



BUILDING CAPACITY FOR A WMD-FREE MIDDLE EAST

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The world has signed up to a shared vision: a secure Middle East region, free from weapons of mass destruction. That means no nuclear, biological or chemical weapons anywhere in the region, and effective mechanisms in place to ensure it remains that way. This ambition for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East was confirmed and institutionalised when state parties to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) committed to indefinitely extend the NPT in 1995. They reaffirmed this vision for the Middle East most recently at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, committing to host a regional conference in 2012 to find a way forward.

That conference has still to take place. Setting the ambition for a WMD-free zone in the region was just the starting point: taking the first tentative steps to delivering it is turning out to be much more complex. Israel, possessing the only nuclear arsenal in the region and which would need to be part of any regional agreement to make it meaningful, stands outside the NPT structure. Iran, a member of the NPT, is in the midst of sensitive negotiations over the future of its controversial nuclear programme. Syria has recently signed and ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and is in the process of destroying its chemical weapons under the watch of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Egypt has not yet signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and Israel has not yet ratified it.

The ambition for a zone remains strong and, in 2013, informal discussions were held in Europe, chaired by the WMD-free zone conference facilitator, with most parties present. This is limited progress; but more concrete steps are necessary - and, perhaps more importantly, are *possible* - in the run up to the next NPT Review Conference in 2015. Without them this tentative start risks running into the sand.

WMD-free zones have already been successfully [established](#) elsewhere in the world, including in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific and South East Asia. While the wholesale application of any one of these models to the Middle East may not be feasible - the regional dynamics are simply too complex and too unique – the partial application of certain elements may be. What is more, rich expertise exists from the establishment of those zones, both on navigating political blockages and on developing the necessary technical capacity to deliver an agreement, which could provide valuable lessons for the Middle East.

**This article is written in a personal and academic capacity. The views contained herein are those of the authors alone.*

The constraints

A core constraint to driving the initiative forward in the Middle East is a dearth of technical capacity and expertise within the region. At present, discussions of a zone are largely the preserve of diplomats, bureaucrats and politicians - which may be appropriate to navigating the political context, but limits the technical breadth and depth of discussions over frameworks and institutions, not to mention the ability to deliver any agreement when it is reached. All too often the politics seem too complex, and assumptions made that technical progress is impossible without political breakthrough. Solutions risk being overlooked, leading us down a path that is potentially self-fulfilling and defeatist.

Technical requirements

Several layers of technical expertise will be required both to write and establish a technically watertight zone, and to run, manage, maintain and protect it once it is in place. This will require knowledge of verification, monitoring and inspection; an understanding of where joint ventures might be possible, and what technologies might be associated with them; the capacity to establish, protect and maintain peaceful nuclear energy programmes; and expertise in the safe and effective dismantlement of the weapons programmes that currently exist. At present, such personnel and skills are largely absent through much of the Middle East region.

Existing outreach

Some capacity building is already taking place. The Centre for Non-Proliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute, for example, is facilitating a Next Generation Initiative for emerging experts from across the region. Likewise, organizations such as the Arab Institute for Security Studies and the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs are bringing together experts, officials and academics in specific initiatives focused on regional security issues. The EU Non-proliferation Consortium, a collection of European based research centres and foreign policy institutions, has also touched on relevant issues in their conferences. However, more could be done to extend this expertise into the region.

Looking forward

More comprehensive and widespread training and education programmes, focusing specifically on scientific universities, ministries, businesses and relevant government agencies, will be required to bolster regional capacity to the necessary level. Universities will need to be better equipped to offer degrees and diplomas on specialized subjects. A starting point would be to explore partnership with universities outside the region, and to encourage existing international institutions such as the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency, Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organisation, to extend their training programmes and workshops to groups and individuals across the region. Likewise, the European Commission and individual EU member states have a valuable expertise to contribute.

Regional think tanks, for their part, need to be better equipped to provide and stimulate considered thinking and analysis on the challenges and opportunities present in developing a regional

framework. A key role for this community would be to draw out the appropriate lessons from other established WMD-free zones, as well as nuclear frameworks such as Euratom. This might include technical analysis of existing treaties - their terms of reference and definitions; cooperation mechanisms; compliance, enforcement and monitoring methods; and their mediation structures.

Opportunities may exist to develop networks and platforms for the exchange of perspectives and ideas across the region, as well as with think tanks in the EU, US and elsewhere, to help the discussion move beyond traditionally constrained diplomatic discourse.

Experts, academics and officials also have a role to play in inspiring responsible media coverage of the zone across the region that extends beyond pure politics. Reaching out to the media to provide accessible expert briefings on the concepts, terms and definitions of a zone could help to build awareness and stimulate greater discussion of the technical building blocks of the zone, rather than simply the politics.

Some will ask whether such capacity building is putting the cart before the horse: they will suggest that we need to figure out what an agreement might look like before we invest in developing the know-how to deliver it. However, the current lack of regional specialist capacity is, in itself, constraining our ability to come to an agreement and deepening the impediments. While the diplomatic process continues to grapple with the political complexities, technical capacity building increases our chances of unlocking new thinking, enhancing mutual understanding, and injecting the momentum needed to move forward.

States will meet in New York from 28 April to 9 May, to once again discuss the international community's progress on their NPT commitments. These Preparatory Committee discussions will, critically, set the tone and expectations for the formal five-yearly review of the NPT in mid-2015. Many will be looking for concrete movement towards the development of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, which is widely seen as a key indicator of progress. The collective benefits of a regional zone in its own right are clear: not least, increased regional security. And while it may not yet be clear what a tailored regional agreement on a zone might look like, strengthening our ability to address some of the central questions, and building the infrastructure needed to make the implementation of a zone possible once it comes into force, would bring us one step closer.

This article connects to roundtables hosted by BASIC in Washington D.C., in which Dr. Aboul-Enein participated in his academic capacity as guest speaker. Summaries can be found at www.basicint.org/news/events

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