

# NARRATIVES OF THE MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE

## DRIVERS, THEMES, AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

By Farzan Sabet



MIDDLE EAST WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION FREE ZONE SERIES



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**UNIDIR**  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACRS</b>	Arms Control and Regional Security
<b>BWC</b>	Biological Weapons Convention
<b>CBM</b>	Confidence Building Measures
<b>CBRN</b>	Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear
<b>CD</b>	Conference on Disarmament
<b>CEND</b>	Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament
<b>CSBM</b>	Confidence and Security Building Measures
<b>CSCE</b>	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
<b>CTBT</b>	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
<b>CWC</b>	Chemical Weapons Convention
<b>CWFZ</b>	Chemical Weapon Free Zone
<b>DoD</b>	US Department of Defense
<b>DNKV</b>	Department for Non-proliferation and Arms Control
<b>DPRK</b>	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
<b>E3/EU + 3</b>	France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as China, Russia, and the United States
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>HINW</b>	Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons
<b>HEU</b>	Highly Enriched Uranium
<b>IAEA</b>	International Atomic Energy Agency
<b>INC</b>	Israeli Nuclear Capabilities
<b>ISU</b>	Implementation Support Unit
<b>JCPOA</b>	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
<b>KGB</b>	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti
<b>LAS</b>	League of Arab States
<b>ME NWFZ</b>	Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone
<b>ME WMD FZ</b>	Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone
<b>MFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>MoD</b>	Ministry of Defense
<b>NAC</b>	New Agenda Coalition
<b>NAM</b>	Non-Aligned Movement
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NNWS</b>	Non-Nuclear Weapon States
<b>NSG</b>	Nuclear Suppliers Group
<b>NPT</b>	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
<b>NPP</b>	Nuclear Power Plant
<b>NWFZ</b>	Nuclear Weapons Free Zone
<b>NWS</b>	Nuclear-Weapon States
<b>OPCW</b>	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
<b>PIR</b>	The Russian Center for Policy Research

<b>PLO</b>	Palestine Liberation Organization
<b>QME</b>	Qualitative Military Edge
<b>SOC</b>	Senior Officials Committee
<b>START</b>	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
<b>TPNW</b>	Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
<b>TOR</b>	Terms of Reference
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UAV</b>	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNSCOM</b>	United Nations Special Commission
<b>WMD</b>	Weapons of Mass Destruction
<b>WMDFZ</b>	Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone

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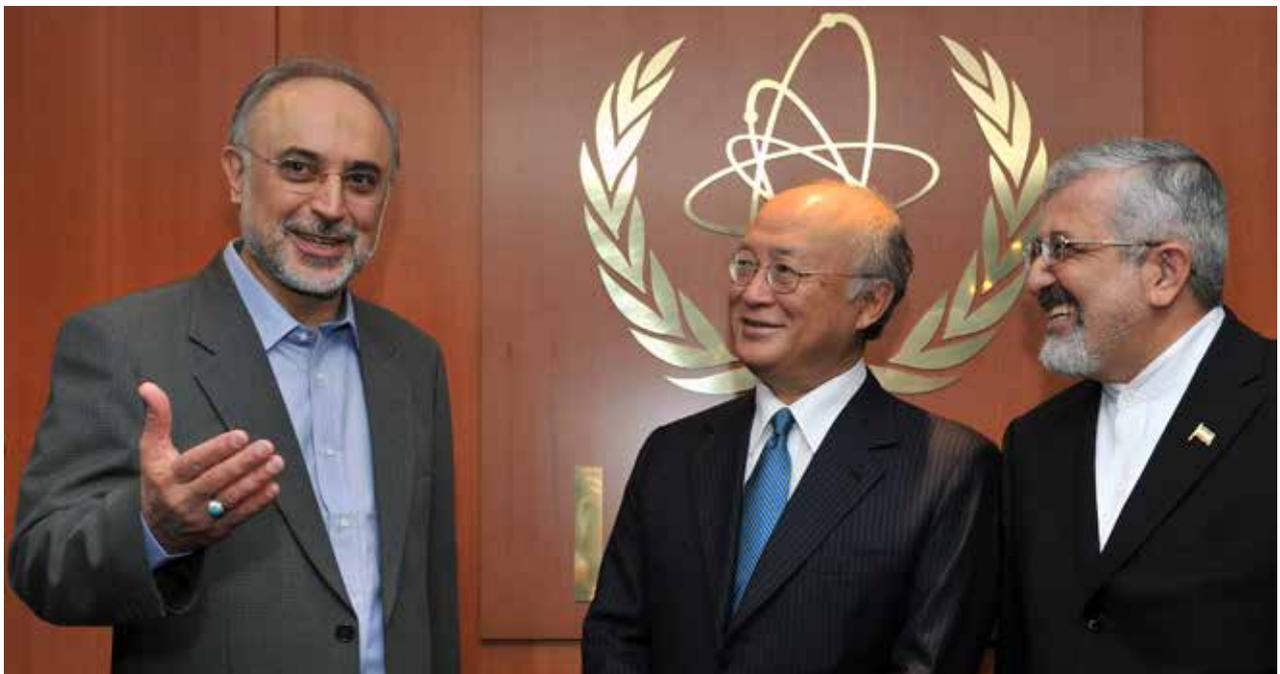
# THE IRANIAN NARRATIVE

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter of Iranian narratives provides a comprehensive analysis of drivers, themes, and historical accounts of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (ME WMDFZ or Zone) as seen from Iran. It is based on interviews conducted with current and former Iranian officials and experts who possess direct knowledge of the policies and events in question. The narrative reflects these accounts and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 explores Iran's security perceptions. Section 2 examines the drivers and themes of Iranian positions regarding the ME WMDFZ. Section 3 provides Iran's perspective on Zone-related historical processes.

Iran generally supports the objective of establishing a ME WMDFZ. This is a goal to which Iran is committed but is not necessarily among the country's top priorities because it does not perceive that the creation of a Zone will address the main challenges and risks in its security perceptions.



*Meeting between Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran's Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's Ambassador in Vienna, with Yukiya Amano, IAEA Director General (Vienna, Austria, 12 July 2011). Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA.*

<sup>1</sup> The chapter does not reflect the official positions of the Iranian government, or the views or an analysis by the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project, its Reference Group, UNIDIR, the United Nations or the United Nations Secretariat. All references to interviewees in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are to Iranian interviewees.

Furthermore, Tehran is wary of taking on any additional obligation under the scope of a ME WMDFZ that would seriously infringe on its security interests and conventional military capabilities. Iran is specifically concerned about the ways in which a Zone could increase its non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament obligations while decreasing its access to peaceful uses of nuclear, chemical, and biological technologies as well as conventional arms.

Iran's security perceptions have been shaped by a series of traumatic national experiences dating back to the 19th century.

Iran's negative experiences in accessing nuclear technologies under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) have significantly eroded its trust in non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament regimes, as well as in the extra-regional states that promote them. As a result, Iran's appetite to engage in processes that could lead it down a similar road has diminished.

## 1. IRANIAN SECURITY PERCEPTIONS AND A MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE

According to Iranian interviewees, Iran's security perceptions have been shaped by a series of traumatic national experiences dating back to the 19th century. These include the loss of territory and sovereignty at the hands of the British and Russian empires; diplomatic, economic and military actions against Iran by the United States of America since the mid-20th century; efforts by the West to isolate it following the revolution of 1979; the lack of a just international response to the invasion of Iran in 1980 by Iraq under President Saddam Hussein; the use of chemical weapons on Iranian soldiers and civilians by the Iraqi military during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War and the inadequate international response; and terrorist attacks against it by state and non-state actors.

Based on this historical background and interviews, the United States poses the main challenge in Iran's security perception. This is due to US military superiority, the past (and to some degree continuing) encirclement of Iran by US military forces, the perceived instability caused by US actions in the Middle East, and the diplomatic, economic, and military pressure it has exerted on Iran. From an Iranian perspective, the United States' aggressive behaviour towards it is often accompanied by a threatening rhetoric, which Iran feels compelled to reciprocate, thereby perpetuating a cycle of conflict and escalation. This mutually antagonistic rhetoric reinforces each side's position and limits the ability of their respective governments to manoeuvre without risking being perceived as acquiescing to an adversary by some domestic audiences.

Israel is considered as the second main challenge in Iran's security perceptions, with its regional nuclear monopoly being the primary hindrance to the establishment of a ME WMDFZ. Iran views Israel's advanced military capabilities, including its regional nuclear monopoly, as a tool that allows it to act with impunity against neighbouring states while politically coercing the West to support it. Iran also views Israel as an "apartheid state" that oppresses the Palestinians.

Israel's security presence near Iran's territorial and maritime borders and its operations against Iranian military and strategic infrastructure and personnel have emerged as a relatively new threat in recent years. Specifically, the Israeli military and intelligence presence along the western border of Iran with the

Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and along its northern border with the Republic of Azerbaijan is seen as an intolerable security risk.

Iran perceives an additional security challenge emanating from the United States' unconditional support for Israeli aggression in the Middle East and its shielding of Israel from any resolution over its violations of international law in the United Nations Security Council, the General Assembly, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These have deepened the mistrust and hostility between Iran and the United States and, to some extent, have become serious obstacles for improving relations.

The third main challenge in Iran's security perceptions is instability in the Middle East, including terrorism, particularly from Sunni extremists on Iran's western and eastern borders. Iran has faced terrorism from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Iranian Balochi terrorist organizations on the Iran–Pakistan border affiliated with Al-Qaida, tensions with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and risk of future attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Besides these three challenges, Iranian interviewees differed on Iran's other main threat perceptions. While acknowledging a gradual but discernible shift from a unipolar to a multipolar global order, some interviewees expressed concern about the perpetuation of Iran's relative economic, political and security inequality in the US-dominated global order.

The environment also appears in the security perceptions of a subset of Iranian interviewees. They mentioned air pollution, soil erosion, the spread of pollution from possible nuclear accidents and water scarcity, among others. These challenges are both domestic and transnational as they can affect Iran and its neighbours.

Although most interviewees did not perceive Saudi Arabia as a threat, some highlighted its past sponsorship of terrorism against Iran as well as its military intervention in Yemen and its potential to pursue a nuclear weapon programme since the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. More broadly, this subset of interviewees expressed concerns at the close security cooperation between the United States (and, to a lesser degree, Israel) and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf sub-region, which they believe complicates the relationships of these Arab states with Iran.

One interviewee noted that the recent Iran–Saudi reconciliation agreement brokered by China is a significant historical development. It could mark the opening of a new chapter for regional cooperation among Iran and its Arab neighbours as well as for China's role as a trusted interlocutor to promote security in the Middle East. The interviewee also saw it as a possible sign of a dramatic paradigm shift from a unipolar to a multipolar global order that could lead to diminishing US hegemony, which he assessed to be a positive development for regional security.

Interviewees said that WMD were not among Iran's top security challenges. But of the three types of WMD, nuclear weapons were of greatest concern. While most interviewees did not consider the emergence of a new nuclear weapon possessor in the Middle East as an immediate threat, a subset believed that this could change if one or more states in the region sought to change the status quo.

One interviewee believed that the main challenges for Iran in the nuclear arena are the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists and the cyberattacks, sabotage and continuous threat of attack against

Iranian nuclear facilities by Israel in violation of IAEA General Conference resolution 533 of 1990.<sup>2</sup> The interviewee warned that, if Israel continued its unacceptable actions, then Iran could eventually respond in self-defence in the form of an unprecedented military response against Israel, citing comments by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi as evidence.<sup>3</sup> He noted that the United States and the European Union referred to resolution 533 in condemning alleged attacks by the Russian Federation on a Ukrainian nuclear facilities.<sup>4</sup> In this context, he believed that the international community had to prevent such provocations by Israel that could lead to a serious military conflict in the Middle East.

Chemical weapons were the WMD of next greatest concern given the legacy of their use against Iran during the Iran–Iraq War. Some interviewees considered the development and use of these weapons by non-state actors as an ongoing issue of concern. Biological weapons were seen as a less prominent challenge in Iran’s security perceptions by interviewees, but they acknowledged that this may be changing since the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 2. IRANIAN DRIVERS AND THEMES ON THE ME WMDFZ

Iranian drivers and themes can be classified according to whether they relate to the ME WMDFZ itself and WMD non-proliferation and disarmament; whether they relate to the other states of the Middle East and the regional context; or whether they relate to the role of extra-regional states. These are addressed in turn in the following three subsections.

### IRANIAN PERCEPTIONS OF A ME WMDFZ AND WMD NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

Iranian perceptions of a ME WMDFZ relate largely to its long-standing support for a Zone, which have been balanced by concerns about expanding the Zone’s scope. It has also felt disadvantaged by a perceived imbalance in the NPT, which has led to a general loss of faith in non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament regimes.

#### Iran’s long-standing support for a Zone

Iran has been a consistent supporter of the establishment of a Zone; initially the nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) proposed in the 1970s, and then the expanded WMD-free zone from the 1990s. Iran co-sponsored the resolution to create a NWFZ in the Middle East in 1974,<sup>5</sup> and the creation and implementation of a ME WMDFZ remains a long-standing policy of the Iranian government despite the change of regime following the revolution of 1979.

Iranian interviewees highlighted several reasons for Iran’s support for a ME WMDFZ today. First, the establishment of a Zone was believed to serve the country’s national and regional security interests by eliminating the threat of WMD in the hands of its regional adversaries and reducing the prospects of non-state actors acquiring such weapons.

<sup>2</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference, “Prohibition of all Armed Attacks Against Nuclear Installations Devoted to Peaceful Purposes whether under Construction or in Operation,” Resolution 533 GC(34)/RES/533, 21 September 1990, [https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc34res-533\\_en.pdf](https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc34res-533_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Nasser Karimi, “Iran News Threats Against Israel During Army Day Parade,” Associated Press, 18 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-army-day-parade-israel-us-80d2369ef953ab21129579eb3233a2b3>.

<sup>4</sup> Francois Murphy, “IAEA Board Passes Resolution Calling on Russia to Leave Zaporizhzhia,” Reuters, 15 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/iaea-board-passes-resolution-calling-russia-leave-zaporizhzhia-2022-09-15/>.

<sup>5</sup> Permanent Mission of Iran to the United Nations, “Iran Request to Include Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Item in the Work of the General Assembly,” 15 July 1974, <https://unidir.org/node/6144>.

Second, personal experience of chemical weapons use has made the creation of a ME WMDFZ potentially more resonant for Iranians than would otherwise have been the case. When Iran was targeted by chemical weapons during its war with Iraq, many Iranians (including in the government) were either directly affected by them or knew someone who was.

Third, a Zone arrangement could reduce the perception held by some states, both within and beyond the Middle East, that Iran poses a WMD threat. Such a change could contribute to an improvement in relations with other states and the improvement of economic conditions in Iran.

Fourth, support for the establishment of a ME WMDFZ is viewed in the broader context of Iran's support for international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes. Iran pursues the universalization of the NPT, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), among other regimes, as a key step towards the establishment of a Zone, as well as pursuing application of comprehensive IAEA safeguards to all nuclear facilities in the region.

Despite the Iranian government's support for WMD-related non-proliferation and disarmament regimes in general, and establishment of a ME WMDFZ specifically, interviewees generally felt that the Zone is not a high priority for Iran because it does not address its main security challenges.

Furthermore, some interviewees distinguished between two schools of thought within the Iranian government regarding the signing, ratification, and implementation of international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes.

One school of thought – mostly associated with the so-called “moderate” political current in Iran – generally favours joining and implementing such regimes.<sup>6</sup> In this context, one interviewee noted the



*An Iranian soldier wearing a gas mask during the Iran-Iraq War (March 1985). Credit: Mahmoud Badrfar (Public Domain).*

<sup>6</sup> “Spotlight on Political Currents: How is Political Competition Organized in Iran?” Majlis Monitor, 2 February 2016, <https://majlismonitor.com/en/2016/02/spotlight-how-is-political-competition-organized-in-iran/>.

significance of the religious edict against nuclear weapons issued by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup>

The other school – associated with the principlist political current – is more sceptical of the ratification and implementation of these regimes. It holds that the scrutiny and pressure that Iran’s nuclear programme is subject to are unjustifiable due to its NPT membership, and that Iran has been deprived of its right to access civilian nuclear technologies. As a result, they view WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes as possible “traps”. Some in this school of thought have even advocated serious consideration of withdrawing from the NPT under the right conditions.

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### **Iranian concerns about expanding the scope of a ME WMDFZ**

Most Iranian interviewees believed that, despite their government broadly agreeing with the goals of a ME WMDFZ, it preferred the original nuclear-focused scope of the Zone. These interviewees usually spoke of a NWFZ, rather than a WMDFZ, when discussing the contemporary Zone concept. Some of them thought that the shift from a NWFZ to a WMDFZ in the Mubarak Initiative in 1990 was a mistake.<sup>8</sup>

Several reasons were given for the preference for a nuclear-focused Zone. First, interviewees perceived the expansion of the scope of the Zone as needlessly complicating the prospects for creating it; as the more issues that need to be addressed within the process, the more difficult it will be to achieve results. An interviewee noted that, whereas there are five existing precedents for a NWFZ, there is no existing model for a WMDFZ. Additionally, the lack of a credible verification mechanisms for the BWC raised questions for him about whether the states of the Middle East could succeed where BWC state parties have failed.

Second, some interviewees viewed the expansion as undermining the primary objective of the Zone: Israeli nuclear disarmament. The unparalleled destructive potential of nuclear weapons makes them a much greater threat than other WMD. Shifting from a NWFZ to a WMDFZ was therefore viewed by these interviewees as decreasing pressure on Israel and removing the incentives for it to denuclearize. Israel could point to a lack of progress on chemical and biological weapons by other regional states as a pretext to postpone its denuclearization.

Third, most interviewees expressed some concern about the introduction of delivery systems into the scope of the Zone,<sup>9</sup> and contrasted this with what they view as the relatively straightforward text of the original NWFZ proposal. One interviewee pointed out that the addition of delivery systems to the scope of the Zone was more sensitive for Iran than the transition from a NWFZ to a WMDFZ and could be an obstacle for Iran to agree to the establishment of a Zone.

<sup>7</sup> Gareth Porter, “When the Ayatollah Said No to Nukes,” Foreign Policy, 16 October 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/16/when-the-ayatollah-said-no-to-nukes/>.

<sup>8</sup> “‘Mubarak Initiative’ Expands the Scope of the Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East to Include All WMD,” 18 April 1990, UNIDIR Timeline of Key Events in the History of Diplomatic Efforts for the ME WMDFZ (UNIDIR Timeline), <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/mubarak-initiative-expands-scope-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-middle-east-include-all>.

<sup>9</sup> “1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference Adopts the ‘Resolution on the Middle East,’” 11 May 1995, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1995-npt-review-and-extension-conference-adopts-resolution-middle-east>.

Iranian sensitivity around delivery systems largely stems from its experience during the Iran-Iraq War that highlighted the importance of missile capabilities. Since then Iran has developed an arsenal that remains key to its security. Interviewees noted that restrictions on what is now referred to as means of delivery could pose a danger to the security of Iran if they cover the country's ballistic missile capabilities. Iran would not agree to limitations on existing missiles because they are one of its main deterrent military capabilities, and so restrictions on them could open new avenues for adversaries to pressure Iran.

Moreover, interviewees felt that means of delivery should not have been included in the scope of the Zone because other NWFZs do not limit them and there are no legally binding international instruments on missiles. It is therefore unlikely that Iran would accept further obligations unless they are mutual and reciprocal among Middle Eastern states, they also include major weapon systems, and they are coupled with certain agreements with extra-regional states.<sup>10</sup>

One interviewee speculated that, while the Iranian government might consider limited restrictions on missiles, for example on range, it would not be willing to compromise on its entire programme. He thought that major restrictions on this capability could only be achieved through regional negotiations on conventional arms control that maintained a balance of power in the region. As part of such negotiations, Iran would have to be granted access to international arms market. This would allow it to purchase more advanced conventional weapon systems to compensate for any resulting loss of power and capabilities, including in the missiles domain and for its conventionally weak air force.

Finally, since 2002, Iran has been preoccupied with the nuclear issue<sup>11</sup> and has limited capacity to focus on the ME WMD-FZ issue. Iran has neither participated in nor made its input to the Egypt–Israel debates that have come to define this issue since 1992, and it was not involved in two major Zone-related processes of the past: the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group of the Madrid Peace Process,<sup>12</sup> to which it was not invited; and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva,<sup>13</sup> where it only attended the first meeting.

According to an interviewee, Iran has no regrets about not taking part in these two processes. This is because the Iranian government considers any process that includes Israel but takes place outside the framework of the United Nations as having an agenda to normalize and gain recognition for Israel, while undermining the Palestinian struggle, and any such process is doomed to fail.

### **The imbalance in the NPT**

From Iran's perspective there is an imbalance in the three pillars of the NPT: non-proliferation (Pillar I), disarmament (Pillar II) and peaceful uses of nuclear energy (Pillar III). Iranian interviewees felt that this imbalance favours the five nuclear weapon states (NWS), including the United States, and non-NPT nuclear-armed states like Israel, while disadvantaging non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) like Iran.

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<sup>10</sup> Nasser Hadian, "Iran: The Middle East WMD-Free Zone: An Opportunity for Regional Dialogue," in *Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region*, eds. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak Kane (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 46–47, <https://unidir.org/publication/perspectives-drivers-and-objectives-middle-east-wmd-free-zone-voices-region>.

<sup>11</sup> Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Iran Nuclear Overview," 25 June 2020, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/iran-nuclear/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Parties of the Madrid Peace Conference Create the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group," 1 December 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>.

<sup>13</sup> "First Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMD-FZ Conference is Held in Glion, Switzerland," 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

Interviewees argued that this was evident in the inordinate pressure on Iran under Pillar I and the denial of its rights under Pillar III, while there was no pressure on states like the United States and Israel to disarm under Pillar II. More disturbingly, from the perspective of some interviewees, the goalpost for the NWS under Pillar II had shifted from disarmament to nuclear risk reduction, which has allowed these states to keep their arsenals intact.

This imbalance in the NPT has raised concerns that it could affect the ME WMDfZ process.

One interviewee warned that, while Iran treats the NPT like a holy book of non-proliferation and disarmament, Israel or the United States could force conditionalities on the Zone that may set a bad precedent for the implementation of Pillar II of the NPT.<sup>14</sup> He cited as an example the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative of the United States, which proposes that disarmament cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying security concerns that lead to nuclear proliferation and the retention of these arms. This could impose constraints on a ME WMDfZ.

Another interviewee remarked that NWFZs are intended to be an intermediary step on the way to global nuclear disarmament. They are not meant to perpetuate the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of a small number of states.

### **Loss of faith in non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament**

Most Iranian interviewees believe that Iran has lost faith in non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament measures. This has been caused by the discrimination and double standards of the international community and Western powers, primarily due to Iran's drive for independence and self-reliance. Three examples were mentioned to illustrate this perception.

First, they perceived discrimination and double standards towards Iran's nuclear programme. The interviewees pointed out that Western nuclear suppliers entered into multibillion-dollar contracts to help launch Iran's ambitious nuclear programme in 1974. However, after the revolution, the United States, West Germany, and France failed to complete nuclear projects and deliver purchased goods and services. When Iran sought alternative international partners to continue its programme - such as Russia, China and Argentina - these states were pressured not to cooperate.

An interviewee also pointed out that, following the revolution, there were negotiations, led by the United Nations and the IAEA, to guarantee nuclear fuel from nuclear suppliers to recipients. This would have removed the need for the latter to acquire nuclear fuel cycles. But the negotiations failed due to the obstinacy of the Western powers. This was one major motivation for Iran to pursue independent fuel cycle capabilities and was why it would not compromise on its capabilities in a ME WMDfZ.

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<sup>14</sup> Shannon Bugos, "CEND Establishes Two-Year Work Program," Arms Control Today 50, no. 1 (January/February 2020), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/cend-establishes-two-year-work-program>.



*The Arak IR-40 heavy water reactor, (Arak, Iran). Credit: Nanking2012 / Wikimedia Commons.*

Second, the lack of serious action by the international system against Iraq after its invasion of and use of chemical weapons against Iran fuelled Iranian distrust of the international community. The response to Israeli nuclear weapons is perceived to have been similarly tepid. In comparison, the response to the Iranian nuclear programme by the international system and Western powers has been much more active, illustrating discrimination and double standards.

Third, Iranian interviewees believe that Iran took a significant risk when it engaged in negotiations over its nuclear programme with France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as China, Russia, and the United States (E3/EU+3). The resulting JCPOA, if it had become a positive experience, could have paved the way for further arrangements on other issues. But Iran's negative experience, especially the US decision to withdraw from the agreement, damaged the credibility of the government of President Hassan Rouhani among many Iranians, which negotiated the nuclear deal. It also undermined Iran's trust in non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament measures.

A contributing factor to this loss of faith has been that proposals for non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament by extra-regional states and some states from the region typically target Iran's capabilities without comparable reciprocity on issues of concern for the Iranian government. The proposals can target both conventional and WMD capabilities, for example in the area of ballistic missiles. Yet possession of nuclear weapons or conventional arms build-up by Iran's regional adversaries, who are also US allies, are not targeted.

Despite these circumstances, the Rouhani government initially chose not to retaliate in response to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the "maximum pressure" campaign launched by the administration of US President Donald J. Trump. These steps discredited the United States as a partner in the eyes of Iranians. Iran initially pursued a policy of "strategic patience", in which it limited its response to US

actions, partly to buy time for the remaining members of the nuclear deal to find ways to restore at least some of the benefits of the deal for Iran. When this policy did not yield results, and especially once the principlists gained control on the Iranian parliament in 2020 and the presidency in 2021, the Iranian government systematically reduced its commitment to the JCPOA without formally withdrawing from it. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA and “maximum pressure” campaign showed Iran that the United States cannot be trusted and that the E3/EU are not reliable partners for maintaining the deal’s integrity. This experience has strengthened the conviction and position of the camp who believe that WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes and agreements are often a “trap” designed to disarm, pressure, and weaken Iran.

Some interviewees believed that Iran may withdraw from the NPT under certain circumstances, such as if the Iranian nuclear file is referred to the United Nations Security Council for action. Any withdrawal would follow from its loss of faith in such agreements and its heightened distrust of its counterparts, namely the United States and E3/EU. If it were to take such drastic action, these interviewees believed that the Iranian government would seek to create constructive ambiguity to keep its adversaries guessing about its intentions. However, a subset of them believed that such an escalatory cycle “would not be good for anyone”.

This sense of discrimination and double standards has led the Iranian government to be less forthcoming in some WMD non-proliferation and disarmament forums. This perception has also led it to endure a high level of pressure to achieve domestic fuel cycle capabilities in part to deter possible future aggression by Middle Eastern and extra-regional states.

Despite facing discrimination and double standards, Iran has shown strong support for WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes. It dismantled any WMD programmes pursued for deterrence



*Representatives from the E3/EU+3 and Iranian officials engaged in high-stakes negotiations to shape the future of Iran’s nuclear program (Lausanne, Switzerland, 2 April 2015). Credit: Dragan Tatic / Bundesministerium für europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten.*

during the Iran–Iraq War and remains in compliance with international instruments like the NPT, the CWC and the BWC, notwithstanding the conflict over the status of its nuclear program. Iran believes that it only stands to benefit from a ME WMDFZ if one is established, since Israel is the only state with nuclear weapons and a *carte blanche* from the West to pursue WMD in the region.

## **IRANIAN PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES, REGIONAL CONDITIONS, AND THE ME WMDFZ**

Iranian perceptions of the role of other Middle Eastern states in the establishment of a ME WMDFZ mainly focus on Israel as the main obstacle to the creation of a Zone. It is also ambivalent about the current geographical delineation of a ME WMDFZ, which is somewhat mismatched with the security perceptions of Iran when it comes to WMD. While it does not want to change this delineation because opening this discussion could effectively erase all of the milestones that have been achieved on this issue in nearly 50 years, this reduces the utility of the Zone for Iran to meet its security needs. Finally, the arms race in the Middle East is seen as creating suboptimal conditions for the establishment of a ME WMDFZ.

### **Israel as the main obstacle to the creation of a ME WMDFZ**

According to Iranian interviewees, the main – or only – obstacle to creating a ME WMDFZ is Israel's possession of nuclear weapons and its refusal to join the NPT as a NNWS. This poses a major threat to regional security.

One interviewee explained that Israel's nuclear weapons have prevented some states from joining or ratifying other WMD non-proliferation and disarmament treaties, as they sought to maintain a form of soft leverage against Israel.<sup>15</sup> This has exacerbated proliferation risks in the region.

Another interviewee suggested that, without Israel's participation in the ongoing effort to establish a Zone under a mandate from the United Nations General Assembly, other and more viable approaches and solutions would be required to create the Zone. He remained pessimistic given the current regional circumstances.

However, an interviewee believed Israel's primary motivation for joining the ME WMDFZ negotiations could be preventing Iran from acquiring or maintaining nuclear deterrent capabilities. Israel may perceive Iran's independent uranium-enrichment capabilities as counterbalancing its nuclear capabilities, elevating it as a potential competitor in the region. However, he maintained that the two programmes are not comparable and that the Iranian nuclear programme would not inevitably result in nuclear weapons because Iran is a party to the NPT and the Iranian programme is distinct, transparent, and under IAEA safeguards.

Another interviewee maintained that Israel's discourse around the Iranian nuclear programme – namely, portraying it as a threat to the region and the world – is Israeli propaganda aimed at drawing attention away from its own nuclear weapons and to avoid joining the NPT. The interviewee argued that Israel uses this propaganda to recast its nuclear weapons as a strategic asset for the region and the world, in order to counter the Iranian programme (and Türkiye and its regional policies). This interviewee felt that this was the reason why Israel was the main opponent of the JCPOA, which could have been a key step towards creating the Zone, and why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasized withdrawal from the deal as his main demand to President Trump.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For Arab perspectives on this topic, see "Israeli nuclear capabilities and the ME WMDFZ" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.

<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Thomsen, "Video Shows Netanyahu Saying He Convinced Trump to Pull Out of Iran Nuke Deal," The Hill, 17 July 2018, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/middle-east-north-africa/397504-video-shows-netanyahu-claiming-responsibility/>.

## The geographical delineation of the ME WMDFZ

The current working definition of the geographical delineation of a ME WMDFZ includes the 22 member states of the League of Arab States (LAS), Iran and Israel. Some Iranian interviewees expressed doubts about this definition. A small subset even questioned the concept of the Middle East itself, which they saw as a construct of the British Empire inherited by the United States.<sup>17</sup> Despite disagreements, these interviewees agreed that going beyond the current definition could potentially unlock progress.

One Iranian interviewee felt that this has left Iran in a position where, on the one hand, it does not want to invest significant new political capital or diplomatic capacity in Zone processes as they are currently conceived, and, on the other hand, it does not want to significantly revamp the Zone concept to better meet its security needs.

Redefining the boundaries of the Middle East as it applied to the Zone, according to this subset of interviewees, could better reflect the interests of the region's states. For example, one interviewee suggested that Iran's security interests are more closely tied to Pakistan and Türkiye, which are not included in the current delineation, than to countries within, including Jordan and Morocco. From his perspective, it did not make sense for Iran to continue with a delineation that emphasized Egypt's security priorities (as the key state leading the Zone process) or includes states that shared little in the way of borders, cross-cutting issues, or interests with Iran. This delineation would not prove very useful for Iran to actively engage in the negotiations.

In this context, some interviewees felt that Türkiye posed a unique challenge for the geographical delineation of a ME WMDFZ. Türkiye has played an increasingly important role in the Middle East, which was not the case when this delineation was first decided.<sup>18</sup> It also hosts US nuclear weapons under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) framework (which some interviewees believe violates Articles I and II of the NPT).<sup>19</sup> Finally, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan interest in nuclear technology could be used for weapon proliferation.<sup>20</sup> There was a sense that the status of Türkiye in relation to a Zone was in need of addressment.

Yet, despite these reservations, one interviewee said that the Iranian government would not push to change the current delineation, as it would not want to be perceived as backpedalling on its support for a Zone, which it first co-sponsored in 1974. Iran would also not want to be seen as undermining the ongoing General Assembly-mandated Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (hereafter the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference), which has reaffirmed the delineation of the Zone as encompassing the 22 LAS states, Iran, and Israel.<sup>21</sup> Opening this discussion could effectively erase all of the milestones that

<sup>17</sup> Osamah F. Khalil, "The Crossroads of the World: U.S. and British Foreign Policy Doctrines and the Construct of the Middle East, 1902–2007," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (April 2014): 305–309, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26376560>, and C.G. Smith, "The Emergence of the Middle East," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 3 (July 1968): 6–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259695>.

<sup>18</sup> Kyle T. Evered, "Regionalism in the Middle East and the Case of Turkey," *Geographical Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 474, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30034248>.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Can the U.S. Protect its Nuclear Weapons in Turkey?," *The Washington Post*, 18 October 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/18/can-us-protect-its-nuclear-weapons-turkey/>.

<sup>20</sup> David Saner and William Broad, "Erdogan's Ambitions Go Beyond Syria. He Says He Wants Nuclear Weapons," *The New York Times*, 20 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/world/middleeast/erdogan-turkey-nuclear-weapons-trump.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction, Second Session, "Rules of Procedure," 3 December 2021, <https://unidir.org/node/6586>.

have been achieved on this issue in nearly 50 years. He felt that this has left Iran in a position where, on the one hand, it does not want to invest significant new political capital or diplomatic capacity in Zone processes as they are currently conceived, and, on the other hand, it does not want to significantly revamp the Zone concept to better meet its security needs.

### **The arms race in the Middle East and suboptimal conditions for a ME WMDFZ**

Some Iranian interviewees expressed concern about what they viewed as an arms race in the Middle East. In this context, they were adamant that Iran's stance is defensive and focused on deterrence. As an example, they noted that Iran has not initiated a war in over two centuries and that it has sought to stop the expansion of its military and to cut arms imports since the revolution of 1979. However, the trauma of the Iran–Iraq War forced Iran to remilitarize and develop its missile programme in response to Iraqi ballistic missile attacks during the “War of the Cities” phase of the war.<sup>22</sup> Due to this traumatic experience, Iran has sought self-reliance in arms production and developed missiles and proxy networks to deter US and Israeli aggression, in response to the arms build-up by neighbouring states, and to establish strategic depth.

One interviewee noted that the Rouhani government attempted to reverse this trend towards militarization with the implementation of the JCPOA in order to boost civilian spending at home. However, these efforts were thwarted by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its “maximum pressure” campaign. The interviewee concluded that the regional incentive structure does not favour arms control, but an arms race. In his mind, this disadvantages Iran given that, unlike its regional rivals, its financial resources and access to the international arms market are constrained by sanctions. He viewed this arms race is partly driven by arms exporters. Iran's loss of faith in and distrust of arms control, and ongoing arms races, thus created unfavourable conditions for a ME WMDFZ.

## **IRANIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF EXTRA-REGIONAL STATES IN THE CREATION OF A ME WMDFZ**

Iranian perceptions of the role of extra-regional states in the establishment of a ME WMDFZ mainly focus on the failure of the depository states (composed of the United States, United Kingdom, and Russian Federation) to abide by their responsibility to work towards the creation of a Zone under the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the mandate to hold a Zone conference in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

### **The role of the depository states**

Iran believes that the three NPT depositories have a responsibility to work towards the establishment of a ME WMDFZ under the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the mandate to hold a Zone conference in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Two interviewees held that, despite these commitments, the depositories have either forgotten their responsibility or have adopted positions that contradict their responsibility. They cited the US support for Israel on the Zone issue and the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Helsinki Conference by the US government as clear examples of this trend.

These interviewees further noted that Israel had not taken a single step towards the creation of a ME WMDFZ and that the United States and the United Kingdom had repeatedly excused it by saying that the regional situation is not ripe for a Zone conference. They therefore felt that these two depositories had violated their commitments under the 1995 resolution and the mandate from the 2010 conference by shielding Israel from blame.

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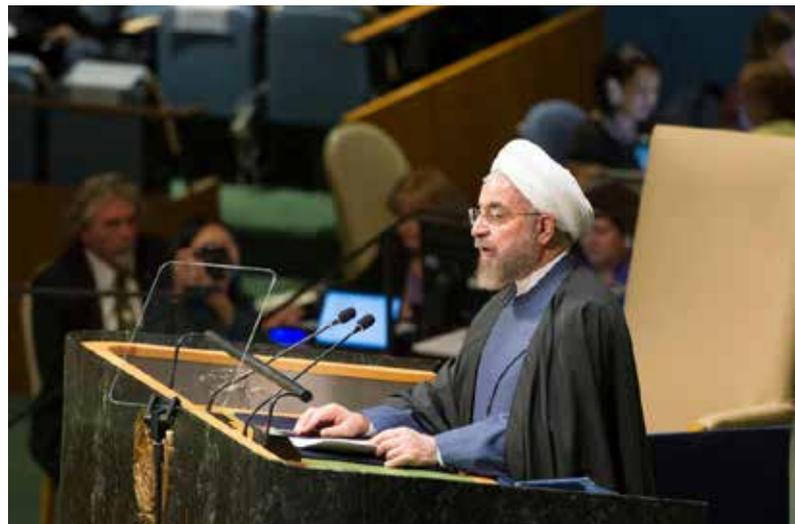
<sup>22</sup> Kamran Taremi, “Beyond the Axis of Evil: Ballistic Missiles in Iran's Military Thinking,” *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 1 (March 2005): 97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26298900>.

Some interviewees felt that the creation of a ME WMDFZ is not only a Middle Eastern issue but should also concern extra-regional states, which must pursue the universality of the NPT, the safeguarding of all nuclear regional facilities and the creation of the right environment for a Zone. But one of these interviewees felt that, instead of being committed to advance the Zone in practice, the depositories – with the possible exception of Russia – had undermined it since at least the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

### **Mistakes and regrets in nuclear relations with Western powers**

One Iranian interviewee felt that the agreement to indefinitely extend the NPT at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference has weakened the leverage of NNWS in relation to the NWS.

It was also seen as decreasing the leverage of Middle Eastern states over Israel to establish a ME WMDFZ. To address this, he suggested that the NPT should be regularly renewed by its member states. Along these lines, the interviewee believed that it was a mistake for Iran to adopt the unprecedented verification and restrictive measures under the JCPOA on Iran's nuclear programme – such as the IAEA Additional Protocol – without reciprocity from the NWS and other states of the region because it risked relegating Iran to a second-tier NPT status. This sentiment was, according to him, shared by representatives of some other states in the region, such as Egypt, which viewed the JCPOA as a pretext to impose standards that go beyond the NPT on the states of the region and feared it could set a precedent.



*Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, addresses the general debate of the sixty-ninth session of the General Assembly (New York, United States of America, 25 September 2014). Credit: Mark Garten / UN Photo.*

## **3. IRANIAN HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMDFZ PROCESSES**

### **THE CO-SPONSORED 1974 RESOLUTION ON THE MIDDLE EAST NUCLEAR WEAPON-FREE ZONE**

Iranian interviewees universally viewed their country as the originator of the Zone initiative, as Iran was the first to sponsor the resolution on a ME NWFZ at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974.<sup>23</sup> Iran had been promoting the idea since 1970.<sup>24</sup> The original draft of the resolution referred to a “nuclear-free zone”, but this was changed to “nuclear weapon-free zone” to better reflect Iranian intentions.

Iranian interviewees mentioned several motivations behind the resolution. First, interviewees believed that Iran under the Shah promoted the resolution to prevent a nuclear arms race in the region. Iran had a growing conventional military at the time, and the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other states of the region would reduce this advantage. Second, according to at least one interviewee, the Iranian government launched an ambitious nuclear energy programme in 1974 and sought to use the Zone

<sup>23</sup> “Iran and Egypt Co-Sponsor a Resolution Calling for the Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East,” 21 August 1974, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1970s/iran-and-egypt-co-sponsor-resolution-calling-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone?timeline=0>.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), “1970 Iran Statement to the General Assembly on the Zone,” 1 October 1970, para. 45, 5, <https://unidir.org/node/6151>.

A shift in priorities in Iran after the revolution meant that it was not actively involved in Zone-related process for over 20 years. Iran was also not associated with the shift of the Zone concept from a NWFZ to a WMDFZ with the Mubarak Initiative in 1990 and was not invited to ACRS in the early 1990s.

resolution to decrease suspicion by the West of its intentions, as controversial statements by the Shah at the time suggested that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other states in the region could lead to nuclear proliferation by Iran.<sup>25</sup>

Third, this initiative was pursued against the backdrop of the Indian “Smiling Buddha” peaceful nuclear explosion of May 1974. This had increased the sensitivity of Western suppliers around nuclear exports and the risk perception of Iran about the prospects of nuclear weapon proliferation by nearby states.

### **THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE**

A shift in priorities in Iran after the revolution meant that it was not actively involved in Zone-related process for over 20 years. Iran was also not associated with the shift of the Zone concept from a NWFZ to a WMDFZ with the Mubarak Initiative in 1990 and was not invited to ACRS in the early 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

Iran supported the Middle East Resolution<sup>27</sup> at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. Iran was a leading state of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and the Iranian delegation at the conference was following the NAM position. Because the NWS were unwilling to make progress on nuclear disarmament, the NAM preferred other options over an indefinite extension, which was advocated by the United States and most other NPT member states. Despite being against the indefinite extension of the NPT, Iran ultimately agreed to join the consensus due to the overall package that was agreed at the 1995 conference, which included the Middle East Resolution.<sup>28</sup>

One Iranian interviewee believed that, if this resolution had not been adopted, the treaty would not have been extended by consensus. He said adopting the resolution was essential to get Middle Eastern states to agree to the indefinite extension by consensus and the NWS owed a commitment to the states of the region to pursue the Zone. Another interviewee suggested that Iran and other states of the region agreed to extend the NPT as a confidence-building measure (CBM) so that the three depository states would fully implement the provisions of the treaty, including disarmament and accession by Israel to the NPT as a NNWS.

However, according to one interviewee with direct knowledge of the Iranian government discussions at the time, some within Iran criticized the Iranian delegation at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference for being too optimistic and not sufficiently cautious. He believed that, absent the extension, the NNWS would have had much more leverage to pressure the NWS on disarmament and a ME WMDFZ, but this leverage is now lost.

<sup>25</sup> Farzan Sabet, “The April 1977 Persepolis Conference on the Transfer of Nuclear Technology: A Third World Revolt Against US Non-Proliferation Policy?,” *International History Review* 40, no. 5 (October 2018): 1141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1404483>.

<sup>26</sup> “1992–1995 the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS),” 1 December 1991–15 December 1994, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>.

<sup>27</sup> “1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference Adopts the ‘Resolution on the Middle East,’” 11 May 1995, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1995-npt-review-and-extension-conference-adopts-resolution-middle-east>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

## THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

The implementation of the 1995 Middle East Resolution to create a ME WMDFZ languished for nearly 15 years until the 2010 NPT Review Conference. In the Final Document of the conference, NPT member states unanimously agreed to a mandate to hold a Zone-related conference in 2012.

One Iranian interviewee explained that this positive outcome was not obvious from the start of the conference as there were several points of contention between Iran, on one hand, and the United States and some of its European Union partners, on the other. The United States sought to insert in the draft final document a paragraph related to Iran and the status of its nuclear programme, an issue which was before the United Nations Security Council at the time.

Iran strongly resisted any such action, arguing that it would break consensus. It also argued that such an inclusion would undermine the spirit of cooperation at the conference, endanger the future of the NPT, and negatively affect cooperation between Iran and the IAEA on the former's nuclear programme. The United States backed off from this position.

This was considered a great achievement for Iran at the conference, which allowed it to make compromises in other areas of the Final Document. For example, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's official position was to include a paragraph in the Final Document demanding that the NWS disarm their nuclear arsenals by 2025, in line with Article VI of the NPT.<sup>29</sup>



*IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, at the IAEA headquarters (Vienna, Austria, 24 February 2015). Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA.*

<sup>29</sup> Iran Permanent Mission to the United Nations, "Statement by the Islamic Republic of Iran on Nuclear Disarmament and Negative Security Assurances at the Main Committee I of the 2010 NPT Review Conference," 7 May 2010, 5, [https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/statements/7May\\_Iran.pdf](https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/statements/7May_Iran.pdf).

Convening the 2012 Conference was another attempt by Iran and the Arab states to implement the establishment of the Zone, which had not been achieved despite the adoption of the 1995 Middle East Resolution.

When the United States retreated from naming Iran and its nuclear programme, Iran withdrew from this demand, although NAM mentioned the demand in its final statement at the conference.<sup>30</sup>

The 2010 conference was a breakthrough because it unanimously decided to convene a conference on a ME WMD-FZ in 2012. This issue had not been addressed since the 1995 Resolution. The 2012 Conference was another attempt by Iran and the Arab states to realize a serious measure on a Zone, which had not been achieved despite the 1995

resolution. The Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference also emphasized disarmament by NWS under Article VI of the NPT.

However, the conflict between Iran and the United States and the E3/EU over the status of the Iranian nuclear programme at the Security Council and the imposition of sanctions on Iran meant that President Ahmadinejad decided towards the end of the 2010 conference that Iran should not join the consensus. At this point, Ali-Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's main representative at the conference, advised President Ahmadinejad that Iran should join the consensus. He argued that the mandate to hold the 2012 Conference, in addition to other elements agreed in the text (such as not naming Iran), represented a breakthrough that revitalized hope and expectation for the realization of a Zone for the first time since 1995. This was an important step in reaching consensus at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and set the Middle East on the path to the 2012 Conference.

## THE INDEFINITELY POSTPONED 2012 HELSINKI CONFERENCE

Finland was eventually selected as the venue and Jaakko Laajava, the deputy foreign minister of Finland, was appointed as the Facilitator for the 2012 Conference on a ME WMD-FZ mandated by the 2010 NPT Review Conference. However, major differences emerged between the Middle Eastern states and the co-conveners – the three depositary states and the United Nations Secretary-General – over substantive and procedural elements of the conference.

Iran announced its readiness to participate in the 2012 Helsinki Conference at an event in Brussels.<sup>31</sup> From Iran's perspective, the conference was on track until the United States announced its decision to indefinitely postpone it on 23 November 2012.<sup>32</sup> This move was perceived by Iran as being in complete contravention of the 2010 NPT Review Conference decision because the United States was only a co-convenor and should not have had the authority to unilaterally postpone the conference. One interviewee who was involved in the breakthrough at the 2010 conference blamed himself for his overly optimistic assessment of the US commitment to hold the 2012 Conference. He saw a repetition of the scenario that had unfolded at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, with the Middle East Resolution still awaiting implementation.

<sup>30</sup> Maged Abdelaziz, "Statement on behalf of the NAM States Parties to the NPT before 16th Plenary Meeting of the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," Egypt Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 28 May 2010, [https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/statements/28May\\_NAM.pdf](https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/statements/28May_NAM.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, "Iran to take part in talks on Nuclear-Free Middle East," 6 November 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-nuclear-meeting-idINDEE8A50AK20121106>.

<sup>32</sup> Victoria Nuland, "US statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," Office of the Spokesperson, 23 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5693>.

## **THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS IN GLION AND GENEVA, 2013–2014**

Between 2013 and 2014, informal consultations on convening the postponed Helsinki Conference were conducted in the Swiss village of Glion and later in Geneva.<sup>33</sup> The first meeting was attended by a diplomat from Iran's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva.<sup>34</sup> There was no Iranian representation in subsequent meetings.

Iranian interviewees provided a few reasons for Iran's absence from the consultations. First, Iran opposed the consultations because it believed that their mandate deviated from the one unanimously adopted at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Second, Iran did not support the informal consultations' ambiguous diplomatic status in terms of their relationship with the NPT and the United Nations. While the High Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs participated,<sup>35</sup> United Nations symbols (e.g. flags) were explicitly excluded from meetings in order to gain Israel's participation. While this addressed Israel's view of the United Nations as being biased against it,<sup>36</sup> it contradicted Iran's policy of attending meetings in which Israel is present only within the United Nations framework.

Third, the Iranian government preferred to focus its diplomatic capacity on the nuclear negotiations with the E3/EU+3 that resulted in the JCPOA,<sup>37</sup> which overlapped with the informal consultations. An interviewee who was not directly involved in either of these negotiations but had insight into Iranian government thinking at the time said that Iran's decision not to participate in the consultations was also partly motivated by a desire to avoid direct connection between the Iran–E3/EU+3 nuclear talks (and any eventual deal) and the ME WMDFZ issue.<sup>38</sup>

Following the failure of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva and later the 2015 NPT Review Conference, Iranian representatives made statements expressing their disappointment with the decision not to hold the Helsinki Conference. The statements conveyed that Iran "strongly rejects all justifications raised by certain conveners for not convening the Conference" and that the postponement "violates the collective agreement of the States parties reached at the 2010 Review Conference and contravenes the letter and spirit of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East".<sup>39</sup>

## **THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY-MANDATED ME WMDFZ CONFERENCE**

Iran next engaged with the ME WMDFZ issue following the 2018 decision by the United Nations General Assembly that a conference be convened on the issue each year.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> "2013–2014 the Informal Consultations in Glion and Geneva," 21 October 2013–19 April 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s>.

<sup>34</sup> "First Informal Consultation is held in Glion, Switzerland," 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

<sup>35</sup> Angela Kane, "Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Multilateral Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference, 2013–2014," in *The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View from the Negotiating Table* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023): 10, <https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2023/AngelaKane>.

<sup>36</sup> For the Israeli perspective on this topic, see "The informal consultation at Glion and Geneva" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

<sup>37</sup> European External Action Service, "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," 14 July 2015, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-comprehensive-plan-action\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en).

<sup>38</sup> For Arab perspectives on this episode, see "The informal consultations at Glion and Geneva" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.

<sup>39</sup> Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations, "Iran Statement At Main Committee II Of The 2015 NPT RevCon," 4 May 2015, 4, <https://unidir.org/node/6166>.

<sup>40</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "Convening a conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction," Decision 73/546, 22 December 2018, [https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Decision-A\\_73\\_546.pdf](https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Decision-A_73_546.pdf).

However, according to one Iranian interviewee, the unwillingness or failure of the depository states, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, to fulfil their obligations under the 2010 mandate and 1995 Resolution to work toward the establishment of a ME WMDFZ, necessitated the creation of a separate track at the General Assembly.

According to an Iranian interviewee with direct knowledge of the Iranian government's thinking, the process to establish a Zone follows two distinct but interconnected tracks: the NPT and its Review Conference cycle; and the United Nations General Assembly, which created the ME WMDFZ Conference process in 2018.<sup>41</sup>

This interviewee believed that, despite the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Helsinki Conference, the mandate for the conference in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which itself refers to the 1995 Middle East Resolution, remains valid.

However, the unwillingness or failure of the depository states, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, to fulfil their obligations under the 2010 mandate and 1995 Resolution necessitated the creation of a separate track at the General Assembly.

The interviewee suggested that one option to reconcile these tracks could be to merge them through a decision of the NPT Review Conference. This would also require the formal support of the NPT depositories. However, given the US vote against the 2018 General Assembly decision during the Trump administration and the absence of a more forward-leaning position under the administration of President Joe Biden, he saw this outcome as unlikely in the foreseeable future.

This interviewee thought that the NPT remains the main forum for the ME WMDFZ process. This has meant that the issue could not be treated as a formality at the Review Conferences but needed to be dealt with seriously. As seen during the NPT Review Conference in 2022, Iran shares this view with Algeria and Iraq. He saw this position as being distinct from Egypt's viewpoint, which combined the two into a single track in order to create less tension at future Review Conferences.

According to one interviewee, there is a triangle of positions among the states of the region on a ME WMDFZ and, by extension, the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference process: the Iranian position, the Arab position (with progressive and conservative camps) and the Israeli position. The interviewee believes that divisions among the Arab states and between some Arab states and Iran were at least partly fomented by Israel in order to divert attention away from its nuclear monopoly and towards the Iranian nuclear programme.

Iranian interviewees generally supported the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference, although they proposed different models for how the process could lead to the establishment of a Zone. The first option is for Middle Eastern states to fully adhere to international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes such as the NPT, the CWC and the BWC. Iran had generally favoured this option as the most straightforward path to a Zone.

<sup>41</sup> "First Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other WMD is Held at the UN in New York," 18 November 2019–22 November 2019, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/first-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=33>, and "Second Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other WMD is Held in New York," 29 November 2021–3 December 2021, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2020s/second-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=2>.

The second option is a hybrid regime that combines international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes with a tailored regional WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regime. An interviewee cited the example of the JCPOA, which featured safeguards and verification overseen by the IAEA. However, direct negotiations with Israel or mutual inspections were a red line for Iran. This was because the Iranian government has no desire to normalize ties with Israel and, furthermore, has concerns about espionage when it comes to inspections and the Israeli government. Interviewees also restated the domestic political sensitivities in Iran regarding the government attending meetings outside the United Nations framework in which Israel is present. This is a major shortcoming of the option to create a regional organization to implement the Zone.

The third option mentioned by interviewees is a regional WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regime. This was seen as problematic by most interviewees, not only because of the same concerns as in the second option, but also because it could relegate states of the region to second-tier NPT status by increasing their obligations beyond the NPT and decreasing their rights.

Considering the second and third options, Iran did not foresee the need for a regional organization to implement a ME WMDFZ treaty because the implementation of international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes like the NPT, the CWC and the BWC with assistance from their responsible agencies (the IAEA, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the BWC Implementation Support Unit) was sufficient for the creation of a Zone.



*Mohammad Eslami, Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Chief of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), delivers his statement at the 65th Regular Session of the IAEA General Conference. (Vienna, Austria, 20 September 2021). Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA.*

Where there are gaps in these regimes (e.g., regarding BWC verification) and additional governance is required, some interviewees felt that a body (e.g., in a framework of the United Nations) could be created to fulfil this role, although it was unclear if Iran would accept this option.

Nonetheless, there was considerable scepticism among interviewees that a regional organization for the implementation of a ME WMDFZ treaty could perform better than international organizations or overcome challenges where those organizations and the international community had fallen short.

To ensure the total absence of nuclear weapons in the Middle East (Iran's main WMD concern followed by chemical weapons), a Zone treaty would have to include prohibitions on the possession, deployment, transfer, testing or use of these weapons.

A ME WMDFZ treaty could also include negative security assurances, committing the NWS not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the members of a Zone.

Iran opposes the inclusion of means of delivery in any way that can negatively affect its conventional military capabilities and deterrence. Any attempts to place limits on Iran's missile capabilities would negatively affect its desire and ability to participate in the creation of a Zone.

In line with Iran's displeasure at the expansion of the scope of the ME WMDFZ from nuclear weapons to WMD, the inclusion of non-WMD-related regional security issues in the Zone process was also seen as introducing complexities that would make a Zone more difficult to reach and as an Israeli tactic to divert attention away from its nuclear monopoly in the region.

One interviewee believed that this issue was one of several hurdles introduced to add complexity to the objective of establishing a ME WMDFZ. Other examples include incremental versus all-at-once approaches to creating a Zone and attempts to link a Zone and the JCPOA. He felt that the addition of regional security issues to the Zone was inappropriate as it would bring into the negotiations the security and non-WMD deterrence capabilities of the states of the region that they were not prepared to discuss. Most interviewees thought that regional security issues were best addressed in a separate forum by states of the region, for example on a subregional basis.

# NARRATIVES OF THE MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE

## DRIVERS, THEMES, AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

The quest to establish in the Middle East a Zone free, initially, of nuclear weapons and, subsequently, all weapons of mass destruction, has spanned nearly 50 years. While notable milestones have been achieved, a Zone treaty still appears to be a far-off goal.

This study chronicles the narratives of key stakeholders closely involved with Zone-related processes at various critical junctures since 1974: the Arab states, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, the Russian Federation, and the United States of America. By distilling insights from these narratives, the study uncovers key drivers and themes that underlie the behaviour of these states toward the WMD-Free Zone. It also provides a comprehensive historical account of key Zone-related processes and events from all perspectives.

The study draws upon information gathered through more than 80 interviews with current and former officials, as well as experts from more than 20 states in addition to regional and international organizations that have played important roles in the Zone processes. It also incorporates primary sources from UNIDIR's Timeline of ME WMDFZ Milestones and Documents Depository.

The insights presented in the study offer a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of contemporary witnesses involved in the ME WMDFZ issue throughout its history. The narratives shed light on how historical events have been perceived and interpreted by various stakeholders, revealing their divergent motivations, objectives, and perceptions assigned to other stakeholders, emphasizing the complexity and multifaceted nature of the ME WMDFZ.

By highlighting discrepancies between factual information, historical events, and stakeholder perceptions, these narratives identify areas that require further dialogue and cooperation to bridge gaps and foster mutual understanding. The diverse perspectives provided in this publication could assist in bridging gaps between Middle Eastern states, uncovering points of convergence, divergence, and misunderstanding.