



Regional Nuclear Nonproliferation Efforts in the Middle East: Lessons Learned and Educational Prospects

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The Middle East, most frequently defined as all the Arab states, Israel, and Iran, is tragically a region with a tumultuous and often violent past. Consequently it is not an area that has been active in regional peace resolution efforts, which would logically be the foundation for regional arms control and disarmament measures. In the same vein, in the absence of regional cooperative measures in the arms control and disarmament field it is not coincidental that very little effort in the region exists with respect to education in the public domain relating to arms control and regional disarmament.

Ironically, while very little exists by way of formal educational or regional cooperation in the disarmament area, each “lull” in the frequent regional conflicts brought with it practical security measures that would fall under the general rubric of arms limitations or arms control but not disarmament. Those were the security arrangements— including limitations on force deployment and weapons systems—that came with the different ceasefire or peace agreements between states in the region.

Within the Arab-Israeli conflict alone, the 1948 and 1956 conflicts saw the genesis of the first UN peacekeeping forces in the Middle East between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the most well known being the UN Truce Supervision Observers (UNTSO). A later permutation of UNTSO was the US-led multinational force that was established, outside the United Nations, to supervise the Egypt-Israel peace agreement of 1979, including not only restrictions on force deployments but also on the kinds of weapons that could be deployed at different points on both sides of the Egyptian-Israeli border.

Several attempts have been made over the years to regionally restrict the presence of certain weapon systems. However, most of these proposals were submitted or announced in the context of international fora. In 1974, Egypt and Iran called for the creation of a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. And later, in 1991, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt proposed creating a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. In the early 1990s, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush proposed a prohibition of fissile material for weapons purposes in the Middle East. None of these proposals have been realized, however, because of the countervailing political environment in the Middle East.

The first concrete and official attempt to deal with arms control and disarmament in the regional context came in conjunction with the Madrid Middle East peace process multilateral track within the context of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group. While the ACRS process was not a successful one and broke down completely in 1995, a number of important lessons can be drawn from that exercise, lessons that can be extrapolated to almost any region in the world.

The first lesson is related to the perception of the other, and how that affects one party's dealing with those on the opposite side. In other words, does each side portray the other similarly? Do they regard each other as potential enemies, or not? If one state thinks so while the other does not, then the negotiations process would start on the wrong foot—as ACRS did—and it would be difficult for the process to result in a successful outcome. One of the main deficiencies with the ACRS process was that while Israel continued to envision existential threats and worst-case scenarios, Arab countries did not see the same threat perception. As a result, no agreements were reached, because each party had a different view of the other. When considering the NATO/Warsaw Pact rivalry and then rapprochement, both camps regarded one another as enemies. But a deal was reached because the two sides shared a similar vision of the other. Defining the other party is therefore important to reach a tangible outcome in this regard.

The second lesson is that while one can always identify a lowest common denominator in

confidence-building measures, such measures will be capped very differently depending on whether or not a state is at peace with all its neighbors. In fact, if there is not full symmetry between states, you may get different “caps” for different border situations, e.g., the level of peace between Egypt and Israel at one level, Israel and Jordan at a second level, Israel and Palestine at a third level, Israel and Syria on a fourth level, in addition to Israel’s relations with the rest of the Arab world. It was very difficult for ACRS to maintain a sustained series of step-by-step approaches, particularly in the context of different perceptions, where Israel’s security perceptions were based on a situation of enmity with at least some of its neighbors, while Egypt’s perceptions were based on a vision of a state at peace with all its neighbors. This drove Egypt toward seeking a discussion of strategic issues, which didn’t make sense for others at the time, while Israel was looking at lowest common denominators (search and rescue, for example) that were not ambitious enough for Egypt. The lesson to be drawn here is that the paradigms of the parties cannot be incompatible. Progress cannot be achieved if one party has a siege mentality while other states are looking at security arrangements between states at peace with each other.

For many of the participating parties, including Egypt, the foundation of the ACRS process was based on the assumption that the achievement of regional peace and security was integrally linked to the success of a viable arms control process, which in turn was to be achieved by addressing—through dialogue—the security concerns of all regional parties. However, Israel had a different vision. It came into the process first as a steadfast proponent of conflict resolution, and then of disarmament, arguing that any meaningful arms control process in the Middle East could only begin after the successful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

History has consistently disproved the argument that arms control must be placed on hold pending the resolution of geopolitical conflicts. For example, superpower rivalry during the height of the Cold War did not preclude the negotiation of the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) I, SALT II, or the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and it also did not block the beginning of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) process. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process was initiated despite the division of Europe. Regional conflicts in Africa, South America, the South Pacific, and Southeast Asia did not prevent the negotiation of the Pelindaba Treaty, the Treaty of Tlatelolco, the Treaty of Raratonga, or the

Treaty of Bangkok, each of which established a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the corresponding region. The third lesson to be drawn from the ACRS process, then, is that for progress to be achievable the different parties have to have the same, or at least compatible, views of the sequence of regional arms control or disarmament measures.

To move regional arms control negotiations forward in the Middle East requires clearly identifying our objectives for and priorities in the process, making political commitments that reflect an explicit pledge toward the fulfillment of these objectives, and finally developing a program of action of concrete security and arms limitation measures.

For the Middle East, the objectives for the process should include: increased security for the regional nations while maintaining lower levels of armaments; a qualitative and quantitative balance between the military capabilities of all the states in the region; and the conclusion of agreements on arms reduction and disarmament that may be applied to all regional states and complemented by effective monitoring achieved to a large degree by military transparency in all weapons systems.

In the meantime, political confidence-building measures of a general declaratory nature—adopted at an early stage of regional arms control talks—should include, but not be limited to: the declaration of the Middle East as a region free of weapons of mass destruction by major arms-producing states (in particular the “permanent five” states of the UN Security Council and the Middle East regional players), ensuring the adherence to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) by its member states; a declared commitment to end the production or acquisition of any nuclear explosive devices or military-related materials; the acceptance of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards regime whereby all nuclear facilities are subject to international inspection; and a declared commitment to actively and fairly address measures relating to all forms of WMD delivery systems.

In addition, consideration should be given to assigning an organ of the United Nations (or possibly another international organization) a role in the verification of those nations’ compliance with agreements on arms reduction and disarmament, providing the ideal threshold upon which to develop an action program for the Middle East’s denuclearization as a

basis for regional security and further substantive arms limitation agreements. This would likely stipulate, for example, that:

- states in the region that have not done so should submit all their nuclear facilities to the IAEA safeguards system and conclude a full-scope safeguards agreement with the IAEA;
- states in the region that have not yet joined the NPT must become a party to the treaty and conclude the relevant safeguards agreement; and
- exporting states outside the region should make full-scope safeguards a condition for the supply of nuclear materials. In this regard, safeguards commitments should be fully implemented.

The ongoing shifts in the security paradigm in the region require immediate action and a clear vision for the future. In the absence of a serious arms control process in the region, the possibility of a regional arms race becomes more imminent, with grave consequences for Middle East, and global, security. The lessons drawn from the ACRS process were difficult but important; the lessons will help if the region ever again entertains regional security and disarmament talks.

Ironically, in spite of (or maybe because of) the recurrent military conflicts in the region, there is no formal education in regional security and disarmament—at least not in the Arab world. In fact, even conflict resolution is not really the subject of much academic education; this is definitely true with respect to undergraduate university education. And I am confident that no structured or formal education in this area exists at the high school level.

Where disarmament experience and education occurs in the Middle East, it is by and for practitioners in the fields of security, defense, and foreign service—those who have faced or expect to deal with disarmament issue regionally or internationally. As part of the ACRS process, seminars were held on verification techniques, and these were insightful and educational. However, I remain rather skeptical about attempting to teach arms control or disarmament at the teenage level in the Middle East; attempting to engage university students on the subject is, I believe, a more tenable idea. The Middle East would gain much by providing university students with such opportunities. An equally important and valuable idea is to create think

tanks and research centers in the Arab world that focus on arms control and disarmament; at the present time, they simply do not exist in the Arab Middle East.