

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
UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE
FOR DISARMAMENT RESEARCH

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

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

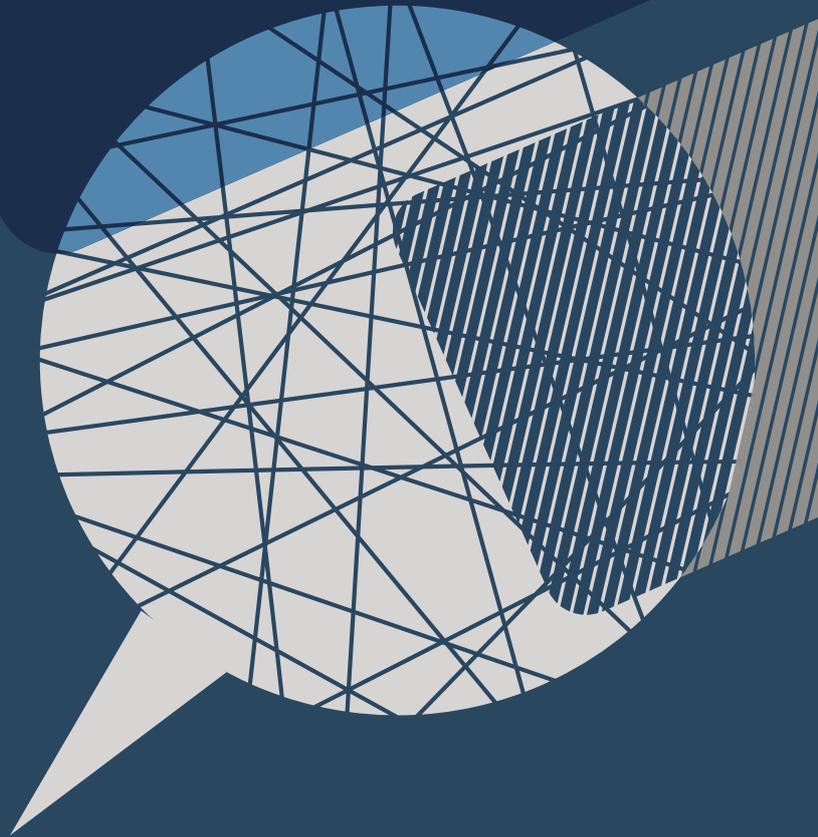


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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

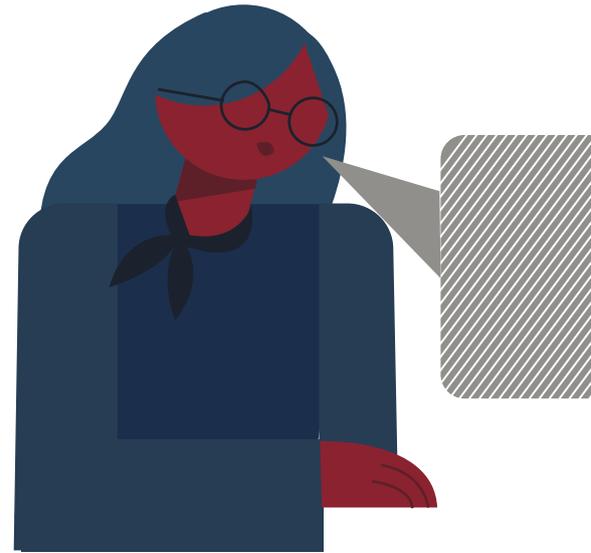
1. SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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

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

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

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



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

PERCEPTIONS OF A ME WMDFZ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ "Iran and Egypt co-sponsor a Resolution for the Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone in the Middle East," 21 August 1974, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1970s/iran-and-egypt-co-sponsor-resolution-calling-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone?timeline=0>.

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

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, "Iran Request to Include Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Item in the Work of the General Assembly," 15 July 1974, <https://unidir.org/node/6144>.

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

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

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

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

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

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

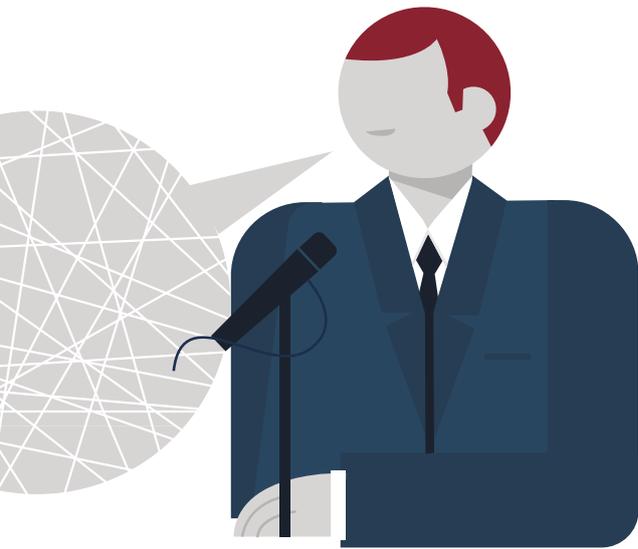
While there is near-universal support among Middle Eastern states for a ME WMDFZ, their view of how it should relate to international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes differs.

Arab and Iranian positions

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Israeli positions

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

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

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

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

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

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

American and Russian positions

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

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

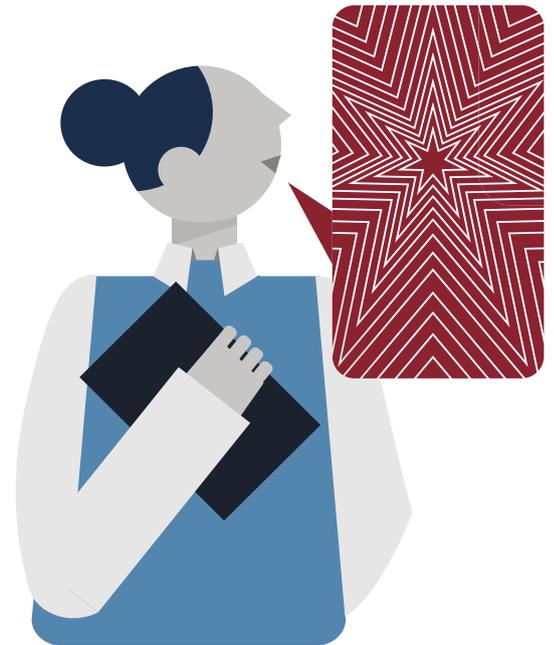
STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTERPARTS ON THE ME WMDFZ ISSUE

Perceptions of Israel

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Perceptions of Iran

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

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

Perceptions of the Arab states

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

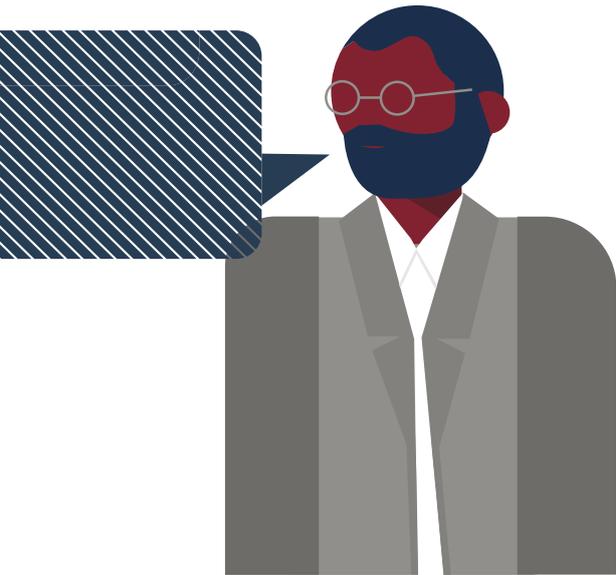
Unlike the Arab states' and Iranian narratives, the Israeli narrative did not focus on the role of depositories per se because Israel is not an NPT Member State, nor did Israeli interviewees place the same value on the ME WMDFZ or its milestones as did Arab and Iranian interviewees. However, Israeli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

The role of the depository states: American and Russian assessments

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

International and regional conditions that facilitated past ME WMDfz processes

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

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

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

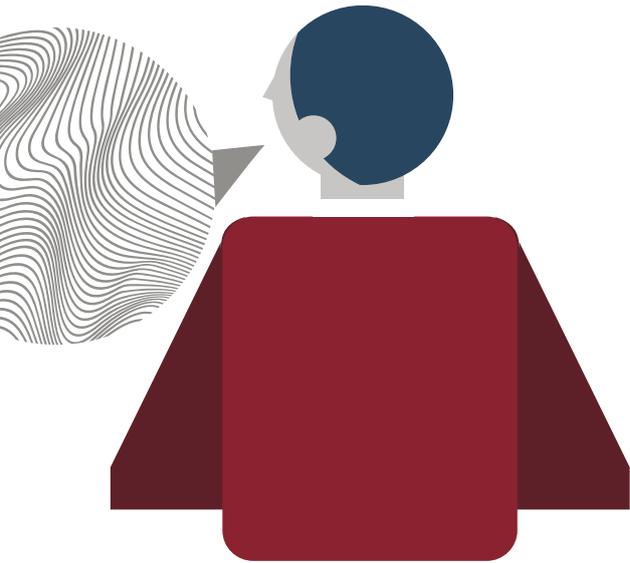
In the early 2010s, two main factors opened up political space to pursue the creation of a ME WMDFZ. The first was the desire of the NWS, particularly the three NPT depository states, to reach a consensus at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. A Final Document was sought to strengthen the integrity of the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

Deteriorating international conditions for reaching a ME WMDFZ today

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

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

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



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



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

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

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THE ARAB STATES' NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. ARAB SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ME WMDFZ

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

NON-WMD SECURITY CHALLENGES

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WMD IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

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



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

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

ARAB SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ME WMDFZ

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

ARAB POSITIONS ON THE ME WMDFZ

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

¹⁷ "Mubarak initiative' expands the scope of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East to include all WMD," 18 April 1980, UNIDIR Timeline of Key Events in the History of Diplomatic Efforts for the ME WMDFZ (UNIDIR Timeline), <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/mubarak-initiative-expands-scope-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-middle-east-include-all?timeline=0>.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰ Ibid, 66.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁰ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

³¹ "First Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMDFZ Conference is Held in Glion, Switzerland," 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

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

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

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

Israeli nuclear capabilities and the ME WMD FZ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Increasing Arab leverage on Israel for nuclear disarmament

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁸ Ibid, 77.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ Ibid, 72.

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

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

3. ARAB HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMD FZ PROCESSES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The international and regional context of ACRS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arab motivations to participate in ACRS

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

Intra-Arab relations in ACRS

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

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

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

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

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

The bifurcated logic of ACRS: The conceptual and operational baskets

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶¹ "1995 NPT Review and Extension conference adopts the 'Resolution on the Middle East,'" 11 May 1995, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1995-npt-review-and-extension-conference-adopts-resolution-middle-east?timeline=15>.

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

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

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



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

THE LAS ME WMDFZ DRAFT TREATY, 1996-2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁴ "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0>; Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague As Delivered," 5 April 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-pressoffice/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>, and "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0>

⁷⁵ "2010 NPT RevCon final document outlines 'practical steps' towards implementing the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East," 1 May 2010, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2010-npt-revcon-final-document-outlines-practical-steps-towards-implementing-1995?timeline=0>

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁶ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹¹ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS AT GLION AND GENEVA, 2013-2014

Before the informal consultations

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE 2015 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

Context of the 2015 NPT Review Conference

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

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

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

Conditions at 2010 versus 2015 NPT Review Conferences

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Reasons for the failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Consultations on the path to the 2018 General Assembly decision

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first to third sessions of the Conference

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

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

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

¹¹⁶ "Resolution on the 'Establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East' is adopted without a vote at the UN General Assembly," 12 December 1980, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1980s/resolution-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region-middle-east-adopted-without?timeline=0>, and "Consensus on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East' resolution at the UN General Assembly is broken," 1 November 2018, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/consensus-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region-middle-east-resolution-un?timeline=32>.

¹¹⁷ "First session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and other WMD is held at the UN in New York," 18 November 2019, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/first-session-conference-establishment-middle-east-zone-free-nuclear-weapons-and?timeline=33>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

Challenges for Israeli participation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iranian participation

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

The scope of the treaty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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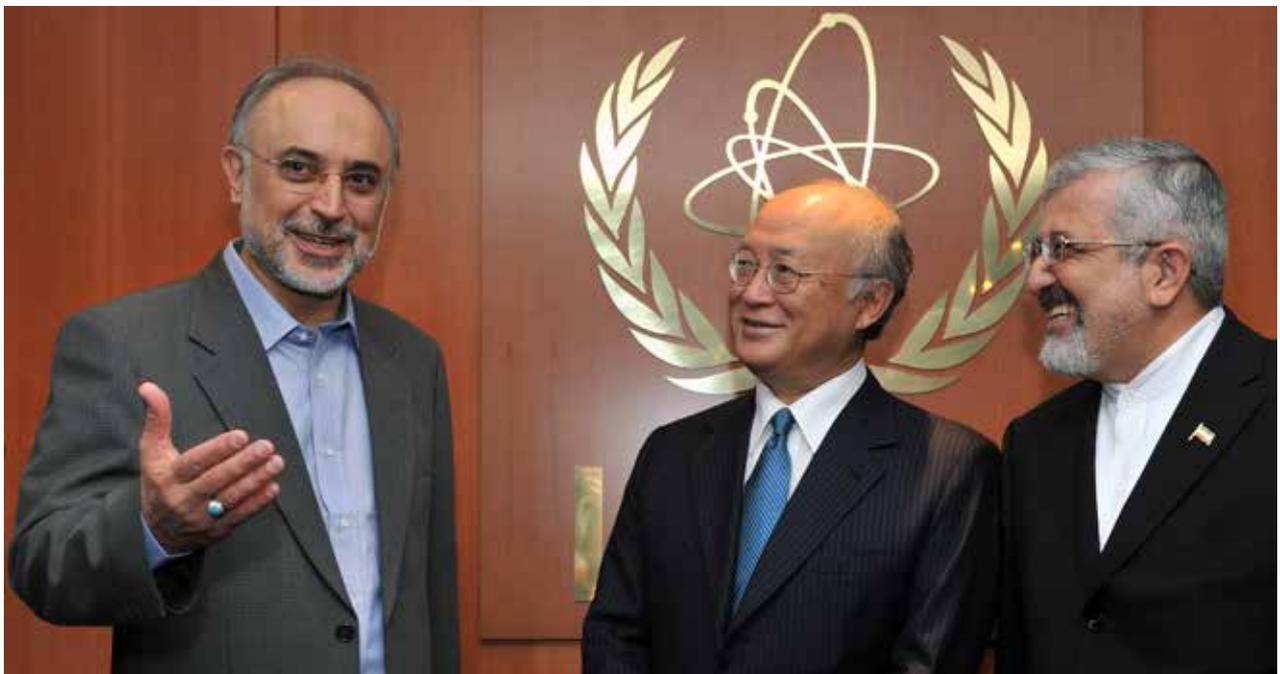
THE IRANIAN NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iranian nuclear facilities by Israel in violation of IAEA General Conference resolution 533 of 1990.² The interviewee warned that, if Israel continued its unacceptable actions, then Iran could eventually respond in self-defence in the form of an unprecedented military response against Israel, citing comments by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi as evidence.³ He noted that the United States and the European Union referred to resolution 533 in condemning alleged attacks by the Russian Federation on a Ukrainian nuclear facilities.⁴ In this context, he believed that the international community had to prevent such provocations by Israel that could lead to a serious military conflict in the Middle East.

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

2. IRANIAN DRIVERS AND THEMES ON THE ME WMDFZ

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

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

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

Iran’s long-standing support for a Zone

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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Iranian concerns about expanding the scope of a ME WMDFZ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, since 2002, Iran has been preoccupied with the nuclear issue¹¹ and has limited capacity to focus on the ME WMD-FZ issue. Iran has neither participated in nor made its input to the Egypt–Israel debates that have come to define this issue since 1992, and it was not involved in two major Zone-related processes of the past: the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group of the Madrid Peace Process,¹² to which it was not invited; and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva,¹³ where it only attended the first meeting.

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

The imbalance in the NPT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The geographical delineation of the ME WMDFZ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The role of the depository states

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

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

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

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

Mistakes and regrets in nuclear relations with Western powers

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

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



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

3. IRANIAN HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMDFZ PROCESSES

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

Iranian interviewees universally viewed their country as the originator of the Zone initiative, as Iran was the first to sponsor the resolution on a ME NWFZ at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974.²³ Iran had been promoting the idea since 1970.²⁴ The original draft of the resolution referred to a “nuclear-free zone”, but this was changed to “nuclear weapon-free zone” to better reflect Iranian intentions.

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

²³ “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>.

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

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

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

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

THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE

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

Iran supported the Middle East Resolution²⁷ at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. Iran was a leading state of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and the Iranian delegation at the conference was following the NAM position. Because the NWS were unwilling to make progress on nuclear disarmament, the NAM preferred other options over an indefinite extension, which was advocated by the United States and most other NPT member states. Despite being against the indefinite extension of the NPT, Iran ultimately agreed to join the consensus due to the overall package that was agreed at the 1995 conference, which included the Middle East Resolution.²⁸

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

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

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

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

²⁷ “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>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE INDEFINITELY POSTPONED 2012 HELSINKI CONFERENCE

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

Iran announced its readiness to participate in the 2012 Helsinki Conference at an event in Brussels.³¹ From Iran's perspective, the conference was on track until the United States announced its decision to indefinitely postpone it on 23 November 2012.³² This move was perceived by Iran as being in complete contravention of the 2010 NPT Review Conference decision because the United States was only a co-convenor and should not have had the authority to unilaterally postpone the conference. One interviewee who was involved in the breakthrough at the 2010 conference blamed himself for his overly optimistic assessment of the US commitment to hold the 2012 Conference. He saw a repetition of the scenario that had unfolded at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, with the Middle East Resolution still awaiting implementation.

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

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

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

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS IN GLION AND GENEVA, 2013–2014

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

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

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

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

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

THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY-MANDATED ME WMDFZ CONFERENCE

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

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

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

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

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

³⁷ European External Action Service, "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," 14 July 2015, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en.

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

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

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

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

According to an Iranian interviewee with direct knowledge of the Iranian government's thinking, the process to establish a Zone follows two distinct but interconnected tracks: the NPT and its Review Conference cycle; and the United Nations General Assembly, which created the ME WMDFZ Conference process in 2018.⁴¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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THE ISRAELI NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

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

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

Israel is very sceptical about its neighbours' willingness to engage seriously in ME WMDFZ negotiations that will also address Israel's security concerns. It participated reluctantly in past Zone-related processes like the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process (1992–1995) and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (2013–2014). Israel conditions its participation in such processes on three general principles: first, direct dialogue between Middle Eastern states; second, that all decisions be made by consensus; and third, that the process incorporates a broad range of security issues into the agenda.

The hesitation of Israeli leaders to participate in ME WMDFZ-related processes is based on its concerns about the "slippery slope": the fear that, once Israel enters a diplomatic process, it will come under pressure to make concessions that contradict its national security. Israel holds that any process that may eventually lead to a Zone needs to progress through a "long corridor": a step-by-step diplomatic approach in which Israel becomes confident to engage in arms control talks only after the resolution of the underlying causes of its insecurity, beginning with the Arab–Israeli conflict, Middle East-wide acceptance of Israel's right to exist, and a confidence-building process through security cooperation between Israel and its neighbours. The "long corridor" concept paves the way for the natural maturation of formal agreements over time, with a Zone only as the final endpoint of this process.

1. ISRAELI SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Israeli interviewees unanimously agreed that the Islamic Republic of Iran is Israel's main security challenge. They divided Iran's challenge to Israel into three main elements in order of importance: Iran's

¹ The chapter does not reflect the official view of or 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 Israeli interviewees.

nuclear programme,² its means of delivery (i.e., its missile and uncrewed aerial vehicle programmes),³ and its proxy non-state actor network. This network includes but is not limited to Ansarullah (also known as the Houthis) in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Shiite militias in Iraq.

One interviewee noted that, while these three elements were historically viewed as distinct security challenges for Israel, as Iran increasingly moved closer to the threshold of nuclear weapons, they became harder to manage separately. When Iran's nuclear and missile programmes combined into a prospective nuclear weapon and its means of delivery, it constituted Israel's top security concern, given the proclamations by Iranian officials calling for the destruction of Israel.⁴

Another interviewee compared the potential threat of Iran's advanced nuclear capabilities and the challenge posed by the Russian Federation to the West in the context of the war in Ukraine. The interviewee suggested that Iran's nuclear capabilities, which would enable it to weaponize quickly, could deter any state considering military action to stop Iran from engaging in malign activities in various domains across the Middle East.

Israeli leaders are reluctant to engage in ME WMDFZ-related processes due to their concern about a "slippery slope." They fear that entering a diplomatic process could result in mounting pressure on Israel to make concessions that contradict its national security.



Iranian demonstrations against the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel by President Donald Trump (Tehran, Iran, 11 December 2017). Credit: Masoud Shahrestani / Tasnim News Agency.

² Prime Minister's Office, "Statement by PM Lapid," 2 July 2022, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_statement020722.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "PM Netanyahu Addresses the AIPAC Policy Conference," 6 March 2018, <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/news/pm-netanyahu-addresses-the-aipac-policy-conference-6-march-2018>.

⁴ Benjamin Weinthal, "Iran Supreme Leader's Rep. Calls for Destruction of Israel," The Jerusalem Post, 2 October 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/iran-regime-supreme-leaders-rep-calls-for-destruction-of-israel-680835>.

Some interviewees also highlighted the potentially dangerous ripple effects of Iranian nuclear capabilities in the Middle East, especially in the light of the US pivot away from the region. They noted that, following the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), some states in the region are now considering acquiring their own nuclear capabilities. The region is thus potentially facing a new wave of nuclear weapon proliferation, most notably by Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. One interviewee felt that, from an Israeli perspective, Türkiye's nuclear aspirations were less problematic than those of Saudi Arabia, given its membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and that the United States has already stationed nuclear weapons on its territory.

Other interviewees expressed concern about the potential security vacuum created by the US pivot from the Middle East, as the United States might no longer be seen as a reliable security partner and guarantor. Some states in the region, particularly member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), could seek closer relations with China, Russia, Türkiye, and – in the worst-case scenario for Israel – Iran to ensure their security. Such a scenario could trigger competition for influence in the region, with US allies like Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia stepping in to fill the void, increasing regional tensions and conflict.

One interviewee compared the disadvantages of US allies in the Middle East facing a potentially nuclear-armed Iran to that of US allies in East Asia and the nuclear weapon programme of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In his view, US assurances were a key factor in dissuading Japan and the Republic of Korea from pursuing nuclear weapons in response to the DPRK's capabilities, but no such arrangements exist to protect US allies in the Middle East from Iranian threats. He speculated that even Türkiye, a NATO member state with US nuclear weapons, would rely on the US nuclear umbrella if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia does not benefit from formal US assurances, and the United States has failed to stop Iranian nuclear advances or respond to past aggression against Saudi strategic infrastructure.⁵

Therefore, Iranian nuclear weapons are a real concern that, unlike the case of the DPRK and its withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), could be the crack that shattered this treaty with a cascade effect in the region. Under this scenario, Saudi Arabia, which this interviewee suspected had an understanding with Pakistan, could acquire nuclear weapons, and Türkiye and Egypt would not be far behind.

Most interviewees agreed that the threat from nuclear proliferation factored most prominently in Israeli security perceptions, but they differed on the significance of chemical and biological weapons. One interviewee noted the potential scale of biological weapons as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic while downplaying the threat posed by chemical weapons. The interviewee pointed out that only a small portion of the nearly half a million deaths during the civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic have been attributed to chemical weapons,⁶ and Syria had largely disarmed its chemical weapons arsenal.⁷ Another interviewee, however, said that chemical weapons are a larger concern, citing their history of use in the Middle East by Iraq under President Saddam Hussein against Iranian troops and civilians and Iraqi Kurds

⁵ Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strikes, and U.S. Blames Iran," *The New York Times*, 15 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>.

⁶ Sarah Haviland, "A Reflection on Accountability for Chemical Weapon Use in Syria," *InterAction*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.interaction.org/blog/a-reflection-on-accountability-for-chemical-weapon-use-in-syria/>.

⁷ Organization of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, "Destruction of Declared Syrian Chemical Weapons completed," 4 January 2016, <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2016/01/destruction-declared-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed>.

and by Syria.⁸ These cases illustrated to him that the concerns about chemical weapons remained and, if authoritarian Arab regimes used chemical weapons against their own people, there was little question they would use them against Israel. In this context, a third interviewee questioned if the ME WMDFZ's focus on nuclear weapons overshadowed the threat posed by chemical weapons in the region.

As early as the mid-1990s, senior Israeli officials considered the potential use of massive bombs and missiles capable of indiscriminate damage and injury to civilian populations as WMD.⁹ Interviewees agreed that missiles posed a serious challenge to Israel's security. One interviewee noted that missiles should be considered separately from WMD or conventional weapons, as advances in missile technology have made them more accurate and capable, which could cause "unacceptable damage" constituting an existential threat.¹⁰

Regarding the conventional military threat from Israel's neighbours, most interviewees did not view it as an imminent danger as in the past. This change was due to the decrease in direct state-to-state military confrontation and the reduced threat of conventional attacks by neighbouring Arab states or coalitions, given that Egypt (Israel's main neighbour with a high military capability) and Jordan were in a cold peace with Israel, Syria was in the midst of civil war, and Iraq had undergone regime change leading to a less overtly hostile approach to Israel. According to these interviewees, Israel enjoys high military capabilities and deterrence.

At least one interviewee, however, advised caution on downgrading the conventional military threat, given the vulnerabilities posed by Israel's demographics and geography. Some interviewees noted that, due to the history of Israelis living in fear of destruction by conventional war, a future agreement pertaining to a ME WMDFZ and regional security should include limits on specific categories of conventional arms and their quantities. In this vein, some interviewees noted the deficiencies of Zone discussions which excluded conventional arms, even though they have been the main instrument of "war and terror" in the region.

Interviewees agreed that terrorism by non-state actors inside Israel – using means such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car attacks, shootings, and stabbings – posed a significant threat to the country's domestic security. Counterterrorism measures and cooperation with the Palestinian Authority were seen as helpful to address this threat. However, non-state actors added another level of complexity to any ME WMDFZ negotiations, according to another interviewee, since they would not be bound by such agreements. Other internal security challenges mentioned included the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, internal cohesion, incitement to ethno-religious violence, and misinformation.

Some interviewees mentioned cybersecurity as a growing security challenge, with one interviewee even considering it a "new WMD category". While Israeli military infrastructure was relatively secure, critical civilian infrastructure, such as Israel's financial sector and water sources, remain vulnerable to cyberattacks.¹¹

⁸ Ben Hubbard, "Syria used Chemical Weapons 3 Times in One Week, Watchdog Says," *The New York Times*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/middleeast/syria-assad-chemical-weapons.html>.

⁹ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Statement issued by Israel at the conference on disarmament on 'Israel's Approach to Regional Security Arms Control and Disarmament'", 4 September 1997, <https://undir.org/node/6021>.

¹⁰ Udi Dekel, "A Multi-Arena Missile Attack that Disrupts Israel's Defense and Resilience Pillars" in *Existential Threat Scenarios to the State of Israel*, ed. Ofir Winter (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2020), 69–70, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/nothing-is-forever/>.

¹¹ Joby Warrick and Ellen Nakashima, "Foreign Intelligence Officials Say Attempted Cyberattack on Israel Water Utilities Linked to Iran," *The Washington Post*, 8 May 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/intelligence-officials-say-attempted-cyberattack-on-israeli-water-utilities-linked-to-iran/2020/05/08/f9ab0d78-9157-11ea-9e23-6914ee410a5f_story.html.

Because of their country's wide range of challenges, most interviewees rarely viewed a Zone under its current narrow scope as being able to adequately address these threats, including those related to WMD proliferation in the region. They maintained that arms control arrangements had to be tools that served a state's national security, and the benefits of joining them had to outweigh the harm, which is not currently the case with a Zone. One interviewee further explained that the nuclear threat is now linked to a wider range of threats, such as missiles, terrorism, and cyberwarfare. As such, most interviewees felt that discussions on a Zone needed to be adapted to cover a broader and more contemporary range of WMD-related threats.

2. ISRAELI DRIVERS AND THEMES FROM ON THE ME WMDFZ

ISRAELI VIEWS ON WMD NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT PROCESSES AND REGIMES

Israel's position on a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (ME NWFZ) and a ME WMDFZ has evolved over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, Israel focused on a regional process and largely rejected multilateral engagement on this issue because it did not perceive global arrangements such as the NPT as meeting its security requirements. However, in the 1990s, Israel became more involved in international arms control treaties and forums.

According to Israeli interviewees, international and regional developments in the 1990s, such as Israel's participation in ACRS from 1992 to 1995,¹² compelled it to contemplate more serious engagement in multilateral arms control and regional security negotiations, which consequently changed Israel's mode of engagement with this set of issues. In efforts to bridge the gaps between regional and international engagement, Israel engaged more with international arms control treaties and forums, including joining the Conference on Disarmament (CD), and signing the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). These experiences were a departure from Israel's historical preference for direct bilateral negotiations. They demonstrated to the Israeli Government that it could join international forums and treaties, where appropriate, and, for example, affect the final language of treaties. While it continues to be engaged in these forums and treaties, Israel continues to hold that, while international arrangements can complement regional ones, they cannot substitute for them.

Some interviewees noted that Israel's policy on a ME WMDFZ has been consistent, as regularly outlined in official statements and documents. These include Israel's response since 1975 to the United Nations Secretary-General's requests for states' views on a Zone; Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1986, when he stated that, under the right conditions and with peace with all its neighbours, Israel could consider the creation of a Zone;¹³ Shalheveth Freier's 1993 informal paper that articulated Israel's nuclear non-proliferation policy;¹⁴ and the statement by Shimon Peres, Israeli foreign minister, when Israel signed the CWC in January 1993.¹⁵ Israel also joined the

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

¹³ "PM Shamir's Address at the 41st General Assembly PM," 30 September 1986, <https://unidir.org/node/6906>.

¹⁴ Shalheveth Freier, "A Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East and its Ambience," 14 July 1993, <https://unidir.org/node/6186>, and United Nations Secretary-General, "Report on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East,'" 28 July 1975, <https://unidir.org/node/5623>.

¹⁵ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Statement Issued by Israel at the Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention," 13 January 1993, <https://unidir.org/node/6022>.

General Assembly consensus on creating a Zone between 1980 and 2018,¹⁶ but its willingness to join this consensus was subject to statements clarifying the need for direct negotiations among the region's states.¹⁷

Along these lines, Israel believes that a ME WMDFZ can only be achieved by negotiations "freely arrived at" and cannot be imposed by other states, from either within or outside the region. As expressed in its explanation of the General Assembly vote on the Zone resolution, Israel aspired to a peaceful and stable region based on mutual recognition and full diplomatic relations between all states. Neither peace, stability, nor a Zone can be imposed from outside.¹⁸

The establishment of a ME WMDFZ can only be accomplished through negotiations that are "freely arrived at" and cannot be imposed by other states, whether from within or outside the region.

Such a process can only be achieved gradually, emanating from within the region, reflecting its unique circumstances based on negotiation and coordination between Israel and its neighbours. While Israel supports the Zone as a concept, the way in which arms control processes, including a Zone, have been promoted regionally has led interviewees to believe that they are not designed to truly enhance the security of all states of the region; instead, they would enhance the security of all other states at Israel's expense.

Two concepts structure and inform Israeli policy and thinking on a ME WMDFZ: concerns over Zone negotiations becoming a "slippery slope"; and the vision of the required pathway for reaching it as a "long corridor". The term "slippery slope" refers to Israel's concerns over entering a diplomatic process and coming under pressure to make unacceptable concessions. These apprehensions are informed by the belief that the goal of Israel's counterparts in such processes is to disarm Israel's alleged nuclear capabilities and any other capabilities that give it military superiority over its neighbours as well as providing some Middle Eastern states with the opportunity to bash Israel and isolate it in international forums. One interviewee, for example, recalled that, when Israeli officials asked their Egyptian counterparts what would happen if Israel surrendered its alleged nuclear capabilities, the latter responded that they would have to discuss Israeli conventional capabilities and an "endless" list of its other capabilities. This concern was also related to Israel's hesitation to allow any international dimension to the process, fearing isolation in multilateral or regional forums, where the Arab states have an automatic majority and Israel would be outnumbered by a coalition of regional and international players.

Israel's "long corridor" (or "step-by-step") diplomatic approach was adopted to partly address its concerns about entering a slippery slope process. This approach involves engaging in regional arms control, non-proliferation, or disarmament processes, including on a ME WMDFZ, only after the resolution of the ongoing regional conflicts such as the Arab–Israeli conflict, region-wide acceptance of Israel's right to exist, and a confidence-building process through security cooperation. In the Israeli

¹⁶ "Resolution on the 'Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East' is Adopted Without a Vote at the UN General Assembly," 12 December 1980, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1980s/resolution-establishment-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-region-middle-east-adopted-without?timeline=0>.

¹⁷ Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, "Israel Draft Proposal on Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," 24 October 1980, <https://unidir.org/node/5625>.

¹⁸ Ofer Moreno, Israeli Explanation of Vote on UNGA Resolution "Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Division for Strategic Affairs, 1–9 November 2018, <https://unidir.org/node/6161>.

view, any regional process needs to reflect and address the regional dynamics by building confidence, peaceful relations, and political normalization as a prerequisite for any discussions on a Zone.

Nearly all interviewees agreed that the path to a ME WMDFZ was through the “long corridor”, with a Zone as a final step. The “long corridor” concept paves the way for the natural maturation of formal agreements. Unless a track record of trust passes the test of time and pressure, most interviewees agreed that moving forwards on a Zone would not be possible.

One interviewee commented that, without trust, lingering tensions could undermine the stability of a ME WMDFZ, and any Zone treaty not built on trust would eventually collapse. Some interviewees further observed that lessons from other NWFZs (e.g., the Treaty of Tlatelolco) demonstrated that a Zone could only emerge based on peace and high confidence among parties.

Under the current regional dynamics and to pave the way for a ME WMDFZ, there was a belief among interviewees that the focus of region-wide diplomacy should be on regional security, given the hostility in the region where there were few peace treaties between Israel and other states. The exceptions are the Abraham Accords with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the treaties with Egypt and Jordan, with the latter seen as “cold peace”.

A recurring Israeli concern regarding arms control agreements was on the risks associated with regime change or state collapse in neighbouring states, which could result in the new government reneging on previous commitments. One case that best illustrated this anxiety was the deterioration in Israeli–Iranian relations after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Similar concerns arose about Egypt after the Arab Spring, but the peace treaty with Israel remained intact despite the regime change. One interviewee noted that this could have been different had the Muslim Brotherhood-backed president of Egypt remained in power longer. But he acknowledged that Egypt did not walk away from its peace treaty with Israel even at the lowest points of bilateral ties.

In contrast to many Middle Eastern states, interviewees observed that the stability of Israel and its democratic institutions meant that Israeli governments felt bound by agreements made by their predecessors. When Israel signed a treaty, the obligations went through the Knesset, became law, and were generally respected, with implementation not considered “optional”. Israeli interviewees highlighted the importance of the need to constantly assess the opportunities versus risks and to engage in security balancing to consolidate and mature relations with Arab states. They emphasized the need to hedge bets on what is possible against the risk of a change in leadership that could undo or worsen ties, given the ever-changing regional landscape and evolving threats.

ISRAELI VIEWS ON THE EFFICACY OF WMD-RELATED REGIMES AND A ME WMDFZ

Israel supports the NPT, which it voted in favour of when it was adopted in 1968. It values its contribution to nuclear non-proliferation efforts. However, Israeli interviewees stressed the treaty is insufficient to address proliferation threats in the Middle East.¹⁹ Therefore, signing the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) was a red line for Israel, according to interviewees, given its commitment to nuclear ambiguity, which provides it with deterrence against existential threats.

¹⁹ Merav Zafary-Odiz, “The Israeli National Perspectives on Nuclear Non-Proliferation,” in *International Cooperation for Enhancing Nuclear Safety, Security, Safeguards and Non-proliferation – 60 years of IAEA and EURATOM*, ed. Luciano Maiani, Said Abousah and Wolfgang Plastino (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 117, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-57366-2_18.

Israeli interviewees cited several reasons why Israel did not join the NPT or the majority of other international WMD non-proliferation or disarmament regimes and related organizations and forums. Some interviewees cited historical events and regional factors that led to Israel's mistrust of international instruments and forums like the NPT. For example, many Israelis are Jews descended from Holocaust survivors who retained the historical trauma of being abandoned by the international community during the Holocaust. An additional example was the Israeli experience during the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when many Western states prioritized low and stable oil prices over defending Israel. One interviewee, reflecting on this history, stated that Israel's comfort zone was to be "left alone", even if it meant being isolated and singled out in the international arena.

Interviewees outlined four factors related to the weakness of international WMD regimes that partly informed Israel's position on a ME WMDFZ and Israel's consideration of accession to the NPT as part of a Zone. First, some interviewees mentioned the history of breaches of international WMD non-proliferation or disarmament regimes in the Middle East, emphasizing that, of the five states recognized as having violated the NPT, four – by Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria – were in the Middle East, which was an indication of the ineffectiveness of the NPT in the region.²⁰ Thus, most interviewees did not consider international agreements sufficient for the region. In this context, Israel's position had been that it would only accept a ME WMDFZ arrangement that covered all WMD and other security issues and included all key states of the region since Israel's security could be affected even if only one state did not adhere to such an agreement.

Second, verification mechanisms in existing international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes were viewed as weak and ineffective in the Middle East and acted on only when, for example, Israel provided intelligence related to non-compliance. Therefore, an interviewee noted that Israel believed the Middle East required stricter verification arrangements within a Zone that went beyond the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and allowed Middle Eastern states to verify compliance for themselves. Another interviewee suggested that a regional verification mechanism should be set up for a Zone, with international organizations like the IAEA, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) Implementation Support Unit (ISU) playing advisory and observer roles.

Third, interviewees noted a gap in existing regimes regarding enforcing compliance after detection of a violation. "Serial cheaters" of international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament regimes have shown that no viable mechanism exists to ensure compliance. In case of violation by Middle Eastern states, Israel does not possess enforcement power in these regimes, and the states that possess such powers (e.g., the United States) might not be sufficiently concerned to ensure compliance or to do so consistently and systematically. These interviewees thus concluded that relying on existing international regimes to ensure compliance with and enforcement of a ME WMDFZ was a flawed approach. If the intention was for a Zone to rely on such treaties, they believed that Israel could not place faith in the sincerity of its neighbours' commitments to non-proliferation. Joining such treaties might thus provide short-term political gains for Israel, but they could eventually become a smokescreen for covert WMD activities.

Finally, one interviewee observed that the accession of Israel to the NPT as part of a ME WMDFZ as conceived by Egypt, Iran, and others would not positively affect the normalization of relations

²⁰ Moshe Edri, "Statement at the 66th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency," 4 September 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/22/09/israel-gc66.pdf>.



Hezbollah stages a military drill featuring parades of fighters and armoured vehicles, mortar artillery, anti-aircraft weapons, rockets, and drone offensives simulating attacks on Israeli military outposts on the occasion of the anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon on 25 May 2000 (Aramta, Lebanon, 21 May 2023). Credit: Elisa Gestri / Sipa USA.

and peaceful ties between Israel and other states in the region. He cited as an example of this the reservation submitted by Syria upon its ratification of the NPT in 1969 to the effect this act did not signify recognition of Israel or entailed entry into relations with it.²¹ The Israeli Government characterized this at the time as incompatible with the treaty's spirit and a "grave obstacle" to establishing a Zone. This raised questions about the security value of a Zone for Israel and the sincerity of other Middle Eastern states to implement their obligations as part of a Zone treaty.

ISRAELI VIEWS OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES, REGIONAL CONDITIONS, AND A ME WMDFZ

Egypt's diplomatic gambit on Israeli nuclear capabilities and a ME WMDFZ

Most Israeli interviewees agreed that the focus of Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on Israeli nuclear capabilities and a ME WMDFZ served Egyptian diplomatic interests, rather than being an Egyptian security priority. They believed that the Zone issue provided Egypt's MFA with a way to demonstrate its relevance and leadership on the regional and international stage. The interviewees also suggested that Egypt uses the Zone issue as a mechanism to attempt to "equalize" its status with Israel by requiring Israel to disarm its superior capabilities – WMD or conventional.

One interviewee believed that the Egyptian military has benefited from having Israel as a foremost "threat of reference", which has helped secure its budget and force structure. He suggested that Arab states continue to focus on the ME WMDFZ issue because it unites them, gives them the appearance of pursuing Israel's disarmament, and allows them to paint Israel as the "bad guy". The interviewee believed most Arab states now see Iran as a greater security concern than Israel.

²¹ Syrian Arab Republic, "Ratification with reservation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in Russian," 24 September 1969, <https://treaties.unoda.org/a/npt/syrianarabrepublic/RAT/moscow>.

Most interviewees believed that Israeli nuclear capabilities were not an obstacle to Israel–Egypt security relations, and that the Egyptian presidents viewed the Zone as an issue the MFA could pursue without making tangible progress or overly upsetting Israel. One interviewee claimed that, in every case that Israel went to the Egyptian president on this issue, he said the MFA could continue its “diplomatic game” because it did not affect security ties between the two states. Israel received a similar response from the Egyptian military, giving diplomats a free hand on a Zone but not allowing them to get involved in conventional arms control or disarmament. The military was said to have told the Israelis that the MFA had limited knowledge of the military’s needs and capabilities, and they did not want the MFA to be at the negotiating table on conventional arms.

Most interviewees believed that Israel’s nuclear capabilities did not pose an obstacle to Israel-Egypt security relations or broader Israeli-Arab cooperation.

Most interviewees believed that the international community understood Israel’s position on a Zone, which Israel regarded as strategically important. They noted that Israel’s position had won support in international organizations, mentioning that a diluted version of the resolution on Israeli Nuclear Capabilities (INC) passed once at the IAEA General Conference, but subsequently failed with ever-widening vote margins that favour Israel.²²

Israeli–Arab relations: Growing normalization and overlapping security concerns

Most Israeli interviewees concluded that the evolving relations between Israel and some Arab states have led to the formation of a group of “like-minded” states in the Middle East that approach regional security and WMD in a different sequence than in the ME WMDfZ process envisioned by Egypt. Bilateral diplomacy with Arab states has shown that, for most, disarming Israel was neither necessary nor desirable. One interviewee said that many Arab states considered such demands highly unrealistic and, for some, disarming Israel even contradicted their desire to have a Middle Eastern actor that Iran feared.²³

Some interviewees characterized the transformation of relations between Israel and Arab states, as manifested publicly by the Abraham Accords with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE, as a paradigm shift. The agreements demonstrated that the Israeli–Palestine problem was not the only source of instability in the Middle East and that progress on the Palestinian issue was no longer a prerequisite for Israel to engage with Arab states. Unlike the cold peace with Egypt, the peace in the Abraham Accord is considered by interviewees as a “warm peace”, demonstrating that Israel–Arab collaboration is possible and mutually beneficial. The agreements are a product of shared security perceptions and interests and major concerns about Iran, including its nuclear and missile programmes, Shiite proxy non-state actor networks, and Sunni Islamist non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaida, and Islamic State.

²² Jasmine Auda and Tomisha Bino, “The Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the IAEA General Conference,” 93–96, and “Arab Group refrains from putting the draft resolution on ‘Israeli Nuclear Capabilities’ to Vote at the IAEA General Conference,” 23 September 2011, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/arab-group-refrains-putting-draft-resolution-israeli-nuclear-capabilities-vote-iaea?timeline=7>.

²³ Eran Lerman, “It was a good idea, it was a very bad idea: Israel’s incentives and disincentives in the Middle East WMD-free zone process,” in Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the ME WMDfZ: Voices from the Region, ed. Tomisha Bino, James Revill and Chen Zak (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), 60.

One interviewee observed that the three diplomatic breakthroughs between Israel and the states of the region – the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and the Abraham Accords – all occurred outside the United Nations framework. This led Israel to believe that, when national interests were at stake, the Arab states would deviate from the United Nations as their preferred venue for negotiations with Israel. Another observed that the number of states willing to engage with Israel outside the United Nations is increasing. Some interviewees, however, also commented that they did not expect relations between Israel and more Arab states to be further formalized until the Palestinian issue was resolved.

Interviewees did not expect Israel's improved relationships with some Arab states to alter its need to safeguard its security independently. Israel has a "self-defence" mindset and a widespread belief that it was cursed to "live by the sword" for the foreseeable future. Thus, Israeli security will always be based on the country's indigenous capabilities, rather than on any diplomatic arrangements or alliances, including with the United States. Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's cautious responses to Iran following its attacks against them²⁴ and their avoidance of publicly naming, shaming, and blaming Iran demonstrated to Israel that other states will not risk their security for Israel. Most interviewees assessed that GCC states were unlikely to "stand up to Iran" as long as the United States or Israel were "leading the charge". Yet, these ties symbolize recognition of Israel as a legitimate partner. One practical benefit mentioned by some interviewees was intelligence sharing, which had existed for decades between Israel and some Arab states, but now took place at a higher level. Overall, interviewees viewed the bilateral and mini-lateral cooperation with some Sunni Arab states as a more desirable and realistic form of diplomacy than Egyptian and other Arab initiatives at the United Nations, including on a ME WMDFZ.

ISRAELI VIEWS OF THE ROLE OF EXTRA-REGIONAL STATES IN ME WMDFZ PROCESSES

A set of understandings underpin the bilateral relationship between the United States and Israel related to nuclear ambiguity, non-proliferation, regional security, and a ME WMDFZ. From an Israeli perspective, the US role in Middle Eastern security and diplomacy revolves around the ongoing validity of US–Israel understandings on these issues and Israel's trust in US actions.

For Israeli decision makers, their room for manoeuvre on non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament processes – including Zone-related processes like ACRS and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (see section 3) – is based on the September 1969 agreement between US President Richard M. Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. According to at least one source, the Nixon–Meir deal is interpreted by Israeli leaders as effectively providing Israel with a US pledge not to pressure it to surrender its nuclear capabilities as long as it continues to face existential threats in the Middle East. For its part, Israel committed to not declaring, testing, or threatening to use its nuclear capabilities.²⁵ Each US president and Israeli prime minister has reaffirmed this understanding over the past half century, which has taken Israel's nuclear capabilities off the table in bilateral security discussions. Thus, Israel perceives pressure on it regarding its nuclear capabilities as a violation of the Nixon–Meir deal.

Although the commitment may not be explicit or binding from a US perspective, the bilateral understanding has persisted for five decades because it served both sides' interests and has

²⁴ Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, "Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strikes, and U.S. Blames Iran," *The New York Times*, 14 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>, and Nada Altaher and Ban Westcott, "Four Ships Targeted in Mystery 'Sabotage Attack,' says UAE," *CNN*, 13 May 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/12/middleeast/uae-cargo-ship-sabotage-intl/index.html>.

²⁵ Adam Entous, "How Trump and the Three Other U.S. Presidents Protected Israel's Worst-Kept Secret: Its Nuclear Arsenal," *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-trump-and-three-other-us-presidents-protected-israels-worst-kept-secret-its-nuclear-arsenal>.



President Nixon's meeting with Prime Minister Meir marked a pivotal moment in the formation of the 1969 US-Israeli nuclear understanding. Following the meeting, Meir pledged to exercise nuclear restraint, and in response, the Nixon White House chose to ease pressure on Israel. This understanding meant that as long as Israel maintained a restrained and discreet nuclear posture, Washington would refrain from scrutinizing its nuclear ambitions (Washington DC, United States of America, 25 September 1969). Credit: Golda Meir Collection, 1904-1987 / University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

contributed to regional stability. However, due to the informality of the commitments and changes in the US bureaucracy, knowledge, and policies between US administrations, some interviewees noted the complexity of maintaining these commitments and the need to repeatedly reaffirm them. Interviewees lamented that the US system allows for a high degree of latitude for incoming US presidents to experience foreign policy “amnesia” and “shaking loose of commitments and obligations”. Incoming administrations often find themselves without files on what previous administrations had agreed, or a new administration might feel it was not bound by past agreements while expecting others to stand by their obligations. One example was President Ronald Reagan’s consideration in November 1981 of an initiative to link Israel’s accession to the NPT to the acceptance by the Arab states of Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.²⁶ The internal discussions in Israel surmised that a Zone initiative could not be advanced before substantial developments in the peace process occurred. Therefore, Israel has adopted an ongoing process of reaffirmation and recommitment, making it harder for the United States to shirk past commitments.

According to one interviewee, US assurances to Israel came with a *quid pro quo* pertaining to US demands in several areas, including Israel’s nuclear posture, technology transfer from and to China, and advanced notification and consultations on delicate security matters. The interviewee said that US demands on Israel have evolved over time and have not always been consistent. One alleged example was a request for Israel to ratify the CTBT under the administration of President William J. Clinton, but the next administration told Israel not to ratify the treaty as the United States did not plan to do so.²⁷

²⁶ United Nations Peacemakers, “Security Council Resolution 242: The Situation in the Middle East,” 22 November 1967, <https://peacemaker.un.org/middle-east-resolution242#:~:text=The%20resolution%20calls%20for%20the,acceptable%20solution%20to%20the%20conflict>.

²⁷ Alais Larioux, “The U.S. debate on the Ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty,” (Prague, Peace Research Center Prague, 2021), 11, <https://www.nonproliferation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Alais-paper-3.pdf>.

Another example was encouragement of Israel by the administration of President Barack Obama to brief other governments on its military option against Iran's nuclear programme in order to get these governments to support US sanctions on Iran.

At several junctures in the US–Israel relationship, thought was given to formalizing some of the understandings between the two sides. Two interviewees mentioned that the United States and Israel discussed the possibility of a defence treaty in the 1960s. However, both states de facto concluded that it was better to leave their relationship uncodified, notwithstanding informal arrangements.²⁸

Two reasons were mentioned for Israel's decision. First was its preference to exercise independent judgment on its security needs. A central pillar of Israel's security strategy relies on it being the ultimate arbiter of its own security regarding capabilities and how it exercises them. The interviewees believed that the United States respected this position and was committed to supporting Israel's capacity to "defend itself, by itself" and to support it while making US views known on how it thought security challenges should be addressed. The second reason to keep commitments informal was to ensure that Israel would not find itself in a situation where it needed to ask the United States to place US military personnel in danger to safeguard Israeli security. One aspect of US–Israel relations codified by the US Congress related to sustaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) against current and potential adversaries.²⁹

Some interviewees highlighted the complex US role in the Middle East as another element in the US–Israel relationship. One interviewee noted Israel's preference for the United States to play a role in the region, but questions remained on where, when, and how Israel could act unilaterally. This was evident, for example, when the US Government was initially upset that Israel and Jordan made headway in their bilateral peace talks without US involvement. There were other instances when Israel preferred to deal with its security concerns without the United States, as the latter could try and dictate terms to Israel, for example, a planned Israeli pre-emptive strike on Egypt ahead of the Yom Kippur War, which the United States blocked under the threat of diplomatic and military isolation.³⁰

Israeli interviewees had little to say about the roles of other extra regional actors (including international organizations) in the Middle East, especially regarding issues like a ME WMD-FZ. Interviewees mentioned Israel's understanding with Russia, which applied to the freedom of action of Israel against the Iranian and Iranian-backed military presence in Syria. On other issues such as a Zone, Russia accepted that Israel would only engage in a Zone-related process and accept any resulting treaty based on arrangements "freely arrived at". One interviewee questioned Russia's long-term presence in the region, calling it an "old bear with health issues". He said that Russia's careful attitude to Israeli operations in Syria showed the fragility of its presence there from Moscow's viewpoint and how dependent its capacity to preserve this presence and advances were on understandings with Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and others.

²⁸ Steven Simon, "Should the United States and Israel Make it Official?," *Foreign Policy*, 20 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/20/united-states-israel-allies-formal-defense-treaty-trump-netanyahu/>.

²⁹ William Wunderle and Andre Briere, "US Foreign Policy and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge The Need for Common Vision," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 24 January 2008, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-foreign-policy-and-israels-qualitative-military-edge-need-common-vision>.

³⁰ P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Revisiting the Yom Kippur War: Introduction," *Israel Affairs* 6, no. 1, (April 2007): 4–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537129908719544>.

3. ISRAELI HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF ME WMDFZ-RELATED PROCESSES

ORIGINS OF A ME NWFZ AND ISRAELI ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ZONE PROCESS, 1970S-1990S

Since the General Assembly adopted the resolution to establish a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East, co-sponsored by Iran and Egypt in 1974,³¹ Israel has expressed its general support for establishing such a Zone. In 1975 Israel stated that it was “a desirable further step towards a just and durable peace in the region”. However, Israel also highlighted that the establishment of a NWFZ in Latin America (also known as the Treaty of Tlatelolco)³² as a “notable” precedent cited in the resolution itself, which was “the result of negotiations and agreement between all the States of the regions concerned”. This precedent and the “general international practice” meant that direct negotiations between all Middle Eastern states were the only means to establish a ME NWFZ.



Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and US President Bill Clinton walk along the Colonnade of the White House (Washington, DC, United States of America, 12 November 1993). Credit: White House Photograph Office.

The Israeli Government at the time confirmed its readiness to participate in a conference of all Middle Eastern states convened to create a Zone and expressed regret that the Arab states had not shown a comparable readiness to do the same, casting doubt on the sincerity of their support for a Zone treaty. Among other criticisms, the Israeli Government noted the contradiction between calls for creating a Zone and the threat of force against Israel and attempts to ostracize it from the international community.³³ Israeli engagement with the Zone process³³ mainly focused on promoting engagement between states of the region by direct, face-to-face, regional processes.

Israel's largely regional approach to non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament treaties and other non-regional measures like export control regimes began to change in the early 1990s. Three developments led to Israeli efforts to bridge international and regional processes. The first was the ACRS working group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process (discussed at greater length below), which provided Israel with a regional forum to discuss arms control and develop a broad regional security agenda with many Arab states based on consensus for the first time. ACRS

³¹ “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>.

³² Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco), opened for signature 14 February 1967, <https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/treaties/treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons-latin-america-tlatelolco-treaty>.

³³ “UN Secretary-General Report on the Establishment of A Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East,” 28 July 1975, <https://unidir.org/node/5623>.

The Israeli government at the time confirmed its readiness to participate in a conference of all states of the region convened to create a Zone and expressed regret that the Arab states had not shown a comparable readiness to do the same, casting doubt on the sincerity of their support for such a treaty.

required Israel to engage in an intensive internal deliberation process to formulate its vision of regional security and arms control. Israel also held bilateral consultations with the US Government on its vision. While ACRS ultimately failed, this experience was seen by one interviewee as having helped shape Israeli thinking for the next decades and brought the United States and Israel closer.

The second development was the Clinton administration's arms control policy, which emphasized the need for tailor-made regional approaches in addition to international treaties. Israel found that it needed to begin exploring the role that international treaties and export control regimes could play in its policy, notwithstanding the difficulty of regional implementation of these frameworks. This development was facilitated by the exceptional relationship of trust between President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. US–Israel relations had reached unprecedented closeness and a high degree of mutual trust under these two leaders, including the mutual understanding that neither side would surprise the other on its critical national security interests.

The third development was the decision in 1995 by the CD in Geneva to accept Israel as a full member as part of its decision to expand its membership.³⁴ Israel was involved from the outset in the negotiations on the CTBT at the CD and subsequently signed the treaty when it opened for signature in 1996. It had also joined the ongoing negotiations on the CWC, which it signed in 1993. The decision to sign these treaties marked an evolution in the thinking of the Israeli Government regarding international WMD-related treaties.

MIDDLE EAST ARMS CONTROL INITIATIVE

Following the US military victory in the Gulf War in 1991, President George H. W. Bush launched the Middle East Arms Control Initiative, which sought to limit the stockpiles of fissile material (that only Israel possessed at the time) and ballistic missiles in the region. This initiative was a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the regional security challenges posed by Iraq's WMD programmes, its use of chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and troops and Iraqi Kurds in the preceding decade, threats of use of chemical weapons against Israel, and the use of ballistic missiles against it during the Gulf War itself.³⁵ The Israeli Government established an inter-agency committee involving the Ministry of Defence MoD and the MFA, among other bodies, to weigh the risks and benefits of engaging with this initiative. The committee's final report, according to one interviewee, reflected the majority view that opposed joining the initiative due to the perceived risks of a "slippery slope. It could then come under diplomatic pressure to make concessions. According to this interviewee, a second reason was the interest of the Israeli military industry in maintaining its capabilities in ballistic missiles and fissile materials for national security and maintaining its relevance and funding. A minority dissenting report favoured Israel's

³⁴ United Nations, Conference on Disarmament, "Decision on Expansion of Membership of the Conference," CD/1356, 21 September 1995, <https://undocs.org/en/CD/1356>, and United Nations, "Conference on Disarmament admits 23 new states as members," Press Release, DCF/266, 17 June 1996, <https://press.un.org/en/1996/19960617.dcf266.html>.

³⁵ "President George H.W. Bush Unveils his Middle East Arms Control Initiative," 29 May 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/president-george-hw-bush-unveils-his-middle-east-arms-control-initiative?timeline=3>.

participation, arguing that, since there was little chance the Arab states would accept the initiative, Israel would appear cooperative and be seen positively. It also argued that Israel's powerful air force made it less affected by the initiative than its regional rivals, which relied more on ballistic missiles.

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

The international and regional context of ACRS: The shifting chessboard

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s birthed a unipolar moment, which allowed the United States to reshape the global order. This development caused a paradigm shift for Israel. A parallel change in the Middle East regional order occurred with the victory of the US-led coalition over Iraq under President Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. President Bush's speech on 6 March 1991 underscored the new vision for a security structure in the region,³⁶ reflecting an international and regional interest in the Middle East peace negotiations.

According to Israeli interviewees, there was a hope that favourable conditions had been created for Israel to engage with the region and that a breakthrough in the Middle East could occur. Interviewees mentioned two significant shifts that changed the international and regional balance of power in Israel's favour. The first was the collapse of the Soviet Union as the leading superpower sponsor of Israel's rivals in the Middle East. The Soviet Union was a major arms supplier to Israel's Arab rivals and had been involved in every inter-state war between Israel and these Arab states on the side of its adversaries.³⁷ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor state, the Russian Federation, was not capable of providing the same level of support to the Arab states, and later it also became friendly towards Israel.

The second major shift was the Gulf War, which further fragmented the Arab states and led some to side with the United States against Iraq. It also ended with the removal of Iraq as a major military threat to Israel and eased Israel's persistent concern that an Arab military coalition could form against it. Iraq's weakened military power also increased Israel's military edge in the Middle East. One interviewee believed that the legitimacy of establishing ACRS in the eyes of some Arab parties was partly because Israel did not retaliate to Iraqi missile strikes during the Gulf War.

The Israeli motivation to participate in ACRS

Israel's decision to participate in ACRS was not an easy one. Traditionally, Israel had avoided engaging in multilateral forums or signing international WMD non-proliferation and disarmament treaties, fearing it would lead to a "slippery slope". The main reason mentioned by some interviewees for the change and Israel's participation in ACRS, other than the change in international and regional circumstances, was US diplomatic pressure. According to one interviewee, the United States pressured both Israel and Arab parties at the Madrid Peace Conference and afterwards to join the multilateral talks in parallel to the bilateral peace talks between Israel and Jordan, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and Syria.³⁸ While there was an agreement between the United States and Israel on the need to tackle the outstanding security issues of the Middle East, Israel tried to assess each of the five suggested working groups to determine which served its national interest. Israel assessed that ACRS was the riskiest

³⁶ "After the War: The President; Transcript of President Bush's Address on the Gulf War," The New York Times, 7 March 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/07/us/after-war-president-transcript-president-bush-s-address-end-gulf-war.html>.

³⁷ For the Russian Perspective, see "Soviet Positions on an ME NWFZ" in the Russian Narrative in this publication.

³⁸ "Parties of the Madrid Peace Conference Create the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group," 1 December 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/1992-1995-arms-control-and-regional-security-working-group-acrs?timeline=7>, and "Fact Sheet: The Middle East Peace Process," US Department of State (Archived content), 11 March 1996, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/nea/ispeace.html>.

working group. Some interviewees mentioned that Israel (and other regional parties) needed external pressure to compel their participation. Given Israel's heavy dependence on the United States and the latter's hegemonic superpower status, Israel could not refuse to participate in the initiative.

Israel's primary goal in entering the Madrid Peace Process and ACRS, according to some interviewees, was to prevent the process from undermining its interests. Another goal mentioned by these interviewees was the hope of increasing Israel's interactions with the other Middle Eastern parties participating in ACRS. Moreover, according to one interviewee, even if Israel could not achieve these objectives, it could at least provide its input and influence the process.

Prime Minister Shamir was initially reluctant and uninterested in joining a multilateral negotiation, recalling his country's traditional stance that peace with an Arab state should be concluded bilaterally rather than through international processes and resolutions.³⁹ However, his decision to join under US pressure, once taken, was serious and reflected an Israeli desire to discuss peace, despite the controversial nature of the decision in Israel. On the other hand, one interviewee assessed that the Madrid Process only became serious after the election of Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister in mid-1992.

Structure of and dynamics within the Israeli delegation at ACRS

The structure and dynamics within Israel's delegation at ACRS were shaped by the country's bureaucratic politics. According to one Israeli interviewee, the decision to engage in ACRS built upon internal preparations in the late 1980s to develop a national policy on the CWC. Under Prime Minister Shamir, a Senior Committee on Arms Control was established consisting of members from the Prime Minister's Office, the MoD, the MFA, the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC), and the intelligence community, including the Mossad and military intelligence. The members were nominated based on their expertise, and their appointment was jointly approved by the prime minister and the defence and foreign ministers.

Israel's preparation for ACRS was very methodical, according to another interviewee. The inter-agency Senior Committee articulated Israel's positions and red lines. An interviewee mentioned that academic subject matter experts were hired to provide an overview of Israel's position and increase the bureaucracy's understanding of arms control.

The Israeli delegation at ACRS was co-led by directors from the MFA and the MoD, with the MFA leading the conceptual basket and the military leading the operational basket. One interviewee said that in practice the team was managed by David Ivry from the MoD, who was very much involved in Israeli policy on WMD non-proliferation and disarmament and related international instruments like the NPT, the CWC, and the BWC. Eytan Bentsur, who shortly after ACRS became the director general of the MFA, represented the MFA on the delegation. The team also included intelligence officers and technical experts from the military, the Mossad, and the IAEC who worked on WMD-related issues. Among them were Uzi Arad and Ariel Levite.

Reflecting on the internal dynamics of the inter-agency Senior Committee, some interviewees noted that the MoD was the most powerful component. At the same time, another mentioned that the coordination body reflected ongoing bureaucratic rivalry between the MoD and the MFA on who should lead on these issues. Yet, another interviewee felt there was significant trust between the MoD

³⁹ Hanne Notte and Chen Kane, An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 6 December 2022, 15–17, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/acrs-oral-history-project-final-report>.

and the MFA and contrasted this with what he perceived as the relatively poorer civil–military relations in the Egyptian delegation at ACRS.

The inter-agency Senior Committee met throughout ACRS. Its members met to learn the unique multilateral diplomacy terms used in the working group, share information, and discuss Israel's positions in the working group. One interviewee recalled that updates on the talks were communicated to the prime minister, the MoD, and the MFA, which provided instructions to the delegation. As the conceptual basket discussed the nuclear issue, a politically sensitive matter, elected officials and civilians retained firm control on decision-making.

The changing perspective around ACRS: From a possible threat to a potential breakthrough

Israel viewed ACRS as the most sensitive working group. Its primary concern was that its neighbours saw ACRS as a mechanism to disarm Israel's nuclear capabilities. One Israeli interviewee commented that the working groups were a balancing act for Israel between what it was more interested in cooperating about (economic development, the environment, and water resources and management) and the topics the Arabs cared more about (arms control and refugees). Another interviewee maintained that the Israeli Government was open to progress in the other working groups. It was not keen on agreeing on the WMD issue without a peace agreement with all the Arab states. According to him, the policy at the outset had thus been not to make any progress on nuclear disarmament.

Israel's strategy in ACRS built on Prime Minister Shamir's 1986 statement that, under the right conditions and with peace with all its neighbours, Israel could consider the creation of a Zone.⁴⁰ The Israeli strategy in ACRS incorporated his idea as a long-term goal for which the right conditions would gradually have to be built. This meant focusing on confidence-building measures (CBMs) and laying the framework for Iran, Iraq, and Syria to join the process later.

Some interviewees highlighted Israel's reliance on the United States in such sensitive negotiations, generalizing that if Israel had to engage in regional security and arms control talks, it had to do it with the United States in the room; otherwise, it was deemed too perilous. They also discussed the vital role of the United States as a key ally. The two held preparatory dialogues before each session to discuss constructive ideas they could advance in the plenaries. An interviewee said that they concluded that, since all proposals put forward by Israel met with Arab objections, if they wanted them to consider any proposal seriously, they were better off having the United States suggest it.

Israel's position on the region's delineation was that the larger a ME WMDFZ was, the more security it could provide Israel. Although some important states were not invited or declined participation in ACRS, Israel felt their absence should not prevent progress and concluding understandings with the other parties. Nonetheless, Israel was concerned over how arms control could be discussed when not all the main players were involved. It was also uneasy that some Arab parties, especially the PLO, might use the multilateral track to advance their bilateral track agenda.

Over time, Israel started to identify real benefits from the multilateral track. First, the overriding assumption of most ACRS participants was that, while the bilateral track was still considered the focus of the Madrid Process, one of the perceived advantages of the multilateral track and ACRS was creating a process to address the sources of regional instability. It was also a route to build relationships

⁴⁰ "PM Shamir's Address at the 41st General Assembly PM," 30 September 1986, <https://unidir.org/node/6906>.

and cooperation with Arab states with which it had previously had little or no contact without prior resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian issue that was discussed in parallel bilaterally.

Second, during ACRS, Israel learned that the Arab parties did not have a united position or identical interests, which broke its monolithic view of the Arab states and showcased their distinctions. In fact, an interviewee noted that some Arab parties in the working group (e.g., Morocco, Tunisia, and others) did not mention Israel as a threat in their threat perception papers, which were submitted by each state participating in ACRS. He recalled that some Arab states even shared more security concerns with Israel than with Iran, Iraq, or the Palestinians, to the extent that the name of the authoring state on the threat perception papers could be interchangeable with that of Israel in some cases.⁴¹ A third interviewee commented that Israel learned to utilize these inter-Arab dynamics to form coalitions between Israel and some Arab states on specific issues. He claimed that this coalition-building enabled the operational basket to conclude five agreements, although they were not implemented.⁴²

Israel, Egypt, and Jordan played the most prominent roles in the working group, likely because they were the most informed on arms control and interested in the outcome of the process. For most other Arabs, this was a completely new subject, and they were generally less concerned about the topics discussed in ACRS. They thus deferred to Egypt in many instances, except the Jordanian delegation, which the Israelis felt closer to because they both had a different agenda than Egypt.

Another interviewee mentioned that, at times, smaller Arab states like Jordan, Morocco, and Qatar agreed with Israel's conceptualization of a gradual regional security and arms control process and were less interested in Egypt's approach. These interviewees also recalled that most, if not all, Arab delegates other than Egypt were excited to meet Middle Eastern senior leaders to discuss these issues for the first time. Israel also used coalition building to try to force Egypt to reach a compromise. Particularly in the operational basket, some interviewees said that, from their recollection, not only did many Arab states prefer Israel's approach in ACRS, but they also resented being told what to do by Egypt, which perceived itself as the leader of the Arab states and as such thought it should lead the decisions with the other Arab parties. One interviewee recalled the example of Nabil Fahmy, head of the Egyptian delegation, and Abdullah Toukan, the head of the Jordanian delegation, clashing in ACRS over Egypt's opposition to Jordan hosting a crisis communication centre in Amman.

Israel identified early on that many of the smaller Arab parties in ACRS sought prestige and a role to play in the process; if one were found for them, that could increase their interest in and prospects for cooperation. Therefore, Israel focused on identifying different roles for these states to assume through the process. For example, hosting a communication or security centre meant that money would be spent in that state to create the facility and that state would gain prestige by playing a central role. This generated interest among states to implement CBMs, including Egypt's interest in establishing a regional communication centre in Cairo to facilitate crisis communications between regional members. One interviewee said that, the further ACRS progressed, the more regional parties gathered there supported the creation of these centres and implementation of other CBMs; except Egypt perpetually objected to many of these measures. It was harder, however, to secure cooperation from states not necessarily looking for prestige or a role, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Another interviewee recalled that, even in the personal relationships that formed between members of the Israeli and

⁴¹ Notte and Kane, *An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 42–44.



The 1996 Sharm el-Sheikh Summit of Peacemakers was chaired by US President Bill Clinton and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The purpose of the meeting was to show international support for the Oslo Peace Process. (Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, 13 March 1996). Credit: Gideon Markowiz / Israel Press and Photo Agency (I.P.P.A.), Dan Hadani collection, National Library of Israel.

Arab delegations in ACRS, the Saudi delegation remained hostile toward Israel almost to the end. An interviewee assigned this to the Saudi's financial and religious stature and position as a leader of the Arab states.

The complex relations with Egypt at ACRS

One of the major paradoxes in ACRS for Israeli interviewees was that Egypt, the only Arab state with a peace treaty at the time, proved to be its most significant strategic adversary there. One Israeli interviewee said that a critical question for the Israeli delegation became how to outmanoeuvre the Egyptian agenda on Israel's disarmament.

Interviewees commented that Egypt perceived Israel's nuclear capabilities as a challenge to its regional leadership, and it saw the multilateral track through the lens of the danger of other Arab states normalizing ties with Israel (similar to the Lebanese and Syrian views of the multilateral track). Egypt opposed any normalization without comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arabs. Despite its peace agreement with Israel, most bilateral relations were conducted through security channels, while diplomatic engagement remained limited. Another interviewee said Egypt was nervous in ACRS because Arab contact with Israel no longer exclusively went through Cairo. Egypt felt a loss of control, especially when it saw a broader normalization between Israel and the GCC states taking shape in the working group. To his recollection, Egypt tried to maintain its singular, leading, position in the Arab world in relation to Israel.

Some interviewees observed divergent opinions in the Egyptian delegation between the MoD and the MFA during ACRS. One interviewee said that the military did not prioritize Israel's nuclear capabilities and disarmament; perhaps due to their understanding that it was beyond their power to address, and it might be better to "leave things as they were". In contrast, the MFA was seen as "obsessed" with Israeli nuclear capabilities and brought up the topic at every opportunity. Another interviewee recalled times in ACRS when the Egyptian MFA wanted to impinge on issues linked to the MoD's interests, such as

One of the notable paradoxes in ACRS, as perceived by Israeli interviewees, was that Egypt, the sole Arab state with which it had a peace treaty at the time, emerged as its most significant adversary in the working group.

conventional weapons, but was rebuffed. However, a third interviewee claimed the Egyptian MFA led the negotiations in the conceptual basket, and the military did not have the authority to act independently. He noted that, in contrast, the MoD mostly led the delegation in the Israeli delegation, enjoying a large degree of autonomy due to the significant trust between civilian decision makers and the military.

The educational approach and CBMs: An Israeli negotiating strategy at ACRS?

ACRS began with an “educational approach” whereby US, Russian, European, and other experts shared their experiences and lessons learned from Cold War negotiations at the first plenary meeting in May 1992 that took place in Washington D.C.⁴³ This approach was adopted because most Middle Eastern states lacked experience of negotiating arms control agreements. This approach also assisted Israel’s inter-agency Senior Committee and delegation in better understanding the Arab states’ positions.

Some interviewees found the European experience highly relevant since it demonstrated to them the utility of CBMs as a first step toward defusing tensions between states with a history of conflict. They maintained that the Israeli approach (and to some degree Jordan’s) in ACRS was guided by the European example as formulated in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, today the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE). One interviewee equated the Helsinki process in Europe and ACRS in the Middle East to building a house: first comes the foundations, then the walls, and only at the end, the roof.

The educational approach aligned with Israel’s step-by-step or “long corridor” approach that emphasized the goal of identifying common security interests, issues, and actions accepted by all the sides that did not impinge on their core security interests. This allowed them to build up a process that gradually created the confidence and trust between states of the region to adopt more ambitious steps. One interviewee also believed many Arab parties considered the dialogue around CBMs as an opportunity for valuable military-to-military interaction.

Israel welcomed the educational approach with some reservations due to the massive differences between the Middle East and other regions with a NWFZ, like Latin America. According to interviewees who spoke on the topic, the gradual European approach demonstrated that Egypt was pushing for a more ambitious enterprise like a WMD-FZ when the region was not ready for it. Egypt attempted to implement what one interviewee called the “Rolls-Royce standard” in a region that had many more urgent security issues compared to other regions of the world, and even in these regions, only NWFZs were established. These interviewees commented that Egypt and several Arab parties only reluctantly accepted the educational approach because Egypt was mainly interested in what Israelis considered the “icing on the cake”: Israeli nuclear disarmament.

Some interviewees indicated that the educational approach and holding discussions on CBMs was a

⁴³ For the American perspective, see “Creating ACRS: A novel exercise in American leadership in a shifting regional and global order” in the American Narrative in this publication.

way to buy time for both sides to build trust. Two interviewees felt that, by highlighting the need to learn, Israel was “acting ignorant” on arms control and regional security in order to delay substantive discussions on the nuclear issue. But two other interviewees disagreed with this view. One of them mentioned that the Israeli delegation invested a lot of time in learning the new concepts of arms control, given that it was the first time Israel was involved in such multilateral talks. Another interviewee explained that the Israeli delegation was always working to keep talks going. They recognized that ACRS offered an opportunity to engage with Arab parties. They were interested in the process if they focused on a balance of issues and not just one issue in isolation. A third interviewee explained that, because Arab states were not interested in holding discussions on tangible issues at the outset of the process, the educational approach of looking through historical material and other experiences was the only way to continue to meet.

The development of interpersonal relations between Israeli and Arab officials at ACRS

According to Israeli interviewees who participated in ACRS, it was a new experience for most to be in the same room with Arab parties and to engage with them directly. One of these interviewees reflected that ACRS was not as important for the papers or declarations circulated and discussed, but rather for the relationships built and conversations had on the side-lines between Israelis and Arabs.⁴⁴ Interviewees shared several instances demonstrating the slow build-up of relations, trust, and socialization between the two sides over personal stories, coffee breaks, outside official sessions, and the convening of smaller groups. One interviewee said that the friendships formed with Jordanians, Omanis, Qataris, and others improved not only the dynamics in the multilateral track, but also the bilateral track. Many representatives involved on the Jordanian side in ACRS were the same people engaged in the bilateral Israel–Jordan negotiations, which helped achieve the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel.

Another interviewee asserted that most members of Arab delegations in the working group were friendly towards the Israeli delegation, and conflicts with Egypt in the process largely remained in the realm of policy. Some interviewees commented that what was said during the official discussions differed from what Israel heard outside the conference room. Arab delegations, including Egypt and Jordan, were said to have felt they had to take hard-line positions in front of fellow Arab states and the public. As a result, whatever was agreed during ACRS was concluded outside the main sessions and not during the sessions themselves.

An interviewee recalled that the Saudi delegation kept its distance from the Israeli delegation at ACRS until the Tunis plenary in December 1994. Israel–Saudi interactions in the working group began frigid, but by the Tunis plenary, David Ivry and Prince Turki bin Saud Al Kabeer, who headed the Saudi delegation to ACRS, had coffee together and comfortably spoke to one another.

The end of ACRS: Reasons for its collapse

Israeli interviewees offered various reasons for the failure of ACRS, but most agreed that the talks failed due to the fundamental difference between Israel and Egypt: the reluctance of each side to deviate from what they believe should come first: regional security or arms control. These interviewees felt that this difference remains to this day. One interviewee felt that under Amr Moussa, the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs, the nuclear issue became a higher priority for Egypt that it aggressively pursued. One interviewee recalled that Egypt suddenly withdrew its active participation during the discussions over

⁴⁴ Notte and Kane, *An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*, 42.

the Declaration of Principles (DoP)⁴⁵ in the conceptual basket at the Tunis plenary, the last session of ACRS, where the sides were close to agreeing on the language of the declaration. It fell apart over one sentence: Egypt wanted to add a sentence that committed Israel to join the NPT; Israel would not commit to doing so as it went against its policy.⁴⁶ Israel was surprised and disappointed when Egypt did not accept the language it proposed on the nuclear issue.⁴⁷ Egypt thus decided it would rather not continue ACRS on this course, and Ambassador Fahmy departed the meeting and, in the words of one interviewee, “left his junior assistants to clean up”. Reflecting on the lost opportunity at the Tunis plenary in the conceptual basket of ACRS, an interviewee recalled that Israel had formulated a response to what Egypt had demanded in this basket but never presented it because Egypt withdrew. Many of the other Arab states followed in solidarity with Egypt and as part of the joint Arab position.

Some interviewees lamented that the tragedy of ACRS was that each practical step that Israel proposed, including on the nuclear issue, was never enough for Egypt and was met with further demands. Egypt was only interested in discussing Israeli nuclear disarmament and considered the issues placed on the table by Israel at ACRS as a tactic to stall for time. Instead, there was a fundamental disagreement between Israel and Egypt on the sequencing of disarmament versus CBMs. Interviewees held that Egypt was willing to shift focus to CBMs and building relations between Middle Eastern states only after Israel disarmed.⁴⁸ Israel reversed this order of priority, seeing the process as “regional security and arms control” (RSAC, the title Israel had initially proposed for the working group). Some interviewees believed that, by including arms control, the mandate may have moved the discussions to an area with no practical possible outcome, bringing a sense of failure as it built expectations – primarily from Egypt but also other Arab parties – that arms control would be the focus of the negotiations. As a result, some parties blamed the breakdown of ACRS on Israel because it refused to commit to joining the NPT as a NNWS. In this vein, one interviewee thought the process would have been better served if it only looked at regional security, as he saw arms control as blocking progress in any other area.

Reflecting on what factors may have held Israel back from being more forthcoming in the conceptual basket of ACRS, most interviewees who spoke on this topic commented on the limits of ACRS in removing existential threats because key players like Iran, Iraq, and Syria were not present. Iran was already seen as a challenge to Israel with its nuclear programme and ideological commitment to the destruction of Israel.⁴⁹ Iraq under Saddam Hussein was also seen as a challenge, although its military capabilities had been reduced after the Gulf War and under international sanctions. Syria was considered a threat, including its chemical weapons stockpiles. With their absence from the process, Israel could not consider ACRS a means for threat reduction, unlike the US–Soviet arms control experiences in the 1960s and 1980s. The consequence of the absence of Iran, Iraq, and Syria was that regional WMD non-proliferation and disarmament agreements could not be discussed. Hence the need (from an Israeli perspective) to begin with finding common ground on CBMs that did not impinge on the security of Israel (and others).

⁴⁵ The Declaration of Principles document was intended to give prominence to the WMD aspect of the working group. Despite a broad agreement on the language of the document, the paragraph surrounding the establishment of a ME WMDFZ remained contested. Egypt insisted to include a clause that all states must ascend to the NPT in the near future, but Israel disagreed.

⁴⁶ “ACRS Issues a Draft ‘Statement on Arms Control and Regional Security,’” 13 December 1994, <https://unidir.org/node/6143>.

⁴⁷ “Workshop of the conceptual basket holds a meeting to draft the ACRS Declaration of Principles (DOP) in Cairo,” 31 January 1994, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s/workshop-conceptual-basket-holds-meeting-draft-acrs-declaration-principles-dop-cairo>.

⁴⁸ “Statement Calling on States in the Middle East to Pursue a ME WMDF,” 28 November 1995, <https://www.unidir.org/node/5644>.

⁴⁹ Gareth Porter, “Israel’s Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 45, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): 45–47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378543>.

The other reason for the failure of ACRS mentioned by some interviewees was the obstructionist role played by Egypt on CBMs because of the fundamental disagreement between Egypt and Israel about the sequencing of disarmament versus regional security. An interviewee recalled that Israel had bilateral meetings with its Arab counterparts before each session. During these meetings, they established some agreements on the language of specific texts. But when these understandings reached the conference room, Egypt successfully prevented progress by influencing the other Arab parties to stand behind the harsher Egyptian official position. Although Egypt accepted the concept of many of the proposed CBMs, and there was a good rapport between members of the Israeli and Egyptian delegations at ACRS, Egypt's official position seemed committed to preventing progress on CBMs if Israel did not agree to ratify the NPT as a NNWS. The Egyptians (and the Palestinians) were thus perceived as stalling and playing a disruptive role by delaying or blocking agreements on CBMs in the operational basket until a deal was reached on nuclear disarmament. One interviewee commented that a similar message was communicated in many bilateral talks with Egypt during ACRS that Israel found disturbing. According to an interviewee, the Palestinians were against any form of normalization with Israel before a peace agreement was reached in the bilateral track and, at times, acted behind the scenes to prevent the implementation of the CBMs.

Another mentioned reason for the failure was that Egypt was seen to have found itself isolated and was unhappy with the fact that Israel and other, smaller Arab states came to a consensus on how to proceed on some of the CBMs, taking steps that would be *de facto* normalization without going through Cairo. One interviewee believed that Egypt did not want to resolve the nuclear issue by accepting the DoP as it had a stake in keeping the issue on the table as a source of pressure on Israel and a source of prestige in the Arab world and on the international stage. Because Egypt made peace with Israel first, it felt a sense of ownership over the relationship between Israel and the Arab world and believed Israel was getting more from ACRS than it was. ACRS, in turn, became a burden for Egypt as it was not progressing on Israel's disarmament and, simultaneously, losing its primacy in the Arab ties with Israel. An example of the displeasure of Egypt with progress in normalization was from Amr Moussa, when he coined the term "Herwalla"⁵⁰ to denote the embrace of Israel by some Arab states⁵¹ and the "sharp reaction" of the Egyptian government at the Casablanca Summit from 30 October to 1 November 1994.⁵²

Some interviewees pointed to the connection between the timing of Egypt's decision in mid-1994 that ACRS did not serve its interests and the upcoming 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. They thought the timing of Egypt ending ACRS served Moussa by creating a crisis that could be capitalized on as a source of leverage for Egypt in time for the NPT conference. One interviewee believed that the 1995 conference served as an excuse for Egypt to stop ACRS.

Another reason most interviewees mentioned was the collapse of the bilateral track, which made it more difficult for the multilateral track to continue. The collapse of the bilateral track was a consequence of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli in November 1995, a wave of

⁵⁰ The term Herwalla directly translates to "trot". The term was used by Amr Moussa to pejoratively describe how Arab states established official relations with Israel following the 1993 Oslo Accords.

⁵¹ Katb Al Araby, "هرولة المتفقين الأسواني نموذجًا," Aljazeera Mubasher, 25 May 2022, <https://mubasher.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/5/25/%d9%87%d8%b1%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ab%d9%82%d9%81%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%8a-%d9%86%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b0%d8%ac%d8%a7>.

⁵² Emily Landau, "Egypt and Israel in ACRS: Bilateral Concerns in Regional Arms Control Process," (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2001), 49, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/egypt-and-israel-in-acrs-bilateral-concerns-in-regional-arms-control-process/>.

Another benefit of ACRS mentioned by some interviewees was that it compelled Israel to contemplate arms control and regional security, changed its mode of engagement on these issues, and established a community of experts in its bureaucracy.

Palestinian terrorism in 1995,⁵³ and the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister in May 1996.⁵⁴ The bilateral track served as a foundation for the multilateral track and, once it broke down, contributed to ebbing interest in ACRS. Once the bilateral track failed, it diminished the hope of any breakthrough in the multilateral track.

It also removed the political cover for Arab parties to engage in multilateral discussions with Israel, preventing the implementation of the CBMs that had been agreed in the operational basket. While it was relatively easy to reach deals on CBMs like

search and rescue at sea, one interviewee commented that it was hard to proceed to the implementation step because Arab parties did not want to be seen as normalizing relations with Israel before the Palestinian issue was resolved. While some Arab parties may have deemed the multilateral track more important than the bilateral track for their national interests, they still needed the bilateral track as a cover due to regional Arab and domestic political pressures. On the other hand, while acknowledging the complementary nature of the multilateral track to the bilateral track, one interviewee wondered if ACRS could have continued even without the latter. Pointing to the Water Resources Working Group of the multilateral track of the Madrid Process, which continued to operate despite the end of the bilateral track, he concluded that if ACRS had its own internal momentum, it would have continued.

Pointing to the limitation of the negotiating technique adopted in ACRS, “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”, an interviewee thought that the Arab states were not interested in reaching partial or interim agreements. Another interviewee agreed that a failure of ACRS was that none of the agreements in the operational baskets were implemented, as some Arab parties insisted that implementation of the deals made on CBMs in the operational basket would be voluntary and not mandatory until all other issues were resolved.

The positive legacies of ACRS and lessons for the future

Most Israeli interviewees agreed that ACRS, despite ultimately collapsing, was a positive experience with several good legacies and even achievements. Among these are helping to shape Israel’s arms control community, pushing it to engage in regional and multilateral forums, building relations with some other Middle Eastern states, and acting as a proof of concept that negotiations on regional security issues are possible and desirable.

Some interviewees mentioned that most Arab parties at ACRS, other than Egypt, accepted Israel’s desire to discuss regional security as a common strategic issue. Interviewees felt that WMD and Israel’s accession to the NPT were not priorities for most ACRS participants. The conclusion of agreements on CBMs in the operational basket and the circulation of the threat perception papers, the definition of the region’s boundaries, and the largely agreed upon DoP (besides one sentence) in the conceptual basket

⁵³ “Chronology, April 16, 1995–July 15, 1995, Arab-Israeli Conflict”, *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 645–649, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328869>.

⁵⁴ Don Peretz and Gideon Doron, “Israel’s 1996 Elections: A Second Political Earthquake?” *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 529–546, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328988>.

were examples of this acceptance. This was the case even if implementing these items depended on the political environment and success in other areas. One interviewee recalled a sense of achievement among the Israeli delegation, even though it eventually became a hollow success, as Egypt stopped it in its track. Another interviewee did not consider the collapse of ACRS to be a failure because he believed it created an understanding between Israel and many Arab states; they could discuss serious issues and learn more about each other's perspectives. Most interviewees highlighted the value of meeting Arab counterparts for the first time and building a community. They formed relationships and even friendships, demonstrating the ability of states in the region to come together. Additionally, the Israeli delegation travelling to places to which Israelis had not been invited before (e.g., Moscow, Doha, and Tunis) was an important demonstration that Israel was welcomed and that there was a space for a meaningful dialogue.

Some interviewees believed that the serious conversations in the working group contributed to peace and stability in the region. The dividends of ACRS mentioned were bilateral contacts with GCC states, Jordan, the Maghreb states, and Türkiye, which was present there as an extra-regional state. This allowed for each to develop a better understanding of the others' security concerns. Israel gained diplomatic confidence and better ties with these states throughout the process. This mainly happened on the margins of the working group through contacts with security officials from the Arab states that participated in the meeting.

Interviewees differed on the durability of these benefits for Israel. One interviewee felt that these dividends were tactical, and it was unclear if they endured long after ACRS collapsed. In his view, the price Israel paid for them was a significant investment of personnel and, once the working group ceased to meet, disillusionment about the usefulness of such processes for Israel. But another interviewee remarked that the relationships built in ACRS benefitted Israel in both the short and the long run. In the short term, for example, the Jordanian officials who engaged in the working group (including Abdullah Toukan, who led the delegation) were also involved in peace negotiations with Israel. Thus, these officials involved in ACRS gained a sense of mutual trust, which helped shorten the length of the bilateral negotiations. A third interviewee agreed, saying that the seeds planted in the multilateral track bore fruit in Israel's improved relations with many Arab states today, notably Jordan and several GCC states.

Another benefit of ACRS mentioned by some interviewees was that it compelled Israel to contemplate arms control and regional security, changed its mode of engagement on these issues, and established a community of experts in its bureaucracy. One interviewee explained that, due to the working group, the Israeli Government concluded that it was better to engage in such processes rather than allow events to unfold contrary to its security interests without trying to influence them.

Interviewees did not know if a formal "lessons learned" exercise was ever performed by the Israeli government on ACRS. But they maintained that a certain "mythology" of this working group still circulated in Israel today and that they took away several lessons. A first lesson is that the success of a process should not be judged solely by the agreements reached there or the number of documents produced. Instead, the process itself can be valuable because it can foster relations between adversarial states and their officials, promote mutual understanding, and bridge gaps between the sides. In the case of ACRS, the interactions there changed the belief that the Arab-Israeli conflict was unsolvable. Although an overarching agreement was not a formal outcome, the process did facilitate discussions between Israel and the moderate Arab parties, demonstrating that there was something to talk about. This in turn can allow negotiators to identify issues where states share a common interest and can reach

an agreement. The process itself could, step by step, help build trust between the sides and facilitate further talks on more challenging issues as they advance.

A second lesson is the drawbacks of the “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” negotiation format. Some interviewees commented that parties should not be allowed to easily escape commitments. It was felt by most of them that, once there was an agreement on an issue, states should commit to implementing it. They noted that, in ACRS, they were left feeling that they achieved much in the operational basket, only to end up with nothing when the conceptual basket and bilateral track hit a dead end.

A third lesson is the importance of holding a multilateral dialogue in parallel to any bilateral negotiations, with one track potentially serving as a positive element to buttress the other more difficult and contentious track. One interviewee noted that the multilateral track positively affected the bilateral track. This interviewee contrasted the positive atmosphere in the multilateral track with the one that prevailed in much of the bilateral track and the narrowing aperture of what could be achieved there, which in turn negatively affected the multilateral track.

A fourth lesson is that a regional security process should be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. In other words, even Middle Eastern states to which the United States was hostile (e.g., Libya) could have participated in some fashion. Finally, the ACRS process demonstrated the importance of understanding the framework and format of multilateral negotiations. The Israeli delegation learned how important it was to know the relationships between the Arab parties in the working group to better build coalitions to outmanoeuvre Egypt.

THE 1995 NPT REVIEW AND EXTENSION CONFERENCE

Most Israeli interviewees did not mention the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and the Middle East Resolution adopted during the conference, probably because Israel is not an NPT member state and did not attend the conference. One interview with some knowledge of these events recalled that, between 1994 and 1995, the nuclear issue became a major point of contention between Egypt and Israel, influencing the bilateral relationship.

This culminated in an unprecedented proposal by the Israeli Government conveyed by Peres to President Mubarak and Moussa in Cairo on 23 February 1995 that Israel would strive for a Middle East free of nuclear weapons two years after bilateral peace treaties are signed by all states of the region. It would also consider, when regional WMD disarmament is introduced, joining international WMD-control regimes like the NPT.⁵⁵ The proposal was not new but harkened back to Peres’s statement when Israel signed the CWC in January 1993.⁵⁶ In the speech, Peres stated that Israel would be prepared to submit to some form of international inspection of its nuclear facilities once peace is achieved in the Middle East. The speech suggested that all regional states should construct a “mutually verifiable zone, free of surface-to-surface missiles and of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons be constructed”.

This idea was expanded on by Eytan Bentsur, Director General of the Israeli MFA, at the CD on 3 September 1997, when he said Israel would endeavour to establish a Zone after comprehensive peace in the Middle East and through direct negotiations by all states of the region based on mutual and

⁵⁵ Shai Feldman, *Extending the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty: The Middle East Debate*, Research Memorandum 28 (Washington DC: The Washington Institute, February 1995), 5, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3616>.

⁵⁶ “Statement Issued by Israel at the Signing Ceremony of the Chemical Weapons Convention,” 13 January 1993, <https://unidir.org/node/6022>.



Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor with the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Yukiya Amano at the First Nuclear Security Summit in Washington 2010 (Washington DC, United States of America, 13 April 2010). Credit: Republic of Korea.

effective verification.⁵⁷ Recalling a conversation on this proposal between Israel and Egypt in 1995, an interviewee said that this substance was exchanged in letters. He concluded that, while it was mentioned in diplomatic exchanges, it was never fully conceptualized or formalized.

The interviewee noted that Israel was probably not “greatly delighted” by the US decision to agree to and co-sponsor the Middle East Resolution that emerged from the 1995 conference.⁵⁸ But he noted that Israel’s reaction in 1995 was nothing like its reaction to the Middle East section of the Final Document from the 2010 NPT Review Conference.⁵⁹ In 2010, some Israeli leaders felt betrayed by the United States and believed it had gone against its commitments.

THE 2010 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

Israeli concerns about the Obama administration’s non-proliferation policies

The 2010 NPT Review Conference presented a new challenge for Israel regarding the ME WMD/FZ issue. Prime Minister Netanyahu had been wary of the Obama administration’s commitment to the Nixon–Meir understanding following President Obama’s April 2009 Prague Speech, which set out “America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”. The Nixon–Meir understanding was interpreted by Israel as a pledge by the United States not to pressure Israel to surrender its nuclear capabilities as long as it faces existential threats in the Middle East.⁶⁰

Obama signed an updated version of the letter reaffirming the Nixon–Meir deal in May 2009. However,

⁵⁷ “Statement issued by Israel at the conference on disarmament on ‘Israel’s Approach to Regional Security Arms Control and Disarmament,’” 4 September 1997, <https://undir.org/node/6021>.

⁵⁸ 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, “Resolution on the Middle East,” 11 May 1995, <https://undir.org/node/5643>.

⁵⁹ Wire Staff, “Israel Reject U.N. Conference resolution on non-proliferation,” CNN, 29 May 2010, <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/05/29/un.israel.nuclear/index.html>.

⁶⁰ Entous, “How Trump and the Three Other U.S. Presidents Protected Israel’s Worst-Kept Secret: Its Nuclear Arsenal”.

in the lead-up to the 2010 conference, Netanyahu had reason to remain concerned that Israel would come under international pressure regarding its nuclear capabilities.

Ahead of the September 2009 IAEA General Conference, one interviewee recalled that Ambassador Israel Michaeli, the Israeli Resident Representative to the IAEA, was encouraged by Glyn T. Davis, his US counterpart, and Jennifer Macmillan of New Zealand, the president of the 53rd IAEA General Conference, to work closely with Ehab Fawzy, his Egyptian counterpart, to coordinate ahead of the General Conference.⁶¹ In the past, Israel and Egypt had agreed that if, during the General Conference, the INC resolution – which Israel viewed as singling it out for criticism – was not put to a vote (it had not been formally adopted since 1991),⁶² Israel would join the consensus on the resolution on “Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East”. However, at the 2009 plenary, Egypt, supported by the other Arab states and Iran, tabled the INC resolution.⁶³ Israel was surprised by this move based on its long understanding with Egypt and other parties’ encouragement, which further increased its mistrust in the United States and Egypt ahead of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Other incidents contributed to the mistrust between Israel and the United States ahead of the 2010 conference. One took place at the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit. Prime Minister Netanyahu was reluctant to send a delegation to the summit but was reassured by Gary Samore, White House Coordinator for Arms Control and WMD, that Israeli nuclear capabilities would not be mentioned. During the summit, President Obama reportedly asked Dan Meridor, the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, when Israel would join the NPT. Meridor, in line with Israeli policy, replied, “Someday”. A third case that exacerbated Israeli suspicion of the United States was President Obama’s perceived abandonment, before he entered office, of the written commitment that outlined a road map for a two state solution on the Palestinian issue that his predecessor, President George W. Bush, made on 14 April 2004.⁶⁴ A fourth case was Rose Gottemoeller’s speech at the 2010 NPT Preparatory Committee, where she stated that the universal adherence to the NPT is a fundamental objective of the United States and named Israel alongside the DPRK, India, and Pakistan.⁶⁵

A rupture point in the relationship came with the US decision to support the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which singled out Israel by name and called on it to join the NPT, in addition to mandating holding a ME WMD/FZ conference by 2012.⁶⁶ In the eyes of the Israeli leadership, this amounted to pressure on Israel to join the NPT and thus violated the Nixon–Meir deal. Israel responded harshly by announcing that it would not participate in the conference as the language of the Final Document “singles out Israel, the Middle East’s only true democracy and the only country threatened with annihilation” and failed to mention Iran, which was under United Nations Security

⁶¹ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference, “Final List of Participants,” GC(53)/INF/7, 16 September 2009, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc53inf-7_en.pdf.

⁶² “IAEA Resolution on the ‘Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East’ is Adopted by Consensus,” 20 September 1991, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/1990s?timeline=5>.

⁶³ IAEA General Conference, “2009 IAEA GC Resolution On ‘Israeli Nuclear Capabilities,’” 18 September 2009, <https://unidir.org/node/6077>.

⁶⁴ Bernard Avishai, “Did Obama ‘Abandon Israel?’,” *The New Yorker*, 24 June 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/did-obama-abandon-israel>; Ben Caspit, “Biden ices Netanyahu as differences grow over settlements, judicial overhaul,” *Al-Monitor*, 17 February 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/biden-ices-netanyahu-differences-grow-over-settlements-judicial-overhaul>.

⁶⁵ Statement by Rose Gottemoeller at General Debate at Third Sessions of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 5 May 2009, <https://unoda-web.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/assets/WMD/Nuclear/NPT2010Prepcom/PrepCom2009/statements/2009/05May2009/05May2009AMSspeaker-4-USA.pdf>.

⁶⁶ “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>.

Council sanctions at the time over its nuclear programme.⁶⁷

The broken US–Israeli understanding in the aftermath of the 2010 NPT Review Conference

The result of the 2010 NPT Review Conference left Israel “surprised” and “disappointed” with the United States, as some Israeli interviewees recall feeling that the United States had not lived up to its promise to Israel. Specifically, one interviewee said that, the day before the Final Document was adopted, the United States gave Israel the impression that it would not support the language on the Middle East based on the “Egyptian plan”. When it did, Israel was shocked. The sense in Israel that the United States had committed a “limited breach” of the US–Israel understanding on Israeli nuclear capabilities was shared across the Israeli leadership. This included Tzipi Livni, leader of the opposition in the Knesset, who joined Prime Minister Netanyahu to convey a unified message of dissatisfaction with the Obama administration on the conference outcome.⁶⁸

While another interviewee equally recalled the Israeli Government’s disappointment with the US support of the Final Document language, he questioned whether the United States had “broken” an explicit commitment to Israel. This interviewee assessed that US actions undermined the traditional general principles embodied by the Nixon–Meir deal that characterized and “anchored” US–Israeli bilateral relations. He recalled bilateral engagement between the US and Israel before and towards the end of the 2010 conference. Given that the language adopted in the Final Document ignored Israel’s concerns, it indicated broader disagreement between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government.

Despite generally “good” and “strong” US–Israel dialogue during this period on arms control and Iran-related issues, he mused that diplomacy is not perfect and expectations are not always “spelled to the letter”. The gap between Israeli expectations and US guarantees may have been a lapse in understanding rather than one party misleading the other. While Israel had a clear position on what it did not want the 2010 NPT Review Conference to conclude, it could have perhaps been more detailed in its position. Whether it was a broken promise or a misunderstanding, he maintained Israel shared with the United States its concerns and the need to not accept anything on this highly sensitive issue before it had been agreed on between the two sides in bilateral consultations.

Interviewees provided various explanations for the US decision to support the Final Document at the 2010 conference despite Israel’s objections.⁶⁹ It is possible that the United States was surprised by the Israeli response as it expected it to accept it, as it had in the case of the Middle East Resolution from the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. Israel was not overjoyed with that resolution, but was prepared for and accepted it. Some believed that the United States was simply pursuing its national interests and assessed that it could manage Israel’s disappointment; others saw it as an extension of the Obama administration’s non-proliferation policies as laid out in his Prague Speech. The United States

The outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference left Israel surprised and disappointed with the United States, as several Israeli interviewees recalled feeling that the United States had not fulfilled its promise to Israel.

⁶⁷ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “Statement by the Government of Israel on the Middle East Resolution passed at the NPT Review Conference,” 29 May 2010, <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spokemes29052010>

⁶⁸ Lerman, “It was a good idea, it was a very bad idea: Israel’s incentives and disincentives in the Middle East WMD-free zone process,” 57.

⁶⁹ For the American perspective, see “The 2010 NPT Review Conference” in the American Narrative in this publication.

faced a dilemma as it had to balance its understanding with Israel with President Obama's multilateral agenda, which entailed ambitious arms control and multilateral non-proliferation commitments. Others recalled US officials recounting that the Egyptian and Irish delegations outmanoeuvred the US delegation at the 2010 conference. Some in Israel accepted this explanation at face value, while others remained sceptical.

The disagreement over the 2010 NPT Review Conference had a significant impact on Israel's trust in US assurances, as it questioned other assurances. One interviewee observed that the 2010 conference became part of Israel's collective memory, demonstrating that even its closest ally could not be relied on. After the conference, James Jones, the US National Security Advisor, issued a statement criticizing the singling out of Israel, and President Obama reaffirmed the unchanged US policy and commitment to Israel's security, saying,

"there is no change in U.S. policy when it comes to these issues. We strongly believe that... Israel has unique security requirements. It's got to be able to respond to threats or any combination of threats in the region. And that's why we remain unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security. And the United States will never ask Israel to take any steps that would undermine their security interests."⁷⁰

These did little to change the NPT Review Conference's outcome in which the United States committed on Israel's behalf to a problematic process.⁷¹ The perceived breach of trust was especially significant because the longstanding US–Israel relations have been based on discussions over decades and exchanges of letters and understandings rather than formal agreements.

THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS AT GLION AND GENEVA

The consultations before the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2010–2013

Following the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Israel conducted an in-depth assessment to analyse the events during the conference. The assessment aimed to understand why the United States supported the language in the Middle East section of the Final Document, evaluate the potential consequences for Israel, and determine the appropriate future course of action. Israel's assessment spanned from 2010 to 2012, during which Israel faced various challenges, including resolutions promoted by Arab states in international forums, the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the international negotiations on Iran's nuclear capabilities. These circumstances significantly dampened Israel's enthusiasm for a potential ME WMD/FZ conference.

At the IAEA, Israel has faced the INC resolution on a near-annual basis at the General Conference, depending on whether the Arab states opted to put it to a vote or not. A diluted version of this resolution was adopted in 2009 after an 18-year gap⁷² (but subsequently it failed to pass from 2010 onwards, with increasingly wider vote margins favouring Israel).⁷³ In addition, Israel grappled with concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme and missile proliferation. The existence and use of chemical weapons by Syria were also heightened concern for Israel, prompting pointed discussions with Russia in 2010 on Syria's chemical weapons.

⁷⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Availability," 6 July 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-joint-press-availabilit>.

⁷¹ "US National Security Advisor Statement About the Middle East Section of 2010 NPT RevCon Final Document," 28 May 2010, <https://unidir.org/node/5657>.

⁷² "2009 IAEA GC Resolution on 'Israeli Nuclear Capabilities,'" 18 September 2009, <https://unidir.org/node/6077>.

⁷³ Auda and Bino, "The Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the IAEA General Conference: Is there a 'Grand Strategy' Behind the IAEA Track?," 93–96.



Ambassador Jeremy Issacharoff, the Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs served as the Israeli representative to the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva (Berlin, Germany, 13 December 2017). Credit: Embassy of the United States of America in Berlin / Flickr.

The appointment of Ambassador Jaakko Laajava of Finland as the Facilitator of the 2012 Conference, as mandated by the Final Document of the 2010 conference, posed a challenge to the Israeli Government since it did not support the mandate.⁷⁴ Shortly after his appointment in October 2011, Ambassador Laajava requested a visit to Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu was initially averse to Israel engaging in the process. It was “nearly impossible” to convince him because of the sense of being “stung” by the Obama administration and the perceived risk of a “slippery slope”.⁷⁵ Yet, he appointed Jeremy Issacharoff, the Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs (the highest-ranking MFA official dealing with non-proliferation, arms control, and regional security), to manage Israel’s response to the mandate from the 2010 conference.

Those within the Israeli establishment who supported welcoming Ambassador Laajava to Israel argued against allowing the “slippery slope” argument to guide Israel’s strategy in this case. They asserted that, as a sovereign state, Israel was free to engage in negotiations, disagree with counterparts, and withdraw from the talks at any point if they stopped serving its interests. Furthermore, they considered it inappropriate to “boycott” a senior European diplomat. Finally, they also warned that, by abstaining from the process, Israel would grant the Arab side an “easy victory”. Israel approved the Facilitator’s request to visit Israel but in his capacity as Under-Secretary of State in the Finnish MFA, rather than as Facilitator of the 2012 Helsinki Conference.⁷⁶

Ambassador Laajava’s visit to Israel for consultations with the government took place in late-2011 or early-2012, with the understanding that the visit did not imply Israel’s concurrence with his mandate.

⁷⁴ “Facilitator and Host Government of the 2012 ME WMDfz Conference are Appointed,” 14 October 2011, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/facilitator-and-host-government-2012-me-wmdfz-conference-are-appointed?timeline=8>.

⁷⁵ For the American perspective, see “Challenges to gaining participation by states from the region in ‘technical meetings’” in the American Narrative in this publication.

⁷⁶ Jeremy Issacharoff, “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/jeremy-issacharoff-consultations-glion-and-geneva-view-negotiating-table>.

During the visit, the Facilitator provided guidance to the Israeli Government on his mandate and outlined his intended approach to implement it as an objective interlocutor. Israel conveyed to the Facilitator that it was open to a conference that would enhance regional security and stability and address Israel's national and regional security concerns. In presenting their position on the conference, the Israeli side provided their overall assessment of the threats that their country faced.

Ambassador Laajava stressed to his Israeli counterparts that his mandate from the United Nations Secretary-General and the co-sponsors was his "Bible", to which he would strictly adhere, even as he gave the impression that he would consider their sensitivities where possible. The Israeli response was that they also had a Bible, a much older one, from which they had drawn inspiration over the centuries. Their message was clear: Israel felt that it was premature to hold a conference before addressing the large conceptual gap between itself and the Arab states. In presenting its position on the conference, the Israeli delegation provided three critical principles about the conference and Laajava's mandate.

First, Israel sought direct consultations among Middle Eastern states on holding the conference, rather than having it mediated by the United Nations or agreeing to a "para-United Nations" conference. By engaging in direct talk with its neighbours, Israel aimed to attain a higher level of recognition of Israel and its legitimacy. This was because many Middle Eastern parties refused to officially recognize and meet with Israeli officials outside the United Nations. This position was rooted in Israel's long-held belief that direct talks were the most effective means to develop mutual understanding and bridge gaps between them. Israel saw the objective of the consultations to agree on a mandate for the 2012 Conference as it rejected the mandate based on the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Second, Israel held that all substantive and procedural decisions should be adopted by consensus among all Middle Eastern states (similar to the approach followed in ACRS). Decision-making by consensus was crucial to assure Prime Minister Netanyahu that Israel would not be bound by the decisions or forced into decisions made by the other participants in the process, considering Israel would be outnumbered by the 22 member states of the League of Arab States (LAS).

Finally, Israel wanted the conference to have a comprehensive regional security agenda addressing the full spectrum of military capabilities and threats that the region faced, including not only WMD but also conventional weapons, missiles, non-state actors, and terrorism.⁷⁷

The internal Israeli debate revolved around whether seeking "guarantees" on the three principles should be a precondition for engaging with the Facilitator. At the most senior level in Israel, it was decided that decision-making by consensus as a basis for decisions adopted in the process would serve as the ultimate guarantee to safeguard the principles of Israeli diplomacy. Interviewees noted that the principle of consensus was supported by the Facilitator and the co-conveners (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia), and even the Arab side did not fully oppose it. This eased Israel's concerns about the potential for "slippery slope."

With the acceptance of the consensus principle, Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed that Israel would participate in the talks to convene the 2012 Helsinki Conference. While the initial meeting with the Facilitator in Israel did not bridge the wide gap in the respective positions, it was evident to the Israeli Government

⁷⁷ Isabel Kershner, Ronen Bergman and Ben Hubbard, "Hezbollah Fires Rockets at Israel as Risk of Escalation Looms," *The New York Times*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-rockets.html>.

that the dialogue had not reached an impasse and discussions could continue. Interviewees felt that the first meeting with the Facilitator started a relationship based on trust, credibility, and transparency. It also marked the beginning of an “intense friendship” between ambassadors Laajava and Issacharoff. The Israeli side maintained frequent communication with the Facilitator, meeting for consultations in various capitals and on the margins of international conferences. The Israeli Government also held many meetings with Ambassador Thomas Countryman, the US representative to the consultations, to discuss Israeli sensitivities concerning the process and the 2010 mandate. According to one interviewee, through these conversations, both sides reached an understanding that mended previous lapses in coordination between them.

Israel advocated for the conference to have a comprehensive regional security agenda that addressed wide range of military capabilities and threats faced by the region, which include not only WMD, but also conventional weapons, missiles, non-state actors, and terrorism.

Following the failure of Israel and the other regional states to agree on the mandate for the conference and whether separate conversations (which later became the informal consultations held at Glion and Geneva) were needed to hold the conference, on 23 November 2012 the United States stated that it was postponing the 2012 Conference. It did not set a new date for the conference.⁷⁸ The statement emphasized the existence of gaps between the Israeli and Arab sides and highlighting the necessity for direct engagement among regional parties to bridge these gaps. It also underscored that a mandate for a conference had to come from the Middle East states and that extra regional actors could not be impose this outcome on the region.⁷⁹

Israel saw the US statement as an important sign that the United States took its concerns seriously. An interviewee felt it also reflected a growing implicit acceptance among the extra regional states in this process that the states of the region themselves should forge the mandate for the conference.

By the time of the postponement of the conference in November 2012, Israel was actively involved in exploring the potential basis for a conference and had become more comfortable with the discussions with the Facilitator. Yet, it still considered it premature to hold a conference.

At this juncture, the Facilitator invited Israel for a meeting in Vienna on 16 August 2013 with himself, the co-conveners, and the United Nations to prepare for consultations scheduled to commence in Geneva on 2–3 September 2013.⁸⁰ Israel accepted the invitation and sent a delegation to Vienna. The meeting in Vienna did not include a general gathering of all the regional and extra regional participants. One interviewee explained that the Israeli delegation preferred not to meet with the Facilitator and the co-conveners so as not to imply recognition of the NPT mandate. Similarly, the LAS was unwilling to have such a meeting to avoid direct contact with Israel. The interviewee added that Israel did not object to

⁷⁸ For the American perspective on this topic, see “Challenges to gaining participation by states from the region in ‘technical meetings’” in the American Narrative in this publication.

⁷⁹ Victoria Nuland, “US Statement on the Postponement of the 2012 Conference,” Office of the Spokesperson, 23 November 2012, <https://unidir.org/node/5693>.

⁸⁰ Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, “Facilitator’s letter to the Israeli MFA regarding preparations for the informal consultations on holding the postponed Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and All Other Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 3 August 2013, <https://unidir.org/node/5703>.

the presence of the United Nations representative as it did not perceive it as conferring United Nations status on the meeting. While the Vienna meeting did not produce a breakthrough, it brought the parties closer to holding consultations in some form.

Israel communicated its willingness to hold informal multilateral consultations in Geneva on 3 September 2013.⁸¹ This position echoed similar previous oral offers made in February and other occasions. The interviewee believed Israel was the first to provide clear-cut written acceptance of Ambassador Laajava's proposal to hold consultations, while the Arab Group took an additional eight months to agree to participate in the consultations.

Israeli motivation to engage in the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva

The first meeting of the informal consultations took place at the secluded Hotel Victoria in Glion in October, overlooking scenic Lake Geneva. It was the first such meeting between Israel and Arab states since ACRS in the 1990s. Israel preferred meeting in Glion over Geneva, where many United Nations offices are located, to minimize the link between the consultations and the United Nations. The informality of the meeting was strengthened as flags or other national emblems were not used.

Israeli interviewees offered various motivations for Israel's decision to participate in the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva. Some interviewees said one of the main reasons for Israel's participation was to prevent a repeat of the 2010 NPT Review Conference at the 2015 NPT Review Conference – aiming to prevent a “similar disaster” or at least mitigate potential damage. One interviewee went as far as to call the engagement with the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva “a diplomatic game” to secure a better outcome in the 2015 conference. Another interviewee further explained that Israel concluded following the events of the 2010 conference that the ultimate assurance for protecting its interests and achieving favourable results was to be “in the room” rather than relying on US guarantees. A third interviewee remarked that, beyond these two goals, Israel also sought to use its participation to influence the “rules of the game” of the informal consultations and explore the possibility of aligning the discussions onto an ACRS-like framework. Israel felt more confident and committed to the process once a preliminary understanding of the consultation rules was reached. A fourth interviewee compared Israel's decision to engage in the consultations to its decision to participate in ACRS because, in both cases, Israel judged that it would benefit more from showing flexibility and that could it not afford to ignore a process with US support behind it.

As the negotiations proceeded, the Israeli government became more confident that it could manage the flow of the negotiations. The Israeli delegation never felt that they were outnumbered or cornered by the Arab states, and over time they became increasingly invested in the process and worked towards identifying solutions to the problems the process encountered.

The five sessions of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, 2013–2014

A major issue that Israel faced in the first meeting at Glion on 21–22 October 2013 and the subsequent meetings of the informal consultations⁸² was the mandate of the Helsinki Conference, according to an Israeli interviewee. The Arab side held that the mandate was agreed upon at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and all that remained was setting the conference date and location. The Israeli position

⁸¹ Jeremy Issacharoff, “Letter from the Israeli MFA to the Facilitator regarding the upcoming informal consultations,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 September 2013, <https://undir.org/node/5704>.

⁸² “First Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMD/FZ Conference is held in Glion, Switzerland,” 21 October 2013, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://undir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

was that the mandate was reached without their input as Israel was neither an NPT member state nor involved in the negotiations of the language of this mandate, and therefore it had to be agreed upon by all states of the region. Ambassador Laajava tried to find a compromise between the two sides by encouraging them to “think outside the box”. But neither the Arab states nor Israel found it compelling: for Israel, there may have been a box, but not one it was obliged to remain in while the Arab parties responded that there is already a mandate.

A second major issue during the first Glion meeting and thereafter was the scope of the conference. The Arab position was that it should focus almost exclusively on establishing a ME WMD-FZ. Based on its threat perceptions, Israel sought a focus on regional security as a holistic concept and a discussion of how an arms control arrangement could address all threats that caused insecurity and instability in the Middle East. According to the interviewee, the Arab side became agitated by the Israeli suggestion that the conference title should incorporate a reference to building regional security through CBMs. They opposed such CBMs as they were unwilling to discuss their overall military posture. Israel found this position highly concerning as CBMs were seen as a necessary step to establish trust and foster the relationships necessary for negotiating on regional security.

Following the first Glion meeting, Israel believed that it had maintained its position on a conference based on consensus decision-making and a regional security agenda. The second round of informal consultations at Glion in November 2013 did not bridge the gap between the two sides.

In February 2014, during the third round of informal consultations at Glion, the Israeli delegation submitted an informal paper outlining the ideas they discussed during the previous two meetings.⁸³ Israel’s submission surprised the Arab states and the co-conveners. The latter were open to some of the Israeli ideas and a proposal was made to convene in a smaller format outside the plenary session to find a middle ground. Israel joined the discussion alongside one Arab counterpart, the Facilitator, and the co-conveners. The Arab representative, however, insisted on the presence of a LAS representative. When the latter did not appear, the Arab representative simply left the session, leaving his Israeli and extra regional counterparts behind.

By this time, Israel became increasingly frustrated with the Arab side’s refusal to engage in smaller group discussions or in a direct Egyptian–Israeli dialogue to resolve disagreements. Ambassador Issacharoff made an “emotional speech” at the third meeting, which proved to be a critical moment for the Israeli participation in the informal consultations. He praised the progress made by both sides, reminded them that Israel had put ideas on the table, and said that, if the sides agreed on an agenda, Israel would be prepared to set a date for the conference. But he also expressed frustration with the rigidity of the Arab position on the conference’s mandate. He felt it was increasingly clear to all that Israel was not the obstacle to holding the conference. But the facilitator and co-conveners were reluctant to attribute responsibility for the lack of progress to the Arabs.

Another prevailing factor that affected the consultations mentioned by an interviewee was the continued submission by Arab states of “intransigent” resolutions on Israel at the IAEA General Conference and the United Nations General Assembly. As described in a non-paper submitted by Israel to the 2015 NPT Review Conference, “that negative approach has reinforced the lack of trust and

⁸³ 2015 NPT Review Conference, “Israel’s Non-paper Submitted to the 2015 NPT RevCon,” 30 April 2015, <https://unidir.org/node/5671>, and Issacharoff, “Personal Recollections and Reflections of the Informal Consultations on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference, 2013-2014”.

confidence and prevented a meaningful dialogue between the States of the Middle East.” Following the third Glion meeting, the Swiss funding to hold the informal consultations at this venue ended, necessitating a move to nearby Geneva. However, when the Israeli delegation arrived at the entrance of the meeting venue for the fourth meeting in Geneva in May 2014, they were confronted with United Nations flags and United Nations uniformed security personnel.

An interviewee remarked that this was disturbing and embarrassing for the Israeli delegation because the absence of a United Nations presence had been one of the conditions for Israel’s participation in the consultations. Even though all the Arab delegations were already in the hall waiting for the discussions to begin, Ambassador Issacharoff informed the Facilitator that the Israeli delegation would not enter the venue until the United Nations flags and uniformed personnel were removed, which they were.

During the fourth meeting, Israel again proposed a formula under which it would support a conference if based on an agreed agenda covering all aspects of regional security and the principle of consensus. It even agreed to negotiate and conclude a joint declaration or final statement in time for the 2015 NPT Review Conference.⁸⁴ However, the gap between the rigid Arab demand to keep the mandate of the 2010 conference without any modification and Israel’s requirement for a comprehensive agenda remained unresolved.

By the fifth round of the informal consultations, which took place in Geneva in June 2014, an interviewee said that the LAS representative stated that the Arab parties had not changed their position and they required new instructions. This effectively discontinued the talks. Ambassador Laajava subsequently attempted to convene a sixth meeting, which Israel agreed to attend in letters of 20 October 2014 and 7 January 2015. Despite Israel’s positive response to continued engagement, the sixth round of consultations was repeatedly postponed and was never held, marking the end of the informal consultations.

The atmosphere between the participants at the informal consultations

According to an Israeli interviewee, the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, unlike ACRS, had no atmosphere of hope. Israel believed that Egypt intended to engage in adversarial talks rather than seeking a middle ground. However, another interviewee said that, throughout the process, the presence of the Facilitator and the co-convenors neutralized Israel’s concern about being confronted and cornered by Arab parties not interested in holding serious discussions and concerns about how to deal with the mandate from the 2010 NPT Review Conference. An interviewee recalled that Israel’s concerns gradually faded away as the consultations unfolded. He noted that the general spirit of the conversations was respectful and non-confrontational, and overall amicable. Despite many disagreements among “non-like-minded states”, Israel never felt isolated, pressured, or outnumbered by the Arabs delegations. He believed that Israel knew where the Arab sensitivities lay and vice versa. It was a breakthrough for the Israeli delegation to be in the same room as their Arab counterparts for the first time since ACRS ended in 1995. Israel had expected a few Arab states to attend and was surprised when representatives from 11 states attended the first Glion meeting,⁸⁵ and 16 attended both the second⁸⁶ and third Glion meetings.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ 2015 NPT Review Conference, “Israel’s Non-paper Submitted to the 2015 NPT RevCon”.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Second Informal Consultation to Hold the ME WMDFZ Conference 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>, and 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://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2023/AngelaKane>.

⁸⁷ “Third Multilateral Informal Consultation on the ME WMDFZ Conference is Held in Glion Switzerland,” 4 February 2014, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2013-2014-informal-consultations-glion-and-geneva?timeline=21>.

Israel's nuclear capabilities per se were not discussed at the consultations, according to an interviewee, and it was subsumed into its broader positions. Israel was unwilling to focus on the nuclear issue because this put the focus solely on it. When Israel reminded its Arab counterparts of this position and referenced the principle that NWFZs should be "freely arrived at", the Israeli side felt that they were flustered, as for the Arab side "freely arrived at" did not apply to Israel.

When Israel reiterated its stance and emphasized the principle of NWFZs being "freely arrived at," they perceived that their Arab counterparts were flustered, as for them "freely arrived at" did not apply to Israel.

According to interviewees, the dynamics between Israel, the Facilitator, and the co-convenors were positive. Over time, a dialogue with Ambassador Laajava was established whereby Israel would always give him a clear answer on what it considered possible. One interviewee described the Facilitator's approach as optimistic, patient, and trying to make each side comfortable to engage while never attempting to make the Israeli delegation feel they were being cornered; Ambassador Laajava tried to mediate impartially between two very different conceptions of the process. A vital element of the Israeli engagement was that the proposals Israel made were ones it was willing to abide by. Israel never made suggestions assuming the Arab side would reject it or for the sake of appearances. An interviewee felt that the Facilitator respected the Israeli position and approach and its desire to be constructive by finding ways forwards instead of simply rejecting proposals.

As for the co-convenors, while the positions presented by the United States and the United Kingdom did not surprise Israel, the positions presented by Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian representative, were intriguing. Israel and Russia held discussions at the informal consultations that were sometimes tough and contained many disagreements. But Ambassador Ulyanov supported Israel's position on the mandate, emphasizing that the Arab states could not expect Israel to agree on a mandate it had no role in creating. Ambassador Ulyanov reportedly approached Ambassador Wael Al Assad, the LAS representative, at the first meeting at Glion to tell him how well Israel was "behaving" and that the Arab side should reciprocate this mode of engagement.

The interviewee concluded that Israel's conduct and constructive approach allowed it to "hold up a mirror" to the Arab parties. He believed the Arab side never imagined Israel would engage with them based on the NPT mandate and attempted to create a dilemma for Israel. If Israel did not engage, the Arab parties would have had an easy diplomatic "win" because of the Israeli Government's perceived intransigence. If Israel engaged, they imagined it would be on their terms, the 2010 NPT Review Conference's mandate. Once Israel did engage but proposed reasonable terms for a mandate in the eyes of the other participants, this presented a more difficult scenario for the Arab side, as they had to choose between agreeing to Israel's terms or opposing any change to the 2010 mandate. He concluded that the Arab side chose the latter at the price of not having a conference. This interview noted that the consultations could have helped usher in a new regional dynamic. The regional security agenda discussed at the consultations resonated with the parallel efforts to constrain Iranian nuclear activities and Syrian chemical weapons. These were just two of several areas in which Israeli and Arab interests converged. The process also coincided with the existing peaceful relations between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan and the (at that time) quiet bilateral contacts with some GCC states. The interviewee believed it could have become another dimension of the regional trend that culminated in the signing of the



President Donald J. Trump, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Minister of Foreign Affairs for the United Arab Emirates Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyani, sign the Abraham Accords on the South Lawn of the White House (Washington DC, United States of America, 15 September 2020). Credit: Shealah Craighead / White House Archived on Flickr.

Abraham Accords in 2020. He felt that Israel's experience in the informal consultations justified the Israeli conviction that it would be easier to engage with the Arab states directly, rather than through a United Nations process.

Reasons for the collapse of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva and lessons learned

The first perceived reason for the failure of the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva, similar to discussions at ACRS, related to the tension between Israel and the Arab parties over whether to prioritize regional security or arms control. When the Israeli delegation tried to introduce regional security and CBMs to the conference agenda, which had precedents, the Arab side vigorously protested and did not want to deviate from the 2010 NPT Review Conference mandate. Israeli interviewees contrasted Israel's relative flexibility during the negotiations with what they perceived as the uncompromising position of Arab states on the conference scope and agenda and their lack of interest in discussing regional security issues.

Israel always tried to find a way forwards instead of rejecting subjects for discussion. While Israel's response was not always a "yes", it was often "yes, but...". One interviewee noted that the Israeli delegation had clear instructions on how to proceed and did not reveal its entire bottom line at the start of the talks. They had the flexibility to make proposals based on Arab responsiveness. In contrast, the Arab side avoided making concessions and "pocketed" any concessions made by Israel, only to

return later with even more ambitious demands and conditions. According to this view, the Arab states simply followed the clear-cut and strict instructions from their capitals and the LAS that required them to proceed exclusively based on the 2010 mandate or not at all.

According to an interviewee, the rejection of discussing regional security was not across the board. He recalled that during one of the Glion meetings, an Egyptian representative mentioned that Egypt and Israel regularly held more sensitive bilateral security discussions, so he did not understand why regional security discussions linked to a Zone were a significant issue. However, such occasional signs of Arab flexibility were ad hoc, non-committal, occurrences. Overall, there was no real move from the Arab side to incorporate regional security and CBMs as part of the agenda.

A second perceived reason among some interviewees for the failure of the informal consultations was the unwillingness of the of the Arab side to shift from the large, multilateral format – which made negotiations and reaching agreement difficult – to a small format that was more manageable. A deal reached there could be reintroduced in the large format for adoption. The inability of the LAS representative to secure agreement on the Arab side on this shift to a small format was the proximate cause of the failure of the consultations at the second Geneva meeting.

A third perceived reason for the failure was the uneven level of diplomatic representation and the political commitment implied by it between the Israeli and Arab sides. The Israeli representative, Ambassador Issacharoff, was a senior MFA official experienced on these issues. He had strategic and tactical flexibility in the negotiation room and direct access to the prime minister for instructions and consultation. In contrast, most Arab delegations sent relatively junior or less experienced officials, often the second highest-ranking officials, from their missions to the United Nations in Geneva. The Arab delegations lacked instructions beyond the mandate, and the relatively low level of representation and lack of proximity to decision makers affected their leeway to negotiate beyond the 2010 NPT Review Conference mandate. Iran only sent a junior diplomat to the first day of the first meeting. There was also no consistent level of representation from the Egyptian delegation, despite being the most important Arab player. Unlike ACRS, Egypt was not the main day-to-day mover and repeatedly changed its senior representation throughout the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva. It was unclear to one interviewee what Egyptian objectives were there and if Egypt was genuine in its effort to establish a ME WMDFZ.

The interviewee believed that a consistent senior Egyptian representative could have facilitated progress. Ambassador Al Assad, the LAS representative, was the only person with whom Ambassador Issacharoff had consistent conversations. The two senior diplomats developed a close and respectful relationship. This interviewee believed that had it been left to Al Assad, who served as the coordinator of all the Arab delegations at the informal consultations, he would have been willing to find a middle ground with Israel. However, He was bound by the consensus of the Arab states in the LAS framework and, unlike Issacharoff, had no flexibility or access to the senior political levels of Arab governments. He was limited to the common denominator position of the LAS, which was the 2010 mandate.

Points were presented on both positive and negative aspects of this process by interviewees. On the one hand, the consultations, and past experiences, like ACRS, convinced Israel that the Arab parties were living in a “different world” and that nothing concrete would come out of the ME WMDFZ-related processes. One interviewee felt that Israel’s engagement with the consultations resulted in only “tactical” gains and that concessions made by Israel, such as agreeing to join the consultations on a Zone, only



An overview of the IAEA high level event on How the Atom Benefits Life held at UN headquarters in the margins of the 2015 NPT Review Conference (New York, United States of America, 27 April 2015). Credit: Cia Pak / Scannews.

raised further expectations and demands on Israel. According to him, Israel's significant gestures were dismissed by the Arab parties, as indicated by the 2018 decision by the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly to hold a conference on a Zone without discussing the mandate with Israel (see below).⁸⁸

On the other hand, the interviewee said that the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva contributed to broader regional security discussions by introducing a more rational set of issues into ME WMDfz-related discussions, which were largely absent up to that point. The interviewee further noted that Israel arguably achieved its main goals at the informal consultations: a Zone conference that Israel was not enthusiastic about was not convened under parameters opposed by Israel, and Israel's positions were considered reasonable by the Facilitator and the co-conveners.

Interviewees highlighted the lessons learned from the consultations, including the ability of Israel to engage in a process, exchange ideas, and control the "diplomatic flow". There was merit to this strategy of engagement, including demonstrating that Israel was not the obstructionist party. This episode was a success for Israeli diplomacy, where an opportunity was identified and seized.

⁸⁸ 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>.

Another lesson learned was that arms control could be a good idea if approached carefully and intelligently, with a clear understanding of the ground rules. Adhering to Israel's three parameters – direct consultations with regional parties, agreement by consensus, and a broad-based regional security agenda – could help avoid the “slippery slope” that Israel is concerned about.

ISRAELI OBSERVER STATUS AT THE 2015 NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

The events between 2010 and 2015 led Israel to attend the 2015 NPT Review Conference as an observer. According to an Israeli interviewee, despite the 2010 NPT Review Conference not being the finest moment of US–Israel coordination, it did result in a high level of consultation, coordination and mutual regard for each other's interests over the next five years. The decision to attend the 2015 conference as an observer was not easy. Prime Minister Netanyahu had to be convinced of the utility of Israel taking such action for the first time in 20 years.

Israel submitted a non-paper to the conference presenting the three key principles it saw as crucial for a meaningful process, outlined during the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva. These principles included direct regional dialogue, consensus-based decision-making, and the inclusion of a broad range of security issues in the agenda.⁸⁹ An interviewee remarked that the failure of NPT member states to reach a consensus on a Final Document at the 2015 conference, mainly due to the ME WMDFZ issue,⁹⁰ reflected a US commitment to retract the mistake it made at the 2010 conference.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY-MANDATED ME WMDFZ CONFERENCE

Israeli interviewees generally held a negative perception of the 2018 decision by the United Nations General Assembly to re-launch the ME WMDFZ process and the resultant 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).⁹¹ These interviewees described the conference as an “empty initiative”, “surreal”, “meaningless” “divorced from reality”, “more a joke than a threat”, and a “sideshow” with no bearing on the core interests of any Middle Eastern state. They believed that Israel had no imperative to join the conference. The interviewees identified various motivations behind the Arab Group's push for the conference. Some saw it as a way for Egypt to assert its leadership and showcase “diplomatic stamina”, given there are few issues on which Egypt could play a leadership role internationally. Others noted that it could also be a way for Egypt to compensate for the lack of progress on this issue in the NPT.

Some interviewees linked the Arab position to diplomatic grandstanding and ideological rhetoric similar to those states and activists pushing for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) who cared little for realistic progress. Others observed that there was no united Arab position on the Zone, and many Arab states were uninterested or lacked expertise on the topic.

Interviewees believed that Egypt would have taken a different path if it was looking to make real progress. One interviewee felt that the Arab states intentionally chose a process under United Nations auspices because they knew it presented a fundamental problem for Israel. Israel perceives the United

⁸⁹ 2015 NPT Review Conference, “Israel's Non-Paper Submitted to the 2015 NPT RevCon”.

⁹⁰ “2015 NPT RevCon Ends without Consensus on a Final Document,” 22 May 2015, UNIDIR Timeline, <https://unidir.org/timeline/2010s/2015-npt-revcon-ends-without-consensus-final-document?timeline=2>, and 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>.

⁹¹ “UN General Assembly Decision 73/546 On Convening A Conference On The ME WMDFZ,” 22 December 2018, <https://unidir.org/node/5664>.

Israel's experience with Zone-related processes consistently reinforced the notion of a "long corridor," emphasizing that there are no quick fixes or shortcuts to progress. Israeli interviewees believed that the lack of progress on this specific issue did not diminish the potential for other forms of collaborative regional security engagements.

Nations as a biased forum where it is consistently outnumbered and targeted for criticism. Interviewees assessed that Israel would persist in not participating in talks under the United Nations auspices. Finally, interviewees believed Israel does not consider the conference or treaty drafting at the conference as posing significant political risks, nor did it feel pressured or isolated by it. They held that it would not contribute "one millimetre" to the realization of a Zone.

ISRAELI VISIONS OF HOW TO PROCEED ON REGIONAL SECURITY AND ARMS CONTROL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Israeli interviewees generally shared the view that, for Israel to actively engage in a regional security and arms control process, including on a ME WMDFZ, the primary focus should be on fostering peaceful relations among states of the Middle East. They believed that the durability of these relationships needs to be tested over time before progressing further.

Some interviewees suggested that US policy could facilitate a new regional process with a broad security agenda and an arms control forum separate from the NPT. This would be like the multilateral track of the Madrid Peace Process, with a Zone as the ultimate objective. In launching such a process, Israel was more likely to adopt a reactive rather than an initiating role, with Iran's involvement being a critical factor for Israel to seriously consider it. The interviewees emphasized that any such process must be well-structured, including being open-ended with clear exit strategies. However, they acknowledged that the political conditions that made such a process feasible in the 1990s, including the bilateral track for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, were unique and not easily replicated today.

Most interviewees were sceptical about the likelihood of Israel seriously considering participation in an arms control process without the initial steps mentioned above. There was little confidence in the feasibility or the desirability of arms control because of the low expectations that such a process under current circumstances could have a profound impact on regional stability, escalation, arms races or proliferation, or stop the carnage in the region.⁹²

Interviewees drew these conclusions based on a combination of factors. First, the way Arab states had approached past ME WMDFZ processes like ACRS and the informal consultations at Glion and Geneva played a role. Disillusionment with the JCPOA; the volatile nature of the region with ongoing conflicts; the refusal of many states to recognize Israel; security threats from non-state actors; and some states lacking full control over their territories, all made it challenging to assess the feasibility of establishing a Zone. Additionally, certain actors' lack of political will further complicate the situation.

Most interviewees concluded that Israel's experience with Zone processes consistently validated the need for a "long corridor", emphasizing that there were no shortcuts to progress. They believed that the

⁹² This was seen by many interviewees as likely the case before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and that the invasion only reinforced this mindset.

lack of progress in this particular issue did not undermine the potential for other forms of collaborative regional security engagements.

Interviewees suggested several avenues for progress on arms control and regional security. One suggestion was to initiate cooperation on essential and cross-regional issues like agriculture, medicine, and water conservation as a starting point, drawing on the growing awareness that no state can deal with issues, including Iran, on their own. This approach could foster interdependence and build trust, potentially laying the groundwork for future security agreements. Indeed, according to the interviewees, the perceived challenges posed by Iran's nuclear and missile programmes is a significant obstacle to arms control in the region and no progress could be made in an arms control process until they were effectively addressed. Overcoming historical animosities, cultural differences, and religious tensions to tackle these cross-regional issues would present challenges but were seen as necessary steps.

Another suggestion involved an informal process focused on regional CBMs, on which Israel had repeatedly demonstrated readiness to engage. Starting with CBMs could address concerns about ensuring commitment fulfilment even before a formal agreement is reached. Discussing CBMs, even without reaching a formal agreement, could gradually build trust and eventually gain support from the Arab publics for normalization with Israel. The maturation of relations between Middle Eastern states was seen as a potential catalyst for reducing acquisitions of military capability and for adopting arms control measures, leading to various regional benefits. An example from Israel–Egypt ties was mentioned: Israel's peace treaty with Egypt was initially made possible due to the involvement of the United States and a larger package that included internationally monitored provisions. Over time, the peace between the two countries proved durable, leading to increased trust, and culminating in Israel's acceptance of additional Egyptian troops deployed in the Sinai Peninsula beyond the limits agreed in the peace treaty.

Another example mentioned of how dialogue and trust building over time could change Israel's threat perception was that Israel did not oppose the provision of US F-35 aircraft and Israeli arms to select GCC states, which was previously inconceivable. Once peace was established, he surmised, security cooperation followed, creating an environment where Israeli engagement in a collaborative security architecture, including arms control, could be seriously considered.

Some interviewees also discussed the topic of a future Middle East security architecture. They highlighted that discussion on this matter could be divided into two types. The first type involved an inclusive approach, bringing together diverse states to address regional conflicts. The second type involved like-minded states cooperating to tackle common challenges. For the time being, most interviewees acknowledged that Israel only considered and discussed a regional security regime based on the second model – cooperation with GCC states to address shared challenges. This focus was primarily driven by Israel's goal of mitigating risks originating from Iran. One interviewee mentioned that an alliance of like-minded states was the most effective way to address nuclear proliferation concerns in the Middle East.

Finally, some interviewees emphasized the importance of defining the boundaries of the Middle East and maintaining flexibility in the definition based on the objectives of the process. They stressed the need to keep the definition broad enough to address different parties' legitimate concerns. The region could be defined differently depending on the specific subject and objectives, such as CBMs,

disarmament, or other strategically relevant issues. For example, while the ME WMDFZ discussions would be region-wide, CBMs could be subregional. Most interviewees even agreed that Iran as a regional actor had to be included in constructing Middle East-focused processes despite Israel's lack of faith in multilateral negotiations that included Iran.

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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.¹

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

¹ 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.²

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.³ 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,⁴ 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”.⁵ Regarding these

² 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>.

³ 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).

⁴ 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/>.

⁵ 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 1969.⁶ 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).⁷

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.⁸

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

⁶ 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>.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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,⁹ 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;¹⁰ the inability of the state parties of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) to formulate a verification mechanism;¹¹ the uncertain status of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START);¹² 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,¹³ 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

⁹ 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>.

¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹ 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/>.

¹² 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>.

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.

¹⁴ 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):¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ 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

¹⁵ 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>.

¹⁶ "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 arrangement¹⁷ with the IAEA when these states were led by military juntas and were suspicious of one another.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

¹⁷ 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>.

¹⁸ 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>.

¹⁹ 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 mechanisms²⁰ 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.²¹

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

²⁰ 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>.

²¹ 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,²² and Israel, which was assumed to possess nuclear weapons by the 1960s.²³ Although the interviewees did not mention the Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) proposal co-sponsored by Iran and Egypt in 1974,²⁴ 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.²⁵

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

²² 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.

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

²⁴ "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>.

²⁵ 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 1982.²⁶

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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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

²⁶ “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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ “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.²⁹ 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

²⁹ Hanna Notte and Chen Zak Kane, An Oral History of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 6 December 2022, 11–14, 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,³⁰ 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

³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.

³¹ 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 1994,³² 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.

³² 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.

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”.³³

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.³⁴ 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 1994,³⁵ 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 1994.³⁶

An important moment in the conceptual basket mentioned by interviewees occurred at the second plenary, in Moscow in September 1992.³⁷ 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

³³ 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>.

³⁴ 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.

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

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

³⁷ 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.³⁸

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

³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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

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

⁴⁰ "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.⁴¹ 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.

⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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

⁴² “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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴

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.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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 2009,⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ 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

⁴⁵ 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)).

⁴⁶ 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>.

⁴⁷ “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>.

⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

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

⁴⁹ "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>.

⁵⁰ "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.⁵¹

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 2010–2011.⁵² 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.⁵³

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.

⁵¹ "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>.

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

⁵³ 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 time⁵⁴ 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",⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

A major obstacle to holding the 2012 Conference was securing the participation of Israel, which the statement by Jones had identified as a requirement.⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁴ 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>.

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

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ 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 2012.⁵⁸ Two interviewees believed that the United States received the brunt of the criticism

⁵⁸ 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).⁵⁹ Even the Russian statement on the postponement pinned some of the blame on the United States.⁶⁰

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.

⁵⁹ “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>.

⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹

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.⁶² 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.

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

⁶² 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.⁶³ 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

⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁴ “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”⁶⁵ 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

⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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)⁶⁷ at the second meeting in Glion.⁶⁸ 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.

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

⁶⁷ Sandra's List.

⁶⁸ "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.⁶⁹ 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.

⁶⁹ 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,⁷⁰ 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

⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

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

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.

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.⁷² 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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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

⁷² 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.

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

⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶ 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,

⁷⁵ 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>.

⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

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

⁷⁷ 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>.

⁷⁸ “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.⁷⁹ 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.

⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹ 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 Conference⁸² or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).⁸³ On the other

⁸⁰ 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>.

⁸¹ 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>.

⁸² “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>.

⁸³ 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 Committee⁸⁴ and the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶

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

⁸⁴ 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'".

⁸⁵ 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>.

⁸⁶ "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.⁸⁷

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.⁸⁸ 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”.

⁸⁷ 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>.

⁸⁸ 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 WMDFZ Conference through an international forum, in his view, took the opposite approach and was unlikely to succeed.

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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 WMD-FZ 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.