual and common interest of all parties concerned. The Helsinki process is a platform that should be properly invested in – it is an opportunity for facilitating constructive dialogue among states of the region. Detaching or distancing from this process will have negative implications for all.