

Research Paper

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The Pursuit of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East

A New Approach



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Summary

- At the 1995 Review Conference (RevCon), states parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) decided to extend the time frame of the treaty indefinitely. This decision was made possible in part because Arab states were given assurances, through a resolution sponsored by the three depositary states of the NPT (Russia, the UK and the US), that those party to the NPT would pursue the goal of establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East.
- Over 20 years later that goal remains a distant possibility, despite several attempts by the signatories of the NPT to further the process. The most notable effort was the decision to hold a conference on the WMD-free zone (WMDFZ) in 2012, which has been postponed indefinitely.
- There are clear differences in the desired outcomes of the states involved in the process, which view the WMDFZ proposal as a means to an end. However, the differing ends they seek are disparate enough to warrant considering a new approach.
- Egypt wants to close the gap in WMD capabilities between the states in the Middle East, and has specifically highlighted Israel's nuclear programme. At the same time, Israel sees the negotiations as an opportunity to engage directly with the Arab states and pave the way for the normalization of ties between them.
- To progress beyond the current stalemate the states involved should create an additional forum, away from the NPT review process, to discuss the aim of establishing a WMDFZ and restore the original link between a WMDFZ and the Middle East peace process.

Introduction

At the 1995 Review Conference (RevCon), the states parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) decided to extend the time frame of the treaty indefinitely. This decision was adopted without a vote and made possible in part because Arab states¹ were given assurances, through a resolution sponsored by the three depositary states of the NPT (Russia, the UK and the US), that the member states would pursue the goal of establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East.² Over 20 years later that goal remains a distant possibility, despite the mandate agreed at the 2010 NPT RevCon to hold a conference with regional states to move forward on the WMD-free zone (WMDFZ). Far from facilitating discussion, however, the 2010 mandate and 1995 resolution may have inadvertently become the main obstacles to achieving the goal. Both of these avenues rely on the NPT and do not reflect the national interests of all regional actors, which need to believe in the process. Even those who have set the goal of creating a WMDFZ as a national priority do not necessarily view it as a policy aimed at promoting international peace and security, and strengthening the non-proliferation norm. Rather, they see it primarily as a vehicle for furthering other policies (e.g. narrowing the gap in military capabilities among Middle Eastern countries), which are targeted at some of their partners within the WMDFZ process.

The countries of the region and the depositary states of the NPT have blamed one another for the failure to achieve any notable progress, citing lack of political will, inflexibility of approach and renegeing on promises made. These problems are compounded by the connection of the WMDFZ proposal to the NPT, the erosion of links between the proposal and the Middle East peace process and, indeed, the lack of progress itself over many years.³ Despite the validity of these complaints, they are symptoms of a larger problem – namely a lack of genuine interest from participants in the outcome of the process.

In recent years, the proposal for a WMDFZ has been discussed primarily within the framework of the NPT. This has resulted in a process that does not factor in the regional realities, such as the lack of progress in the Arab–Israeli peace process, changes in the security priorities of several Middle East countries, the concerns and interests of all the countries involved, and particularly the fact that Israel remains outside the treaty and is concerned about possible attempts to tie it into the NPT. Crucially, its non-member status means it is not bound by NPT decisions.

The fact that not all countries in the Middle East see the utility of and support the normative benefits of a WMDFZ has highlighted the need for it to be addressed within a wider context. Continuing to think that this process is primarily about establishing such a zone without addressing the primary interests of those countries involved has led to a process that is not transparent and has limited the prospects for success. This is evident from the discrepancy between the policies and postures of the two most prominent parties in the negotiations, Egypt (representing the Arab states) and Israel. Egypt wants to close the gap in WMD capabilities between the states of the region and specifically highlights Israel's nuclear programme. Israel, in contrast, sees the negotiations as an opportunity to engage directly with the Arab states and pave the way for the normalization of ties between them.

¹ This paper will not detail the individual country positions of every Arab state, but rather the common position of Arab states on the WMDFZ, which has been consistent throughout the process and promoted chiefly by Egypt.

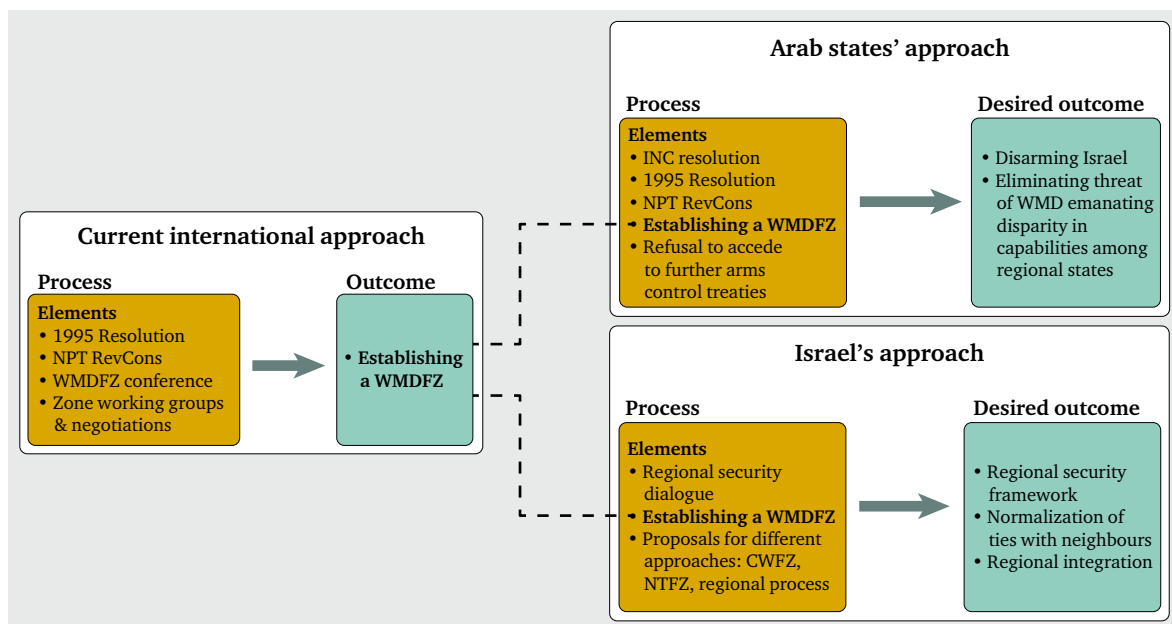
² 'History of the NPT 1975–1995, Reaching Critical Will', www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/npt/history-of-the-npt-1975-1995.

³ The Middle East peace process began with the Madrid Conference of 1991 and is a set of bilateral and multilateral negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours, addressing several concerns including regional security. The 1995 Resolution on the Middle East establishes the link between the Middle East peace process and the establishment of a WMDFZ.

Given this difference in desired outcomes among the states involved in the process, it is clear that they do not view the WMDFZ as a goal in itself, but rather as a means to an end – and the ends they seek are different enough – at least in the short term – to warrant rethinking a more effective way forward. This paper argues that the current approach to the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East, anchored as it is in the NPT, is not worth pursuing as it does not correspond to the priority interests and concerns of the regional actors, nor does it adequately address the link between the intent of the WMDFZ proposal and the aspirations of the Middle East peace process. In fact, the confinement of the negotiations under NPT auspices has damaged the prospects for success. Instead, the states involved need to find an additional forum, away from the NPT review process, to achieve the aim of establishing a WMDFZ. Additionally, if the original link between the zone and the Middle East peace process were to be restored in a more integrated approach, core differences relating to regional security are more likely to be reconciled.

Figure 1 demonstrates different perceptions of desired outcomes by all states: both the Arab states and Israel view the establishment of a WMDFZ as a process that will yield certain desired outcomes. The figure also shows clearly how the current international approach differs from that of the Arab states and Israel and fails to address the needs of either. It therefore should be adapted and complemented if the process is to succeed.

Figure 1: Different perceptions of processes and desired outcomes



Source: Author's analysis.

The paper starts by assessing the history of the proposal for a WMDFZ in the Middle East and the process that was created for implementation within the NPT. It then details the positions of the main regional states and the complexities and uncertainties that the region has faced, especially in relation to the changing political landscape, ongoing conflicts and doubts about the use and development of WMD in the region. It concludes with recommendations for a way forward based on the arguments for a new, more integrated approach. The paper draws upon official documents from national and international bodies, such as statements by governments, working papers, final documents and resolutions from NPT RevCons and resolutions by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

and Security Council (UNSC), as well as a review of secondary data from the existing literature. Additionally, it draws upon personal discussions and correspondence between the author and several officials and experts, and qualitative discussions from conferences and meetings, including a workshop hosted at Chatham House with participants from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, Israel and the UK, aimed at mapping out the security and foreign policy of the regional actors.

The process thus far

The idea of establishing a zone free of WMD⁴ in the Middle East was first proposed by the Soviet Union in 1958.⁵ It was later taken up as a regional discussion in 1962 by the Committee for the Denuclearization of the Middle East – a collective of Israeli intellectuals that saw a nuclear-armed Israel as a threat to its own security. This was not a pacifist stance or an abhorrence of the destructive nature of nuclear weapons, but rather a strategic concern that sparking a nuclear arms race in the region would be extraordinarily dangerous for both the region and global security.⁶

The proposal for the establishment of a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) was formally proposed by Iran in a resolution submitted to the UNGA with Egypt⁷ as a co-sponsor in 1974.⁸ The resolution has been adopted by the UNGA without a vote since 1980. From early on, Egypt has been particularly interested in establishing such a zone, with the then president Hosni Mubarak writing to the Conference on Disarmament in 1990 to suggest expanding the proposed zone to include all WMD.⁹

In 1991, United Nations Security Council Resolution 687, establishing a ceasefire in Iraq, affirmed that the actions to be taken by Iraq regarding its WMD and ballistic missile capabilities ‘represent steps towards the goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery’. This lent Mubarak’s proposal international recognition and support, and led to the 1995 resolution that formed one of the central planks enabling the NPT to be extended indefinitely.

However, despite the seemingly genuine interest in the proposed zone and belief in its importance and necessity within the international community, it took 15 years for any real progress to materialize. In the final document of the 2010 NPT RevCon various practical steps were put forward including: (1) the convening of a conference on the WMD-FZ by the Secretary-General and the co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution (US, UK and Russia) in 2012, with the attendance of all the Middle Eastern states; (2) the appointment of a facilitator and host government for the conference; and (3) the requesting of documentation from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), BWC-Implementation Support Unit (BWC-ISU) and Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) on ‘modalities for a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems’.¹⁰ The first step was particularly significant, as a conference would create the opportunity for all stakeholders to meet in one place and engage in direct talks.

⁴ In this instance nuclear weapons and missiles.

⁵ Mentioned in Baklitsky, A. (ed.) (2013), ‘Ten steps toward a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East’, White Paper, PIR Center, Moscow: PIR Press.

⁶ Cohen, A. (2010), *The Worst Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷ A resolution on establishing a Middle East NWFZ was adopted by the Council of the League of Arab States in September that year.

⁸ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3263 (XXIX), Establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East, 2309th plenary meeting, 9 December 1974, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/738/65/IMG/NR073865.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁹ Also see Lewis, P. and Potter, W.C. (2011), ‘The Long Journey Toward A WMD-Free Middle East’, *Arms Control Today*, www.armscontrol.org/2011_09/The_Long_Journey_Toward_A_WMD-Free_Middle_East.

¹⁰ 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2010), Volume I, Part I, Conclusions and Recommendations for Follow-on Actions IV.7, www.nti.org/media/pdfs/npt2010fd.pdf?_id=1316544035.

In retrospect, however, there are several reasons why it is difficult to see the 2010 NPT RevCon as a success with regard to the WMDFZ. First, the US immediately demonstrated some retreat from its commitment on convening the conference. Its final statement was quick to make clear that the US did not fully support the language of the final document regarding the Middle East, arguing that its ‘ability to [fulfil the commitment on working towards a WMDFZ] has been seriously jeopardized because the final document singles out Israel in the Middle East section, a fact that the United States deeply regrets’.¹¹ Only hours later, a statement by the US National Security Advisor, General James Jones, cast further doubt on the impact of the 2010 final document on the establishment of the Middle East WMDFZ. This all but ruled out the prospect altogether and repeatedly emphasized the United States’ unwavering support for Israeli security and its condemnation of the language of the final document.¹²

Secondly, although the conference was set to take place by the end of 2012, a facilitator (Finnish Ambassador Jaakko Laajava) and a host government (Finland) were not selected until October 2011. This effectively gave the facilitator barely a year to make all necessary arrangements, including securing the attendance of all the regional stakeholders – a task that proved impossible to complete in the time frame.¹³

Furthermore, the uncertainty about Israel’s participation and the uprisings in several Arab countries gave the US an opportunity to back out of its 2010 commitment, and in November 2012 it announced the indefinite postponement of the Helsinki conference. The UK and Russia, along with the UN, have pressed strongly for a new date to be announced, but the NPT depositaries have been unable to reach agreement on this issue.

Despite the postponement, Jaakko Laajava continued to hold informal consultations with the stakeholders in 2013 and 2014, and was able to convene five meetings in Glion and Geneva, Switzerland. Attendance at these meetings varied in terms of the states represented and the level of seniority of the delegations, suggesting that trust in the utility of these meetings was waning.¹⁴ Importantly for Israeli officials, the meetings took place outside UN premises since Israel did not want to be seen to commit to any formal international process under UN auspices at this point.¹⁵

Even before the start of the 2015 NPT RevCon, it was clear that the deliberations were going to be difficult. The disruptive events since the 2010 RevCon, including the US postponement and Egypt’s walkout from the 2013 Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) in protest at this, did not augur well for progress on the Middle East WMDFZ. None of the other Arab states followed suit and at the 2015 RevCon they showed a fragmented front, with uncertain support for a new Egyptian proposal that ‘call[ed] upon the UN Secretary-General to convene a conference within 180 days from the adoption of the 2015 Review Conference Final Document’,¹⁶ regardless of the attendance of all the states of the planned WMDFZ.

¹¹ United States Closing Statement at the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, Ellen Tauscher, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, 28 May 2010, www.state.gov/t/us/142370.htm.

¹² Statement by the National Security Advisor, General James L. Jones, on the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 28 May 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/statement-national-security-advisor-general-james-l-jones-non-proliferation-treaty->

¹³ Lewis, P. (2014), *All in the Timing: The Weapons of Mass Destruction free Zone in the Middle East*, Research Paper, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140805WMDLewis.pdf; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2012), Press Statement on the 2012 Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction, 2210-24-11-2012, 24 November 2012, http://archive.mid.ru//bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcb3/fdb6a81ff09d276a44257ac2004d9362!OpenDocument.

¹⁴ See Lewis (2014), *All in the Timing*.

¹⁵ Grossman, E. M. (2014), ‘Mideast Envoys Weigh Two New Bids to Jolt WMD-Ban Talks’, NTI, 6 June 2014, www.nti.org/gsn/article/mideast-envoys-weigh-two-new-bids-jolt-wmd-ban-talks; Grossman, E. M. (2014), ‘Diplomats Bound for Geneva with Differing Aims for Mideast WMD-Ban Talks’, NTI, 20 June 2014, www.nti.org/gsn/article/diplomats-bound-geneva-differing-aims-mideast-wmd-ban-talks.

¹⁶ 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2015), ‘Implementation of the 1995 resolution and 2010 outcome on the Middle East’, working paper submitted by Bahrain on behalf of the Arab Group, NPT/CONF.2015/WP.33, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2015/WP.33.

Israel's attendance as an observer state for the first time in 20 years added to the tense atmosphere at the conference. According to media reports,¹⁷ this was intended to signal to the Arab states that Israel was open to discussing issues of regional security, but it was difficult to convince them of this openness after Israeli media reported that the US had blocked the final document owing to Israeli objections¹⁸ and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked the then US Secretary of State John Kerry for keeping America's 'commitment to Israel by preventing a Middle East resolution that would single out Israel and ignore its security interests and the threats posed to it by an increasingly turbulent Middle East'.¹⁹

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The RevCon ended without consensus on a final document being reached. The US blamed the Egyptians for putting forward unworkable suggestions, but the US was blamed for acting on Israel's behalf.²⁰ There is much debate about what really happened and to what extent the breakdown of the 2015 NPT RevCon can be pinned on any single country – or even just on the issue of the WMD-FZ.

In response to the failure of the 2015 NPT RevCon to reach consensus on further steps in the process, the League of Arab States (LAS) formed a 'Committee of the Elders'. Among other things, it was tasked with formulating the Arab position before the First Preparatory Committee meeting for the 2020 NPT RevCon.

At this meeting, held in Vienna on 2–12 May 2017,²¹ the Arab states expressed their disappointment at the outcome of the 2015 NPT RevCon. A joint working paper submitted by Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Republic of Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen stressed the importance of achieving universality of the treaty and the need for talks on the WMD-FZ to begin before the 2020 NPT RevCon, and called upon the co-conveners of the conference to propose a 'complete plan and time frame for the stages of implementation' of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East.²² But no new proposals for the WMD-FZ process were offered, despite the hopes that had been pinned on the work of the LAS Committee of the Elders.

¹⁷ Williams, D. (2015), 'Eyeing Arab ties, Israel to observe nuclear pact meeting', Reuters, 26 April 2015, www.reuters.com/article/us-nuclear-un-conference-israel-idUSKBN0NH0H420150426; Gross, J.A. (2015), Report: Israel to attend nuclear disarmament summit, *Times of Israel*, 26 April 2015, www.timesofisrael.com/report-israel-to-attend-nuclear-disarmament-summit.

¹⁸ Ravid, B. (2015), 'U.S. Blocks NPT Conference Statement Over Israeli Objections', *Haaretz*, 23 May 2015, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.657783.

¹⁹ Reuters (2015), 'Netanyahu thanks US for blocking push for Middle East nuclear arms ban', 23 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/23/netanyahu-thanks-us-blocking-middle-east-nuclear-arms-ban.

²⁰ As was reported by Israeli media, the former assistant secretary of state for international security and non-proliferation, Thomas Countryman, had been visiting Israel during the 2015 NPT RevCon to discuss Israel's fears over a repeat of the decisions made during the 2010 NPT RevCon. See 'US blocks nuclear disarmament move over Israel concerns', *Times of Israel*, 23 May 2015, www.timesofisrael.com/us-rejects-nuclear-disarmament-document-over-israel-concerns and Ravid, B., 'Concern in Jerusalem Over International Decision Against Israeli Nuclear Program', *Haaretz*, 22 May 2015, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.657683.

²¹ Ministerial Council of the League of Arab States (2017), The dangers of Israeli armament to the Arab national security and international peace: Establishing the WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East, Res. no. 8131 – d.u. (147) – g 2–7 March 2017.

²² Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2017), 'Establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction', Joint working paper submitted by Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Republic of Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, NPT/CONF.2020/PC.I/WP.30, www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom17/documents/WP30.pdf.

Complexities and uncertainties

The Middle East WMDFZ remains elusive. The list of difficulties, complications and complexities that stakeholders and observers have to wade through grows ever longer, the prospects seem increasingly bleak and interest in the issue has waned accordingly.

Despite Egypt having been at the vanguard of the Middle East WMDFZ effort from early on, it has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) or the IAEA's Additional Protocol, nor has it ratified treaties that it has already signed: The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty (ANWFZ), also known as the Treaty of Pelindaba. Egypt claims this is in order to retain the use of its pending ratifications as leverage over Israel's refusal to join the NPT.²³ There have been efforts to persuade Egypt to sign and ratify the CWC as a confidence-building measure, but it claims that it already brings enough to the negotiating table with its existing membership of the NPT and signatory status on other arms control treaties.²⁴

Syria has also been a problematic actor on WMD issues. Although it has been a member of the NPT since 1969 and a supporter of the Middle East WMDFZ proposal, it faced US and Israeli allegations that it was seeking a military dimension to its nuclear programme. In 2007, Israeli airstrikes destroyed Al-Kibar, the Syrian nuclear facility believed to have been a nuclear reactor capable of producing plutonium.²⁵

Moreover, like Egypt, Syria asserted that it would not join the CWC until Israel joined the NPT,²⁶ and its chemical weapons programme had been an obstacle for the Middle East WMDFZ.²⁷ But after the sarin gas attacks in Ghouta in 2013, a deal brokered by Russia, the US and the UN left it no option but to join the CWC,²⁸ and its chemical weapons were transported out of the country and destroyed.²⁹ The raging civil war has made it difficult to determine whether its chemical weapons arsenal has been completely eliminated, as reports of continuing use by state and non-state actors raise doubts about the completeness of the country's declared stockpiles.

The incidents that have followed Syria's accession to the CWC have included chlorine gas use, which requires relatively little expertise to produce. Such use has been of very serious concern internationally for some years.³⁰ Additionally, attacks with mustard gas have been reported in both Syria and Iraq.³¹ Whether the gas used was obtained from leftover Syrian, Libyan or Iraqi stockpiles and regardless of who perpetrated the attacks, the existence and ongoing use of chemical weapons in the region pose a challenge to the realization of a Middle East WMDFZ.

²³ Esfandiary, D. (2014), 'In the Middle East, Get Rid of Chemical Weapons First', Arms Control Association, 9 September 2014, www.armscontrol.org/act/2014_01-02/In-the-Middle-East-Get-Rid-of-Chemical-Weapons-First.

²⁴ Anonymously cited from an event held under the Chatham House Rule on 'Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation in Israel', 29 February 2016, London, www.chathamhouse.org/event/nuclear-disarmament-and-non-proliferation-israel.

²⁵ See 'Background Briefing With Senior U.S. Officials on Syria's Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea's Involvement', 24 April 2008, dni.gov/interviews.htm, and 'Al-Kibar', NTI, www.nti.org/learn/facilities/461.

²⁶ Feakes, D. (2008), 'Getting Down to the Hard Cases: Prospects for CWC Universality', Arms Control Association, 1 March 2008, www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_03/Feakes#5.

²⁷ Ravid (2015), 'U.S. Blocks NPT Conference Statement Over Israeli Objections'.

²⁸ In response to the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, Russia and the US reached an agreement for the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons on 14 September 2013. The Syrian government had deposited its instrument of accession to the CWC that same day. See OPCW, 'Joint National Paper by the Russian Federation and the United States of America. Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons', EC-M-33/NAT.1, 17 September 2013, www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/M-33/ecm33nat01_e_.pdf and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013), S/RES/2118 (2013), 27 September 2013, www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf.

²⁹ OPCW (2016), 'Destruction of Syrian chemical weapons completed', 6 January 2016, www.opcw.org/news/article/destruction-of-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed.

³⁰ See United Nations Security Council Resolution 2235 (2015) S/RES/2235 (2015), 7501st Meeting, 7 August 2015, www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2235.pdf.

³¹ Dearden, L. (2015), 'Isis "manufacturing and using chemical weapons" in Iraq and Syria, US official claims', *Independent*, 11 September 2015, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-manufacturing-and-using-chemical-weapons-in-iraq-and-syria-us-official-claims-10496094.html.

Iran introduced a UN resolution for the establishment of a NWFZ in the Middle East as early as 1974. Despite the changes in Iran's political environment, its support for the NWFZ and later the Middle East WMD-FZ has remained a consistent policy, albeit lately upstaged by its negotiations with the world powers regarding its own nuclear programme. Until the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)³² – also referred to as the Iran deal – in 2015, the possible military dimension of the Iranian nuclear programme was seen as one of the biggest obstacles to a WMD-FZ in the Middle East. But the hopes pinned on the positive effect of the JCPOA on progress on this zone quickly withered as Saudi Arabia and Israel questioned Iran's intent to adhere to the terms of the JCPOA.

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Although the JCPOA was largely hailed as a success, it also has had some adverse effects on the region. Theoretically, resolving the issue of the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear programme might be expected to foster more trust among its neighbours – an essential element for negotiations. In reality, it has angered Israel and Saudi Arabia, as both have felt that the JCPOA should have included elements to limit what they regard as hostile Iranian regional behaviour.³³ Also, both countries viewed the JCPOA as representative of a realignment of US interests and renewed focus towards Iran during the Obama administration. This perception is stronger in Saudi Arabia, whose relationship with Iran has recently become more strained. It remains to be seen if this perceived realignment might result in Saudi Arabia being less willing to cooperate in initiatives that include Iran, such as the Middle East WMD-FZ, as it might view these as making concessions to its rival and legitimizing the new order in which Iran is a powerful regional player.³⁴

Israel is believed to have started developing its nuclear weapons capabilities in 1958 with the construction of the Dimona nuclear facility.³⁵ Although Dimona is officially a nuclear research facility, experts are in broad agreement that it has been used to produce material for nuclear weapons. After the revelations of the whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu, the declassified documents³⁶ from the Nixon presidency – which revealed Washington's knowledge of the programme, concerns and decision to support the Israeli nuclear ambiguity strategy – and Ehud Olmert's 'slip of the tongue' in an interview in 2006,³⁷ there is little doubt left about the nature of the Israeli nuclear programme.³⁸

Israel's official policy on its nuclear programme is to maintain ambiguity. This means that it neither confirms nor denies its possession of nuclear weapons and has maintained that it will not be the first

³² Between Iran and the E3/EU+3 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the US).

³³ Amidror, Y. (2015), 'After the Agreement – Israel's Perspective', in Mohseni, P. (ed.), *Tipping the Balance? Implications of the Iran Nuclear Deal on Israeli Security*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, pp. 45–48, <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/Tipping%20the%20Balance%20WEB.pdf>; 'Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal', *Al Jazeera*, 14 April 2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal-150401061906177.html; anonymously cited from an event held under the Chatham House Rule on 'Relationships across the Atlantic: Converging or Diverging?', Scenario Exercise: The Iran Deal Falls Apart, 18 February 2016, London.

³⁴ Amidror (2015), 'After the Agreement – Israel's Perspective'.

³⁵ Cohen, A. (2010), *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 2, 57–62.

³⁶ Myre, G. (2004), 'Israeli Who Revealed Nuclear Secrets Is Freed', *New York Times*, 21 April 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/04/21/international/middleeast/israeli-who-revealed-nuclear-secrets-is-freed.html; Stout, D. (2007), 'Israel's Nuclear Arsenal Vexed Nixon', *New York Times*, 29 November 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/11/29/world/middleeast/29nixon.html?_r=0.

³⁷ 'The World from Berlin: Olmert's Diplomatic Bombshell', *Spiegel Online*, 13 December 2006, www.spiegel.de/international/the-world-from-berlin-olmert-s-diplomatic-bombshell-a-454262.html.

³⁸ Also see Cohen (2010), *The Worst-Kept Secret*, pp. 121–46.

to 'introduce' nuclear weapons into the region.³⁹ This policy poses a dilemma for the US. On the one hand, Washington has long supported nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear security efforts, yet one of its closest allies remains outside the NPT with an alleged nuclear weapons programme. On the other hand, it faces strong resistance and accusations of renegeing on its security commitments to Israel if it ever decides to challenge the status quo. Governments in the Middle East and elsewhere have accused the US of double standards over its handling of the Iran nuclear programme, heightening the sense of discriminatory treatment within the nuclear regime.⁴⁰

Despite continuous calls for Israel to join the NPT – and indeed Israel's support of and reliance on its neighbours' membership of the treaty – it has not done so. Transparency over Israel's nuclear arsenal is important, not only to enable a serious debate on the issue of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, but also to allow Israel to 'diminish one of the grounds for the international community to treat [it] as an outlaw "pariah state"'.⁴¹ The risks of a nuclear incident are perceived as high owing to this lack of transparency. For example, Israel ranks very low in the Nuclear Security Index of the Washington-based think-tank NTI.⁴² This low ranking is not due to subpar security practices, but rather to the absence of information on the practices in place.⁴³ The absence of inspections and the lack of verifiable information raise questions about the security and safety of the facilities with regard to both accidents and deliberate incidents such as sabotage or theft. These possibilities – and owing to the lack of transparency neither can be ruled out – put the region at risk from a nuclear incident or nuclear terrorism using stolen materials.

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The complexities of establishing the zone have been discussed at length by experts and officials. The existing debate is rife with recommendations that address both the technical and the political difficulties that have held back progress on the Middle East WMD-free zone. There has been significant progress on the technical aspects. As mandated by the 2010 RevCon final document, the IAEA, OPCW, BWC-ISU and CTBTO submitted documentation to the facilitator of the 2012 conference on the 'modalities for a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems'.⁴⁴ This was in turn shared by the facilitator with the states of the region in December 2012.⁴⁵

³⁹ Cohen, A. (1998), *Israel and the Bomb*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 316–18.

⁴⁰ "Drop Israel nuke program double standards, get IAEA to supervise" – Arab League', *Russia Today*, 17 July 2015, www.rt.com/news/31009-5-israel-nuclear-program-double-standard; see also Nashashibi, S. (2015), 'The Middle East's nuclear double standard', *Middle East Eye*, 3 June 2015, www.middleeasteye.net/columns/middle-east-nuclear-double-standard-1864482121.

⁴¹ Pillar, P. R. (2014), 'Israel's Nuclear Weapons: Widely Suspected Unmentionables', *The National Interest*, 3 September 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/israels-widely-suspected-unmentionables-11191?page=show>; see also Cohen, A. and Miller, M. (2010), 'Bringing Israel's Bomb Out of the Basement: Has Nuclear Ambiguity Outlived Its Shelf Life?', *Foreign Affairs*, 89(5), pp. 30–44, www.jstor.org/stable/20788643.

⁴² Data & Results: Israel, Theft Ranking (n.d.), Nuclear Security Index, NTI, <http://ntiindex.org/countries/israel/?index=theft>; see also Data & Results: Israel, Sabotage Ranking (n.d.), Nuclear Security Index, NTI, <http://ntiindex.org/countries/israel/?index=sabotage>.

⁴³ Data & Results: Israel, Theft Ranking.

⁴⁴ 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2010), Volume I, Part I, Conclusions and Recommendations for Follow-on Actions IV.7, www.nti.org/media/pdfs/npt2010fd.pdf?_id=1316544035.

⁴⁵ 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2015), Preparations for the conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, Report by the facilitator, item 18, 30 April 2015, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2015/37.

Although some of the difficulties cited in past literature have been resolved, new difficulties have emerged. The majority of these are a result of the changes in the regional political landscape, primarily:

1. Regional instability stemming from the 2003 Iraq war;
2. Domestic tumult during the Arab Spring and its fallout, in particular the Syrian civil war;⁴⁶
3. Regional instability caused by non-state armed groups, in particular the rise of ISIS; and
4. The adverse reaction to the JCPOA.⁴⁷

Consequently, the priorities of all governments in the region have had to change. How these changes will manifest over time remains to be seen. However, it is clear that subdivisions among Arab states regarding positions on current conflicts in the region have deepened as domestic issues have taken priority over considerations about the Middle East WMDFZ. The combination of a fragmented LAS and weaker backing by some of its members for Egypt's leadership, as well as Egypt's own diminished ability to lead the process – owing to its need to focus on domestic development priorities after the Arab uprisings and on balancing regional security challenges such as the instability in Libya and Sinai – makes it even more difficult than before to bring all stakeholders to the negotiating table.

Another difficulty lies in the lengthy negotiations on the proposal and between the Arab states and Israel. In any such prolonged process, involving several instances of unsuccessful negotiations, it is inevitable that participants will become frustrated and their positions will harden. They are now accustomed to one another's political and negotiation strategies and become more suspicious about any move that reminds them of past tactics.⁴⁸ One Israeli negotiation strategy that makes Arab negotiating partners wary is that of the 'long corridor',⁴⁹ where an issue is divided first into smaller steps, such as the suggestions for a chemical weapons-free zone (CWFZ), a nuclear test-free zone (NTFZ) or an enrichment-free zone, and is then linked to other issues, such as the recognition of the State of Israel. In this way negotiations become so entangled that they are unresolvable. Arab governments, on the other hand, prefer to avoid direct negotiations and try to force Israel's hand by resorting to international organizations and laws – a strategy that is seen by Israel as a form of coercion.⁵⁰ This further highlights the need for a different approach and framework if the process is to break away from established negative patterns.

⁴⁶ See next section on 'Practicality of a WMD-Free Zone for the Middle East'.

⁴⁷ Instead of bringing hope of progress to the WMDFZ process, the JCPOA has instead highlighted tensions between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has perceived the deal as a signal of US disengagement from the region, and has taken a more confrontational position towards Iran as a result. See Ayoob, M. (2016), 'Iran Nuclear Deal Fuels Tension with Saudi Arabia Inflaming New Conflicts', *YaleGlobal*, 19 January 2016, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/iran-nuclear-deal-fuels-tension-saudi-arabia-inflaming-new-conflicts>; and Al Jazeera (2015), 'Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal', *Al Jazeera*, 14 April 2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal-150401061906177.html.

⁴⁸ See Greig, J. M. (2001), 'Moments of opportunity: Recognizing conditions of ripeness for international mediation between enduring rivals', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45 (6), pp. 691–718; and Bercovitch, J. and Diehl, P. (1997), 'Conflict management of enduring rivalries: the frequency timing and short-term impact of mediation', *International Interactions*, 22, pp. 299–320.

⁴⁹ 'Belief in the WMD Free Zone: Designing the corridor to Helsinki and beyond' (n.d.), BASIC, IKV PAX Christi, The Israeli Disarmament Movement, www.basicint.org/sites/default/files/wmdfz-israel.pdf.

⁵⁰ Oren, A. (2012), 'Israel Rejects U.S.-backed Arab Plan for Conference on Nuclear-free Mideast', *Haaretz*, 20 September 2012, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-rejects-u-s-backed-arab-plan-for-conference-on-nuclear-free-mideast-1.465679. Also see 'Israel should be coerced to sign NPT, says expert' (2003), *Gulf News*, 3 January 2003, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/general/israel-should-be-coerced-to-sign-npt-says-expert-1.343614>.

Practicality of a WMDFZ in the Middle East

As part of the project to examine the prospects for the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East, Chatham House held a workshop in May 2016 entitled ‘WMD-Free Zone: A Scenario-Building Exercise’.⁵¹ This aimed to map out current security challenges facing Egypt, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia by exploring different scenarios to gauge the applicability of the WMDFZ. Egypt, Iran and Israel represent the three main blocs in the process, with Egypt spearheading the Arab states’ position. Saudi Arabia was also included because of its newly assertive role in the region.⁵² The participants included officials and experts from these four countries as well as from Jordan, Turkey and the UK.

At the workshop, country experts gave short presentations focusing on developments since 1995⁵³ in the foreign and security policy positions of each of the four states covered by the exercise. They then shared what they saw as the three key challenges facing each country, to which participants formulated possible and plausible responses from each country. These responses were then clustered to form four themes:

1. *Domestic unrest*: All four countries face security challenges from domestic unrest, but in each there is a different trigger. For example, Egypt’s struggling economy might lead to a renewed revolution like those of the Arab Spring, while Iran faces the possibility of unrest at any time but the likelihood would be increased following the eventual death of its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is currently in his late seventies.
2. *Terrorism*: Whether in Sinai, Baluchistan or Syria and Iraq, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia face the common threat of terrorism and view it as a key security challenge.
3. *Lack of mirroring*: Both Israel and Saudi Arabia view Iran as a key threat to their security. Despite the assurances provided by the JCPOA, suspicions of Iran’s nuclear ambitions persist and a further threat is that from Iran’s proxies. Iran, however, does not reciprocally see Israel or Saudi Arabia as threats to its own security.
4. *Low WMD threat perception*: Apart from Iran, none of the countries covered by the workshop viewed WMD threats as a national security priority or challenge. In Iran’s case, the threat perception stemmed not from concerns about a WMD attack, but rather from fear of the possible fallout if the JCPOA were to collapse.⁵⁴

The key point that emerged from the workshop was that the threat from WMD is not seen as an immediate security challenge for any of the four countries. Even though they see the benefits of the WMDFZ, competing security priorities receive greater attention and the political energy to drive progress is lacking.

The workshop did expose several common threats. Terrorism is viewed as a key security challenge by three of the four countries included in the workshop framework, and security cooperation and intelligence-sharing are important tools in countering this threat. Furthermore, the perceived threat

⁵¹ See details at www.chathamhouse.org/event/wmd-free-zone-scenario-building-exercise.

⁵² See Ghattas, K. (2015), Saudi Arabia’s new muscular foreign policy, BBC News, 21 April 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32381798; and Katulis, B. (2015), ‘How Saudi Arabia Is Expanding Its Role in the Middle East’, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 December 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/12/13/how-saudi-arabia-is-expanding-its-role-in-the-middle-east>.

⁵³ The year the NPT Resolution on the Middle East was issued.

⁵⁴ The collapse of the JCPOA is more likely under the Trump administration, because of the president’s dislike of the negotiated deal. He has stated on many occasions that it is not comprehensive and is not the best deal. Yet he has not yet ‘torn it up’, as experts feared. See Tabatabai, A. (2016), ‘Trump said he’d tear up the Iran nuclear deal. Now what?’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 10 November 2016, <http://thebulletin.org/trump-said-hed-tear-iran-nuclear-deal-now-what10148>.

from Iran has highlighted the benefits of cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia.⁵⁵ However, Saudi Arabia does not recognize the State of Israel and any official cooperation between the two could be met with strong opposition from Muslim and Arab allies.⁵⁶

Moreover, it is increasingly clear that the establishment of a WMDFZ is not the desired outcome of the process for any of the countries involved.

The WMDFZ beyond the context of the nuclear agenda

A central weakness in the approach towards a Middle East WMDFZ is that it has only been considered in the context of arms control and not in the wider context of Middle East politics. This narrow focus has slowed the process significantly. The need to address the issue in context has not gone unnoticed. Israeli officials and experts reiterate this need by calling for a process that is reminiscent of the Arms Control Regional Security (ACRS) talks,⁵⁷ in that it should go beyond WMD issues to include all regional security-related aspects (e.g. terrorism). The Arab states and Iran are opposed to the Israeli position, arguing that a WMDFZ would serve as a first step towards further cooperation on regional security. They fear that the past experience with ACRS, where other security aspects, such as maritime issues, were advancing at a much quicker pace than the WMD issues, threatening to have them lose their priority, would repeat itself in similar future efforts.

Unofficially, the Arab response to regional security talks with Israel has always been to note the need to include the issue of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.⁵⁸ At this point the dialogue reaches an impasse, as Israel refuses to approach talks with a pre-set agenda. The proposal for a Middle East WMDFZ is closely connected to the Middle East peace process, a fact that seems to have been forgotten. The ACRS talks, the first occasion when the regional parties formally negotiated WMD issues, were born out of the 1991 Madrid Conference. The NPT's 1995 Resolution on the Middle East cements this connection in its first paragraph, where it 'endorses the aims and objectives of the Middle East peace process and recognizes that efforts in this regard, as well as other efforts, contribute to, *inter alia*, a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons as well as other weapons of mass destruction'. The subsequent talks and measures taken to further such a zone, however, do not reflect this initial link.

Apart from the weakened link between the Middle East peace process and the WMDFZ, an NPT-only process has resulted in a solely mechanical approach focused on designing frameworks for implementing a future Middle East WMDFZ and convening the postponed 2012 conference. These efforts are certainly constructive and will provide much-needed technical support if the zone comes into being, but they have become the main avenues of work and have not been complemented by similar efforts to address the political realities on the ground or the national security interests and concerns of the countries involved in the process.

⁵⁵ See Medea, B. (2016), 'Israel and Saudi Arabia: Strange Bedfellows in the New Middle East', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 18 May 2016, <http://fpif.org/israel-saudi-arabia-strange-bedfellows-new-middle-east>; and Sen, A. K. (2015), 'Strange Bedfellows: Saudi Arabia, Israel Oppose Iran Nuclear Deal for Different Reasons', Atlantic Council, 16 March 2015, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/strange-bedfellows-saudi-arabia-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal-for-different-reasons.

⁵⁶ Munayyer, Y. (2017) 'Why Iran Won't Bring the Israelis and Arabs Together', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 June 2017. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2017-06-06/why-iran-wont-bring-israelis-and-arabs-together.

⁵⁷ The ACRS was one of the outcomes of the 1991 Madrid Conference. Talks broke down after Egypt refused to take part in any further negotiations unless the Israeli nuclear programme was addressed. Iran was not part of that process.

⁵⁸ Anonymously cited from an event held under the Chatham House Rule, a conference on 'Establishing a Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Devising the next steps', 23 May 2016, Moscow.

The proposal for the Middle East WMDFZ has, conversely, hindered the NPT regime's own effectiveness and credibility. Several NPT conferences have foundered as a result of language on the zone being deemed unacceptable by one or other of the concerned states, thus holding back progress on other issues, while the treaty's credibility has been damaged by the apparent default of its states parties on past decisions, with no more than lip-service being paid to honouring commitments.

One means, different ends

It is clear that the main fault-line in the process has been between Israel and the Arab states, led by Egypt. This section starts by assessing the positions taken by these two key actors throughout the process, particularly in debates on the sequencing of peace and disarmament, and considers what these reveal about their motivations and interests. It then discusses the current national security challenges faced by the wider circle of countries involved in the process – namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran.

The interests and concerns of the key players

Egypt and the League of Arab States

Until recently, Egypt had been the most active advocate of the Middle East WMDFZ since its inception. Egypt's refusal to take part in further discussions regarding regional security unless the issue were put on the agenda contributed to the breakdown of the 1992–95 ACRS talks. Less than a year later, Egypt campaigned heavily on behalf of the Arab group states to secure the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East as a precondition for their vote on the indefinite extension of the NPT. Egypt also made less successful attempts at strong-arming international forums to move the process forward (such as its walkout at the 2013 PrepCom, as noted above).

The official reason for Egypt's active support of the Middle East WMDFZ is given as the elimination of the Middle Eastern WMD threat, but the realities on the ground and Egypt's behaviour throughout the process suggest its motivations are not so straightforward. In the early to mid-1990s, a reasonable case could be made that the proposal was not only aimed at the Israeli nuclear arsenal but was prompted by the development and, in some cases, use of WMD by other regional states including Iran, Iraq and Syria. However, since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013 and the conclusion of the JCPOA, it has become difficult to argue that Israel is not the focus of Arab efforts on this front, particularly given Egypt's refusal to join any other WMD treaties, such as the CTBT, CWC and BWC.

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In addition to the NPT RevCons, the Arab states have also been addressing the Israeli nuclear arsenal by pushing for the tabling of an agenda item at the IAEA General Conference on Israeli Nuclear Capabilities (INC). They had in fact been asking for this since 1991, but previously had agreements with Israel that it would not be put to a vote. However, given the lack of progress on the Middle East WMDFZ, in 2006 they

began to demand that INC be put to a vote.⁵⁹ The link between INC and Middle East WMDFZ is clear: when progress on the latter has been made, the INC will be shelved. Should the talks on the zone break down, the INC would be pushed forward in the IAEA.⁶⁰ This dynamic⁶¹ has bolstered existing Israeli claims that the Middle East WMDFZ is aimed only at Israel by making it clear that it is indeed Egypt's motivation (and by extension that of the Arab states) for supporting the proposal.

The interest of Arab states in disarming a nuclear Israel is a reasonable goal. The UNSC, NPT and IAEA have all called on Israel to accede to the NPT and place all its nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards. However, the US has been providing strong political cover for the Israeli nuclear programme to sustain its exceptionalism and ambiguity, initially by tacitly allowing the programme to develop, counter to its own interests in nuclear non-proliferation, and later by holding back efforts to address it.⁶² Other nuclear powers have not made any notable efforts to challenge Israel's nuclear ambiguity either. This double-standard treatment of Israel has only amplified the mistrust and negative feelings of Arab states. The effect of these feelings should not be underestimated, as they further damage the already strained relations among countries in the region and make constructive engagement, whether on WMD-related issues or otherwise, less likely.

Israel

Israel is wary of a Middle East WMDFZ process that does not provide adequate verification mechanisms to ensure that all states in the region have fully disarmed. This guardedness also comes from the international community's demands for transparency over Israel's nuclear programme. Without a sufficient guarantee that all other states in the region would not proliferate, Israel would not sign any legal agreement. Moreover, Israel asserts that it must be able to defend itself, and despite strong relations with and security assurances from the US, it believes in the importance of having its own nuclear deterrent. Israel's position has remained unchanged throughout the process. Whether it is the opinions of Israeli officials in Track 1 meetings or those of experts in Track 2 meetings, the message is clear: a WMDFZ – yes, but only in the context of regional security.⁶³ Israel often mentions it needs 'peace first' and then perhaps at a later stage disarmament. This should not be taken at face value. Israel desires recognition from its neighbours and a normalization of ties.⁶⁴ This would cement its status in the region, grant benefits from access to the Arab markets and secure the ability to work officially and publicly with the states of the region to address the security threats of extremism. As counterproposals to the Middle East WMDFZ, which it views as an effort to single it out, Israel has suggested a CWFZ or even an NTFZ.⁶⁵ Arab states have always dismissed these as a manifestation of Israel's 'long corridor' and procrastination tactics, but have failed to understand that the proposed

⁵⁹ Kane, C. and Mukhatzhanova, G. (2012), 'Information Relevant to the IAEA General Conference, Topic: Middle East Issues', CNS, VCDNP, www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/120911_cns_iaea_factsheet_middle_east.pdf.

⁶⁰ Ibid. and 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2015), 'Implementation of the 1995 resolution and 2010 outcome on the Middle East', working paper submitted by Bahrain on behalf of the Arab Group, NPT/CONF.2015/WP.33, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2015/WP.33.

⁶¹ Kane and Mukhatzhanova (2012), 'Information Relevant to the IAEA General Conference, Topic: Middle East Issues'.

⁶² See discussion in section above on 'The process thus far', and Cohen (2010), *The Worst-Kept Secret*, pp. 1–33.

⁶³ Lewis (2014), *All in the Timing*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ See Pileggi, T. (2016), 'Netanyahu hails "dramatic warming" of Israel-Arab ties', *Times of Israel*, 15 March 2016, www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-hails-dramatic-warming-of-israel-arab-ties; Associated Press (2009), 'Netanyahu calls on Arab States to normalize ties', NBC News, 27 May 2009, www.nbcnews.com/id/30961646/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/netanyahu-calls-arab-states-normalize-ties/#.V6ybnFsrLcs; Associated Press (2016), 'Netanyahu: Israel's deal normalizing ties with Turkey promotes "stability"', Fox News, 27 June 2016, www.foxnews.com/world/2016/06/27/netanyahu-lauds-benefits-normalizing-ties-with-turkey.html.

⁶⁵ See Landau, E. B. and Stein, S. (2013), 'A Chemical-Free Middle East?', *The National Interest*, 16 October 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/chemical-free-middle-east-9239>, and Landau, E. B. (2016), 'The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT): Enhancing its Confidence-Building Role', *INSS Insight*, 796, 11 February 2016, www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/No.%20796%20-%20Emily%20for%20web615758406.pdf.

options would also help Israel attain the outcome it seeks: recognition and normalization. Through a process of CWFZ or NTFZ the Arab states would have to engage directly with Israel, a diplomatic opening that Israel very much desires. However, they continue to maintain an all-or-nothing approach on the Middle East WMDFZ, refusing to enter such negotiations.

Conclusion

The prospects for establishing a WMDFZ in the Middle East appear bleak. From the outset the proposal for such a zone, the first of its kind, faced several obstacles. For the Arab states, such a process needs to address regional security issues more comprehensively, including the issue of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, because of concern about a domestic backlash against perceived normalization.

Israel, however, would rather enter into negotiations without any preconditions, but it will need to address the Palestinian issue if it wants to start building a closer relationship with its Arab neighbours, which would enable regional talks to begin. Even a regional Middle East WMDFZ might not be acceptable for Israel, which has favoured a security process that addresses a wider range of issues, similar to that of the ACRS talks. If Israel intends to continue on this path it should remember that the ACRS talks were an outcome of the 1991 Madrid Conference and thus linked to progress on peace with the Palestinians.

Another factor that has contributed to this deadlock is the inherent incompatibility between the current process and the political interests and security concerns of the countries involved. So far, the steps taken by Arab countries suggest that their interest in the Middle East WMDFZ is primarily about dismantling Israel's nuclear arsenal, a goal that is not effectively served by a process grounded in a treaty in which Israel is not a member. Israel's response to the process, on the other hand, points to its desire for direct talks and official relations with its neighbours. Throughout the process, Israel has called for a more holistic approach to disarmament that is part of a regional security framework. The Arab states are not opposed to this idea, but they cannot agree to it without the inclusion of the Palestinian question. It is at this point that most talks grind to a halt.

Recommendations

- A parallel regional process: The fact that negotiations have taken place primarily under NPT auspices has limited their scope to the international arms control regime, although they were initially conceived as part and parcel of the Middle East peace process. This constraint has gradually eroded the connection between the WMDFZ and the peace process, and has contributed to the current deadlock.
- The stalemate damages not only relationships and trust between states in the region, but also the strength and credibility of the NPT. Inability to make progress on the Middle East WMDFZ means that other issues, such as disarmament, are held back owing to the inability to reach consensus at NPT RevCons.
- The Arab states, under the leadership of Egypt, have been the initiators of the Middle East WMDFZ process within the NPT and progress on that is unlikely to change unless they initiate a regional process that would include Israel – and this would also help ease the pressure to achieve specific successful outcomes from the NPT RevCons. The states involved could consider creating a complementary regional forum without undermining the NPT, to work towards the creation of a WMDFZ. This parallel process would be possible only with the direct involvement of the Arab states and Iran. The former have long viewed the UN resolution on the WMDFZ in the Middle East as the fourth pillar of the NPT and hence they can only consider a process initiated or accepted by them as legitimate.
- In practical terms, the Arab states could put forward a proposal at the 2020 RevCon stipulating that the deliberations on the WMDFZ resolution of 1995 within the NPT RevCons should be suspended while the parallel, regional process is under way, and should only be addressed in NPT meetings (PrepComs and RevCons) in the form of reports from the parallel regional process.
- More transparency from all those involved: For any meaningful progress to materialize, and to foster trust, the states involved must be more transparent with regard to their WMD dual-use capabilities, as well as their desired outcomes from the WMDFZ process. Negotiations on the latter have been held back by the inability to address states' nuclear, chemical and biological capabilities openly.
- Renewed investment in the Middle East peace process: At the heart of the delays on establishing the WMDFZ is the absence of direct and official talks between the Arab states and Israel. The main hurdle to this is the abandoned Middle East peace process. The international community, Arab states and Israel all stand to benefit from the revival and success of this process and thus must engage more actively to achieve this end.
- Keeping up diplomatic momentum despite competing priorities: The numerous conflicts in the region make it difficult to focus diplomatic capacities and create the essential political will to push the process forward. Many states in the region are involved in at least one conflict. Greater stabilization efforts are needed to create an environment that is more appropriate for serious negotiation. The current political environment, in which several crises and their causes are interwoven, means it is no longer possible for states to expect that their foreign policy mode of operation, in which they address issues separately and consecutively, is effective or sustainable.

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Cover image: Iranians hold a celebration in Tehran after negotiators took a significant step toward the framework for an agreement aimed at keeping Iran's nuclear program peaceful.

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