

# NARRATIVES OF THE MIDDLE EAST WMD-FREE ZONE

## DRIVERS, THEMES, AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

By Farzan Sabet



MIDDLE EAST WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION FREE ZONE SERIES



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**UNIDIR**  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

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

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# THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE

## INTRODUCTION

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

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 explores US security perceptions in the Middle East. Section 2 examines the drivers and themes of US positions regarding the ME WMDFZ. Section 3 provides an American perspective on Zone-related historical processes.

Based on the views of American interviewees, the United States supports the goal of establishing a ME WMDFZ. This aligns with its policy of preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East and supporting Middle Eastern states' objective of reaching such a Zone. However, the US government's pursuit of a Zone has been influenced by at least two factors.

First, the United States does not consider the creation of a ME WMDFZ as a panacea for the WMD-related challenges of the Middle East, including the Iranian nuclear programme.

Second, it maintains that the establishment of a Zone must be based on "arrangements freely arrived at" by the states of the region. In the past, the United States has shown a degree of willingness to pressure Israel to engage with Zone-related processes such as the 1992-1995 Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process and the 2013-2014 informal consultations in Glion and Geneva following the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). According to some interviewees, these examples illustrate that the United States is willing to exert pressure on Israel on matters that the former views as vital to its national security. Regarding the ME WMDFZ, this means that the United States will pressure Israel to participate in Zone-related processes but within the parameters that the Zone can only be established through a process that Israel voluntarily chooses to engage in, resulting in a treaty with provisions that Israel has negotiated.

## 1. US INTERESTS IN AND SECURITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, the United States has been a key extra-regional player in the Middle East. Its involvement in the region is driven by several national interests according to American interviewees. First, the US aims to protect the free flow of crude oil, natural gas and

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



*Strategically engaged in the Middle East since 1945, the United States deploys its maritime capabilities to secure the flow of oil, gas, and petrochemicals through the Strait of Hormuz. Credit: Andrew Waters / US Navy photo.*

petrochemicals through the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial route that accounts for 21 per cent of global liquid petroleum transportation.<sup>2</sup>

A second interest, particularly since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, has been to prevent the Middle East from becoming a launchpad for non-state actors to instigate instability and to commit acts of terrorism against the United States and its allies.<sup>3</sup> This has led successive US administrations – with varying degrees of prioritization – to promote democracy in region.

A third interest has been preventing the proliferation and use of WMD in the Middle East. The United States has employed numerous diplomatic, economic, and even military campaigns to counter this risk,<sup>4</sup> targeting countries like Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic. Supporting the establishment of a ME WMDFZ has been one element of the broader US goal of preventing WMD proliferation and use, enhancing stability, and ensuring regional security.

A fourth US interest in the Middle East has been defending the existence and security of Israel. Interviewees characterized the ties between the two states as a “special relationship”.<sup>5</sup> Regarding these

<sup>2</sup> US Energy Information Administration, “The Strait of Hormuz is the World’s Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint,” 20 June 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Byman and Sara Bjerg Moller, “The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks and Costs,” in *Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy*, ed. Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> The White House, “National Security Strategy,” 12 October 2022, 42–43, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/>, and Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism,” 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/>.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Reich and Shannon Powers, “The United States and Israel: The Nature of a Special Relationship,” in *The Middle East and the United States*, ed. David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas (New York: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429492778>.



four interests, Iran has been the primary state of the region posing challenges to United States interests in the region since 1979. A fifth interest, and a relatively new one in a post-Cold War era, is countering the expansion of Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East.

## **2. US DRIVERS AND THEMES ON THE ME WMDFZ**

### **AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES AND THE ME WMDFZ**

#### **The “fixation” of the Egyptian MFA with a ME WMDFZ**

A common view among American interviewees – that extended across administrations of both parties – was that, in the Middle East, the ME WMDFZ was solely a preoccupation of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). In this vein, they often pointed out that since the time of President Anwar, this issue has not been a priority for Egypt’s leadership and security establishment.

One interviewee characterized the Egyptian MFA’s efforts on the Zone as “an object of near religious devotion”. Two more interviewees remarked that other Arab states did not raise Israel’s NPT status or the creation of the Zone at a high level when speaking with senior US leadership. One of the two recalled that, between 2010 to 2013, when he was directly involved in this issue, the Zone was raised only once over the course of numerous meetings with Arab foreign ministers, and it was by Egypt. He felt that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was the only Middle Eastern leader who truly understood this issue and was personally involved.

Other interviewees attributed the Egyptian MFA’s focus on Israeli nuclear capabilities, and by extension the ME WMDFZ, to a desire for political gain, rather than a serious national security concern. One interviewee wondered if the willingness of Egyptian presidents to humour the MFA by allowing it to pursue this issue was to provide political cover for the “concrete” and “constructive” engagement between Egypt and Israel on other issues. He thought that this issue was a tool to ensure Egypt’s position of leadership in the Arab world and international forums.

A second interviewee remarked that the status of Egypt as the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel had left its position as a leader in the Arab world vulnerable. To counteract this, Israeli nuclear capabilities and the Zone became key fronts for Egypt to increase its political capital among Arab states by putting pressure on Israel to make concessions on these issues.

A third interviewee, speaking in a similar vein, believed that Egypt’s perception of itself as a leader among Arab states made Israel’s nuclear capabilities an intolerable asymmetry. As a consequence, it had become the Egyptian MFA’s mission since the Camp David Accords to narrow this asymmetry through diplomatic pressure on Israel. The interviewee thought that this issue had the additional benefit of giving Egyptian diplomats global prestige at international forums such as International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors meetings, NPT Review Conferences, and the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (hereafter the ME WMDFZ November Conference process (hereafter the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference), among others.

### Israeli nuclear capabilities

There is an understanding relating to Israeli nuclear capabilities between the United States and Israel that dates back to 1969.<sup>6</sup> According to this, the Israeli government will not confront the US government with its nuclear capabilities by being the first to publicly introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East and the United States in turn will not isolate Israel for its failure to accede to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS).<sup>7</sup>

The Israeli government will not confront the US government with its nuclear capabilities by being the first to publicly introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East and the United States in turn will not isolate Israel for its failure to accede to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state.

One interviewee maintained that the United States had not given up on the goal of addressing Israeli nuclear capabilities until the Clinton administration, during which the two sides formalized the long-standing arrangement. Since then, the interviewee assumed this issue is no longer raised.<sup>8</sup>

### The role of Iran in the Middle East, the Iranian nuclear programme, and a ME WMDFZ

The United States does not view a ME WMDFZ as a solution to the perceived challenges posed by Iran's nuclear programme. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was conceived as a tailored approach to deal with this issue. American interviewees who spoke on the nexus between the JCPOA and the Zone said that little thought was given to the latter when conceiving of the former even though the 2013–2015 negotiations that culminated in the Iran nuclear deal overlapped to some degree with the 2013–2014 informal consultations at Glion and Geneva.

### Conditions for arms control and regional security processes in the Middle East

#### *New and emerging political dynamics in the Middle East since ACRS*

The political context in the Middle East around WMD and regional security has changed considerably. In the view of American interviewees, past ME WMDFZ-related processes such as ACRS (1992–95) and even the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (2013–14) showed promise. Compared to these processes, the new political context presents both fresh challenges and new opportunities for a ME WMDFZ. They first identified complicating factors that, in their view, create suboptimal political conditions for creating a Zone.

One salient political dynamic in the region in this regard is the conflict, on one hand, between Iran and its state and non-state allies and, on the other, Israel and a subset of pro-US Sunni Arab states. This has brought the challenges posed to the latter grouping by Iran's nuclear and missile programmes and its proxy non-state actors network to the fore. However, as partially outlined above, the United States does not view the Zone as a way to address these issues.

A second salient political dynamic when it comes to WMD and regional security in the Middle East has been the rising profile of Türkiye as a power in the region that is active in the affairs of its neighbours. This dynamic, alongside statements by Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan demonstrating possible

<sup>6</sup> Avner Cohen and William Burr, "Israel Crosses the Threshold," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 62, no. 3 (2006): 23–30, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2006.11460984>.

<sup>7</sup> For the Israeli perspective, see "The Israeli position on the NPT and its implications for an ME WMDFZ" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Entous, "How Trump and Three Other U.S. Presidents Protected Israel's Worst-Kept Secret: It's Nuclear Arsenal," *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-trump-and-three-other-presidents-protected-israels-worst-kept-secret-its-nuclear-arsenal>.

interest in nuclear weapons,<sup>9</sup> highlights the limits of the utility of a ME WMDFZ concept that does not include Türkiye within its boundaries.

A third dynamic is the prioritization of a new set of issues in the security perceptions of Middle Eastern states. These have arisen since the end of the Cold War when the current version of the Zone was first conceptualized and WMD had a higher priority on international and regional agendas. One of these issues is the role in inter- and intra-state conflicts in the Middle East of non-state actors, whose prominence accelerated after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

Another issue is the increasing presence of sensitive and emerging military technologies on regional battlefields. These include artificial intelligence-enabled weapon systems, ballistic and cruise missiles, cyber weapons, space-enabled weapon systems, and uncrewed vehicles. The changes in the regional landscape introduced by these challenges affect the security of the states of the region on a day-to-day basis more than WMD, thereby lowering the utility of the Zone.

Some interviewees also mentioned the faltering status of major WMD-related arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation agreements at the global (and regional) level as a fourth, international dynamic that raised questions about the desirability of the creation of a ME WMDFZ. This has included the two consecutive failures to reach consensus at the NPT Review Conferences; the conflict between state parties of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) over chemical weapons in Syria;<sup>10</sup> the inability of the state parties of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) to formulate a verification mechanism;<sup>11</sup> the uncertain status of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START);<sup>12</sup> and the uncertain future of the JCPOA. The trend, for these interviewees, was therefore towards more arms races and greater conflict and instability, rather than non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament.

Under these conditions, the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference process was generally not viewed by interviewees as a viable forum to deal with regional WMD-related issues. A subset of these interviewees did not dismiss this process entirely, but still questioned its long-term viability in its current form. However, most interviewees believed that new possibilities for dialogue on regional security issues had opened up. These opportunities had arisen from the normalization of ties between Israel and several Sunni Arab states and the cooperation taking shape. Most prominently and overtly, this was in the framework of the Abraham Accords,<sup>13</sup> but other states were believed to be covertly developing ties with Israel.

These interviewees generally agreed that these growing ties between Israel and some Sunni Arab states was at least in part being driven by their common concerns regarding Iran and the future role and staying power of the United States in the Middle East. In this context, a subset of these interviewees speculated that the Iranian nuclear programme was perceived as posing the more imminent security

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<sup>9</sup> David Sanger and William Broad, "Erdogan's Ambitions Go Beyond Syria. He Says He Wants Nuclear Weapons," *New York Times*, 21 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/world/middleeast/erdogan-turkey-nuclear-weapons-trump.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Hanna Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's Chemical Weapons: A Tale of Cooperation and its Unravellings," *Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1–3 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2020.1766226>.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Kahn, "The Biological Weapons Convention: Proceeding without Verification Protocol," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 9 May 2011, <https://thebulletin.org/2011/05/the-biological-weapons-convention-proceeding-without-a-verification-protocol/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Rogers, Matt Korda, and Hans Kristensen, "The Long View: Strategic Arms Control after the New START Treaty," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 78, no. 6 (November 2022): 348–351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2022.2133287>.

<sup>13</sup> US Department of State, "The Abraham Accords," 13 August 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.



*US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif discuss the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Vienna, Austria, 17 May 2016). Credit: State Department photo.*

challenge for these Sunni Arab states.<sup>14</sup> Israeli nuclear capabilities and military strength, in contrast, were mostly political issues, and could also be seen by these states as an asset in the conflict with Iran. This classic “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” dynamic enhanced the prospects for dialogue and cooperation between these Middle Eastern states not only on regional security issues but also on WMD. American interviewees generally felt that, once more Arab states overcome the political taboo on the normalization of relations with Israel, more could be achieved on regional security and the Zone.

Several interviewees, while viewing the Abraham Accords as a promising development in the Middle East, expressed concern that the Palestinian issue would continue to limit how far Israeli–Arab ties could improve, and would thus constrain progress on regional security and the Zone. They felt that this was a key obstacle to the success of ACRS, including the unwillingness by some Arab states to enter major formal negotiations without some progress on the Palestinian issue.

### ***Formats for a new regional security and arms control process in the Middle East***

With the challenges and opportunities posed by these new and emergent political dynamics in the Middle East since ACRS in mind, American interviewees generally felt that there could still be some appetite among Middle Eastern states to discuss regional security and arms control issues in parallel. To this end, interviewees assessed a range of possible formats for doing so. ACRS was a recurrent reference point for interviewees when discussing a possible future regional security and arms control process. While the interviewees in general did not think the conditions exist in the region to create such a comprehensive process, let alone for its success, some did see value in the structure of ACRS or in drawing lessons from its elements for a new process.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with current and former American officials and experts took place between 2019 and 2022, prior to the Iran–Saudi reconciliation agreement, and as such does not consider any resulting changes to this dynamic.

One interviewee said that the concept of a bilateral track to negotiate peace and normalize relations, complemented by a multilateral track to broaden the agenda, could be a useful format. Another interviewee agreed that a process with a multilateral track like ACRS, separated from a bilateral track to deal with the Israel–Palestine peace process, is necessary but not sufficient to provide the needed stability to undergird ME WMDFZ negotiations. This was because states of the region had developed more mature security needs since the 1990s that would make a process like ACRS more difficult to manage today. For example, severe humanitarian situations like those in Syria and Yemen could become the focus for cooperation in the region, or they would hang like a millstone around the talks. A fourth interviewee emphasized that the greater complexity of the region today, with the destabilizing dynamics from the Gulf and a more fragmented Arab world, would make regionwide talks more difficult to piece together in a coherent and politically sustainable manner.

Some interviewees suggested a format that featured a small number of the most relevant Middle Eastern states as being better for a future regional security and arms control processes. One interviewee remarked that a key limiting factor in ACRS and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva was the large number of states of the region involved in the negotiations. Holding talks in a format with many states proved difficult and, if future discussions were to be based on the principle of consensus, it would be difficult to make progress. He saw the danger of a situation whereby one state could needlessly hold the other states back over a specific issue in negotiations. The interviewee assessed that, in a small format negotiation, once the key states and leaders were identified, they could formulate a common agenda and rules of procedure before opening the talks to more members. He felt that reaching a common concept for a process was itself a challenge given the many dimensions and security predicaments in the Middle East.

Some interviewees suggested dividing the region into two subregions – one centred on the Persian Gulf and one on the Mediterranean – with their own distinct security architectures. The Gulf subregion could follow the format of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):<sup>15</sup> the common security of Iran and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (like the common security of the Communist bloc and Western Europe during the Cold War) would be a counterpart to US–Iran détente (like US–Soviet détente).

The Mediterranean subregion, in contrast, would need an accelerated Barcelona Process,<sup>16</sup> where states of the region would take on more responsibility for their individual and collective security. Such formats, along with arrangements such as subregional security structures and related measures (e.g., around nuclear energy, safety, and cooperation), could be building blocks for a Zone or could help create conditions more conducive to progress towards establishing it.

Interviewees drew lessons from the experiences of other regions for the ME WMDFZ's feasibility. Some referred to US–Soviet arms control processes during the Cold War and the importance of mutual recognition as a condition for broad-based arms control and regional security dialogue. When assessing opportunities for arms control, political relationships first need to exist. While these

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<sup>15</sup> Lorenz M. Lüthi, "The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe," in *Cold Wars Asia, The Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 438–461, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108289825.025>, and OSCE Secretariat, "CSCE becomes OSCE," 3 January 1995, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/52527>.

<sup>16</sup> "Barcelona Process adopts a statement calling on states in the Middle East to pursue a WMDFZ," 27–28 November 1995, UNIDIR Timeline of Key Events in the History of Diplomatic Efforts for the ME WMDFZ (UNIDIR Timeline), <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/barcelona-process-adopts-statement-calling-states-middle-east-pursue-wmdfz>.



relationships do not have to be excellent or even require comprehensive peace, one interviewee felt that there must be political support by governments and publics. For another interviewee, the history of US–Soviet arms control demonstrated that significant progress came in the period between détente and the end of the Cold War, during which both sides agreed to isolate this set of issues and often sought progress wherever possible.

A third interviewee added that the Middle East is unstable, denying political leaders the confidence that it is the right time to advance a process like the Zone. He noted that, in Latin America, it would have been impossible for Argentina and Brazil to conclude their regional arrangement<sup>17</sup> with the IAEA when these states were led by military juntas and were suspicious of one another.<sup>18</sup> He speculated that the Middle East is in a similar phase that is not favourable to such arrangements.

### **THE ROLE OF THE DEPOSITORY STATES AND INTERNATIONAL WMD REGIMES IN THE ME WMDFZ**

The US government believes that efforts to establish a ME WMDFZ does not necessarily need to be initiated and led by Middle Eastern states themselves and must address the security concerns of all parties concerned. One interviewee said that the United States would be prepared to attend the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference if all states of the region (specifically Israel) could live with it. Another interviewee highlighted the role of extra regional actors like the United States in encouraging the states of the region to engage with each other with the aim of creating a political environment in which basic security issues could be discussed and navigated. A third interviewee recognized Russia's unique position, as it had good relations with both Iran and Israel and could thus play a positive role in creating a constructive environment even if it was not currently conducting itself positively.<sup>19</sup>

A fourth interviewee noted that the US government hoped to rebalance away from the Middle East. According to him, the region is likely to be a lower US priority in the future compared to regions where competition with Russia and China is more direct.

A fifth interviewee said that the United States could try to reduce some regional tensions by helping to address the basic underlying Israel–Palestine conflict, as well as by engaging in actions that made it less likely for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Others disagreed on the feasibility of the United States being able to do so, as well as the expected results described by him.

Some interviewees believed that the best way to create a Zone in today's regional context would be to begin with Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy and later adopt confidence-building measures (CBMs). One interviewee noted that such diplomacy offered a conducive platform to formulate ideas so that, when an opportunity opened, it could be seized, and the ideas adopted. A second interviewee agreed but noted that this type of diplomacy was difficult because they required high-level political buy-in to succeed.

A subset of interviewees described a preference for a piecemeal (rather than comprehensive) approach to regional security and arms control in the Middle East, conducted through CBMs to avoid the complications that come with large multilateral formats. Examples mentioned included the Iran–Saudi Arabia security

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<sup>17</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), "Agreement between the Republic of Argentina and the Federative Republic of Brazil for the Exclusivity Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy," IAEA-INF/CIRC/395, 26 November 1991, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/infcirc395.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Dunlap, "Rethinking Nuclear Cooperation in Argentina's and Brazil's Competition for Prestige, 1972–1980," *Latin American Research Review* 56, no. 2 (15 June 2021): 385–399, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.713>.

<sup>19</sup> This interview took place before the conflict in Ukraine.

dialogue; the concept of a chemical weapon-free zone (CWFZ) in the region to help preserve the non-use norm and serve as a regional framework to support the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW); the creation of a regional civil nuclear organization that conducts monitoring and oversees limits on fuel cycles; and a ban on nuclear weapon tests in the Middle East as a step towards entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Some interviewees commented that the ME WMDFZ will need to go beyond current WMD regimes if it is to be accepted by more sceptical Middle Eastern states (e.g., Israel) by solving verification and compliance issues and exploring best practices from around the world. One interviewee noted that some verification elements of the JCPOA could be the basis for thinking about stricter regional arrangements since they went beyond the NPT and Additional Protocol safeguards. These could be the basis for stricter regional arrangements that would be in line with the Israeli long-term position that the Zone should go beyond existing verification mechanisms<sup>20</sup> to give assurance that non-compliance would be detected soon after it took place.

Finally, reflecting on the health of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, one interviewee believed that the biggest challenges that the NPT Review Conference process faced today were disarmament and the ME WMDFZ. He believed that there is a long-term danger of Arab disengagement from the NPT over the Zone issue that such a step would be a miscalculation. Nonetheless, this interviewee asserted that no state would withdraw from the NPT over failure to achieve the Zone. He explained that, while a state might use the Zone as a pretext to withdraw, its real reasons would likely be different – for example, a pressing security concern or a desire not to be left behind if other states of the region were moving towards acquiring nuclear weapons. Another interviewee doubted the long-term viability of the NPT, considering further disruptions of Review Conferences as likely to be due to this region and potentially with the rise of other proliferators.

### 3. AMERICAN HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMDFZ PROCESSES

#### THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE OF NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION ANXIETY IN THE 1970S

American interviewees noted that, despite the entry into force of the NPT in 1970, the United States faced challenges that required additional efforts to strengthen the nascent regime to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. A seminal event in this regard was India's 1974 "Smiling Buddha" nuclear explosion, which raised concerns about a potential wave of nuclear weapon proliferation. Various states, including Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, the Republic of Korea, Libya, Pakistan, and South Africa were identified as sources of proliferation concerns. Among efforts made or considered by the US government to curb further proliferation, interviewees mentioned sanctions, nuclear cooperation agreements with stricter non-proliferation requirements, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), domestic export controls and ideas to establish multinational fuel cycle facilities.<sup>21</sup>

The Middle East was a particularly concerning region for the United States, a concern that even extended to US allies such as Iran under the Shah, which was believed to have a nuclear weapon

<sup>20</sup> Andreas Persbo, "Monitoring, Safeguards and Verification," in *From the Iran Nuclear Deal to a Middle East Zone? Lessons from the JCPOA for an ME WMDFZ*, ed. Chen Zak and Farzan Sabet (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMDfZ/2021/JCPOA1>.

<sup>21</sup> David Elliott and Robert Oakley, "Kissinger's Interim Decisions Regarding Pakistan's Nuclear Acquisition," Memorandum, US National Security Council, 12 July 1976, <https://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76ve08/pdf/d232.pdf>.



*The Camp David Accords, signed by US President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in September 1978, established a framework for a historic peace treaty concluded between Israel and Egypt in March 1979. These were followed by Egypt's ratification of the NPT two years later. Credit: US Government Archives.*

programme,<sup>22</sup> and Israel, which was assumed to possess nuclear weapons by the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> Although the interviewees did not mention the Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) proposal co-sponsored by Iran and Egypt in 1974,<sup>24</sup> they acknowledged that nuclear non-proliferation played an important role in the negotiations that led to the 1978–1979 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. According to Egyptian interviewees, Egypt's ratification of the NPT in 1981 was preceded by talks in which the United States made an unwritten pledge to persuade Israel to join the NPT as a NNWS. When asked about this, one American interviewee present at the Camp David negotiations did not entirely dismiss the possibility, recalling Egypt's request to include it in the peace agreement (which was rejected), as well as the importance that US President Jimmy Carter placed on non-proliferation.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1980s, the United States remained concerned over nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, although it assessed the overall risk as less acute compared to the 1970s. Israel's air strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 posed a policy dilemma for the administration of President Ronald

<sup>22</sup> Farzan Sabet, "The Iranian Nuclear Program, U.S. Policy, and the Nonproliferation Regime, 1974–1978," Doctoral dissertation (Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2018), 149–182.

<sup>23</sup> Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Israel Nuclear Overview," 14 May 2014, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-nuclear/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Iran and Egypt Co-sponsor a Resolution Calling for the Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East," 21 August 1974, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1970s/iran-and-egypt-co-sponsor-resolution-calling-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone?timeline=0>.

<sup>25</sup> For the Egyptian perspective, see "From using, possessing, or pursuing WMD to non-proliferation and disarmament regimes" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.



The Middle East region posed significant concerns for the United States, including regarding allies such as Iran under the Shah, which was suspected of pursuing a nuclear weapon program, and Israel, which was widely believed to have acquired nuclear weapons by the 1960s.

Reagan. While the United States opposed the strike, it nonetheless sought to prevent criticism of Israel's action at the IAEA General Conference in 1982.<sup>26</sup>

Interviewees noted that Iraq continued to be a proliferation concern despite the Israeli strike. One interviewee highlighted that the proliferation and use of chemical and biological weapons came increasingly to the fore in the 1980s. This was partly due to the use of chemical weapons by Iraq and limited use by Iran.<sup>27</sup>

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

### **Creating ACRS: A novel exercise in American leadership in a shifting regional and global order**

In the early 1990s, changes in the international system and in the Middle East opened up new opportunities and marked a new chapter in the US approach to WMD, both globally and in the Middle East. One important development was the establishment of the ACRS Working Group as part of the broader Arab–Israeli Madrid Peace process.

According to American interviewees, two major factors facilitated the creation of ACRS. The first was the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which allowed the United States to pursue its foreign policy priorities without Soviet opposition. The second factor was the First Gulf War and the decisive US victory, which demonstrated the military and diplomatic power of the United States and highlighted the challenge of WMD, particularly Iraq's WMD programmes. These developments in turn enabled Egypt's initiative to expand the Zone concept from a focus on nuclear weapons to cover all WMD.<sup>28</sup>

These strategic shifts created a new era in which the United States was the sole superpower and promoted a US-led international order. This led to enhanced US–Soviet (later US–Russian) cooperation characterized by one interviewee as a “golden age” of non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament agreements. Important development during that time included the dismantlement of South Africa's nuclear programme; the dismantlement of Iraq's WMD programmes; the return of Soviet nuclear weapons from former Soviet states to the Russian Federation; China's ratification of the NPT; the adoption of the CWC; the strengthening of the IAEA's safeguards and the adoption of the Model Additional Protocol; and the conclusion of the Framework Agreement to address the nuclear programme of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In the Middle East, these shifts resulted in more cooperative dynamics as the superpower proxy wars that characterized the region in the past diminished. Critically, many Arab states lost their Soviet

<sup>26</sup> “Administration's Nonproliferation Policy and the Osirak Raid,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 23, no. 2 (May 2021), [https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws\\_a\\_01007](https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_01007).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Brill, “We Attacked them with Chemical Weapons and they Attacked us with Chemical Weapons: Iraqi Records and the History of Iran's Chemical Weapons Program,” *Wilson Center, History and Public Policy Program*, 31 March 2022, [www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/part-ii-we-attacked-them-chemical-weapons-and-they-attacked-us-chemical-weapons-iraqi](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/part-ii-we-attacked-them-chemical-weapons-and-they-attacked-us-chemical-weapons-iraqi).

<sup>28</sup> “Mubarak Initiative’ Expands the Scope of the Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East to Include All WMD,” 18 April 1990, *UNIDIR Timeline*, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/mubarak-initiative-expands-scope-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-middle-east-include-all>.

patron and were unable to play the superpowers against one another. This, in turn, reduced Israel's threat perception from Arab states, making it more open to negotiations. Another outcome was the unprecedented willingness of an ideologically and geographically diverse range of Arab states (including such leading states as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) to join the military coalition against a fellow Arab state.

Amid these global and regional shifts, in 1991 under President George H. W. Bush, the US government initiated efforts to reshape the Middle East, including the establishment of an Arab–Israeli peace process and (as demanded by some Arab states in return for supporting the US-led coalition in the Gulf War) a new arms control process. These efforts culminated in the Madrid Peace Process, which had a dual structure, with a bilateral track to negotiate peace treaties between Israel and Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and a multilateral track for a broader set of issues between Israel and participating Arab parties.

The multilateral track aimed to engage Arab states on issues beyond the bilateral negotiations and to support and legitimize the peace talks. The United States addressed Israel's initial opposition to the multilateral track by excluding the PLO from the multilateral track; a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation attended ACRS (until 1992) at Israel's behest. It overcame opposition from Lebanon and Syria, which prioritized the bilateral track, by sequencing the multilateral track to begin a few months after the bilateral track in March 1992 in order to denote its secondary importance. Lebanon and Syria elected not to join the multilateral track. This sequencing and the resulting two tracks also addressed Israel's preference to negotiate with its neighbours bilaterally.

In addition to the ACRS Working Group, the multilateral track featured four additional working groups – on economic development, the environment, refugees, and water resources and management – to address important issues for post-Gulf War regional stability. ACRS was considered, according to the interviewees, as one of the most important working groups but also the most contentious.<sup>29</sup> One interviewee explained that it was shaped both by US views on the need to somehow address arms control and regional security issues in the post-Gulf War context and to reflect Egyptian priorities. In contrast, another interviewee felt that ACRS was an afterthought. Some interviewees further noted that the Israelis preferred to call it the “regional security and arms control” (RSAC) working group, in line with their prioritization of regional security over arms control. They eventually accepted the ACRS formulation.

The United States had three main goals for ACRS: developing a joint vision for the region; establishing CBMs to lower the risks of conflict; and building relations and trust among states to reduce conflicts and stabilize the region. As one of the most difficult topics in the multilateral track, according to interviewees, ACRS was jointly chaired by the United States and the Soviet Union for a number of reasons: the need for the two superpowers' joint experience of arms control agreements; the symbolic importance of the two former rivals working together; the Soviet Union's strong relationships with some of the key Arab participants in the Madrid Process; and a US desire to show Moscow respect. Interviewees noted that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent internal turmoil in the Russian Federation limited Russia's active role. However, one interviewee claimed that Washington, D.C. still cleared all decisions with Moscow. Participation in ACRS included the two co-chairs, 13

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<sup>29</sup> Hanna Notté 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, 11–14, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/ACRS%20Oral%20History%20Project%20-%20Final%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/ACRS%20Oral%20History%20Project%20-%20Final%20Report_0.pdf).

ACRS was regarded as both as the most crucial and highly contentious working group within the multilateral track.

Middle Eastern states, the PLO,<sup>30</sup> and extra regional states that supported the talks such as Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and Türkiye.

The plenary sessions were the primary formal meetings that set the overall tone and direction of the working group. In 1993 the discussions were divided into two “baskets”, allowing for more technical and less formal discussions. While

the plenaries were influenced by the political presence of MFAs and senior officials, the intersessional meetings involved military, technical, and junior personnel, although participants from the United States, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan often overlapped in both types of meeting.

The division had a positive impact on the interpersonal dynamics in ACRS because, according to some interviewees, delegations from the Middle East often had a “political minder” in the plenaries who ensured that their officials adhered to the guidance from their respective capitals. In contrast, the intersessional meetings allowed for more direct engagement between junior experts, without political minders or senior officials “looking over their shoulders”. This created a less stilted environment for negotiations and fostered the building of relationships.

### Regional participation in ACRS: A Goldilocks problem

American interviewees described a “Goldilocks problem” that the US government faced in selecting the optimal balance of Middle Eastern states to participate in the multilateral track, including ACRS. Inviting only those Middle Eastern states open to dialogue would exclude states of significant concern regarding WMD proliferation. Conversely, including too many adversarial states could quickly lead into acrimony and the breakdown of the multilateral dialogue. Eventually, Israel and 15 Arab parties were invited, while Syria and Lebanon declined due to their reluctance to be perceived as normalizing relations with Israel before achieving their goals in the bilateral track. According to one American interviewee, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria insisted on Israel returning the Golan Heights to Syria before any normalization could take place.

Iran, Iraq, and Libya were not invited to ACRS due to their strained relations with the United States. Some Arab states also opposed their attendance, fearing they could disrupt the process. This left Israel, 12 Arab states, and the PLO, which the same interviewee felt contributed to a more amicable atmosphere in ACRS. There was, however, a recognition that the three excluded states would eventually need to be brought in, as their absence could potentially undermine the process. One interviewee noted that the prevailing view was that they should renounce their “rogue state” behaviour before being invited to join the working group, while another interviewee felt that they could have been incentivized to join later. Most interviewees who spoke on ACRS felt that it was the right decision to exclude them at least initially, but a minority considered it a mistake.

Another significant question that arose repeatedly, without hindering discussions, was how to define the geographical boundaries of the “Middle East”. According to interviewees, some participating states in ACRS had security concerns regarding countries, such as Pakistan and Türkiye, which were not invited but bordered

<sup>30</sup> The 13 states were Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Initially, there was a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation, with a separate PLO delegation joining later.

Middle East and North Africa region.<sup>31</sup> These parties worried that agreements reached in the working group could have an impact on their security in relation to states defined as being outside the Middle East.

### **ACRS begins: Creating a sequential process that moved from modest to ambitious goals**

The format of the ACRS discussions were designed to be relatively unstructured simply because there was no Middle Eastern template to follow, but American interviewees noted that there was a logic to the format. To bridge the diplomatic and technical gaps required for multilateral dialogue and negotiations on arms control and regional security, Middle Eastern parties agreed to start the process with educational lectures. While Egypt, Israel and Jordan had more experience in regional security negotiations, only Egypt had previous experience in multilateral nuclear negotiations. One interviewee mentioned that, while many Arab parties relied on Egypt in this area, the US government wanted to develop wider regional expertise.

One crucial aspect of the educational format was drawing lessons from the history of US–Soviet and European arms control negotiations and agreements, including their verification mechanisms. While arms control was not a substitute for conflict resolution on the bilateral track, a lesson from these experiences recalled by an interviewee was that CBMs could achieve a great deal to build trust and reduce the level of arms even among adversaries with poor relations. The goal was thus not to replicate the US–Soviet or European experiences but to utilize them as a starting point to tailor solutions suitable for the Middle East.

Some interviewees noted that many representatives from the region did not find this educational process useful, as they believed the Middle East differed significantly from the Cold War dynamics of US–Soviet and European security. One interviewee acknowledged that US officials overestimated the utility of these historical analogies. But another said that this criticism provided an opportunity for the US facilitators to involve regional representatives more actively in developing the agenda of future meetings, thus keeping the ACRS process substantive. Two interviewees said that, as ACRS progressed, Middle Eastern delegations found that a better model for discussion was the experience of Türkiye, a Muslim state neighbouring the region and a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with a long history of managing relations with the two superpowers.

Although the United States hoped to achieve agreements in ACRS, two interviewees asserted that early in the process they understood that agreement was unlikely, at least initially. Their hope, instead, was to foster direct interaction among Middle Eastern participants during meals and breaks in order to end the social isolation between the Israeli and Arab representatives. Shifting meeting locations was seen by interviewees as a way to empower states of the region to take ownership and leadership of the working group. It also signalled some recognition by participating Arab states of Israel, aligning with the broader structure that the US government hoped to build in the Middle East over time.

The United States envisioned ACRS as a sequential process, starting with feasible short-term objectives and gradually progressing towards more ambitious long-term goals. One interviewee believed that the focus was to build mutual trust, rather than pursuing a ME WMDFZ or Israeli nuclear disarmament. While progress on addressing WMD (especially nuclear) challenges was desired, the Zone was considered a distant and aspirational goal.

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<sup>31</sup> United Nations Secretary-General, "Study on Effective and Verifiable Measures which would Facilitate the Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East," A/45/435, 10 October 1990, <https://undir.org/node/5634>.

To address Israel's sensitivities and its concerns about being singled out, efforts were made according to an interviewee to embed dealing with nuclear weapons within the broader context of WMD in the region. He claimed that the United States accepted the creation of a ME WMDFZ as a "broad objective", but he suggested at the time that chemical weapons be dealt with first, followed by biological weapons, and nuclear weapons last. Two interviewees agreed that it was necessary for modest initial steps to be taken on the Zone to establish the overall framework for ACRS and to satisfy Egypt. Another interviewee, however, said that focusing too heavily from the start on the Zone would bring the sides to an impasse, which eventually became a reality.

### **The political dynamics shaping the trajectory of ACRS**

American interviewees identified four main political dynamics in ACRS that shaped its trajectory. The first was Egypt-Israel tension over whether the working group should prioritize arms control and nuclear disarmament (the "elephant in the room") or regional security and CBMs. Egypt wanted Israel to discuss adherence to the NPT as a NNWS, while Israel did not want to address this topic at all, focusing instead on regional security. The United States sought to bridge this gap by beginning discussions on related issues like verification in part to satisfy the Egyptian insistence on Israeli nuclear disarmament.

Interviewees present in ACRS agreed that Egypt viewed progress on regional security as conditioned on Israeli adherence to the NPT and full-scope safeguards. One interviewee felt that no Israeli position short of nuclear disarmament would have satisfied the Egyptians in the working group. Another speculated that the Egyptian military did not want the MFA to make progress on other issues, such as CBMs, which he said some MFA officials were genuinely interested in developing CBMs with Israel. The military thus mainly limited the MFA to the intractable issue of nuclear disarmament on which it knew no agreement could be made at that time.

Some interviewees explained that Israel had no interest in speaking about its nuclear capabilities and instead wanted to frame the discussion around security issues, of which WMD was just one. At least two interviewees said that progress on Israeli nuclear disarmament was inconceivable because of Israel's belief that, while it would live up to its commitments, Middle Eastern authoritarian governments (namely those that did not participate in ACRS) would not do the same, and could develop WMD, thereby decreasing Israel's security. A third interviewee acknowledged that Israel probably said this and believed it at the time. But, because it believed retention of nuclear weapons was essential for its security, Israel would not have agreed to disarm and join the NPT even if it was entirely confident that states of the region outside the working group would abide by the treaty. Israel would thus consider disarmament only after a comprehensive and durable peace in the region.

Egypt was viewed by interviewees present in ACRS as a challenging partner on the regional security aspects of the working group like CBMs, and Israel was viewed as a challenging partner on arms control. This distinction and the dynamic between the two sides were partly the reason why the work of ACRS was separated into conceptual and operational baskets (see below).

A second political dynamic was the Egyptian government's view of itself as the leader of the Arab states. It was the most populous Arab state, had unparalleled expertise in arms control in the Middle East, possessed a unique status as the only state at the time with direct relations with Israel and had strong ties with the United States. Egypt thus hoped to use arms control to regain its leadership in the Arab world, which had been lost in the aftermath of the peace treaty with Israel.





*In his first major speech, US President Barack Obama announced his commitment to seeking a world without nuclear weapons (Prague, Czechia, 5 April 2009). Credit: Emilio Bellu.*

Some interviewees with first-hand knowledge of events identified Ambassador Nabil Fahmy, the head of the Egyptian delegation, as a forceful presence and a would-be spokesperson for the Arab side in ACRS. But they went on to say that, as the working group unfolded, the Egyptian assertion of leadership became a source of intra-Arab tension. One reason was the presence of other Arab states with expertise whose interests diverged from Egypt's – for example, Jordan.

Jordan sometimes assumed a leading position. Some interviewees highlighted the role of Abdullah Toukan, head of the Jordanian delegation, as an alternative Arab leader in ACRS. Arab states would sometimes refer to him due to his expertise, his strong ties to Jordan's royal court, his strong personality, and (towards the end of the working group) his country's peace treaty with Israel. Some interviewees noted that, although Toukan included wording on the ME WMDfZ in the Israel–Jordan peace treaty of October 1994,<sup>32</sup> his delegation was generally more concerned with regional security. The Jordanians also occasionally pushed back against the Egyptians, to the latter's consternation.

Some interviewees observed that, over time, other Arab delegations began to develop interest and attempted to assert greater agency or leadership. One interviewee named Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates as playing an important role or asserting their agency at important junctures. This included, for example, the decisions by Qatar and Tunisia to each host plenaries. Some interviewees also observed that some GCC states demonstrated over time more independence by bringing in a wider set of issues beyond the traditional Arab–Israeli conflict, such as the perceived challenges posed by Iran and Iraq. This further developed and matured the agenda and helped to foster a more cordial and professional relationship with Israeli representatives.

<sup>32</sup> Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 26 October 1994, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20JO\\_941026\\_PeaceTreatyIsraelJordan.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20JO_941026_PeaceTreatyIsraelJordan.pdf).

The United States aimed to promote the normalization of relations among Middle Eastern states in ACRS by fostering constructive dialogue and cooperation on less sensitive security issues through the operational basket.

These interviewees also highlighted intra-GCC tensions at ACRS. Their perception was that the Saudi delegation sought to dominate the GCC states in the working group, while smaller GCC states sought to assert themselves in the proceedings. The trend observed by these interviewees was a slight shift over time from a more centralized leadership of the Arab parties by Egypt (and of GCC states by Saudi Arabia) to a greater diffusion in positions than had existed before.

A third political dynamic observed by interviewees was the evolution in Israel's perception of ACRS from a potential threat, due to Egypt's push for its nuclear disarmament, to an opportunity to derive security benefits from CBMs and to move political normalization forwards with Arab states. Thus, despite Israeli concerns about the potential dangers of engagement with the working group, their team had some flexibility to engage and take risks to move the process forward. One interviewee called the Israeli delegation in ACRS an "all-star" team.

The fourth political dynamic was the relationship between ACRS in the multilateral track and the bilateral track and how progress (or lack thereof) in one affected the other. At the outset, Lebanon and Syria decided not to join ACRS and prioritized the bilateral track. One interviewee observed that Arab representatives in the working group also tried to keep it one step behind the bilateral track to avoid "premature normalization". This approach worked from 1993 until 1995, when the bilateral track showed promise. For example, some interviewees believed the Israel–PLO Oslo Accords of 1993 and the Israel–Jordan Peace Treaty of 1994 boosted the multilateral track and created the political space for more forward-leaning positions and proposals by all sides.

Another interviewee acknowledged that, later on, the failure of Israeli bilateral talks with Syria and the PLO to advance cast a shadow over the multilateral track. However, he also pointed out that much of the progress in ACRS on CBMs came after this point as some of the discussions matured and because the multilateral track sometimes went ahead of the bilateral one. A third interviewee noted that several Arab parties were ready to develop and test CBMs and transparency arrangements. But they balked at implementing them until the bilateral track advanced further. Beyond this narrow aspect, however, he believed based on his experience in the working group that progress on WMD was not dependent on progress on Israeli–Palestinian peace.

According to a fourth interviewee, the argument for continuing the multilateral track when the bilateral one slowed was its novelty and to keep the process alive by creating regional constituencies who felt they had a stake in it. While progress in the multilateral track might have kept the process alive, a fifth interviewee felt that it would have had no positive spill over effect on the bilateral track.

### **The bifurcated logic of ACRS: The conceptual and operational baskets**

Egypt's greatest interest was advancing Israeli nuclear disarmament, while Israel wanted to concentrate on normalization and regional security issues. In order to address these issues simultaneously in a way that would not impede progress, the United States suggested at the fourth plenary session of ACRS, in

Moscow in November 1993, the division of the working group into two baskets, one “conceptual” and one “operational”.<sup>33</sup>

The conceptual basket addressed policy issues such as general principles and norms to guide regional security and arms control, and how to move towards a ME WMDFZ. The operational basket dealt with technical confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) in four areas: maritime issues; exchange of military information and pre-notification of military activities; establishment of a regional communications network; and creation of a Regional Security Centre. These two sets of topics required different expertise. The conceptual basket featured more diplomats who worked on high-level political documents. The operational basket included military officials and experts dealing with technical CBMs. One interviewee said that this was also a way to involve the extra regional actors in ACRS by assigning them to lead specific issues in the operational basket.

### *The conceptual basket*

One of the documents negotiated in the conceptual basket was the Declaration of Principles (DoP), which was eventually watered down to a statement. One goal of the DoP was to give prominence to the WMD aspect of the working group in order to reassure Egypt that this issue would eventually be addressed. The two sides at ACRS ultimately drafted a final document, which came to be known as the “bracketed document” due to disagreements on (and brackets placed over) the last paragraph – there were US, Egyptian and Israeli versions of this paragraph.<sup>34</sup> One interviewee claimed that, while work on the DoP advanced relatively far, consensus could not be reached over a range of topics, from Israeli adherence to the NPT as a NNWS to how to address each individual WMD category. Another interviewee felt the DoP was the most important task of the working group.

Parties from the region shared papers on long-term national policy and objectives in the conceptual basket, presenting their threat perceptions, security environment, and strategic goals. One interviewee said that his job leading up to the second meeting on the conceptual basket, held in Paris on 10 October 1994,<sup>35</sup> was to analyse all these statements and produce a paper that underlined their commonalities and differences. The goal was to use the gaps to be bridged as the basis of an agenda for future meetings – but these never took place due to the breakdown of the talks by 1995.

The initial talks in the conceptual basket were typically held between a core group of five states, including the United States, Russia, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, before being broadened to the entire working group to efficiently advance the process. One interviewee noted that this was a good negotiating strategy that moved the process through to the fifth plenary, in Doha on 2 May 1994.<sup>36</sup>

An important moment in the conceptual basket mentioned by interviewees occurred at the second plenary, in Moscow in September 1992.<sup>37</sup> The head of the Israeli delegation, David Ivry, made a statement that said Israel could envision a time in the future when the threats to Israel were no longer

<sup>33</sup> Fourth Plenary Session of ACRS is held in Moscow” 2–4 November 1993, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/fourth-plenary-session-acrs-held-moscow>.

<sup>34</sup> Shai Feldman, “Draft ‘Statement on Arms Control and Regional Security,’” in *Nuclear Weapons and Arms control in the Middle East* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 320–325.

<sup>35</sup> Timeline for ACRS Oral History Project, “2nd Conceptual Basket Meeting (Paris, France), 10 October 1994, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/topics/acrs-oral-history-project>.

<sup>36</sup> Timeline for ACRS Oral History Project, “5th ACRS Plenary Meeting (Doha, Qatar),” 4 May 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Timeline for ACRS Oral History Project, “2nd ACRS Plenary Meeting (Moscow, Russia),” 15 September 1994.



present and there would not be a need for any state in the region to possess nuclear weapons. Despite its vague nature, two interviewees saw this statement as forward leaning for Israel, although both acknowledged that it did not elicit the hoped-for positive response from Arab parties.

### *The operational basket*

The idea of the operational basket for the United States was to facilitate the normalization of relations by creating productive dialogue and cooperation around less sensitive security issues. According to some interviewees, it was partly inspired by US–Soviet CBMs during the Cold War.

The CBSMs in the operational basket were seen as the initial steps that would pave the way for the more ambitious goals of the conceptual basket. At least two interviewees believed that, if the bilateral track between Israel and some Arab parties resulted in peace and normalization, it could lead to more comprehensive agreements on the multilateral track, possibly setting the basis for the establishment of an organization for security and cooperation in the Middle East (along the lines of the OSCE today). One pointed to wording in the Israel–Jordan peace treaty as proof that such a structure was a goal that some states of the region contemplated at the time.<sup>38</sup>

Discussions on and activities for these CBMs were sometimes proposed, overseen, and funded by extra regional states that had experience in the topic. At other times, they emerged from parties from the region themselves. Four agreements were concluded and operationally finalized (but never formally adopted) in the operational basket: the Regional Security Centre in Jordan and two affiliated centres in Qatar and Tunisia; a communications network to be based in Cairo; procedures for pre-notification of some military activities and exchange of military information; and maritime CBMs, such as draft agreements on search and rescue and the prevention of incidents at sea.

The separation of ACRS into conceptual and operational baskets achieved one of its main intended effects: it allowed the operational basket to move forward without being stymied by the complexities and politicization of the conceptual basket. However, no matter how far the operational basket and its CBMs advanced, they would eventually hit the hard limits imposed by some parties on progress in the bilateral track and the conceptual basket. For this reason, the Saudis and others insisted that CBMs remain voluntary and confidential according to one interviewee, although another said this view was not universally shared, but was another manifestation of intra-Arab differences.

### **Interpersonal dynamics in ACRS: A surprising budding of Israel–Arab interpersonal relations**

Over time, the interpersonal relations between Israeli and Arab representatives evolved for the better. Most American interviewees mentioned that the early plenary sessions between the parties were very “formal” and “stiff”, with representatives simply reading the talking points. Arab representatives addressed their questions for Israelis through the American and Russian co-chairs, who would then relay the Israeli answer back to them.

The interviewees went on to explain that the stiffness slowly eased over the course of ACRS, mainly through social interactions at events, meals and breaks at meetings, during which the level of protocol and decorum steadily decreased, and Arabs and Israelis began to speak directly to one another. The last holdout was the Saudi delegation, which had been the most resistant to any perceived normalization with Israelis and

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<sup>38</sup> Israel–Jordan Peace Treaty, 26 October 1994, Article 4b, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-179122/>.

continued not to address them directly. This last barrier broke down at the sixth (and final) ACRS plenary, at Tunis in December 1994. Iterative contact, person-to-person connections, and the personalities of the diplomats in ACRS helped to generate positive dynamics and were conducive for diplomacy. This was even the case in the context of intractable conflicts and security sensitivities in the Middle East.

### **The end of ACRS: Reasons for its failure**

After an Experts Meeting on the Regional Security Center in Amman in September 1995, Egypt did not consent to hold a seventh ACRS plenary. This was a clear indication of the end of the working group according to American interviewees. The first and most frequently cited reason for the demise of ACRS was the loss of momentum in the bilateral track. Interviewees noted that it became politically difficult for many Arab parties to continue to participate in the multilateral track when the Israeli talks with the Palestinians and with the Syrians lost steam in the bilateral track. An important factor behind the loss of momentum in the bilateral track was the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 and the defeat of his successor as Prime Minister, Shimon Peres, by Benjamin Netanyahu in the Israeli general elections of May 1996.

Another dimension was what some interviewees saw as Egypt's sense of a loss of control and leadership in ACRS, and its assessment that Israeli–Arab normalization was advancing too rapidly in the multilateral track without Israeli reciprocal concessions in the bilateral track. One interviewee observed that this latter concern was also shared by the Palestinians, Saudis, and Syrians, who kept an eye on the multilateral track to ensure that it did not move too far ahead.

A second factor was Egypt's belief that the conceptual basket was not progressing quickly enough, while the operational basket was progressing too rapidly. Two interviewees explained that, with this frustration as a motivating factor, the Egyptian government effectively ended ACRS in September 1995. A trip by Peres to Cairo, including a statement by Israel, failed to resolve their differences. Four reasons were suggested by interviewees for the deadlock reached by Israel and Egypt in the conceptual basket in ACRS.

The main reason was the Israeli government's refusal to discuss its nuclear capabilities. According to one interviewee, Israel feared that any discussion would lead to a "slippery slope" that would just increase pressure on it to abandon its capabilities.<sup>39</sup> Another major reason suggested by another interviewee was the timing of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. He speculated that Egypt decided to de-emphasize ACRS while prioritizing the upcoming conference.<sup>40</sup> A third, broader, consideration by Israel and Egypt that led to this impasse may have been disagreements about what a ME WMDFZ would be based on. It could be based on international instruments such as the NPT, the CWC and the BWC, on regionally negotiated ones, or on both. If based on both, there would be the question of how these regimes would interact with one another. The Israeli government's preference was for regionally negotiated instruments since it felt that international instruments did not provide sufficient assurance of the absence of WMD-related activity in the Middle East. A final reason that Israel was not willing to be more forward leaning in the conceptual basket on its nuclear capabilities was the absence from ACRS of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Syria.

The deadlock in the conceptual basket highlighted the disparate approaches of Israel and Egypt. While the former preferred a gradual approach beginning with regional security issues and CBMs, the latter

<sup>39</sup> For the Israeli perspective, see "The end of ACRS: Reasons for its collapse" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

<sup>40</sup> "1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference adopts the 'Resolution on the Middle East,'" 11 May 1995, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1995-npt-review-and-extension-conference-adopts-resolution-middle-east?timeline=15>.

While the United States had a clear majority of NPT state parties supporting the indefinite extension of the treaty, it was crucial for the US government to indefinitely extend the treaty by consensus, rather than a vote, at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference.

prioritized arms control and preferred to tackle this and regional security simultaneously. The United States engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan in search of common ground to save ACRS. Although Israel recognized the importance of the NPT extension and made some related statements, it was too little too late for Egypt, which wanted Israel to indicate willingness to join the NPT as a NNWS. Israel was unwilling to take more steps as long as the risks posed by Iranian and Iraqi WMD programmes were unresolved.

Interviewees disagreed over whether the interest in ACRS of senior US leadership waned over time, and its impact on the working group. Warren Christopher, the US Secretary of State, and Dennis Ross, a senior official at the State Department, both played important roles in the bilateral track. Yet, one interviewee felt that their absence from ACRS was noticed and that it amounted to a lower level of prioritization of the working group, although if asked at the time, they would probably have said that ACRS was important. Another interviewee strongly disagreed with this perspective. He believed that senior US officials placed importance on both the bilateral and multilateral tracks and saw them as mutually reinforcing in producing a more stable and peaceful region. This interviewee felt that the “absence” of senior US officials such as Ross from ACRS was due to the recognition that things were moving along relatively well for the most part and their personal involvement was not needed.

The transition in 1992–1993 from the Bush administration to the presidency of William J. Clinton may also have affected the focus by senior US officials on ACRS in three ways according to one interviewee. He felt that, even with the understanding by everyone on the US delegation of the US–Israeli special relationship, the Bush administration was more willing to be tough on Israel.<sup>41</sup> This interviewee said that the US willingness to push back on some aspects of Israeli policies evaporated with the Clinton administration. He believed that this began a nearly 30-year-long trend of the US government moving into closer alignment with the Israeli government. This had direct consequences for the bilateral track, which was being held in Washington, DC, and which was more sensitive to US policy shifts. This interviewee claimed that he advocated for a focus on the Palestinian issue as key to the conflict in the Middle East, which was ripe for resolution. Other Clinton administration officials wanted to focus on Syria, which did not work out. Lack of progress on Israeli–Palestinian peace in the bilateral track had a knock-on effect of decreasing momentum for ACRS. Another interviewee agreed that the Clinton administration may have been less tough on Israel but felt that neither administration was willing to pressure Israel on the nuclear issue, and that this was not a reason for the failure of ACRS.

Although ACRS went into hibernation after its last formal meeting in September 1995 and effectively came to an end over the next year, it was still formally in existence until the last meeting of the multilateral track steering committee, in 2000. One interviewee mentioned “feeble attempts” after 1995 to revive ACRS but that, from a senior US perspective, it was seen as dead from this point onward.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, the Bush administration threatened to withhold loan guarantees over Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. See Norman Kempster and Daniel Williams, “Bush Rejects Israeli Loan Compromise,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-03-18-mn-3828-story.html>.

Another interviewee felt that it was still possible to resurrect the working group and all or parts of the Madrid process after 1995 but that these hopes steadily ended after the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 and the Second Intifada of 2000–2005.

### The legacies of ACRS and lessons for the future

Interviewees highlighted what they viewed as several positive legacies of ACRS. Most emphasized the importance of the interpersonal relationships created in the process. One interviewee said that the process itself was the substance as it led to better mutual understanding. Given the relatively young age of many Israeli and Arab officials there, some felt that ACRS introduced them to each other and helped to cultivate informal relations, and later on even led to the cooperation and normalization that culminated in the Abraham Accords. Those Americans interviewed after the inauguration of the Abraham Accords saw a connection between the legacy of the working group and the process of peace-making and normalization happening today.

Some of these interviewees highlighted how the ACRS experience demonstrated the feasibility of a different approach to security in the Middle East. One interviewee concluded that a lesson in this regard was that a formalized process like ACRS was not necessary if states were covertly communicating directly or through backchannels. He felt this was more the case in the lead up to the Abraham Accords compared to when the working group began 30 years ago. The facts on the ground had changed and many Israeli and Arab interests had converged.

Some interviewees identified the importance of conducting discussions in a confidential manner in ACRS to avoid negative consequences as another lesson learned. When ACRS became overexposed, there were sometimes negative consequences. An example mentioned was the agreement by the Tunisian government to host an exercise for observation of a search-and-rescue operation off the coast of Tunisia near Libya. A few days before this happened, the head of the Israeli delegation spoke to the media about the exercise, which led Tunisia and others to back off from participating in this CBM-related activity.

### **THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE AND THE RESOLUTION ON THE MIDDLE EAST**

With ACRS having effectively come to an end, the focus of US efforts on WMD non-proliferation in the Middle East shifted to the NPT. The main focus of the United States and other nuclear weapon states (NWS) at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference was to indefinitely extend this treaty. Although the United States secured a clear majority of NPT states parties in support of the indefinite extension, it was important for the US government to have the treaty indefinitely extended by consensus (without a vote) at the 1995 conference. American interviewees who spoke on this topic said that the objective was to show unanimity for the extension that would demonstrate that the treaty had “vitality” and its indefinite extension had “legitimacy”.

Extension came as part of a package of measures, including adoption of a Resolution on the Middle East. One interviewee claimed that Saudi Arabia initially led the effort on the resolution, and that, for six to eight months prior to the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, the US government was taking its cue from them. He did not recall what happened to the Saudi initiative but speculated that they may have eventually lost interest. Another interviewee who was in the room for the talks that led to the Middle East Resolution vehemently disagreed with this characterization as “overstated”. He acknowledged that the United States had discussions with the Saudis on the topic, but ultimately recognized that Egypt would take the lead on behalf of the Arab states at the conference. Egypt



*Ellen Tauscher, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, in a meeting at the IAEA headquarters (Vienna, Austria, 15 June 2011). Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA.*

communicated to the United States that it would not support the extension because of the lack of progress on addressing the status of Israel as a non-party to the NPT. The United States and Egypt thus embarked on a path that culminated in the Middle East Resolution.<sup>42</sup>

Egypt wanted a resolution that named Israel as a Middle Eastern state that was not yet party to the NPT. To get a resolution naming Israel, Egypt agreed to language that would name all states of the region that had not yet acceded to the treaty and called on them to accede to it. By the time of the 1995 conference, these included Djibouti, Israel, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. However, these Arab states pushed back on being named and the United States, as one interviewee recalled, was opposed to singling out Israel in multilateral forums. Egypt thus lost interest in sponsoring its own resolution. Another interviewee believed the Egyptians did not want to be on the record endorsing the indefinite extension without a resolution calling on Israel to sign the NPT.

One interviewee claimed the idea for what became the Middle East Resolution came from Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala, the Conference President. The resolution was drafted over the course of the four weeks of the conference. Although drafts circulated widely among delegations at various stages of the process, Robert Einhorn (a member of the US delegation) and Ambassador Nabil Fahmy (head of the Egyptian delegation) “firmly held the pen” in drafting the authoritative version. The United States worked for weeks on a resolution that it hoped would win wide Arab support for the extension without crossing Israel’s red lines. A senior US official consulted with Israelis in New York almost daily to ensure that the evolving draft was within their comfort zone. One interviewee compared this to the 2010 NPT Review Conference, when James Jones, US National Security Advisor, issued a statement to

<sup>42</sup> “1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference Adopts the ‘Resolution on the Middle East,’” 11 May 1995, UNIDIR Timeline.



reassure the Israelis. The night before the extension vote was to take place, key members of the US, Egyptian, and Syrian delegations as well as Dhanapala decided that the Middle East Resolution would be co-sponsored by the other depository states – Russia and the United Kingdom – which US officials scrambled to get onboard.

Interviewees with direct knowledge of US thinking at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference disagreed on whether the Middle East Resolution was necessary to get Egypt and other Arab states to join the consensus for the indefinite extension of the NPT or at least not oppose it. Some interviewees maintained that the Egyptians would not have voted against the indefinite extension. One saw the Middle East Resolution as a product of “a moment of [US] magnanimity” that at the end of the day was not necessary for the United States to win a majority for the extension – although not consensus without a vote. Another interviewee speculated that Egypt and the other Arab states might not have voted against the extension but would have found some device to show their opposition, like simply not being present in the room for the vote.<sup>43</sup>

An interviewee speculated that, although Egypt did not accomplish all of its ideal goals at the 1995 conference (i.e., singling out Israel by name), it was happy with the final result. This is because the Egyptians could interpret the 1995 resolution as assigning special responsibility for its implementation to the depository. While this might have been the impression among Arab states, including Egypt, two American interviewees questioned the legal standing of the 1995 resolution under international law, especially in comparison to the indefinite extension of the NPT, and therefore the level of obligation imposed on the depositories to implement it.

The resolution also satisfied Israel because it was not named in it and because the resolution further consolidated the expansion of the Zone concept from nuclear weapons (mainly targeting Israel) to all WMD and their delivery systems. It was also satisfied with the connection established by the resolution between the Middle East peace process and the ME WMDFZ.<sup>44</sup>

Interviewees held diverse opinions on the connection between ACRS, the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, and the Middle East Resolution. Two interviewees saw the resolution as an attempt by Egypt to raise the Zone issue in an international forum once it perceived that ACRS had failed. A third interviewee said that the United States foresaw at the time that the impasse over the Israeli nuclear issue, which held back ACRS, would also become an obstacle to getting an indefinite extension without a vote. As a result, the US government paid “lip service” to the Zone by co-sponsoring the resolution at the 1995 conference. In contrast, a fourth interviewee felt that the United States was genuine in its sponsorship of the Middle East Resolution, viewing the Zone as a desirable, long-term, aspirational goal. Finally, a fifth interviewee believed that there was a causal relationship between the failure of ACRS and the success of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference: with the conference on the horizon, Egypt hardened its position at ACRS because it no longer saw a reason for the working group to continue.

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<sup>43</sup> For the Egyptian perspective, see “The 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and the Middle East Resolution” in the Arab states Narratives in the publication.

<sup>44</sup> The Resolution “Endorses the aims and objectives of the Middle East peace process and recognizes that efforts in this regard, as well as other efforts, contribute to, inter alia, a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons as well as other weapons of mass destruction,” in “1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference Adopts the ‘Resolution on the Middle East,’ 11 May 1995, UNIDIR Timeline.

## THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

In the 15 years between the 1995 conference and the 2010 NPT Review Conference, there was limited multilateral action to establish a ME WMDFZ. One American interviewee attributed this long gap to the absence of a clear vision for the implementation of the Middle East Resolution by Middle Eastern states or the depositary states. This interviewee observed that the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 changed the nature of US engagement with the Middle East. The attention of both regional and international players became focused on the intersection between the security challenges posed by terrorism and WMD.<sup>45</sup> These players thus turned away from multilateral diplomacy as the primary mechanism for achieving regional WMD non-proliferation objectives. Another interviewee involved in US policy in that period agreed that there was little progress on the Zone or the 1995 resolution. But he said that incremental steps taken by states of the region towards joining the NPT and applying IAEA safeguards as well as other international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament treaties and instruments constituted a measure of progress towards implementation of the resolution, even if they were not labelled as such.

As a consequence of this gap, by the time the newly elected US President Barack Obama made his Prague speech on disarmament in April 2009,<sup>46</sup> with the 2010 NPT Review Conference on the horizon, the health of the global nuclear order had become a pressing issue. This included rising challenges from the nuclear programmes of Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

One interviewee noted that, after the Iraq War of 2003–2011 and the controversial policies of US President George W. Bush, the priorities of President Obama included strengthening the multilateral nuclear non-proliferation and arms control mechanisms and gradually making progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons. The Prague speech and the conclusion of the New START with Russia had created a positive environment for a successful Review Conference in 2010.

To achieve consensus on a Final Document at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, reaching an agreement on the ME WMDFZ with the Arab states (and Egypt in particular) was deemed important. In advance of and throughout the conference, the US delegation engaged with Egypt, Russia, and other key delegations to better understand each side's positions on the Zone. In a US–Egyptian compromise, it was ultimately agreed that the United Nations Secretary-General and the co-sponsors of the Middle East Resolution, in consultation with Middle Eastern states, would convene a conference to be attended by all of them, in 2012. The arrangements for this conference would be freely arrived at by the states of the region.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout the drafting process of the Final Document, the US delegation was in consistent contact with Israel. Following the end of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, however, Israel claimed that it was surprised and disappointed by the US agreement to the language of the Middle East section of the Final Document.<sup>48</sup> One interviewee with first-hand knowledge of US actions at the 2010 conference strongly asserted that this claim was “blatantly untrue”. If Prime Minister Netanyahu was displeased with

<sup>45</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1540, S/RES/1504(2004), 28 April 2004, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1504\(2004\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1504(2004)).

<sup>46</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered,” 5 April 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

<sup>47</sup> “The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution, in consultation with the States of the region, will convene a conference in 2012, to be attended by all States of the Middle East, on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by the States of the region, and with the full support and engagement of the nuclear-weapon States,” in 2010 NPT Review Conference, “Final Document,” NPT/CONF.2010/50, 1 May 2010, para. 7(a), <https://undir.org/node/5656>.

<sup>48</sup> For the Israeli perspective, see “Israeli concerns about the Obama Administration's non-proliferation policies” in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

this compromise language, it may have been the product of his diplomats pushing harder to avoid this outcome, or the Prime Minister not being properly briefed.

The other explanation offered by this interviewee was that the Israeli side knew what the US government was doing and reported it to Netanyahu, who decided not to attempt to block it with a phone call to President Obama. Instead, he elected to complain about it in bad faith afterwards. The interviewee felt that the second explanation could be true. The decision to hold a conference on a ME WMD/FZ in 2012 and the resultant Israeli grievances contributed to an overburdened bilateral agenda and to the negative atmosphere between the United States and Israel.

Interviewees highlighted three drivers of Israeli displeasure on the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, all of which became recurring themes on the Zone issue for the United States over the next years. The first was the international forums to which the 2012 Conference was linked. It was being held as a result of a decision by the NPT Review Conference, of which Israel is not a member state. A role in the 2012 Conference was also assigned to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, an organisation which the Israeli government views as biased against it.

The second issue was the Israeli expectation that the United States should prevent the creation of any forum where Israeli nuclear capabilities may be discussed, and Israel would be pressured to make concessions. Finally, singling out Israel in a document that otherwise did not name states seriously agitated Netanyahu. An interviewee felt that, while the Israeli Prime Minister would have probably still been upset about the agreement on the 2012 Conference, the political fallout may have been less severe if Israel had not been singled out.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the importance that the Obama administration placed on the success of the 2010 conference, it was still concerned with protecting the interests of Israel, as demonstrated by two statements delivered on the final day of the conference. The first was by Ellen Tauscher, the US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, who stated that:

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.<sup>50</sup>

The US government was not backtracking on the agreement to convene the 2012 Conference, interviewees said, but remarking that the states of the region would better encourage Israeli participation if they had not fashioned the Final Document to score political points at Israel's expense. In particular, the document singled out Israel, but not Iran, and as such it was not, in the US view, a balanced statement. The second US statement that day was by James Jones, the US National Security Advisor, who stated, along similar lines, that:

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

<sup>49</sup> "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," Part I, Section IV(5), 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0>.

<sup>50</sup> "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>.



countries feel confident that they can attend. Because of 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.<sup>51</sup>

For one interviewee, these two statements illustrated how the Obama administration planned to interpret the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference: namely, that convening the 2012 Conference required the consent of all relevant parties. In this vein, another interviewee said that the Arab states may have expected the United States to force Israel to attend the Conference. He also further contextualized the statements by adding that, if a joint statement is issued by states in a multilateral forum, then, when their diplomats return to capital, they may also release national statements to address criticism and to signal how they plan to proceed with the issue in question.

A third interviewee said that the US delegation repeatedly explained to the Arab side that the United States could not force Israel to participate in a ME WMDFZ conference and the only way to gain the participation of the Israeli government was by providing it with incentives to do so.

## **THE ROAD TO INDEFINITE POSTPONEMENT OF THE 2012 HELSINKI CONFERENCE**

Sustaining the credibility of the NPT was a high priority for the Obama administration, particularly after the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which it considered to have been a success. The White House encouraged the team assigned to the 2012 Conference to work creatively to find a way to keep the US commitment to organize the conference, while it emphasized the parallel need to prevent this issue from continuing to be an irritant in bilateral relations with Israel.

The road leading to holding a conference in 2012 was riddled with challenges. The long time it took to choose a Facilitator for the process was one of these challenges. One American interviewee noted that a complaint of the Arab states was that the depositary states showed no sense of urgency to begin the process immediately after the 2010 conference. But he felt that this delay did not affect the likelihood of convening the conference. Another interviewee claimed the delay was partly due to the priority given by the United States and the Middle Eastern states to efforts to revive Israeli–Palestinian peace talks in 2010–2011.<sup>52</sup> The start of the Arab Spring at this time may also have been a factor. The US government accelerated efforts to find a Facilitator when attempts at launching a new peace process collapsed.<sup>53</sup>

In order to ensure the acquiescence of the key regional parties, the Obama administration tried to find an extra regional state to act as the Facilitator that would be perceived as neutral in the Middle East. Interviewees identified Canada, Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, and Norway as the main candidates that were deemed diplomatically and financially capable of organizing the 2012 Conference. One interviewee noted that Japan dropped out. Another mentioned that the Russians were less comfortable with Canada, satisfied with the Netherlands, but most comfortable with Finland, which they knew well. The final choice was between the Netherlands and Finland.

<sup>51</sup> "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>.

<sup>52</sup> Jay Solomon, "U.S. Pushes New Effort on Peace in Mideast," Wall Street Journal, 17 June 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303499204576389882833250362>.

<sup>53</sup> Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, "Rough Seas Ahead: Issues for the 2015 NPT Review Conference," Arms Control Today 44, no. 3 (April 2014), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014-04/rough-seas-ahead-issues-2015-npt-review-conference>.

An interviewee said that the Netherlands was perceived by Arab states as less neutral, with a better relationship with Israel than Finland. The Finns were seen as enthusiastic and skilled with this type of diplomacy. The interviewee felt the Dutch would have been equally capable, but it would not have been such a national priority for them as it was for the Finns.

Ambassador Jaakko Laajava of Finland was ultimately selected as the Facilitator for the 2012 Conference, and Helsinki as the location for the Conference. He had been involved in the negotiation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in the 1970s and in the process that led to the Helsinki Final Act and the follow-up to the CSCE in the 1970s. According to one interviewee, this experience made Laajava optimistic about the task ahead.

The initial meetings of the three co-conveners – Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – with Angela Kane, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs at the time<sup>54</sup> and Ambassador Laajava were encouraging. The Facilitator had full support from his government, including funding, for extensive consultations in Middle Eastern capitals. The co-conveners, for their part, had each assigned seasoned officials who came with ideas about how to proceed. Despite a mutual recognition of the difficulties of the process before them, and the conveners' respective interests in the region, the three agreed that they would not surprise one another with unilateral initiatives and statements and would communicate regularly. In particular, the United States and Russia, despite disagreements on "tactics",<sup>55</sup> remained relatively well coordinated until the 2015 NPT Review Conference. There was also a tacit understanding between the two that Washington would consult closely with and seek to influence Israel, while Moscow would do the same with the Arab states. Among the most important points of consensus among the co-conveners was the goal that they should not just organize a conference in 2012 but should do so in such a way that would result in a productive outcome, with the complete participation of states of the region.

According to one interviewee, Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, who represented Russia, brought several assets to the table. These included a familiarity with the Middle East and, unlike the US officials, the ability to speak directly with Iran. This interviewee stated that, while there was extensive US–Russia engagement on the 2012 Helsinki Conference, Russia played more of a supporting role, typically not taking any initiative by itself.<sup>56</sup>

A major obstacle to holding the 2012 Conference was securing the participation of Israel, which the statement by Jones had identified as a requirement.<sup>57</sup> One interviewee said the prospects of Israel

One of the key points of consensus among the co-conveners was the shared objective of not only organizing a ME WMDFZ conference in 2012 but ensuring that it would lead to a productive outcome, with the active participation of all states in the region.

<sup>54</sup> Angela Kane, "Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Multilateral Consultations at Glion and Geneva on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference, 2013–2014," in *The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View From the Negotiating Table* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), <https://unidir.org/publication/angela-kane-consultations-glion-and-geneva-view-negotiating-table>.

<sup>55</sup> For the Russian perspective, see "Preparation for and the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Helsinki Conference" in the Russian Narrative in this publication.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> James L. Jones, "Statement About the Middle East Section of the 2010 NPT Review Conference Final Document," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 28 May 2010, <https://unidir.org/node/5657>.

joining the conference were damaged by the political fallout from the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Throughout 2010–2012, bilateral consultations were held between the co-convenors, Israel, and the Arab states to secure agreement on the meeting's agenda, rules of procedure, modalities, terms of reference, and on the role of the United Nations.

Israel did not immediately come around to the idea of participating in a conference in 2012. It remained sceptical and frequently critical of the whole endeavour, including the US role, although it also showed hints of flexibility. One of the main Israeli critiques of the process was that it had no interest in participating in a process which, if the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference was any indication, was primarily intended to stigmatize and isolate Israel. Another key critique of the process by the Israeli government was that it was being organized under the auspices of a treaty (the NPT) of which Israel is not a member and an organization (the United Nations) which it views as being biased against it. Based on this reasoning, the Israelis refused to meet with the full delegation of the co-sponsors when they visited the country in 2012 to avoid giving the impression that it was participating in an NPT process.

It was, on the other hand, understood that some Arab states and Iran were less likely to participate if the 2012 Helsinki Conference was convened outside a United Nations umbrella as many of these states had a firm policy not to engage with Israeli officials outside formal meetings of the United Nations. Additional elements like mistrust, security concerns, and lack of direct contact between most Arab states and Israel also affected the tone and political dynamics of these discussions. While the impression of Arab states may have been that it was the responsibility of the co-convenors to secure the attendance of Israel, the 2010 conference language included the phrase "on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at", which the US delegation fought hard to include.

In autumn 2012, the United States reached the conclusion that the participation of Israel could not be secured and that the conference should be indefinitely postponed until such a time that this impasse was resolved. Russia (strongly) and the United Kingdom (less strongly) disagreed with the US decision. The former argued that the credibility of the co-convenors would be damaged if they did not issue an invitation for a conference, with a target date of 2013, even if Israel did not attend. The US government could not agree with this position as it did not know if the Middle Eastern states would be able to agree on an agenda and modalities for a conference by this date.

One interviewee recalled that Russia' preferred option was to issue the invitation for a conference with an agenda and modalities based on consultations with all parties, and to then allow the Middle Eastern parties to decide whether to attend. He half-jokingly said that, in hindsight, he felt that they should have done this to allow the co-convenors to say that they had done their duty, even if some parties from the region did not participate. But the convenors agreed that they could not hold the conference if the United States was not prepared to do so. This interviewee said all of them acknowledged that this had to be a process that Israel had an interest in and that the Arab states needed to make concessions to bring it on board.

There was an effort to get a joint statement by all the co-convenors about the indefinite postponement of the conference. Once this proved unsuccessful, the United States issued a unilateral statement on 23 November 2012.<sup>58</sup> Two interviewees believed that the United States received the brunt of the criticism

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<sup>58</sup> Victoria Nuland, "US statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," Office of the Spokesperson, 23 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5693>.

for the indefinite postponement, including harsh criticism from the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).<sup>59</sup> Even the Russian statement on the postponement pinned some of the blame on the United States.<sup>60</sup>

## **THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS AT GLION AND GENEVA**

### **Challenges to gaining participation by states from the region in “technical meetings”**

Following the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Helsinki Conference, the co-conveners decided to hold direct informal consultations among the Middle Eastern parties on arrangements for a conference. Even before the postponement announcement, Ambassador Laajava had tabled the idea of convening “technical meetings” among the parties from the region. According to American interviewees the US objective for these consultations was to reach an agreement among all states of the region on the agenda and the modalities of the Helsinki Conference.

One of the first questions faced by the co-conveners was how to convince Israel to join a conference in which it was under no legal obligation to participate. Without necessarily endorsing or agreeing with Israeli arguments, the co-conveners concluded that Israel, as with any other sovereign state, had the right to seek an agenda and modalities for the conference that addressed its concerns and empowered it to attend. The Americans frequently emphasized to the Israelis the importance that the United States placed on the conference in the framework of the NPT and how well the NPT regime had served the international community, including Israel.

At this juncture, the option was raised again to issue an invitation for the conference without further consultation with the Middle Eastern parties. This would accept much if not all of the LAS positions but would modify the agenda and modalities to make it more attractive to Israel. The co-conveners again decided that this would not lead to a fully attended and useful conference.

The US side regularly noted that NWFZs in other regions had been negotiated among states that recognized one another and without the need for major powers or the United Nations to facilitate the process. It argued that it would be more fruitful for the states of the region to follow the example of the other regions. The counterargument of the LAS was that the unique situation of the Middle East necessitated a different approach, hinting at a US role to pressure Israel into the negotiations.

Israel gradually developed an interest in the idea of informal consultations and went from ignoring these efforts and hoping they would disappear to entertaining the possibility of joining them. According to an interviewee, the Israeli government’s interest in participating in the conference was probably motivated by its strong interest to directly interact with the Arab parties. It also had a desire to prevent further WMD proliferation, create a more stable regional security environment, and maintain good bilateral ties with the United States. The Israeli calculation was that, if nothing substantive came out of the informal consultations, at least it would not be blamed for the failure.

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<sup>59</sup> “NAM Statement on the Postponement of the Conference on the Middle East WMD Free Zone,” 29 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/6078>, and League of Arab States, “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,” Resolution 7580, 13 January 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5698>.

<sup>60</sup> Victoria Nuland, “US statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference”; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Russia Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference,” 24 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5694>; United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “UK Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference,” 24 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5695>; United Nations Secretary-General, “UN Secretary General’s Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference,” 24 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5697>, and Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, “Facilitator’s Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference,” 24 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5696>.

The US delegation viewed Ambassador Ulyanov's role in the informal consultations as constructive, particularly in his encouragement for the LAS to develop a formula that would effectively address the concerns raised by Israel.

As for the Arab parties, this interviewee said securing their attendance was not a simple matter either. The LAS Senior Officials Committee (SOC), in response to the initiative to hold the consultations, outlined several conditions for the participation of Arab parties. These included that the consultations had to take place under the umbrella of the United Nations; that a date for the conference should be set in advance of consultations; and that agreement by all participants to attend the conference had to be secured ahead of time.<sup>61</sup>

Eventually, both Israel and the Arab parties accepted the ambiguous nature of the informal consultations. For the Arab side, the inclusion of the United Nations Secretary-General as a sponsor addressed one of their requirements. Israel continued to resist any optical signal that it was participating in an event mandated by the NPT while also resisting any visible symbols of the United Nations such as its facilities, flags, and personnel.

The interviewee claimed that Laajava made efforts to secure the participation of Iran. The Iranian government was aware of the process but not deeply involved in it. A junior Iranian official from the Geneva Mission did attend the first meeting in Glion but soon ceased participation. This interviewee assessed that, if the LAS could get onboard with an agenda and modalities, then Iran would ultimately not boycott the actual conference.

The effort to find a suitable role for the United Nations that addressed the concerns of both the Arab parties and Israel led the co-conveners and the Facilitator to consider meeting sites other than the United Nations Office at Geneva and, eventually, locations outside Geneva. The logistical and financial support of the Swiss government was important in this regard and led to the decision to hold the informal consultations at the Hotel Victoria in Glion. While this village was near Geneva, it was geographically and symbolically distinct from it. Once Swiss funding ran out after the first three meetings in Glion, the consultations moved to Geneva for the subsequent two meetings, but they continued to be held without United Nations symbols.

The co-conveners became frustrated because the effort to convene "technical meetings", intended to write a mutually acceptable agenda and modalities for a conference, was caught up in the second-order issue of finding mutually acceptable modalities for the technical meetings. The co-conveners sought to reassure the two sides from the region that the technical meetings in Switzerland aimed to reach agreement on a conference in Helsinki and that arrangements for the first set of meetings did not constitute a precedent for the next meeting. Nonetheless, Israel was worried by the prospect of falling down a "slippery slope" created by the Arab side.<sup>62</sup> The LAS similarly remained concerned that it would be "trapped" by the Israeli "long-corridor". It continued to insist on holding any meetings in a United Nations building and with a prominent role for the representative of the Secretary-General.

<sup>61</sup> For the Arab perspective, see "The informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2010-2013" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.

<sup>62</sup> For the Israeli perspective, see "The consultations before the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2010-2013" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

### **The first meeting in Glion, 21 October 2013**

The first meeting of the informal consultations was held in Glion on 21 October 2013, nearly a year after Ambassador Laajava first suggested direct consultations. One factor that nudged the Middle Eastern parties to participate was that it was a “meeting of the co-conveners” to which regional parties were invited, rather than a meeting of these parties themselves.

Ambassador Thomas Countryman, the US representative, outlined what he believed would be a productive consensus that could result from the informal consultations: that all the Middle Eastern parties believed that the Helsinki Conference would be valuable for the region; that all the parties from the region approach the conference with mutual respect; and that its agenda should facilitate a full discussion of all parties’ concerns rather than restrict it. He further emphasized that neither side could force the other to accept its definition of the nature of the conference (e.g. focusing exclusively on WMD or on regional security), its agenda, the role of the United Nations, or that of the co-conveners. A creative compromise was needed all around.

At the outset of this meeting, the Israeli representative and an Arab representative said how pleased they were that the co-conveners and Middle Eastern parties were present in the same room, although the Egyptian representative added that the meeting should have been held at the United Nations in Geneva. There were disagreements between the parties from the region throughout the meeting, but everyone remained polite. Some Arab ambassadors came over to shake the hand of Ambassador Jeremy Issacharoff, the head of the Israeli delegation and the most senior career diplomat in the MFA, and vice versa, while others consciously avoided him.

One American interviewee believed that the Israeli delegation was impressed with the positive tone of the Arab side, with virtually no “Israel bashing”, while the Arab participants were similarly impressed by the positive tone of Israeli remarks. The interviewee noted that these remarks were more positive about the value of a ME WMDFZ than he had heard from any Israeli official before.

Once the process began in earnest, however, the core differences between the two sides became apparent to all present. Issacharoff focused on the need to simultaneously discuss regional security challenges in order to make progress on negotiating a Zone treaty, and on the need for the whole process to advance based on the principle of consensus among all parties from the region. The Arab side maintained that any discussion of regional security, particularly conventional military challenges, was beyond the mandate from the 2010 NPT Review Conference. However, they believed that progress in Zone negotiations would itself constitute a CBM among Middle Eastern states. The LAS also re-stated its position that the diplomatic formulation “freely arrived at” applied exclusively to the conclusion of a Zone treaty, and not to every step along the way. The Israeli representative rejected the idea that a Zone treaty could by itself constitute the starting point of a process or a CBM, instead asserting that any such treaty would be the end result of a process of confidence-building and threat reduction among regional parties.

At the end of the first meeting in Glion, the co-conveners and the Facilitator were encouraged by the “positive” and “respectful” tone demonstrated by nearly all parties present. Israel assessed it to have been more productive than it had expected and signalled its willingness to continue. All sides thus agreed to hold a second meeting.



### The second meeting in Glion, 25 November 2013

At the outset of the second meeting in Glion, Ambassador Laajava summarized the progress made and laid out the remaining differences. These were not inconsiderable: first, and most important, was if and how to include discussion of regional security issues in the Helsinki Conference; second was the role of the United Nations in such a conference; third, and finally, was whether it would operate according to the principle of consensus. These major issues, as well as other lesser ones, were discussed at this meeting in an atmosphere of continued mutual respect. On the inclusion of regional security in the agenda of the Helsinki Conference – the most contentious issue between the two sides – there was extensive discussion but no agreement.

The US delegation perceived the role of Ambassador Ulyanov as being positive throughout the second meeting. In particular, he encouraged the LAS to find a formula to seriously address the issues raised by Israel. One important Russian effort in this regard was to share a proposal to establish three working groups to work in parallel: one on the properties of a Zone; a second on verification and compliance; and a third on regional security and confidence-building.<sup>63</sup> Ambassador Issacharoff welcomed the Russian proposal and emphasized that his government would want to see a draft concluding document before committing to attend the conference.

The LAS, which represented the collective Arab position at the informal consultations, continued to oppose the inclusion of “regional security” in an agenda or outcome document. It maintained that the issue of WMD was the most pressing one facing the Middle East. It also argued that expanding the scope of the conference beyond WMD (and thus the mandate of the 2010 NPT Review Conference) would open potentially endless discussion of issues. Finally, the LAS was concerned that Israel would use discussions of regional security to indefinitely delay serious work on the ME WMDFZ, although this was stated less formally at the side-lines of meetings rather than in meetings themselves.

The LAS at this point indicated its readiness to have an item on the agenda on “WMD-related confidence-building measures, and WMD delivery systems”. It also accepted that the Conference could operate according to the principle of consensus. Credit was given by the US side to the Arab parties for the acknowledgement of this principle as an important show of flexibility that provided positive impetus for the talks to advance. Nonetheless, one American interviewee noted that consensus was a basic principle of any multilateral negotiations and that this was not a big concession.

The LAS continued to highlight the importance of having a visible role for the United Nations Secretary-General, or at least the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, in the conference. The Israeli delegation, for its part, continued to resist assigning the Secretary-General any role in the Helsinki Conference, be it issuing the invitations or chairing its sessions.

Several issues of secondary importance were discussed but not resolved during the second meeting. These included: if the invitation and agenda for the conference needed to define specific terms of reference; if it was necessary to provide official “background documentation” for the conference; the text of invitations to Helsinki, and if they would be issued by the Facilitator, the co-conveners, or the United Nations; and the status of Palestine at the conference. The LAS appealed to Israel to respond to the LAS’s proposals, contained in a non-paper, with its own non-paper to facilitate the challenging

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<sup>63</sup> 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>.

process of finding a compromise between the two sides.

At this juncture, Laajava circulated a non-paper, titled "Sandra's List", on the modalities for a Helsinki Conference based on the discussions thus far.<sup>64</sup> An interviewee remarked that by doing this the Facilitator had "wisely" tried to put out some of his own ideas, producing a compilation of the various proposals up to that point, and a draft agenda.

In his closing remarks, Countryman, the US representative, introduced the idea of direct Arab–Israeli talks, without having to wait for the co-conveners, in order to facilitate even faster progress towards an agreement. Ahead of the third meeting in Glion, the co-conveners discussed the progress that had been achieved and concluded that resolving if and how to reference "regional security" issues in a conference, which they felt would be the most difficult issue, could best be addressed in a smaller group format featuring Israel, Egypt, and one or two other Arab states.



*UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon meets with Jaakko Laajava, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Security Policy of Finland and Facilitator for the 2012 Conference on the Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction (New York, United States of America, 27 October 2011). Credit: Eskinder Debebe / UN Photo.*

### **The third meeting in Glion, 4 February 2014**

The co-conveners sought to make a smaller group format happen at the third meeting in Glion. One American interviewee explained that, while there were honest and useful discussions in small groups over meals, there were no focused bilateral negotiations that culminated in a compromise on the agenda, and the place of regional security in it. The Egyptians were explicit that they were not prepared to take such a step.

According to this interviewee, the third meeting had a notably less positive tone, even as all sides continued to speak with one another in a generally respectful manner. This may have partly been because the Arab side was less strongly represented, as Ambassador Wael Al Assad, the LAS representative, and some others did not receive visas on time.

Although the tone of the LAS's opening comments remained positive, it also insisted that, unless the meeting set a date for the Helsinki Conference, the LAS could not continue the consultations. Ambassador Issacharoff argued that they should focus on reaching an agreement on the agenda and, ideally, a draft outcome document, instead of the date. This was because a date for a conference would naturally flow from reaching these other milestones.

<sup>64</sup> "Sandra's List," Facilitator Non-paper at the 2nd Informal Consultation Meeting, 16 November 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5705>.



The main point of contention between the Arab and Israeli sides during the informal consultations was their differing perspectives on the relationship between the Zone and regional security.

The parties from the region, even with the assistance of the co-conveners, were unable to find a compromise between the two sets of priorities. Both sides grew more visibly frustrated over this impasse, which in turn soured the mood of the second day of the meeting.

#### **The fourth meeting in Geneva, 14 May 2014**

Following the third Glion meeting, the United States continued to work with the other conveners to arrange meetings in a smaller group format outside the public eye between Israel and a selection of

Arab states. These would focus on the main goal of reaching a compromise on the agenda.

The nature of the role of the United Nations in the Helsinki Conference had also still not been resolved. The insistence by the Arab side on having a United Nations umbrella appeared to be hardening and was part of the rationale for moving the meetings from Glion to Geneva. Yet the presence of United Nations flags and security personnel outside the premises of the fourth meeting in Geneva, on 14 May 2014, raised objections from Ambassador Issacharoff, who would not join the meeting until these symbols were removed.

According to an American interviewee, there was a substantive exchange between the Arab and Israeli sides on the question of the inclusion of “regional security” in the agenda. Despite the substantive nature of this exchange, and the Russian side once again playing a positive role to help bridge this gap, the impasse over this difficult issue remained.

#### **The fifth meeting in Geneva, 24 June 2014**

At the fifth (and final) meeting of the informal consultations, in Geneva on 23 June 2014, Ambassador Issacharoff again emphasized that an agreement on an agenda and a draft final document would directly lead to setting a date for the Helsinki Conference.

Ambassador Countryman, the US representative, supported his Israeli counterpart on including “regional security” in the agenda. He based this on the argument that, while discussion of this topic would indeed complicate the conference, its exclusion would result in an agenda that did not address Israel’s main concern and would lead to an even longer and less fruitful process. In this context the British representative helpfully reminded those assembled that the mandate of the 2010 NPT Review Conference neither required nor forbade the discussion of regional security issues.

At this point, Israel tabled a non-paper in response to the LAS’s proposals at the second meeting. This ignited hopes that the sides would be able to create a compromise agenda. According to an American interviewee, despite a clear and substantive discussion between the two sides, as well as a strong effort by the Russian delegation to encourage a compromise, comparing the two non-papers appeared to only harden the position of each side on the question of the inclusion of “regional security” or a similar formulation. At this juncture, it appeared to him that the co-conveners and the Middle Eastern parties were positioning themselves to avoid blame for their inability to reach a compromise both at home and before the international community.

The meeting ended without a firm decision to hold one more meeting of the informal consultations in the coming months. A majority of Arab delegations preferred to wait to receive new instructions from the upcoming meeting of the LAS Council of Arab Foreign Ministers.

The co-conveners and Ambassador Laajava continued to work on two tracks from June 2014 until early 2015. The first track sought to arrange a meeting (with or without the participation of the co-conveners and the Facilitator) between Israel, Egypt, and possibly one other Arab representative to focus on writing a concise two-sentence agenda. This agenda would need to allow both Israel and the LAS to justify their participation in a conference as consistent with long-held positions. The second track sought to continue the informal consultations, ideally with a smaller group format that could carry on the search for a compromise on the modalities for a conference.

By early 2015, however, it became clear that Egypt was mainly focused on addressing the issue of a conference on a ME WMDFZ at the upcoming 2015 NPT Review Conference, rather than continuing with the informal consultations. At this point, the US side had maintained for several months that the key breakthroughs in multilateral negotiations had nearly always been achieved in small format, rather than plenary meetings. One interviewee speculated that Egypt pursued this course of action as it may not have wanted to put itself in the position of negotiating independently with Israel on the agenda given how difficult it had been to reach a consensus within the LAS.

### **The main dividing lines between Israel and the Arab parties**

There were three substantive issues of contention throughout the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva: the agenda (and the inclusion of regional security); if decision-making at the Helsinki Conference would be based on the principle of consensus; and the role of the United Nations.

Some American interviewees felt that what was needed at this stage was agreement on the structure of the agenda, and not on detailed items. One interviewee noted that the Arab parties were explicit that they believed the way the agenda was written in the first meeting would determine the course of discussions. The interviewee said that he disagreed with this viewpoint at the time and tried to persuade the Arab side that a process leading up to a conference would require many years, during which the agenda would evolve, and no one would even recall the agenda of the first session.

The key substantive difference between the Arab and Israeli sides at the informal consultations was over the relationship between a ME WMDFZ and regional security. The Israeli position was that a discussion of a Zone could only happen in parallel to discussions on regional security issues. From the outset, however, Egypt's position was that this conference should discuss only WMD, and all other topics were irrelevant. Some other Arab states generally acknowledged that regional security issues were relevant but were concerned that, if included in the agenda, then Israel would use it as an opening to say it could not discuss the Zone until this priority was addressed. The viewpoint of the Israeli side was the mirror image: that unless the process was clear on the parallelism between a Zone and regional security, then the Arabs would come to the meeting ostensibly to discuss regional security, say nothing, and then discuss the Zone exclusively. The co-conveners, for their part, did not read the decision of the 2010 NPT Review Conference as forbidding the discussion on certain related topics and were willing to consider regional security topics for the agenda that Israel believed were directly related to the creation of a ME WMDFZ.

One interviewee mentioned that, in order to address Israeli interest in discussing regional security, those at the informal consultations considered including in the agenda the wording “regional security issues as related to the Zone”. This vague formulation could be interpreted broadly as applying to any regional security issue, or narrowly. He recalled the wording was suggested by Russia. The interviewee did not consider it as a significant compromise, given that the wording may not have been ultimately approved in the LAS and encompassed a potentially narrow scope.

Zooming out to a broader principle for a conference on a ME WMDFZ, the inclusion of the phrase “on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at” was, from a US perspective, crucial to reaching an agreement on the Middle East section of the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The United States maintained that respect for this principle had to apply not only to the conclusion of any agreement but every step along the way. The Arab position, at least prior to informal consultations, was that this formulation applied only to the ultimate decision on a Zone.

Following the second meeting in Glion, the Arab side distributed a non-paper agreeing that the phrase “freely arrived at” meant “consensus”<sup>65</sup> and that decisions at the Helsinki Conference had to be made by consensus. The Arab parties considered this a big concession, and two interviewees credited them for it, but they also noted that it was basic diplomacy. One interviewee believed that a reason this and subsequent meetings of the consultations stalled was that the Arabs felt they had not received reciprocal concessions, and there were even some discussions among them on whether they should continue to attend the consultations.

The venue for a prospective Zone conference and the objectives of the conference was also a looming issue where the two sides disagreed. The Arab parties insisted that a ME WMDFZ conference be held under United Nations auspices, whereas Israel insisted it should not.

Finally, on the process that resulted from the consultations, the Arab side wanted the Conference to launch a Zone treaty-negotiating process, whereas Israel wanted a more open-ended process.

### **The role of the Facilitator**

Ambassador Laajava was viewed by the United States as having done an enormous amount of work to speak with and figure out the requirements and red lines of the key Middle Eastern players. One American interviewee asserted that the Facilitator tried to make progress, bridge the chasm between the sides, and find avenues for compromise in terms of the setting, style, and the tone of meetings, including convening smaller group format meetings. He also believed that a lot of effort was put into Laajava’s visits to all the region’s capitals to gather and synthesize the opinions there.

Another interviewee noted that this approach was generally a good one, because when visiting capitals like Abu Dhabi, Amman, or Riyadh, one heard different or possibly more creative ideas than what would emerge from the LAS SOC in Cairo. But he observed that Laajava’s approach also antagonized some Arab representatives to the extent that they blamed him for being insensitive and disrespectful.

An interviewee recalled his first conversation with the Facilitator in which the latter saw parallels between his task and the CSCE process. While Laajava recognized that the two processes were distinct, he also saw the similarities, including the notion of historical rivals learning to live together by making

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<sup>65</sup> League of Arab States, “Non-paper prepared following the 2nd Glion Consultation,” 25 November 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/6094>.

agreements across a range of topics.<sup>66</sup> The interviewee believed this analogy was not applicable to the Middle East as the situation in Europe in the 1970s was not as bad as in the Middle East in the 2010s. Interviewees with direct knowledge of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva were satisfied with the Facilitator's performance but acknowledged that there was a growing discontent by the Arab parties with the execution of his role as the process unfolded.

A highpoint of this discontent came after Laajava provided the "Sandra's List" non-paper (named after Sandra Hatzidakis, a member of his team)<sup>67</sup> at the second meeting in Glion.<sup>68</sup> The sides agreed that this was an unofficial document, with no legal standing, on which the Facilitator would receive feedback and then circulate updated versions as the informal consultations advanced. But its unofficial status and the fact that it was titled as a "list" and was issued by a relatively junior member of the Facilitator's team and not by him led some of the Arab representatives to perceive that the document's standing and relevance were ambiguous. They felt that they were not being treated seriously, and that Ambassador Laajava had been "disrespectful" towards them.

One interviewee speculated that the name of the document may have been an attempt by the Facilitator to work around some procedural issues, the informal nature of the consultations, and political sensitivities of both Israel and the Arab side. He maintained that it is possible that, if a different name had been used, the Arab parties might have received it better. But as it stood it became a point of rupture (among others) between Ambassador Laajava and the Arab side. Another interviewee concluded that, once the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva fell apart and did not hold a sixth meeting, there were mutual recriminations and attacks on the Facilitator.

### **The constrained but constructive approach of Israel versus inflexibility of the LAS and Egypt**

American interviewees who spoke on the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva contrasted the approaches of Israel and the Arab parties on the assignment of personnel and decision-making there. One interviewee found it easier to get answers from Israel than from the Arab parties: the latter were reluctant to take on new or risky positions, while the former had a senior official who was trusted by decision-makers. Ambassador Issacharoff was one of Israel's most senior diplomats, who outranked the heads of Arab delegations. His appointment to represent Israel at the informal consultations was taken as a sign of Israeli good faith by the Obama administration and the other conveners. Another interviewee noted his integral role in creating a constructive atmosphere. The Arab representatives were pleased with his directness, positiveness, and open-mindedness.

An interviewee recalled that the proposal by the co-conveners to pivot to a smaller group format towards the end of the consultations was partly due to the perceived inefficiency of the decision-making process of the LAS SOC. This was a source of frustration given that much time was spent on negotiations among the LAS member states to find a common position. The effort they made to achieve internal consensus meant that they had little ability to consider any deviation or compromise from their agreed position. At the consultations, it became clear to the United States that the Arab delegations were not sufficiently empowered to negotiate on important issues without returning to the SOC and frequently even had to refer issues up to the LAS Council of Arab Foreign Ministers.

<sup>66</sup> US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "The Helsinki Process and the OSCE," <https://www.csce.gov/about-csce/helsinki-process-and-osce>.

<sup>67</sup> Sandra's List.

<sup>68</sup> "Second Informal Consultations to hold the ME WMD/FZ Conferences are Held and Sandra's List is Shared," 25 November 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

One interviewee recalled that the meetings in Glion had showcased to the United States that many Arab parties were not going out on a limb on these issues, but instead deferred to Egypt. The latter was a primary actor on this set of issues and had a substantial voice in the LAS, which represented a unified Arab position during the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva. He noted that, while the other Arab parties may have had their own preferences, they were often not willing to challenge Cairo even if they occasionally expressed their national views.<sup>69</sup> According to this interviewee, it was clear to him that there was some unhappiness with perceived Egyptian heavy-handedness that prevented compromise. He acknowledged not all parties expressed this sentiment but said that some were more willing to bridge the gap with Israel.

As explained above, to overcome the stalemate, the Facilitator and co-conveners (mainly the United States) began trying to hold a meeting between Egypt and Israel. This non-public meeting could have been either strictly bilateral, with Ambassador Laajava in his role as the Facilitator, or with both the Facilitator and the co-conveners attending. As outlined above, Egypt responded that they could not meet alone as the topic was an issue pertaining to all of the LAS and thus required the consent of all of its member states.

One interviewee maintained that, while this was the official Egyptian explanation, the LAS has positions on many matters but that did not stop Egypt, which had generally proactive diplomats, from negotiating on matters that were priorities for Egypt. He outlined three potential explanations for why Egypt saw more risk than benefit in meeting with Israel in a smaller or bilateral format. One explanation was that the Egyptians felt that they did not have a mandate from their foreign minister to negotiate beyond what was already agreed. Second, they may have been concerned about the repercussions if the other Arabs parties discovered that they were negotiating separately with Israel. Finally, they may have calculated that they would have less leverage to get a good deal with Israel if they were put on the spot, particularly if Laajava and the co-conveners attended. Whatever the reason, the interviewee criticized Egypt for not convening this meeting to finalize the agenda. Egyptian representatives held general discussions, including friendly coffee conversations with Issacharoff in Glion, and Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi discussed the ME WMD-FZ at least once. However, there was no bilateral discussion of the issue, at either a political or a technical level, with the purpose of writing an agenda.

Another interviewee believed that Egypt's failure to act on this suggestion showed that it was less interested in making progress than in keeping the issue alive under its leadership. It may have been safer and more attractive for Egypt to maintain the status quo rather than take a risk or an initiative to advance the Zone issue and thereby lose its primacy.

Another reason mentioned by interviewees was the division of labour in the Egyptian governmental on Israel. In this context, a third interviewee noted the striking contrast in Egypt–Israel relations between the ME WMD-FZ and all other security issues. The two states have diplomatic ties and increasingly tight security cooperation managed directly by the top leadership and their security bodies. Yet, although they have direct conversations on other security issues, he believed that the Egyptian MFA does not discuss the Zone – theoretically one of Cairo's top priorities – directly with Israel. He saw the reason for this as being at least partly due to the MFA's role as maintaining the reputation of President El-Sisi as anti-Israel and pro-Palestine and to give Israel trouble in international forums within the bounds of reason. This includes on the Zone issue.

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<sup>69</sup> For the Arab perspective, see "The informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2013-14" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.



*Rose Gottemoeller, US Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, delivered her concluding remarks at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, noting that the US could not endorse the draft Final Document. Gottemoeller explained that the language concerning the convening of the ME WMDFZ Conference was incompatible with longstanding US policies. (New York, USA). Credit: UNIDIR Timeline video screenshot.*

Interviewees with first-hand knowledge of the informal consultations mainly highlighted among the Arab parties the role of the Ambassador Al Assad as the LAS representative, which they generally viewed positively, and the role of Egypt, which they generally saw negatively. One major exception to this was the role of Algeria, which one interviewee characterized as being “hard-line”, including pushing back on the inclusion of regional security in the agenda. He felt that Algeria’s role was to keep the Egyptians “honest” and not allow them to make any big “concessions”.

### End of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva: Reasons for failure and positive legacies

American interviewees with direct knowledge of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva said that, in general, they were pleasantly surprised by the progress made. Reflecting on the process, they believed that it had all the right ingredients for success: direct, respectful communication between parties with opposing views; a readiness to reconsider long-standing and deeply entrenched positions; an inadequate but still noticeable readiness to focus on potential long-term opportunities, rather than just short-term risks; and a well-designed process with sufficient input from the Facilitator and support from the co-conveners.

These interviewees, prompted by questions derived from criticisms of the Facilitator by Arab interviewees,<sup>70</sup> felt that Laajava and the Finnish team did everything they could. They actively circulated substantive ideas, put together a series of non-papers, conferenced ways to move forward, and highlighted areas in which there was agreement for holding the Helsinki Conference. The only thing the Facilitator could have done differently, according to one interviewee, was to send invitation letters to the

<sup>70</sup> For the Arab perspective, see “The informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2013-14” in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.



conference, share an agenda, and hope everyone attended – an option also contemplated by the co-conveners. This approach, however, may have been just as unsuccessful as what transpired due to the lack of agreement on many issues by regional players.

These interviewees first and foremost placed responsibility for the end of the informal consultations squarely on Egypt and, to a lesser degree, the other Arab parties. This applied to both the proximate cause of the decision not to have a sixth meeting and the decision not to continue the consultations in some form before, during, or after the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

One interviewee equated the reason for the end of the consultations with that for the end of ACRS: it ended when the Egyptian government believed that it was not getting enough, fast enough. Another interviewee, also thinking of ACRS, said that Egypt concluded that, after five years of getting nowhere with the Helsinki Conference, it would be more productive for it to get agreement to convene a ME WMD/FZ conference on its terms through the 2015 conference. Another interviewee highlighted that the expectation of Egypt that it could make swift progress at the 2015 conference was unrealistic. He noted that negotiations on sensitive security issues take time. He felt that Cairo held steadfast to its positions and did not budge from them. In contrast, in his view there was some evolution in the positions of certain Arab parties, from believing the consultations must result in a diplomatic conference on a Zone to – in the words of this interviewee – “let us at least have a first conference and hopefully there can be enough political momentum to continue”.

Second, the failure of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva according to these interviewees could be attributed to the lack of political will by Egypt and other Arab parties for the process to continue. One interviewee said that the Arab side was not interested in reaching a compromise but instead wanted to impose a solution that fitted its own requirements painstakingly negotiation in the Arab League. It was also clear to him from the talking points of Egypt and its unwillingness to hold smaller format meetings with Israel that Egypt was not interested in expanding the agenda beyond WMD, even if this would have helped the sides reach an agreement on the agenda as a key requirement for holding the Helsinki Conference. From this he surmised that, for Egypt and the other Arab parties, the Zone was not as large a priority as they signalled.

Third, an interviewee believed that neither the Arab parties nor Israel could easily let go of their chief historical complaints and bridge the gap between their viewpoints in order to allow the Helsinki Conference to go ahead. For the Arab side, it was the experience of ACRS, which made them “allergic” to any reference to “regional security” during the informal consultations and led them to fear that any engagement with this concept would (among other things) lead them into the Israeli trap of the “long corridor”. For Israel, since Israel had been left out of its negotiation of the mandate to hold the Helsinki Conference, its default position was not to participate in any subsequent process. The Israeli side feared that engagement with a process that they believed was imposed on them or any other major concessions (without sufficient reciprocity by their Arab counterparts) would lead them down a “slippery slope”.

With these three factors in mind as the main reasons for the failure of the consultations from a US perspective, one interviewee concluded that they were probably doomed to fail from the start. Despite this pessimism, interviewees with first-hand knowledge of these events believed that the United States, Israel, and most Arab parties who attended these meetings did not regard the process as a complete failure and thought it was useful. An interviewee remarked on the important and positive roles of

ambassadors Al Assad of the LAS, Issacharoff of Israel, and Countryman of the United States in advancing the process.

Three key lessons the United States learned from the consultations were outlined by these interviewees. First, there was a need for deeper engagement with capitals. A ME WMDFZ is not an issue that disarmament ambassadors can resolve on their own. What was achieved might have been salvaged if there were direct talks between Egypt and Israel. Another lesson was on the role of the United Nations. The US position is that, as the Zone is a regional matter, it should be negotiated by Middle Eastern states since its obligations and enforcement will be taken on by them. When the United Nations is placed in the centre of a regional issue, it is likely to be more of a hindrance than an assistance since Israel views it as another forum of pressure against it by the Arab states. Finally, getting to a Zone conference and reaching agreement depended on regional conditions. Advancing ambitious regional arms control goals is very difficult without addressing underlying tensions and conflict on the ground there.

There were also broader impressions by interviewees that security arrangements cannot be forced on unwilling states unless there is readiness to employ coercion and, in the case of the Zone, no state is prepared to go to war to persuade either Israel or Egypt to alter their positions. A second broader impression was that the Arab parties at the consultations and in other forums consistently overstated the capability of the United States to compel Israel to do what the Arab parties wanted.

## **THE 2015 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE**

### **The context shift between the 2010 and 2015 NPT Review Conferences**

American interviewees involved in the 2015 NPT Review Conference reflected on the differences with the 2010 NPT Review Conference. In May 2010 there had been goodwill and optimism in the international community to make progress on disarmament: New START Treaty had been signed; the first Nuclear Security Summit had brought together heads of states; and the 2010 Review Conference was seen as a continuation of President Obama's Prague agenda.

The world was a very different place in 2015. The 2015 conference was more challenging due to the ME WMDFZ issue but even more so due to the failure of the United States and Russia to make progress on further arms reductions after New START. The desire of most NNWS was for stronger statements on arms control and that the five NWS should make stronger commitments on disarmament.

The US delegation at the 2015 NPT Review Conference was prepared to agree with many of the stronger statements and commitments on nuclear disarmament. However, one interviewee sensed that Russia was not interested in taking additional steps on arms control and felt threatened by the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (HINW) movement, which likely cooled its willingness to offer more conciliatory language on disarmament in the Final Document.<sup>71</sup>

**The informal consultations in Glion and Geneva ended similarly to ACRS according to one interviewee, because the Egyptian government felt that it was not getting enough, fast enough.**

<sup>71</sup> For the Russian perspective, see "The 2015 NPT Review Conference" in the Russian Narrative in this publication.

An additional element worth noting for this interviewee was the souring of relations between the United States and the Russia following the latter's annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, he noted that this dynamic was not very evident between the respective delegations and, in general, did not affect their discussions on the NPT and the Zone.

### **The Egyptian gamble**

Going into the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the Obama administration sought to secure agreement among the Arab parties and Israel to continue the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, with an aim of convening the proposed conference soon after the 2015 conference. An American interviewee said that, although the shadow of the Middle East Resolution hung over the conference that year, the US delegation was hopeful that it could reach a deal on the language "to keep the cauldron from bubbling over" and to hold a conference the following year.

On the first day of the 2015 NPT Review Conference, however, the US delegation was surprised by an aggressive Egyptian proposal.<sup>72</sup> This called for a ME WMDFZ conference to be held under a United Nations mandate, for decision-making to be made by consensus only to the extent feasible, for the agenda to focus narrowly on a Zone, and for the conference to be held within 180 days. This interviewee perceived the Egyptian proposal as a wholesale rejection of continuing the informal consultations and building on the progress made there. The proposal was worse than what US officials had expected. It was obvious to the interviewee that Egypt was not serious about trying to reach an agreement on this issue at the 2015 conference.

The interviewee saw the Egyptian proposal as a gamble on their part. The proposal, if it later came to be reflected in the Final Document, would put the US delegation into a corner by forcing it to either break consensus or accept an outcome that is inconsistent with its principles on the ME WMDFZ.<sup>73</sup> He felt that the Egyptian perspective on this gamble was that their relationship with the United States was unlikely to be disrupted by disagreement over the Zone issue.

Another interviewee mentioned that senior leaders in the Egyptian delegation held deeply ingrained views on the ME WMDFZ and had political cover from their MFA to push the issue during the 2015 NPT Review Conference. They therefore may have been comfortable with the risks of upsetting the Obama administration, assessing that the pressure to achieve consensus would force the US delegation to accept a way ahead on the Zone that did not fully align with its position. The interviewee noted that NPT Review Conferences have a theatrical element, and Egypt played up its grievances at the 2015 conference as they felt the co-conveners had failed to fulfil their promise, with the hope the United States might accept their proposal.<sup>74</sup>

### **The US and Russian paths diverge on the ME WMDFZ**

In the lead-up to the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the ME WMDFZ conference was treated as a "protected" issue between the United States and Russia, compartmentalized from the downturn in bilateral relations after the invasion of Crimea. Designated US and Russian officials worked closely on this issue and had a shared assessment of the benefits and challenges of the informal consultations in

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<sup>72</sup> Hisham Bad, "Statement delivered at the Main Committee II of the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations in New York, 2 May 2015, [https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2015/statements/4May\\_Egypt\\_MCII.pdf](https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2015/statements/4May_Egypt_MCII.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> John Kerry, "US Opening Remarks At The 2015 NPT RevCon," Secretary of State, 27 April 2015, <https://unidir.org/node/6127>.

<sup>74</sup> For the Egypt perspective, see "The 2015 NPT Review Conference" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.

Glion and Geneva. All that remained to figure out was the language on a path that would allow the process to continue in a way that would not seriously upset the Arab position.

The co-convenors and the Facilitator met at the outset of the 2015 conference. According to one interviewee, the co-convenors agreed that the Egyptian draft should not be the basis for negotiation. Instead, they concurred that they should try to resurrect the informal consultations, although there was little interest from Egypt. After this meeting, the US delegation and the other parties did not see Ambassador Ulyanov, the head of Russian delegation, again until the end of the conference. In essence, he did not keep the US delegation apprised of the development in his thinking on the Zone issue during the two middle weeks of the conference. Russia broke unity with the other depository states on the Zone issue and appeared to be working with Egypt to come up with their own proposal. Ulyanov claimed this was done in a good faith to save the 2015 conference.

The Russian proposal called for a ME WMDFZ conference to be convened no later than the 1 March 2016 and called for all states of the region (including Iran and Israel) to engage “without delay” in preparatory meetings for the conference. The paper indicated that the UN Secretary-General would appoint a Special Representative to lead the conference and the co-sponsors would provide support. As soon as a consensus was reached on the agenda and final document the conference would convene within 45 days.<sup>75</sup> One interviewee believed that Russia had an incentive to encourage Egypt to stand its ground and avoid compromise on their proposal. He also felt that there were reasons to question Ulyanov’s claim of good faith. Some interviewees agreed with this assessment and felt that the shift in the Russian approach was probably due to a desire to garner favour with Arab parties and to put the United States in a difficult political position.

A third interviewee remarked that, with this course of action, Russia benefited from a win–win scenario. If it succeeded in formulating a proposal that was accepted, it could take the credit for helping reach a compromise that advanced the implementation of the Middle East Resolution. In the event that the NPT consensus was broken over this issue, however, the United States would be seen as bearing much of the blame for it. From the perspective of this interviewee, this would be beneficial for Russia in the “neo-Cold War ideological competition” that was already taking shape.

### **The Final Document and the “2 a.m. surprise”**

Consultations on the proposed language for a ME WMDFZ conference took place right up until the night before the final day of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. One American interviewee noted that negotiations were conducted between Rose Gottemoeller, the US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Ambassador Ulyanov, and Ambassador Hesham Badr, Egyptian Assistant Minister for International Institutions and Organizations and the Head of Delegation at the time. Eventually, Ambassador Taous Feroukhi of Algeria, President of the Conference, sent everyone home and said they would continue negotiations in the morning.

However, around 2 a.m., Ambassador Feroukhi sent a draft Final Document to all NPT member states.<sup>76</sup> The proposed language on the Middle East contained essentially the Egyptian proposal with Russian edits. It called for the Zone conference to be convened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations,

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<sup>75</sup> Russian Delegation, “Working Paper by Russia on Convening a Conference to Establish a Middle East WMD Free Zone,” 14 May 2015, <https://unidir.org/node/5998>.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Countryman, “Learning from the 2015 NPT Review Conference,” *Arms Control Today* 50, no. 4 (May 2020), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-05/features/learning-2015-npt-review-conference>.

At approximately 2 a.m., Ambassador Feroukhi circulated a draft Final Document to all member states of the NPT. The draft document included mostly the Egyptian proposed language on the Middle East with some edits made by the Russian delegation.

with a reduced role for the co-conveners, no later than 1 March 2016 – regardless of whether Middle Eastern states had reached consensus on arrangements.<sup>77</sup> An interviewee asserted that the language did not reflect any of the compromises agreed between Gottemoeller and Badr. Another interviewee noted that there were only three people who know how the proposal came about: Ulyanov, Badr, and Feroukhi. Interviewees who spoke on the matter proposed two possible explanations of what was likely to have led Feroukhi to reverse the text. One believed that Ulyanov and Badr convinced her that the US delegation would back down and not

dare break consensus over the Zone. Another interviewee noted that the language on the Middle East in the draft Final Document may have also reflected the views of some of the other states of the region and that Feroukhi might even have received a call from her capital with instructions on this language.

In addition to the bad faith shown by the other side with the removal of language on some issues on which Egypt and the United States had reached compromise only hours before, the crucial sticking point for the US delegation was the removal of the phrase “on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at”, which had been central to the agreement at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The US delegation had been very clear that it could not accept language that would lead to a conference without a provision in it on the need for consensus among Middle Eastern states.

Distributing what, in the view of one interviewee, was the unamended Egyptian text to all delegations at this late juncture foreclosed the possibility of continuing negotiation on the conference’s Final Document. Although Feroukhi tried to convince the US delegation to accept the draft that she had distributed, the United States broke consensus on the draft Final Document of the 2015 conference over this issue along with the United Kingdom and Canada.<sup>78</sup>

Interviewees identified two factors that they felt contributed to the deadlock on the final day of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. First, Feroukhi, under the influence of Egypt and Russia, fundamentally miscalculated the willingness of the United States to back down on what these interviewees characterized as clearly communicated red lines on the issues in order to reach consensus. Second, the delegation to Egypt by NAM of negotiating power on the Middle East issue was seen as giving the former – and this issue – an outsized role in NPT Review Conferences and the ability to prevent member states from reaching consensus on a Final Document.

One interviewee elaborated on this second factor by explaining that, historically, NAM had essentially ceded its entire negotiating power on the ME WMD/FZ issue to Egypt, which traditionally exercised this power in the final 48 hours of NPT Review Conferences. However, he believed that NAM was interested in the other parts of the draft Final Document at the 2015 conference (and other Review Conferences as well) and wanted to express a NAM view as to whether positive parts of the draft

<sup>77</sup> 2015 NPT Review Conference, “Working Paper By Russia On Convening A Conference To Establish A Middle East WMD Free Zone,” NPT/CONF.2015/WP57, 14 May 2015, <https://undir.org/node/5998>.

<sup>78</sup> “2015 NPT RevCon Ends Without Consensus on a Final Document,” 22 May 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://undir.org/timeline/2010s/2015-npt-revcon-ends-without-consensus-final-document?timeline=25/>.



*Christopher Ford, US Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Non-Proliferation, in a statement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee, emphasized the need for nations to work together to create the conditions conducive to further nuclear disarmament (Geneva, Switzerland, 25 April 2018). Credit: Eric Bridiers / U.S. Mission Photo.*

Final Document outweighed the importance of the Zone language. Instead, it ended up deferring to Egypt on this issue. Given this reality, the interviewee believed that Egypt could have, for example, accepted the same language on the Middle East issue from the 2010 NPT Review Conference and not forced NAM to throw away the whole draft Final Document because of the Zone. Another interviewee agreed that the arrangement between NAM and Egypt made it more difficult to reach compromise.

Interviewees with direct knowledge of events differed on whether the 2015 NPT Review Conference would have reached consensus if the ME WMDFZ issue had been resolved to the satisfaction of all parties involved. These responses were prompted by claims by some states (and non-American interviewees) that the Zone issue was scapegoated for the failure of the conference.<sup>79</sup> One interviewee remarked that, while the discussion over disarmament-related issues between NWS and NNWS were difficult throughout the 2015 conference, the conditions were not so bad that a productive Review Conference and a compromise on this section of a Final Document could not have been reached. Another interviewee wondered if Russia and the HINW movement could have reached a compromise or if one side (e.g., South Africa as a leader of the HINW movement) would have broken consensus. He recalled that Russia was unhappy (more so than the other NWS) with some of the NAM and HINW language in the disarmament section of the draft.

<sup>79</sup> For the Arab perspective, see "The 2015 NPT Review Conference" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.



Nevertheless, as an interviewee highlighted, with consensus in the 2015 NPT Review Conference broken, the United States thought that it was important to clarify to all parties that Egypt was to blame, as noted in a speech by Gottemoeller at the conclusion of the conference.<sup>80</sup>

## **THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND PREPARATIONS FOR THE 2020 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE**

The next steps on the ME WMD/FZ issue were taken in the context of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference, which was repeatedly postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and was eventually held in August 2022. The US approach changed when the administration of US President Donald J. Trump assumed office in January 2017. They entered the 2017 meeting of the Preparatory Committee with what one American interviewee characterized as a “blank slate” when it came to dealing with the issue of WMD in the Middle East at the NPT. Aside from supporting consensus-based discussions among Middle Eastern states, it was interested in hearing the positions of the states of the region themselves.

Another interviewee had the impression that the Trump administration would have an easier time dealing with the NPT and the Middle East issue than the Obama administration. With the Obama administration drawing a red line with the Arab states in 2015 by breaking consensus, he felt that it put the Trump administration in a good position to hold even firmer to the US position and signal to the Arab states that it would not “sacrifice” Israel for the sake of consensus.

An interviewee recalled clear cleavages at the 2017 Preparatory Committee. On one hand, Russia and a subset of Arab states called for the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva to restart. On the other, Egypt had no interest in this and vaguely threatened alternatives. As for Israel, another interviewee remarked that it felt burned by its experience with the Arab states during the period 2010–2015 and had no interest in repeating the experience. This was partly because the Israelis felt that the Arab states had not recognized the concessions that Israel had made in participating in the informal consultations and that they had instead essentially tried to strongarm the Israeli government into a follow-on process that it could not stomach.

The Trump administration submitted a working paper at the 2018 Preparatory Committee to signal its position on the ME WMD/FZ.<sup>81</sup> Despite perceptions by some Middle Eastern states to the contrary, there was a clear decision by the Trump administration not to disengage on this issue, but to offer new ideas grounded in what the US government perceived to be the reality of the regional security environment. However, interviewees who spoke on this period believed that the states on the other side of this issue were not willing to engage in dialogue based on this reality.

One interviewee contended that NNWS attempted to weaponize multilateral forums to stigmatize their adversaries and attempt to coerce them to agree to things they believed are against their security interests. They did this through initiatives like the process for the General Assembly-mandated ME WMD/FZ Conference<sup>82</sup> or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).<sup>83</sup> On the other

<sup>80</sup> Rose Gottemoeller, “Remarks at the Conclusion of the 2015 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference,” US Department of State (Archived content), 22 May 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/us/2015/242778.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> United States delegation, “Working Paper by the US on ‘Establishing Regional Conditions Conducive to a Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Delivery Systems,’” 19 April 2018, <https://unidir.org/node/5662>.

<sup>82</sup> “First Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and other WMD is held at the UN in New York,” 18 November 2019, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/first-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=33>.

<sup>83</sup> Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 7 July 2017, A/CONF.229/2017/8, <https://undocs.org/A/CONF.229/2017/8>.

hand, he acknowledged that other motivations could come into play, including a need to satisfy domestic constituencies in some of the states involved.

Two interviewees agreed that those who supported these initiatives often refused to acknowledge the real-world security problems that needed to be overcome to produce progress. One of the interviewees noted a broader Trump administration response to efforts like a ME WMDfZ and the TPNW. By redirecting the discourse to address the underlying security conditions that prompted states to develop and retain nuclear weapons in the first place, the administration sought to address the problems that prevent progress. As evidence, he pointed to Working Paper 33 submitted by the United States to the 2018 NPT Preparatory Committee<sup>84</sup> and the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative.<sup>85</sup>

In Working Paper 33, the United States argued for the need to build an environment to address underlying barriers to a Zone, rather than just negotiating a treaty text. In the Middle Eastern context, the paper pointed to Israel's publicly stated position that the NPT is not sufficient to guarantee its security. The Trump administration thus envisioned a different process whereby states of the region could come to the table to discuss practical steps and CBMs to ameliorate their regional security concerns, rather than focusing attention on negotiating a treaty. A third interviewee noted that, although the US government realized that the working paper might upset some Arab states, it assessed that their reaction would be a matter of theatrics, rather than raising serious issues in the framework of the NPT or bilateral relations.

An interviewee noted that, while the United States consulted extensively on these issues with Middle Eastern states, it did not consult the Arab states specifically on the working paper before its release, four days ahead of the 2018 Preparatory Committee. He explained that this was a routine matter as the US government does not generally allow other delegations to edit their documents. The interviewee noted that those Arab officials claiming surprise by the content of the working paper had not paid attention to earlier US statements on the issue. For him, the direction of events on the ground in the Middle East made the conventional wisdom of the Arab states on how the Zone should be negotiated and implemented "fanciful" and "unserious".

## **THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISION AND ME WMDfZ CONFERENCE, 2018 TO THE PRESENT**

The Arab states were, of course, disappointed with the result of the 2015 NPT Review Conference, and then from 2017 found themselves locking horns with the Trump administration. This culminated in the Arab Group introducing to the First Committee of the General Assembly in October 2018 a draft decision that requested the United Nations Secretary-General to convene a conference on a ME WMDfZ on an annual basis with the objective of negotiating a Zone treaty.<sup>86</sup>

One American interviewee claimed that, in the week prior to the introduction of the draft decision, the United States asked Egypt if it was planning anything for the First Committee meeting that year

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<sup>84</sup> United States delegation, "Working Paper by the US on 'Establishing Regional Conditions Conducive to a Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Delivery Systems'".

<sup>85</sup> Shannon Bugos, "CEND Establishes Two-Year Work Program," *Arms Control Today* 50, no. 1 (January/ February 2020), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/cend-establishes-two-year-work-program>.

<sup>86</sup> "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>.



*Izumi Nakamitsu, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, addresses the 3rd session of the Conference on Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (New York, United States of America, 14 November 2022). Credit: Manuel Elías / UN Photo.*

and received a negative answer. The US government was not consulted in advance on the draft decision and there was a lack of interest on the part of Egypt and the Arab Group to be flexible on the substantive issues. The United States had let it be known that it would actively oppose any proposal by them on this issue, rather than passively disapproving of it.

The interviewee argued that the claim by some Arab states that they were forced by Working Paper 33 of March 2018 onto the path of the General Assembly decision in October 2018 was simply rhetoric. He argued Egypt was already on this path to implement the Zone. He nonetheless expressed regret that the United States did not release the working paper earlier to inform the thinking of the Arab Group on a conceptual level. This was because he felt that, in launching the General Assembly initiative, they pursued the same past failed approach, just more vigorously.

Two interviewees explained that for the US government, the problem was not that the mandate for a conference came from the General Assembly per se. It was instead the use of the multilateral system to advance the decision in the absence of consensus among Middle Eastern states on this issue. In the view of the United States, a multilateral body like the General Assembly should not impose its will on a sovereign state, especially on an issue affecting its vital security interests.

The Arab Group's draft decision followed a pattern seen since the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva that exposed Egypt's hand: it wanted a meeting on its terms more than it wanted Israel in the room. The Egyptian government had knowingly structured the decision contrary to Israeli interests and policy. This was seen by the United States as an attempt to isolate and pressure Israel, rather than allow

it to enter organically on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at.<sup>87</sup>

Interviewees were polarized on whether the United States should attend the sessions of the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference as an observer, and if this process would bear fruit. With the first three sessions having been held at the time of writing, some interviewees noted that several key Middle Eastern states had tried to prevent the conference from becoming very divisive and from demonizing Israel. Another positive development according to some interviewees was that many Arab states spoke in the sessions about their security concerns. In this sense, these interviewees felt it could have been of benefit if the broader political and regional security concerns that affected the stability of the region as a whole – including perhaps the challenges posed by Iran – had been raised at the ME WMDFZ Conference.

Some interviewees hoped the ME WMDFZ Conference could act as a pressure relief valve for the NPT Review Conference, preventing the Middle East issue from torpedoing future conferences. Under these circumstances, a small subset of interviewees believed that the United States could have sent representatives to attend the ME WMDFZ Conference as an observer. One interviewee observed that, although the NPT Review Conference in August 2022 did not reach consensus, this failure was not due to the Zone issue, on which the parties had worked out agreed language.

Most interviewees, however, expressed some cynicism about the ME WMDFZ Conference. One said that, if the conference had refrained from being a pressure campaign against Israel and did not focus on forcing other states to sign treaties, it could have been a good forum for constructive dialogue. To him it appeared as a combination of propaganda and personal aggrandizement, comparing it to the “Ban the Bomb” campaign.<sup>88</sup> This view was grounded in the belief that conducting successful diplomacy comes from bringing the main decision makers together, rather than pressuring them from the outside. Another interviewee similarly believed the United States and Israel were right to not attend, as the process was not serious. Instead, the conference was seen as a means for Egypt to raise a flag of leadership on this issue on the regional and global stages. With these critiques in mind, some interviewees felt that there is likely to be no real benefit from the United States participating in the ME WMDFZ Conference. If Egypt were serious, it would call the Israeli government directly to reach agreement on how to proceed, with or without the support of outside players. That would change the political dynamics entirely.

A second interviewee highlighted the uncertainties that Israel faces in relation to its security, which have informed its position on this process: most states in the Middle East do not even recognize the right of Israel to exist. Under such circumstances, this interviewee equated the pursuit of a Zone to putting “the cart before the horse”.

<sup>87</sup> United Nations General Assembly, “Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in All its Aspects,” A/RES/3472(XXX)[B], 11 December 1975, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/640311>, and Report of the Disarmament Commission, A/54/42, 1999, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1494144>.

<sup>88</sup> Rebecca Johnson, “Banning the Bomb: From 1950s activism to the General Assembly vis Greenham Common,” in *Civil Society Engagement in Disarmament Processes – The Case for a Nuclear Weapon Ban* (New York: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, April 2017), 35–36, <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210600835c011>.

The draft decision presented by the Arab Group reflected Egypt’s priority to shape the ME WMDFZ process according to its own terms rather than ensuring Israel’s participation.

Reflecting on the history of US–Soviet arms control during the Cold War, some interviewees believed that the Egyptian government’s approach to a Zone was disingenuous in comparison to what they viewed as good-faith diplomacy in this area. One interviewee explained that, during the Cold War, the United States did not sponsor United Nations resolutions to create a process against the Soviet Union over its head; instead, it held talks to discuss issues regardless of conflicts. The General Assembly decision in 2018 opting for the ME WMD-FZ Conference through an international forum, in his view, took the opposite approach and was unlikely to succeed.

# 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.