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The Middle East Regional Security Regime and CSBMs

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Background paper

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Abbreviations

ACRS	Arms Control and Regional Security
API	Arab Peace Initiative
CSBMs	Confidence and Security Building Measures
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IAEC	Israel Atomic Energy Commission
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
MEWMDFZ	Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
WMDFZ	Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone

1. Introduction

The Middle East is well short of having any type of security regime and is one of the few regions lacking any type of cooperative security regime whatsoever. There are some interstate frameworks, for example the Arab League, but they do not encompass the entire region, and they are quite hollow when it concerns real substance. During the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, the US tried to establish a collective security regime in the Middle East based on similar regimes that had been established in other regions as a way of containing the Soviet Union and preventing expansion of the Eastern Bloc. This alliance, the Baghdad Pact, failed because it proved incapable of rising to the challenge of the wave of Arab Nationalism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. In May 1981 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established. It is a political alliance of the Arab States bordering the Persian Gulf and located on the Arabian Peninsula. It was also supposed to serve as a kind of military alliance. For that purpose a unified military presence, Peninsula Shield Force, was established by the member states. So far it is the only regime of its kind that has proved to be resilient and to some extent effective, mostly because it is composed of like-minded monarchies, obsessed with the survival of their regimes. The GCC demonstrated its usefulness when, after the protests of the Arab Spring had engulfed Bahrain and endangered the Sunni monarchy, Bahrain's government requested the intervention of the Peninsula Shield Force and police from the GCC, who arrived on 14 March and participated in the 'successful' suppression of the rebellion. In any event, the GCC is a merely sub-regional organization¹ and it is not a cooperative security regime aimed at regulating and establishing norms and rules of the game among states that have adversarial relationships.

The only real intergovernmental attempt to discuss the establishment of a cooperative regional security regime took place in the first half of the 1990s within the Arms Control and Regional Security Group (ACRS) of the Multilateral Negotiations that were part of the Madrid Process that started at the end of 1991. In this group the parties tried to emulate to some extent the European experience by adopting ideas from the Helsinki process. This ambitious attempt failed and the talks collapsed for two main reasons: the failure to reach understandings on the path towards arms control agreements, especially in the nuclear domain, and the linkage between the multilateral negotiations and the bilateral ones, coupled with the failure of the bilateral negotiations and the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian track. It is also possible that the very formal and institutional nature of the European security regime was unsuitable for the Middle East, a region that lacks interstate cooperation in most of the important areas and is characterized by a multitude of unresolved interstate disputes and a very high level of mutual distrust. Nevertheless, ACRS has had some important achievements as the parties were successful in identifying a number of CSBMs that may also be useful in the Middle East environment. There were some very modest beginnings of the implementation of some of these CSBMs by a number of participant states, but the stalemate in the bilateral tracks led to the end of the multilateral talks, and these very cautious first steps were withdrawn.

Now, 17 years later, the multilateral tracks are still in a complete deadlock. It seems the present situation of the Middle East peace process is worse than it has ever been since the beginning of the Madrid process in 1991. The parties are not capable of re-starting any

¹ Jordan and Morocco were invited to join the GCC in 2011 following the events of the 'Arab Spring' as a way of expanding the alliance of the monarchies to assure their survival, but it seems it was not a serious offer and it simply faded.

meaningful negotiations, and certainly not of concluding any agreements. On top of that, the shockwaves produced by the so-called Arab Spring, the rebellions of Arab populations against their dictatorial regimes, have not settled down and have created an atmosphere fraught with uncertainty. Whereas, in the past, governments could assess the governments in the neighbouring states and have a good grasp of their behaviour, in the present atmosphere of uncertainty everyone expects the worst of their neighbours and the level of mutual distrust is only rising. The new developments also make resumption of the bilateral negotiations in the different tracks more difficult and in some cases utterly impossible. Can Syria resume peace negotiations with Israel when it is engulfed in a civil war? Can Lebanon start peace negotiations with Israel without Syrian consent?

Another development that may have significant implications on the ability to resume Mideast regional security talks is the 2010 NPT Review Conference decision to convene in 2012 a conference to discuss the establishment of a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (MEWMDFZ). Only recently, a senior Israeli official, the director of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC), announced that Israel had decided not to participate in this conference. Following that decision, it will be difficult to convene the conference on the scheduled dates, in December 2012, if at all. Israeli willingness to discuss a MEWMDFZ will probably be the condition for Arab consent to include Israel in regional security discussions.

Taking all that into account, Middle East states will probably find it very difficult to perceive that serious talks on a Middle East cooperative security regime can resume in the foreseeable future. The feeling is that some answers to a number of critical questions should be given before this idea can be seriously considered:

Assuming that the bilateral talks are not going to be re-started soon as well as the low probability of real talks, is it possible to de-link regional security talks from the bilateral track and the WMDFZ talks and resume the one set of talks without the other?

How can this kind of regional talks start when the states are so obsessed with the repercussions and uncertainties of the Arab Spring, of which some of them are still at their epicentre?

Is it possible to adopt a less formal and institutional approach to these talks and the arrangements they strive to develop?

2. De-linking the multilateral track and nuclear talks from the bilateral tracks

The consistent Arab position is that any advances in regional cooperation that will include Israel are dependent on success of the bilateral tracks. The Arab states suspect that Israeli support of regional talks, regional security regime and CSBMs is only an Israeli ploy aimed at achieving 'normalization' of the Israeli relationship with the Arab world without Israel's willingness to pay the price for that, whether in terms of bilateral peace agreements with the neighbouring Arab nations, or in terms of progress towards nuclear disarmament. One good example is the 'Arab Peace Initiative' (API). According to the language of the API, adopted by the Arab League in 2002 and repeatedly re-confirmed since then by the Arab League states, if the tracks are concluded successfully, the Arab countries will 'consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region.' That is a very clear commitment for the establishment of a

cooperative regional security regime following the conclusion of final agreements in the bilateral tracks with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon. That raises a ‘chicken and egg question’ because it is possible to argue that the conclusion of the bilateral agreements may be dependent on some confidence-building processes that will enable the parties to take the security risks ensuing from the conclusion of these agreements. It is also possible to argue that the growing uncertainties at play in the Middle East only emphasize the need for forums that will provide effective inter-state dialogue and the lack of such dialogue denies the parties one of the main instruments for dealing with such uncertainties. The problem is that political leaders are risk-averse in most cases, and they are reluctant to taking risks, especially in times of uncertainty. On one hand, it is difficult to assume that the Israeli leadership will take bold initiatives in its relationship with its Arab neighbours and make it easier for them to start a dialogue with Israel. On the other hand, the Arab populist regimes, and especially the new ones, are more reluctant to having dialogue with Israel because of a combination of their ideology (mostly in the case of Islamic parties that came to power) and fear of their constituency’s virulently anti-Israeli stance.

All of that implies that it will be extremely difficult to resume talks on a cooperative regional security regime in the Middle East unless the talks are informal and without any commitment by the participating governments. That can be changed in one of two scenarios. The first scenario would be one in which there is a surprising breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian track. The second scenario is one in which Israel changes its approach towards participation in the MEWMDFZ conference scheduled for December 2012. If Israel does participate in the conference, it can make its participation conditional on an understanding that the conference and the process of dialogue that it will start will discuss the MEWMDFZ in the wider context of the security realities of the ME, and within it the necessary security arrangements that should be established to provide security to all. The probability of either of these two scenarios is very low.

3. Dealing with the turbulences of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring makes dialogue between Arab States and Israel even more difficult. Egypt’s new Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammed Mursi, is not willing to utter the word Israel and is always looking for indirect ways of dealing with Israel. On the other hand, the Arab Spring augmented the role of civil society and generally contributed to free speech. The real threats to free speech and views now are represented less by the regimes and more by the wrath of incited mobs (the ugly face of civil society). The Islamic political parties that are on the rise are adjusting to their new positions that give them not only new powers but also new responsibilities, and the old answers built upon their Islamic ideology are not good enough to deal with this difficult transition. To some extent it creates an openness that did not exist before. That may make it easier for individuals to participate in informal talks, and even easier to recruit new participants to these talks and not the usual suspects: liberal intellectuals from the old elites.

The conclusion to be drawn from the discussion so far is quite clear. The only really open venue for discussion of regional security is continuation of Track 2 talks that will develop ideas, market them to the political echelons and try to present very cautiously to public opinion. Overly aggressive public discussion of such sensitive subjects in the loaded atmosphere of the Middle East may, in many cases, only alienate the political class. It can

also be assumed that the participants in these Track 2 talks will only come from one subset of the Middle East, from states that either were democratized enough to enable free speech or from states in which the political leadership allows this kind of activity even though these states are not so democratic. The special challenge is the need to include in these Track 2 talks members of the emerging new political and intellectual elites in the Arab states (especially Islamists) as part of their learning more about a process which is new to them and growing accustomed to their status within this process. This adaptation process by new government leadership will be an important benchmark for the success of these initiatives.

In some limited cases it may be possible for Israel to start bilateral discussion of regional security with some states as an offshoot of bilateral security discussions. Sometimes the developments of the Arab Spring provided the basis for more intensive security dialogue with Israel's neighbours. An interesting example is Egypt. The fall of the Mubarak regime created a political and security vacuum in the Sinai Peninsula. That was used by radical Jihadist and Palestinian groups to establish a growing armed presence in this area, creating severe security problems for Egypt and Israel, which borders the Sinai. The two parties have no other choice but to increase security cooperation and intensify their security dialogue. These talks are an opportunity that can be used to broaden the scope of topics discussed.

4. What should be discussed in these Track 2 talks?

The topics for discussion should be based on the ACRS experience and lessons and the very rich history of regional security Track 2 initiatives. The first area of focus might be the experience gathered from other regions. A major lesson is the need to look for models that are different from the European one and are less formal and institutional. The Asian-Pacific model, a combination of an orderly Track 2 and governmental dialogues, may be a good point of reference.

The second area of focus should be the scope of participation. One main point is the definition of the region for the purpose of regional security. It seems this was dealt with quite effectively in ACRS where a good working definition was worked out. The only modification that should be discussed pertains to the place of Turkey. In ACRS it was considered an out-of-region actor because of its orientation towards NATO and Europe. The changes in Turkey's orientation towards the Middle East in recent years make it necessary to consider it part of the Middle East. Middle East security is strongly influenced by out-of-region powers. That makes it mandatory to include some of these powers in regional security arrangements, but in a way that will differentiate between them and the regional members.

The security arrangements and their discussion should be inclusive. One of the problems of the ACRS was the exclusion of several important states of the ME. That does not mean that opening of Track 2 dialogues should be dependent on the ability to have participants from all states of the region. Everyone will be invited but the process can start with those that are willing to participate. Others may join in later. Even implementation of certain steps, especially CSBMs, can start with a subset of the region's states.

According to the revised ACRS definition, the Middle East is a large area that stretches from Morocco and Mauritania to Iran and from Sudan and Yemen to Turkey. There are security issues that are common to this entire area but there are security issues of a more local nature that are relevant to particular sub-regions. In general, the Middle East can be divided into three sub-regions: the Levant (the main area of the Arab-Israeli conflict), the Gulf area,

and the Maghreb. There is some overlapping among these sub-regions and states can belong to more than one region. This can be dealt with through discussion of security arrangements based on the idea of a 'geometry variable,' namely, by devising a package of arrangements. Some of them would be for the entire region and others for specific sub-regions.

Confidence- and security-building measures should be an important part of the discussion. The lack of these kinds of measures in the Middle East is striking. If we take another volatile area, the Indian Peninsula, in comparison, we see that in the Indian Peninsula, as in the Middle East, the conflict seems intractable. In addition, it is also one that has had a long series of high- and low-intensity armed conflicts. Nevertheless, the two parties, India and Pakistan, were successful in agreeing on an extensive list of CSBMs. In the Middle East even feeble attempts at unilateral CSBMs did not last for long.

In ACRS a Helsinki Process-like list of CSBMs was discussed and their definition agreed, but it was decided that the implementation of these CSBMs would be voluntary and not mandatory. As a result, only very few states manifested willingness to implement these CSBMs even before the entire process collapsed. It may be helpful to discuss fewer CSBMs with more probability of implementation.

One area in which CSBMs may be more useful in the reality of the Middle East is the ballistic missiles domain. Proliferation of these systems is very common in the Middle East, and their usage is also becoming common. There is a specific problem concerning the short warning times involved with these systems. CSBM-like advance notification of ballistic missiles tests can be a good way of easing unnecessary tensions.

5. Conclusions

Barring real progress in the Middle East peace process it is difficult to imagine the region's states seriously considering issues of regional security including establishment of cooperative security regimes and implementation of CSBMs. The upheavals of the Arab Spring make it even more difficult to assume that such progress will materialize or that states will be willing to seriously engage in cooperative regional security means without such progress. States will continue to operate in the security domain driven by zero-sum game thinking.

At the same time it is important to continue developing and exploring ideas for the establishment of cooperative regional security regimes that will be suitable for the Middle East. That our region has so many security problems and tensions and no hope of finding cooperative ways of dealing with some of these problems is a luxury the region's states cannot afford.

At present, engagement with cooperative regional security regimes can be made via informal frameworks only. It is to be hoped some officials can participate in these frameworks in their personal capacity, thus making it easier for ideas developed in these frameworks to trickle into the states' systems. It will help to create and preserve a regional security community that will be available when the time is ripe for these ideas.

These informal frameworks should start to operate even when there is only a subset of states that are willing to allow their people to participate in such frameworks; but the process should be inclusive and open to all states. It is to be hoped that more states will join in as the process unfolds. It does not make sense to exclude states because of the nature of their regime or their animosity towards other states. The whole idea of the discussion is to deal with these conflicts.

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The process should retain a high level of flexibility. It is not a matter of one size fits all. The principle of a 'geometry variable' can prove to be very useful in this context. Flexibility will also be expressed in the willingness to include in the process out-of-region states that have a real influence on the region's security or that may prove useful because of their extensive experience with cooperative security regimes.