



The American Middle East Policy Lacks Vision

by **Barbara Zanchetta**

Key Points

- *The uncertain situation in the Middle East calls for a departure from America's current issue-by-issue policy in favour of an all-encompassing regional approach.*
- *In particular, the United States should dramatically shift its policy and openly endorse the discussions on the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-Free Zone in the Middle East, towards which, instead, Washington has thus far maintained a very low profile and a detached attitude.*
- *The negotiations on a WMD-Free Zone are crucially important because they could represent a unique opportunity to break the impasse in the controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear programme and address the Iranian-Israeli hostility, while at the same time tangibly advancing America's declared non-proliferation agenda.*
- *Considering the special relationship between America and Israel, and the centrality of the United States in the Iranian security calculations, Washington has the potential to exercise a crucial role.*
- *However, the prospects for a real shift in US policy currently appear very grim. A longer-term vision and the definition of a clear strategy are needed in order for Washington to be able to exercise leadership and support the process which could lead to the creation of a new security structure in the Middle East.*

The idea of discussing the establishment of a Middle East free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), however distant and futuristic a dream it may seem, could represent a unique opportunity for addressing both the fragile political equilibriums of the region and the global concerns of the international community regarding the proliferation of WMD.

In fact, the establishment of a zone banning all nuclear, chemical and biological weapons could provide a solution to the decade-long controversy over the Iranian nuclear programme; tackle the sense of injustice and double standards surrounding Israel's nuclear capability; and address the threat of chemical and biological weapons. Most importantly, the creation of such a zone would necessarily entail the development of structures to sustain future regional cooperation – a “side effect” of the creation of the zone which would, in the long term, outweigh the technicalities in favour of long-term regional stability.

However, despite the obvious long-term implications of such an idea, the United States (US) – still the only extra-regional power capable of influencing regional dynamics – seems to be unwilling, or is incapable, of raising the stakes and investing political capital in this potentially ground-breaking initiative.

The WMD-Free Zone in Context

While the idea of a zone (initially limited to only nuclear-free) dates back to almost four decades ago – it was originally proposed by Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat and the Shah of Iran in 1974 – it became a concrete legalistic recommendation in 1995, when the Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) approved a resolution which called upon “all States in the Middle East to take practical steps in appropriate forums aimed at making progress towards, inter alia, the establishment of an effectively verifiable Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological, and their delivery systems, and to refrain from taking any measures that preclude the achievement of this objective”.¹

The same resolution, however, also called upon all member states of the NPT – and particularly on the nuclear weapons states – to “extend their cooperation and exert their utmost efforts to ensuring the early establishment by regional parties of a Middle East zone.” But for many years, no tangible progress was made.

¹ 1995 Resolution on the Middle East, available at: http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/1995-NPT/pdf/Resolution_MiddleEast.pdf. This resolution built on the approval of UN General Assembly resolution approved by consensus the previous year calling for the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East.

On the wave of the enthusiasm following President Obama's "global zero" initiative and his renewed emphasis on nuclear disarmament at the outset of his administration, member states at the 2010 Review Conference of the NPT agreed to give concrete impetus to the idea of establishing a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East. The final document of the Review Conference in fact called upon the UN Secretary-General and the three co-sponsors of the 1995 resolution (the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia), in consultation with the regional countries, to convene a conference in 2012 on the establishment of the zone. The organization of such a conference is ongoing – amid the difficulties inherent in the region's deeply-rooted enmities and the uncertainties following the Arab spring – and it is scheduled to take place in Helsinki in December 2012.

The United States, one of the most powerfully nuclear armed states in the world and the only country which has historically taken a mediating role in the Middle East (from Camp David to Oslo, for example) could be seen as having a special responsibility in endorsing this initiative. Instead, the American position clearly indicates that this idea is considered neither crucial, nor feasible, by Washington.

In fact, at the First Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) of the 2015 NPT Review Conference held in Vienna in May 2012, the United States stated quite bluntly that due to the current upheavals sweeping the region, the timing of the 2012 conference is not right. Moreover, repeating its long-standing position (which is in line with Israel's) the United States claimed that the states in the region need to achieve peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours before initiating discussions on the WMD-Free Zone.

For the past decade, the American non-proliferation goals in the Middle East have mainly focused on the Iranian nuclear controversy, dealt with in isolation from the broader regional context. US attention has concentrated on the endless dispute on the details and levels of Iran's uranium enrichment, while an all-encompassing regional approach towards the Middle East has been lacking since the early 1990s with the breakdown of the Arms Control and Regional Security talks.

It is thus evident that America's current approach towards the Middle East in general, and towards the WMD-Free Zone initiative in particular, lacks a long-term vision. It is in moments of grave uncertainty and increased tensions that creative statecraft and effective leadership are called for. Considering the situation on the ground, America still remains the only power potentially capable of making an impact and – in the words of the 1995 resolution – should "exert its utmost effort" to bring the regional actors to the negotiating table with a constructive attitude. If and when the US leadership will be willing and capable to take on this role remains to be seen.

The Crux of the Problem: Israel and Iran

The 2012 conference organizers and the regional states have agreed that the geographic extension of the prospected WMD-Free Zone includes all members

of the Arab League (22 countries), plus Israel and Iran.² The consequences of the Arab spring – in particular the dramatic violence unfolding in Syria – and the future political orientation of Egypt cast a shadow over the prospects of fruitful negotiations.



Map No. 4102 Rev. 5 United Nations

Note: The prospected zone would also include North African countries who are members of the Arab League, not shown on this map.

"The US still occupies a crucial position in the security calculations of many Middle Eastern countries, and of Israel and Iran in particular"

The presence of Syria at the conference – a key country, especially from Israel's point of view because of its past nuclear ambitions and chemical weapons arsenal – is, indeed, dependent on the future of the Assad regime. In Egypt, on the other hand, the unsettled political situation seems not to have changed the country's firm stance in favour of the zone; but the evolution of Egypt's policy vis-à-vis Israel is a matter of growing concern. In general, because of the severe challenges many of the regional countries are facing, the question of whether or not the WMD conference remains a priority is definitely well-grounded.

However, despite these uncertainties, all Arab countries have, with different degrees, signalled their support for the initiative – either as a means to address the dispute surrounding Israel's nuclear monopoly, or as a cooperative solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis (the Gulf Arab states are more concerned with Iran, while the Levant Arab states remain focused on Israel). And they have all confirmed their intention to be present at the Helsinki Conference. Therefore, the crux of the problem – around which the hopes for progress or dangers of total impasse hinge upon – rotates around the positions of Israel and Iran, and their mutually hostile (non-)relationship.

Having a decade-long history of "nuclear ambiguity" or "opacity",³ Israel has clung onto its widely-known – though never publicly acknowledged – nuclear capability for purposes of deterrence. From the origins of its statehood, Israel has considered the nuclear option the only ultimate security guarantee in a hostile and threatening security environment. The long-standing statement describing

2 "The 2012 Conference on a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East. Prospects, Challenges, and Opportunities. A Special Roundtable Report", Monterey Institute of International Studies, July 2012, p. 4.

3 A. Cohen in *Israel and the Bomb*, Columbia University Press, 1998, and *The Worst Kept Secret*, Columbia University Press, 2010 comprehensively describes Israel's nuclear policy.

Israeli policy, i.e. that Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East, unveils the inherent value of the nuclear deterrent for defensive purposes. Consequently, the Israeli stance towards disarmament – including its inclusion in a prospected zone free of weapons of mass destruction – has been unequivocal: such discussions can and will take place only if the overall security environment becomes more favourable for Israel. This has been summarized in the often-cited “peace first” slogan. While previously this was interpreted as a code-word for progress in the peace process and resolution of the Palestinian issue, the controversy surrounding Iran’s nuclear programme has increasingly shifted the attention towards Tehran. Currently, Israeli threat perceptions unequivocally point to Iran as Israel’s main “existential threat.”

Just as the Israeli nuclear capability has a deeply-rooted origin, Iran’s quest to access peaceful nuclear energy dates back to the years of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s rule. Symbolizing the country’s search for autonomy (especially from outside influence) and modernity, Iran’s nuclear programme is tied to the nation’s identity. Over the past decade, the dispute between the West and Tehran over the suspected militarization of Iran’s nuclear activities is seen in Iran as a means to interfere in the country’s internal affairs and deny its legitimate rights (a topic of high sensitivity for Iranians). While the West focuses on the suspected development of a nuclear capability, the Iranian leadership insists on its exclusively peaceful nature. Consequently, Iran officially supports the initiative towards the creation of a WMD-Free Zone and points to Israel – the only country in the region not to have signed the NPT – as constituting the main obstacle to forward movement.

The absence of diplomatic relationships between Iran and Israel and the extremely charged rhetoric completes the picture of a “wall against the wall”, with seemingly very low chances of progress. It is far easier (though extremely disconcerting) to envision war-like scenarios rather than diplomatic, face-to-face negotiations between these two countries. At the same time, a region-wide zone free of WMD would be pointless if it excluded Israel and Iran. While other countries in the region either possess or are suspected of possessing chemical or biological weapons, Iran and Israel are the only ones to have or almost have nuclear capabilities.

Table: WMD Capabilities of Major Middle East Countries

Country	Nuclear	Biological	Chemical
Egypt	No	No	Suspected
Iran	Suspected	Suspected	No
Iraq	No	No	No
Israel	Yes	Likely R&D	Likely R&D
Jordan	No	No	No
Libya	No	No	No
Saudi Arabia	No	No	No
Syria	No	Suspected	Yes
UAE	No	No	No

Source: Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) Country Profiles (www.nti.org)

Therefore, an effective WMD-Free Zone would have to necessarily include both Israel and Iran. While acknowledging that the end goal of the creation of such a zone is a long-term objective, the question is how to concretely provide an incentive for these countries to at least initiate a negotiation and start a process.

The American Position: Potential does not Match Reality

Although the issues inhibiting progress towards a WMD-Free Zone are undoubtedly rooted in the complex and highly-charged political enmities in the region – which means that also any authentic long-term solution can only be a regional one – the United States still occupies a crucial position in the security calculations of many Middle Eastern countries, and of Israel and Iran in particular.

The decade-long special relationship between the United States and Israel makes America the only power capable of exercising some – however limited – leverage on the Israeli leadership. In the context of the prospected conference on the WMD-Free Zone, Israel will most likely search for a strong role of the United States as the ultimate guarantor of Israeli interests and security.

Conversely, Iran’s relationship with the United States has been characterized by more than three decades of deeply-rooted mutual hostility. Nevertheless, Iran – albeit for different reasons – also views America as a crucial actor in the context of regional negotiations. For the Iranian leadership, the United States still poses the main security threat to the country (and to the survival of the regime). From Tehran’s point of view, the WMD-Free Zone Conference would have to address all Iranian threat perceptions, and thus extend to including guarantees from the United States (and possibly other influential extra-regional actors).

Consequently, the American choice is crucial. It can either support – and perhaps openly endorse – the 2012 initiative, or it can maintain a low profile, thus suggesting that the effort will most likely be doomed to fail and at best result in an inconclusive diplomatic gathering.

In the past decade, America’s policies towards the Middle East have been all but encouraging. Locked in military quagmire in neighbouring Afghanistan, left with the troubled legacy of the Iraq War, and with an enduring sense of double standards concerning the position towards Israel, American policies have focused on single issues – the peace process/Iraq/Iran – while lacking a wide-ranging regional approach. Even the US non-proliferation strategy – a declared priority of both the Bush and Obama administrations – does not take an all-encompassing regional stance. For example, despite a specific heading on strengthening the NPT and a long section dedicated to reversing “the spread of nuclear and biological weapons and secure nuclear materials”, the 2010 US National Security Strategy (NSS) does not mention the idea of supporting a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East as an effective, long-term counter-proliferation policy (and neither did previous NSS documents).⁴

4 2010 National Security Strategy of the United States, pp. 23-24, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf

At the 2010 NPT Review Conference, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did express nominal support for the initiative: “We support efforts to realize the goal of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East, in accordance with the 1995 Middle East Resolution. The Middle East may present the greatest threat of nuclear proliferation in the world today. Adherence to the NPT is not universal, and a few countries that are parties to the NPT have violated their treaty obligations. But in spite of these difficulties, we want to reaffirm our commitment to the objective of a Middle East free of these weapons of mass destruction, and we are prepared to support practical measures that will move us toward achieving that objective.”⁵

However, in order to make a real impact, the American support for this idea would have to be political, and not merely practical. Specifically, concrete moves towards Israel and Iran are needed in order to set the stage for negotiations. The United States should offer Israel an explicit security guarantee in exchange for decreased Israeli reliance on nuclear weapons. In this way, gradually moving away from the “peace first” slogan in favour of disarmament talks would not be perceived as a diminished US commitment to Israel’s defence. Similarly, regarding Iran, the United States should issue an explicit non-aggression pledge – thus breaking from the decade-long ambiguity on the prospects of “regime change” – in return for Iranian cooperative participation at the conference, and a specific commitment to not single out Israel during the talks. But these two policy recommendations first entail an authentic shift in America’s policy towards the region.

A Shift in the US Stance: Sorely Necessary, but Perhaps Impossible?

A wide-ranging regional approach and a long-term vision – similar to the one that guided US policy during the initial phases of the Camp David process in the 1970s – would be necessary on the American part in order to break the current dangerous impasse, and implement creative diplomacy in the Middle East. The basis of a new US strategy must rotate around the fact that America lies behind the insecurity dilemma for Iran, and maintains a special relationship with Israel. The American leadership should learn from the role that US diplomacy exercised

⁵ Hillary Clinton’s Remarks before the 2010 NPT Review Conference, available at: <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/hillary-clintons-remarks-before-2010-npt-review-conference/p22042>

“The basis of a new US strategy must rotate around the fact that America lies behind the insecurity dilemma for Iran, and maintains its special relationship with Israel”

in the 1970s in setting the basis of a dialogue between then arch-enemies Egypt and Israel. Today, it is all the more imperative to avoid conflict. A war, in fact, need not be waged in order to shift the psychological framework for negotiations and set the basis for progress (as was the case in 1973). A US endorsement of the WMD-Free Zone – and a real political commitment to it – would represent a significant breakthrough, which could lead to starting the process of regional cooperation.

History demonstrates that arms control agreements are negotiated between enemies, and in most cases lead to improved relationships in the long term. Positive relationships need not be a precondition, but should rather be the end goal of negotiations. In the charged context of the Middle East, the leadership and mediation exercised by the United States in initiating a process is called for, although indirectly, by the regional parties.

Unfortunately, however, such a monumental shift in America’s approach to regional affairs seems improbable, at least in the foreseeable future. The escalating tension between Israel and Iran and the uncertain political evolution of the Middle East seem to discourage, rather than encourage, an American role. Moreover, in an election year, it is highly unlikely that the US leadership will take any bold moves, especially in the sensitive area of American-Israeli relations. This lack of strategic thinking, combined with objectively difficult conditions on the ground, may result in missing the opportunity presented by the 2012 conference. But if Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Fridtjof Nansen was right in claiming that “the impossible is what takes a little longer”, one can still hope that, in the long term, the United States might be better positioned to take a more constructive approach. If there will be a second term for Barack Obama, he might return to pose non-proliferation and disarmament at the centre of his platform, with the possibility of investing more political capital in foreign policy initiatives (as is normally the case during a second term presidency).

Therefore, in the long term more than for its immediate prospects, it is vital to remain focused on the 2012 conference, even if it were to be temporarily postponed. The spotlight needs to remain on this initiative. It must be seen as an opportunity for initiating a crucially important process. It would be reckless and short-sighted to declare it a failure without even having seriously tried.

NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.

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