

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 WMD FZ	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

THE ARAB STATES' NARRATIVES

Introduction	26
1. Arab security perceptions in the Middle East and the ME WMDFZ	27
Non-WMD security challenges.....	27
WMD in the Middle East.....	30
2. Arab states' drivers and themes on the ME WMDFZ	32
Arab security perceptions in the Middle East and the ME WMDFZ	32
Arab positions on the ME WMDFZ	32
From possessing or pursuing WMD to joining non-proliferation and disarmament regimes	34
Arab perceptions of Middle Eastern states, regional conditions, and the ME WMDFZ ...	38
Arab perceptions of the role of the NPT depository states in the creation a ME WMDFZ.....	42
3. Arab historical accounts of ME WMDFZ processes.....	43
The 1974 Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone General Assembly resolution	43
The First Gulf War, Mubarak Initiative, and origins of the ME WMDFZ, 1990.....	43
The Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, 1992-1995	44
The 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and the Middle East Resolution.....	50
The LAS ME WMDFZ draft treaty, 1996-2002	51
The 2010 NPT Review Conference	54
The road to the indefinite postponement of the Helsinki Conference, 2010-2012.....	55
The informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2013-2014.....	59
The 2015 NPT Review Conference	66
The 2018 General Assembly decision on the ME WMDFZ Conference.....	69
The General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference, 2019-2022.....	73

THE ARAB STATES' NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION¹

This chapter of Arab states' narratives provides a comprehensive analysis of drivers, themes, and historical accounts of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (the ME WMDFZ or Zone) as seen from Arab states and the League of Arab States (LAS or Arab League) General Secretariat. These narratives are based on interviews with current and former officials and experts from ten Arab states (and the LAS General Secretariat) with direct experience or knowledge of their respective governments' or LAS policies as well as the events in question. This chapter does not necessarily reflect the official position of any Arab government or the LAS General Secretariat. Efforts were made to reflect diverse perspectives from Arab states. Given the central role played by Egypt in Zone initiatives and processes, the chapter contains a preponderance of views by Egyptian interviewees.²

The chapter is divided into three parts. Section 1 explores the security perceptions of Arab states. Section 2 examines the drivers and themes of Arab positions regarding the ME WMDFZ based on the interviews. Section 3 provides historical accounts of Zone-related processes from the perspective of Arab states as conveyed by the interviewees.

Arab states, according to Arab interviewees, consistently and unequivocally support the establishment of an ME WMDFZ. This support has been repeatedly demonstrated through collective support by all Arab states in international forums and public statements. However, there are variations among these states regarding their level of involvement, prioritization of the issue, and differing visions regarding the scope of a Zone.

When discussing security perception related to WMD challenges, Arab interviewees highlighted the risks posed by Israel's nuclear weapons, Iran's nuclear program, and the development and use of WMD by non-state actors. However, apart from Egyptian interviewees, few Arab interviewees considered establishing an ME WMDFZ as a top priority for their governments. This does not indicate a diminishing interest or support for the Zone but may reflect two other issues. First, many Arab interviewees viewed the direct risks posed by WMD as either remote or not as imminent as other, non-WMD, security challenges. For example, while the Iranian nuclear program is seen as a significant threat for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, their immediate concerns are more focused on potential non-WMD aggression from Iran. Second, some non-Egyptian Arab interviewees offered their personal opinion that the Zone as it is currently conceptualized may not address their primary concerns relating to WMDs, namely Iran's nuclear

¹ This chapter reflects historical accounts, drivers, and themes derived from interviews with current and former Arab officials and experts from ten Arab states and the League of Arab States General Secretariat. It does not reflect the official view of the governments of Arab states or the LAS General Secretariat or analysis by the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project, its Reference Group, UNIDIR, the United Nations, or the Secretariat.

² 38 officials and experts from LAS countries and the LAS General Secretariat were interviewed, and their insights have been supplemented by input from other ME WMDFZ Project activities, such as the Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region publication and the Project's workshops in Cairo, Egypt, and Manama, Bahrain. These interviews were conducted between September 2019 and June 2023.

program, the development and use of WMD by non-state actors, and the ability to bring Israel to join a Zone-related process. It was unclear if these personal opinions reflected these states' official or internal government thinking.

1. ARAB SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ME WMD FZ

Arab interviewees, despite some key differences, shared many similar security perceptions with the main risks stemming from non-state actors and proxy networks; aggressive behaviour in the Middle East by non-Arab state actors; great power competition in the region; and the proliferation and use of WMD by state and non-state actors. Interviewees prioritized these challenges differently based on their unique national experiences. Most interviewees believed that these challenges had intensified since the start of the Arab Spring in 2010.

NON-WMD SECURITY CHALLENGES

Non-state actors as agents of instability, terrorism, and criminality within Arab states and as cross-border, transnational, threats were consistently identified by Arab interviewees as a security challenges. Four categories of non-state actors were highlighted: Al-Qaida, the Islamic State, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Iran-aligned Shiite non-state actors. These non-state actors have engaged in disruptive and destabilizing activities due to their access to rockets, missiles, and uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), and other weapon systems, either acquired illicitly or through support from state actors. Some interviewees attributed the emergence of non-state actors in the Middle East to factors such as weak governance, the lack of sustainable development, social inequality, and overpopulation.

Israel was the most frequently mentioned state challenge in the region security perceptions of Arab states according to Arab interviewees, despite Israel having signed peace treaties with Egypt, Jordan, and, more recently, with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as part of the Abraham Accords.³ Some Arab states sharing a border with Israel (namely Lebanon, Palestine, and the Syrian Arab Republic) considered Israel as their top external security challenge due to concerns about military interventions by it. Although Egypt is no longer concerned about direct military attack by Israel, it remains wary of Israel's military capabilities, both conventional and unconventional. Some Egyptian interviewees expressed optimism that these concerns could be resolved through further economic, political, and security cooperation, while others disagreed.

Another reason cited by Arab interviewees for Israel's prominent position as a challenge to Arab states was the unresolved status of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Israeli government's oppression of the Palestinians. The Palestinian quest for independence continues to be politically significant for Arab governments, emotionally resonant for the Arab publics, and a major obstacle to peace and

Arab interviewees expressed many similar security perceptions, highlighting key risks stemming from non-state actors and proxy networks, the proliferation and potential use of WMD by both state and non-state actors, aggressive behaviour by non-Arab state actors in the Middle East, and competition among extra-regional states in the region.

³ For the Israeli perspectives on this topic, see "Israeli Views on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Processes and Regimes" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.



Iran's Emad medium-range ballistic missile, mounted on a launcher showcased during the 2019 Sacred Defense Parade at the mausoleum of Imam Khomeini in Iran (Tehran, Iran, 22 September 2019). Credit: Majid Asgaripour / Mehr News Agency.

normalization by them with Israel. Israel and the occupation have been at the top of the agenda for Palestinians themselves.⁴ However, some interviewees noted that this issue is not as high a priority for their governments as it was in the past.

A significant trend in the security perceptions of Arab states has been the increased challenge posed by Iran. Most Arab interviewees, especially from the GCC states, either viewed the role of Iran in the Middle East negatively, believing that it is determined to expand its influence there, or were at least ambivalent about it (notwithstanding the recent Iran-Saudi deal to restore diplomatic relations).⁵ A small subset of Arab interviewees viewed the role of Iran in the region positively.

Arab states' concerns about Iran's negative role have been exacerbated by its development and use of delivery systems like missiles and UAVs. The accessibility and low production cost, and technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), have expanded the threat of Iran's delivery systems. Most Arab states affected by them lack the necessary systems to comprehensively intercept such technologies. GCC interviewees believed that the Ukraine war had created a new arms race and introduced concerns over the trade in delivery systems, given the sale of Iranian UAVs to the Russian Federation and their use in the Ukraine theatre. This provides a source of funds for Iran to expand its regional activities and increase support to its proxy networks.

This set of concerns with Iran was further exacerbated by its creation of proxy relationships by it with Shiite non-state actors in the Middle East, such as Ansarullah (also known as the Houthis) in Yemen,

⁴ Hiba Hussein, "Palestine Negotiating Security: The case for Palestinian membership of the Middle East WMD-free Zone," in *Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region*, ed. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak Kane (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 65, <https://unidir.org/publication/perspectives-drivers-and-objectives-middle-east-wmd-free-zone-voices-region>.

⁵ Vivian Nereim, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Agree to Restore Ties, in Talks Hosted by China," *The New York Times*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/10/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-reestablish-ties.html>.

Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shiite militias in Iraq. These entities allow Iran to pressure or attack Arab states at a low cost and with lower accountability. The proxy relationship between Iran and Shiite non-state actors in the Middle East posed a more significant challenge when combined with the transfer of missiles and UAVs, allowing these non-state actors to inflict even more significant damage. The most prominent example cited was the missile and UAV attacks by Ansarullah on strategic and military infrastructure in Saudi Arabia⁶ and the United Arab Emirates.⁷

In this context, maritime security was also highlighted by GCC interviewees. The Middle East is home to crucial maritime passages for global trade, most notably crude oil, such as the Suez Canal, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, and Bab-el-Mandeb strait. Non-state actors posing threats to maritime security, such as attacks on vessels, hijackings, and illicit trafficking, were seen as grave concerns. UAV attacks were explicitly noted as a common method used in the region. Some of these interviewees expressed concern about Iran's military activities at sea, and the lack of security on the Iranian and Yemeni maritime borders, considering them serious threats to regional security.

The rise of Turkey as a major state actor in the Middle East is a relatively recent development that has significantly influenced the region. According to many Arab interviewees, Turkish military involvement in Iraq, Libya, and Syria and its political and occasional military support for Muslim Brotherhood affiliate organizations and other non-state actors were mentioned as examples of Turkey's growing influence and impact on several Arab states' security threat perceptions.⁸

Some Arab interviewees (most notably from the GCC) expressed concerns about the United States' receding role in the Middle East since the administration of President Barack Obama, which has created uncertainty and a shift in the Arab-US dynamic, as well as anxieties about great power competition in the region. An Emirati interviewee recalled that during President Obama's first term, particularly following his Cairo speech on 4 June 2009,⁹ there was a sense of optimism among the Arab states that the United States would resolve many of the Middle Eastern conflicts taking place at the time. But he said that by 2015, this sense of optimism had dissipated, with some Arab states not viewing US policy over the preceding years very positively and questioning whether the Obama administration still regarded them as close and reliable partners. Many GCC interviewees emphasized some receding trust in the relationship between their governments and the United States, feeling that the latter does not fully appreciate or sufficiently take their concerns into account, and doubting whether the United States would defend itself and its regional allies in case of military confrontation. This concern was often raised in the context of Iran's nuclear and delivery system (missile and UAV) programmes and proxy non-state actors network. Of course, many Arab interviewees did not necessarily see the reduced US role in the region as a problem.

The reduced US focus on the Middle East has led some states of the region, according to a subset of Arab interviewees, to strengthen their relationships with each other, while Russia and China have increased their presence in the region to fill the gap left by the United States. These interviewees expressed concern that the tumultuous relationship between the United States, Russia, and China might

⁶ Seth Jones et al., "The Iranian and Houthi War against Saudi Arabia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21 December 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia>.

⁷ Yasmine Farouk, "Riyadh's Motivations Behind the Saudi-Iran Deal," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 March 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/30/riyadh-s-motivations-behind-saudi-iran-deal-pub-89421>, and Shuaib Almosawa, Vivian Yee and Isabella Kwai, "Yemen's Houthi Militia Claims Rare Military Strike on U.A.E.," The New York Times, 17 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/world/middleeast/uae-attack-yemen-houthi.html>.

⁸ Turki Al Faisal, "Saudi Arabia: Preserving and Strengthening The Middle East WMD-Free A Zone Process," in Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region, ed. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak Kane (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 72.

⁹ "Full text of Obama's speech in Cairo," NBC News, 4 June 2009, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna31102929>.

require them to take sides in any great power competition that takes place the region (or beyond), which they would prefer to avoid.

WMD IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Arab states remain concerned about the risks posed by existing WMD arsenals in the Middle East and the proliferation of WMD by both state and non-state actors according to Arab interviewees. Nearly all interviewees expressed some level of concern regarding Israel's nuclear arsenal, even if they did not perceive these weapons to pose a direct, imminent, threat at the moment. Concerns surrounding Israel's nuclear capabilities can be categorized into three main categories. First, Israel's possession of nuclear weapons allows it to utilise its conventional capabilities against Arab states and enables it to be more aggressive in regional conflicts, whereas, without them, it would have to exercise more restraint and could face greater consequences.

Second, Israel's nuclear weapons create an asymmetry of military power as well as an asymmetry of obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) between Israel and the Arab states. All Arab states are NPT member states, no Arab state is pursuing a military nuclear capability, and the majority of them are signatories to other WMD non-proliferation treaties. These asymmetries are perceived as unjust by Arab interviewees. Some of them also viewed this asymmetry as a contributing factor to past regional nuclear proliferation or hedging by countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Iran, currently. Third, the asymmetry in capabilities between Israel and Arab states is considered as a double standard by the international community, especially the United States, which undermines the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Nearly all Arab interviewees expressed some concern regarding Iran's nuclear program. These concerns can also be categorized into three issues. First, there is concern that a crisis involving Iran could prompt its leadership to pursue nuclear weapons, thereby escalating the risk of nuclear conflict in the Middle East. However, a regional nuclear war was seen by interviewees who spoke on the topic as a relatively remote possibility, albeit one with catastrophic consequences. Second, there was a fear by most interviewees that Iran's high level of nuclear latency¹⁰ or potential nuclear weapons could embolden it to adopt an even more aggressive foreign policy. This could manifest through conventional military activities or its network of proxy non-state actors. Lastly, there was a widespread concern among Arab interviewees – which they claimed was shared by most of their governments' – that Iran's possession of a high level of nuclear latency or future weapons could trigger a nuclear weapons proliferation cascade in the region.

The highest level of concern regarding the Iranian nuclear programme came from interviewees from the GCC, mainly due to their proximity to Iran. While Egyptian interviewees perceived Iran's nuclear program as a less immediate challenge, they still deemed it as important to closely monitor for the additional reasons of Egypt's solidarity with GCC states and the complexities it could create for Egyptian efforts towards Israel's nuclear disarmament and the establishment of a ME WMDFZ. Some Egyptian interviewees believed that their government, as the traditionally leading advocate for a Zone, mediated between two main camps: One prioritizing addressing Israel's nuclear capabilities and the other prioritizing Iran's nuclear programme. A subset of these interviewees said that their government does not apply the same policy or political rhetoric to these two states because while Israel possesses nuclear weapons, Iran does not.

¹⁰ Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran's Nuclear Latency Needs To Be Guarded, not Goaded," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 6 March 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2020/03/iran-low-enriched-uranium-stockpile-iaea-report>.

Arab interviewees also expressed concerns regarding the acquisition of a radiological weapon (or “dirty bomb”), chemical agents, and biological pathogens (a concern that has become more acute following the Covid-19 pandemic) by non-state actors in the Middle East. They cited weak national controls on sensitive biological and chemical materials, the low priority given to chemical and biological terrorism compared to conventional terrorism, and porous borders as the main contributing factors behind these concerns. A senior Algerian expert, for example, said that despite the anecdotal nature of failed attempts by non-state actors to acquire or use WMD in the region, the Covid-19 pandemic could lead to greater interest among non-state actors in bioterrorism, particularly considering growing biotechnology industry in his country (and the region).¹¹

A former senior Iraqi official highlighted how concerns over the risk of non-state actors using WMD was one motivation behind Iraq’s prohibition of such weapons. He recounted historical instances where Iraq had narrowly avoided WMD terrorism in what he called “a lucky break”. For example, in 2014, the Islamic State captured a facility and unsuccessfully attempted to access chemical agent-filled artillery shells and other ammunition in two bunkers at the Muthanna facility that had been sealed by United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) in 1998.¹² He emphasized that this was not a challenge unique to Iraq but a risk to all Middle Eastern states with different categories of WMD or means of producing them. He also raised safety concerns around decommissioned WMD programs and urged states of the region to take measures to mitigate such risks.¹³

Safety and security of civil nuclear, chemical, and biological infrastructure and materials within and across states were also key issues for many Arab interviewees and their governments. Algeria, influenced by its historical experience with French nuclear tests in the Algerian Sahara,¹⁴ as well as the existence of two nuclear research reactors in Draria and Ain Oussera, places significant importance on nuclear security and safety.¹⁵ GCC states are highly concerned about nuclear safety and security in their subregion, mainly due to fears of accidents, seismic activity, or state or non-state attacks on Iran’s Bushehr nuclear power plant (NPP) or the UAE’s Barakah NPP. Both plants are near Persian Gulf waters, and their contamination would be catastrophic to the adjacent states’ water supply, not to mention the effects of radiation on the health of the citizens of these countries. The GCC and its member states have taken important steps toward emergency preparedness for such scenarios. For example, a Qatari interview explained that his country established the Doha Regional Center for Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Training to address these threats. He noted that the centre has strong ties with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and trained other states on the practical and technical aspects of implementing WMD regimes, including submitting declarations and preparing for inspections. Other GCC states have made similar efforts.¹⁶

¹¹ Arslan Chikhaoui, “Algeria Preventing WMD Threats in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel,” in *Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region*, ed. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak Kane (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 28-29.

¹² “Iraq confirms rebels seized Muthanna chemical arms site,” BBC, 9 July 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28222879>.

¹³ Hussain Al-Shahristani, “Iraq: The Importance of Middle East WMD-free Zone: Heading Lessons from the Past,” in *Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region*, ed. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak Kane (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 51-52.

¹⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), “Radiological Conditions at the Former French Nuclear Test Sites in Algeria: Preliminary Assessments and Recommendations, Radiological Assessment Reports Series, (Vienna: IAEA, 2005), 28-30, <https://www.iaea.org/publications/7174/radiological-conditions-atthe-former-french-nuclear-test-sites-in-algeria-preliminary-assessment-and-recommendations>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁶ IAEA, “Moving towards a Regional Emergency Response Plan in the Gulf,” 14 April 2014, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/moving-towards-a-regional-emergency-response-plan-in-the-gulf>.



The Barakah nuclear power plant contains the United Arab Emirates first set of nuclear reactors, and is the second NPP in the Middle East. (UAE, 2017). Credit: Wikiemirati / Wikimedia Commons.

2. ARAB STATES' DRIVERS AND THEMES ON THE ME WMDFZ

ARAB SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ME WMDFZ

From the perspective of Arab interviewees, the threats posed by WMD from state and non-state actors generally featured among the leading challenges in the security perceptions of Arab states. This is reflected in the broad and consistent support among Arab states for the establishment of an ME WMDFZ since the 1990s. That said, some interviewees raised at least two reasons for why they felt that the Zone is not a priority for some Arab states, although it is unclear if this view is shared more broadly by Arab security experts or their respective governments. First, these interviewees claimed that WMD are not generally considered an imminent threat (at least compared to the other main challenges outlined above) in the security perceptions of their governments. The risk from WMD either seems to be a distant possibility or becomes meaningful in how it shapes other security challenges. Second, for the WMD-related challenges that were consistently raised (Israeli nuclear weapons, the Iranian nuclear programme, and WMD proliferation by non-state actors), there was a sense among these interviewees that the Zone (at least in its current form) was not necessarily the best or most practical solution to these challenges.

ARAB POSITIONS ON THE ME WMDFZ

Arab interviewees agreed that Arab states have consistently and collectively worked towards establishing a ME WMDFZ. They have played a leading role in efforts to establish a Zone, beginning with Egypt co-sponsoring (alongside Iran) the Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (ME NWFZ) resolution at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 and later expanding the scope of the Zone through the 1990 Mubarak Initiative.¹⁷ Most Arab interviewees acknowledged that given Egypt's

¹⁷ "Mubarak initiative' expands the scope of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East to include all WMD," 18 April 1980, 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?timeline=0>.

historical diplomatic interest and technical capability, it has played a significant role in leading Zone-related processes, including at times on behalf of the Arab states. The Arab position on the Zone issue is often significantly shaped by Egypt's policies, particularly when it comes to presenting a common position on this issue at international forums like the IAEA General Conference and the General Assembly. The Arab League has also helped coordinate efforts among Arab states on this issue. To strengthen LAS's expertise in this area, Amr Moussa, the LAS Secretary-General from 2001 to 2011, established the Department of Disarmament and Arms Control within the General Secretariat. This department has focused on conventional arms, WMD, and capacity building for Arab officials dealing with disarmament issues. Despite the relative unity of efforts among Arab states on the Zone issue, there have in the past been differences between Egypt and its fellow Arab states over the direction of the common policy in this area, with a few examples explored in Section 3 of this publication on historical accounts.

Arab states have played a leading role in efforts to establish a Zone, beginning with Egypt's co-sponsorship (alongside Iran) of the Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone resolution at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 and later expanding the scope of the Zone to all categories of WMD through the 1990 Mubarak Initiative.

According to Arab interviewees the motivation of Arab states to establish a ME WMDFZ is mainly security and, to a lesser degree, the economy. Arab states saw the purpose of creating a Zone as diminishing the threat posed by WMD in the region, notwithstanding the difficulty of eliciting Israeli engagement with Zone-related processes and convincing it to disarm its nuclear weapons, as well as the challenges posed by Iran's nuclear programme and the uncertain future of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).¹⁸ Relatedly, Arab interviewees (Egyptians foremost among them) believed that creating a Zone also helped address the asymmetry of military power and asymmetry in NPT status between Israel and the Arab states.

Arab interviewees appeared to frame the security utility of a Zone based on their national perspectives. For example, an Emirati interviewee said that the UAE has a long-standing position to support and promote a ME WMDFZ. The UAE has agreed to many resolutions on this process in the UN and the IAEA. Additionally, it has issued joint statements urging Israel to join the NPT, that all nuclear facilities in the Middle East should be under IAEA safeguards, and supported the creation of a Zone. In contrast to the Israeli view of the 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) as a UN pressure campaign against it, this interviewee said the Arab Group saw this process as a comprehensive and integrated approach to address several security issues. He concluded that the UAE believed the Zone was an important issue that needed to remain a priority on the international agenda. At the same time, this interviewee questioned the degree to which the Zone is being prioritized by the UAE Government and most other Middle Eastern governments due to other, more pressing security issues, limited bandwidth, and the inability to expend serious diplomatic effort on such an elusive goal. Thus, while he concurred with most Arab interviewees that the states of the region largely agreed on the importance of WMD, he felt these states did not all assign the same priority to establishing a Zone.

¹⁸ European External Action Service, "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," 14 July 2015, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en.

Another example came from Palestine which, according to a Palestinian expert, sees joining a ME WMDFFZ as helping enhance its security. Given Palestine's inability to compete with Israel on a military level, it believes that demilitarization and participation in the Zone would contribute to its goal of independence and accelerate conflict resolution.¹⁹ In addition, a move by Palestine to participate in a regional governance framework like the Zone would also conform with the relatively recent trend in its foreign policy towards internationalizing the conflict with Israel, such as by achieving observer status at the United Nations and other multilateral organizations. The Zone could also strengthen the relative power of Palestine in bilateral relations with other Arab states due to further regionalization and institutionalization of these relations. This could counter the effects of Israeli normalization with some Arab states as part of the Abraham Accords.²⁰ A senior Saudi official viewed a WMD prohibition as the only means to prevent states of the region from possessing WMD. Therefore, he believed that his government assigned a high premium to pursuing a ME WMDFFZ to ensure a safer and more secure Middle East.

Economically, some Arab interviewees speculated that creating a more symmetric military power balance in the region through a Zone could be a cost-effective way to enhance the security of their countries and redirect resources towards economic development projects. The potential dividend from establishing a Zone was also linked to better facilitating the peaceful uses of nuclear, chemical, and biological technologies and materials. Some GCC interviewees, in particular, said that their governments view peaceful nuclear energy as a solution to one of the region's most pressing environmental issues – water scarcity – through nuclear water desalination.

FROM POSSESSING OR PURSUING WMD TO JOINING NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT REGIMES

The independence of most Arab states in the aftermath of the Second World War, de-colonization, the Arab-Israeli Wars (1948-1973), and the struggle of Palestine for self-determination contributed to a general trend in which Arab states either abstained from joining international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes, attempted to develop WMD, developed WMD, or used these weapons on the battlefield and against civilians. This trend has gradually reversed: Today, nearly all Arab states that possessed WMD programmes or arsenals have dismantled them and have signed or ratified nearly all WMD-related regimes.

Arab interviewees identified at least three main reasons for the high subscription rate by Arab states to WMD-related regimes. The first reason was a desire by Arab states to be viewed as members in good standing of the international community that did not wish to possess WMD and wanted to fully benefit from the peaceful uses of nuclear, chemical, and biological technologies.

The second reason was the role of the United States in promoting WMD non-proliferation and disarmament in the Middle East. The United States is the foremost extra-regional ally and provider of security cooperation with Arab states. It has been able to use security and economic inducements (including peaceful nuclear cooperation), threats to withhold cooperation in these areas, and military and diplomatic pressure to prevent the pursuit of WMD by these states. For Arab states that are or were in the past adversarial to the United States, the latter intervened against them militarily based on actual or alleged WMD programmes (Iraq) or used the threat of military intervention to coerce them to dismantle their programmes (Libya and Syria).

¹⁹ Husseini, "Palestine: Negotiation Security: The case for Palestinian Membership of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone," 65.

²⁰ Ibid, 66.



Pictured: The first Battle of Khorramshahr, which took place from 22 September to 10 November 1980, during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Beginning in 1983, Iran suffered from the use of increasingly effective Iraqi chemical weapons attacks, which initially involved blister agents (e.g. mustard gas), but later included nerve agents such as tabun and possibly sarin. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The third reason cited by Arab interviewees was a desire by Arab states to signal to the international community and Israel their commitment to WMD non-proliferation and disarmament as a source of leverage to pressure Israel to undertake nuclear disarmament and join the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS). For example, at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, Djibouti, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates – the three Arab states that had not yet ratified the NPT at the time – agreed to ratify the treaty in order to strengthen the Arab position on nuclear non-proliferation and lend it greater credibility for pursuing a ME WMDFZ. This also left Israel as the only state in the Middle East that had not yet ratified the NPT.

To illustrate this broader pattern, Egyptian and Iraqi interviewees shared how their countries went from pursuing or possessing WMD to dismantling these programmes and becoming leading proponents of WMD non-proliferation and disarmament. Egyptian interviewees acknowledged that their government considered pursuing nuclear weapons in the 1960s to 1970s.²¹ This was difficult due to the lack of domestic capacity in Egypt and the unwillingness of international suppliers to provide the needed technology and material. Beginning in the 1970s, and in the context of its conflict with Israel, Egypt shifted its focus away from the option to build nuclear weapons to acquiring conventional weapons, first from the Soviet Union and later the United States. Additionally, it became interested in building NPPs to meet its energy needs. In this context, Egyptian interviewees explained that Egypt ratified the NPT in 1981,²² which it had already signed when the treaty became open for signature in 1968, for three main reasons.

²¹ Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Egypt nuclear overview," 1 July 2014, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/egypt-nuclear/>.

²² United Nations (UN) Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Egypt: Ratification of Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," 26 February 1981, <https://treaties.unoda.org/a/npt/egypt/RAT/london>.

First, Egypt agreed to ratify the NPT as part of the negotiations that culminated in the Camp David Peace Accords,²³ although it initially sought Israeli reciprocity. During the peace talks with Israel in the late-1970s, Egypt proposed a draft article that required both sides to renounce nuclear weapons and to ratify the NPT. However, Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Minister of Defence, rejected the draft article, and the United States did not push the issue further. Instead, the United States pressured Egypt to agree to peace and ratify the NPT. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat prioritised peace, regaining the Sinai Peninsula, and obtaining the benefits of improved ties with the United States. As a result, Egypt ratified the NPT without a reciprocal commitment from Israel.

Second, although Egypt ratified the NPT without Israeli reciprocity in 1981, some Egyptian interviewees claimed that during the talks, the United States assured their government that it would encourage Israel to reciprocate with NPT ratification. These interviewees differed on the precise form of this pledge. Some believed that senior US officials committed to getting Israel to ratify the NPT. Others recalled that US officials argued that Israeli nuclear weapons resulted from the conflict with Arab states, so once Egypt ratified the NPT and implemented the peace treaty, this would result in an increase of trust, and eventually result in Israel's NPT ratification. Regardless of the precise form of this pledge, most interviewees agreed that there was a clear understanding that the US government would try to persuade Israel to join the NPT.²⁴

Finally, Egypt ratified the NPT to gain peaceful nuclear cooperation with the United States.²⁵ Discussions took place with the US Government to build eight nuclear reactors in 1974. The latter made NPT ratification, and the application of full-scope IAEA safeguards a condition for peaceful nuclear cooperation. According to some Egyptian interviewees, NPT ratification divided opinions within the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and inter-agency deliberations. Those who supported ratification argued that it would facilitate US sales of NPPs to Egypt, which the Minister of Electricity believed were desperately needed at time, and to begin a dialogue with Israel about ratifying the NPT. Those who opposed ratification argued it undermined Egyptian national security to forfeit leverage over Israel to join the NPT and would thus reinforce the asymmetry of military capabilities and create an asymmetry of legal obligations. The Egyptian inter-agency committee overseeing this issue supported ratification of the NPT, with one member opposing it.²⁶

Egyptian interviewees consider their country today as a leader among Arab states, including because it is the first Arab state to conclude a peace treaty with Israel and ratify the NPT.²⁷ While these actions initially isolated Egypt from other Arab states, over time some of them followed suit by establishing peace treaties with Israel, and eventually, all Arab states ratified the NPT. As a consequence, Egyptian interviewees also regarded their country as a leader among Arab states in WMD non-proliferation and disarmament efforts. Egypt has actively participated in negotiating all relevant treaties and agreements, although it has not yet ratified all of them. For instance, Egypt signed the NPT in 1968 but delayed ratification until 1981, after signing the peace agreement with Israel. Despite participating in

²³ United Nations Peacemaker, "Framework for Peace in the Middle East and Framework for the Conclusion of a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel (Camp David Accord)," 17 September 1978, <https://peacemaker.un.org/egyptisrael-frameworkforpeace78>.

²⁴ Nabil Fahmy, *Egypt's Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 120, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-26388-1>.

²⁵ Ibid, 162, and "Agreement for cooperation between the government on the United States of America and the government of the Arab Republic of Egypt concerning peaceful uses of nuclear energy," 29 June 1981, <https://media.nti.org/pdfs/StateandEgyptPeaceNuc1981.pdf>.

²⁶ Fahmy, *Egypt's Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, 118.

²⁷ Permanent Representation of Egypt to the United Nations, "Letter addressed to the Secretary-General," A/36/112, S/14387, 26 February 1981, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/20277>.

the negotiations of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1993 and the Pelindaba Treaty (on an African NWFZ) in 1996, Egypt has not ratified them due to Israel's refusal to join the NPT. And, as already noted above, Egypt also co-sponsored a resolution on a ME NWFZ at the General Assembly in 1974 to promote nuclear obligations parity.²⁸

A former senior Iraqi official distinguished the WMD-related policy of Iraq into two distinct eras: the period under President Saddam Hussein (1976 to 2003) and the post-Saddam period (2003 to the present). According to him, during Saddam Hussein's reign, the development and possession of all WMD were seen to empower Iraq, reshape the Middle East, including territorial conquest in nearby states, and deter adversaries. He believed that Saddam had considered acquiring nuclear weapons before the Israeli attack on the Osirak research reactor in Baghdad in June 1981. However, as confirmed to him by Iraqi Atomic Energy Commission scientists, the Iraqi nuclear weapons program was only launched in earnest after the Israeli attack.²⁹

The former senior Iraqi official also noted that Iraq pursued chemical and biological weapons during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) and managed to produce an estimated 3,857 tons of toxic substances between 1981 and 1991. These substances included nerve agents, mustard gas, and other weapons used against the Iranian military and civilians, as well as in the Iraqi town of Halabja in March 1988, where nearly 5,000 civilians were killed. The United Nations Special Commission destroyed most of the Iraqi chemical substances between 1991 and 1998. However, after the downfall of Saddam's regime in 2003, hundreds of tons of chemical weapons and precursor materials were found at the Muthanna State Establishment, the main production facility. Iraq also pursued biological weapons and produced 19,000 litres of botulinum toxin, 8,500 litres of anthrax, and 2,200 litres of aflatoxins at the Al-Hakam research and production facility. While biological weapons were field tested, they were not deployed in warfare.³⁰

The former senior Iraqi official emphasized that post-Saddam Iraq is committed to prohibiting WMD due to the devastation and tragedy that Iraq experienced from 1991 to 2003 due to its pursuit of WMD. He participated in the creation of Article 9 of Iraq's post-Saddam constitution which prohibits the development, production, and use of all WMD. He said that the decision to implement Article 9 sent a strong and clear message to the international community on Iraq's position on disarmament and non-proliferation. In addition, it solidified Iraq's reputation as a changed state in the international community. This position also has a security dimension, aiming to prevent WMD from being used as a pretext for future military actions against Iraq.

ASYMMETRICAL OBLIGATIONS, DOUBLE-STANDARDS, AND THE LOSS OF CREDIBILITY OF THE INTERNATIONAL WMD NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT REGIMES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ARAB STATES

In light of international and regional events, most Arab interviewees expressed some level of concern regarding the health and credibility of international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes. Three areas of concern were mentioned. First, many Arab interviewees pointed out the asymmetry in legal obligations between the Arab states and Israel, especially when it comes to the membership of all Arab states in the NPT. According to these interviewees, this asymmetry removed an important incentive for Israel to join the NPT and helped to create a double standard. They believed that Israel,

²⁸ "Mubarak initiative' expands the scope of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East to include all WMD," UNIDIR Timeline.

²⁹ Hussain A-Shahristani, "Iraq The Importance of Middle East WMD-free zone: Heeding lessons from the past," 50-51.

³⁰ Ibid.

India, and Pakistan have received preferential treatment as nuclear possessors without facing any real consequences, thus undermining the credibility of the NPT. They argued that this asymmetry has led to scepticism about these regimes.

Second, some Arab interviewees assessed that Arab states' adherence to other WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes besides the NPT may have further deepened this asymmetry, as not adhering to these regimes could have provided them with a stronger bargaining position or leverage vis-à-vis Israel's nuclear program. Third, some interviewees believed that the primary tension within the NPT regime today revolves around nuclear disarmament. They asserted that the lack of nuclear balance in the Middle East contributes to the broader global tension between, on one side, nuclear weapon states (NWS), nuclear possessors, and their allies who enjoy nuclear umbrellas, and, on the other side, NNWS. These interviewees believe that this imbalance undermines the NPT and is unacceptable to the governments and publics of the region.

These criticism and concerns about the credibility and fragility of international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes were not universally shared among Arab interviewees. According to a small subset of them, some Arab states have adopted an even more robust WMD non-proliferation measures regarding their civilian nuclear program, because they thought that the existing international regimes can be effective in a regional context in conjunction with additional, stronger, measures. For instance, despite the UAE's strong support for the existing international system to address WMD risks, a former senior Emirati official believed that signing the NPT and committing not to acquire nuclear weapons under it was no longer sufficient to address the region's nuclear proliferation challenges. They believed additional complementary measures are required within the ME WMDFZ-related processes.

ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES, REGIONAL CONDITIONS, AND THE ME WMDFZ

Intra-Arab dynamics and the ME WMDFZ: Maintaining a united Arab front

According to many Arab interviewees, Egypt has been traditionally perceived as the natural leader among the Arab states on multilateral WMD non-proliferation and disarmament diplomacy, in part due to its efforts in forging a united Arab front on the ME WMDFZ. In parallel, the League of Arab States has played an important role in coordinating the policies of its 22 member states on this set of issues. A former senior Arab official outlined a spectrum among Arab states in this regard. Some states, like the UAE, enthusiastically support these Western-backed regimes. Others, like Egypt, adopted a more pragmatic approach, while some expressed criticism of how they have operated, such as Syria. Nonetheless, Arab states maintain a united front on core issues related to the Zone in international forums. Through its Department of Disarmament & Arms Control, the LAS helps coordinate the policies of Arab states in this area, establishing impartiality and unity. According to this interviewee, the LAS became prominently involved in WMD non-proliferation and disarmament issues between the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and the 2013-2014 informal consultations in Glion and Geneva.³¹ It provided agenda proposals, facilitated discussions, and brought draft resolutions on WMD-related issues to the LAS Council of Foreign Ministers for their approval. Today, the Senior Officials Committee (SOC) within the LAS continues to coordinate positions on new treaties or WMD-related issues. Despite the prominent role played by the LAS in this area, the interviewee noted that each LAS member state is a sovereign entity with the ultimate decision-making power to ratify or reject a treaty.

³¹ "First Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMDFZ 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>.

However, some Arab interviewees highlighted challenges in ensuring coherence and coordination between the discussions held in the LAS, Arab capitals, and Arab ambassadors based in the international organisations in Geneva, New York, and Vienna. For example, the former senior Arab official recalled that when approved resolutions or strategies were sent to these ambassadors, some were unaware or disinterested in the topic or had other priorities and diplomatic battles. Amr Moussa made efforts to address this issue by having LAS officials hold discussions with Arab foreign ministers urging compliance from ambassadors, leading to instructions from MFAs to these ambassadors to align with the LAS position. Another challenge in coordinating the position of all LAS member states is the lack of experience with WMD-related issues among many Arab states. Finally, often when these states come together to coordinate their policies, their own diverging politics influence the dynamics of the discussions. According to the former senior Arab official, Egypt's position on the ME WMD FZ aligned with the LAS position until 2013, when a change in Egypt's foreign minister introduced some divergence from LAS positions. For example, Egypt walked out of the NPT Preparatory Committee conference that year without informing its Arab counterparts, deviating from the agreed-upon positions.³² This shift caused some Arab states to view Egypt as pursuing its own agenda rather than acting in the collective interest, although this interviewee did not entirely agree with this perspective. He believed that, overall, Egypt has traditionally brought other Arab states on board with a common position on this set of issues.

The LAS has been involved in WMD non-proliferation and disarmament issues throughout the years. It provided agenda proposals, facilitates discussions, and brings draft resolutions on WMD-related issues to the Council of Foreign Ministers for approval.

But some Arab interviewees felt that, in recent years, some Arab states have begun to diverge from the common line. For example, the UAE antagonized some other Arab states when pursuing a nuclear cooperation agreement with more restrictive terms (also called the "gold standard") as its Arab critics rejected these terms as applicable to the entire region. Another example of divergence mentioned was Iraq's decision to seek alternative wording more aligned with US preferences on the Middle East section of the draft Final Document at the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

Israeli nuclear capabilities and the ME WMD FZ

Israel's zero-sum mindset on the ME WMD FZ and lack of incentives to change

Arab states generally maintain a unified position regarding Israel's effect on the ME WMD FZ issue. These states are highly critical of Israeli nuclear capabilities and view the Zone-related processes as an opportunity to highlight Israel's nuclear regional monopoly and the negative impact of this monopoly on regional security dynamics.

Egyptian interviewees emphasized the importance of Israel's disarmament as an essential step in creating a new regional security order. While Cairo does not seek to isolate Israel, it believes that meaningful progress on this new order cannot be made without Israel joining the NPT. These interviewees regarded Israel's possession of nuclear weapons as the most urgent nuclear issue in

³² "Egyptian Delegation Walks out of 2013 NPT PrepCom in Protest over the Lack Of Progress on the ME WMD FZ," 29 April 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/egyptian-delegation-walks-out-2013-npt-prepcom-protest-over-lack-progress-me-wmdfz>.

the region. They observed that the Israeli government perceives security as a “zero-sum game” and fears that engagement in a ME WMD/FZ process would inevitably become a “slippery slope”, leading to disarmament.³³ They felt that this mindset is deeply ingrained in Israel’s core security perception. However, most Egyptian interviewees argued that there is no valid security justification for Israel to possess nuclear weapons. They noted that Israel enjoys a qualitative military edge and does not truly face existential threats from neighbouring countries.

Some Egyptian interviewees also pointed out that Israel’s negotiating style and internal checks and balances prevent concessions on its nuclear weapons. They believed that Israel lacks the incentives to change its policy as there is no international pressure on Israel, and it mistakenly believes that it has nothing to gain or lose with its current position. Engaging Israel on the issue of nuclear disarmament was seen as challenging since Israel’s leadership demands significant progress towards comprehensive regional peace, normalization, and stability as a precondition for joining a process leading to NPT accession and nuclear disarmament.³⁴ An Egyptian interviewee mentioned that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made it clear to the Egyptian government that nuclear weapons are not up for discussion, and only he, within his government, is authorized to engage in such discussions. Under Prime Minister Netanyahu’s leadership, Israel even attempted to engage Egypt bilaterally ahead of the 2010 and 2015 NPT Review Conferences to prevent the Israeli nuclear capabilities issue from being raised in international forums. Israel sought to bypass the Egyptian MFA by going directly to the president.³⁵

There was a sense among Egyptian interviewees that they should not make up-front concessions to Israel as they are unlikely to be reciprocated. Despite the ME WMD/FZ issue being a priority for Egyptian foreign policy, both sides have learned to compartmentalize it within their relationship. Some Egyptian interviewees believed that the current political situation in Israel does not allow for difficult decisions regarding the Zone, while a far less common view was that the rise of different voices within Israel could lead to a change in this posture in the future.

Increasing Arab leverage on Israel for nuclear disarmament

While Arab states remain committed to WMD non-proliferation and disarmament, some Arab interviewees expressed the sentiment that their governments have over time adopted strategies to exert “soft leverage” over Israel. For example, the Egyptian government, since the mid-1990s, has generally refrained from signing or ratifying additional WMD non-proliferation and disarmament agreements to create a form of “soft leverage” to walk Israel towards nuclear disarmament.³⁶

One Egyptian interviewee mentioned an alternative approach to address Israel’s nuclear weapons: for Israel to abandon its policy of nuclear ambiguity and openly declare its possession of nuclear weapons, similar to what India and Pakistan have done. According to this view, such a declaration could initiate a dialogue on regional disarmament, starting with Israeli tactical nuclear weapons and eventually encompassing other systems. However, the interviewee acknowledged that this perspective does not

³³ For the Israeli perspectives on this topic, see “Israeli Views on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Processes and Regimes” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

³⁴ For the Israeli perspective on this topic, see “Egypt’s diplomatic gambit on Israeli nuclear capabilities and a ME WMD/FZ” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

³⁵ “US Tauscher’s December 1–2 visit to Israel,” WikiLeaks, 22 December 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TELEAVIV2757_a.html, and Yossi Melman, “Israel, US working to prevent discussion of ‘Israel’s nuclear capabilities’ at IAEA meeting,” Jerusalem Post, 16 September 2015, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/israel-us-working-to-prevent-discussion-of-israels-nuclear-capabilities-at-iaea-meeting-416291>.

³⁶ For the Israeli perspectives on this topic, see “Israeli Views on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Processes and Regimes” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

align with the policies of Egypt or other Arab states, and it could generate domestic pressure within Egypt and other Arab countries to react. Other Arab interviewees also expressed concerns that demanding Israel to declare its nuclear status may go too far, especially considering their belief that nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is already taking place due to Israel's weapons. While these interviewees noted occasional slip-ups by Israeli officials describing their country's capabilities, these did not provoke an adverse reaction from Egypt due to tensions between Iran and Arab states and US policies. However, if Israel's capabilities were to become officially acknowledged, the Egyptian government would have to react accordingly.

According to Arab interviewees, two main contemporary regional security issues and dynamics relating to Arab-Israel relations could impact the prospects for establishing an ME WMDFZ: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Abraham Accords.

Ultimately, most Arab interviewees believed their governments have adopted a balanced approach to Israel's nuclear disarmament. While they acknowledged that there are exceptions, they asserted that this approach has been consistent over time: as long as there is a good-faith Zone process and progress, Arab states will not apply pressure on Israel in international forums. However, when these conditions are not met or progress stalls, they revert to applying pressure on Israel.

Regional security dynamics as they relate to Israel and its engagement with a ME WMDFZ

According to Arab interviewees, two main contemporary regional security issues and dynamics relating to Arab-Israel relations could impact the prospects for establishing an ME WMDFZ. First, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was seen as a potential obstacle to creating the Zone. Most Arab interviewees believed that the persistence of this conflict provided Israel with another reason to delay engaging with the Zone. They also noted that the conflict's continuation could negatively affect the durability and effectiveness of a Zone treaty's implementation.³⁷ The second dynamic is the Abraham Accords, which established peaceful relations between Israel and select Arab states. Some interviewees viewed these accords as signalling the possibility of the end of the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict since 1948, despite the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict and unmet promises of Palestinian statehood. A subset of these interviewees believed these agreements could have positive implications for the Zone. They suggested that decreased tensions between Arab states and Israel resulting from the Abraham Accords could create an opportunity to discuss the Zone. A former senior Saudi official suggested that the Arab states involved in the Accords could leverage their improved relations with Israel to highlight the Zone in their bilateral agendas with Israel and issue public statements, bringing more attention to the Zone issue.³⁸

The increasing role of Turkey in the Middle East and the ME WMDFZ

Turkey was viewed by some Arab interviewees as an outlier for the ME WMDFZ. Geographically, Turkey was not traditionally included in the definition of the Zone.³⁹ However, it was acknowledged that Turkey's security dynamics and regional orientation could impact the establishment of the Zone. One specific concern raised by these interviewees was the stationing of US nuclear weapons at Turkey's Incirlik

³⁷ Al Faisal, "Saudi Arabia: Preserving and Strengthening The Middle East WMD-Free A Zone Process," 74.

³⁸ Ibid, 77.

³⁹ Emad Kiyae, "Introduction: The Path Forward to a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East," Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament 5, no. 1 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2094699>.

Air Base. Considering Turkey's active foreign and security policies in the Middle East in recent years, they believed this issue needed to be addressed within a Zone treaty. A former senior Saudi official suggested that establishing a Zone could provide an opportunity for the states in the region to formally engage Turkey on this topic. Nevertheless, including Turkey in the Zone discussion did not mean redrawing the borders of the Zone to include Turkey. Instead, alternative approaches were suggested, such as granting Turkey observer status while creating the Zone or developing protocols within the Zone treaty to address its concerns and involvement.⁴⁰

ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE NPT DEPOSITORY STATES IN THE CREATION A ME WMDFZ

Arab interviewees said their governments considered the three NPT depository states (composed of the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia) as co-sponsors of the 1995 Middle East Resolution, and especially the United States as Israel's chief ally, partly responsible for implementing the ME WMDFZ. While the United States has generally supported the Zone, most interviewees felt it had not been actively working towards its realization. Instead, in their eyes, the United States has dealt with regional proliferation issues on an *ad hoc* basis, as it did in Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, rather than consistently and comprehensively. This has allowed regional non-proliferation challenges to persist, increasing the risk of future proliferation. For example, some Egyptian interviewees expressed regret over Egypt's NPT ratification at US insistence since the promised benefits have not materialized. The US pledge to convince Israel to join the NPT has gone unfulfilled, while Egypt has lost its leverage over Israel. Even if the United States made efforts to encourage Israel's NPT ratification, it is unclear what concrete steps were taken, and these interviewees believed only minimal efforts were made. This regret was compounded by unforeseen events, like the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, that has delayed Egypt's nuclear progress.

More broadly, the US position on the ME WMDFZ was seen as irreconcilable and contradictory by most Arab interviewees. While the US advocates for non-proliferation and supports the idea of a Zone, it also supports Israel's nuclear ambiguity. An Egyptian interviewee attributed this inconsistency to the lack of domestic political benefit for the US to pressure Israel on disarmament and the lack of a credible threat that an Arab state will pursue WMD. Therefore the Zone is not a priority. Some interviewees said their governments have concluded that convincing the United States to attend the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference depends more on convincing Israel to attend. For example, some Egyptians observed that since ACRS, their government has found direct communication with Israel to be more productive, although the United States has played an important role in NPT Review Conferences, where Israel is not a party to the treaty, to include references to Israel in the Final Document. They also believed US pressure was useful in bringing Israel to ACRS and the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva.⁴¹

Similarly, most Arab interviewees viewed the US, UK, and Russian approach to the JCPOA negatively. For example, most Egyptian interviewees saw the Iran nuclear deal as an example of these states' *ad hoc* approach to nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East. While Egypt did not oppose the JCPOA, it did not view it as a solution to regional proliferation challenges partly because it dealt with a single issue in a single state rather than the larger interconnected web of WMD issues in the region. They believed the issues covered by the nuclear deal should have been dealt with by states of the region comprehensively

⁴⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁴¹ For the Israeli perspective, see "Israeli views of the role of extra-regional states in the ME WMDFZ processes" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

under a Zone. They also expressed disappointment that the JCPOA did not include a reference to a Zone. Most Arab interviewees felt the nuclear deal was a stopgap measure to address the risk of Iranian nuclear latency. They believed their countries were not sufficiently consulted or their concerns taken under serious consideration. Some even felt that the JCPOA may have legitimized nuclear latency status and could potentially lead other Middle Eastern states to consider similar fuel cycle options. On the other hand, some Egyptians were concerned that the nuclear deal's high verification standard may be a precedent for a Zone, and they would be pressured to adopt them on a regional basis.

3. ARAB HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMD FZ PROCESSES

THE 1974 MIDDLE EAST NUCLEAR WEAPONS-FREE ZONE GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION

The ME NWFZ Resolution was initially introduced by Iran at the UN General Assembly in 1974, with Egypt joining as a co-sponsor. Egypt and Iran, under President Sadat and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, respectively, who had a close relationship, fleshed out the Zone concept. According to one Egyptian interviewee, before 1974, the concept of a Zone was not on the Egyptian MFA agenda. The 1967 Tlatelolco Treaty partly inspired it. The idea was to have a regional treaty and organization (overseen by the IAEA), focusing on nuclear weapons and peaceful nuclear cooperation. Egypt's primary objective in launching this initiative, according to some Egyptian interviewees, was to exert pressure on Israel and prevent its dominance in the Middle East. Significant milestones on the Zone were reached in the 1970s to 1980s, including the UN Secretary General publishing a report on the "Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East" in 1975,⁴² the final document at the tenth UN General Assembly calling for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East in 1978,⁴³ and the adoption of the IAEA resolution on the "Israeli nuclear capabilities and threat" for the first time in 1987.⁴⁴

THE FIRST GULF WAR, MUBARAK INITIATIVE, AND ORIGINS OF THE ME WMD FZ, 1990

In the early 1990s, significant changes in the Middle East opened up new opportunities and marked a new chapter in the Arab approach to the Zone. Egyptian interviewees identified the main factors that led senior Egyptian diplomats Amr Moussa and Nabil Fahmy, under President Hosni Mubarak, to launch the Mubarak Initiative in 1990. The initiative expanded the ME NWFZ scope to include all WMD categories.⁴⁵ The first factor was the use of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War against Iranian troops and civilians as well as Iraqi civilians. Relatedly, the threat of chemical weapon use against Israel and Saudi Arabia brought the issue of WMD to centre stage in the region.⁴⁶ This, led Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to warn that Iraq would "pay a

⁴² "UN Secretary-General publishes a report on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East,' 28 July 1975, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1970s/un-secretary-general-publishes-report-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region?timeline=2>.

⁴³ "Tenth UN General Assembly Special Session final document calls for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East," 30 June 1978, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1970s/tenth-un-general-assembly-special-session-final-document-calls-establishment-nuclear?timeline=3>.

⁴⁴ "IAEA resolution on the Israeli nuclear capabilities and threat" is adopted for the first time," 5 October 1987, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1980s/iaea-resolution-israeli-nuclear-capabilities-and-threat-adopted-first-time?timeline=2>.

⁴⁵ This initiative was mainly addressed by Egyptian interviewees. See "'Mubarak Initiative' expands the scope of the nuclear-weapon-free zone," UNIDIR Timeline.

⁴⁶ Gerald M. Steinberg, "Israeli Responses to the Threat of Chemical Warfare," *Armed Forces & Society* 20, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 85–101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45346561>.

terrible price” if chemical weapons were used against Israel.⁴⁷ The Arab states were concerned about the implications of WMD proliferation and on regional security and stability.

The second factor was Egypt’s desire to reclaim its leadership role in the Arab world, which it felt had diminished after signing the peace treaty with Israel in 1979.⁴⁸ Some Egyptian interviewees further believed their government did not want Saddam Hussein to assume leadership in the Arab world. The Mubarak Initiative was first introduced at the Emergency Arab Summit in Baghdad in May 1990, which aimed to address inter-Arab tensions, among other pressing issues.⁴⁹ Saddam initially opposed the initiative, according to an Egyptian interviewee, possibly to downplay his possession and use of WMD, but he eventually relented after facing criticism from other Arab leaders. The third factor was the perceived loss of momentum on the Zone issue, prompting the need for the initiative to evolve in response to changing regional and global conditions. Their goal was to maintain nuclear weapons as a priority within the Zone while also addressing chemical and biological weapons, which were considered a priority for Israel considering their use, possession, and development by other Middle Eastern states.

UN Security Council Resolution 687, adopted after the 1990–1991 First Gulf War, endorsed the expansion of the scope of the ME WMDFFZ. It noted the steps to be taken by Iraq contribute to the establishment of a Zone, including a global ban on chemical weapons.⁵⁰

THE ARMS CONTROL AND REGIONAL SECURITY (ACRS) WORKING GROUP, 1992-1995

The international and regional context of ACRS

Arab interviewees broadly agreed that the First Gulf War provided the main impetus for US President George H.W. Bush to launch the Middle East Arms Control Initiative to address the perceived problem around the proliferation of conventional weapons and WMD in the region.⁵¹ This initiative included a freeze on fissile material production in the Middle East. It did not move forward in part due to the lack of buy-in from the states of the region. But some of its key ideas were considered again by the United States and some of the Arab states following the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation and the start of the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference.⁵²

The Madrid Conference was an attempt by the international community to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process through negotiations. It was co-chaired by US President H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and attended by Israel, Egypt, a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, Lebanon, and Syria. (An Egyptian interviewee claimed that Syria agreed to join the Madrid Process and the bilateral negotiations with Israel that came after the Conference after being persuaded to do so by the Egyptian Government.) The Conference was unprecedented for the Arab world, which up to that point

⁴⁷ “Shamir warns Iraq would pay ‘terrible price,’” Washington Post, 30 October 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/10/30/shamir-warns-iraq-would-pay-terrible-price/5cfea21f-31d9-4f2c-a279-3b458c5f3216/>.

⁴⁸ Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962–68* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Dany Shoham, “Chemical and biological weapons in Egypt,” *Nonproliferation Review* 5, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736709808436720>.

⁴⁹ Permanent Representation of Iraq to the United Nations, “Letter addressed to the Secretary-General,” A/45/305, S/21345, 6 June 1990, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/92819https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/92819>.

⁵⁰ “UN Security Council resolution 687 calls for a nuclear-weapon-free zone and a zone free of all WMD,” 3 April 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/un-security-council-resolution-687-calls-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-and-zone-free-all?timeline=2>.

⁵¹ “President George H.W. Bush unveils his Middle East arms control initiative,” 29 May 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/president-george-hw-bush-unveils-his-middle-east-arms-control-initiative?timeline=3>.

⁵² “The Madrid Conference, 1991,” United States Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/madrid-conference>.



Group photo from a meeting of the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS) Operational Basket (Antalya, Turkey, 4-6 April 1995). Photograph courtesy of Michael Yaffe.

had refused to formally sit across the table from Israel outside of the UN framework, either individually (except Egypt, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979) or as a group. The Conference resulted in a direct bilateral negotiation track featuring three negotiation channels: Israel-Jordan, Israel-Palestine, and Israel-Syria.

This track was complemented by a multilateral track of Arab-Israeli negotiations that included five working groups: arms control and regional security, economic development, the environment, refugees, and water resources and management. An Egyptian interviewee commented that the creation of the multilateral track reflected an optimistic change of mindset among many Middle Eastern states, whereby the regional narrative started to shift from thinking about conflict, war, and violence to thinking of what the region's future would look like if peace came and possible cooperation. Between the Madrid Conference and the start of the Madrid Process' multilateral track, participation by Arab states expanded to include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Primarily at the insistence of Israel, the Palestinians were part of the Jordanian delegation.

The creation of ACRS: the roles of the United States and Egypt in shaping ACRS

Most Egyptian interviewees largely credited their own government for creating ACRS.⁵³ They asserted that the Madrid Conference sponsors initially did not plan to have a working group to cover arms control, but that ACRS was added by the United States as a compromise with Egypt alongside the Refugees Working Group as a key demand by the Palestinians. But many Arab interviewees still praised the Bush Sr. administration's central role in the Madrid Peace Process and getting Israel to engage with the Arab states meaningfully. An Egyptian interviewee believed that the United States was the key

⁵³ For the American perspective, see "Creating ACRS: A novel exercise in American leadership in a shifting regional and global order" in the American Narrative in this publication, and "1992-1995 the Arms Control and Regional Security working group (ACRS)," 1 December 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>.

player in any processes involving Israel, be it the bilateral peace treaty between Egypt and Israel or the bilateral and multilateral tracks that emerged from the Madrid Conference. He said Israel eventually joined the conference and the multilateral track under US pressure. A Palestinian interviewee confirmed the reluctance of Israel to join this working group, saying that Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was “dragged to the table kicking and screaming,” even after the United States and the Arab states had accepted all of his conditions.

While the Russia served as the co-chair of the working group, an Egyptian interviewee asserted that they were a junior partner and only present at the insistence of the United States rather than because anyone else present felt that they had influence. Nonetheless, he believed Russia played an important symbolic and constructive role in the process.

Another Egyptian interviewee noted that in the working group, his government wanted to discuss disarmament and not regional security. He further elaborated that Egypt did not want to discuss arms control per se – which he viewed as a Western concept – but that as a “medium-sized” state in the international system, it was forced to accept this framework. Another Egyptian explained that Israel only wanted to deal with the regional security dimension of ACRS and not arms control, which it viewed as a “slippery slope” to bring it into the NPT.⁵⁴

Arab motivations to participate in ACRS

Arab interviewees listed four main motivations for their governments to participate in ACRS. First, they sought to start a process featuring Israel that would lead to Israeli nuclear disarmament. It was understood that such a process would be challenging to begin and take a long time to make progress, but it was hoped that once it was in place, it would contribute to lowering tensions in the Middle East and promote peace in the region. Most Arab states supported this objective and largely followed Egypt’s lead. Second, some Arab states joined ACRS to support the peace negotiations in the bilateral track, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Third, some Arab states hoped that the working group would lead to a regional process like the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) between Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Finally, some Arab states participated in ACRS in line with their desire to be part of the US-led process to create a new order in the Middle East because they felt it conveyed prestige to them. As the process advanced, the opportunity to benefit from taking responsibility for confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) in the operational basket of the working group was also seen as attractive for many of the Arab states involved.

Intra-Arab relations in ACRS

Arab interviewees believed the Arab delegations in ACRS could be divided into two main groups. The first group was composed of Egypt and Jordan, which played a leading role in the working group but approached it with different objectives and tactics, occasionally clashing: Egypt focused more on disarmament, while Jordan focused more on regional security. Egyptian interviewees believed that in ACRS, it was mainly Egypt, Jordan, and Israel that possessed the political will and technical capacity to advance the process. A Jordanian interviewee agreed that many Arab delegations, besides Egypt and Jordan, had minimal representation in ACRS and lacked the technical capacity to actively participate in the negotiations. Most Egyptian interviewees believed that their government articulated and led the approach of the Arab states on arms control. One Egyptian interviewee maintained that Egypt was leading the Arab participation there due to its pioneering role in the Middle East. It had thorough

⁵⁴ For the Israeli perspective, see “The Israeli motivation to participate in ACRS” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

experience in talks with Israel, being the first Arab state to make peace with it and was uniquely positioned to assess what could come after peace, as this was a topic that Egyptian diplomats were eager to engage in due to its perceived importance. He contrasted this attitude with that of many other Arab states that saw this topic as “mundane”. The interviewee further believed that these issues were, to his surprise, followed closely by the Egyptian public, who sometimes exerted pressure on their politicians to act. The interviewee explained that the government’s delegation to ACRS always included representatives from the MFA, Ministry of Defence, and intelligence. The MFA led the delegation, and Egyptian delegates had good inter-agency cooperation, as each had a complementary set of expertise.

The second group of Arab states in ACRS comprised of countries that were initially not politically or technically prepared to enter serious discussions with Israel and followed the lead of Egypt. These included Arab states from the Gulf and Maghreb sub-regions. Some Arab interviewees believed this second group of Arab states wanted to be helpful across the multilateral track working groups and were prepared to discuss issues like economic cooperation, the environment, and water resources and management with Israel. However, they were ambivalent about normalization of relations with Israel, partly because they lacked the political will to endure pressure from their publics and the anti-Israel Arab states on this sensitive topic. Relatedly, this group placed a premium on the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and wanted to ensure the multilateral track did not go too far ahead of them due to concerns about normalization with Israel. According to a Jordanian interviewee, the Palestinians attended only to prove they had the right to sit at the table. By the end of ACRS, the political will of these Arab states to interact with Israel had improved, notwithstanding the external pressures that led to the end of the working group, and they had a better technical capacity to participate in part thanks to capacity building processes undertaken by extra-regional states on issues like arms control, disarmament, and CBSMs.

There was a third group of Arab states that did not participate in ACRS. These states were generally characterized as staunchly anti-Israel, had strained relations with the United States, and in most cases, had a history or expressed interest in WMD proliferation. Iraq and Libya were not invited to the working group, while Lebanon and Syria chose not to participate. According to a former senior Jordanian official, the exclusion of Iran, Iraq, and Libya was based on the perception by the organizers, particularly the United States, that they were the leading proliferators in the Middle East. However, he questioned the strength of the logic behind excluding the potentially most dangerous proliferators in the region from ACRS, while an Egyptian interviewee observed that inviting them may have been deemed a “bridge too far”.⁵⁵

The bifurcated logic of ACRS: The conceptual and operational baskets

The decision to split ACRS into “conceptual” and “operational” baskets was made at the fourth plenary session of ACRS in Moscow in November 1993.⁵⁶ The division aimed to differentiate between negotiations on political and technical-military issues. Some Arab interviewees recalled that the initiative for this division partly came from Arab participants, such as Jordan. According to a Jordanian interviewee, the conceptual basket focused on managing or defusing existing and persistent conflicts and issues in the Middle East. On the other hand, the operational basket aimed to utilise tools like CSBMs to anticipate and prevent conflicts or their recurrence. Military officials predominantly handled

⁵⁵ Hanna Notte and Chen Zak Kane, *An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 6 December 2022, 11.

⁵⁶ “Fourth Plenary Session of ACRS is held in Moscow,” 2 November 1993, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>.

the latter basket, engaging in a dialogue on the technical-military issues with the goal of reaching CSBMs that promoted transparency and openness among the participating states in the region.

In comparison to the politically complex and seemingly intractable issues in the conceptual basket, the Jordanian interviewee believed that the operational basket, which he viewed as “very important” (a sentiment less shared by Egyptian interviewees), provided an opportunity for military-to-military cooperation based on clear and well-established procedures that were mutually understood by the militaries of participating Middle Eastern states. These procedures encompassed areas such as communication, information exchange, military visits, notification of military exercises, and arms procurement, among other aspects. He also believed that the activities of this basket offered a valuable socializing experience for the militaries before engaging in the conceptual basket.

The political dynamics between Arab states and Israel in ACRS and reasons for its failure

During the first ACRS plenary in Washington, DC, in May 1992 Egypt presented a “comprehensive action plan” outlining its goals for the working group. The plan began with unilateral and non-binding CBMs, progressed to reciprocal and binding CBMs, and ultimately aimed at Israeli nuclear disarmament.⁵⁷ According to an Egyptian interviewee, Israel’s primary interest in the multilateral track was to achieve normalization and hold meetings with Arab states giving the appearance of progress in ACRS. The interviewee stated that Israel was displeased when Egypt presented a plan that reflected Egypt’s serious objectives and ideas for the process.

Egyptian interviewees believed their side made compromises throughout the process, including focusing on CSBMs in the operational basket, which was a priority for Israel.⁵⁸ Egypt initially agreed to focus on non-nuclear issues, such as conventional weapons and other WMD, as well as CSBMs, before gradually addressing nuclear disarmament. However, Israel did not reciprocate and rejected substantial discussions on disarmament or its mention in the draft Declaration of Principles (DoP).⁵⁹ As a result, progress was not made on disarmament or conventional arms control. According to these Egyptian interviewees, the issue extended beyond nuclear matters, representing a fundamental difference in approach: Israel did not want to engage in disarmament discussions for any category of weapons. The Egyptian government raised concerns about Israeli nuclear capabilities with the United States and Russia, the co-chairs of the working group. The two co-chairs conveyed that positive steps taken by the Arab states would help persuade Israel to join the NPT and move toward nuclear disarmament. An Egyptian interviewee believed that the United States and Russia applied a double standard against the Arab states, particularly Egypt, which put them in a difficult position. Israel appeared to receive preferential treatment by having a nuclear weapons exception made for it, while everyone else was expected to accept it.

Arab interviewees identified two major reasons for the failure of ACRS, depending on their priorities within the working group or the peace process in the bilateral tracks. Those who prioritised the nuclear issue blamed Israel’s refusal to engage in discussions on nuclear disarmament, while those who prioritised the peace process attributed the failure to the breakdown of the bilateral track, especially the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

⁵⁷ Notte and Kane, *An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*, 31.

⁵⁸ For the Israeli perspective, see “The complex relations with Egypt at ACRS” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

⁵⁹ “Sixth and final plenary session of ACRS is held in Tunis,” 13–15 December 1994, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs>, and Fahmy, *Egypt’s Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, 119–120.

First, most Egyptian interviewees primarily attributed the failure of ACRS to Israel's refusal to discuss its nuclear capabilities and its resistance to including a reference to the NPT in the draft Final Declaration. These interviewees believed that while there was progress on CSBMs in the operational basket, there was no agreement on nuclear issues in the conceptual basket. They felt that focusing on CSBMs without addressing nuclear disarmament was futile. They perceived Israel's lack of seriousness in negotiating on nuclear issues as a result of its view of the working group as a potential "slippery slope" towards disarmament, which they considered detrimental to Israel's security. Egypt and Jordan, on the other hand, were committed to ACRS and believed that all topics should be open for discussion, while Israel prioritised normalization and economic ties with Arab states. An Egyptian interviewee believed that the United States viewed the working group as a "sweetener" for the Arab states' agreement to peace and normalization with Israel. Since progress on nuclear disarmament was lacking, Egypt decided to halt progress in other working groups in the multilateral track that were important to Israel.⁶⁰

Egyptian interviewees expressed frustration with the compromises they made during ACRS, including focusing on non-nuclear issues, such as conventional weapons and other WMD, and CSBMs, which were a priority for Israel before gradually addressing nuclear disarmament. However, Israel did not reciprocate and rejected substantial discussions on nuclear disarmament or its inclusion in the Declaration of Principles.

Second, most non-Egyptian interviewees attributed the failure of ACRS to the disconnect between the bilateral and multilateral tracks. Many Arab states considered the multilateral track secondary to the bilateral ones, which aimed at facilitating peace agreements. As the bilateral negotiations between Israel and Lebanon, Palestinians, and Syria stalled, the other multilateral working groups, excluding ACRS and Refugees, progressed too rapidly and were perceived as tools for Israeli normalization. This was seen as a reward to Israel, facilitating it to sit at the same table with Arab delegations. However, the lack of progress in the bilateral talks with the Palestinians placed Arab delegations in a delicate position with their publics. In the absence of progress in the peace process, discussions on CSBMs in ACRS although interesting, did not serve the larger objective and were difficult to conceive, especially considering that some Arab states in the working group did not recognize Israel's existence. Consequently, Arab participation in ACRS diminished following the collapse of the bilateral track. The linkage between the two tracks was considered important but challenging to achieve. Progress in the multilateral track depended on advancements in the bilateral talks, yet it was often unclear how progress in one track should be reflected in the other.

Third, some non-Egyptian interviewees said a reason for the failure of ACRS was the perceived lack of inclusiveness in the decision-making process for smaller Arab states. A Kuwaiti interviewee noted insufficient coordination among the Arab states in the working group and the limited influence of smaller states in shaping the process. It remained uncertain whether this lack of coordination was intentional or a result of the "rushed manner" in which the work was conducted.

⁶⁰ Fahmy, *Egypt's Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, 120; Notte and Kane, *An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*, 49, and for the Israeli perspective, see "The end of ACRS: Reasons for its collapse" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

Overall, many Arab interviewees had positive impressions of their personal experiences or their government's involvement in ACRS. A senior Jordanian official considered one of the biggest successes of ACRS to be its provision of a platform for discussing regional issues that had not existed before. However, most Egyptian interviewees focused on the reasons for ACRS's failure and had little to say about the process's success or positive aspects. Some of them expressed the view that the ACRS model would not be suitable for future arms control or regional security processes, as the Middle East has become a more complex region, with different fault lines.

THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE AND THE MIDDLE EAST RESOLUTION

With the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference approaching, Egypt (leading the Arab states) pivoted from ACRS to an international forum as a path to promote Israel's disarmament in and establish a ME WMD-FZ. An Egyptian interviewee said his country "played a bad hand well" at the 1995 conference to secure the Middle East Resolution.⁶¹ He said that the Egyptian MFA strongly opposed the indefinite extension of the NPT due to the asymmetrical obligations between NNWS in the NPT and nuclear weapon possessors (like Israel) outside it and the lack of progress on disarmament by the five NPT NWS. However, South Africa's break with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to support the extension meant that Egypt had no realistic path to block it. US pressure on President Mubarak also tied the MFAs hands. Egypt leveraged the US desire for an extension by consensus to push the NPT depository states to accept the Middle East Resolution.

An Egyptian interviewee recalled that the Arab Group, led by Egypt and with the NAM's support, submitted a draft resolution at the conference calling for "a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East". He said that the first draft of the resolution named all regional states that did not yet possess full-scope safeguards. Egypt intended to highlight global concern regards Israel's nuclear weapons and underline the rejection of indefinite Israeli nuclear exceptionalism.⁶²

Those Arab states that had not yet signed or ratified the NPT – Djibouti, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates – objected to being mentioned, and the US objected to singling out Israel. Egypt refused to sponsor the resolution without referencing Israel but proposed the depositories should instead sponsor the resolution. The Egyptian interviewee felt that a resolution backed by the depositories would hold more weight for Egypt than a "politicized" Arab resolution, as it would obligate the depositories to take the issue seriously. Additionally, the United States wanted to expand the scope of the resolution to include not just nuclear weapons but also chemical and biological weapons and their delivery systems. Egypt had already included these elements in the Zone concept through the Mubarak Initiative, so it did not object to this change.⁶³

Following consultations with some delegations, the depositories agreed to include this resolution as the only one in the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. The three Arab states that had not signed or ratified the NPT agreed to do so at Egypt's behest, and all did by 1997 to strengthen the Arab position. This left Israel as the only Middle Eastern state outside the NPT.⁶⁴

⁶¹ "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?timeline=15>.

⁶² Fahmy, *Egypt's Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition*, 122.

⁶³ Michal Onderco and Leopoldo Nuti, *Extending the NPT? A Critical Oral History of the 1995 Review and Extension Conference* (Washington: Wilson Center, 2018), 130–131, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/extending-npt-critical-oral-history-1995-review-and-extension-conference>.

⁶⁴ Susan B. Welsh, "Delegate perspectives on the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference," *Nonproliferation Review* 2, no. 3, (Spring/Summer 1995): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736709508436589>.



United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres delivers his remarks to the Summit of the League of Arab States (Tunis, Tunisia, 31 March 2019). League of Arab States / Video screen-grab.

THE LAS ME WMDFZ DRAFT TREATY, 1996-2002

Some Arab interviewees saw the 2000 and 2005 NPT Review Conferences as lost opportunities for progress on the ME WMDFZ and to implement the 1995 Middle East Resolution, noting the failure to reach a consensus at the 2005 conference.⁶⁵ Others disagreed and noted several examples of developments on the Zone and the implementation of the 1995 Resolution. First, some Arab interviewees highlighted the significance of the language on Israel in the Final Document of the 2000 conference, which was the product of US–Egypt coordination before and during the conference. Since the United States wanted Egyptian support for a resolution on Iraq, Egypt demanded in exchange that Israel’s nuclear status be mentioned in the final document. Despite initial hesitation, the United States eventually agreed to a text that called on Israel by name to work towards the universality of the NPT under Article I.⁶⁶ Egypt disagreed on naming Iraq, despite proliferation concerns about its WMD programs, since Israel actually possessed nuclear weapons. Cairo eventually agreed to language reaffirming the importance of Iraq’s full and continuous cooperation with the IAEA and compliance with its obligations.⁶⁷

Another example mentioned by a former senior Arab official was the creation of a LAS Expert Committee on the Elaboration of a Draft Treaty on Nuclear Weapons and Other WMD Free Zone in the Middle East in the mid-1990s (possibly 1996) to write a draft ME WMDFZ treaty as a basis for future

⁶⁵ John Simpson and Jenny Nielsen, “The 2005 NPT Review Conference,” *Nonproliferation Review* 12, no. 2 (2005): 286–287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700500378901>.

⁶⁶ “2000 NPT RevCon final document notes that Israel is the only state in the Middle East outside the treaty,” 1 May 2000, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2000s/2000-npt-revcon-final-document-notes-israel-only-state-middle-east-outside-treaty?timeline=0>.

⁶⁷ “2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” Final Document, NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), 2000, 17–18, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt2000/final-documents>.

Zone negotiations with non-Arab states of the Middle East.⁶⁸ According to an Arab official, this body convened biannually for five days per year between 1996 and 2007. While the major Arab states were always present at these meetings, others were less involved based on their level of political interest and technical capacity. Delegations included diplomats, military, legal, and technical officials from Arab states. One early question was whether there should be one treaty for all WMD or a treaty that focused on declaratory statements and procedural issues and was supplemented by protocols for each WMD. The Arab states decided on the latter option.

According to some Arab interviewees, as part of the treaty writing exercise, Committee members reviewed the NPT, CWC, and BWC and used their provisions as a basis to begin talks among themselves and amend them for the draft treaty. There was a division of labour on the work of the treaty, with, for example, Kuwait being responsible for the draft protocol on chemical weapons. The Kuwaiti delegate posed questions to the representatives to start the discussion and to elicit states' positions. Another issue was whether the ME WMD-FZ should be implemented by the existing technical international organizations of the three WMD-related treaties or by a regional organization. The Arab representatives opted for a regional organization due to the unique circumstances of the Middle East, including the need to lower tensions and build trust through CBMs and mutual inspections to unlock close cooperation to implement a Zone treaty successfully.

A former senior Arab official recalled that because the future treaty would also have to accommodate the positions of Iran and Israel, some LAS officials on the Committee played the role of "the devil's advocate" during discussions on issues that they felt might be the subject of contention between the Arab and non-Arab states in the region. One such issue was whether decision-making in an ME WMD-FZ treaty should be by majority or consensus, with the latter being the Iranian and Israeli preferences.

Arab interviewees who spoke on this subject characterized the exercise as an organized and logical effort and serious attempt to find common Arab positions on key Zone issues and to write a legally and technically defensible treaty by Arab states that served as a model for a Zone, including in its technical and legal aspects. The Committee did not focus on the "minute details" of the treaty drafting process but rather on broad aspects to reduce the workload of the Committee. It completed the main draft treaty and nearly completed protocols for nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

Not all issues were fully resolved in the draft treaty. Several reasons were mentioned for this by Arab interviewees. One reason was that the Committee members felt that due to the highly political nature of some of the issues, they had to be addressed at the ministerial level. Another reason was that they also believed that once the major outstanding issues of a treaty were resolved among the Arab states, the minute details could be discussed with Iran and Israel if and when the international and regional environment became more conducive for creating a Zone. Lastly, one interviewee reflected that states of the region largely lacked the capacity to implement such a treaty, and thus a significant capacity-building effort backed by the international community would be required.

A former senior Arab official, reflecting on this experience, said that while he viewed this treaty drafting process as an exercise in futility, he did feel that it helped Arab states to better understand the issues involved in drafting such a treaty. For example, he felt that conducting this activity in Arabic was helpful due to familiarising an Arabic-speaking audience with WMD-related regimes and

⁶⁸ League of Arab States, "League of Arab States ME WMD-FZ Draft Treaty," 29 August 1995, <https://www.unidir.org/node/6611>.



Delegates and Member States' Representatives at the morning session of the IAEA 64th General Conference (Vienna, Austria, 25 September 2020). Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA.

diplomatic and technical terminology. According to this interviewee, the work of the Committee was ultimately stopped in 2006 or 2007 due to the frustration of Arab states with the international disarmament environment and failure to progress toward the establishment of an ME WMDfz, including the continued unwillingness or inability of the NPT depository state to implement the 1995 Middle East Resolution; the failure to reach a consensus on a final document at the 2005 NPT Review Conference; and the breaking of consensus on the "Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East" by Israel and the United States at the 2006 IAEA General Conference for the first time since 1991, after Oman, on behalf of the Arab Group, requested that the "Israeli nuclear capabilities and threat" (INC) Resolution be included in the conference agenda. The INC Resolution was not put to a vote at the conference after Canada moved to adjourn the debate, thereby taking no action on the draft resolution, a move backed by a majority of states.⁶⁹

Another reason cited by the former senior Arab official for why the activities of the Committee froze was an announcement made by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2006 that, in the view of many Arab states, acknowledged Israel's possession of nuclear weapons.⁷⁰ The interviewee felt that behind the Arab decision to introduce the INC was a sense of frustration that while Arab states continued to take on more WMD non-proliferation and disarmament obligations, Israel made no moves in this direction but continued to behave as the victim. He agreed that by signing up to all these treaties, the Arab states had surrendered their leverage over Israel. Nuclear possessors outside the NPT, like India, Israel, and Pakistan, were seen as being rewarded by the international community while flouting its norms. Arab states thus decided not to sign on to any new treaties until the commitments already made by the international community, including the 1995 Middle East Resolution, were implemented. The interviewee said that the LAS Council of Foreign Ministers issued a resolution explicitly stating they had stopped work on the ME WMDfz draft treaty and that their governments would not adhere

⁶⁹ "Consensus on the "Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East," 22 September 2006, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2000s/consensus-application-iaea-safeguards-middle-east-resolution-broken-iaea?timeline=9>.

⁷⁰ Greg Myer, "In a slip, Israel's Leader seems to confirm its Nuclear Arsenal," The New York Times, 12 December 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/12/world/middleeast/12Olmert.html>.

to the Additional Protocol (AP) or take on additional obligations as long as this status-quo remained in place.⁷¹

However, the Arab solidarity of not adhering to the AP or other means of maintaining leverage vis-à-vis Israel did not hold firm. The interviewee felt that this was because of the diverging interests of some Arab states and the enormous pressure on them by extra-regional states to break ranks by signing the AP or nuclear power.⁷²

The former senior Arab official said that not long after the 2018 General Assembly decision to launch the ME WMD/FZ Conference, some Arab states wanted to consider the LAS ME WMD/FZ draft treaty for the work of the new process. Others, however, felt that it was outdated because the politics around the Zone had shifted considerably since 2006 and faced the complication that they would require the consensus of Iran (and Israel if it were to join) to introduce it to the process.

THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

The dawn of the presidency of Barack Obama was greeted with optimism by Arab states, who saw many positive signals, such as the Cairo speech,⁷³ indicating a shift in US foreign policy towards the Middle East. Arab states also had high expectations about progress on the ME WMD/FZ issue at the 2010 NPT Review Conference because of the disarmament agenda introduced by President Obama in his Prague Speech.⁷⁴ In this context, the Arab Group undertook a preparatory process to unify the positions of the Arab states and get international support for their resolutions and the Zone at the IAEA General Conference, the General Assembly, and the 2010 conference. Egyptian interviewees recalled that Cairo intended to create a process on the Zone at the 2010 conference.⁷⁵ It made a concerted effort on several fronts, including at the 2009 IAEA General Conference where INC was adopted for the first time, as part of broader LAS efforts to address Israeli nuclear capabilities. An Emirati interviewee said that the Arab Group firmly held that if the Middle East issue was not addressed at the Review Conference it would not agree to the draft Final Document.

During the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Rose Gottemoeller, US Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, contacted the LAS General Secretariat on behalf of the NWS to organize a meeting with the Arab Group. According to a former senior Arab official, there was a daily meeting between the two sides for the entire month of the conference. Both sides were serious about finding a compromise and came to the negotiations prepared with proposals and draft texts that went

⁷¹ "League of Arab States, 5 6876 رقم قرار الدولي، مخاطر التسليح الإسرائيلي على الأمن القومي العربي والسلام الدولي، فبراير 2008، 74، <http://www.lasportal.org/ar/councils/lascouncil/Documents/129%20%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%20%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A.pdf>

⁷² U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, "U.S.-UAE Agreement for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation (123 Agreement)," 15 January 2009, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/01/114262.htm> <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/01/114262.htm>

⁷³ "Full text of Obama's speech in Cairo," NBC News.

⁷⁴ "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 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>; Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague As Delivered," 5 April 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-pressoffice/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>, and "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 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>

⁷⁵ "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 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>

back and forth. The final compromise between the two sides featured three main elements. First, the UN Secretary-General and the co-sponsors of the 1995 Middle East Resolution would convene a conference in 2012 in consultation with Middle Eastern states, to be attended by all states of the region, on the establishment of a ME WMDFFZ. Second, the Secretary-General and co-conveners would appoint a Facilitator and a host country for the conference. Finally, the 2012 Conference would take as its terms of reference the 1995 Resolution.⁷⁶ Arab interviewees viewed the 2010 conference as a success and a high-water mark lasting from 2008 to 2011 due to LAS member states' unified position on the Zone issue in international forums.

During the 2010 NPT Review Conference, daily meetings occurred between the Arab states and the NWS. Both sides demonstrated a genuine commitment to finding a compromise and actively engaged in negotiations. They came prepared with proposals and draft texts, engaging in back-and-forth exchanges throughout the conference.

Most Egyptian interviewees saw their government as playing a pivotal role in their capacity as a leading Arab state, NAM chair, and New Agenda Coalition (NAC) coordinator.⁷⁷ Egypt hosted several delegations at the Egyptian mission in New York. They kept the Arab Group abreast of developments and held meetings with the NPT depositories and NWS. They did not consult Israel directly, but an interviewee believed that the latter followed the issue closely, and the United States represented Israel's positions during the negotiations on the language of the Final Document.

According to the former senior Arab official, Israel was furious over the decision due to their absence from the decision-making process since it was not an NPT Member State and felt it would be disadvantaged. Yet, the interviewee said that there was a feeling among Arab states that if Israel had truly been upset by the content of the Final Document, they would have objected to it while it was being negotiated. He claimed US delegation sought to stymie Egyptian efforts and lobbied to remove the reference to Israel by name in the 2010 Action Plan.⁷⁸ When this tactic failed, the United States pressured Libran N. Cabactulan, the conference president, who proposed to bring for approval the draft Final Document by consensus, and the US delegation could have opposed it and explained why they broke the consensus to the international community. The interviewee concluded that United States agreed to hold a ME WMDFFZ conference in 2012 with the Secretary-General as a co-convener. An Egyptian interviewee felt that US President Obama was an important factor in this success because he was unwilling to give the Israelis "unnecessary support".

THE ROAD TO THE INDEFINITE POSTPONEMENT OF THE HELSINKI CONFERENCE, 2010-2012

At the end of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, US officials made two significant statements critical of the naming of Israel that were seen by some of their Arab counterparts as potentially walking back the commitments the United States had made on the Middle East in the Final Document. The first was by Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Ellen Tauscher, who stated in the US closing statement at the conclusion of the 2010 conference that:

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Permanent Representation of Egypt to the United Nations, "Letter addressed to the Secretary-General," A/63/968, S/2009/516, 24 July 2009, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/667247>, and Permanent Representation of Egypt to the United Nations, "Statement on behalf of the New Agenda Coalition," 4 May 2010, https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2010/statements/4May_New%20Agenda%20Coalition.pdf.

⁷⁸ United Nations, 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Final Document, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I)*, 2010, [https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=NPT%2FCONF.2010%2F50%2520\(VOL.I\)&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False](https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=NPT%2FCONF.2010%2F50%2520(VOL.I)&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False).

“the Parties should know that we take seriously our commitments with respect to this regional conference...our ability to do so has been seriously jeopardized because the final document singles out Israel in the Middle East section, a fact that the United States deeply regrets.”⁷⁹

The second US statement was by General James Jones, the US National Security Advisor, made on 28 May 2010 along the same line stating:

“The United States will not permit a conference or actions that could jeopardize Israel’s national security...the United States will ensure that a conference will only take place if and when all countries feel confident that they can attend. Because of the gratuitous way that Israel has been singled out, the prospect for a conference in 2012 that involves all key states in the region is now in doubt.”⁸⁰

Despite these two statements, the Arab states were eager to begin work to hold a ME WMD/FZ conference in 2012. The LAS Council of Foreign Ministers established a Senior Officials Committee, which was mandated to handle preparations for the conference and to report back to the LAS Ministerial Council. The latter adopted the proposal in a resolution on 16 September 2010.⁸¹ According to a former senior Arab official, this was an important step because it centralized decision-making by Arab states in the hands of a single authorized body (each state was asked to nominate a qualified senior official) that would produce a common position and strategy toward the 2012 Conference. This strategy was also aimed at preventing Arab officials in capitals or ambassadors in centres of multilateral diplomacy from interfering with the process. Other preparatory steps included creating expert working groups on technical issues of the Zone, harmonizing views on its details, and preparing policy papers.

A second discouraging sign for Arab states for progress on holding the 2012 Conference was the delay in appointing a facilitator and a host country for the conference, resulting in mounting frustration on their part. Amr Moussa, the LAS Secretary-General, wrote to Ban Ki-Moon, the United Nations Secretary-General, on 2 January 2011 to request information on the progress of this search.⁸² This was followed by a LAS Council of Foreign Ministers resolution adopted at an extraordinary session of this body on 15 March 2011 that expressed the ministers’ “deep concern” on the lack of momentum in this search since the adoption of the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference over nine months prior.⁸³ The LAS Secretary-General communicated this resolution to the UN Secretary General and the depositories in a second letter dated 21 June 2011.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ “US Objects to the ‘Singling Out’ of Israel in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT RevCon and Warns it Jeopardizes the Prospects of Convening a ME WMD/FZ Conference,” 28 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/us-objects-singling-out-israel-final-document-2010-npt-revcon-and-warns-it?timeline=1>.

⁸⁰ For the American perspective, see “The 2010 NPT Review Conference” in the American Narrative in this publication, and “US National Security Advisor Issues a Statement about the Middle East Section of 2010 NPT RevCon Final Document,” 28 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010/us-national-security-advisor-issues-statement-about-middle-east-section-2010-npt?timeline=1>.

⁸¹ “LAS Res. 7243 On The ‘Threat Of The Israeli Nuclear Weapons And Other Weapons Of Mass Destruction On International Peace And Arab National Security,” 29 June 2010, <https://unidir.org/node/5680>.

⁸² Secretary General of the League of Arab States, “Letter to The UNSG Regarding Progress of Implementation of The 2010 NPT RevCon Action Plan On The Middle East,” 2 January 2011, <https://unidir.org/node/6917>.

⁸³ “LAS Res. 7362 On ‘Realizing A Unified Arab Position On Freeing The Middle East Of Nuclear Weapons,’” 15 May 2011, <https://unidir.org/node/5713>.

⁸⁴ Secretary General of the League of Arab States, “Letter to The UNSG Urging The Acceleration Of Efforts To Appoint A Facilitator,” 21 June 2011, <https://unidir.org/node/6919>, and Secretary General of the League of Arab States, “Letter From The LAS-SG To Russian Foreign Minister Regarding The Slow Progress Of Implementation After The 2010 NPT RevCon,” 21 June 2011, <https://unidir.org/node/6918>.

This sense of frustration for Arab states was compounded by how the search for a Facilitator and host country for the 2012 ME WMDFZ Conference was conducted. According to the former senior Arab official, the search was initially supposed to be conducted by the UN Secretary General. But this task was instead taken over by the depositories who did not revert to the Arab parties regarding progress on holding the conference until nearly 16 months after the 2010 conference.⁸⁵ Within the SOC, this was seen as a sign of disinterest on the part of the depositories to fulfil their obligations.

Around this time, the Israeli Nuclear Capabilities (INC) draft resolution was initially put on the agenda for the 2011 IAEA General Conference by the Arab side but was later withdrawn as a show of goodwill to Israel and because submitting this resolution might have been used by Israel as a pretext to delay the 2012 Conference.⁸⁶

Finally, in September 2011, the depositories presented the Arab side with two candidates for Facilitator: A Dutchman and a Finn. According to the former senior Arab official, these candidates did not have an international reputation in multilateral disarmament or Middle East affairs. This interviewee felt that the depositories could have found better-known and more knowledgeable candidates. The fact that they chose relatively unknown figures demonstrated to him the lack of seriousness of the depositories about the process, and he felt that choosing between the two candidates was tantamount to “flipping a coin”, as they were relatively indistinguishable.

The Arab side chose the Finnish candidate. The UN Secretary-General and the co-conveners announced Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, the deputy foreign minister of Finland, as the Facilitator and Finland as the host country of the 2012 Helsinki Conference on 14 October 2011. Over 17 months had elapsed since the end of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The Arab side was dismayed by how the co-conveners managed the process and wondered if they could organize a conference in the 14 months left to the end of 2012. The LAS Council of Foreign Ministers was briefed on developments and adopted resolution 7466,⁸⁷ which stressed the commitment of all Arab states to participate in the 2012 Conference. At this point, Iran and Israel had not yet committed to participate in the conference.⁸⁸ Iran confirmed its participation by the end of the year.

Wael Al Assad, head of the Department of Disarmament & Arms Control in the LAS General Secretariat, who coordinated the LAS participation in the conference, received Hannu Kyröläinen, the Facilitator’s deputy, in Cairo on 23 May 2012. The latter shared a non-paper that included the Facilitator’s proposal on substantive and procedural issues related to the conference. The SOC received the Facilitator in the LAS Headquarters on 12 September 2012. They shared with him the Arab response and comments on the non-paper given by his deputy. Ambassador Laajava responded on 18 September with a modified non-paper. The Arab side perceived this proposal as ignoring all the major proposals and comments they had previously made.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ For the American perspective, see “The road to indefinite postponement of the 2012 Helsinki Conference” in the American Narrative in this publication.

⁸⁶ For the Israeli perspective, see “The consultations before the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2010–2013” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

⁸⁷ LAS Council of Foreign Affairs Ministers, Resolution 7466, “Threat of the Israeli nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction on international peace and Arab national security,” 10 February 2012, 66–68, <https://unidir.org/node/5687>.

⁸⁸ 2015 NPT Review Conference, “Implementation of the 1995 resolution and 2010 outcome on the Middle East, Working paper submitted by Bahrain on behalf of the Arab Group,” NPT/CONF.2015/WP33, 22 April 2015, 4, https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/NPT_CONF.2015_WP33_E.pdf, and Wael Al Assad, “Arab States Are Ready for the Conference,” in A Special Roundtable Report, ed. Bilal Y. Saab (Monterey, CA: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, July 2012) 4 https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/151308/120731_mideast_wmdfz_conf_roundtable.pdf.

⁸⁹ Wael Al Assad, “The Informal Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD Free-Zone: History, Mistakes, and Lessons Learned,” in The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View From the Negotiating Table (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), <https://www.unidir.org/publication/wael-al-assad-consultations-glion-and-geneva-view-negotiating-table>, and League of Arab States, “Note Verbal,” 5/5992, 13 November 2013, 4–5, <https://unidir.org/node/6101>.

In its 12th session on 11 November 2012, the SOC met again with the Facilitator. The latter disclosed that the conference might be postponed to the first half of 2013. He proposed “extended consultations” with the Middle Eastern states to lay the groundwork for the 2012 Conference. The SOC responded by expressing its dissatisfaction with Ambassador Laajava for ignoring their requirements in his non-paper and emphasized four elements that they viewed as non-negotiable.

The first was the need for the United Nations to remain involved in issuing invitations for the 2012 Helsinki Conference, to chair the conference sessions, and to serve as its secretariat. The second element was the requirement for full compliance with the terms of reference of the conference: The 1995 Middle East Resolution and mandate from the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The third was the need to have agreed outcomes of the conference with specific commitments, a time frame, and follow-up actions to carry out these outcomes. The final element was the inclusion of Palestine as a participating state and not an observer.

Two weeks later, the United States indefinitely postponed the Conference, stating that it “cannot be convened because of present conditions in the Middle East and the fact that states in the region have not reached an agreement on acceptable conditions for a conference”.⁹⁰ The other co-conveners, the Facilitator, and Secretary-General each issued their own separate statements.⁹¹

The Arab side reacted negatively to US decision to indefinitely postpone the 2012 Conference for several reasons. The decision did not set a new date for the Conference, it was taken without any consultation with them, and it did not include mentioning the real reason for the postponement: Israel refusal to attend. An Arab official recalled that in their postponement statements, the co-conveners justified not imposing preconditions on Israel by stating that it was not an NPT Member State and did not participate in the consensus on the Final Document of the 2010 conference. The interviewee found this reasoning unconvincing as Israel’s absence did not prevent the depositories from agreeing to the language in the 1995 Middle East Resolution, even though compliance could not be enforced. This discrepancy led him to believe that the depositories had deceived the Arab states. The Arab official further believed that although the United States took the lead in postponing the 2012 Conference, the other co-conveners followed suite, despite the US Government’s claim that the decision had not been coordinated by the three beforehand. This interviewee recalled that a bitter lesson for the Arab side from this episode was that the existence of a mandated conference on paper, as decided by the NPT Review Conference, does not guarantee that it would actually take place. In response to the postponement, the LAS Council of Foreign Ministers adopted a resolution describing it as a breach of obligations. The resolution also asked the SOC to work with the Facilitator on setting a new date as soon as possible.⁹²

Despite the postponement, the Arab side achieved several milestones: All Arab states agreed to participate in the conference, and the SOC was created to coordinate a unified Arab position. The SOC actively prepared positions, and generated ideas, formed working groups, and provided the Facilitator with responses, feedback, and suggesting ideas on his non-paper. The LAS Secretary-General and the

⁹⁰ “2012 ME WMDfz conference is postponed,” 23 November 2012, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010/2012-me-wmdfz-conference-postponed?timeline=12>, and “2013–2014 the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva,” 21 October 2013–19 April 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² League of Arab States, “Res. 7580 On ‘The United Arab Position Regarding The Postponement Of The 2012 Conference On Establishing A Zone Free Of Nuclear Weapons And All Other Weapons Of Mass Destruction In The Middle East,’” 13 January 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5698>.

SOC met nine times with the Facilitator to discuss progress and exchange ideas. The main Arab requirements, at this stage, centred on two main elements: A UN umbrella for the 2012 Conference and to respect as the terms of reference the 1995 Resolution and 2010 mandate.

The Facilitator responded negatively to the SOC's requests without offering convincing explanations. The perceived marginalization of the United Nations in the process also caused consternation among the Arab side, particularly considering that the Review Conference had assigned the principal responsibility of convening the conference to the UN Secretary-General alongside the co-conveners, and the Facilitator himself had been appointed by them.

The Arab parties strongly disagreed with the US decision to indefinitely postpone the 2012 Helsinki Conference for several reasons: The decision did not include a new date for the conference; it was made without prior consultation with them; and it failed to acknowledge the real reason for the postponement, which was Israel's refusal to attend.

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS AT GLION AND GENEVA, 2013-2014

Before the informal consultations

With the deadline to hold the 2012 Helsinki Conference missed, the co-conveners, the Facilitator, and the Middle Eastern states searched for a path to hold the conference. During a meeting between the Facilitator and the LAS Secretary-General on 12 March 2013, the former briefed the latter that while all Arab states had announced their intention to participate in the conference, Iran and Israel had yet to do so. In the meeting, Amr Moussa stressed to Ambassador Laajava the importance of participation by all the states in the region; warned that all parties concerned must shoulder their responsibilities; and noted that the topic of the conference is an ME WMDFZ, and it should not be broadened to include other regional security-related topics. He stressed the importance of avoiding highly controversial topics that could easily sabotage the conference's primary focus. A former senior Arab official claimed that the co-conveners and the Facilitator were unable to bring Israel on board and, although they may have sent a *pro forma* invitation letter to Iran, he felt they did not seriously engage it, possibly because this may have upset Israel and made it less likely to attend.

The Arab Group submitted a working paper to the 2013 NPT Preparatory Committee on 19 April 2013.⁹³ The paper laid out the group's position on the Facilitator's non-paper on the conference and the parameters they believed necessary to engage in the consultations proposed by him. The Egyptian delegation walked out of the Preparatory Committee meeting in Geneva to protest the failure to convene the 2012 Conference. This move was not coordinated with other Arab states.⁹⁴

On 3 August 2013, the Facilitator invited the LAS Secretary-General and the SOC Chairperson and Israel for a meeting with the co-conveners in Vienna on 16 August 2013 to discuss the planned consultations. A former senior Arab official said he believed the idea for the informal consultations to discuss convening the conference did not originate from the Facilitator but from the co-conveners or Israel. The Arab and Israeli representatives met in Vienna separately with the co-conveners and the Facilitator

⁹³ "Working Paper Submitted On Behalf Of The Arab Group 'Implementation Of The 1995 Resolution On The Middle East'", 19 April 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5659>.

⁹⁴ Stephanie Nebehay, "U.S. regrets Egypt walk-out at nuclear talks," 30 April 2013, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-nuclear-npt-egypt-idUKBRE93TOKZ20130430>.



Jaakko Laajava, the Facilitator for the 2012 Helsinki Conference on the ME WMDfZ, addresses the second session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the 2015 NPT Review Conference. (Geneva, Switzerland, 29 April 2013). Credit: Jean Marc Ferré / UN Photo.

on 16 August 2013 to discuss and coordinate the consultations. Ambassador Al Assad, the LAS representative, reiterated that the planned consultations should be under United Nations auspices. He also expressed surprise that Iran was not invited to the Vienna meetings since it would be an important member of any future ME WMDfZ.⁹⁵ The LAS representative advised the Arab states not to attend the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva.

During this meeting, the Facilitator and Ambassador Thomas Countryman, a US representative,⁹⁶ also met with Al Assad to express their concern that only Egypt and Jordan would participate in the consultations as they were the only two Arab states at the time to have a peace treaty and diplomatic relations with Israel. They impressed upon the LAS representative their desire to ensure the participation of as many Arab states as possible in the consultations. The LAS representative also preferred the Arab states to show up in full force. Indeed, 11 to 17 Arab states attended various meetings throughout the consultations.⁹⁷ All the major players were present, which broke the taboo of not sitting down to negotiate with Israel outside the United Nations (mainly as was still observed by Saudi Arabia and Syria) for the first time since ACRS. According to an Arab official, those who did not attend usually had a limited presence in the LAS or faced economic constraints that prevented them from assigning officials to the consultations. Yet even these states agreed to accept the decisions made by those that attended.

The former senior Arab official explained that despite their displeasure with the trajectory of events since the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and reservations with the proposed format of the consultations, the Arab side accepted to participate in them with the goal of setting the ME WMDfZ conference back on track. In his view, the Arab states were presented with a demand that they found unpalatable: An

⁹⁵ "Letter from LAS and the Senior Officials Committee (SOC) to Laajava Reiterating the Arab Criteria for the Consultations," 12 September 2013, <https://undir.org/node/6923>.

⁹⁶ Thomas Countryman, "To Helsinki, Via Glion: Personal Reflections," in *The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View From the Negotiating Table* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), <https://undir.org/publication/thomas-countryman-consultations-glion-and-geneva-view-negotiating-table>.

⁹⁷ "First Multilateral informal consultation on the ME WMDfZ conference is held in Glion, Switzerland," 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://undir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

informal process whose meetings would feature no formal agenda, no official papers or documents, no state name plates, and no UN umbrella. But they acquiesced since they did not want to be blamed for being uncooperative and sabotaging the conference.

The five sessions of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, October 2013 to June 2014

The informal consultations took place in Glion and Geneva, Switzerland, between 2013 and 2014, with the Swiss serving as the hosts and at least partly funding the first three meetings in Glion at the secluded Victoria Hotel overlooking Lake Geneva. The two last meetings took place in Geneva.

The first meeting of the informal consultation, Glion, 21-22 October 2013

The first meeting of the informal consultation took place in Glion on 21-22 October 2013. Eleven Arab states, the LAS (with Ambassador Al Assad serving as the LAS lead negotiator and a “facilitator” for the Arab states), Iran, and Israel participated in this meeting alongside the Facilitator, co-conveners, and UN Secretary General. The Iranian representative, a relatively junior official from the local mission, stated that he was there to observe the informal consultations and not to engage in them. This was the only meeting of the consultations that an Iranian representative attended. The discussions on the first day of the first Glion meeting were generally positive and cordial. The Russian side proposed including a session each day of the conference to discuss regional security and CBMs important for establishing the proposed Zone. The Arab side agreed to consider this idea and asked the proposal to be conveyed in writing. The idea was later added to the Arab non-paper to discuss measures to facilitate the establishment of the zone.⁹⁸

The discussion took a negative turn on the second day for the Arab side as Israel suggested a title for the conference that indicated a reference to regional security and CBMs. Jeremy Issacharoff, the Israeli representative, emphasized that since Israel is not an NPT member, it is not bound by the 2010 NPT Review Conference Final Document. He further said that Israel was only participating in the meeting to make its position clear and that it cannot discuss non-conventional arms in the absence of a discussion of regional security and conventional arms.⁹⁹ A Qatari interviewee saw Israel's unwillingness to meet under UN auspices and its attempts to include non-WMD issues in the consultations as signals that Israel was not serious about reaching an agreement.

The LAS, speaking on behalf of all the Arab states, emphasized the importance of the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the mandate from the Final Document of the 2010 conference as the terms of reference of the sought-after ME WMD FZ Conference. The LAS further explained that it had clarified its position on the agenda and modalities in the Arab non-paper and would like to receive feedback from the other participants. The LAS also hoped that the co-conveners would guarantee that the meeting remained within the terms of reference and the mandate given to them. Furthermore, from the Arab perspective, regional security was not included in the conference's terms of reference, and it was not possible substantively to include all the regional security issues of the Middle East in a single agenda or conference and expect it to be productive and successful. The quest for a ME WMD FZ was already a highly complicated endeavour.

Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian representative, supported the Arab position. He declared that adding a reference to regional security and CBMs would completely change the subject of the conference and

⁹⁸ LAS Senior Official Committee, “LAS Senior Officials Committee response to the Facilitator's November 2013 proposal in ‘Sandra's list,’” 15 December 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5708>.

⁹⁹ For the Israeli perspective, see “Israeli motivation to engage in the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.



Wael Al Assad participated in the 2013-2014 informal consultation in Glion and Geneva, representing the League of Arab States (LAS) (Geneva, Switzerland, 10 October 2019). Credit: UN Institute for Disarmament Research.

remove any sign that it was linked to the ME WMD/FZ. Ambassador Countryman, the US representative, for his part, backed the Israeli idea. He further declared that the role of the co-conveners was limited to implementing what the Middle Eastern parties agreed to, which was supported by the United Kingdom and the Facilitator.

The Arab side strongly disapproved of this interpretation of the co-conveners to the mandate and clarified that the role of the co-conveners was more about finding the middle ground between the regional parties and providing ideas and sometimes even solutions to problems they faced. The Arab side further believed among the most critical roles of the co-conveners was to ensure that the discussions remained within the confines of the terms of reference of the 1995 Resolution and 2010 mandate. It was unthinkable for the LAS to renegotiate all that had already been agreed upon under these terms of reference. The Arab side requested that the Facilitator provide a summary of the meeting, an agenda for the next meeting, and set a new date for the ME WMD/FZ conference. He and some of the co-conveners refused all these requests and abruptly ended the meeting but asked the participants to convene once more based on the request of some of the co-conveners.

The second meeting of the informal consultation, Glion, 25-26 November 2013

In response to the Facilitator's invitation letter to the second informal consultations in Glion on 25-26 November 2013, the SOC highlighted its disappointment regarding the "set up and parameters" of the meeting in Glion but decided to continue to "engage positively". The letter also asserted its sense that convening the consultations as "an open meeting without an agenda or clear terms of reference and mandate stipulated in 2010 by the NPT RevCon and the 1995 Resolution will lead to unfruitful discussions that go beyond the mandate". The SOC reiterated the need for the Facilitator to limit the consultation to a discussion of the Conference agenda and modalities.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ League of Arab States, "Letter to Facilitator regarding the second consultation," 13 November 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/6101>.

The second informal consultation meeting took place in Glion on 25-26 November 2013. Sixteen Arab states (alongside the LAS) and Israel participated. During this meeting, the Facilitator presented an informal paper entitled "Sandra's list" that contained a list of proposed substantive and organizational matters for the conference at the insistence of the Arab side that he should provide his ideas as written proposals.¹⁰¹ The Arab side interpreted the absence of the Facilitator's name on the paper – "Sandra" was his assistant – as a tactic by Ambassador Laajava to not commit himself to the elements in it. Ambassador Al Assad, the Arab coordinator, strongly objected to this approach, and some Arab participants rejected the paper. Ambassador Ulyanov at this point presented a non-paper on "Possible elements of the final document" for the conference. He stated that this was his personal contribution and not an official Russian proposal.¹⁰²

The Israeli side insisted that the conference should deal with regional security and CBMs, taking the discussion back to where they had begun in the first Glion meeting a month prior. Israel wanted to discuss its non-WMD security concerns, such as conventional weapons, short-range missiles, and terrorism. The LAS responded that, in this case, the Arab side would also like to discuss their security concerns, such as the occupation of Arab and Palestinian land and state terrorism by Israel, among other things. This gesture made it clear that discussing all of these topics under the "regional security" rubric would open a Pandora's Box and guarantee the conference's failure.

The Israeli side also insisted on removing from both the invitations to the conference and its agenda any reference to the NPT Review Conference or the United Nations. The Arab side reiterated its position that these meetings are based on the above-mentioned terms of reference. The United States and the Facilitator backed the Israeli position on the role of the United Nations.

The co-conveners held several meetings with the Arab side on the margins of the second Glion meeting. These meetings were mainly focused on convincing the Arab side that to keep Israel at the table, it should accommodate the Israeli perspective by including elements of regional security and CBMs in the conference despite the agreed mandate.

The third meeting of the informal consultation, Glion, 4–5 February 2014

The third informal consultation meeting took place in Glion on 4-5 February 2014. Once again, 16 Arab States (alongside the LAS) and Israel participated in this meeting. The Arab delegations were frustrated that, like the last meeting, it had no planned agenda, and the Facilitator did not summarize the previous discussions. Thus, there was extensive repetition of the same discussions, in which Israel reiterated its demands that the proposed conference focus on Middle East regional security issues and be convened outside the UN umbrella and the mandate of the 2010 NPT Review Conference mandate. The Arab side reiterated its red lines: That a new date be set for the Conference, under UN auspices, and under the mandate of the 2010 conference.

During this meeting, the Facilitator distributed a draft paper prepared by his office entitled "Organizational and procedural matter for the Conference". The Arab side announced that the SOC would study the paper. It also presented its position on "Sandra's List" in writing to the Facilitator after the SOC had studied the informal paper; their position on the list was discussed at the meeting.

¹⁰¹ "Sandra's List," Facilitator Non-paper at the 2nd Informal Consultation Meeting, 16 November 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5705>.

¹⁰² Russian Federation, "Russian Non-Paper on 'Possible Elements of the Final Document' of the ME WMDFZ Conference," 25–26 November 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5706>.

During this meeting, the co-conveners and the Facilitator also attempted to hold a separate side meeting with a limited number of Arab states (alongside the LAS) and Israel under the pretext of speeding up the process. Ambassador Al Assad, the LAS coordinator, conveyed that the Arab side was not sympathetic to this request after ambassadors Countryman and Laajava had asked him earlier to bring as many Arab states as possible to the consultations.

At the end of the meeting, the Facilitator read an announcement titled "Facilitator's guidelines on the timeframe", in which he proposed two conference-preparation meetings in Geneva to complete their work. He refused to distribute a written copy of the announcement and ended the meeting.

The fourth meeting of the informal consultation, Geneva, 14–15 May 2014

The fourth informal consultation meeting took place in Geneva on 14-15 May 2014. The Israeli delegation refused to enter the meeting building because there were United Nations guards and flags. Upon the Israeli refusal to enter the building, these UN symbols were removed. A former senior Arab official felt that if the Arab side had made a similar demand, it would not have been received by the co-conveners and the Facilitator in an equally charitable light. This interviewee further claimed that when this drama delayed the entry to the meeting of Ambassador Issacharoff, the Israeli representative, Ambassador Laajava would not tell the Arab side why he was late. When the Arab states discovered what had happened, they concluded that by removing the UN flags and guards, the Facilitator was acting outside of his UN mandate and criticized him.

The meeting began with Laajava proposing moving forward with three working groups: one to discuss the agenda, a second for the elements of the conference's outcome document, and a third for follow-up steps. Both the Arab states and Israel thanked the Facilitator for his proposal but rejected it mainly because their delegations were too small to participate in parallel working groups.

The Arab side requested that the meeting focus on developing the agenda for the conference. They also asked that Laajava introduce a rolling text based on the previous discussions and the papers already presented. Issacharoff and the Facilitator rejected the latter idea. The day was otherwise spent, according to the former senior Arab diplomat, rehashing the same discussions over the agenda, the mandate, and the terms of reference. The meeting closed at the end of the first day due to the inability of the Israeli representative to continue to participate for personal reasons.

The fifth meeting of the informal consultation, Geneva, 24-25 June 2014

The fifth and last informal consultation meeting took place in Geneva on 24-25 June 2014. Once again, 16 Arab States (alongside the LAS) and Israel participated. The LAS presented two amended Arab papers incorporating some of the ideas discussed.¹⁰³ The Israeli intervention asserted that Israel disagreed with the premise of the Arab position in the two papers but positively expressed that it was prepared to discuss and interact with the Arab side. The discussion between the Arab states and the co-conveners became heated later in the meeting over the perception of the Arab side that the co-conveners tried to rewrite the mandate, abandoning what was agreed at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The co-conveners saw no contradiction between the mandate and addressing regional security issues at the Conference, even seeing them as mutually reinforcing.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Al Assad, "The Informal Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD Free-Zone: History, Mistakes, and Lessons Learned," 9.

¹⁰⁴ For the Russian perspective, see "The informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, 2013–2014" in the Russian Narrative in this publication, and for the American perspective, see "The fifth meeting in Geneva, 24 June 2014" section in the American Narrative in this publication.

Ambassador Countryman proposed a breakfast meeting at the US Ambassador's residence between himself, Ambassador Al Assad, and Ambassador Issacharoff, which they accepted. During the meeting, Al Assad remarked to Issacharoff that Israel had thus far made clear what it rejected but not what it wanted and that the Arab side would view it very positively if Israel commented on the Arab paper and informed them which parts of the paper were acceptable, and which were not. The Israeli representative agreed with this approach and commented on the Arab paper the next day. He accepted some paragraphs and disagreed with others. This exchange led to a discussion over the Conference's title, the agenda, the role of international organizations, and the elements of a final document. The discussion was cordial and candid, but significant gaps remained between the two sides. The fifth meeting ended without setting a date for a sixth meeting.

At this juncture, John F. Kerry, the US Secretary of State, sent a letter to the LAS Secretary-General dated 29 August 2014 emphasizing the US commitment to the goal of a ME WMDFZ and that compromises were required to pave the way for a conference acceptable to all Middle Eastern states. He urged the LAS Secretary-General to appoint a negotiator, or a small negotiating team, on behalf of the Arab side to engage in the intensive talks needed for such a sensitive topic.¹⁰⁵

The Facilitator also wrote to the LAS Secretary-General on 15 September 2014 proposing further consultations, to the LAS coordinator to propose smaller group consultations, and followed up with the SOC Chairman on 2 November 2014. Ambassador Laajava again attempted to hold a drafting session in January and April 2014, but these were to be held under the same conditions as before, which the Arab states found unacceptable: No UN umbrella and no terms of reference from the 2010 conference mandate. The SOC informed the Facilitator that given the proximity of the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the Arab side would engage on the ME WMDFZ in that forum.¹⁰⁶

Reasons for the failure of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva

The course of events between the end of the 2010 NPT Review Conference in May 2010 to the end of the fifth meeting of the informal consultation in Geneva in June 2014 had sapped the Arab states of any optimism they had felt at the start of the process and replaced it with anger and frustration. Arab interviewees assigned three reasons for the failure to convene the ME WMDFZ conference mandated by the 2010 conference and the failure of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva. First, some Arab interviewees believed that Israel never had any serious intention to engage based on the 2010 conference mandate and instead sought to take it in a completely different direction to focus on regional security and CBMs. A subset of these interviewees felt that Israel, the co-conveners, and the Facilitator demanded one concession and compromise after another from the Arab states without ever demanding any from Israel.¹⁰⁷

Second, some Arab interviewees believed that Ambassador Laajava and the co-conveners deviated from their mandated role. On the Facilitator, a former senior Arab official commented that his attitude and actions contributed to the failure of the consultations, for example by rejecting the mandate from the 2010 conference, including the terms of reference and having the process under a UN umbrella, despite himself being appointed by the UN Secretary General. According to this interviewee, at one point during the consultations, the Arab side asked the co-conveners and the Facilitator for a definition of

¹⁰⁵ US Secretary of State, "Letter to the LAS Secretary-General on the 'Israeli nuclear capabilities' resolution," 29 August 2014, <https://unidir.org/node/6925>.

¹⁰⁶ League of Arab States, "LAS Letter to the Facilitator regarding the upcoming 2015 NPT RevCon," 7 April 2015, <https://unidir.org/node/6108>.

¹⁰⁷ For the Israeli perspective, see "Reasons for the collapse of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva and lessons learned" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

From the conclusion of the 2010 NPT Review Conference in May 2010 to the fifth meeting of the informal consultation in Geneva in June 2014, the optimism Arab states' had felt at the start of the process was replaced with anger and frustration.

the role of the latter, but none was forthcoming, except for the basic outline provided in the Final Document of the 2010 conference. He felt that it served the interests of some parties at the informal consultations that Laajava did not strictly adhere to his role and did not have a clear path to success. The Facilitator was also seen to reject all of the requests from the Arab side while supporting all the Israeli demands. This interviewee characterized Laajava as curt and impatient with the Arab representatives, having a high sense of his position, being easily offended,

never mingling with them during the consultations, and lacking the required cultural knowledge to optimally interact with Middle Eastern officials. He also noted that at the time, the Facilitator participated in many international and regional events that were not directly related to his work, which some Arab states viewed as objectionable.

Some Arab interviewees felt that the co-conveners supported the Israeli request to change the main objective of the conference from the ME WMDFZ to the controversial topic of regional security. These interviewees also felt that the co-conveners rejected the papers and ideas they presented and postponed the 2012 Conference without consulting them. An Arab official questioned whether these states ever intended to implement the obligations they had agreed to under either the 1995 Middle East Resolution or the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

The Arab official pointed to a structural and long-term issue he thought important to highlight about the consultations. He observed that the co-conveners and Laajava believed that Iran would eventually agree to join a Zone conference if the Arab states and Israel could agree on its main parameters. He emphasized that there could be no Zone without Iran and expecting that the country to attend without first consulting the Iranian government underlined for him how badly managed the process was by the co-conveners and Facilitator. A former senior Arab official had a diverging view. He believed that Iran's absence from the informal consultations was due to a lack of bandwidth or desire to engage while the negotiations on the JCPOA were taking place. He thus saw the decision by Arab states to advance without Iran as giving the process a "kiss of life", and Iran could have joined later if the sides reached an agreement.

THE 2015 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

Context of the 2015 NPT Review Conference

Arab interviewees who spoke about the 2015 NPT Review Conference described the fraught atmosphere there, including between the United States and Russia, with the two delegations exchanging mutual and public accusations regarding the crisis in the arms control negotiations.¹⁰⁸ The intensified demands by the NNWS to ban nuclear weapons due to their humanitarian impact injected a new sense of urgency to nuclear disarmament. The Conference heard concrete proposals, including the NAM plan of action for the total elimination of all nuclear arms, the calls by the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) to negotiate a treaty banning nuclear arms, and the step-by-step approach

¹⁰⁸ The US delegation accused Russia of violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the Budapest Memorandum. The Russian delegation denounced the US and NATO countries by pursuing the "nuclear sharing policy" which undermines the NPT.

without a timeline proposed by the Non-Proliferation Disarmament Initiative (NPDI). A former senior Arab official explained that these high expectations by the NNWS fuelled radical positions by some of them that led to an impasse on the issue of nuclear disarmament.

Conditions at 2010 versus 2015 NPT Review Conferences

The Arab states did not find the hoped-for breakthrough on the ME WMDFZ at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, which failed to reach a consensus on a Final Document due to the Zone issue. Arab interviewees generally viewed the conditions prevailing in 2010 versus 2015 at the Review Conference as a major factor contributing to the failure to reach a consensus on a Final Document. A former senior Arab official believed that while the NPT depository states felt that they needed a Final Document at the 2010 NPT Review Conference to preserve the nuclear non-proliferation regime and its benefits, they did not have the same sense of urgency in 2015, and did not make serious efforts to reach consensus. An Arab official agreed that the conditions for consensus on a Final Document were better in 2010 than in 2015. He considered the outcome of the 2015 conference as a step back from the 2010 conference.

Despite this different atmosphere, an Emirati interviewee believed that the Arab Group (led by Egypt) entered the 2015 NPT Review Conference expecting the same Obama administration that they had encountered in 2010, which had agreed to a favourable Final Document. He explained that they did not necessarily believe the United States would be more flexible on their ME WMDFZ-related positions in 2015. Instead, the Arab side perhaps entered the negotiations misunderstanding the general disarmament environment.

The Arab position and negotiations on the Middle East section of the draft Final Document

The Arab Group headed by Egypt was very active with a draft text circulated to all regional Groups, Taous Ferroukhi, the President of the Review Conference, as well as the Co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution. Hisham Badr, the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, declared in a statement to Main Committee II of the 2015 NPT Review Conference that, with the failure to hold the 2012 Conference and the end of the 2015 review cycle, the mandate of the Facilitator to organize an ME WMDFZ conference from the 2010 Action Plan had elapsed.

Ambassador Badr instead called for a “fresh approach” to convening a conference. He noted that both the Arab Group and NAM had presented working papers providing a simplified approach that laid out practical and detailed steps for implementing the 1995 Middle East Resolution. The 10-point proposal in the working papers featured at least two notable elements. First, the responsibility for convening a Zone conference was placed with the UN Secretary-General, and the depositories noticeably lacked the role they had as co-conveners in the 2010 mandate. This was intended to prevent the depositories from having a what the Arab states saw as a “veto” power over the process, which they believe had contributed to the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Conference. Second, the conference would establish two working groups. Working Group I would deal with the scope, geographic demarcation of the Zone, prohibitions, and interim measures. Working Group II would deal with verification measures and implementation mechanisms.

According to a former senior Arab official, Mikhail Ulyanov, the head of the Russian delegation, presented a draft on the ME WMDFZ issue to Ambassador Ferroukhi, who in turn encouraged him to meet the Arab Group and the two other Co-sponsors. Rose Goetmuller, the head of the US delegation, for her part deplored the lack of coordination by Russia. In the meantime, the back and forth between



The 2015 NPT Review Conference, presided over by Taous Feroukhi of Algeria, was held at the United Nations in New York from 27 April to 22 May 2015. (New York, United States of America, 27 April 2015). Credit: Cia Pak / Scannews.

delegations led to the merger of the Arab Group and Russian drafts, and the NAM endorsed the unified text. This interviewee recalled that the US delegation did not welcome the joint Arab-Russian draft and questioned the deadline of convening a conference not later than 1 March 2016 as well as the role entrusted to the UN Secretary-General to convene a Conference on the Middle East, which the United States saw as downgrading the role of the co-conveners.

The former senior Arab official explained that the intensive negotiations held on the last day of the 2015 conference, involving the Co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution, president of the Arab Group, president of the NAM, and representative of the UN Secretary General¹⁰⁹ to find an agreed language on the Middle East (the only missing part in the draft Final Document) were inconclusive. The meeting ended without any proposal to overcome the impasse. This interviewee recalled that with only five hours left before the closing session of the conference, no alternative language emerged to accommodate US concerns. With time running out, Ferroukhi drafted a text on the Middle East section based on discussions previously held in her office, in a good faith attempt to accommodate the concerns of all sides and circulated it as part of the draft Final Document to all delegations.

The former senior Arab official said that at this point, the Conference President submitted the draft Final Document to the States parties for consideration, guided by the fact that the overwhelming majority was ready to adopt it, among other factors. Despite the difficult and complex global context, a draft Final Document was produced on all three pillars of the Treaty.¹⁰⁹ No objections were received before the opening of the last plenary session of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. However, at the beginning of this meeting, the US delegation requested Ferroukhi to inform the other state parties that there was

¹⁰⁹ The Review process is made up of two parts: A backward-looking part (implementation of past commitments) and the forward-looking part (new measures for the next quinquennial cycle) on the three pillars of the Treaty, namely: disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy, as well as on the Middle East issue.

no consensus on the draft Final Document. When she announced the classic formula, “May I take it that the Conference is willing to adopt the draft final document of the 2015 RevCon,” it was formally opposed by the United States, backed by the United Kingdom and Canada, over the language on the Middle East, causing the failure of the conference.

Reasons for the failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference

Arab interviewees listed three main reasons why the 2015 NPT Review Conference failed. First, a former senior Arab official believed that the US objective was to preserve its Israeli ally from the double frustration of being confronted by a new ME WMDFZ conference around the same time as the conclusion of the JCPOA, which Israel opposed. Second, most Arab interviewees agreed that the general disarmament environment was worse in 2015 than in 2010, which may have contributed to less flexibility by the United States and Russia at the 2015 conference, alongside less of a need by them to reach a consensus that year. These interviewees diverged on the role of the depositories for the failure. A former senior Arab official felt that Russia may have been in a less accommodating mood towards the United States. This interviewee believed that Ambassador Ulyanov pushed the Middle East issue firmly that year because he blamed the United States for the failure of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva. However, another former senior Arab official believed that the Russian delegation showed perseverance in its willingness to achieve a fruitful outcome to the Zone issue. In contrast, this interviewee felt that the United States was less eager to reach a consensus that year, and that the Obama Administration prioritized the Iran nuclear negotiations that culminated in the JCPOA in July 2015.

Third, some Arab interviewees assigned the reason for the failure to the NWS; they believed that broader US-Russia disagreements over other issues, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine the prior year, spilled over into the Middle East issue. Fourth, some Arab interviewees also believed that to mask the strong reservations of the NWS on the disarmament language in the draft final document and prevent reaching a consensus, the NWS used the ME WMDFZ issue as a scapegoat for the failure of the conference. Fifth, some interviewees believed the Arab Group proposal crossed the United States’ (and, by extension, Israel’s) red lines. An Arab official felt that the Arab Group misinterpreted the disarmament environment, pushing the United States “too far” regarding the Arab demands. However, the environment at the 2015 NPT Review Conference proved more difficult than expected, and the Middle East issue was no longer a US priority in his view.

Relatedly, this subset of Arab interviewees saw the tough position taken by Egypt at the 2015 conference and the insufficient attention given to the other Arab Group and NAM states positions as a contributing reason for the failure to reach a consensus. Not all the Arab states were involved in the consultations at the 2015 conference. Egypt updated the Arab Group in the final days of the conference that a deal was struck, which subsequently did not happen. Besides being unfair, the limitation of the consultations to a small group of states was seen as a contributor to the failure in 2015. There was a sense that Egypt could have done better by consulting with more delegations. One reason mentioned for the tough Egyptian position in the 2015 conference was the emphasis on the disarmament issue by Sameh Shoukry, the Egyptian foreign minister.

THE 2018 GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISION ON THE ME WMDFZ CONFERENCE **Intra-Arab deliberations and the path to the 2018 General Assembly decision on the ME WMDFZ**

The push for what became the 2018 UN General Assembly decision entrusting the UN Secretary General to convene an annual conference aimed at “elaborating a legally binding treaty establishing a

Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction¹¹⁰ was a function of Arab frustration with several successive failures, including the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Conference the failure to reach consensus on a final document at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, and the failure of the INC Resolution to pass at the IAEA General Conference that year by one of the broadest vote margins yet.¹¹¹ It also reflected Arab frustration over the failure of the NPT depository states (above all, the United States and the United Kingdom) to work toward establishing an ME WMDFZ, more than 20 years after the 1995 Middle East Resolution had ensured the indefinite extension of the NPT by consensus. This frustration led the Arab states to review their collective position. The idea for what became the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference was based on a proposal by Egypt, expanded on by other Arab states, and discussed in the LAS to shift away discussion on the Middle East issue from the NPT Review Conference to the General Assembly.

Rationales behind the decision of Arab states to propose a new ME WMDFZ conference

Several rationales informed the intra-Arab debate on how to promote a ME WMDFZ conference through the General Assembly according to Arab interviewees. The first rationale was related to Arab perceptions of WMD as a security issue in the Middle East that has yet to be addressed. The double standard towards Israel, and the lack of parity in treaty obligations in the Middle East between Israel and the rest of the region, was seen to have created a dangerous security dynamic where Israel is emboldened to use unilateral military action at home and abroad despite many Arab states signing peace treaties or normalizing relations with it. They saw this dynamic as preventing Israel and Arab states with which it had good ties from fully capitalizing on opportunities.

Some Arab interviewees indicated a second rationale was to identify a forum where the Arab states can promote progress on the Zone, capitalise on the nearly universal support for the Zone, and overcome obstruction by Israel or one or more of the depositories (mainly the United States). Arab states had previously tried international (NPT) and regional (ACRS) avenues but with very limited progress. The United States was seen to have also blocked progress on the Zone in these forums to shield Israel. In particular, the 2018 US working paper to the NPT Preparatory Committee outraged the Arab states because the United States asserted that the NPT was not the proper forum nor was that year the right time to pursue the Zone, undermining what they see as an integral pillar of the indefinite extension.¹¹² Pursuing the Zone through a General Assembly-mandated conference thus created a framework for implementing the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the mandate to hold a Zone conference in the 2010 Action Plan. At the same time, it also ensured that holding the conference could not be “vetoed” – by any state within or outside the region.

Some Arab interviewees mentioned that their governments believed creating this implementation framework for the ME WMDFZ outside the NPT would have two benefits. It will allow the Review Conference cycle to overcome the perennial challenge of failing to reach a consensus final document on the Middle East issue. It was also hoped that this change would help prevent the Zone issue (and Arab states by extension) from being scapegoated for the Review Conference’s failure to reach a consensus and ease tensions between the Arab states and the United States on this issue.

¹¹⁰ UN General Assembly Resolution 73/28 on the “Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East,” 11 December 2018, <https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/2018.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Jasmine Auda and Tomisha Bino, “The Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the IAEA General Conference: Is There a ‘Grand Strategy’ behind the IAEA Track?,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5, no. 1 (June, 2022): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2079328>.

¹¹² NPT PrepCom, “Establishing regional conditions conducive to a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems,” Working Paper by the United States, NPT/CONF.2020/PC.II/WP33, 19 April 2018, <https://unidir.org/node/5662>.

Another perceived benefit of moving the ME WMDFZ process from the NPT to the General Assembly according to an Arab interviewee was the broader mandate to cover all WMD. Given the Zone concept also covers chemical weapons, biological weapons, and their means of delivery, it fits better in a dedicated forum mandated by the General Assembly rather than the NPT, which covers only nuclear weapons. Arab interviewees mentioned that a mandate through the General Assembly also allows the Arab states to address Israel's complaint that it is not a party to the NPT and is not bound by decisions made in its absence. This is a forum where all Middle Eastern states, even those that do not recognize one another, can negotiate. Arab interviewees were adamant that the General Assembly-mandated forum was not meant to attack Israel but to explore a way forward. Given the membership of all Middle Eastern states in this body, some felt it could serve as both an international and regional forum. Finally, bringing the Zone process to the General Assembly was viewed as a means to facilitate funding for the conference by UN Member States through the Fifth Committee, which is responsible for approving the spending of the United Nations.

The push for the 2018 UN General Assembly decision entrusting the UN Secretary-General to convene an annual conference aimed at elaborating a legally binding treaty for the establishment of the ME WMDFZ was a function of Arab frustration with successive failures, including the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Helsinki Conference and the failure to reach consensus on a final document at the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

The possible risks of holding an ME WMDFZ conference through the General Assembly

Arab interviewees who spoke on the subject mentioned that their governments understood that moving the ME WMDFZ issue to the General Assembly also posed some risks. First, if Israel feels besieged by all sides in international forums like the NPT, IAEA and now the General Assembly, then they might feel compelled to participate in the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference, but this participation would not come from a genuine desire to negotiate in good faith. An Arab official recalled that the Arab group weighed these risks of the General Assembly and understood at the time that Israel was highly unlikely to participate.

Second, some Arab interviewees were concerned that pursuing the Zone at the General Assembly would decrease pressure on the NPT on this issue by giving the appearance of "closing the old door [at the NPT] when opening the new door". They felt pressure must be maintained in both forums and a clear link kept between them. Moreover, they felt that positive developments at a Zone conference should be reflected in the NPT, perhaps even having it acknowledged in the final document of the Tenth NPT Review Conference as part of implementing the 1995 Middle East resolution and the 2010 Action Plan. Language was thus added to the statement of the last LAS ministerial meeting before the first session of the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference, calling on the Conference to authorize the UN Secretary-General to submit a report to the next Review Conference requesting its support for the Conference until it reaches its goals.¹¹³ Indeed, the 10th NPT Review Conference draft Final Document, although not adopted due to a Russian veto, acknowledged the two sessions of the

¹¹³ "League of Arab States Ministerial Council adopts SOC action plan for the implementation of 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," 7 March 2018, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/league-arab-states-ministerial-council-adopts-soc-action-plan-implementation-1995?timeline=28>.



Jeanne Mrad, Chargée d’Affaires, ad interim and Deputy Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations, Presided over the 3rd Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (New York, United States of America, 14-18 November 2022). Credit: Manuel Elías / UN Photo.

ME WMDFZ Conference that had taken place by then: “The Conference acknowledges developments at the first two sessions of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction convened in November 2019 and November 2021 at the United Nations in New York.” Egyptian interviewees said discussing the ME WMDFZ through a decision at the United Nations did not mean replacing the 1995 Resolution; it was the same Zone, just “discussed in a different forum”. For them, it remains integral to the NPT indefinite extension package. If any pillar is substantively undermined, it affects the entire extension, with these interviewees believing that their government can raise this issue and question the extension at any time in the future.

Consultations on the path to the 2018 General Assembly decision

There are differing accounts on the extent to which non-Arab states were consulted before the Arab Group submission of the draft decision at the General Assembly in April 2018. One Arab official recalled that many Arab states were convinced that Iran needed to be included in shaping the General Assembly draft decision at an early stage. But GCC states disagreed, with their position shaped by their tensions with Iran. The Arab Group thus put forward a draft decision at the 2018 General Assembly that was mainly a product of intra-Arab deliberations.¹¹⁴ Another Egyptian interviewee noted that this created problems later for implementing the 2018 General Assembly decision because Iran criticized the Arab Group for not involving them earlier, given that they were the originators of the ME NWFZ proposal in 1974. Iran felt that the Arab states could not simply expect them to attend a conference organized according to their own parameters. Ultimately, many consultations in New York were required before Iran agreed to attend the Conference’s first session in November 2019.¹¹⁵ Another Egyptian

¹¹⁴ “UN General Assembly draft decision on convening a ME WMDFZ is put before the First Committee,” 11 October 2018, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/un-general-assembly-draft-decision-convening-me-wmdfz-put-first-committee?timeline=31>.

¹¹⁵ Tomisha Bino, “A Middle Eastern WMD-Free Zone: Are We Any Closer Now?,” Arms Control Today 50, no. 7 (September 2020), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-09/features/middle-eastern-wmd-free-zone-we-any-closer-now>.

interviewee, however, claimed that while some states saw the lack of consultations as a tactic by Egypt to deny non-Arab states time to deliberate or garner opposition to the Arab Group draft decision, this was not the case. The reason for the lack of consultations was simply that there was insufficient time ahead of the General Assembly: The Arab states ran out of time due to how long it took to coordinate among themselves.

On the other hand, some other Arab interviewees claimed that there were consultations with Iran, Israel, the NWS, and other states before the Arab Group draft decision was advanced at the 2018 General Assembly. Israel and the United States were initially open to the idea. But later, they raised objections in different forums and warned there would be consequences if it moved forward. US–Egypt talks on this issue reached a deadlock, and after the Arab Group submitted the draft decision at the 2018 General Assembly, the United States and Israel broke the long-held consensus since 1980¹¹⁶ on the ME NWFZ Resolution at the General Assembly in retaliation for the adoption of the conference decision. An Egyptian interviewee asserted that this decision to break consensus demonstrated that the United States was not an impartial actor when it came to this issue.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY-MANDATED ME WMD FZ CONFERENCE, 2019-2022

The first to third sessions of the Conference

Ahead of the first session of the General Assembly-mandated ME WMD FZ Conference, the UN Secretary-General informed the Arab states that it was not the responsibility of the United Nations to appoint the President of the conference. The Arab states agreed with this assessment, and the LAS Council of Foreign Ministers appointed Jordan as the first session's president. Jordan was considered to have the diplomatic bandwidth and technical capability to take on this responsibility – which could set the tone for subsequent sessions – and had good ties with the LAS, Iran, and Israel. Another decision adopted by the first Conference was that the conference's presidency would rotate alphabetically among Middle Eastern states annually, starting with Jordan.¹¹⁷ A less openly discussed but important motivation was to avoid having Iran or Israel, two states of the region with adversarial relations with one another and some Arab states, holding the conference's presidency while the process was still in its infancy to allow it to gain momentum.

Some Arab interviewees said their governments defined success at the first session of the ME WMD FZ Conference, held on 18–22 November 2019, based on at least three criteria.¹¹⁸ First, they considered holding the conference a success after addressing reservations by Iran over the rules of procedures and scope. The fact that attending Middle Eastern states agreed on an agenda, programme of work, intercessional meetings, and a second session was considered an achievement.

Second, they hoped to create a process that would produce long-term results. It could become a dedicated forum to discuss the ME WMD FZ creatively. Some interviewees said their governments hoped that there would eventually be serious negotiations and ideas. Thus, while they were under

¹¹⁶ "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>, and "Consensus on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East' resolution at the UN General Assembly is broken," 1 November 2018, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/consensus-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region-middle-east-resolution-un?timeline=32>.

¹¹⁷ "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, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/first-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=33>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

no illusions that the process could fail, they saw this as the closest Middle Eastern states have come to a substantive Zone process and hoped to build momentum towards a treaty. Third, Arab states considered holding a civil and balanced discussion a success. The conference has not engaged in what they saw as excessive Israel bashing, leaving the door open for it to join.¹¹⁹

Some Arab interviewees believed that the intercessional meetings that took place between the first and second sessions of the Conference provided an opportunity to better understand the issues at hand, like the three kinds of WMD to be covered (that is, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons) and verification and that experts from the region and beyond need to go into more specifics in and between future sessions of the conference.¹²⁰

The second session was delayed due to the Covid 19 pandemic and was held between 29 November and 3 December 2021. The session was held under the presidency of Kuwait. An Egyptian interviewee said that for the second session of the ME WMDfZ Conference, Egypt sought to focus more on the details of a ME WMDfZ treaty. It submitted a Working Paper to the Conference outlining its position on various Zone related details.¹²¹ Egypt was interested in what could be gleaned from international instruments like the NPT, CWC, BWC, and NWFZs. Yet, some states wanted to avoid the experiences of other international treaties like the TPNW, producing a treaty that was then “put on the shelf”. The conference report of the second session included, in paragraph 51, a list of topics that required further deliberation. These were membership in WMD-related treaties, conditions of entry into force of the treaty, verification mechanism for biological weapons, other verification measures and the optional Additional Protocol, unilateral coercive measures, a secretariat, and the depository of the treaty.¹²² During the 2nd session, participating states also decided to establish a Working Committee with a mandate to continue deliberations on issues related to the mandate of the Conference based on the outcomes of each session.

The third session was held between 14 November and 18 November 2022 and was held under the presidency of Lebanon. The session concluded with the adoption of a report that covered the thematic debate and the four agreed topics, which were: core obligations, issues identified in paragraph 1 of the second session, glossary of terminologies, and other related issues.

Challenges for Israeli participation

Some Arab interviewees who spoke at the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDfZ Conference highlighted the dual challenges faced by the Arab states in advancing this process, in which they needed to show progress to build and maintain momentum but could not proceed too far on substantive matters, lest this excludes the future participation by Israel. An Emirati interviewee felt that maintaining this balance was also essential to ensure that the Conference process is considered competent and reliable in generating positive outcomes contributing to regional security. He felt this

¹¹⁹ “Political Declaration Adopted at the First Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 18–22 November 2019, <https://undir.org/node/5668>.

¹²⁰ Informal Workshop on Good Practices and Lessons Learnt with Respect to Existing Nuclear-Weapons Free Zones, 7–9 July 2020, <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/me-nwmdfz-workshop-july2020/>, and Second Informal Workshop on Good Practices and Lessons Learnt with respect to Existing Nuclear-Weapons Free Zones, 23–25 February 2021, <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/me-nwmdfz-workshop-feb2021/>.

¹²¹ “Working Paper by Egypt on the Establishment of a Middle East zone free of Nuclear Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 14 July 2021, <https://undir.org/node/6582>.

¹²² United Nations General Assembly, “Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction on the work of its second session,” A/CONF.236/2021/4, 3 December 2021, 7, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FCONF.236%2F2021%2F4&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>.

signalling would be initially more important than the texts and drafts produced.

Some Arab interviewees said that their governments were confident that Israel would join the process at a later stage, once the process gained momentum.¹²³ However, the question of the conditions under which Israel could be induced to join in the future usually elicited no response or analogies with other processes, such as the Treaty of Tlatelolco,¹²⁴ with reference to Argentina and Brazil joining the treaty at a later stage. A GCC interviewee in Autumn 2019, ahead of the Conference's first session, said that the Arab states expected Israel to join the process in terms of its preparation and implementation. But the interviewee was cognizant of the risk that the Conference would be held "just for the sake of holding it" and that, absent participation by Israel, it might not succeed. Due to the absence of Israel (and, to a lesser extent, the United States), he believed that the first few sessions of the Conference would abstain from serious negotiations on some of the most challenging issues not to preclude future participation and agreement by Israel.

Some Arab interviewees who participated at the UN General Assembly-mandated ME WMD FZ Conference highlighted the dual challenges faced by Arab states in advancing this process. They recognized the need to demonstrate progress to build and sustain momentum but are cautious about proceeding too far on substantive matters, as this might discourage future participation by Israel.

Iranian participation

According to some Arab interviewees their government saw Iran as a partner for establishing a ME WMD FZ. Some also noted that if Iran abandoned its participation in the Conference and Israel did not join, this situation would significantly hinder progress towards achieving a Zone. However, according to a subset of these interviewees, the Arab states (especially Egypt) could seize the divide between Iran and Israel as an opportunity to be a broker and mediate a solution between them. According to one Egyptian interviewee, Iran and Israel have opposite positions on the scope of a Zone. Iran wants WMD prohibitions in line with international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament treaties.¹²⁵ Israel wants regional security. The middle ground is unclear.

The scope of the treaty

Arab states differed on the scope of a prospective ME WMD FZ treaty, primarily on whether and how it should address regional security and means of delivery. Some Arab interviewees held that broadening the agenda beyond WMD to regional security issues would make the General Assembly-mandated ME WMD FZ Conference process more complex and a treaty less attainable. For example, most Algerian, Egyptian, and Iraqi interviewees were adamant that regional security issues should not be dealt with in the scope of the Conference.

However, other interviewees expressed varying degrees of flexibility on how these issues, for example as they pertained directly to the Zone itself, could be addressed in this framework, such as non-state actors. A GCC interviewee recalled that the idea to introduce regional security issues outside

¹²³ For the Israeli perspective, see "The general assembly-mandated ME WMD FZ Conference" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

¹²⁴ OPENAL, "Treaty for the prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean," Inf.11/2018, 5 June 2018, <https://www.opanal.org/en/text-of-the-treaty-of-tlatelolco/>.

¹²⁵ For the Iranian perspective, "The United Nations General Assembly-mandated ME WMD FZ Conference" in the Iranian Narrative in this publication.

of the WMD agenda faced pushback from some Arab states and Iran ahead of the first session of the Conference in 2019. On the other hand, this interviewee argued that broadening the agenda to include some regional security issues in this process would not only create greater incentives for some Arab states to be more active in the process but could also help induce Israel to join. The alternative, he cautioned, would be adhering to the “classical” path that the Arab states had pursued for the last few decades (including pressuring Israel through numerous international resolutions), which would not produce the necessary progress or results if history is a guide.

The GCC interviewee also noted that Egypt did not want to “pollute” early discussions in the Conference process with contentious issues like means of delivery, which drew resistance from Iran and Syria. Yet, he noted that delivery systems are mentioned in the 1995 Middle East Resolution, which is considered the terms of reference for the process based on the 2018 General Assembly decision. The interviewee emphasized that addressing means of delivery, particularly regarding ballistic missiles, which could be used to deliver WMD payloads, could make the Conference process more attractive to states currently within and outside the process. He suggested that issues like the production, proliferation to other state and non-state actors, range(s), and testing of ballistic missiles are regional security issues related to the ME WMDFZ that could be addressed in the Conference agenda, beginning with modest measures like CBMs before moving to more ambitious ones (perhaps drawing inspiration from the International Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, also known as the Hague Code of Conduct).¹²⁶

Egyptian interviewees maintained that while their government is more concerned about ballistic missiles today than in the 1990s, incorporating this issue into the Zone negotiations is hard because Israel is fixated on it to the exclusion of nuclear weapons. But a small subset of these interviewees also said that when their government first put delivery systems in the Zone, the focus was on ballistic missiles. However, given recent conflicts have also prominently featured cruise missiles and a growing technological gap favouring Israel, Egypt might not be satisfied to continue to focus on ballistic missiles alone. Yet, Egypt wants to ensure the success of the first sessions by avoiding strong opposition by those states of the region that oppose including means of delivery in the scope.

¹²⁶ UNGA, “International Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation,” A/57/724, 6 February 2003, <https://www.hcoc.at/what-is-hcoc/text-of-the-hcoc.html>.

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.