



Keynote Address

The Great Acronym Carousel in the Middle East: WMD, MEWMDFZ, NPT, and UN

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I am very grateful to the Amman Security Colloquium for inviting me to address this distinguished audience on a rather daunting list of issues. These include the United Nations, disarmament, the establishment of a Middle East Zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and preparations for the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

In their letter of invitation from the joint organizing committee, Philip Smith and Ayman Khalil informed me that my subject is even more challenging, as this colloquium also aims to “examine the impact of regional turmoil in the Middle East.”

What is most extraordinary about this list of issues are the stakes involved both for the States in this region and for international peace and security. A great writer once said that “one day, sooner or later, we all wake up to a banquet of consequences”.¹ The consequences we would all face from any further use of weapons of mass destruction in this region are clear to everybody. Even the very existence of such weapons breeds mistrust and mutual suspicion, blocks avenues for confidence-building, and invites the further proliferation of such weapons, which would predictably be deemed necessary for deterring first strikes.

Fortunately, the world appears to be quite aware of the scope of these consequences. There has been no evidence of any global rush to acquire WMD. Yet there is plenty of evidence of the extent that such weapons are widely viewed in the world as abhorrent and deserving only the fates of abolition and total elimination. The great chorus of political voices calling for the elimination of all WMD, especially nuclear weapons, includes parliamentarians, mayors, religious leaders, women’s groups, environmentalists, lawyers, and former military and defence officials. The foot soldiers of disarmament are not only the peace groups—they clearly have plenty of allies not just from other civil society organizations but also among coalitions of concerned States.

We have witnessed in recent years the unfolding of a political process involving both governments and civil society working together to advance a humanitarian approach to disarmament. Large international conferences have been held in Norway and in Mexico on the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, and another one will take place next month in Austria. At the NPT Review Conference in 2010, language addressing such consequences was adopted by consensus in the conference’s Final Document and incorporated into the agreed Action Plan. And last month at a meeting of the General Assembly’s First Committee, New Zealand circulated a joint statement signed by 155 Member States expressing concern over the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons and calling for the elimination of such weapons—a statement signed by several of the States of this region.

One of the most noteworthy features of this emerging humanitarian disarmament movement concerns the support it is lending to a consensus statement in the Final Documents of both the 2000 and 2010 NPT Review Conference—namely, that the total elimination of nuclear weapons offers the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. In other words, the whole point of the humanitarian approach is to advance actual disarmament, not simply to attempt to limit the effects of such weapons or to reduce their risk of use. Once it is fully accepted that the risk of use derives from the very existence of such weapons, the door will be fully open to elaborating detailed plans for their elimination.

¹ Various versions have been attributed to Robert Lewis Stevenson.

Quite independent of the non-proliferation purpose of the NPT, the treaty also explicitly aims at advancing the goal of global nuclear disarmament, as is made clear in both the Preamble and Article VI of that treaty. The fact that the required nuclear disarmament negotiations have not yet occurred does not detract from the legal authority of that obligation.

A similar point can be made concerning another long-time NPT goal—namely, the goal of establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. This objective was expressly endorsed at the 2000 and 2010 NPT Review Conferences and it was also part of the “package deal” that led to the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995.

So in many ways, I do believe one can sincerely say that the future of the NPT is very much tied up with the future of nuclear disarmament and the future of the Middle East zone.

There will, in short, be consequences as the relationships between these issues evolve in the years ahead—consequences for the better, if disarmament commitments are fulfilled, and consequences for the worse, if disarmament is relegated to the category of some distant goal only to be addressed after the prior achievement of many other goals, including such modest ones as world peace, an end to all regional disputes, and the reduction to zero of the risk of WMD proliferation and terrorism.

There will also be consequences in terms of ongoing efforts to convene a conference on the establishment of the Middle East zone. While few expect that the simple act of convening such a conference would suffice to create such a zone, I would suspect that most observers both within this region and beyond would agree that it would at least open doors to future deliberations and a process that may have its own confidence-building effects. It is certainly true that the benefits of convening the conference would substantially overwhelm the real costs of failing to convene it—costs that include damage to the NPT regime, the aggravation of mistrust in the region, and new political obstacles to a viable peace process.

The more closely one examines these various subjects—commonly denoted by acronyms—the more one can see the relationships that exist between them, and the clearer it becomes how the fate of each affects the fate of all. Imagine for a moment a short list of acronyms that are constantly changing over time through a process that displays their mutual interdependence. Leading the way is WMD, a class of weaponry that includes the chemical weapons that were used in Syria—a tragedy followed by the country’s decisions to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC—another acronym) and to eliminate its chemical arsenal. The investigation of the alleged uses of these weapons was undertaken by the UN, the OPCW (the familiar acronym of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons), and the WHO—the World Health Organization. I was proud to have personally participated in this process, which left a profound impression on me concerning the horrible humanitarian effects of chemical weapons.

Other types of WMD are believed to exist, or may indeed exist, in other countries in this region—and as long as those perceptions continue, risks will continue to grow of both their proliferation and use. Here, the NPT’s logic about elimination offering the only absolute guarantee against use is particularly compelling—logic that applies both regionally and globally.

Now, I cannot possibly be expected to forecast the future of WMD in this region. There are just too many uncertainties, too many contingencies, and too much of a role for chance and unanticipated events.

Yet what I can say is that how this issue of the future of WMD gets resolved will have profound implications for regional and international peace and security. Imagine what a monumental political achievement it would be for the States of this region—despite their many other differences—to establish the Middle East WMD-free zone. It would strengthen the NPT, further de-legitimize the very existence of WMD, assist in building pressure for advancing global nuclear disarmament, improve the security of each State in the region which would no longer have to fear any WMD attack, and create a better environment for the peace process.

Obviously no international organization—including the UN or any coalition of the willing—can establish such a zone on its own in this region or any other—as this is a collective responsibility only of all the States of the region concerned. These States must lead the way—it is their duty to ensure that the establishment of the zone would serve their individual and collective security interests. Civil society can also contribute to this process, by voicing political support, engaging the media, and promoting studies and debates.

The UN, however, is not an entirely disinterested party in the outcome. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has long voiced his support for the establishment of this zone, and he has also been a leading advocate for progress in global nuclear disarmament. His five-point nuclear disarmament proposal launched on 24 October 2008 stressed the need to bring the rule of law to disarmament, either through the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of mutually reinforcing instruments with the same objective. In making his proposal, he specifically voiced his strong support for a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East.

Thus, the great carousel of acronyms in the Middle East will continue to turn in the years ahead. The UN will have its contributions to make, especially in helping to sustain and strengthen political and diplomatic support for the zone. The OPCW and IAEA will have their own roles to play in verifying that sensitive materials are not being used for weapons. The States Parties to the NPT will most certainly remain deeply concerned with the fate of the Middle East zone initiative, the humanitarian approach to disarmament, and global nuclear disarmament. Groups of States both inside and outside this region will also lend their own political support for progress in these areas.

In the end, it is not so much the motion of this carousel that is important, but its overall purpose. The objective of the various political and diplomatic processes for addressing WMD issues is not intended for popular entertainment and must not succumb to misuse for purposes of propaganda or to advance other goals. The purposes must remain to ensure that WMD will again never be used in this region and—to this end—to outlaw the presence in this region of any such weapons and to eliminate existing stockpiles. Yet the development that will have the greatest impact on international peace and security of future generations will be the achievement of a global WMD-free zone—so we have yet another acronym: a GWMDFFZ. While its fate is in the hands of governments and civil society groups worldwide, I believe that its prospects will be profoundly influenced by events underway in this region.

Ladies and gentlemen, the world has witnessed too many setbacks in disarmament. Military spending continues to soar, and with each increase, countries appear to become if anything less secure. The bloodshed and various ongoing arms races must stop and government priorities must become re-focused on meeting real needs for the social and economic progress of their citizens. If the participants at this colloquium can identify some concrete steps forward, you will perform a great public service indeed. With this in mind, I wish you all a very successful meeting.