

## Starting over: the prospects for regional security and arms control in the Middle East in the next decade

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The development of significant regional security and arms control frameworks in the Middle East is a particularly complex and daunting task. The multipolar nature of this region, with many competing centres of power, and the number of cross-cutting, mutually reinforcing and deeply seated ethno-national and religious conflicts, have plagued the Middle East for decades. Instability was often the general rule, rather than the exception, and violent warfare and terrorism were and remain all too common. In addition to the vast armies and arsenals of weapons, this region is plagued by the presence of huge numbers of landmines and by a flood of small arms that continue to circulate, with tragic consequences that do not halt at international borders. Military spending is also disproportionately high, even among countries that do not face a significant external threat, and major weapons acquisitions divert resources from urgently needed economic development.

At the beginning of the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, the prospects for developing a foundation for regional security, and for preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles in the Middle East, appeared to be enhanced. This optimism led to major investments in time and resources designed to promote the development of regional security and arms control frameworks. However, the stagnant political relationships in the region, the difficulties associated with major structural asymmetries, the failure to construct a foundation for co-operation based on confidence-building measures, and the increasing threat posed by WMD in Iraq, as well as other countries in the region, combined to produce meagre results. If this outcome is to change when the next window of opportunity opens, the lessons from the first round must be understood.

### *The initial basis for optimism*

In the wake of the ceasefire agreement that ended the 1991 Gulf War, a high degree of optimism emerged with respect to reducing instability through regional security co-operation. The terms of the ceasefire, as embodied in United Nations Security Council resolution 687, included the verified destruction of Iraqi WMD, related technologies and facilities, delivery systems (ballistic missiles), and the creation of a long-term monitoring system to insure that Iraq stayed 'WMD- and missile-free'. The United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) — an extraordinary institution with unprecedented powers to undertake highly intrusive on-site inspections — was created to implement the terms of resolution 687. Although UNSCOM's work began more slowly than anticipated, and encountered Iraq's consistent resistance, it seemed that within a few months all of the suspected facilities would be identified, and any remaining weapons would be destroyed.

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At the same time, the convening of the Madrid Middle East peace conference (itself a consequence of the conditions that developed after the Gulf War) and the creation of the multilateral working group on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) seemed to mark a major step forward. For the first time, many of the key states in the region, including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, agreed to meet and discuss regional security and arms control issues and possible measures. This forum provided the basis for developing and implementing the type of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) that are always necessary for the transformation of conflictual zero-sum relationships into co-operative positive sum frameworks.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, in contrast to the global arms limitation regimes, which address each type of weapon and technology independently (nuclear, chemical, biological and missiles) and generally do not incorporate conventional military forces, the ACRS process seemed to provide an integrated framework in which the interrelationships between the various threats and military capabilities could be considered. Even in the case of Egypt and Israel, which signed a peace treaty in 1979, the extent of CSBMs has been very limited, while the need for such measures is increasingly acute. The ACRS structure provided the basis for such CSBMs as the ground floor of a wider regional security and conflict transformation process. On this basis, a number of other states, led primarily by the United States, participated as facilitators, shepherds and hosts for various inter-sessional activities.

In Israel, the new environment and the accompanying activity led to fundamental changes in policy and also in the decision-making process with respect to security and arms control. Prior to 1991, the Israeli defence and security establishment kept away from global arms control initiatives and regimes, viewing them as unreliable and contrary to vital Israeli national interests. In this context, Israel kept a low profile in the discussions of the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, and did not participate in the activities of the Conference on Disarmament, including the negotiation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). From Jerusalem, many international institutions were viewed as politically biased and not always reliable. (For example, in the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA, Israel was, and still is, excluded from participation in the regional groupings, the Board of Governors and other institutions.) These assessments were reflected in the low priority and minimal resources assigned to arms control issues in the Foreign and Defense Ministries.

In conjunction with the global recognition of the need to strengthen verification procedures and systems following the discovery of Iraq's violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the beginning of the ACRS meetings, Israeli regional security and arms control went through a fundamental review. At the highest levels, the government began to consider and debate different approaches to these issues. Officials continued to believe that effective arms control in the Middle East required regional frameworks, with mutual verification among all the parties. At the same time, they began to consider the benefits of participation in some global regimes.

The policy was presented in January 1993, when Foreign Minister Shimon Peres signed the CWC, and presented a broad Israeli programme for advancing arms control in the region.<sup>2</sup> In the Foreign Ministry, the arms control office was expanded and given a high profile in decision-making. A similar position was created in the Ministry of Defense. Israeli representatives began to attend the Conference on Disarmament as observers (and in 1996 as full members), and played a central role in the negotiation of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, which Israel signed in 1996. The Israeli government became an adherent to the Missile Technology Control Regime guidelines, participates in the UN Register of Conventional Arms, ratified the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, and halted the export of anti-personnel mines.<sup>3</sup> This activity reflected the view that regional security mechanisms would become increasingly important for Israel, allowing for the gradual replacement of exclusive reliance on unilateral security measures.

## What went wrong?

Events proved this optimism to be premature and, at the end of the 1990s, the potential for regional agreements and limitations in the Middle East seemed very small, at least in the immediate future. A combination of factors explain this disappointing outcome, including: 1) the failure to create the political and security environment that would allow for the development of co-operative security; 2) asymmetry and the limits of universality; 3) the absence of confidence-building measures; 4) the inconsistent implementation of the terms and undertakings with respect to disarming Iraq; and 5) the continued flow of WMD and missile technology in the region, thereby heightening threat perceptions. Each one of these deficiencies, in itself, was very costly to the process, and the combination proved fatal to this round of the regional security development efforts.

### THE NEED FOR A CONDUCTIVE POLITICAL AND SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

While the 1990s began with a number of developments that pointed to the reshaping of the political environment in the Middle East, this optimism gradually dissipated. At the beginning of this process, Egypt was the only Arab state that had concluded a peace treaty with Israel. Many other states to varying degrees still supported violence, in the form of terrorism, against Israel and continued the policy, established in 1948, that rejected Israeli legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the darkest days of the Cold War, in which the United States and the Soviet Union exchanged ambassadors and their leaders communicated directly, these conditions were and continue to be the exception, rather than the rule, in the Middle East. In some capitals, denunciations of ‘the Zionist entity’ and support for the most violent acts of terrorism are repeated officially on a daily basis.

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Despite the initial hopes, including the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (the ‘Oslo Agreement’), efforts to negotiate a ‘permanent status agreement’ floundered.<sup>5</sup> Syrian-Israeli negotiations did not produce tangible and lasting results, and the conflict in various venues, including Lebanon, continues. The only enduring breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict zone after 1993 was achieved in the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty of 1994.

As the fortunes of the various negotiating tracks rose and fell, these changes had a direct impact on the efforts to develop regional security systems and promote arms control in the Middle East. The limited progress in the ACRS process was frozen in 1994–1995, and has not yet been revived. This lengthy pause was directly related to overarching political conditions and the fragile state of the Middle East negotiation process and Israeli-Egyptian relations. In turn, as ACRS and the multilateral workshops lost momentum, and differences sharpened regarding the Egyptian government’s insistence on focusing narrowly on the nuclear issue — these differences magnified the difficulties encountered in the bilateral tracks of the Middle East peace efforts.<sup>6</sup>

### ASYMMETRY AND THE LIMITS OF UNIVERSALITY

In any region, efforts to develop a co-operative security framework must confront and overcome basic structural asymmetries in geography, demography, resources and political systems. Such

asymmetries played a major role in the shaping of the regional security system in Europe, including the conventional force reduction agreements.

In the Middle East, and particularly with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict zone, asymmetries in each of these dimensions are of major importance. In terms of both geography and demography, Israel is a very small state, with no strategic depth in which to absorb a first strike, whether based on conventional forces or using missiles and WMD. The 'rough neighbourhood' of the Middle East and the extreme violence and warfare compound the impact of these asymmetries.

Under these conditions of acute asymmetry, universal implementation of arms limitation agreements is very difficult to achieve. From the Israeli perspective, these factors, multiplied by the existential threats from various states in the region, have created an environment that is not comparable to that of Europe, North or South America, and other parts of the world.

Before the principles and norms that were developed in other contexts can be applied to the Arab-Israeli conflict zone, it is necessary to establish the fundamental conditions of mutual acceptance, diplomatic recognition, and an end to threats to national survival. Once such conditions are established, Israeli leaders have indicated that they will be prepared to enter into a regional zone free of WMD. Until that stage is reached, the asymmetries will require Israel to maintain a policy based on deterrence in response to existential threats.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE FAILURE TO CONSTRUCT A FOUNDATION BASED ON CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES

In high-conflict environments, it is necessary to lay the foundation for regional security and the gradual transition from 'zero-sum' (in which one state's limitations are seen as another's opportunity to gain advantage) to co-operative non-zero-sum conceptions (in which co-operation and mutual self-restraint are understood to serve shared interests in stability and survival). In this process, the development and implementation of a wide range of confidence-building measures play important roles. Although the circumstances were very different, this broad pattern was followed in Europe during the transition at the end of the Cold War, and in American-Soviet relations prior to the negotiation of the first and relatively narrow arms limitation agreements. In the American-Soviet case, a series of CSBMs, including the installation of a direct communications system (the 'hot line') and agreements to prevent incidents at sea helped to pave the way for more ambitious agreements.

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In the case of the Arab-Israeli regional security framework, the absence of significant CSBMs turned out to be a major flaw and cause of failure. The impressive list of CSBMs that were discussed and developed in the beginning of this process was gradually eroded. Egyptian officials viewed CSBMs involving Israel as rewards for 'good behaviour' rather than an essential element in the transformation from conflict to co-operation. The opposition to CSBM activities and functional co-operation reinforced the political barriers to peace-building, and suggested to Israelis that even with formal peace treaties, the transition to co-operative relations and mutual acceptance would occur very slowly, if at all.<sup>8</sup>

While the formal activities, including a number of small-scale CSBMs, were abandoned, an impressive number of informal 'Track Two' meetings continued.<sup>9</sup> Some of these discussions provided important insights, particularly when a comparative perspective was presented, based on the regional security experiences in other conflict-intensive regions. However, in many other cases, the participants often seemed to go over the same ground, without measurable progress or the ability to translate some substantive discussions into the decision-making realm.

The ACRS efforts were also hampered by the absence of key actors. Syria, Lebanon and Iran boycotted the multilateral workshop meetings and activities for political and ideological reasons, and Iraq and Libya were not invited. Without these states, consideration of regional measures to restrict WMD and long-range ballistic missiles remained inherently limited. A number of CSBMs and regional security measures could have been implemented without the full participation of all states, particularly in areas such as co-operative search and rescue exercises,<sup>10</sup> measures to prevent mutual fear of surprise attack, crisis prevention and communication centres, and landmine clearance. However, in most cases, the political factors cited above blocked these efforts.

Instead of contributing to the development of the foundation for regional security through support for CSBMs, a number of states, led by Egypt, sought to focus all the attention on Israel's nuclear deterrence policy.<sup>11</sup> The pattern that characterized the regional interaction was repeated with regularity in various other arms control frameworks, both formal and informal. This confrontation takes place in the annual United Nations General Assembly debates, the discussions and resolutions of the First Committee, PrepComs and review conferences for the NPT, meetings of the IAEA, activities and discussions related to the CWC, etc. From the Israeli perspective, the Egyptian government's statements and resolutions are one-sided, distort the proliferation threat in the Middle East, and are counterproductive.

#### THE IRAQI WMD LEGACY AND THE EROSION OF CREDIBILITY

The slow realization that Iraq had violated the provisions of the NPT, and had eluded IAEA safeguards for a number of years, was a major blow to the integrity and viability of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The creation of UNSCOM provided an opportunity to repair some of this damage, and restore credibility to the regime, while at the same time destroying Iraqi chemical, biological and nuclear weapons capabilities and related facilities, as well as ballistic missiles and launchers.

However, the UNSCOM experience demonstrated that even with the most intrusive inspection and verification systems in the history of arms control, closed states and totalitarian regimes are capable of concealing weapons and facilities for many years. In Iraq, UNSCOM's inspections reached a dead end in 1998, and the sanctions regime has eroded, allowing Iraq to resume WMD development and deployment. Repeated reports to the UN Secretary-General and the Security Council from UNSCOM and the IAEA document both Iraqi non-compliance and the extensive deception mechanism.<sup>12</sup> The creation of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) under Security Council resolution 1284 (December 1999) has not altered this situation. As noted in the final statement of the 2000 NPT Review Conference, and in many other sources, Iraq remains 'non-compliant' with respect to the terms of resolution 687.

These developments contributed to the erosion of the foundation for Middle Eastern arms control, and served to underline the concerns of Israel and other states regarding the implementation of global arms limitation treaties, regimes and technology export control policies in the region.

#### ACCELERATED PROLIFERATION OF WMD AND MISSILE TECHNOLOGY

In the past decade, a number of factors have combined to accelerate the rate of proliferation of WMD and ballistic missiles in many countries in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the threat perceptions, military/political objectives, and other factors that drive different states to

seek these types of capabilities, the failure to end the Iraq threat contributed to efforts to acquire comparable systems. The nuclear weapons tests conducted by India and Pakistan in 1998, and their *de facto* status as nuclear powers, also highlighted the perceived importance of this status for many states in the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

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At the same time, there is growing evidence that participation in the network of global arms limitations regimes is not a sufficiently strong barrier against proliferation, as was demonstrated in the case of Iraq and the NPT. In some cases, there is a concern that states that are active members of such limitation regimes can use their access to information in order to promote their proliferation objectives, particularly when verification mechanisms and responses to violations are insufficient.

Similarly, despite their considerable accomplishments, the various supplier control regimes designed to control the export of WMD and missile technologies (including dual-use systems, in which technologies with civil and commercial applications can be used to develop and produce weapons) have not succeeded in halting proliferation in the Middle East.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of all of these factors, both structural and substantive, efforts to adopt the processes used to develop regional security frameworks and mechanisms in Europe at the end of the Cold War era have not produced results in the Middle East. Similarly, it is clear that the global ('universal') models and principles often require significant modification in order to fit the complex security environment of this region.

### *Breaking the impasse*

When the political and military conditions in the region change enough to allow for the resumption of the diplomatic process, regional and co-operative security frameworks will again be on the agenda. In order to make progress, it will be necessary to avoid repeating the mistakes of the previous round.

Based on the experience and lessons of the 1990s, this will require:

- A major investment of political resources towards the transformation of political and cultural perceptions, and the development of relations based on mutual recognition and acceptance;
- Acknowledgement of fundamental asymmetries, their consequences in terms of national security requirements, and the role of mutual verification mechanisms;
- Step-by-step development beginning with CSBMs, and including co-operation on issues such as small arms, landmines and conventional weapons;
- Consistent, responsible and effective action by the international community to insure that signatories honour their commitments with respect to treaties such as the NPT, CWC and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention; and
- Effective control over the export of technologies and expertise used in the proliferation of WMD and missile capabilities in the region.

As noted above, the informal 'Track Two' meetings continue to play an important role, but their scope needs to be expanded. Discussions on means to increase co-operation in the area of landmine

education, removal and victim rehabilitation would have an immediate and important impact on human security in the region, and would help to create the foundation for further development of a broad-based regional security structure. With increasing international focus on the human costs of illicit traffic in small arms, and the particular importance of co-operation to prevent the flow of small arms in the Middle East, this is another area that should receive attention in the context of regional discussions at different levels.

In a broader sense, any effective regional security and arms control framework must be based on a transition from a zero-sum perception to a positive sum approach. This transformation requires an understanding of the interdependent nature of security, and the process by which decisions by states to acquire new weapons or change deployments trigger responses that increase instability and harm the interests of the initiator of this process. For example, new missiles in one state are often matched by similar acquisitions by others, and/or deployment of missile defence systems. In this case, the overall impact of the 'security dilemma' is to increase crisis instability and mutual fears of a first strike.<sup>15</sup>

During the Cold War, 'worst case' analyses and an overarching security dilemma contributed to the instability demonstrated during the Cuban missile crisis and on other occasions. A series of strategic discussions focusing on the dangerous instabilities of ballistic missile defences and growing arsenals of highly accurate ballistic missiles (useful for first strike scenarios) paved the way for the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. While these treaties, and a number of CSBMs, did not end the Cold War or change the political relationships, they were successful in increasing stability and serving the vital security interests of both superpowers.

In regional deterrence situations, whether in South Asia or the Middle East, the analytic framework presented by the security dilemma model is also useful. By examining the opposing positions through this framework, and addressing each country's major threat perceptions explicitly, it may be possible to discuss the conflicting views in depth, and to define arms limitation policies that minimize the common risks of accidental war, and maximize mutual interests. Indeed, this was the initial concept behind the ACRS framework, but was not maintained in later stages.

Substantively for this process to succeed, the key regional states — Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria — must be actively involved and must view mutual limitations as realistic means for enhancing national security and regional stability. Progress will depend on whether the political and military leaders in these countries perceive unilateral policies, including restrained acquisitions and deployments of advanced weapons, as ultimately dangerous to national security interests, and even, in some cases, regime survival. Fundamental changes in the perceptions of these leaders will be required before substantive agreements on regional security are likely.

Although general discussions have been conducted, the parameters are still being debated, and security negotiations in the Middle East have not really begun yet. To move to the next stage, including regional arms control measures, significant improvement in the political and security climate are necessary, involving Israel, the Palestinians, Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. Continued terrorism and warfare are not conducive to confidence-building or security co-operation. In addition, to go beyond CSBMs and agreed limitations encompassing short-range conventional weapons, Iran, Iraq and Libya must also decide to join and contribute to this process, for the same reasons. This will take a long time and require fundamental political changes that are not even on the horizon.

Until these conditions develop, efforts to force the pace and skip stages are likely to be counterproductive. Without first building the infrastructure to support a credible regional security framework, and creating a foundation of stability and security, states facing major threats, including Israel, will not be willing to dismantle their basic defence and deterrence structures. Pressures to force premature disarmament, in the absence of reliable alternative security structures, will be seen

as efforts to gain unilateral advantage in a zero-sum context, rather than part of a broader approach towards co-operative security and stability. The road to regional security must be travelled one careful step at a time.

## Notes

- 1 Many articles and books have been published on conflict transformation and the role of CSBMs. See, for example, Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York, Basic Books, 1984; James Macintosh, 'Confidence Building Measures in Europe: 1975 to the Present', *Encyclopedia of Arms Control and Disarmament*, Richard Dean Burns, ed., New York, Charles Scribners' Sons, 1993; *Asia Pacific Confidence and Security Building Measures*, Ralph A. Cossa, ed., Washington, DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1995.
- 2 Address by the Foreign Minister of Israel, Mr. Shimon Peres, at the Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention Treaty, Paris, 13 January 1993, Jerusalem, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 3 Statement by Jeremy Issacharoff, Representative of Israel to the 55<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly First Committee, 'The Challenge of Peace, and the Threat of War', 13 October 2000.
- 4 Many radical Arab and Islamic groups still call for the destruction of the Jewish state, and even 'moderates' portray acceptance of Israel as a temporary and reluctant recognition of strategic reality, while rejecting the legitimacy of the Jewish state. They continue to refer to Israel as an 'infringement of Arab territory and rights', thus suggesting that in the absence of Israeli military capabilities, these 'rights' could be reclaimed. Abdulhay Sayed, 'The Future of the Israeli Nuclear Force and the Middle East Peace Process', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 28 (March 1997), pp. 31–48.
- 5 Extensive official Israeli and Palestinian perspectives on the origins of this violence can be found in the presentations to the Fact-Finding Committee established at the Sharm-El Sheik Summit (the Mitchell Committee) at <<http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0jcb0>> and <[http://www.pna.net/peace/preliminary\\_submission.htm](http://www.pna.net/peace/preliminary_submission.htm)>.
- 6 Gerald M. Steinberg, 'The 1995 NPT Extension and Review Conference and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process', *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, Fall 1996.
- 7 This ambiguity was designed, in large part, to limit friction with the United States. See Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998. For a discussion of the development of Israeli deterrence doctrine, see Yair Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma*, London, Routledge, 1994.
- 8 For an analysis of ACRS and the role of national status and identity factors in Egyptian policy making, see Bruce W. Jentleson and Dalia Dass Kaye, 'Explaining Regional Security Cooperation and Its Limits in the Middle East', *Security Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1998), pp. 204–38.
- 9 Michael D. Yaffe, 'Promoting Arms Control and Regional Security in the Middle East', in this volume of *Disarmament Forum*.
- 10 A number of cooperative search and rescue exercises in the Mediterranean have been held, with participation based on 'a coalition of the willing'.
- 11 See the contribution ('Special Comment') by Ambassador Nabil Fahmy in this volume of *Disarmament Forum*.
- 12 United Nations Security Council, S/Res/1205 of 5 November 1998, *Condemnation of Iraq's decision to halt monitoring*, <<http://www.un.org/Depts/unscom/Keyresolutions/sres98-1205.htm>>; S/1998/995 of 26 October 1998, *Report of the Group of International Experts on VX*, <<http://www.un.org/Depts/unscom/s98-995.htm>>; and similar reports and documents.
- 13 Mohamed Kadry Said, 'Missile Proliferation in the Middle East: a Regional Perspective' in this volume of *Disarmament Forum*.
- 14 Gerald M. Steinberg, *Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Developments in the Middle East: 1998–99*, Security and Policy Studies # 44, BESA Center For Strategic Studies, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Sept. 2000, <[http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~steing/conflict/1999\\_Middle\\_East\\_Report.htm](http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~steing/conflict/1999_Middle_East_Report.htm)>; Statement by A. Norman Schindler, Deputy Director, DCI Nonproliferation Center to the International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services Subcommittee of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, on 'Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs', 21 September 2000, <[http://www.cia.gov/cia/public\\_affairs/speeches/schindler\\_WMD\\_092200.htm](http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/schindler_WMD_092200.htm)>.
- 15 Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1978.