

Conditions for a Nuclear Free Middle East

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The goal of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East, and more generally a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East, has been repeatedly affirmed by all states involved as well as the international community at the highest political levels. Yet instead of movement towards this goal, security analysts and popular media headlines indicate a trend towards proliferation of WMD in the Middle East. Greenpeace believes that a Nuclear Free Zone is a condition for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the region and therefore is also a condition for a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East.

The Middle East remains the region with the greatest concentration of states that are not party to one or more of the international treaties dealing with WMD: the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).¹ Moreover and more ominously, WMD (specifically chemical weapons) have been used in the Middle East.² The overwhelming majority of countries in the region have some form of WMD-related research, development or weaponisation program.³

This reality is an enormous challenge but is also the very reason that the Middle East is the region that receives the most international attention as a potential WMD free zone. Elsewhere in the world, Nuclear Weapon Free Zones (NWFZs) have been successfully negotiated and adopted, and additional such zones are being systemically pursued. But in the Middle East the goal of a NWFZ has been linked to a WMD Free Zone in all the relevant official circles. This is because of the strategic link that states in the region have made among the various WMD,⁴ with biological and chemical weapons perceived as the “poor man’s nukes” despite the significant difference in scale of mass destruction between nuclear weapons on the one hand and biological and chemical weapons on the other hand.

Because of the inherently dual-use nature of nuclear technology – for civilian as well as military applications – and because of the suspicion and proliferation concerns that all nuclear programs generate, Greenpeace believes that a fully Nuclear Free Zone is an essential element of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East. Such a zone will also require parallel progress on biological and chemical weapons disarmament through the existing treaties that deal with these two categories of weapons.

Background

All the relevant players as well as the highest international security authority have affirmed the goal of a WMD free zone in the Middle East. Specifically, the United Nations Security Council,⁵ all the member states of the NPT,⁶ as well as Israel⁷ have expressed support for this goal.

In addition, the call for a NWFZ in the Middle East has a history of over 30 years. In 1974 Iran, supported by Egypt, submitted a proposal toward this end to the UN General Assembly, which has since then adopted an annual resolution calling for such a zone. Since 1980 the resolution has been supported by all the states of the region and to this day it continues to be adopted annually by consensus.

In 1990 Egypt’s President Mubarak proposed expanding this concept to establish a zone free of WMD, together with a verification system. In 1991, in the context of the war in Iraq and subsequent disarmament efforts, the UN Security Council passed a resolution affirming both the goal of a NWFZ and a WMD Free Zone. In 1995, the NPT was indefinitely extended (ie, made into a permanent treaty) through an agreement among state parties that included a “Resolution on the Middle East” calling for a WMD Free Zone. In addition, this goal has been a topic of discussion at countless conferences and seminars. The rhetoric, however, is far from the reality.

Conditions for Progress

The current deadlock on negotiations towards a WMD free zone in the Middle East is a direct result of substantively different starting positions. But they do not preclude possible interim measures that might help lay the groundwork for eventual realisation of UN resolutions, NPT commitments, and security aspects of the regional peace process.

The position of the Arab states is that Israel's nuclear capabilities are destabilizing and must be addressed as a precondition to peace and security in the region. Israel's position is that "the establishment of peaceful relations, reconciliation, mutual recognition and good neighborliness, and complemented by conventional and non-conventional arms control measures"⁸ is a precondition for establishing a NWFZ and achieving the vision of a WMD free zone. These apparently polar opposite positions are what led to the breakdown of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks within the Middle East Peace Process. But these polar opposite positions – nuclear first or Nirvana first – can be overcome if the states involved accept that everything needs to be put on the table, that it is not possible to discuss regional peace without addressing the nuclear issue, and that the nuclear issue cannot be dealt with in isolation, outside the context of a comprehensive regional solution.

For example, Recommendation 12 of the report recently concluded by the WMD Commission:⁹

All states should support continued efforts to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East as a part of the overall peace process. Steps can be taken even now. As a confidence- building measure, all states in the region, including Iran and Israel, should for a prolonged period of time commit themselves to a verified arrangement not to have any enrichment, reprocessing or other sensitive fuel-cycle activities on their territories.

Such a commitment should be coupled with reliable assurances about fuel-cycle services required for peaceful nuclear activities. Egypt, Iran and Israel should join the other states in the Middle East in ratifying the CTBT.

The IAEA Board of Governors resolution of 4 February 2006 also points out that the resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis could contribute to the realisation of a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East.

Besides these important but incremental measures, however, it will also be necessary to consider the starting points of each of the representative positions of the Arab states, Iran, and Israel. In each case, internal or domestic factors are inseparable from the national security and foreign policy positions that dictate stated positions in global fora. Threat perceptions originate outside of the states involved, but within the region they are a direct contributing factor, probably the key factor, in each of the representative positions considered here. What this means for international and regional efforts to promote a WMD free zone is that the most persuasive arguments and relevant information might differ in the case of each representative position.

The Arab states are grouped together for the purposes of this discussion because they generally take a joint position in the relevant fora, but among themselves they have varying WMD-related capabilities. While a few Arab states have small nuclear research programs, none has a large-scale nuclear program that gives rise to immediate nuclear proliferation concerns. Whether this remains the situation is a crucial question, because nuclear programs *of any sort* are inherently suspect to proliferation concerns. The case of Iran proves this point, and the reactions to the recent announcement of six Arab states regarding intentions to develop nuclear energy programs further support it.¹⁰ Outsiders might not be able to know whether and to what extent regional security developments factor into domestic decisions to develop a nuclear program, but that will not stop them from assuming that it is such a factor.

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In the case of Iran, the positions and actions taken by international bodies to date have essentially had the reverse of the intended effect. Moreover, it is unlikely that sanctions will succeed in achieving the desired change in Iranian policy. The tools of escalation, isolation, and the threat or use of force have not historically succeeded in solving proliferation crises. However, signs of progress toward a WMD free zone in the Middle East could help to reassure Iran that its security would be better served without a uranium enrichment program that generates suspicion. In the interim, Iran could drop its linkage between the efforts of the international community to end its uranium enrichment program and its suspended implementation of transparency measures and could thereby reduce international suspicion.¹¹

Within Israel an important internal confidence-building measure is the opening up of the nuclear issue for discussion at the domestic level, where ambiguity has become a way of life and essentially accepted as a norm by an Israeli public that has successfully been persuaded that it does not want to know. The very existence of such a discussion within the country will bring about a change of perception regarding Israel on the part of a variety of other countries. In addition, having a discussion on a matter that had previously been considered taboo would turn the nuclear issue into something that can be explored, debated, and even challenged. Except for Israeli nuclear policy, public discourse in Israel focuses extensively on regional nuclear issues. Despite this, very little or no attention is given to disarmament as a solution or as a means to reducing regional nuclear tensions.

For example, the term “disarmament” is translated into Hebrew as “weapons dismantlement”, a concept that focuses on the physical aspects of the weapons. In contrast “disarmament” is essentially an effort at change in policy. In Israel, which is extremely practiced and fluent in security issues, incorporating a reduction of reliance on nuclear weapons into the security discourse as a relevant way to pursue and achieve security will be a necessary and positive step.

In addition, a broad historical and cultural perspective that builds on the traditional ties among the peoples involved – Arabs, Jews, and Persians – as well as a willingness to consider internal domestic concerns and to engage at that level, will contribute greatly to the goal of a WMD Free Zone. These cultural and historical ties run deep, have on the whole been constructive and mutually enriching, predate the nuclear era by millennia, and have the potential to outlast it as well if seen from this angle.

Progress can also be made by tackling nuclear materials and technology concerns head on. Discussions leading to a Fissile Materials Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) are a step in the right direction but they do not go far enough because the current proposals would not address existing stocks or the capability to produce weapons usable material in the future. In contrast, a model Comprehensive Fissile Materials Treaty (CFMT) has recently been proposed and informally circulated among members of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.¹² This approach would prohibit the separation or processing of weapons-usable plutonium as well as the production or processing of highly enriched uranium and would therefore go farther towards addressing proliferation concerns than any of the official proposals currently circulating. As an international proposal, it could cut across the current deadlock on WMD free zone negotiations in the Middle East, since each state in the region could independently entertain and engage with this proposal.

Moreover, since nuclear material and technology, and the suspicion they generate, are the source of proliferation concerns in the Middle East, then the solution lies in the alternatives. The option of exploring these alternatives is completely independent of the WMD free zone deadlock but, if pursued in parallel, could help pave the way for progress on negotiations by demonstrating the attractiveness of alternatives. The key alternative lies in the option of renewable energy sources and the vision of a Nuclear Free Middle East.

Exploitation of the considerable potential for renewable energy development in the Middle East can provide an alternative to nuclear energy plans recently announced by a number of Middle Eastern governments, including Egypt, with its associated financial, environmental, human health and of course proliferation consequences. *A Pathway to a Sustainable and Clean Energy Future for the Middle East* recently published by Greenpeace¹³ demonstrates that a combination of renewable energy sources,

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energy efficiency and decentralised energy could transform the Middle East energy sector, increasing security, reducing future energy prices and accelerating development, not to mention freeing the region from the threat posed by dual use nuclear technology. From an environmental and economic point of view, renewable energy sources are an option well worth exploring, and from a non-proliferation point of view they would make a decidedly positive contribution to security in the region.

Finally, given the political link among WMD in the Middle East, progress is needed on all three fronts – nuclear, chemical, and biological – in order to further the goal of a WMD free zone in the region. Progress towards the universalisation and implementation of the BWC and CWC, in parallel with national level measures to address nuclear proliferation concerns, is needed.

Conclusions

For many observers around the world the Middle East has become synonymous with war and conflict, and for those concerned with WMD proliferation it is a “hot spot.” For those living in the region, the reality of war and the fear of mass destruction are all too real. But the Middle East is more than that. Its potential for growth and positive change and for making lasting contributions to the rest of the world is also part of the history and identity of the people who live here. For these reasons passions run deep in the Middle East and the world watches with more than a little trepidation to see how the nuclear era will play itself out in this famously volatile region.

There are those who believe that civilisation began in the Middle East, and there are those who believe that it will end here. The former perspective does an injustice to the rest of the world, and the latter does an injustice to the Middle East. By looking beyond narrow national interests, which reflect only a snapshot of Middle Eastern history, the people of this region can make another lasting contribution to global civilisation if they succeed in achieving the first negotiated WMD free zone. A Nuclear Free Middle East will be a necessary element of this goal, and as challenging as that step appears today, stranger things have happened in this part of the world.

¹ *Building a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East: Global Non-Proliferation Regimes and Regional Experiences*, UNIDIR/2004/24, pp. 25, 29. See also Center for Nonproliferation Studies, *Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East* (updated 29 September 2006) <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wmdme/index.htm>

² Center for Nonproliferation Studies, *Reported Use of Chemical Weapons, Ballistic Missiles, and Cruise Missiles in the Middle East*, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wmdme/timeline.htm>

³ Center for Nonproliferation Studies, *Weapons of Mass Destruction Capabilities in the Middle East*, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wmdme/capable.htm>

⁴ Alan Dowty, “Making ‘No First Use’ Work: Bring All WMD Inside the Tent,” *The Non-proliferation Review* 8 (Spring 2001): 79-85.

⁵ Security Council Resolution 687 (3 April 1991).

⁶ NPT 1995 Resolution on the Middle East. Note: NPT member States include ALL countries except India, Israel and Pakistan. North Korea has since announced its withdrawal (although not accepted by NPT member states) but in 1995 was a member of the NPT.

⁷ State of Israel, *Explanation of Vote on the Establishment of a NWFZ in the Middle East*, UN General Assembly First Committee, 23 October 2006. This is the most recent statement of Israel's position: “Israel remains committed to a vision of the Middle East developing into a zone free of Chemical, Biological and Nuclear weapons as well as ballistic missiles.” Available at: <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/1com/1com06/res/eov1israeloct23.doc>

⁸ Israel, *Explanation of Vote on the Establishment of a NWFZ in the Middle East*, UN General Assembly First Committee, 23 October 2006, above.

⁹ *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms*, WMD Commission, 2006, www.wmdcommission.org

¹⁰ See Dominic Moran, “Egypt goes nuclear amid regional tensions” *International Relations and Security Network*

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=16724>, and Richard Beeston, “Six Arab states join rush to go nuclear” *The Times*, 4 November 2006, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,251-2436948,00.html>

¹¹ Wade Boese, “Preventing Nuclear Disaster” 25 March 2006 http://www.armscontrol.org/events/20060325_Boese_NuclearDisaster.asp

¹² *Comprehensive Fissile Materials Treaty*, 21 February 2006 <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/press/reports/comprehensive-fissile-material>

¹³ <http://www.greenpeace.org/mediterranean/news/introduction-to-the-mideast-energy-scenario>