

Focus

Building Sustainable Security for Southwest Asia: A Regional Integration Process of the Highest Priority

A nuclear weapons-free zone is the only sustainable option for regional security and in the best interests of both Israel and Iran.

by [Ali Fathollah-Nejad](#)

With war drums against Iran resounding ever more forcefully and the revolts in the Arab world taking a tumultuous path, the question of a vision for sustainable stability for Southwest Asia, often referred to as the “Middle East,” remains to be resolved.¹ The lack of both security and cooperation is an enduring malady plaguing the region. The present article will shed some light on the rationale behind the need for a regional integration process, focusing on the element of security.

Civil Society Effort toward Common Security and Regional Cooperation

Some years ago a civil society initiative for a Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME) was spearheaded in Germany by peace and conflict researcher Prof. Mohssen Massarrat in collaboration with the German branches of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms (IALANA).² After decades of violent conflict in the region, the initiators chose not to sit and wait anymore, but instead decided to assemble civil society actors from all countries concerned in order to promote a perspective for peace, security and cooperation — something state actors neglected. One of its key aims is the creation of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone (abbreviated as WMDFFZ). A first workshop was held in Germany in January 2011, and a second took place in late October 2012 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in cooperation with its Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD). The meeting was linked to an annual CISD conference on a related subject, the 6th SOAS/British Pugwash London Conference on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

So far CSCME has brought together civil society forces from almost all countries of the region. Unified in the desire to break out of the vicious cycle of regional militarization, they want to offer a vision for common

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security and regional cooperation to security policy, the CSCME process comprises a number of fields for cooperation, including the areas of socioeconomic development, cross-border resource management, interreligious and -cultural dialogue and health. It is hoped that the next expert conference will take place in the region itself, in view of holding a founding conference for the civil society CSCME process in the near future.³ An international conference on a Middle East WMD-Free Zone was planned for 2013 in Helsinki. Meanwhile it has been postponed, but hopefully it will still take place. Ideally, concrete steps towards the realization of this aim will be defined there and civil society groups involved.⁴

The “Arab Spring”: The Necessity of a Veritable Regional Security Architecture

An important topic of the last workshop in London was the “Arab Spring,” which demonstrated that the pejoratively dismissed “Arab Street” is not a passive object for authoritarian rule, but that societies can take the offensive in fighting for their own needs and interests, and eventually bring about change. This development has emboldened the initiative for a CSCME as it showed that civil-society pressure can indeed yield tangible results.⁵

Importantly, if we comprehend the revolutionary process in the Arab world to be motivated by a triad of popular demands — namely the pursuit of socioeconomic justice, civil liberties and sovereign independence — the question of security is intimately connected to the latter (especially for those countries so far over-dependent on non-regional powers). This realization is not limited to civil society discussions, but has already reached policy circles. Indeed, in January, the EastWest Institute has published a report in which it advocates for a regional security arrangement. It states that:

Southwest Asia now is undergoing greater changes in its security environment than at any time in the last half century. Among the many forces at play is a growing sense among key regional states that their security and prosperity have to be managed much more through their own independent, regional diplomacy than through reliance on outside powers. As those major powers signal a declining willingness to bear the material and human costs of security in the region, regional states have new opportunities to set the agenda rather than be policytakers subject to pressure from outside. In spite of deep conflicts among some neighbors, the states of the region should consider the opportunity that this weakening commitment by remote powers now presents. Now may be the best chance for countries in Southwest Asia to work collectively to put behind them the violent aftermath of imperialism, colonialism, liberation struggles, and bloody dictatorships. The violence of recent decades was an obstacle to effective decision making for long-term peaceful development. War and violence force states to choose sides and to make new enemies. A new regional security consensus among all states in Southwest Asia is the way to break out of that cycle of crisis, and it is the best protection against untoward ambitions of more powerful states, either from inside or outside the region.⁶

The report demands that both the United States and the European Union be actively engaged in assisting such a process, which would require nothing less than a paradigm shift.

The Iran–Israel Conundrum: A Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ) as the Only Sustainable Solution

However, these implicit den... ..curity and coexistence, inherent in the Arab uprisings, are not the only factor which propels us to contemplate new paths and solutions in this region. In addition, there is the ongoing spectacle around the so-called Iran conflict,⁷ which seems to be tilting more toward war than toward a peaceful resolution. This has again produced heated debates on where the conflict is heading. With the majority of the policy debates almost endlessly vacillating between a rock (war) and a hard place (sanctions), it is clear that neither option will alleviate concerns regarding nuclear proliferation and the well-being of civilian populations.⁸ The only meaningful way forward would be to abandon bogus policy alternatives which have proven counterproductive and have — quite predictably — pushed the conflict toward the brink of war. Instead, it would be best to focus efforts on bringing about regional disarmament and ultimately a NWFZ. In order to avoid a collision resulting from contentions over nuclear monopoly (Israel) and deterrence (Iran), the creation of such a zone would arguably constitute the only meaningful solution. Indeed, this illustrates the importance of bringing both Iran and Israel to the table at the above-mentioned international conference.

Why a NWFZ Would Be in Israel's and Iran's Long-Term Interest

Contrary to widespread assumptions, it can be argued that both Tel Aviv and Tehran have a long-term strategic interest in the creation of such a zone.

For Israel, the danger would lie in the nuclearization of other important countries in the region such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.⁹ Such a “balance of threats” would then have an unfavorable impact on Israel's security and certainly curtail its military deterrence capacity toward its neighbors.¹⁰ The “military solution” against the nuclear armament of a larger country — as can be observed in the case of Iran — is not considered a sustainable one, also by Israeli strategists. Thus, the only solution to ensure effective security would be regional disarmament.¹¹

For its part, if Iran over time were to become a nuclear weapons state, that development would almost certainly trigger the nuclearization of its geopolitically weaker neighbors (especially those on the Arabian Peninsula). In turn, this proliferation of nuclear weaponry in the region would cause Iran abruptly to lose its natural, geographically determined power position in Western Asia.¹² Thus, in the medium to long term the possession of nuclear weapons would constitute a great disservice to the grand strategic interests of the country.

If decision-makers on both sides are far-sighted, it is hard to see how they can avoid coming to the conclusion that fragile short-term security calculations are no guarantee of a secure future. That goal can only be achieved through a NWFZ.

The Situation Necessitates Alternative Approaches

The above considerations are not meant to obscure potential adversities to creating a NWFZ. They are intended to underscore that a mature view of national interest might offer a way out of the current stalemate. A key point

here is that sometimes the e.....enges cannot (or can no longer) be met by resorting to the all-too-familiar repertoire of alleged *Realpolitik* options. Indeed, that case would probably lead to the continuation of containment policies predicated on heavy military build-up in an already highly volatile and militarized region — a policy that will not sustainably solve the issue. In such circumstances, it is much more advisable to look at other, even opposite, directions to find a solution. For example, the centuries-long, bloody arch rivalry between France and Germany was unexpectedly overcome in the post-World War II period. History shows us that the Iranian–Israeli rivalry is of a geopolitical nature, and as such it is by no means immune to resolution.¹³

In a similar argument of necessity, in a report released this February, Rouzbeh Parsi, a research fellow at the European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris, advocates for a “common security framework” for the region and highlights the importance of Europe taking the initiative:

A positive contribution by the EU at this stage would be to use the historical experience of its own creation. Just as a positive peace between France and Germany lies at the heart of the European Union, a change of the zero-sum game metrics in the Middle East would be a huge step forward. What the region needs is a common security framework, where no one is excluded and everyone’s security needs are taken into consideration. In the end, the best way to stem nuclear proliferation and an arms race is by changing the threat perceptions and diminishing the mistrust that motivates and fuels proliferation. In this endeavour the EU must take the initiative since the US has had very little experience of day-to-day exchanges with Iran over the last 30 years and any given US President faces considerable domestic political forces dead set against any kind of *rapprochement* with Iran. [...] Only with a clear-eyed appraisal of the region as it is today, rather than as Western powers feel it ought to be, and an ambition to craft a long-term strategic vision does it become evident that the *status quo ante* of balancing regional powers through rewards and punishments cannot be revived.¹⁴

The current situation in the region calls for alternative approaches in order to avoid a disastrous war on Iran with global ramifications. Many commentators and organizations have already pointed to the necessity of building a regional security architecture and a WMD- or nuclear weaponsfree zone.¹⁵ In a recent article on the escalating conflict surrounding Iran, Phyllis Bennis, a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington and of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, points to the dark prospects if a WMD-free zone were not to be realized:

In the medium and longer term, we must put the urgent need for a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East back on the table and on top of our agenda. Such a multi-country move would insure Iran would never build a nuclear weapon, that Israel would give up its existing 200 to 300 high-density nuclear bombs and the submarinebased nuclear weapons in its arsenal, and that the U.S. would keep its nuclear weapons out of its Middle East bases and off its ships in the region’s seas. Otherwise, we face the possibility of the current predicament repeating itself in an endless loop of Groundhog Daystyle nuclear crises, each one more threatening than the last.¹⁶

While there can be little doubt that the region is in need of a prospect for common security and intra-regional cooperation, there can be no less doubt that the so-far preferred policies affecting the region have proven unsuccessful at best. The model of a Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME) has two important assets. First, as a civil-society initiative it is perfectly suited to respond to the growing demand of participation by the region’s citizenry in the wake of the Arab

Revolts. Secondly, the complex and multi-faceted conflicts in the region can only be addressed in a sustainable manner in the CSCME framework. Here, the continuing and increasing insistence from diverse civil society actors will be indispensable to encourage policy-makers to pave the way for bringing sustainable peace and security to the region.

In order to lay the first foundation stone and at the same time send out de-escalating signals for the conflict around Iran and Israel, active political support from the West will be crucial to make the Middle East WMD-Free Zone international conference a success. If the security dilemmas afflicting the region continue to be ignored or to deal with escalating sanctions and ultimatums, it will only be a matter of time before the spectacle at Europe's doorstep will flare up in an inferno.

This article is based on two previously published shorter articles: "A Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East," Fair Observer, 2 December 2011, and "A Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East," guest column, Informed Comment, 1 March 2012. Both can be accessed via his website fathollah-nejad.com.

Endnotes

1. For a critical examination of the term "Middle East," see Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The 'Middle East': From Past and Present Attributions to a Future Regional Identity?," *Polyvocia: SOAS Journal of Graduate Research*, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, Vol. 2 (March 2010), pp. 3–20. For the purpose of the present article, Southwest Asia is used as defined and qualified in a recent report by the EastWest Institute: "[...] Southwest Asia is the area from the Eastern Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea in the west to Pakistan and Afghanistan in the east. It comprises Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and adjacent maritime areas. Such regional descriptors as Southwest Asia can never be watertight, and there will be important forces that speak against this or that framing, even as alternate regional framings recommend themselves." (EastWest Institute, *Bridging Fault Lines: Collective Security in Southwest Asia*, New York: EastWest Institute, 2012, p. 5, Footnote 3).
2. See the CSCME website at <http://www.ippnw.de/frieden/konfliktregionen/cscmekszmno.html>.
3. See Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Konferenz für Sicherheit und Zusammenarbeit im Mittleren und Nahen Osten: Eine zivilgesellschaftliche Initiative [Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East: A Civil-Society Initiative]," *WeltTrends: Zeitschrift für internationale Politik*, Vol. 20, No. 83 (March–April), pp. 98–99.
4. See Elizabeth Whitman, "Finland to Host Conference for a WMD-Free Zone," *Inter Press Service*, 19 October 2011.
5. On the London CSCME workshop, see Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "A New Security Architecture for the Middle East?," *Fair Observer*, 13 December 2012. [Translation from "Eine KSZE für den Nahen Osten? »Arabischer Frühling« zeigt: Druck der Zivilgesellschaft wirkt," Interview by Thomas Kachel, *Neues Deutschland* (Berlin), 8 November 2011, p. 8.]
6. EastWest Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
7. See Rouzbeh Parsi, "A Never-Ending Spectacle: The IAEA Report and Iran's Nuclear Programme," *Analysis*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 10 November 2011.
8. See "No Military Action Will Prevent Nuclear Proliferation," Statement by the Executive Committee of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), 8 February 2012. Available at <http://peaceandhealthblog.com/2012/02/08/no-military-action/>; and Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Collateral Damage of Iran Sanctions," *The ColdType Reader*, No. 46 (May 2010), pp. 56–57.
9. See Mitchell Bard [Executive Director, American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise], "Arab Nukes: Is Iran the only Muslim Nation in the Middle East seeking to Develop Nuclear Technology," *The Cutting Edge News*, 5 March 2012.
10. See the comments by Alex Fishman, journalist with the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Tel

Aviv), "Israel Divided Over Plan : Lia Tarachansky reports that a split has developed between Israeli security establishment and Netanyahu," *The Real News Network*, 30 November 2011. For Israel's 'deterrence capacity,' see Norman G. Finkelstein, "*This Time We Went Too Far*": *Truth and Consequences of the Gaza Invasion*, New York: OR Books, 2010.

11. On an Israeli perspective on why a nuclear weapons free zone would ensure real security for the country, see Hillel Schenker, "The Other Iran Option," *Haaretz*, 11–12 November 2011.

12. See Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Playing Nuclear Politics: The Islamic Republic has Little to Gain from Acquiring the Bomb," *guardian.co.uk*, 20 February 2009; the comments by the EUISS' Rouzbeh Parsi on "Empire", Al Jazeera English, 1 December 2011.

13. See Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliances: The Secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

14. Rouzbeh Parsi, "Introduction: Iran at a Critical Juncture," in: *ibid.* (ed.) (2012) *Iran: A Revolutionary Republic in Transition*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) (*Chaillot Paper*, No. 128 [9 February]), pp. 21–22.

15. Amongst them the two Nobel Peace Prize-holding organizations, the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs (see its memo "Towards a Conference on a Nuclear Weapon or WMD-Free Middle-East: Some Points for Consideration," 26 September 2011, http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/MEWMDFZ_26Sept_FIN.htm) and IPPNW as well as the German branches of IALANA and the International Federation of Human Rights. See also Sam S. Shoamanesh & Hiran Abtahi, "The Case for a Union: A Majestic Region-Wide Union May Well Transform the Strategic Calculus of the Sceptics and the Spoilers," *Global Brief* (Canada), 19 February 2010; Noam Chomsky, "The Iranian Threat: The US Is Not Taking any Practical Steps to Ensure a Nuclear-Free Middle East," *AlJazeera.com*, 24 November 2011; the special issues of *International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2008) and of the **Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture**, Vol. 16, Nos. 3 & 4 (March 2010).

16. Phyllis Bennis, "Iran in the Crosshairs Again," *Red Pepper* (UK), March 2012.

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