

A “WMD-FREE” MIDDLE EAST

IS A DISARMED ISRAEL EVEN DESIRABLE FOR THE REGION?



While the preparations for next year's UN conference on a Middle East Nuclear & WMD Free Zone are underway, commentators are already expressing pessimism as to the possibility of such a zone being established. Even those supporting the conference expect no easy gains, and see it as the start of a long and arduous process. This pessimism is unfortunately well founded: the historical record for broad regional co-operation on security is rather bleak and in spite of relatively high levels of economic development, the region has seen several bloody wars. One important argument in favour of a WMD free zone is that these conflicts then would not be capable of escalating into even more disastrous nuclear war.

At the centre of Middle Eastern conflicts is that between Palestine and Israel, which feeds into all the others in various ways. The treatment of ordinary Palestinians, the regular assassinations of their leaders and continuing construction of illegal settlements provoke popular resentment throughout the region and the world as a whole. These sentiments are dealt with, and used, by regional powers in various ways. Iran supports and funds Hamas and Hezbollah, while Turkey wins 'hearts and minds' by championing the

Palestinian cause and standing up against Israel, notably through the recent Gaza-convoys. As the decline of secular Arab nationalism centred on the individual states continues and the pan-Islam movement grows, these connections will grow stronger rather than weaker.

While Israel has no moral grounds to deny democratic regimes in Egypt, Libya and beyond, it does have legitimate security interests that may appear to be at stake. Israel has been at war with several of its Arab neighbours in the past, and remains immensely unpopular with the region's populations. Taken together, Egypt, Jordan and Syria have more than 900.000 troops, compared to Israel's 176.000. Granted that the US is ensuring Israel's "Qualitative Military Edge" over its neighbours by the nature of its arms deals, this is still a potentially overwhelming imbalance of power, presently moderated by Israel's monopoly on nuclear weapons. What then would be the likely consequences if Israel were to abolish their WMDs?

It is certainly not a given that this disarmament, and populist democratic regimes in the region, would precipitate an invasion or even a limited incursion into Israel or Palestine, but this is nevertheless an eventuality Israeli policy-makers would



do their utmost to prevent. Considering Israel's increasingly strained relationship with the US, it is unlikely that they could obtain more favourable arms deals than those they already have, so they would be obliged to increase their conventional forces, reversing the current trend to reduce the defence budget.

However, as Israel is already one of the most militarized countries in the world (10 per cent of the population are either on active duty or in the reserves, and they spend more than 6 per cent of GDP on their armed forces) there is a limit to how much they can rearm conventionally without doing harm to its economy. Even with a military build-up, Israel's military position would be severely weakened. To have a chance of winning, or even surviving, they may be forced to strike pre-emptively in the case of a crisis – like in the 6-day war.

Leaving potential risks aside, it is important to consider what exactly is the purpose of a WMD-free zone. The issue of nuclear weapons is *not* the cause of the region's conflicts; neither are they serious obstacles to resolving *the underlying sources* of the conflicts. They are merely symptoms that have gotten a too prominent place in the discourse. The doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction was not the cause of the Cold War; rather it was the symptom of a great mistrust between two different cultural, political and economic systems that both claimed the virtue of universality.

The "great power" rivalry between Iran and the US is similar in some ways to the rivalry between the US and the USSR, with the obvious great difference in balance of power, which Tehran may have an interest in adjusting by acquiring WMDs. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is that of land ownership. Israel's possession of WMDs has no direct bearing on this conflict, as it could not use them on Palestinian targets without killing as many of its own citizens. Israel's WMDs has a regional effect, deterring its neighbours from trying to solve the conflict over the land by violent means – which they have attempted to do in the past several times.

Is it really realistic to ask a strong, but still militarily vulnerable and isolated state to renounce its possession of nuclear weapons when the central conflict in question remains unresolved, and thus the security of the state is not yet fully consolidated? This is a question that applies not only to Israel, but also to Iran (*if* they are indeed aiming to produce WMDs).

A WMD free zone will only be a reality when key stakeholders find that these weapons are superfluous in providing security. Basically, Israel and Iran need to feel safe in the long term. This can only happen if *the underlying conflicts are solved*. Talking of a Middle East free from WMDs is starting at the wrong end.

However, it is still of great importance to recognize the importance to preventing nuclear proliferation and to roll back the deployment of WMDs globally. The main point in support of next year's conference is the same as for non-proliferation or abolition generally: WMDs are inherently indiscriminate in causing destruction, they leave deadly radiation for many years and they may have global climatic consequences. The more there are of them, the likelier it is that some will malfunction or fall into the wrong hands.

Nevertheless, establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, however morally desirable, would not stop militants from acquiring weapons from other sources, and it would do little to compel the current *nine* WMD-states to abolish their arsenals (which by the lowest estimates still outnumber middle eastern stockpiles 25 times). In the move towards a world without nuclear weapons, there are many steps that can and need to be taken on a global level. An obvious one that could be the next step is to designate the use of all types of WMDs as crimes against humanity. Campaigning for something so basic, intuitively foolproof and relatively uncomplicated politically is the right place to start.

Note:

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