

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



CARRIED OUT WITH FUNDING BY THE EUROPEAN UNION



UNIDIR
UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication was produced with funding by the European Union. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union. The authors would like to thank the reviewers who provided feedback for the publication and Sarah Ruth Opatowski and Salma Al-Wahaibi for assisting in the publication research and production. Design and Layout by Phoenix Design Aid.

CITATION

Farzan Sabet, "Narratives of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Drivers, Themes, and Historical Accounts", 2023, Geneva, Switzerland: UNIDIR, <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEWMD-FZ/2023/narratives>.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

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

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THE RUSSIAN NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter of Russian narratives provides a comprehensive analysis of historical accounts, drivers, and themes of a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (ME WMDFZ or Zone) as seen from the Russian Federation. It is based on interviews conducted with current and former Russian 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 Russia.¹

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

Russia is a strong supporter of a ME WMDFZ and views itself as among the foremost supporters of a Zone among the depository states of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – composed of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Russia. While Russia has been active in Zone-related efforts since the mid-1990s and believes that extra regional states have a potentially important role in the establishment of a Zone, it also believes that their role is ultimately limited and that the success of any such endeavour is ultimately up to Middle Eastern states themselves.

1. RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN AND SECURITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Russian interviewees listed some of their country's main interests in the Middle East as including promoting stability and security, WMD non-proliferation and disarmament, and economic relations with the states of the region through arms exports, energy products (e.g., nuclear reactors), and food. Concerned by regional instability unleashed by the Arab Spring, the Russian Federation began playing a more assertive diplomatic and security role in the region in the early-2010s and has become more influential since its military interventions in the Syrian Arab Republic in the mid-2010s.²

Given the relative proximity of the Middle East to Russian borders, many interviewees felt that their government has a strong security interest in the region to prevent instability and the spillover of conflict and insecurity across its frontiers. For example, since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Russian

¹ The chapter does not reflect the official positions of the Russian 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 Russian interviewees.

² Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalisation and implications for the West," *The International Spectator* 53, no. 4 (October 2018): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1507135>.

citizens have participated in foreign extremism there.³ In the absence of a stable government in all of the territory of Syria, the Russian Government has been concerned by the prospect of some of these seasoned fighters returning to exacerbate terrorism inside Russia.

A ME WMDFFZ corresponds with Moscow's global interest in preventing WMD proliferation, including in the Middle East. This has been manifested in Russia's deep involvement in several non-proliferation initiatives in the region, including the nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as disarmament and removal of WMD from the region. The latter includes playing a central role in Syria's chemical weapon disarmament;⁴ advocating removal of the United States' nuclear weapons stationed in Türkiye (which falls outside the scope of a Zone);⁵ and promoting Israeli nuclear weapon disarmament by supporting a ME WMDFFZ.⁶

Due to its geographical proximity to the Middle East, Russia has a strong security interest in preventing instability in the region and the spillover of conflict and insecurity across its frontiers.

2. RUSSIAN DRIVERS AND THEMES ON THE ME WMDFFZ

SOVIET POSITIONS ON A ME NWFZ

According to some Russian interviewees, Russian concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East date back to the time of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Cold War and were linked to a desire for regional stability. These concerns were intensified by the region being a focal point for geopolitical competition between the superpowers and concerns over the potential for it to become an arena of more intense interventionism by the West. For example, the Soviet Union threatened to launch nuclear missiles at the United Kingdom, France, and Israel during the 1956 Suez Crisis, as part of a bid to stop the military intervention by these three states in Egypt that was intended to overturn the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal.⁷

Another source of Soviet concern was over the stationing by the United States of strategic nuclear weapons in the region to further assert its influence there. Indeed, the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Türkiye in 1961 became a factor in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.⁸ Anticipation of these developments undergirded the reporting on January 1958 by the official Soviet news agency TASS of a call for a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (ME NWFZ).⁹ Interviewees were divided on whether

³ Lila Hassan, "Repatriating ISIS Foreign Fighters is Key to Stemming Radicalization, Experts Say, but Many Countries Don't Want Their Citizens Back," *Frontline*, 6 April 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/repatriating-isis-foreign-fighters-key-to-stemming-radicalization-experts-say-but-many-countries-dont-want-citizens-back>.

⁴ Hanna Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's Chemical Weapons: A Tale of Cooperation and its Unravellings," *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1-3 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2020.1766226>.

⁵ Ruslan Mamedov and Grigory Lukyanov, "Russia and Turkey: Approaches to Regional Security in the Middle East," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (October 2018): 59, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/perception/issue/39593/468101>.

⁶ Presidential Executive Office, "Signed Decree on Measures to Implement Foreign Policy," 7 May 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15256>.

⁷ Oles M. Smolansky, "Moscow and the Suez Crisis, 1956: A Reappraisal," *Political Science Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (December 1965): 589, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2147000>.

⁸ Süleyman Seydi, "Turkish-American Relations and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1957-63," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 3 (May 2010): 440, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263201003666035>.

⁹ "Soviet Initiative Calls for a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East," 21 January 1958, UNIDIR Timeline of Key Events in the History of Diplomatic Efforts for the ME WMDFFZ (UNIDIR Timeline), <https://unidir.org/timeline/1950s/soviet-initiative-calls-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-middle-east?timeline=0>.



The US nuclear-armed PGM-19 Jupiter ballistic missile was removed from Türkiye in 1963 as part of the resolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Credit: Wikipedia / Public Domain.

this was a serious official proposal or just political propaganda. Although the call did not gain traction, most viewed this as the first milestone in the history of the ME NWFZ. Soviet anxiety about the presence of US nuclear weapons in the Middle East decreased following Iran's pledge in 1962 not to host foreign missile bases and the removal in 1963 of PGM-19 Jupiter missiles from Türkiye as part of the resolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁰

Some interviewees asserted that, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union saw two main potential nuclear risks emanating from the Middle East during the 1960s and 1970s. The first was Israeli nuclear weapons. This was a function of both the Soviet Union's general desire to curb nuclear weapon proliferation around the world and of its close alignment with Arab states and poor relations with Israel due to the latter's strong ties with the West. These strained dynamics led to a rupture of ties with Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War;¹¹ covert military operations against Israel on the contested Egypt–Israel border during the 1967–1970 War of Attrition;¹² and even alleged Soviet consideration of strikes against Israeli nuclear facilities.¹³

Some interviewees mentioned the Iranian nuclear programme under the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as the second perceived risk during the 1960s and 1970s. While the Iranian nuclear programme

¹⁰ Roham Alvandi, "The Shah's Détente with Khrushchev: Iran's 1962 Missile Base Pledge to the Soviet Union," *Cold War History* 14, no. 3 (April 2014): 423–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.890591>.

¹¹ Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925884>.

¹² Isabella Ginor, "Under the Yellow Arab Helmet Gleamed Blue Russian Eyes: Operation Kavkaz and the War of Attrition, 1969–70," *Cold War History* 3, no. 1 (October 2002): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713999972>.

¹³ Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, "The Spymaster, the Communist, and Foxbats over Dimona: The USSR's Motive for Instigating the Six-Day War," *Israel Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 89–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245796>.

was ostensibly peaceful, the Soviet Union watched it closely. One Russian interviewee even claimed that Russia sent a *démarche* to France in opposition to French plans to build a spent fuel reprocessing facility in Iran in the 1970s, which ultimately never materialized.

While the Soviet Union was not in favour of fuel cycle capabilities in non-nuclear weapon states, it was open to the idea of a regional reprocessing facility in the Middle East. It took part in a study by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on such a facility as a way to address the desire of Middle Eastern states to acquire nuclear technologies and fuel while at the same time preventing the misuse of this material for weapon purposes. It was also not wholly opposed to the Iranian civilian nuclear programme, and the two states explored the possibility for peaceful cooperation in the 1970s, including the construction of a Soviet nuclear power plant in Iran.

One interviewee claimed that the Shah visited a nuclear facility during a tour of the Soviet Union, possibly in 1968,¹⁴ where he met with Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin. However, a cooperation agreement never materialized because, according to one interviewee, Dr. Akbar Etemad, the father of the Iranian nuclear programme, opposed cooperation on reactors with the superpowers. This was due to his concern that the superpowers would link nuclear cooperation to other issues and slow the programme's progress.¹⁵ Despite this hesitancy by Dr. Etemad, the Shah ultimately pushed him to pursue peaceful cooperation with the United States, in part due to the close Cold War alliance between the two states.¹⁶ These global and regional dynamics ultimately led the Soviet Union to reinforce its support for the concept of a ME NWFZ, for example by calling for its practical realization at the 1985 NPT Review Conference.¹⁷ Beyond such calls, Russia was otherwise not particularly active on this issue.

Some interviewees noted that concerns over nuclear proliferation in the region and the Soviet experience in exporting nuclear technology to the Middle East helped shape Soviet nuclear export controls in the 1970s and 1980s. The Libyan Government of Muammar Gaddafi sent a delegation to Moscow in 1977 led by Abdessalam Jalloud, the country's second in command at the time, on a secret mission to obtain assistance for a large nuclear programme for US\$10 billion. The Libyan request included the construction of a natural uranium-fuelled reactor, a heavy water plant, and facilities for plutonium separation, among other things. These elements would have given Libya many of the capabilities and materials required for nuclear weapons.¹⁸

The Soviets initially agreed in principle to the Libyan proposal, motivated by financial benefits and a desire to support the Arab states in their conflict with Israel. Gosplan, the central economic planning agency, and other ministries and agencies were charged with implementing the decision to fulfil the Libyan request. The Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Defence (MOD), however, objected to this request and sought to hinder its implementation for several reasons. They were uneasy with the fact that the technologies requested by Libya would provide it with the capability to

¹⁴ George Lenczowski, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *Current History* 55, no. 327 (November 1968): 271, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45311992>.

¹⁵ Golnaz Esfandiari, "The Father of Iran's Nuclear Program Recalls How it all Began," *RadioFreeEurope*, 3 July 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/father-of-iran-nuclear-program-recalls-how-it-began/27108228.html>.

¹⁶ Roham Alvandi, "A Ford, Not a Nixon: The United States and the Shah's Nuclear Dreams," in *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 126–71. Akbar Etemad, however, was forced by the Shah to enter ultimately incomplete cooperation negotiations with the United States due to the close US–Iran relations during his reign.

¹⁷ Natalia Artemenkova and Vladimir Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East: The Road Toward it as seen from Moscow," *The International Affairs* 66, no. 3 (March 2020): 53.

¹⁸ Roland Timerbaev, "On Libya, Antimissile Defense, as well as Other Autobiographical Events," *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security* 14, no. 1 (2008): 113–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19934270.2008.9756527>.

Russian interviewees agreed that, while the creation of a ME WMDFZ is an important part of Russia's non-proliferation policy, and to some degree its Middle East policy, it is not a priority of Russian foreign policy and does not receive close personal attention from President Vladimir Putin.

produce fissile materials for weapons and they doubted the country's ability to pay.

Based on this opposition, the Soviet Union instead proposed to build a research reactor. The Tajoura Nuclear Research Reactor, a 10-megawatt facility near Tripoli, was completed in 1979 and began operation in 1981. The Tajoura reactor, which used highly enriched uranium (HEU) as fuel, was placed under IAEA safeguards. Soviet specialists were present on-site to assist the Libyans with conducting research and to ensure its safe operation and peaceful nature. The Soviet Union provided the HEU as a fuel despite a self-imposed

ban from 1978 on exporting it.¹⁹ This exception may have been because the deal to build this reactor was concluded prior to 1978 or, as one interviewee speculated, as a result of a political decision to overlook the prohibition.

According to an interviewee, the Libyan episode was a lesson for the MFA amid resurgent Soviet concern with nuclear proliferation. The Politburo established the Inter-agency Commission on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the late-1970s, tasking it with providing approval for all Soviet nuclear activities abroad.²⁰ The MFA, the MOD, the Committee for State Security (KGB), and other relevant entities played an official role in – and reinforced – the decision-making of this commission.

RUSSIAN POSITIONS ON A ME WMDFZ

Promoting nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East has remained a priority for Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its goals include universalization of the NPT and the creation of NWFZs (including a ME WMDFZ). Russian interviewees agreed that, while the creation of a ME WMDFZ is an important part of Russia's non-proliferation policy, and to some degree its Middle East policy, it is not a priority of Russian foreign policy and does not receive close personal attention from President Vladimir Putin.

Policy in this area is overseen in the MFA by the Department for Non-proliferation and Arms Control (DNKV), which also plays a central role in the ministry on decision-making for nuclear exports. Officials from the regional departments of the MFA cannot pursue cooperation with a country without the support of the DNKV. Other governmental agencies that play a role in decision-making on peaceful nuclear cooperation projects include Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation and its Department for International Cooperation, which constantly seeks new export markets, as well as Russian embassies, where some ambassadors can be very influential.

DRIVERS OF THE RISING PROFILE OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND A ME WMDFZ IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Despite a ME WMDFZ being a low priority on the Russian foreign policy agenda, Russian interviewees identified three drivers behind the rising profile of the Middle East and specifically a Zone when compared to the early post-Soviet period in the 1990s.

¹⁹ Pavel Podvig, *The Use of Highly-Enriched Uranium as Fuel in Russia* (Princeton: International Panel on Fissile Materials, 2017): 49, https://fissilematerials.org/publications/2017/09/the_use_of_highly-enriched.html.

²⁰ Roland Timerbaev, *The Nuclear Suppliers Group: Why and How it was Created (1974-1978)* (Moscow: PIR Center, 2000).

First, the recovery of Russian domestic stability since the 2000s following the chaos of the early post-Soviet period has increased the country's ability to project influence abroad. Russia's perception of itself as a great power returned with a desire and sense of responsibility to be engaged on all major topics of international diplomacy, including the Middle East and non-proliferation.

Second, increasing instability in the Middle East in the 2010s due to the Arab Spring compelled Russia to respond while simultaneously creating greater opportunities for it to project influence in the region. An important subset of these conflicts in the region included risks related to WMD use and proliferation relatively close to Russian borders, with spillover risks.²¹ In this vein, some Russian interviewees believed that it is important to have a dedicated channel for dialogue between all key states in the Middle East on security issues related to WMD, and that such a channel could help with other security issues by building trust and rapport.

Third, interviewees reported that maintaining and strengthening the non-proliferation regime remains an important driver of Russian foreign policy. This is compounded by Russian policymakers' perceived responsibility for supporting the creation of a ME WMDFZ as a co-sponsor of the 1995 Middle East Resolution. This commitment has been highlighted in several Russian documents, including an order issued by President Putin at the start of his third term, in 2012, that decreed that the MFA and other bodies should support the establishment of a Zone.²² In this regard, nearly all interviewees viewed the role of ambassadors Anatoly Antonov and Mikhail Ulyanov²³ as key for bringing this topic to the attention of the highest political levels in Moscow. One cited the vital role Ambassador Antonov played in promoting a Zone, including in his capacity as head of the Russian delegation to the 2008 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting in Geneva.²⁴ Meanwhile, interviewees also cited Ambassador Ulyanov's important role in providing continuity in Russian policy on this issue in the 2010s, including in his roles as director of DNKV and head of the Russian Mission to the international organizations in Vienna.

RUSSIA AS AN HONEST BROKER AND SUPPORTER BUT CONSTRAINED ACTOR ON A ME WMDFZ

Russian interviewees perceived their country as having been an honest broker and supporter of a ME WMDFZ that has tried to create favourable conditions for its establishment since 1995. They contended that the Russian Government played an important role in most diplomatic successes on non-proliferation in the Middle East of the 2010s, including removal of chemical weapons from Syria and agreement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, which they held Russia is doing its utmost to restore.

Interviewees also maintained that Russia's consistent approach to the Zone process was appreciated by its partners in the Middle East, such as Egypt, and that even states in the region that had doubts about Moscow's role, such as the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), could not ignore

²¹ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 66–67.

²² Presidential Executive Office, "Signed Decree on Measures to Implement Foreign Policy," and Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East" 56.

²³ Mikhail Ulyanov, "A Missed Opportunity: The Glion-Geneva Process," in *The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View From the Negotiating Table* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2023/MikhailUlyanov>.

²⁴ Anatoly Antonov, "Statement at the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and Other International Organizations in Geneva, 28 April 2008, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom08/statements/RussiaApril28.pdf>.



In 1991, the Soviet Union, alongside the United States, co-sponsored the Madrid Peace Conference, which marked the historic participation of Israel and several Arab parties in a conference dedicated to achieving peace in the Middle East (Madrid, Spain, 30 October 1991). Credit: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA record: 4097323).

its clear and logical approach.²⁵ They believed that Russia's uniquely good ties with key states such as Iran and Egypt and its improved relations with Israel in the post-Soviet period²⁶ allow it to play a role as intermediary – for example, by quickly delivering messages or convening dialogues.

However, these interviewees sensed that Russia was limited in its ability to persuade any Middle Eastern state to join the ME WMDFZ processes for a range of reasons, including that WMD capabilities go to the core of these states' national security and Russia has limited leverage over them. One of these interviewees, for example, highlighted close US–Israel relations as a factor limiting Russian influence when it comes to the Israeli position on the Zone.

Although the Soviet Union co-sponsored the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and Russia later co-chaired the 1992–1995 Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, Russian interviewees did not discuss ACRS.²⁷ None participated in or had direct knowledge of policy and actions from that time. Interviewees nonetheless emphasized Russia's active role in the ME WMDFZ process since 1995.

As an NPT depository state, Russia co-sponsored the Middle East Resolution during the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and its role further evolved following the decision by the 2010 NPT Review Conference to hold a Zone conference. Most interviewees saw their country today as being

²⁵ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 66–67.

²⁶ Yury Barmin, *Russia and Israel: The Middle Eastern Vector of Relations* (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2018), 8, 19.

²⁷ "The 1992–1995 Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS)," 1 December 1991–15 December 1994, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>.

among the leading international advocates for the creation of a Zone, particularly among the three depository states.

RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES, REGIONAL CONDITIONS, AND A ME WMDFZ

Good relations but limited leverage over key Middle Eastern states

Russian interviewees said their government – uniquely – has good relations with three of the states of the region central to the Zone process: Egypt, Iran, and Israel.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Government under President Boris Yeltsin was unsure if Iran posed a threat. Iranian alignment with the West and hostility or neutrality seemed a possibility. But in the 2000s, Russian foreign policy found its footing in the Middle East and Iran was no longer perceived as a potential challenge but as a partner on some issues. The two countries now have good and mature peaceful nuclear cooperation and narrow but strong defence cooperation. Despite these good relations, one interviewee said that Russia has limited leverage over Iran, even though the United States and others often exaggerate Russian influence and even portray Iran as a Russian client state.²⁸

Some interviewees acknowledged that the same exaggerated view may exist in Moscow about US influence over Israel. They noted that their government's good ties with Israel were undergirded by deep social and cultural ties. Many Israelis emigrated from the Soviet Union or Russia or are descended from people who did. Despite these links, one interviewee felt that Russia has even less leverage with Israel than with Iran. Nonetheless, he felt it is easier to conduct dialogue with Israel than Iran. One interviewee doubted the sincerity of the Israeli emphasis of the importance of regional security in the Zone process, as they may have focused on this issue partly to water down and delay a ME WMDFZ. Others speculated that this Israeli emphasis was genuine and driven by the complexity of the WMD issue as well as the difficulty of defining and discussing the parameters of regional security.

When asked about Russia's Concept for Collective Security in the Persian Gulf Area²⁹ and its relationship with a Zone, one well-placed interviewee said that he thought there was no connection between the two, either conceptually or practically. If both were implemented, he felt they would be complementary and mutually reinforcing but noted that, at this initial stage, there is no link between them. The interviewee further distinguished the two. He noted that, on the one hand, Russia had no specific proposals on the table for a ME WMDFZ but instead took initiatives on a tactical basis to create a conducive environment for the states of the region to discuss the issue themselves. On the other hand, the concept for the Gulf was proposed by Russia as part of its good services to the subregion to initiate a discussion. He personally felt that Russia was somewhat more invested in taking the initiative into its own hands when it came to the Gulf.

Limited linkage between a ME WMDFZ and the JCPOA

Russian interviewees saw a limited linkage between a ME WMDFZ and the JCPOA. One said that, as the JCPOA was being negotiated, Russian officials encouraged the Iranians to be more involved with the

²⁸ Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov, "Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy Toward GCC," *International Politics* 58, (February 2021): 892–93, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00286-4>, and Nicole Grajewski "Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (March 2020), <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1341691/friends-or-frenemies-how-russia-and-iran-compete-and-cooperate/1953812/>.

²⁹ Proposal of the Russian Federation on Collective Security in the Area of the Persian Gulf, 26 July 2019, A/73/971, and S/2019/604, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3824211>.

informal consultations in Glion and Geneva that were taking place in parallel since Iran was one of the founders of the Zone process. But Iran lacked the capacity to engage in the two processes in parallel.

Most interviewees believed that, if the JCPOA fails, it will negatively influence the ME WMDFZ process because, if a narrower agreement like the Iran nuclear deal cannot succeed, then it is difficult to conceive that a much broader Zone treaty will. A key lesson for some interviewees from the Iran nuclear talks for a ME WMDFZ was the need for compartmentalization and the most difficult issues to be addressed first. This approach worked for the JCPOA, creating stability on the Iranian nuclear programme, and they saw it as a potential building block for the Zone process.

Allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria and the problematic role of the OPCW

Russian interviewees viewed Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and elimination of much of its chemical weapon stockpile by the Joint Mission of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations in 2014³⁰ as one of Russia's greatest diplomatic accomplishments on WMD in the 2010s alongside the JCPOA. Despite subsequent events, many maintained that, in the absence of the agreement, a large quantity of chemical weapons would have remained and, in the context of the conflict in Syria, would have led to further regional instability and death. Despite this success, interviewees were unhappy with the OPCW's expanded mandate of attributing responsibility for chemical weapons use in Syria, which they saw as exceeding its mandate and believed was an effort directed by a United States-led coalition.

The danger of asymmetry of obligations

Russian interviewees described an asymmetry of capabilities among Middle Eastern states, namely between Iran and the Arab states on the one hand and, on the other, Israel, which possesses nuclear weapons. Some expressed puzzlement as to why the Arab states all joined the NPT without Israel doing the same. While this was welcomed, they did not see the logic, although they noted that some Arab governments have subsequently refused to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the CWC, or the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in an attempt to create a balance in obligations.

Interviewees acknowledged an increased number of statements since the 2015 NPT Review Conference by some Arab states questioning the wisdom of having ratified the NPT without Israeli reciprocity or otherwise questioning the health of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.³¹ One interviewee was not sure about the sincerity of these statements but believed that they are indicative and that some Arab states may eventually have an incentive to leave the NPT. He thus asserted that tending to NPT-related issues such as a ME WMDFZ enhanced the NPT's integrity and survivability from his government's perspective. At the same time, until Israel feels it can assure its security without nuclear weapons, most interviewees did not view Israeli disarmament as realistic in the foreseeable future.

Forum selection as an obstacle for reaching a ME WMDFZ

Several Russian interviewees noted that one central obstacle to dialogue on a ME WMDFZ is forum selection: choosing the institutional framework for the Zone negotiations. One interviewee outlined Israel's view of the United Nations as being biased against it and its preference not to negotiate in an NPT framework because it is not a state party. These interviewees questioned this Israeli position, with one noting that Israel was founded under the United Nations banner.

³⁰ Notte, "The United States, Russia and Syria's Chemical Weapons."

³¹ For the Arab perspective, see "Arab perceptions of the role of extra regional states in the creation of an ME WMDFZ" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.

Nonetheless, they claimed that this Israeli criticism was one of the main reasons why Israel objected to the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (also known as the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference).³² One interviewee recalled explaining to the Israelis – to no avail – that, in the context of this conference, the United Nations decides only administrative and logistical issues and neither it nor its staff intervene on substance.

Although, between the 2010 and 2015 NPT Review Conferences, there was an effort to make progress at the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, in which Russia participated actively, the planned 2012 Conference was not held, and the parties were now nearly at the same point as in 1995.

For Iran and some Arab states, the question of forum selection is the mirror image of the view of Israel: most will only negotiate with Israel under the auspices of the United Nations. Interviewees believed the Zone process cannot progress without the participation of both Iran and Israel. One interviewee recalled that this issue also presented itself as a challenge for gaining Iranian participation at the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva. A junior official from the Iranian mission in Geneva participated in the first Glion meeting.³³ However, following leaks to the media about the consultations, the Iranians stopped even this low-level participation in the informal consultations because, according to the interviewee, their policy is only to appear with Israeli diplomats under United Nations auspices. This was not seen by the Russians as an immediate problem during the consultations because getting the Arabs and Israelis to settle their problems was already almost impossible, so adding Iran to this dynamic at an early stage would only have complicated things further. But forum selection may continue to pose challenges.

RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF EXTRA REGIONAL STATES IN THE CREATION OF A ME WMDFZ

Most Russian interviewees expressed concern over the two other NPT depository states' level of commitment – or lack thereof – to a ME WMDFZ. For example, they believed that, when the depositories co-sponsored the 1995 Middle East Resolution, the focus of the United States and the United Kingdom was the indefinite extension, and they did not take implementation of the resolution seriously compared to what they saw as the serious Russian attitude.

Many interviewees expressed discomfort that, after 25 years, the depositories had made little progress on a Zone. Although, between the 2010 and 2015 NPT Review Conferences, there was an effort to make progress at the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, in which Russia participated actively, the planned 2012 Conference was not held and the parties were now nearly at the same point as in 1995. At the same time, these interviewees did not believe that the depositories can create a Zone on behalf of the Middle Eastern states themselves.

The depositories can facilitate, can induce states to engage, and can offer new solutions or processes to advance the ME WMDFZ process, but they cannot create a Zone on behalf of the Middle Eastern states. The interviewees felt that this is one reason why Moscow is less active than it could be: it does not want to be the only depository active on this issue. The Russian Government is not convinced that others

³² UN General Assembly, 22 October 2018, A/C.1/73/PV.14, 11–12, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3826657?ln=en>.

³³ "First Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMDFZ Conference is Held in Glion, Switzerland," 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

will follow suit right now and, since the process could fail, it does not want to be blamed. But, if others become more active, then Russia will increase its efforts too.

Another trend one interviewee noted was the reinterpretation of obligations and key elements associated with a ME WMDFZ. For example, in the lead-up to the indefinite postponement of the 2012 Conference by the United States, it portrayed the phrase “freely arrived at”, which is associated with a Zone, as expansively applying to the conference, the process and the treaty provisions. In contrast, he said Russians believed that this phrase strictly applies to the establishment of a Zone and to agreement of the treaty provisions.

Another source of disagreement among the depositories and between the Middle Eastern states themselves has been on the appropriate roles of the depositories and any appointed facilitators in ME WMDFZ processes. According to one interviewee, at the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, the United States took the position that the Finnish Facilitator should be more proactive and should take a leading role in the informal consultations. The Russians, in contrast, thought that the co-conveners were responsible for everything, and that the Facilitator’s role was strictly limited to facilitating. By placing responsibility on the Facilitator, the interviewee felt that the United States sought to shift responsibility from itself to the Facilitator.

In the end, this interviewee assessed that the Facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, was cautious because of the gravity of his responsibilities and the difficulty of assessing the risks of being proactive. He said that the Russians also believed the United States was encouraging the Finns to move slowly and cautiously, which was a mistake because, after the fifth meeting of the consultations, the Egyptians decided that they had exhausted this path. Another interviewee felt that the depository states and the Middle Eastern states should have been more proactive and could have achieved better results if they had held a few more meetings. Another believed that the different and sometimes contradictory approaches of the depositories was not conducive to progress on a Zone.

However, interviewees viewed the responsibility of the depositories in relation to a ME WMDFZ as being limited to ensuring that a conference is convened and feasible, and not extending to the content and form of a Zone. Ultimately, most believed that even successfully helping to organize a Zone conference would result in only limited progress on materializing such a treaty in the foreseeable future.

3. RUSSIAN HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMDFZ PROCESSES

Russia was co-chair of the ACRS Working Group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process, an important ME WMDFZ-related process. However, none of the Russian interviewees with knowledge of their country’s participation in this process, or of the substantive literature on the Russian role there, were found. Russian historical accounts of Zone-related processes therefore begin in earnest with the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference.

THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE

According to some Russian interviewees, during the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, Russia and the four other NPT-recognized nuclear weapon states (NWS) wanted the treaty to be extended indefinitely by consensus, but they realized that the desire of the Arab states to get a formal commitment on a ME WMDFZ as part of the extension process might become a stumbling block.



Russia's Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation completed the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran in 2011, the first operational nuclear power plant in the Middle East (Bushehr, Iran, 29 September 2000). Credit: Paolo Contri / IAEA.

These interviewees believed the indefinite extension without a vote was possible only because of the adoption of the Middle East Resolution. While acknowledging that, among the three depository states, the Russian delegation was not the most closely involved with the negotiation on this resolution, one interviewee said that it was involved at the most important stages. According to another interviewee, Russia may have helped secure Iranian support for the extension due to the Russia–Iran peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement signed in January 1995 on the Bushehr nuclear power plant.³⁴ Other interviewees were less certain that this was a major factor (or a factor at all) in Iran's decision to support the NPT's indefinite extension.

While the extension was the only legally binding decision of the 1995 conference, most interviewees felt that all elements from the conference were tightly connected. Some said that, if the 1995 resolution were to be annulled, the extension could also come under question.³⁵

THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

The next major engagement by Russia with the ME WDMFZ concept would come 15 years later. Russian interviewees stated that, in the lead-up to the 2010 NPT Review Conference, their government was concerned about the health of the NPT regime after the failure to adopt a consensus document in 2005 and possible implications for international adherence to the treaty.³⁶

³⁴ Victor Mizin, "The Russia–Iran Nuclear Connection and U.S. Policy Options," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8, no. 1 (March 2004): 71–85, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_mar04/meria04_miv01.pdf.

³⁵ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 55–56.

³⁶ For the American perspective, see "The 2010 NPT Review Conference" in the American Narrative in this publication.



Anatoly Antonov, Director for Security and Disarmament Affairs at the Russian MFA, played an important role in promoting the ME WMDFZ prior to and during the 2010 NPT Review Conference (New York, USA, 05 May 2010). Credit: Mark Garten / UN Photo.

There was a sense that the NPT could begin to fall apart if a Final Document was not agreed upon. To address this concern, the Russian delegation discussed a range of pressing issues with other states at the 2009 Preparatory Committee meeting in Annecy, France. This included consultations with the United States in the bilateral Arms Control and International Security Working Group, which also encompassed an exchange on the ME WMDFZ process between Sergei Ryabkov, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, and Ellen Tauscher, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security.

Although there had initially been no indication that the Zone process would become a stumbling block, it became clear after US consultations with Egypt that Cairo would block consensus on a Final Document if the Review Conference did not adopt language that advanced the ME WMDFZ issue. The Zone process thus became a priority because there was a perception that, otherwise, a consensus document would again not be adopted. During the US–Russia meetings, the Russian side made a proposal to address the impasse on a Zone. Some elements of this proposal that were carried over to the Middle East section of the Final Document of the 2010

conference included holding an international conference to discuss how to implement the 1995 Middle East Resolution and the appointment of a Facilitator to oversee the process and consult with Middle Eastern states. Two other elements were not incorporated in the Final Document. First, as a confidence-building measure to implement the 1995 Resolution, was to be the adoption of voluntary obligations by all states of the region not to create and develop national fuel cycle capabilities in exchange for guaranteed supplies of nuclear fuel through multilateral fuel cycle arrangements. The second element omitted from the Final Document was that Egypt, Israel and Iran were to ratify the CTBT as a first step to all Middle Eastern states joining the treaty. These three states, which had already signed the treaty, are among the states on which the treaty's entry into force legally depends.³⁷

Ambassador Antonov, head of the Russian delegation, was personally involved in the talks related to a ME WMDFZ prior to and during the 2010 NPT Review Conference. He coordinated among the NWS and was in constant dialogue with the relevant states, including direct mediation. Russia was also involved in drafting the language of the Middle East section, but much of the negotiating took place directly between the United State and Egypt. The sides ultimately came to a compromise and agreed to hold a conference on a ME WMDFZ in 2012.³⁸

Russia made efforts to maintain the momentum for holding a Zone conference after the 2010 conference according to some interviewees. For example, in a move calculated to forestall Arab action that might alienate the Israeli Government from attending such a conference, the Russian delegation

³⁷ Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations in New York, "Russian Statement at the 2009 NPT PrepCom on the ME WMDFZ," May 2009, <https://unidir.org/node/5654>.

³⁸ "2010 NPT RevCon Final Document Outlines 'Practical Steps' Towards Implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0>.

launched an initiative at the 2011 IAEA General Conference for a resolution supporting the Zone conference in exchange for the Arab states foregoing their usual resolution on Israeli nuclear capabilities (the INC Resolution).³⁹ A well-placed interviewee said that the initiative was launched too late to gain support from Israel and the Arab states and, as a result, was not submitted as a draft resolution. He said it was re-launched in 2012, when a draft resolution on the Zone conference was submitted, but was not put to a vote and was withdrawn due to a lack of support.⁴⁰

PREPARATIONS FOR AND THE INDEFINITE POSTPONEMENT OF THE 2012 HELSINKI CONFERENCE

Following the 2010 NPT Review Conference, the main goal of the Russian Government according to one Russian interviewee was to hold the 2012 Conference as agreed in the Final Document. For Russia, not implementing the decision would mean that the co-conveners of the conference – Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom⁴¹ – had not implemented their obligations, which in the minds of Russian decision-makers would be detrimental to the NPT.

Nearly eight months after the 2010 conference, the co-conveners and the United Nations Secretary-General initiated a search for a Facilitator. The favoured candidate of the Russian Government, according to an interviewee, was Sergei Ordzhonikidze, a Russian diplomat who served as Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva at the time. This candidate was not selected because he did not fulfil the three criteria presented by the Arab states: that the Facilitator be ministerial level, from a non-nuclear weapon state, and neutral.

Of the initial candidates identified, one from Norway declined and another from Canada was perceived as being too close to the United States and the United Kingdom. Russia had no preference between the remaining candidates, from Finland and the Netherlands. The membership of the Netherlands in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was an issue for the Arab states. Therefore, the co-conveners made the final decision to select the Finnish candidate based on a wider set of criteria that considered the three Arab criteria. One interviewee noted that the United States did much of the preparation work without coordination with the other co-conveners, while Russia helped to coordinate with the United Nations Secretary-General, with technical international organizations (e.g., the IAEA, the OPCW, and the BWC Implementation Support Unit), and with the Arab states.

Not long after the selection of Finland as the conference host and Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, the Under-Secretary of State in the Finnish MFA, as the Facilitator, major differences emerged between Middle Eastern states and among the co-conveners. Russia played a constructive role to bridge these divides according to one interviewee by convening a conference in Moscow in October 2012 supported by the Russian MFA and organized by the PIR Center, a Russian think tank.⁴² This conference was attended by senior officials from the United States, the League of Arab States (LAS), Iran, and Israel as well as regional and extraregional experts and alongside the Facilitator, Ambassador Laajava.

³⁹ Jasmine Auda and Tomisha Bino, "The Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the IAEA General Conference: Is there a 'Grand Strategy' behind the IAEA Track?," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 5 (13 June 2022): 86–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2079328>.

⁴⁰ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference, "Russian Draft Resolution 'Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East,'" GC(56)/L.1, 28 August 2012, <https://undir.org/node/5689>.

⁴¹ Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, "Facilitator's Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," 24 November 2012, <https://undir.org/node/5696>.

⁴² PIR Center, "The Results of PIR Center International Seminar on the Middle East Zone Free of Mass Destruction," 9 October 2012.

The Russian Government felt that a postponement was necessary given that the Israelis needed time to hold their general elections, put in place their leadership after the election, and decide on how to approach the conference.

One interviewee noted that the Russian side made enormous efforts to persuade Iran and Israel – neither of which had yet confirmed their participation – to join the conference in Finland tentatively scheduled for December 2012.⁴³ For example, the Israelis were put at the same table for breakfast as the LAS representative to facilitate engagement and they even met behind the scenes. Another interviewee recalled that Rose Gottemoeller, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, played a constructive role in identifying a

compromise. In the end, Iran agreed to attend the 2012 Helsinki Conference, but the United States and Israel decided not to. This was frustrating for Russia, but not surprising. Despite multiple meetings and consultations, the Facilitator could not reach an agreement between the sides on an agenda, terms of reference, and an outcome document.⁴⁴

The US Government subsequently decided to indefinitely postpone the 2012 Conference. This was seen by some interviewees as part of a broader pattern of US–Russian divergence on the Zone issue at that time, mainly over tactics rather than strategy. The Russian Government felt that a postponement was necessary given that the Israelis needed time to hold their general elections, put in place their leadership after the election, and decide on how to approach the conference. But it felt that a postponement decision should only have been taken after further consultations with states in the region and with their acquiescence. The interviewees said their government was displeased with the unilateral US statement postponing the conference (a decision supported by the United Kingdom) after failing to convince Russia to join the statement.

One interviewee felt that, although the Russian Government did not support the US decision to postpone the conference and despite Russia releasing a significantly different statement to that of the United States and the United Kingdom⁴⁵, all three co-convening states were initially held equally responsible by the Arab states for the postponement. Notwithstanding the failure to reach an agreement among Middle Eastern states to hold the conference in 2012, the Russian preference would have been to fulfil the obligation of the co-convenors based on the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference by holding a conference after setting a date and sending invitations to all of the states of the region.

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS IN GLION AND GENEVA, 2013–2014

The idea for informal consultations was suggested by Ambassador Ulyanov, who had been appointed in March 2011 as Director of the MFA's Department for Security Affairs and Disarmament (the predecessor of the DNKV).⁴⁶ This suggestion was first put forward on 31 May 2012, during a meeting in Helsinki attended by the three co-convenors, the Facilitator, and United Nations representatives. The idea of

⁴³ IAEA General Conference, "Russian Draft Resolution 'Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East,'" 28 August 2012, <https://undir.org/node/5689>.

⁴⁴ Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, "Facilitator's Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," 24 November 2012, <https://undir.org/node/5696>, and Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 57.

⁴⁵ Victoria Nuland, "US Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference"; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Russian Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," 24 November 2012, <https://undir.org/node/5694>, and United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "UK Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference," 24 November 2012, <https://undir.org/node/5695>.

⁴⁶ United Nations Information Service, "New Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation Presents Credentials," 6 February 2018, <https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/pressrels/2018/unisbio1169.html>, and Mikhail Ulyanov, "A Missed Opportunity: The Glion-Geneva Process".

holding these consultations was prompted by the need to ensure involvement of all Middle Eastern states in the preparations for the conference in order to make sure that it was carried out successfully.

The arrangements for the informal consultations took a year to finalize because it was first necessary to secure consent from the co-conveners, the United Nations Secretary-General, and the Facilitator, and then later from all states of the region. Some Russian interviewees claimed that both the United States and the LAS initially objected to this idea but later agreed to the consultations hosted by the Swiss Government in Glion and Geneva in 2013 and 2014.

The first meeting of the informal consultations, held in the Swiss village of Glion in October 2013, was largely introductory in nature according to two Russian interviewees. Egypt, Israel, and the LAS sent senior diplomats to this meeting, while other Middle Eastern states representatives were the local staff of their respective permanent missions in Geneva.

Later meetings featured increasingly substantive discussions. For example, during the third meeting of the consultations in Glion, in February 2014, these interviewees believed that the sides were close to a breakthrough. Jeremy Issacharoff, the head of the Israeli delegation, announced that his country would be prepared to agree to the date of the ME WMDFZ Conference if its regional counterparts agreed to discuss regional security issues as part of the agenda and once the conference draft outcome document and all organizational modalities were agreed upon.⁴⁷

One interviewee recalled that either Russia or Israel came up with the idea of introducing regional security issues as related to a Zone in the agenda and the other supported it. This idea was incorporated in the Russian non-paper on "Possible Elements of the Final Document" of the ME WMDFZ Conference as a working group on "Regional Security, Conventional Weapons and Confidence Building Measures aimed, inter alia at facilitating favourable environment for establishing the Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery".⁴⁸

The Facilitator's informal orientation paper carried this idea forwards through a clause to establish an expert group on "confidence- and security-building measures and cooperation in the Middle East" as part of a prospective Helsinki Conference alongside another expert group that was to discuss the "properties of the zone, including its scope of prohibition and coverage; parameters, definitions, geographic extent, verification and compliance, as well as other necessary provisions".⁴⁹

Despite these hints of a potential breakthrough, the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva also experienced major setbacks due to major political disagreements between the Arab states and Israel. These disagreements, combined with the slow pace of the talks, eventually led to the cessation of the informal consultations only part of the way towards the desired outcome.

Some interviewees emphasized that, while the consultations did not achieve their goal of convening the Helsinki Conference, they were an important milestone in the decades-long effort to create a Zone. For them, the consultations were the first event of its kind since ACRS to ensure Israeli participation in ME WMDFZ-related talks, which these interviewees felt that it was a significant step.

⁴⁷ For the Israeli perspective, see "The five sessions of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, 2013 to 2014" in the Israeli Narrative in this publication.

⁴⁸ 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>.

⁴⁹ Office of the Facilitator, "Facilitator's 'Orientation Paper' for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference," 28 November 2014, <https://unidir.org/node/6126>.

Interviewees concluded that the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva did not achieve its intended goal – convening the Helsinki Conference – for four main reasons. The first was lack of active participation by Middle Eastern states. According to some interviewees, several of these states expected the co-conveners and the Facilitator to solve all the disagreements between them and hold the conference, and they blamed the co-conveners when this did not transpire. Holding the conference and resolving differences was the responsibility of the states of the region themselves, according to these interviewees, and it did not happen because they were not sufficiently active.

The second reason was disagreements over the scope of the conference. While Israel conditioned its attendance on also discussing regional security, Arab states resisted this because they felt including it would dilute the mandate of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

The third reason was insufficient US encouragement of Israel. One interviewee said that holding the Helsinki Conference would have been possible if the United States had actively encouraged Israeli participation, rather than echoing its position ahead of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. The interviewee recalled that the Russian Government was of the view that the main task of the co-sponsors under the Final Document of the 2010 conference was to convene the Helsinki Conference. When it became clear that Israel would not attend, he said his government still wanted to send invitations and hold the conference. This was the breaking point because the United States was not prepared to put Israel in the uncomfortable position of deciding whether to attend or not.

Lastly, some interviewees believed that the deterioration of US–Russian relations over US allegations of chemical weapons use by the Syrian Government worsened the atmospherics at the informal consultations. One interviewee with first-hand knowledge, however, felt that these events were unrelated and that productive US–Russia cooperation on non-proliferation was historically insulated from the general climate of bilateral relations. The JCPOA negotiations around that time was given as one example. Commenting on the consultations, one interviewee recalled that, over time, the United States and Israel simply lost interest in continuing to engage with the Zone issue.⁵⁰

THE 2015 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

Some Russian interviewees noted that their government's goal on the ME WMD-FZ issue at the 2015 NPT Review Conference was broadly the same as in 2010, in addition to wanting to fulfil its obligation from 2010 to hold a Zone conference. The Russian working paper submitted to the 2015 conference reflected Russia's view of the parameters for convening a Zone conference.⁵¹ It included a detailed description of the conditions, sequencing, and time frame for a Zone conference.

One interviewee noted that the time frame for holding a conference was an important element of this paper. The need for this was a lesson drawn from the failure to hold the 2012 Helsinki Conference and also reflected the Arab position. According to the document, the conference should be convened by United Nations Secretary-General not later than 1 March 2016 (nine months after the 2015 NPT Review Conference), all Middle Eastern states should start direct consultations on the agenda, and they should pass all decisions by consensus. According to the working paper, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations were to preserve their key roles in the preparations for and organization of the conference.

⁵⁰ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 57.

⁵¹ Delegation of the Russian Federation, "Working Paper by Russia on Convening a Conference to Establish a Middle East WMD Free Zone," NPT/CONF.2015/WP57, 14 May 2015, <https://unidir.org/node/5998>.

The formulation of the Russian paper was based on long and difficult consultations with Middle Eastern states. One interviewee with knowledge of the matter maintained that the paper considered and addressed the problems of the 2010–2015 period, was non-controversial, was based on the lowest common denominator, and should have been acceptable to all the main parties.

At the 2015 conference, the Russian delegation, led by Ambassador Ulyanov, proposed wording for the Final Document on how to proceed on a ME WMDFZ. It viewed its wording as more positive than the alternative circulated by the Arab Group, which could be viewed as anti-Israel and therefore unrealistic.⁵² On the penultimate day of the conference, there was disagreement within the Arab Group on the language, particularly between Egypt (which liked the Russian draft) and Iraq (which held what one interviewee felt was a less ambitious and a more pro-US position).



Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov played an important role in maintaining continuity in Russian policy regarding the ME WMDFZ during the 2010s through his positions as the Director of the Department for Security Affairs and Disarmament at the Russian MFA and as the ambassador to Vienna (Vienna, Austria, 2 March 2022). Credit: Dean Calma / UN Photo.

Negotiations on the draft were held in Subsidiary Body 2 of the Review Conference, which examined regional issues, including the Middle East and implementation of the 1995 Middle East Resolution. The head of the body consulted Russia and other important players to produce a report to be incorporated into the draft Final Document. One interviewee claimed that the draft report was essentially the Russian working paper with additional provisions at the beginning. Taous Feroukhi, the conference president, moved to incorporate the paper into the draft Final Document with changes which Russia accepted. Iran expressed readiness not to block consensus, although it was difficult for it to join partly because of the sentence introduced by Russia on the need to have a direct dialogue on regional security that included Israel.

Everyone was ready to accept this solution until the final 48 hours, when, according to one interviewee, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the White House, and US diplomats at the Review Conference received instructions from Washington to reject the proposed Russian language. The interviewee believed the same pattern had unfolded at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, but the US administration had been more willing to withstand pressure and find creative solutions to achieve a consensus Final Document in 2010 than 2015. Ambassador Ulyanov was closely involved in (ultimately unsuccessful) last-minute efforts by the conference president to resolve the differences between the United States and Egypt in a quadrilateral meeting. The interviewee lamented that Israel, a non-NPT state, essentially blocked consensus on an NPT document through the United States with the support of the United Kingdom and Canada.

⁵² "Arab Group Calls for Holding the Postponed 2012 ME WMDFZ Conference within 180 Days of the Conclusion of the 2015 NPT RevCon," 22 April 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/arab-group-calls-holding-postponed-2012-me-wmdfz-conference-within-180-days>.

Until the final 48 hours of the 2015 NPT Review Conference, there was a widespread agreement to accept the Russian proposed language until, according to one interviewee, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the White House, which instructed the US delegation to reject the proposed Russian language.

Some interviewees saw their government as having played a positive and constructive role on the Zone issue at the 2015 NPT Review Conference by moderating the Egyptian position and being prepared to adopt the Final Document. They viewed the United States' one-sided support for the Israeli position and disregard for its responsibility as co-sponsor of the 1995 Resolution as playing a major role in the failure of the Review Conference.

One interviewee also emphasized that consensus in 2015 was undermined by the US insistence that all Middle Eastern states should agree on the conditions of a conference and rejection of the inclusion of a deadline to hold it and by the Canadian insistence that Israel be involved at every stage of talks on agreed language. While acknowledging Egyptian intransigence, they believed this was understandable given the delay in implementing the 1995 Middle East Resolution and holding the 2012 Conference, and that Cairo had already shown a lot of patience.⁵³

One of these interviewees also believed that, if agreement over the ME WMDFZ issue had been reached at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, no other issue had the same potential to lead to failure to adopt a Final Document. In this vein, some interviewees rejected the notion put forward by some Egyptian interviewees that the Zone issue was scapegoated for the failure when tension over the NWS commitment to disarmament was an equal or greater cause.⁵⁴ These interviewees noted that, while the final draft of the Final Document of the 2015 conference was difficult for the NWS to accept due to the disarmament issue,⁵⁵ the Russian delegation had a green light from Moscow to support it if other states did, whereas Washington rejected it over the Zone issue.

THE ROAD TO THE 2018 UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISION

Following the failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference, one Russian interviewee reported that his government initially preferred to continue the informal consultations but realized the United States and Israel were not ready to continue. With growing Arab frustration over the stalled ME WMDFZ process, the Russian Government also foresaw that action was needed to build momentum on this issue to avoid another failure at the next Review Conference. It thus sought to formulate a new proposal based on the experience of the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva and a Track 1.5 meeting held in Moscow in 2017 with all key Middle Eastern states represented.

The Russian Government presented the new proposal in a working document at the first session of the 2017 NPT Preparatory Committee.⁵⁶ The document elaborated three principles for the preparatory work ahead of a Zone conference that Russia felt were balanced, took into consideration the interests of the Arab states and Israel, and should be agreed in advance. These included that all decisions be made

⁵³ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 58.

⁵⁴ For the Arab perspective, see "The Arab position at the 2015 NPT RevCon and reasons for its failure" in the Arab states Narratives in this publication.

⁵⁵ William C. Potter, "The Unfulfilled Promise of the 2015 NPT Review Conference," *Global Politics and Strategy* 58, no. 1 (February 2016): 153–165.

⁵⁶ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 59.

by consensus; that preparatory meetings should be attended by all Middle Eastern states; and that at least one conference session be dedicated to regional security.

At the 2017 session of the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, the Russian delegation presented what they saw as a non-controversial draft resolution pertaining to the ME WMDFZ issue.⁵⁷ It was based on the Russian non-paper presented at the informal consultations in Glion and Geneva, which contained a section on establishing three working groups: on compliance and verification, on Zone parameters, and on regional security as related to a Zone. One interviewee claimed that the Arab Group appreciated the effort, but did not find it timely, while Iran expressed dismay at what it viewed as Russia's pro-Israel stance, although – unlike the United States and Israel – it was willing to discuss the idea. Another interviewee noted that, while Moscow was ambivalent about pursuing the Zone issue through the General Assembly, it felt that this was the only alternative given the impasse on this issue at the NPT.⁵⁸

When Arab states proposed launching a new ME WMDFZ process at the General Assembly in 2018, the Russian Government initially hesitated to support this initiative and expressed serious reservations to its Arab counterparts. It was concerned by the possibility of having two distinct Zone processes, one at the United Nations and another at the NPT, and the problem of how these two tracks would be reconciled. It was also concerned that the process could be hampered by lack of US and Israeli support. However, seeing this proposal as the only realistic alternative to pursue a Zone, Russia relented and supported the Arab proposal. One interviewee noted this support was at the cost of unprecedented toxicity between, on the one side, the United States and Israel and, on the other, those states supporting the Arab proposal.

An interviewee characterized the two tracks – the NPT Review Conference and the General Assembly – as mutually reinforcing for reaching a ME WMDFZ. He said that his government viewed the Review Conference as the primary venue for the Zone process because of the 1995 Middle East Resolution, which has not been implemented despite being an integral part of the package to indefinitely extend the NPT. This issue should therefore continue to be discussed in NPT forums.

He said that his government saw the General Assembly as a good supporting track: if something emerged from the process it should be introduced to the Review Conference. But he acknowledged that, given the broader scope of the United Nations, if a ME WMDFZ treaty were to be reached there, it would not necessarily need to be approved by the NPT Review Conference.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY-MANDATED ME WMDFZ CONFERENCE, 2019–2022

Russian interviewees said that their government was satisfied with the two sessions held so far of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction, which resulted from the General Assembly's 2018 decision. Although Israel and the

When Arab states proposed launching a new ME WMDFZ process at the General Assembly in 2018, the Russian Government initially hesitated to support this initiative and expressed serious reservations to its Arab counterparts. Subsequently, Russia has become one of the foremost extra-regional states to support the General Assembly-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference.

⁵⁷ United Nations General Assembly, A/C.1/72/PV.14, 16 October 2017, 4–5, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1644133>.

⁵⁸ Artemenkova and Orlov, "A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East," 59–60.

United States did not attend, most viewed it as an important step in the practical realization of the 1995 Middle East Resolution. They also felt it was important that the first session, in 2019,⁵⁹ did not single out any state and that those absent could join future sessions.

Reflecting on the second session, held in 2021,⁶⁰ one interviewee said that his government characterized it as successful because it adopted the rules of procedure and agreed on the work in the intersessional period, among other things. This gave further impetus to the process and the most important thing moving forwards was for Middle Eastern states to continue to develop communication with one another on this issue. This interviewee said that the main task for the intersessional periods is concentrating on building regional capacity to gain the needed skills and dialogue on specific aspects of a Zone in order to create mutual understanding – ideally but not necessarily including Israel.

Interviewees generally agreed that tensions around a ME WMDFZ decreased at the NPT Review Conference in 2022 thanks to the ME WMDFZ Conference process.

Most interviewees said that the ME WMDFZ Conference should be characterized by regional ownership and inclusiveness, and that the United States and Israel could be brought in by incorporating regional security in some way. Not having these key actors would fundamentally undermine the long-term credibility and survivability of the process, but this should not stop Arab states and Iran from advancing. Middle Eastern states should also accede to international instruments and consider regional formulas in areas like WMD verification along the lines of the Brazilian–Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials. Finally, they felt that regional security should not be addressed in the same forum as a Zone, but separately.

⁵⁹ “‘Haves and Have Nots’ Debate Best Way Forward to Negotiate Binding Treaty on Nuclear-Weapon-Free Middle East, as Landmark Conference Continues,” 19 November 2019, DC/3820, <https://press.un.org/en/2019/dc3820.doc.htm>.

⁶⁰ “Second session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other WMD is held in New York,” 29 November 2021, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2020s/second-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=2>, and “Working Paper by the Russian Federation on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction and Their Means of Delivery,” 15 July 2021, A/CONF.236/2021/WP3, <https://unidir.org/node/6584>.

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.