Time for Arms Talks? Iran, Israel, and Middle East Arms Control

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Dalia Dassa Kaye.
The Middle East has all it takes to frustrate international arms control regimes. Key regional actors do not recognize one actor’s right to exist, let alone share diplomatic relations. Countries in the region perceive their own security as requiring the insecurity of others, leading them to adopt offensive military postures. At the same time, there is virtually no regional arms control culture or constituency.

The ongoing showdown between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran is a case in point, underscoring the limitations of global nonproliferation norms in addressing regional proliferation. Despite Tehran’s stated commitment to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as the IAEA’s success in uncovering a pattern of Iranian violations, the violations themselves raise many questions about the adequacy of the NPT in blocking determined states from acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities. Even strengthened verification measures under the Additional Protocol do not address the broader political and security context of proliferation problems in unstable regions such as the Middle East.

Without such consideration, even the best orchestrated international diplomatic efforts will fall short. Because effective arms control follows political relationships and is dependent on the broader security environment, current diplomatic efforts focused on Iran must take place in conjunction with attempts to create a more favorable regional climate for arms control. This will require altering political relationships and establishing new regional processes that focus not just on international disarmament goals but also on regional confidence-building measures.

Although solving current proliferation challenges such as Iran is not dependent on the creation of new regional security structures, strong political support for such processes by the United States and its Western allies could create a more favorable regional climate and provide some cover for regional actors to make concessions in the proliferation area. That said, the creation of a regional security dialogue should be viewed primarily as a long-term process to address the underlying motivations and security vulnerabilities that lead to the type of crises we are facing today with countries such as Iran.

Consequently, the United States and Europe need to work together, preferably in conjunction with Russia and other Western allies such as Japan, on three levels: first, rein in the Iranian nuclear program; second, involve Israel, the one nuclear power in the region, and its Arab neighbors more actively in regional and global nonproliferation efforts; and third, revive multilateral regional security talks. On none of these points are there reasons to be sanguine about the prospects for success, but neither are such efforts futile, particularly if international coordination and willingness to exert political capital on the Middle East proliferation problem increases.

Dealing With Iran

Iran’s potential acquisition of nuclear weapons must be addressed quickly and resolutely. No other proliferation challenge would more dramatically disrupt the regional balance of power and escalate the regional arms race, not to mention undermine the credibility of the NPT, than an Iranian nuclear weapons capability. The potential for nuclear breakout among other Middle Eastern states, in addition to the horrifying risks of such technologies reaching terrorists, would create a proliferation nightmare several times worse than previous threats to the NPT regime.
Indeed, the prospect of a nuclear Iran is one of the few issues currently generating transatlantic agreement, even if tactics differ. Compared to the Europeans, the United States considers sanctions against Iran more favorably and prefers a shorter timeline for imposing them if Iran does not comply with IAEA demands. Both sides are in agreement that Iran cannot be allowed to develop its own nuclear fuel cycle, which could enable Iran to produce enough weapons-grade material for a small arsenal within a short period of time.

The specter of Iranian acquisition of nuclear capabilities is so troubling that Israel predictably has not ruled out a preventive military strike. Such a military option would be much more difficult (militarily and politically) than the Israeli strike against Iraq’s Osirik facility in 1981. Worse still, it could prompt an Iranian military response, further destabilizing the region.[1] Still, the Israelis are leaving the option on the table, issuing statements and pursuing actions that are preparing the ground for such an attack, even if such preparations are solely for deterrent purposes.[2]

Although the IAEA has postponed a decision on whether to refer Iranian safeguards violations to the UN Security Council until its Board of Governors meeting on Nov. 25, Iran’s hard-line position since a September IAEA resolution called on Iran to suspend all enrichment-related activities raises the prospects for escalation. Iran’s refusal to fully abide by its previous commitment to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany to suspend all enrichment activity and hints that it might consider withdrawing from the NPT are raising the stakes.

Generating agreement in support of sanctions will be difficult given the importance of Iranian energy supplies to Western countries, particularly with oil prices at an all-time high.[3] Nevertheless, in the face of continuing Iranian defiance, such a course of action is possible, even though it may take place outside the UN Security Council context. Unfortunately, as the India and Pakistan cases demonstrated, international sanctions that are not pursued through a broad multilateral process over a sustained period of time (as was the case with Libya) are not always an effective instrument in persuading determined states to reverse course.

Time is running out, but the contours of a transatlantic approach are apparent, providing some hope for a nonmilitary solution. Such a strategy, most clearly and forcefully outlined by Robert Einhorn, assistant secretary of state for nonproliferation in the Clinton administration, essentially calls for the United States and Europe to switch roles, with Europe becoming the “bad cop” and the United States becoming the “better cop.”[4] The idea is to change the cost-benefit analysis of the Iranian leadership to the extent that pursuing the nuclear path will be viewed as too costly.

In practice, this translates into tougher and more credible European threats to isolate Iran politically and economically if it does not reverse course (i.e., using sticks instead of simply the threat of deferred carrots). At the same time, the United States will need to indicate what Iranian nuclear capabilities would be acceptable even under the current regime (e.g., nuclear technology that did not allow for an indigenous fuel-cycle capability and would require the return of all spent fuel to approved third parties). Recent discussions between the United States and the Europeans on a package of incentives for Iran, including imported nuclear fuel, suggest the United States and its allies may be moving in this direction.

Even more significantly, the United States would need to drop its regime-change rhetoric and explore the improvement of bilateral relations, beginning perhaps with limited dialogues focused on issues of mutual concern such as Iraq and Afghanistan.[5] Improved relations with Iran will face tremendous domestic resistance in the United States, but an increasing number of voices are calling for such a shift. Indeed, an altered U.S.-Iranian political relationship is the linchpin for any other efforts to address regional proliferation; rethinking this relationship should be the top priority for whichever U.S. administration comes to office this January. The outlines of a Western strategy to resolve this crisis may be clear, but the political will to carry it out, both in Washington and European capitals, is still questionable.

Israel and Its Neighbors

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear challenge could gain momentum if other regional
parties, particularly Israel, take steps to boost the nonproliferation agenda and improve the regional security environment. Accusations of double standards must be evaluated in the context of the existential threat Israel faces and its belief that nuclear weapons offer a valuable deterrent in warding off any attack. Iran’s recent parading of its Shahab-3 missiles, capable of reaching Israel and covered with banners calling for Israel’s destruction, only contributes to this security perception, even though Iran’s motivations for nuclear weapons capabilities are complex and extend beyond the Israeli factor. [6]

Still, the perception among Arab parties and others in the developing world that the West applies double standards when it comes to “acceptable” and “unacceptable” proliferators is real and needs to be addressed. The recent U.S. focus on the Iranian nuclear threat in the context of the Bush administration’s lack of commitment to global arms control treaties such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has only reinforced this perception of double standards.

Some specific steps by Israel could thus improve the climate in the Middle East. Expecting Israel to join the NPT or alter its policy of nuclear ambiguity is a nonstarter; efforts pressuring Israel in this direction will only backfire. [7] Still, Israel could move forward with other arms control measures, such as ratifying the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the CTBT (building on its recent signing of a facilities agreement with the CTBT Organization) and joining the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). At the 2005 NPT Review Conference, Israel could also reaffirm its commitment to join the NPT in the future if certain security conditions are met, such as peace treaties with all of its neighbors and the establishment of a verifiable weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-free zone (WMDFZ)—to include long-range missile capabilities—throughout the region. [8] The United States should encourage Israel to take such steps by offering assurances that renewed political attention to regional arms control will extend beyond a focus on the weapons themselves to include the broader agenda of transforming the security environment and nature of political relations in the region.

Moreover, because one cannot divorce nuclear arms control from other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, a comprehensive approach is necessary if arms control is to be a serious endeavor in the region. In particular, Egypt and Syria should be encouraged to join the CWC. Even if Syria is unlikely to move forward on the CWC until Israel’s posture on the NPT changes, Syria could take other nonproliferation steps, such as ratifying the BWC and the CTBT and subscribing to the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation.

Expectations in Europe that Syria may follow the Libyan model of completely ending its WMD programs may be unwarranted, [9] but the growing European attention to Syria in relation to weapons of mass destruction, especially its chemical weapons program, in conjunction with increasing U.S. pressure should continue. The European refusal to conclude its Trade and Cooperation Agreement with Syria until Damascus accepted the EU’s new standard nonproliferation clause is a welcome step. [10] Europe’s new Neighborhood Policy, which promises closer economic, political, and security relations with the EU’s neighbors in exchange for progress on a variety of “priority” areas including nonproliferation, may also prove a useful lever for European influence on these issues. The Neighborhood Policy, initiated after the EU’s enlargement in May 2004, applies to all non-EU participants in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or Barcelona process, including key actors in the regional proliferation context such as Israel, Syria, and Egypt. [11]

Renewed Regional Security Dialogue

Specific steps taken by individual Middle Eastern actors can improve regional security, but ultimately the region needs a multilateral regional security process to address the interrelated web of security perceptions and vulnerabilities and the underlying sources for proliferation in the region. Such a process should work toward the creation of a WMDFZ in the long run, along the lines of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in Latin America. Given the political and security realities in the Middle East at present, however, a more realistic short-term agenda could focus on practical confidence-building measures in areas such as conflict prevention, misperception, and limitation of damage should conflict occur.

The short-lived history of the only official multilateral security experiment to date in the Middle East—the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group of the Arab-Israeli multilateral
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peace process—demonstrates that such an agenda is possible.\[12\] Established with the Madrid peace conference in 1991, the ACRS process accomplished more than many thought was possible in this region, even if it ultimately collapsed in 1995. As the co-sponsor of the group, the United States sought to structure the ACRS group based on previous arms control experience in the European and U.S.-Soviet context, suggesting that incremental approaches to arms control tended to precede formal arms control measures, such as the banning of certain military activities or actual reductions in capabilities.

Consequently, the ACRS group focused on incremental confidence-building measures to encourage cooperative security norms rather than on a more advanced arms control agenda. After the Oslo breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian relations in 1993, the ACRS group engaged in a number of conceptual and operational confidence-building activities, such as the drafting of a declaration of principles for regional security and arms control; the creation of a regional security center; the establishment of a communications network; the production of a Pre-notification of Certain Military Activities agreement; an Exchange of Military Activities document; and a number of maritime confidence-building measures such as Search and Rescue (SAR) and Prevention of Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) agreements.

Despite this active agenda, the ACRS group’s demise was brought about largely by the dispute between Israel and Egypt over the Israeli nuclear issue. Egyptian pressure on Israel to sign the NPT increased tension in the group and essentially held all other activities in the process hostage to this issue. Its progress was also limited by setbacks on the bilateral peace process tracks as well as by the exclusion of key regional parties from the process, most notably Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

The ACRS experience underscores that regional security dialogue can be fruitful and confidence-building measures in a variety of areas are possible. Future efforts, however, will need to adequately address Egyptian and other Arab concerns over the Israeli nuclear arsenal while assuring the Israelis that this will not be the sole focus of such discussions. The ACRS process thus demonstrates the need to work both on longer-term disarmament goals as well as shorter-term regional security confidence-building and cooperative activity. Moreover, a renewed regional dialogue must include the actors who were absent from the ACRS group if the process is to be comprehensive and address the full range of regional security relationships and concerns.

After the demise of the ACRS process, the prospects for a renewed, regional arms control dialogue appeared dim, despite a variety of unofficial track-two dialogues.\[13\] Yet, in the aftermath of the Iraq war, which highlighted weapons of mass destruction and made clear that Iraq desired to maintain a nuclear deterrent even though it did not actually possess such an active weapons program after 1991,\[14\] attention is once again being focused on a regional arms control agenda. The ongoing crisis with Iran as well as the positive developments with Libya have only further fueled interest in re-establishing some sort of official regional process.

IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei underscored the critical need for a regional security dialogue during his visit to Israel in July 2004. As a result, ElBaradei secured the agreement of regional parties, including Israel, to participate in an IAEA conference this January, which will examine how negotiations established WMDFZs in other regions and what lessons these efforts might offer the Middle East. This meeting is a one-time event, however, and, although useful, cannot replace a more durable regional dialogue process with a broader agenda.

The recent Euro-Med agreement to start a dialogue on weapons of mass destruction is also a positive step. It will include both Israel and Syria, which participate in the Barcelona process. But it cannot replace a dialogue that includes key extra-regional actors such as the United States and critical regional parties in the Persian Gulf that are not part of the Barcelona process. In order to improve understandings of mutual threat perceptions and engage in confidence-building measures in such areas as surprise attack, transparency, conventional stockpiles, and the like, in addition to longer-term disarmament goals, a comprehensive regional security process is essential.

Many will argue that the creation of a multilateral regional security dialogue is impossible absent a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Few can doubt that progress on the Middle East peace process would create a more favorable climate for regional arms control, as occurred in the early 1990s with
the ACRS process. A successful Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, for example, could generate momentum and provide political cover for the resumption of a regional arms control process, as would serious Israeli commitment to dismantling settlements deep inside Palestinian territory. Yet, the absence of progress on the peace process also should not provide an excuse for doing nothing. The WMD revelations in Iraq, the recent Libyan decision to dismantle its WMD programs, the growing vulnerability felt by Syria, and the current focus on the Iranian nuclear issue provide an opening for moving a regional arms control agenda forward even in the current environment, as the emergence of recent initiatives suggests.

A new regional security process can work toward a WMDFZ in the long run while maintaining a more pragmatic agenda in the short term. The fact that even under the best political conditions a WMDFZ in the Middle East may never fully transpire should not lead the international community and the region itself to avoid confronting the proliferation crisis and taking steps now to avoid further destabilization. Ultimately, a transformation of political relationships and the creation of a broad, durable, and effective regional arms control process will be key to meeting the proliferation challenges from the Middle East that so threaten stability today.

ENDNOTES


7. Indeed, the International Atomic Energy Agency’s revelations regarding Iranian violations and growing capabilities have only reinforced the Israeli rationale for maintaining its current nuclear stance. See Emily B. Landau, “ElBaradei’s Message to Israel: Regional Security Dialogue,” Tel Aviv Notes, no. 106, July 15, 2004.


10. In December 2003, the European Union adopted a nonproliferation strategy and has since agreed to include a nonproliferation clause in all agreements with third parties; the Syrians were the first to put this clause to the test. For the text of the nonproliferation clause, see http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/st14997.en03.pdf.
11. For the European Neighborhood Policy, see [http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/policy_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/enp/policy_en.htm).


Dalia Dassa Kaye is currently a visiting professor of political science at the University of Amsterdam. Kaye has published many articles on Middle East security issues and is author of *Beyond the Handshake: Multilateral Cooperation in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process*.

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