ARMAMENT ESCALATION AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Amos A. Omojowo

Department of Planning, Research, Budget and Monitoring, University of Benin Teaching Hospital, Benin City

E-mail: andrewomojowo@yahoo.com +234-803-865-7582

and

Abu A. Braimah

Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma

Abstract

This paper is a critical evaluation of the challenges of the insecurity posed by the production of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the Middle East. It argues that the insecurity in the Middle East particularly arise as a result of the alteration of the regional military balance, destruction as a result of covert means and as a result of defense mechanism which has consistently endangered the lives and properties of the inhabitants of the Region. The paper concludes that unless the crisis between the Israelis and the Arab World is resolved and Arabs are prepared to accept the existence of the State of Israel and as long as the Israelis face what they regard as an existential threat, they are going to be reluctant to surrender what they see as an ultimate guarantor of their security.

Keywords: Proliferation, security, defence, destruction.

Introduction

The proliferation of nuclear weapons (nuclear, biological, chemical and missiles) in the Middle East, a region of tension, poses serious threats to peace and security in the Region and the world. This is so because the production of the weapons has posed a nuclear threat to both the superpowers and the other countries of the world, knowing fully well that the nuclear explosives and the means to deliver them could wreck terrible damage on the Region and the world (Schuster, 1991).

Proliferation already shapes the regional military balance in ways that affect the peacetime balance of power and influence, the structure of regional deterrence, and option for future war fighting: Israel relies on nuclear weapons, deterrence, and “soft strike” preemption. Iran has chemical and probably biological weapons, while nuclear effort continues. Iraq’s massive pre-Gulf war efforts gave it a major “break out” effort the moment UN and US containment efforts ceased and may give a successor threaten the existence of one or more states, or produce massive civilian casualties (Cordesman, 2004).

Many Middle Eastern States have resisted the temptation to deploy such weapons. At the same time, there are strong regional incentives to proliferate – at least to the point of developing the capability to rapidly manufacture and deploy some form of weapons of mass destruction. These incentives include: prestige, deterrence, war fighting, and arms race with neighbours.
some break out capability in spite of the Iraq war. Syria has significant chemical warfare capabilities and will soon acquire significant biological capabilities. Terrorists, extremists, and “proxies” are also making efforts to acquire such nuclear capabilities. This in turn, has already created the following unstable mix of possible contributions of adversaries and contingencies: Iran versus Iraq, Iraq versus Southern Gulf, US, and/or Israel, Israel versus Syria, Iran versus Southern Gulf, US, and/or Israel, Yemen use of gas, Saudi Arabia joins the club in reaction to Iranian and Iraqi proliferation, changing the nature of war fighting involving the Southern Gulf.

**Dangers in the Middle East**

There are a number of war fighting options where proliferation could affect the balance. The region has at least some leaders who believe in personal rule, are impatient with technical details and may be poorly prepared for crises when they do occur. The region’s military experts also tend to be far more interested in acquiring new weapons than the details of employing them, and it may be difficult for many countries to estimate weapons reliability and effects, particularly when weapons development is covert. Restraint and rational deterrence in peacetime could quickly turn into uncontrolled escalation in a major crisis.

The table below shows the countries that possess weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Type of Weapon of Mass Destruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Breakout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Deployed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Deployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Residual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Production of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East

Source: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, N. W. Washington D.C.

The probability that WMD in the Middle East will be used is actually low in most cases, though one can cite the use of both missiles and chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war and of missile in the 1991 Gulf war. At the same time, though, WMD can play an important role in providing local powers with strategic and diplomatic leverage. For example, the possession by Iran or Iraq of long range-missiles and nuclear warheads could contribute significantly to their ability to affect their neighbours’ policies on various issues (Georde, 2000). Thus, the use of WMD to obtain leverage in the region may be more significant than the likelihood that these weapons would actually be used.

One should also clearly understand, however, that the use of such weapons is so frightening and even their development is so potentially destabilizing, as to inspire caution by most Middle East leaders. It is worth noting that Israel’s edge in nuclear and missile capability has only been mentioned in connection with deterring Iraq’s use of WMD against Israel in 1991. In April, 2000, Lebanon’s defense minister suggested that in the event of an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Syria troops might fill the vacuum and target Israeli cities with missiles, a proposal that Syria quickly rejected. In Iran’s case, the drive to obtain WMD is arguably based partly on the fact that this route is much cheaper than rebuilding a large conventional army requiring expensive planes, tanks and other such equipment.

Concern over the WMD race also influences countries to seek defence mechanisms. Israel’s attempt to create a multi-level defence has been a major military priority. Turkey has become
increasingly interested in obtaining anti-missile defences and Egypt has pressed for other States to accept the non-proliferation Treaty. One issue that is likely to surface is the question of a declared American umbrella, in which allied States – especially in the Gulf would publicly offer protection from WMD attacks in order to deter threats from neighbours.

Atomic swords in the Middle East

Since the introduction of nuclear weapons into the Middle East conflict in 1973, Israel has pressed forward in bomb production as well as bomb delivery system. In 1974, Israeli Primier Yitzhak Rabin warned that Israel’s arsenal could inflict “ten times more destruction on Arab cities” than Arabs could inflict upon Israel. Israeli President, Ephraim Katzir in 1974 confirmed that Israeli bombs were in the “twenty-kiloton range,” indicating that the nuclear threat to incinerate whole sections of the Middle East was being used to ensure that Washington “doesn’t desert Israel morally and diplomatically under any future pressure from Middle East oil exporting countries” (Hoag, 1989). The Israeli Government in 1975 also requested that the United States supply it with lance missiles, which are designed primarily as short-range nuclear delivery systems, and Pershing missiles. The Pershing is one of America’s larger atomic weapons vehicles for theatre warfare, with a range of 450 miles that would allow Israel to strike the Aswan Dam with a nuclear bomb, loosing a flood that would obliterate all Egyptian civilization, which is congested in a tight band along the flood plain of the Nile River. The Pentagon balked at supplying Pershing to Israel. Israel has received lance missiles, which have a range of seventy miles. Furthermore, Israel has also been working to greatly enhance the efficiency of its enriched uranium and plutonium producing capacity, the process by which the core material of atomic bombs is made.

Conclusion and recommendations

The rate and nature of the destruction of lives and properties in the Middle East are largely due to availability and proliferation of WMD in the region. Since the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction revolves around mass destruction of people, altering the regional military balance, destruction as a result of covert means, building a strong defence mechanism among others, ameliorating it would have to entail capacity building for the people and participatory approach in resolving issues and problems among stakeholders in the Region.

All countries in the Middle East should negotiate and vigorously support WMD-Free Zones and to oppose the production, acquisition, or trade in separated plutonium or highly – enriched uranium and to support efforts in the Conference on disarmament and elsewhere to achieve an equitable global ban on such materials.

All countries in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world should, instead of engaging in the production of weapons of mass destruction, take to the alternative approach to build upon the idea of mutual gain. This will yield benefits from cooperation, self-restraint, reduction in weapons stockpiles, defence conversion. Projects should be developed to ensure that former weapons workers have gainful civilian jobs. This is the road map that all countries in the Middle East should choose.

References


Hoag, L. (1989), Arab Reach, the Secret War against Israel, London: Sidgwick and Jackson Limited.
