Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

A Gulf WMD Free Zone within a Broader

Gulf and Middle East Security Architecture

Peter Jones

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Policy Papers

Gulf Research Center
187 Oud Metha Tower, 11th Floor,
303 Sheikh Rashid Road,
P. O. Box 80758,
Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
Tel.: +971 4 324 7770
Fax: +971 4 324 7771
E-mail: sales@grc.ae
Website: www.grc.ae

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By publishing this issue of *Policy Analysis*, the Gulf Research Center (GRC) seeks to contribute to the enrichment of the reader's knowledge out of the Center's strong conviction that "knowledge is for all."

Abdulaziz O. Sager

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Contents

Introduction[1]

The question of creating a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East has been a matter of critical importance for many years. Different plans and studies have been advanced,[2] but real progress towards this important goal has been, to be quite frank, non-existent.

This brief paper will begin by asking why this is so. The specific circumstances of the Middle East will be raised, as will the general "lessons" which seem to emerge from other cases of states which have renounced WMD programs. The paper will then advance the thesis that a WMDFZ can only be created within the context of a broader regional structure which has the goal of providing a forum in which the regional states may address their differences on an ongoing basis.

Despite the argument that a WMDFZ is highly unlikely to be achieved in the Gulf only, but will require a broader, Middle East-wide approach to be successful, this does not mean that the states of the Gulf sub-region should not begin to examine the idea of such a WMDFZ. Nor does it mean that the states of the Gulf cannot play a critical role in beginning the process towards developing one. This paper will argue quite the contrary; the states of the Gulf can play a critical role in stimulating the process of serious discussion of this subject, both in the Gulf and the Middle East as a whole, intellectually and by example. Other regions have shown that

1- The views presented in this paper are solely those of the author.

2- For an example of an official proposal see President Mubarak's proposal for a regional Nuclear Weapons Free Zone presented to the UN in 1990 (See Conference on Disarmament document CD/989, April 20, 1990). For an example of an official study, see Prawitz, J., and Leonard. J.F., *A Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East*, (Geneva; United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1996). For a brief background to the various ideas and plans see Baumgart, C., and Mueller, H., "A Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Middle East: A Pie in the Sky?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2004-05.

WMDFZs have begun with some states taking the lead and others joining as the political reality evolves to permit this. Indeed, this paper will conclude with some thoughts as to how this may be initiated.

Creating a Middle East WMDFZ: The Current Regional Reality

As noted, the Middle East is not without initiatives, studies and plans for a WMDFZ. In spite of all this, the region retains the dubious distinction of being the only one where WMD have actually been used since 1945. It is also a region where the dynamic is particularly complicated, with several states having explored and developed various WMD options.[3] Though often portrayed publicly as a response to Israel's widely accepted (though never officially confirmed) WMD programs, the WMD programs of other Middle Eastern countries are, in fact, motivated by a wide variety of factors.

Indeed, if one looks at the history of the actual use of WMD in the region over the past forty years - as opposed to their declared purpose in terms of the Arab-Israeli question - one sees that Arab-Arab and Arab-Iranian disputes have been at least as great a motivating force for the creation of these capabilities as any difference with Israel. The actual use of WMD in the region suggests that many states have developed, or attempted to develop, these weapons for use against each other;[4] as a means of internal

3- For obvious reasons, the development of WMD is a highly classified matter. Thus, reliable open-source information is difficult to come by. An overview of the WMD programs of Middle Eastern states may be found on the website of the Center for Non-proliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Affairs available at: http://cns.miis.edu/research/wmdme/index.htm See also the Middle East page of the Nuclear Threat Initiative at http://nti.org/e_research/e3_24a.html

4- For example, Iraq against Iran, and Egypt against opposing factions in Yemen.

control of minorities;[5] as a highly unsuccessful, to this point, means of trying to counter fears held by certain regimes over the "dangers" posed to them by extra-regional powers;[6] and even as a means of shoring up their prestige and "leadership" within the region.[7]

In effect, these weapons are intimately bound to a variety of issues, some of which are only peripherally related to the Arab-Israeli dispute, if at all. Another critical point is that different types of WMD are, to some extent, related as to their functions. Syria, for example, maintains chemical weapons to compensate for Israel's nuclear capability. Therefore, the eventual elimination of WMD in the Middle East will have to encompass all different types of WMD simultaneously and be part of an effort to address multiple security concerns.[8]

Thus, the particular challenge in creating a WMDFZ in this region lies in developing a situation in which several countries will feel themselves able to begin to renounce capabilities they have developed for a variety of different reasons. This implies a rather sweeping change in the political order of the region which will only happen, if at all, over a long period of time.

In the specific case of the Gulf, the destruction of Saddam's regime means that Iraq is not going to be a source of proliferation concern, hopefully ever again. This leaves Iran as the sole indigenous source of proliferation concern in the Gulf, its protestations of innocence notwithstanding. None of the GCC

5- For example, Iraq against its own Kurds.

6- For example, Saddam's regime against the US, Iran against the US, and perhaps even, until recently, Libya against the US.

7- This was a real, if undeclared, aspect of the Shah's original program to develop an Iranian nuclear capability, and also appears to have been a motivating factor behind Saddam's WMD project.

8- These arguments are developed in Jones, P., "New Directions in Middle East Deterrence: Implications for Arms Control", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* l, no. 4 (December 1997) available at http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1997/issue4/jvol1no4in.html

states, or Yemen, have WMD programs or aspirations, so far as is known.[9] One might think that the task of creating a WMDFZ in the Gulf is, therefore, a relatively "easy" one. However, the many and varied reasons why Iran has embarked on its course indicate that this is not the case.

Although Iran has one less reason to maintain a WMD capability with the destruction of Saddam's regime, the fact that the US has moved in next door cannot make Tehran more comfortable, and Iran may not be able to regard Iraq's disarmament as final. Israel remains, if not an actual security problem for Iran, then certainly an ideological problem for much of the Iranian regime. The unwillingness of the international community to come to Iran's aid when Iraq initiated the use of CW, in clear violation of the latter's obligations under the 1925 protocol, has created a sense that the security assurances which are both explicit and implicit in international arms control treaties are not going to be of use if WMD are used against Iran in the future. More generally, the instability of Iran's immediate neighborhood, including the nuclear status of both India and Pakistan, contribute to a general feeling of insecurity in Iran. Finally, questions of Iran's status as a regional power and a deep-seated sense of "discrimination" fuel a belief that Iran should retain, at least, the capability to develop WMD in future if that is necessary. Interestingly, the search for WMD unites, to at least some extent, people who would otherwise be considered "reformers" and "conservatives" in Iran.[10]

These considerations point to the fact that persuading Iran to completely and finally renounce all WMD options will involve

9- Some rumors exist that Saudi Arabia funded the Pakistan nuclear program in return for some form of access. These rumors have not been publicly substantiated.

10- For more on these arguments see Chubin, S., *Whither Iran? Domestic Politics and National Security*, IISS Adelphi paper no. 342, April 2002; International Crisis Group, *Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Programme*, Middle East Report no. 18, October 2003; and Jones, P., *Iranian Security Policies at the Crossroads?*, Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, Occasional Paper no. 50, 2003.

solutions to issues which are beyond the scope of the other Gulf countries to provide. If these factors demonstrate how difficult it will be to achieve a WMDFZ, whether in the Gulf, or the wider Middle East, they also indicate that a key question to be addressed is that of how and why countries that embarked on WMD research and development decide to reverse themselves.

Creating a WMDFZ; Lessons from other Cases of Reversal

There is a voluminous literature on why states seek to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction. The literature on why certain states have decided to renounce this option is less fulsome.[11] However, there are important cases of states "giving up" a quest for a WMD capability, or renouncing such a capability after it had been achieved. As the Middle East is a region in which many states have acquired WMD, careful study of the cases of renunciation or reversal is required in any attempt to understand the potential dynamics of how a future Middle East WMDFZ might be brought about.

Most analysts agree that there is a wide divergence of factors which may explain why states which had previously sought, or acquired, a WMD capability decide to renounce it. Indeed, each case is unique unto itself and generalisations must be approached with care. However, many who have analysed this phenomenon advance three basic reasons:

- states come to the conclusion that their basic security requirements have changed so fundamentally that the perceived

11- The key texts are: Paul, T.V., *Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2000); Reiss, M., *Bridled Ambitions: Why States Constrain Their Nuclear Capability*, (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995); Solingen, E., "The Political Economy of Nuclear Restraint," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994); and Potter, W.C., *The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation: The Cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine*, Occasional Paper 22 (Washington D.C.; Henry L. Stimson Center, 1995).

external threats which led them to pursue WMD capabilities no longer apply and that their security may better be achieved through other means;

- a domestic change occurs such that the ruling elite who had believed that WMD were necessary is either replaced, or has a significant change of view and no longer believes WMD are necessary or useful; and

- powerful new norms emerge at the systemic level, or specific initiatives are in play, which diminish the appeal of WMD over time.[12]

These reasons are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in cases of actual reversal or renunciation, there are usually several factors in play. In the case of South Africa, for example, it may well be the case that the first factor (change in the external security environment) was key, though the impending end of the apartheid era (domestic change) was a critical factor in shaping the new external security situation in which South Africa found itself. In the case of Libya, it may be that the third factor (specific initiatives diminishing the appeal of WMD over time – in this case, sanctions) was key in bringing about the second (change of heart amongst the ruling elite – in this case, apparently, one man - as to the utility of WMD).

Moreover, an important consideration has recently been advanced to the effect that cases of renunciation or reversal may not be so finite as they publicly appear. In many cases, states are, at least for a period of time, effectively "hedging" their WMD activities; placing them in a form of limbo to achieve political or other gains, but not entirely foregoing the option.[13] Analysis reveals that three characteristics are often in play, either singly, or, more

12- These factors are advanced in Paul, T.V., *Power versus Prudence*, op cit, pp. 3-11.

13- The idea of hedging was advanced by Ariel Levite in his "Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002/03), pp. 59-88.

often, in some combination.[14] First, WMD programs usually do not "end" at a finite moment, but rather fizzle out over time and in a non-linear way. Second, contemplation of reversal or renunciation does not usually begin as a clearly articulated objective, shared by all concerned within a state – there is often considerable uncertainty as to the way forward and its potential implications. Decision-makers are aware that their current WMD policies are not as beneficial as they had expected, but do not know what to do about the situation. Reversal or renunciation is but one of the ideas in play. Finally, declarations concerning renunciation or reversal are rarely themselves absolutely irreversible until well after the factors which led a state to pursue a WMDFZ option are considered utterly past. It may thus be critical to think of reversal as a process which unfolds over a period of time, rather than as a moment in time.

This concept of "hedging" is critical in that it opens up a new area for consideration in the creation of a WMDFZ; cases of states who may be prepared to sign on to a general declaration of intent, or indicate a willingness to eventually sign on to a treaty, but for whom the decision to do so is not entirely final until they are absolutely convinced that they will never require a WMD option. Given the very difficult history of the Middle East and its many rivalries, it is likely that a Gulf or a Middle East WMDFZ will have to be able to deal with hedging by several potential members for a long time. *What is really being envisaged, then, is a regime which will, at least initially, seek to (i) place some rules on hedging behaviour; (ii) offer rewards for those who go beyond hedging and completely renounce the WMD option, including security guarantees; and (iii) promote the eventual renunciation of even hedging – though that will take many years and only be achieved in the context of a fundamental set of changes in the regional security paradigm.*

14- These three characteristics are taken from ibid, p. 74; and Paul, op cit, pp. 147, 154-155.

A Regional WMDFZ and a Broader Regional Security Architecture

This latter point leads to another basic observation about WMDFZ experiences: no other region with a WMDFZ achieved this goal without also establishing a broader regional system for cooperation and dialogue. Such systems provide a widely accepted and adhered to set of regional norms of conduct and mechanisms by which regional states may discuss their differences peacefully. These systems do not end differences or competition between regional states, but they place this activity within a framework of accepted norms of behavior. This is not to say that these various regional systems are all equally effective. But it is striking that they exist in each case where a regional WMDFZ (or NWFZ in some cases) has been established.

It is very hard to believe the Middle East, or the Gulf, will be able to create a WMDFZ without also, and probably first, taking considerable steps to develop a broader regional security and cooperation architecture (to say nothing of also seeing the Arab-Israeli dispute well on its way towards a mutually acceptable resolution). We are, thus, obviously talking about a very long-term process, as has been the case in every other region which achieved a regional WMDFZ or NWFZ agreement.[15]

In terms of the place of arms control and disarmament in a future regional cooperation and security system, a few points stand out:

- First, an approach should be taken that the issue to be addressed is not the particular WMD program of any one country in the region, but rather the conditions that have led various states to investigate and develop WMD options (focusing excessively

15- For more on this idea, see Jones, P., *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East; Issues and Options,* (Stockholm, SIPRI, 1998), available at: http://projects.sipri.se/mideast/MEreport.pdf

on, or demonizing any one state, however politically satisfying it may be, will only have the effect of distorting the issue and creating an atmosphere which will make it impossible to really address the problem);

- Second, the declared goal must be the complete elimination of all categories of WMD – there can be no “permitted” WMD for anyone and no exceptions due to any special concerns – though it is recognized that "hedging" behavior will make this complete elimination a long-term goal which will be achieved in stages;

- Third, the verification provisions of a regional WMDFZ must be designed by the regional actors themselves – though the verification standards of the main international non-proliferation treaties may serve as a basis for this, it may well be necessary to go beyond them and develop regional verification provisions (the experience of the Middle East as a region where states have actually developed and used WMD suggests that especially intrusive verification and transparency provisions are likely to be necessary in this region); and

- The role of outside powers in supporting such a regional system is critically important – the Permanent Five are likely going to have to provide security guarantees to regional states who agree to accept a regional WMDFZ (which raises the question of the Iran-US relationship), and states neighboring the region who have WMD capabilities (in this case, Indian and Pakistan) will also have to provide formal and binding assurances that they will support the Zone.

The Role of the Gulf States in Beginning This Effort

It may seem from the foregoing discussion that a Gulf WMDFZ effort is misplaced; if a real WMDFZ is only to be achieved in the context of the establishment of a pan-Middle Eastern security system, what role can the Gulf itself play? Probably not much, one might conclude.

In fact, the reality is quite the opposite, though that may seem counter-intuitive based on the argument developed to this point. There is a very important role for the Gulf states, and particularly the GCC states to play, if they wish to do so. But it is probably not in terms of creating a Gulf WMDFZ. It seems unlikely, for example, that Iran, at least in its current political configuration, will entirely give up its desire for a nuclear option unless whatever regional security and WMDFZ system is created also addresses Tehran's concerns with Israel and with the US presence in the region. A purely Gulf WMDFZ system is not likely to be able to achieve that.[16]

What role might exist for the states of the Gulf, and specifically for the GCC states? Arguably, the key role for the next few years is that of catalyst and shaper of the agenda, both within the Gulf sub-region and in the Middle East as a whole. In the cases of Africa and Latin America, the Zones which were created began with a few states taking the lead to develop the ideas and show that it could be done. While each of these Zones may not have been truly created until political circumstances allowed the recalcitrant states to come forward, in some cases many years after the process began, the role played by those who started and nurtured the process was critical.

By formally re-asserting their abandonment of any WMD aspirations, calling for a sub-regional and a region-wide WMDFZ and by beginning the process of developing a regional cooperation and security regime, the states of the GCC can play a critical and catalytic role in developing the idea of a new security order. Such an order may not be realized until later, but the idea can emerge over time as a powerful force. This was the African NWFZ experience. Taking serious steps to outline a regional order as it should be, and outlining the steps required to get there – including offers of a new set of beneficial relationships which could be

16- A point recently made by the Saudi Foreign Minister in his intervention at a conference on the subject in Bahrain. The text of his comments was released by the Saudi Press Agency on December 5, 2004.

achieved if changes can be made – could have a powerful effect at this moment in the history of the Gulf and Middle East. This idea is already well understood. The peace plan advanced by Saudi Arabia at the 2002 Arab League Summit was very much along these lines. It may take time for it to be realized, but history will look back at that initiative as a very important moment.

What might be the characteristics of such a proposal? First and foremost, such a proposal would begin with a recognition that this is a very long-term goal which forms part of a much broader regional dynamic. The proposal would recognise that steps to create a WMDFZ go hand-in-hand with steps to develop a broader regional architecture of cooperation in which both sub-regional and region-wide steps are critical. A proposal could outline a principled vision of a regional order as it should be, and outline a set of notional steps required to get there, including the aforementioned offers of a new set of beneficial relationships if changes can be made. The proposal could also recognise that there will be hedging; the WMDFZ Treaty is not an end in itself, the creation of a new norm of behavior is the end, and that will take a long time. Thus, a subtle, sophisticated and long-term concept of success and failure is required.

The tone of such a proposal will be important. It should, so far as possible, be positive, and not negative. While not ducking the reality that some regional countries have engaged in activities not consistent with international non-proliferation standards, it should take the view that this is a complex and multi-faceted issue which will require broad changes in the regional security dynamic. Effectively, the proposal should take the view that it is the security concerns which have led to proliferation which are the problem to be addressed.

Such a proposal must come with a real "workplan" if it is to be regarded as something more than a high-minded declaration which will soon be forgotten. In terms of practical steps that can be taken by the states of the Gulf, there is great need for serious work on the technical aspects of a future regional WMDFZ, such as the

questions of verification; security guarantees; and zonal definitions. Much has been said about such an idea, but relatively little has been done by the states and peoples of the region themselves to really consider what it would mean, and to discuss their differing perceptions of how a regional WMDFZ might be achieved. Another area for intensive research, and one which is particularly germane to the situation which prevails today, is the question of how the creation of a WMDFZ might also lead to agreements to help the regional states in keeping WMD capabilities and knowledge out of the hands of terrorists.

Sponsorship of serious research efforts along these, and other lines is a critical requirement. If regional governments are not yet able to undertake this work themselves, they can sponsor regional institutes to do it. Perhaps the key is to create a network of regional institutes who are cooperatively working on this subject. Asia has had a particularly rich experience in developing ideas in a Track Two setting, which can then be adopted by the official process when they are ripe. This experience may be relevant to the Gulf and the Middle East.

Beyond the technical issues surrounding the creation of a WMDFZ, there is a need for regional work to consider the question of creating a regional security or cooperation system. Some work has been done by regional experts,[17] but there is a need for the region to take the lead in this effort. One of the points made in the work done to date is that the creation of a Middle East region-wide cooperation system should not be seen as an effort that negates the idea of creating sub-regional systems. Indeed, it will be quite necessary to have both a region-wide system and sub-regional ones, as there are some issues which are best dealt with at the sub-regional level. Therefore, in taking steps to create a sub-regional cooperative structure – steps which leave open the door to a wider regional system – the states of the Gulf can play a role in both

17- See, *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East; Issues and Options*, op cit.

securing their immediate neighborhood and in developing ideas and concepts which can play a wider regional role when the situation permits.

Conclusion

This will be a long term process which will require the states and peoples of the region to reconsider some of their basic assumptions about their security and about each other. But the experience of other regions shows that this can be done. Experience also shows that Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zones do not exist in a political or security vacuum. A regional commitment to the development of a cooperation and security structure for both the Gulf and the wider Middle East will be a critical aspect of bringing the region's WMD situation under control.

About the Author

Peter Jones is a Research Associate of the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. Dr. Jones was Leader of the Middle East Security and Arms Control Project at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) from 1995 to 1999. In addition to his affiliation with the Munk Centre, Dr. Jones is a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), John's Hopkins University, Washington D.C. and a Research Fellow of the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Beyond his academic life, Dr. Jones is presently a Policy Advisor on security issues in the Privy Council Office (the Prime Minister's Department) in Ottawa. His previous government experience includes service with Canada's Department of National Defence and with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Academically, Dr. Jones holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from King's College, London and an MA in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada. He is the author of numerous articles and books on arms control, confidence-building, peacekeeping and regional security in the Middle East, Europe and Asia including: *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options* (Stockholm; SIPRI, 1998), which is available at http://projects.sipri.se/mideast/MEreport.pdf

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