

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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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

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



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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The quest to establish a Zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and, subsequently, all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has spanned nearly 50 years. While notable milestones have been achieved, a Zone treaty still appears to be a far-off goal. To help understand why this is the case, it is necessary to look at the history of the Zone. This study documents the narratives of five key groups closely involved in Zone-related processes since 1974: stakeholders from Arab states, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, the Russian Federation, and the United States of America.

This comprehensive study is based on more than 80 interviews with current and former officials and experts from over 20 states and representatives from regional and international organisations that have played important roles in processes related to a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (ME WMDFZ). The interviewees were carefully selected based on their first-hand experience and expertise, ensuring valuable insights into the issues and events covered. The interviews were carried out between August 2019 to June 2023, with most of them having been conducted before 2022. This study reflects the views of interviewees and does not necessarily reflect the official view of any of the stakeholder governments or analysis by the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project, its Reference Group, UNIDIR, the United Nations, or the Secretariat.

To augment and enrich the interviews, the study also draws upon the archival record, which includes primary sources from UNIDIR's ME WMDFZ Documents Depository,¹ as well as summaries of key events from UNIDIR's Timeline of key milestones in the history of diplomatic efforts for the ME WMDFZ.² These sources were utilised to bridge any gaps in information and provide additional perspectives on important issues and historical events. Secondary literature on the Zone or related topics was also consulted to supplement the research where appropriate.

Each chapter is dedicated to one of the five stakeholders and explores their unique perspectives in-depth. The chapters commence by delving into the security perceptions of the stakeholder group and their relevant state(s), the role of WMD in their threat perceptions, and how the prioritisation or lack thereof, of the WMD issue, shapes their stance on the ME WMDFZ. The chapters then explore

¹ ME WMDFZ Documents Depository, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), <https://unidir.org/wmdfz-documents-item>.

² UNIDIR Timeline of Key Events in the History of Diplomatic Efforts for the ME WMDFZ (UNIDIR Timeline), UNIDIR, <https://unidir.org/timeline>.

the underlying drivers and themes that shape the behaviour of these states towards the Zone. The chapters conclude by providing a comprehensive overview of the stakeholder group's involvement and perception of historical Zone-related processes and events.

The methodological focus of this study on narratives and interviews entails both advantages and disadvantages. While human memory is fallible, especially regarding events that span nearly 50 years, the interviews offer a personal perspective on critical historical moments and allow the interviewees to revisit their thinking. This sometimes allowed them to provide a more candid assessment due to the passage of time and the absence of political or professional constraints. This approach allows the narratives to uncover areas of convergence, divergence, and misunderstanding, illuminating the diverse perceptions, motivations, and objectives of the stakeholders and the views they assign to other stakeholders. Rather than attempting to synthesise all the gathered information into a single, supposedly objective analysis, this study emphasises the subjective retelling of events by interviewees framed into four national and one multinational narratives. This subjectivity raises the possibility that the narrative of a specific interviewee or stakeholder may be factually incorrect or biased. Nonetheless, there is value in presenting subjective narratives to allow readers to understand each unique perspective. Indeed, by putting the contrasting narrative chapters in dialogue with one another, readers can better understand these perspectives and, importantly, gain a holistic picture of the Zone endeavour. In this way, the insights in this study can offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in the ME WMDFZ issue throughout its history. By highlighting discrepancies, the narratives emphasise the complexity and multifaceted nature of the Zone but also identify areas that require further dialogue and cooperation to bridge gaps and foster mutual understanding.

There are several limitations to a methodology that heavily relies on interviews besides those already noted above. First, not all of the relevant individuals involved in the ME WMDFZ initiative could be interviewed. Some individuals have passed away, some declined to be interviewed, and some could not be reached or identified. In certain instances, this resulted in limited but noticeable gaps, for example, in the participation of Russia and most Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in the 1992–1995 Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group,³ or the absence of greater diversity in the national backgrounds of interviewees from Arab states. Only 10 out of the 22 member states of the League of Arab States (LAS) are featured in the Arab states' narratives. In other instances, this resulted in more structural gaps, for instance, efforts to feature the United Kingdom as a narrative were unsuccessful due to the lack of a critical mass of British interviewees.

Second, due to the time elapsed since the events recounted, some nearly five decades ago, there were significant differences in the level and accuracy of detail remembered and the availability of shared anecdotes. In addition, interviewees may have overemphasised their role or that of their country in key events. Where possible, such distortions were mitigated by corroborating accounts with other interviewees, the archival record, and secondary literature. Third, given the extensive scope of Zone processes spanning nearly half a century and numerous dimensions, it is impossible to revisit all aspects or proceedings. Instead, the publication focuses on key security perceptions, the most commonly cited Zone-related drivers and themes, and key historical events.

³ "1992–1995 The Arms Control and Regional Security working group (ACRS)," UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>.

Fourth, because the process was mostly led by ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs), interviewees were predominantly from MFAs. It is possible that interviewees from other ministries or senior decision-makers may have revealed additional insights or priorities. Finally, in synthesising such a large quantity of material, covering over 80 interviews and hundreds of historical documents over a long period, it is possible that some important insights were missed, or errors made. Any faults in this publication are solely attributed to the author.

This introductory chapter continues in section 1 by collating and highlighting fault lines in security perceptions in the Middle East. Section 2 then outlines the drivers and themes in the five narrative.

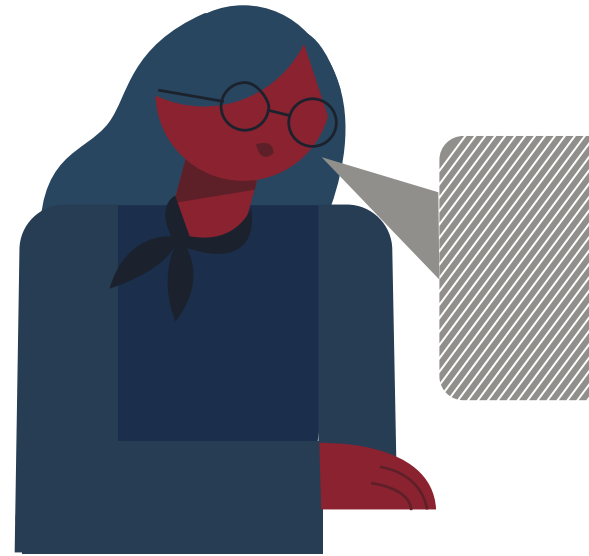
1. SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Based on the interviews conducted, the security perceptions of Arab states, Iran, Israel, the United States, and Russia in the Middle East highlight three main challenges: threats from non-state actors, the behaviour of state actors, and the use, possession, or development of WMD. Interviewees often mentioned these three main sets of challenges as being interconnected. For example, WMD were considered a challenge on their own, but these weapons also amplified the non-WMD challenge posed by state actors and regimes' fragility, should they fall into the hands of non-state actors, would become a catastrophic threat. While WMD consistently features in the security perceptions in the five narratives, they rarely feature as the top challenge, at least as a stand-alone issue.

All Middle Eastern and extra-regional states share concerns about the risks associated with the intended or accidental use of WMD arsenals in the region. While most Arab and Iranian interviewees expressed concerns about Israel's nuclear arsenal, none of them believed that their government perceived Israel's nuclear weapons as likely to be used in a conflict. Instead, their concerns can be categorised into three main areas. First, most Arab and Iranian interviewees viewed Israeli nuclear weapons as granting Israel the ability to employ its conventional military against other regional states without impunity. They believed that Israel's possession of nuclear weapons fuelled its aggressiveness in regional conflicts and suggested that Israel would exercise more caution if it did not possess such weapons. Second, Israeli nuclear weapons were seen as providing Israel with military superiority over other states in the region and creating an asymmetry of political obligations, with all other states in the region being committed to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Third, these asymmetries were believed to fuel proliferation or hedging behaviours by states in the region, including in the past by Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and the Syrian Arab Republic, and currently, by Iran.

Most American, Arab, and Israeli interviewees expressed concern regarding Iran's nuclear programme, although the level of concern varied between them. Some interviewees expressed concern that a crisis involving Iran could lead the Iranian leadership to cross the threshold and assemble a nuclear device, thereby increasing the risk of a nuclear conflict in the Middle East. While the likelihood of a nuclear conflict was considered a relatively remote risk, the potential consequences were considered grave. In addition, these interviewees also expressed concerns that Iran's high level of nuclear latency or potential for future possession of nuclear weapons would embolden it to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy. This could manifest directly through conventional military actions or indirectly through Iran's proxy network. Finally, there was a widespread concern that Iran's possession of a high level of nuclear latency or potential future possession of nuclear weapons could trigger a cascade of regional nuclear proliferation.

Interviewees also expressed concerns about the use and proliferation of chemical weapons primarily due to their historical use in the Middle East, although there was a general agreement that they posed a lower threat compared to nuclear weapons. Israeli interviewees raised concerns about chemical weapons as a present-day challenge, while Iranian interviewees usually referenced their past use against Iran by Iraq during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has also heightened concerns regarding biological pathogens. Finally, interviewees frequently expressed concern about the possibility of non-state actors in the region acquiring a radiological weapon (or “dirty bomb”), chemical agents, or biological pathogens. Many felt this threat should be addressed, including through a ME WMDFZ.



2. DRIVERS AND THEMES IN THE NARRATIVES OF A ME WMDFZ

PERCEPTIONS OF A ME WMDFZ

Most interviewees in this study viewed the ME WMDFZ positively as an important tool to address existing WMD arsenals in the Middle East and potential WMD proliferation. Yet, they distinguished between the approach of their respective governments to the Zone. For the Arab states and Iran, establishing the Zone is a goal they actively pursue. In contrast, for Israel, establishing a Zone is either a far-off aim that can only serve its national security interests under particular circumstances and an expanded scope, or it is mostly seen as a potential threat to Israel’s security interests under its current form and scope.

The near-universal support for a ME WMDFZ in the Middle East

All Middle Eastern states have expressed their support for the establishment of a ME WMDFZ. Arab states and Iran have actively promoted this idea through resolutions in international forums such as the United Nations General Assembly, NPT Review Conferences, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference.⁴ They have participated in multilateral Zone-related processes, such as ACRS in the early 1990s (in which Iran, Iraq, and Libya were not invited to participate, and Lebanon and Syria chose not to participate), the 2013-2014 informal consultations in Glion and Geneva (in which Iran did not participate after the first meeting), and the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction since 2019 (hereafter the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference, in which Israel does not participate).⁵

Arab states, represented by institutions like the LAS and multilateral groups like the Arab Group, have played a leading role in advocating for the ME WMDFZ. Egypt, in particular, has been at the forefront

⁴ Some examples include the 1974 Adoption of Resolution 3263 ‘Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the region of the Middle East’, the 1987 IAEA resolution on ‘Israeli nuclear capabilities and threat’, which was adopted for the first time and the 1995 NPT RevCon adoption of the ‘Resolution of the Middle East’.

⁵ “First Session of the Conference on the Establishment off a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other WMD is held at the UN in New York,” 18-22 November 2019, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/first-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=33>.

of these efforts. Egypt co-sponsored the 1974 General Assembly resolution alongside Iran on a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (ME NWFZ)⁶ and expanded its scope with the 1990 Mubarak Initiative to cover all WMD.⁷ Egypt's active involvement in Zone-related processes, often leading the Arab position, stems from its strong interest in the topic and technical capabilities.

Iran has also supported the creation of a Zone despite the regime change in that country after the revolution of 1979. Iran co-sponsored the ME NWFZ resolution in 1974⁸ and supports the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference. However, some Iranian interviewees believed that while the Iranian Government agrees with the goals of a Zone, it preferred the original nuclear-focused scope for a prospective treaty. Iran perceives a Zone as a beneficial way to address Israel's nuclear weapons capabilities, given it is the only state in the region with such capabilities, and is seen as receiving a *carte blanche* from the West in pursuing and possessing WMD. They felt that the expansion from an NWFZ to a WMDFZ was a mistake because it shifted emphasis away from nuclear weapons, which have much higher catastrophic effects, and Israel's possession of these weapons. Furthermore, despite the Iranian Government's support for a Zone, Iranian interviewees felt that it is not considered a high priority, as it does not address Iran's main security challenges, which revolve around the threats posed by the United States and Israel.

Israel, the "slippery slope," and the "long corridor"

Israel's position on a ME WMDFZ (and WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes, including the NPT) is primarily driven by scepticism about the credibility and effectiveness of such measures in addressing Israel's security threats. Israeli interviewees argue that for a Zone to address these threats effectively, it needs to be established after comprehensive peace agreements between Israel and all Middle Eastern states have been signed, implemented, and endured over time. Furthermore, the negotiations for a Zone should be conducted directly among regional states, based on consensus, with an agenda that addresses a wide range of regional security issues.

Israel's stance on a ME WMDFZ has evolved over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, Israel advocated for a regional process and was reluctant to engage with regional states on a multilateral basis, as it believed that international arrangements could not adequately address its specific threat perceptions. Although Israel voted in favour of adopting the NPT and the General Assembly consensus to create a Zone in 1980,⁹ it consistently emphasised the conditions under which it would participate in such a process, including direct negotiations among Middle Eastern states.¹⁰

In the 1990s, Israel's engagement on WMD non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control, including the ME WMDFZ, evolved due to international and regional developments. Israel became more involved in multilateral arms control and regional security negotiations, such as ACRS, joining the Conference

⁶ "Iran and Egypt co-sponsor a Resolution 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>.

⁷ "Mubarak Initiative' expands the scope of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East to Include all WMD," 18 April 1990, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/mubarak-initiative-expands-scope-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-middle-east-include-all?timeline=0>.

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, "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>.

⁹ "Resolution on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East' is Adopted Without a Vote at the UN General Assembly," 12 December 1980, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1980s/resolution-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region-middle-east-adopted-without?timeline=0>.

¹⁰ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israeli Explanation of Vote on UNGA Resolution "Establishment of A Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," 2 November 2018, <https://unidir.org/node/6161>.

on Disarmament (CD) and signing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Through these experiences, the Israeli Government recognised that it could participate in international forums and regimes and, when appropriate, influence the final language of treaties to protect its interests. However, for Israel, international arrangements can only complement regional ones and not substitute for them.

Israeli policy and thinking on a Zone are shaped by two main concepts: The “slippery slope” and “long corridor”. The term “slippery slope” refers to concerns that participating in a diplomatic process in a non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament context could lead to forced concessions that Israel is unprepared to make. These apprehensions are based on Israel’s belief that the goal of its counterparts in such processes is to dismantle its nuclear capabilities and any other capabilities giving it military superiority over its regional adversaries. Israel also expects that the diplomatic forum for discussing the Zone will be used to criticise and isolate it.

To address these concerns, Israel has adopted the “long corridor” (or “step-by-step”) approach, which involves engaging in talks on a Zone only after resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict, achieving region-wide acceptance of Israel’s right to exist, and establishing a confidence-building process through security cooperation with its neighbours. This approach emphasises Israel’s three requirements for a Zone negotiation: direct negotiations, consensus-based decision-making, and a regional security agenda. Israeli interviewees believed that region-wide diplomacy should focus on regional security due to the existing hostility and lack of peaceful relations between Israel and most other regional states except Egypt and Jordan (with whom Israel has a “cold peace”) and the state parties to the Abraham Accords.¹¹ Essentially, the “long corridor” approach sets the stage for formal agreements, contingent upon establishing trust that endures over time and under pressure.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE LINK BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL WMD-RELATED REGIMES AND A ME WMDFZ

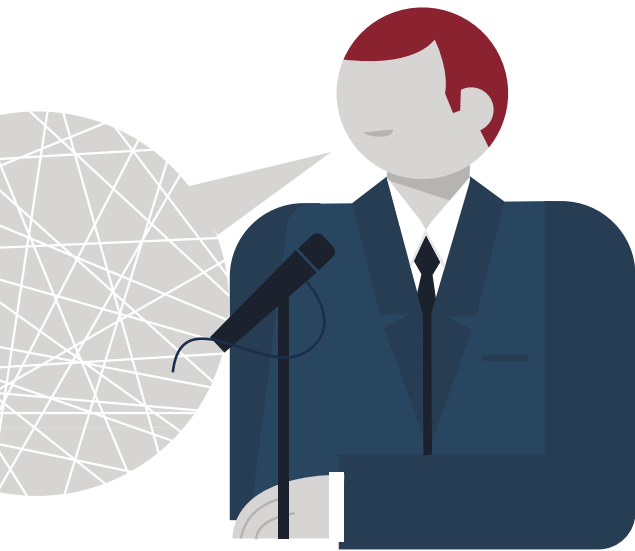
While there is near-universal support among Middle Eastern states for a ME WMDFZ, their view of how it should relate to international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes differs.

Arab and Iranian positions

The Arab states and Iran prefer a ME WMDFZ based on international non-proliferation and disarmament regimes like the NPT, CWC, and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), according to interviewees from these states. They see an organic relationship between the Zone and these international regimes. However, there are concerns among Arab interviewees regarding the effectiveness and health of these regimes, while Iranian interviewees demonstrated growing scepticism towards them. These attitudes, particularly towards the NPT, are partly due to perceived shortcomings in international support for establishing a Zone.

First, many Arab and Iranian interviewees believed that the commitment of the three NPT depository states (Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to the establishment of a ME WMDFZ is an integral part of the NPT regime, as it played a role in the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. The failure to establish a Zone and the perceived lack of support from the depositories, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, are seen as significant shortcomings in fulfilling their commitments

¹¹ The Abraham Accords is a series of peace treaties between Israel on one hand, and Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the other. US Department of State, “The Abraham Accords,” 13 August 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.



under the NPT. This has undermined the trust in the NPT regime by the Arab states and Iran. Russian interviewees also express concerns about the level of commitment from the other two depositories. Some Arab and Iranian interviewees linked these issues to broader tensions within the NPT regarding disarmament and the perceived lack of progress by the nuclear weapon states in this area.

Second, many Arab and Iranian interviewees argued that the perceived “asymmetrical obligations” and “double standards” within international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes contributed to their growing frustration with them. Many Arab interviewees believe

that the adherence of Arab states to the NPT, alongside Israel’s nuclear capabilities, has created an asymmetry in obligations and a double standard in treatment between the Arab and Israeli sides, both globally and regionally. Globally, they perceived preferential treatment towards Israel, India, and Pakistan as nuclear possessors, allowing them to maintain their nuclear status without facing the consequences. Regionally, this asymmetry removed a significant incentive for Israel to join the NPT. In contrast, other Middle Eastern states face stricter enforcement of these regimes and even their use as a pretext for military intervention. This double standard further undermines the trust and confidence of Arab states in the effectiveness and fairness of these international regimes.

Some Arab interviewees suggested that Arab states’ adherence to international non-proliferation and disarmament regimes may have deepened this asymmetry. They argued that abstaining from joining these regimes could have granted Arab states “soft leverage” over Israel to join the NPT and eventually establish a ME WMDFZ. As a result, Egypt, for example, has refrained from adopting new obligations such as an Additional Protocol with the IAEA, the CWC, the BWC, and the CTBT since the mid-1990s, hoping to leverage these to eventually gain Israel’s NPT accession. A small subset of Arab interviewees suggested that their governments could even consider reassessing their commitments to these international regimes, partly in response to the double standard favouring Israel and concerns about the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

Iranian interviewees expressed even stronger scepticism towards the NPT, perceiving an imbalance in its three pillars (non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy) favouring the five nuclear weapon states (NWS; e.g., the United States) and nuclear possessors (e.g., Israel) while disadvantaging non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS; e.g., Iran). These interviewees believed their country has suffered from double standards and undue pressure by the international community under the non-proliferation pillar due to its drive for nuclear independence while being denied its rights under the peaceful uses pillar. At the same time, there was no pressure on states like the United States and Israel under the disarmament pillar.

The disillusionment of Iran with international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes stems primarily from its experience with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the nuclear deal negotiated between Iran on the one hand and France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as China, Russia, and the United States (E3/EU+3) on the other. According to many Iranian interviewees, Iran perceives the NPT as a pretext for diplomatic, economic, and military pressure against it. After agreeing to unprecedented, albeit mostly temporary, restrictions on its nuclear programme

under the JCPOA, the United States unjustifiably withdrew from the agreement and implemented a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. The remaining members of the E3/EU+3 could not uphold their commitments under the deal.

Another significant factor contributing to Iran’s disillusionment is the proposals for non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament measures targeting Iran’s capabilities (e.g., its ballistic missiles). However, these proposals lack comparable reciprocal measures to address Iranian concerns, such as the nuclear weapons or conventional arms build-up by Iran’s regional adversaries, which are also US allies. Some Iranian interviewees speculated that Iran might consider withdrawing from the JCPOA or the NPT under certain circumstances, such as if its nuclear programme were referred for action by the United Nations Security Council. In such a scenario, the Iranian Government would aim to create constructive ambiguity to prevent adversaries from discerning its intentions. Ultimately, this sense of discrimination and double standards has led Iran to endure high pressure to develop domestic fuel cycle capabilities, partly as a deterrent against potential aggression from Middle Eastern and extra-regional states.

Despite the challenges of asymmetrical obligations, double standards, and a degree of loss of faith in international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes, Arab and Iranian interviewees broadly believed that their respective governments still broadly support these regimes.

Israeli positions

Israel’s position on the link between international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes and the ME WMDFZ differs from that of other Middle Eastern states. While Israel voted in favour of the NPT when it was adopted in 1968, has signed the CWC and CTBT, and values these treaties’ (including the BWC) contribution to global WMD non-proliferation, it believes that these treaties alone are insufficient to address WMD challenges in the Middle East.¹² Israeli interviewees emphasised that signing the NPT as an NNWS or ratifying these treaties is a red line for Israel because they believe these instruments alone do not serve Israel’s national security interests. They added that Israel’s mistrust in international instruments and forums stems from its historical experiences, such as being abandoned by the international community during the Holocaust and the Israeli experience during the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1974 Yom Kippur War when many Western states prioritised low and stable oil prices over assisting Israel.

Israel’s comfort zone because of these experiences, as articulated by one Israeli interviewee, was to be “left alone”, even if it meant facing isolation and being singled out in the international arena. Another Israeli interviewee also expressed Israel’s doubt that its accession to the NPT as part of a ME WMDFZ process currently conceived by Egypt and Iran would lead to the normalisation of relations and peaceful ties between Israel and other states in the region. He cited as an example of this Syria’s note upon its ratification of the NPT in 1969, which stated that the ratification did not signify recognition of Israel or entail entry into relations with it.¹³ Such actions raise doubts in Israel about the security value of a Zone treaty and the sincerity of other Middle Eastern states’ commitment to fulfilling their obligations under such a treaty.

¹² Merav Zafary-Odiz, “The Israeli National Perspectives on Nuclear Non-Proliferation,” in *International Cooperation for Enhancing Nuclear Safety, Security, Safeguards and Non-proliferation – 60 years of IAEA and EURATOM*, ed. Luciano Maiani, Said Abousahl, Wolfgang Plastino (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 117, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-57366-2_18.

¹³ Syrian Arab Republic, “Ratification with reservation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in Russian,” 24 September 1969, <https://treaties.unoda.org/a/npt/syrianarabrepublic/RAT/moscow>.

Israeli interviewees outlined three main weaknesses of international WMD-related regimes in the regional context that shaped Israel's position on a ME WMDFZ and its consideration of accession to these treaties within the Zone framework. First, they pointed to Middle Eastern states' repeated violations of existing WMD-related regimes. For example, these interviewees noted four out of the five recognised NPT violations took place by the hands of Middle Eastern states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria).¹⁴ Second, they expressed concern over these regimes' structural weaknesses, such as their weak verification mechanisms and the lack of reliable enforcement measures after a violation is detected and confirmed. Third, Israeli interviewees questioned the sincerity of their neighbours' commitments to non-proliferation when these states advocate for reliance on these flawed tools to create a verifiable Zone treaty. Thus, while joining such treaties might provide short-term gains for Israel and alleviate international pressure on it, they could, in the long run, become a smokescreen for covert WMD activities by Israel's neighbours.

In light of these concerns and the weakness of these regimes, Israel asserts that stricter and stronger arrangements are required beyond the current treaties and their implementation mechanisms. This includes the need for regional verification measures to ensure compliance with a ME WMDFZ. One Israeli interviewee suggested involving existing international bodies, such as the IAEA, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU), in advisory and observer roles within a future Zone.

American and Russian positions

Russian interviewees expressed concerns about the integrity of the NPT due to tensions related to a ME WMDFZ and the increased number of statements since the 2015 NPT Review Conference by some Arab states questioning the wisdom of having ratified the NPT without Israeli reciprocity. While they welcomed the Arab states' participation in the NPT without Israel doing the same, they noted that some Arab governments have refused to ratify the CWC and the BWC to balance their obligations. They believed that Israeli disarmament is highly unlikely until Israel feels it can ensure its security without nuclear weapons. Russian interviewees emphasised that addressing NPT-related issues, such as the Zone, could strengthen the integrity and survivability of the NPT.

The United States, like Russia, supports the establishment of a Zone as a means to address challenges faced by the NPT Review Conference – namely disarmament and the ME WMDFZ. This support aims to alleviate pressure on the NPT, reduce the risks of regional WMD proliferation, and mitigate the potential disengagement of Arab states from the NPT due to concerns related to the Zone. However, some American interviewees expressed scepticism regarding the likelihood of any Middle Eastern state withdrawing from the NPT solely due to the failure to achieve a Zone. They assessed that if a state were to use the Zone as a pretext for withdrawal, its underlying reasons would likely be pressing security concerns or a desire to hedge against another regional state's perceived movement towards acquiring nuclear weapons.

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTERPARTS ON THE ME WMDFZ ISSUE

Perceptions of Israel

The Arab states and Iran view Israel's role in regional security as negative and reversing its unsafeguarded nuclear capabilities as the main objective of pursuing a ME WMDZ and the main obstacle to its creation. Most Arab states are highly critical of Israel's nuclear monopoly in the

¹⁴ Statement by Moshe Edri at the 66th General Conference on the International Atomic Energy Agency, 4 September 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/22/09/israel-gc66.pdf>.

Middle East and see the Zone-related processes as an opportunity to highlight this issue. In recent years, however, some Arab states, exemplified by those who signed the Abraham Accords, adopted a more distinct position on Israeli nuclear capabilities and its role in the region. They seek to engage with Israel on the economy, security, and technology, but remain critical of it, particularly in international forums, when necessary. Egypt, aiming to exert soft leverage over Israel, shifted its policy in the mid-1990s from signing and ratifying international WMD-related regimes to abstaining from doing so, largely, or partly citing its negative experience with Israel at ACRS.



Reflecting on Zone-related processes and milestones, such as ACRS, the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, the non-implementation of the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the 2010 NPT Review Conference mandate to hold a ME WMDFZ conference, some Arab interviewees mirrored Israel's "slippery slope" concerns. They felt that despite making multiple concessions in these Zone-related processes, Israel and the depositories demanded more concessions from the Arab states without serious reciprocal gestures or, if they did, they failed to fulfil them. They perceived Israel (and, to a lesser degree, the depositories) as trying to lead them down an endless "long corridor". Many Egyptian interviewees mentioned as examples the failure of Israel to make significant gestures on nuclear disarmament in ACRS and its attempts to shift the focus of the agenda of the indefinitely postponed 2012 Conference from WMD to regional security as one of the main reasons for the failure of ACRS and the informal consultations.

Despite this negative perception of Israel in the Arab states' narratives concerning the ME WMDFZ, most Arab interviewees stated that their governments maintain a balanced approach to Israel on this topic. They said that since the inception of the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference in 2018, their governments have refrained from targeting Israel in the Conference sessions. These interviewees said their governments do not pressure Israel in international forums when they feel that Israel participates in a good-faith Zone process that is making progress. However, they revert to pressure when they believe these conditions are unmet.

The Iranian narrative, similar to the Arab states' narratives, considers Israel a significant threat to regional security. Israel's possession of nuclear weapons and refusal to join the NPT as an NNWS are viewed as the main, if not the only obstacle, to establishing a Zone from Iran's perspective.

The American and Russian narratives do not share the negative perception of Israel on the ME WMDFZ issue that is prominent in the Arab and Iranian narratives. In particular, American interviewees' perception of Israel in the context of the Zone was partly a reflection of the long-standing bilateral understanding regarding Israel's nuclear capabilities, dating back to 1969. According to this understanding, the Israeli Government will not publicly acknowledge its nuclear capabilities or be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East. The United States, in turn, will not pressure Israel to accede to the NPT as an NNWS.

Perceptions of Iran

The Arab states and Russian narratives generally viewed Iran as an important partner for establishing a ME WMDFZ. Yet, significant concerns about Iran's role in the Middle East and the future of its nuclear programme were mentioned in the Arab states', Israeli, and American narratives. Concerns were expressed over how these factors could profoundly shape the regional security environment and the approach of other Middle Eastern states to WMD. According to some Arab interviewees, Iran's nuclear programme has increasingly influenced their governments' thinking regarding WMD in the Middle East, making this issue more urgent. It was said that if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons or withdraw from the NPT, it would have negative implications for the obligations of their countries under international WMD-related regimes and would impact the prospects of creating a Zone.

Conversely, if an agreement is reached that ensures the peaceful nature of Iran's programme, it could positively influence the prospects for a Zone, including the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference. Some Arab interviewees suggested that if such a deal were reached, it could be linked or referenced in the ongoing Conference process or a Zone. In contrast, few interviewees believed that efforts to establish a Zone would positively influence Iran's programme.

Perceptions of the Arab states

The Israeli and American narratives express scepticism regarding the motivations behind the Arab states' (most prominently Egyptian) objective to establish a ME WMDFZ. According to these narratives, establishing a Zone is not perceived as a genuine reflection of Egypt's or other Arab states' security concerns or efforts to address regional WMD proliferation threats beyond disarming Israel's nuclear capabilities. In fact, both narratives feature claims that the Zone initiative is a result of Egyptian grandstanding in multilateral forums, an obsession of the Egyptian MFA, driven by a desire to "equalise" or rebalance the military asymmetry between Egypt and Israel or to at least pressure the latter; and a tool by Egypt to gain status on the global stage to show its relevance and leadership in the international community and the Arab world.

Additionally, most Israeli and American interviewees believe that the ME WMDFZ agenda of the Egyptian MFA does not align with the priorities of Egyptian decision-makers or the military. Most Israeli interviewees did not consider their country's nuclear capabilities as an obstacle to Israel-Egypt security relations. An American interviewee contemplated that Egyptian presidents may allow the MFA to pursue the issue to provide them political cover domestically and internationally for the concrete and constructive engagement with Israel on other matters. Furthermore, most American interviewees believed that the creation of a Zone is not a priority for the senior leadership of Arab states, with one interviewee saying these leaders do not raise Israel's NPT status or the creation of a Zone when speaking with senior US leaders, nor have they personally promoted it.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE NPT DEPOSITORY STATES IN ESTABLISHING A ME WMDFZ

The failure of the depositories on a ME WMDFZ: Arab and Iranian assessments

The Arab states hold the three NPT depository states, particularly the United States, as Israel's chief ally, at least partly responsible for implementing a ME WMDFZ, as the co-sponsors of the 1995 Middle East Resolution. Arab interviewees believed that the US Government is not actively working towards its realisation. Instead of consistently and comprehensively addressing regional WMD proliferation threats through the establishment of a Zone, they see the United States as dealing with this issue on an *ad hoc*, case-by-case basis, with Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Iran mentioned as examples of this approach, which,

according to Arab interviewees, contained an inherent contradiction. While the United States supports WMD non-proliferation and the eventual establishment of a Zone, it also supports Israel's nuclear ambiguity and does not exert pressure on it to disarm. Some of these interviewees believed that many Arab states considered convincing the United States to attend the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference highly depends on convincing Israel to participate. In some cases, Egyptian interviewees observed that their government has found it more productive to engage with Israel directly, although US involvement has been deemed essential in certain instances, such as including a reference to Israel in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. US bilateral pressure on Israel was also viewed as useful in bringing Israel to the table to various Zone-related processes.

Similarly, the Iranian narrative criticised the depositories, particularly the United States, for its perceived failure to fulfil their responsibility in working towards establishing a Zone under the 1995 Resolution and the 2010 NPT Review Conference Final Document. Iranian interviewees argued that the depositories had either forgotten their responsibilities or adopted positions that contradicted their obligations, which hindered progress towards a Zone. Some of them specifically pointed to US support for Israel, including the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Conference,¹⁵ as an example that these depositories had violated their commitments from 1995 and 2010.

Arab, Iranian, and Israeli interviewees generally held a positive view of Russia's role in the context of the ME WMDFZ, although they did not consider it as central as the role of the United States.

A unique position on the role of extra-regional actors in regional security: Israeli assessments

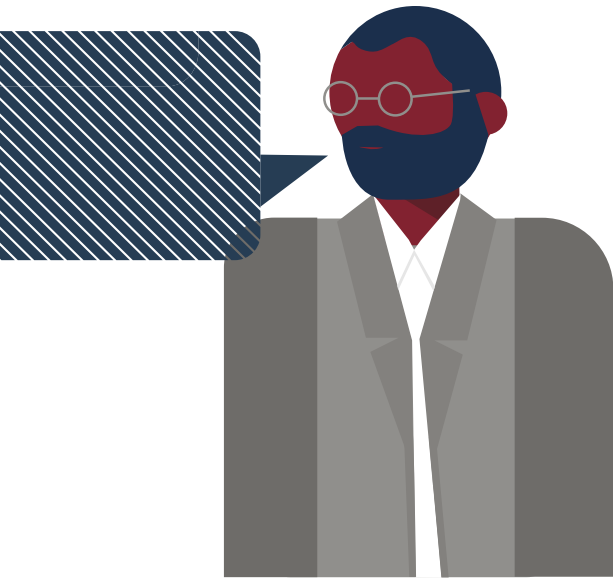
Unlike the Arab states' and Iranian narratives, the Israeli narrative did not focus on the role of depositories per se because Israel is not an NPT Member State, nor did Israeli interviewees place the same value on the ME WMDFZ or its milestones as did Arab and Iranian interviewees. However, Israeli interviewees foresaw some role for extra-regional actors in their capacity as security guarantors (among other roles) in any future regional security negotiations and agreements (that may or may not include a WMD component). This especially applied to the United States. The bilateral relationship between the United States and Israel is based on informal and formal understandings regarding Israeli nuclear ambiguity, regional security, nuclear non-proliferation, and a Zone. Israeli decision-makers believe their ability to participate in Zone-related processes, such as ACRS and the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, was possible due to these understandings, which have persisted for five decades and Israel interprets as a US commitment not to pressure Israel to relinquish its nuclear capabilities as long as it faces existential threats. Interviewees mentioned the fragility of the US–Israel understanding as a source of anxiety as it is not based on any formal agreement and needs to be reaffirmed with every new US administration.

The role of the depository states: American and Russian assessments

American interviewees believed that the establishment of a ME WMDFZ should be initiated and led by Middle Eastern states themselves. In this context, one American interviewee recalled that the United States chose not to participate in the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference because, among other reasons,¹⁶ it was not agreed upon by all states of the region (i.e., Israel). However, the

¹⁵ "2010 ME WMDFZ conference is postponed," 23 November 2012, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010/2012-me-wmdfz-conference-postponed?timeline=12>.

¹⁶ 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, "Report submitted by the United States of America: Actions 5, 20 and 21 of the action plan of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," NPT/CONF.2020/47, 27 December 2021, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/418/22/PDF/N2141822.pdf?OpenElement>.



United States supports “efforts to promote direct, inclusive, and consensus-based dialogue [on a Zone] on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by all the regional states,” and would be prepared to attend the Conference if all states in the region agreed to the process.

The Russian narrative highlights Russia’s active role in the ME WMDfz process since the early-1990s as a co-chair of ACRS, a depository, a co-sponsor of the Middle East Resolution at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, and as a co-convenor of the 2012 Conference. Russian interviewees saw their country as a leading international advocate for creating a Zone, particularly among the three depositories. However, they expressed concerns over the lack of progress towards a Zone after more than 25 years of efforts. Some of these interviewees believed that the United States was

focused on the indefinite extension of the NPT when it agreed to the 1995 Resolution, and it did not take its implementation as seriously as Russia did. Russia also opposed the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Conference by the United States.

Like American interviewees, Russian interviewees did not believe that the depositories can create a ME WMDfz on behalf of the Middle Eastern states. In their view, the depositories can facilitate and encourage engagement among the states in the region and offer new solutions or processes to advance a Zone, but they cannot single-handedly create a Zone. Some felt Russia is not as active as it could be on the Zone because it does not want to be the sole depository taking significant action on this issue, fearing the process might fail and it would shoulder the blame alone. However, if Washington, London, and the states in the region become more active, Moscow would increase its efforts.

THE EFFECT OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONDITIONS ON THE PURSUIT OF A ME WMDfz

This subsection draws on various narratives to uncover some of the international and regional conditions that facilitated past ME WMDfz processes like ACRS and the informal consultations in Gion and Geneva.

Looking ahead, the Arab states’ (and to a lesser extent Iranian) narratives largely reflect the view that a Zone can probably be successfully pursued today despite – and perhaps even because of – the challenging regional conditions. Meanwhile, the Israeli and American narratives (and in some places, the other narratives) express much greater scepticism about whether international and regional conditions today favour the Zone endeavour.

International and regional conditions that facilitated past ME WMDfz processes

Israeli and American and, to a lesser extent, Arab states’ and Russian narratives agreed that the early-1990s and early-2010s presented favourable conditions for pursuing a regional arms control process and establishing a ME WMDfz, at least relative to today or other periods.

Three main factors were mentioned as enabling efforts to create a new Middle East regional security

architecture in the early-1990s, including a region-wide arms control discussion. The first factor was the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to a transformation of the international system from US–Soviet bipolarity to US unipolarity and opened up expanded possibilities for US–Russia cooperation. The second factor was the US-backed efforts to strengthen non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament regimes. The third factor was the US-led coalition's victory against Iraq following the latter's invasion of Kuwait in the First Gulf War. These factors allowed the United States to pursue the transformation of the Middle East regional order. The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, a significant outcome of US-backed efforts, sought to facilitate Arab–Israeli peace. The subsequent Madrid Peace Process included bilateral peace negotiations between Israel and Jordan, Palestine, and Syria, complemented by a multilateral track that addressed various Arab–Israeli issues, including arms control and regional security, economic development, the environment, refugees, and water resources and management. The United States co-convened ACRS alongside Russia and engaged many Middle Eastern states in a process that could have led to regional security arrangements, including discussions leading to a Zone. Despite the unprecedented nature of ACRS, it failed after more than three years of activities in 1995 due to the inability of key states (Egypt and Israel) to bridge their differences.

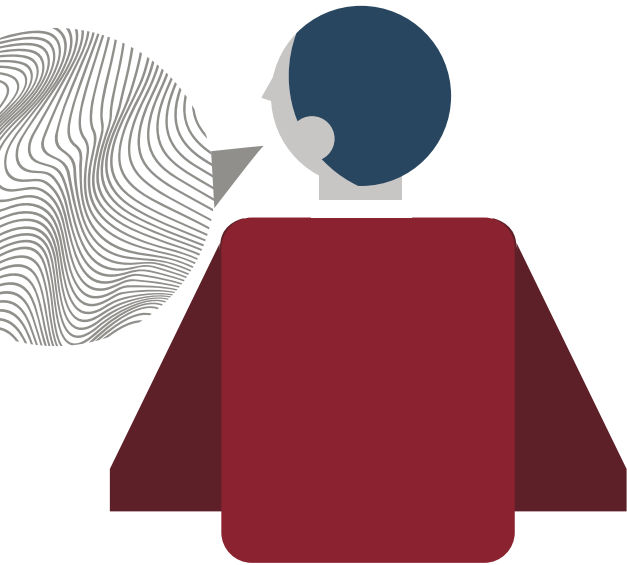
In the early 2010s, two main factors opened up political space to pursue the creation of a ME WMDFZ. The first was the desire of the NWS, particularly the three NPT depository states, to reach a consensus at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. A Final Document was sought to strengthen the integrity of the nuclear non-proliferation regime after a failure to reach a consensus in 2005, which made the depositories more flexible in responding to Arab and Iranian demands regarding implementing the 1995 Middle East Resolution. As a result, the 2010 conference agreed to hold a conference on the Zone in 2012.¹⁷ The second factor was the ongoing cooperation among the depositories, particularly the United States and Russia, to achieve common non-proliferation objectives in the region during that period. The depositories worked together before and during the 2010 conference to reach the Final Document, and this cooperation continued in the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva as part of an effort to convene the Zone conference. More broadly, the E3/EU+3 collaborated on imposing international sanctions on Iran's nuclear programme between 2006 and 2010 and negotiating the JCPOA with Iran between 2013 and 2015. The United States and Russia also worked collaboratively around this time to dismantle Syria's chemical weapon programme.

Deteriorating international conditions for reaching a ME WMDFZ today

Interviewees across the Arab states', Israeli, and American narratives questioned if the conditions that facilitated ACRS and the informal consultations exist today. Many interviewees assessed that the international system is moving towards greater multipolarity, reducing the ability of the United States to set agendas or convene processes as it has done in the past in the case of the ME WMDFZ.

Relatedly, the United States reduced involvement in the Middle East and its focus on other regions, as well as its strained relations with Russia following events like the war in Ukraine, were seen as contributing factors to the failure to reach a consensus at the 2015 NPT Review Conference (however, this was more often primarily attributed to US–Egypt disagreements over a Zone). Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 was similarly seen as a contributing factor to the failure of the NPT Review Conference in 2022. While these interviewees did not view the deterioration of US–Russia ties as a major obstacle

¹⁷ "2010 NPT RevCon Final Document Outlines 'Practical Steps' Towards Implementing the 1998 Resolution on the Middle East," 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0>.



to reaching a Zone, it was considered another hurdle in an already difficult and complex process.



The above drivers, themes, and historical accounts offer a glimpse into the rich tapestry of opinions, recollections, and individual assessments presented in the following five narrative chapters. Through a dialogue between the five different accounts of the same process and events, we can gain insights into areas of disagreement, identify common ground, and shed light on instances where parties have struggled to comprehend each other's motives or actions. By presenting these different perspectives side by side, future

negotiators of a ME WMD-FZ can cultivate a deeper understanding of their counterparts' objectives and requirements, thereby paving the way for the realisation of a Middle East free of WMD.

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.