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Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Trends in the Middle East: Report of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project (2023–2026)

ABDOLRASOOL DIVSALLAR

MIDDLE EAST WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION FREE ZONE SERIES

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Note

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
CBM	Confidence-building measure
ECSSR	Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LAS	League of Arab States
ME WMDFZ	Middle East WMD-Free Zone
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSA	Negative security assurance
NWFZ	Nuclear-weapon-free zone
NWS	Nuclear-weapon states
P5	The five permanent members of the Security Council
SQP	Small Quantities Protocol
UNODA	United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs
VCDNP	Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

Introduction

Since its formal launch in 1974, the initiative to establish a Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East has gained substantial political, intellectual and public support, both within the region and from the international community. Despite significant obstacles that have delayed the Zone's establishment, it remains the only regional, multilateral and comprehensive effort to address the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East.

The need for a Middle East WMD-Free Zone (ME WMDFZ) has only grown over recent years as WMD-related threats in the region have increased in complexity and regional security dynamics have become more volatile than ever before. In this situation, establishing the ME WMDFZ would be a crucial step towards – and an essential element of – a future peaceful, sustainable and inclusive regional security architecture in the Middle East.

In response to these needs, UNIDIR launched in 2019 a project, with support from the European Union (EU), to assist international efforts to establish the ME WMDFZ. The EU has been a long-term supporter of the Zone initiative and of the full implementation of the Resolution on the Middle East of the 1995 Review and Extension Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The first phase of UNIDIR's ME WMD-Free Zone Project, carried out from August 2019 to July 2023, organised 23 events, published 15 reports, and participated in 57 external events.[1] The second phase of the project, from August 2023 to July 2026, aimed to deepen understanding of the causes, motivations and risks linked to WMD proliferation in the region, build regional capacity for negotiation and implementation of the ME WMDFZ, and promote an effective, verifiable, inclusive and sustainable ME WMDFZ. During this phase, the project organised 20 events, released 9 reports and contributed to over 70 external events.

The project is the only research, dialogue and training programme dedicated solely to the Zone initiative. It adopted a unique team structure composed entirely of researchers from the region; this has increased the support for, the credibility of and confidence in the project's activities while demonstrating a commitment to building regional capacity. The project benefited from

[1] Tomisha Bino and Chen Zak Kane, *Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project: Final Report*, (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023), https://doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2023/FinalReport.

the guidance and advice of a Reference Group consisting of high-level current and former officials from Middle Eastern states, the EU, the United States, the Russian Federation and the United Nations. Members of the Reference Group, which has met annually, also contributed to the project's activities, publications and events.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the main objectives, activities and findings of the ME WMDFZ Project from August 2023 to July 2026. The report is organised into four sections and three annexes. Section 1 explains the project's key objectives and how its activities were adapted to the evolving regional and international environment. Section 2 offers a detailed report on the main project activities, workstreams, and their outputs. Section 3 highlights key takeaways from the project's observations of political processes, research and dialogues. These substantive findings will provide important insights for decision makers as they adopt policy solutions to existing challenges. Section 4 concludes the report. Annex I lists the project's activities, including its events and publications, Annex II presents a summary of project's publications, and Annex III provides detailed statistics about the project's outputs and engagements.

1. The Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project: An instrument to support the Zone initiative

Capacity-building workshop, Vienna, Austria, February 2026. Credit : UNIDIR.

The core mission of the ME WMDFZ Project has been to promote WMD nonproliferation, arms control and disarmament in the Middle East by supporting the ME WMDFZ initiative and other relevant processes. The project has fulfilled this mission by pursuing three specific objectives. Success in implementing these objectives required timely, flexible adaptation and responses to evolving global and regional political and security developments. This section outlines the project's objectives and the measures implemented to adapt to the Middle East's changing security environment.

1.1. The project's objectives

The project pursued three objectives in its support of the Zone initiative.

1.1.1. Deepen understanding of regional WMD threats

The first objective of the project has been to deepen the understanding of the causes, motivations, and risks associated with regional WMD threats. The aim has been to identify solutions to WMD threats and enhance regional security in the Middle East.

Many Middle Eastern states are reassessing their security and defence strategies in response to the deteriorating regional security environment and expansion of war in the region. The reassessments are also a response to advances in new technologies and the potential risks and opportunities they entail, which have heightened perceptions of insecurity and instability. On this basis, the context and drivers of WMD policies, including their military-strategic and political dimensions, are evolving and require taking into consideration in future policy plannings.

The project has analysed these ongoing developments and trends through policy papers to better evaluate states' WMD-related calculations and policies. This allowed the project to grasp the key political and security factors shaping WMD policies and to identify opportunities for and obstacles to establishing the Zone. By organising dialogue on these critical issues, the project has been better positioned to identify practical solutions to mitigate or address them.

1.1.2. Build regional capacity

The second objective of the project has been to build regional capacity to improve understanding of the problems and to identify solutions related to the negotiation and implementation of the ME WMDFZ.

As the ME WMDFZ would be the first zone to cover all three WMD categories – nuclear, biological and chemical weapons – unique solutions and ideas are needed to address its exceptional scope and the specific circumstances of the Middle East. The project's courses, briefings, and digital tools are aimed at increasing the number of experts from the region and equipping them with additional analytical tools and qualifications to identify and pursue these solutions. In addition, established nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs) offer many technical, legal and procedural lessons that Middle Eastern officials and experts should be aware of. The project's activities have thus also facilitated learning from other zones' experiences to strengthen expertise in the Middle East.

As the contemporary Zone process is not fully documented in public accounts, there is a risk of losing institutional memory. Knowledge management and the capture of the historical record of key negotiations, outcomes, and events in the Zone process are critical. The project's activities, and in particular its digital tools, articles and fact sheets, ensure continuity of knowledge for current and future diplomatic efforts throughout the process of establishing the Zone.

1.1.3. Promote an effective, verifiable, inclusive and sustainable Zone

The project's third objective has been to support an effective, verifiable, inclusive and sustainable ME WMDFZ. In an environment where many aspects of the Zone are politically sensitive and contested, and where issues linked to broader security dynamics are at play, the Zone can gradually contribute to building trust among the states of the region by being effective, verifiable, inclusive, and sustainable. These characteristics may prove essential to ensuring that the process for establishing the Zone, and other regional processes supporting it, withstand political and security volatility and deliver positive value for regional peace and stability.

The project has provided technical, legal and procedural support to the Secretariat of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction. It has also provided such support to other regional security forums that contribute to discussions on nonproliferation and disarmament in the Middle East. The project's activities to promote inclusive regional dialogue on WMD issues have helped to raise awareness of the Zone. These efforts have enhanced recognition of the Zone as a comprehensive nonproliferation mechanism and have garnered support from political and expert communities in the region.

1.2. Implementation in a volatile regional security environment

Significant security developments occurred in the Middle East after the start of the project's second phase, in July 2023. From the attacks by Hamas on Israel of 7 October 2023 and Israel's war in Gaza, followed by the Israel–United States and Iran wars, the region's political and security landscape has fundamentally changed and is still changing.

Elevated tensions and a volatile regional security situation have increased threat perceptions and mistrust among the region's interlocutors. In addition, concerns about additional conflicts and spillovers, along with the decline of arms control regimes globally, have affected the implementation of the ME WMDFZ Project and necessitated adaptation to new realities on the ground. These changes affected the scope, format and timing of some of the project's specific tasks. Activities such as organising inclusive security dialogues or maintaining contacts with interlocutors in the region became more complicated due to personal and reputational risks, as well as participants hesitation to engage on politically sensitive topics with adversaries.

> **The project's activities to promote inclusive regional dialogue on WMD issues have helped to raise awareness of the Zone.**

In the Middle East's evolving security environment, threat perceptions have shifted in some key states crucial to the success of the Zone initiative. Many states have focused more on national security by restoring deterrence, thereby affecting Zone-related issues and consequently the project's research activities.

The project team adopted a series of measures in response to the above challenges and constraints as they arose during the project's implementation.

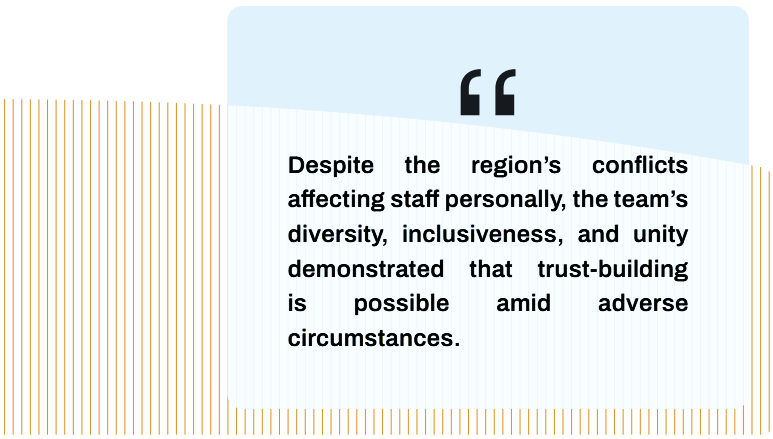
First, the project has placed greater emphasis on analysing the evolving security environment and its impact on states' threat perceptions and policies. For example, the project dedicated its first closed-door dialogue, held in February 2024, to better understanding the new environment and assessing regional dynamics. A second dialogue in January 2025 and a third in February 2026, built upon one another and demonstrated significant progress. Additionally, activities in the first year focused on knowledge-based and capacity-building. The project also published research papers analysing the regional security environment and its impact on threat perceptions and held a capacity-building workshop.

Second, to maintain stakeholders' trust, the project has placed great emphasis on consulting relevant stakeholders and reflecting their input in project planning. This approach has ensured consideration of a broad range of perspectives, including those that were at times

divergent. Integrating such a wide range of views required adjustments to the project's plans and timelines, reinforcing the project's relevance and coherence.

However, implementing activities in the region became increasingly challenging. In addition to the above-mentioned challenges related to capacity and willingness to engage, newly introduced or expanded state-imposed requirements, such as visa restrictions, posed additional constraints on UNIDIR's efforts to maintain broad inclusiveness and achieve geographical representation across project activities. Consequently, the project had to relocate several events outside the Middle East and used virtual events to ensure inclusive participation.

Third, the project benefited from its key structural advantage, rooted in the United Nations' approach of inclusive representation. This mitigated to the greatest extent possible the negative consequences of the volatile security environment. Arguably, the project team – with its Arab, Iranian and Israeli representation – is a microcosm of the Middle Eastern ecosystem. While the conflict in the region affected the staff personally, the team's diversity, inclusiveness and unity demonstrated that trust-building is possible under adverse circumstances. It also showed that experts of the region could work cooperatively and respectfully to bridge gaps on critical security issues. The diversity of the project's Reference Group and staff also contributed to maintaining regional buy-in and team unity throughout this period.



Despite the region's conflicts affecting staff personally, the team's diversity, inclusiveness, and unity demonstrated that trust-building is possible amid adverse circumstances.

2. Project activities and impact

Diplomats and experts participated in the project's capacity-building workshop in Vienna, Austria, February 2026. Credit: UNIDIR.

The project activities have been guided by two main principles: (a) inclusive representation, consultation and outreach, and (b) thorough examination of complex political and technical issues. In this regard, the project staff across various workstreams have consulted with most of the 24 countries members of the future ME WMDFZ. They have also consulted with the five permanent members of the Security Council (the P5) and key international and regional organisations, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), the League of Arab States (LAS), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the EU. Since the launch of the project in 2019, the project webpages, including its online tools, have been visited over 232,000 times, by users from over 160 countries, and its publications have been downloaded over 10,000 times (see Annex III for additional details). Over 2,800 participants registered for project events, including from all countries in the Middle East and regional organisations. Additionally, in various research papers, the project staff have included views and analyses from many experts, officials and academics from the region and beyond through dedicated interviews and review processes.

In its second phase, the ME WMDFZ Project activities resulted in 9 publications, 20 events, contributions to over 70 events, and regular briefings of stakeholders involved in the process. This section provides a detailed overview of the project's key activities during its second phase, and which objective each activity fulfilled.

Dialogue on "Regional security and the proliferation of WMD in the Middle East", Prague, Czech Republic, February 2026. Credit: UNIDIR.

2.1. Deepen understanding of the causes, motivations and risks associated with regional WMD proliferation

Under its first objective, the UNIDIR ME WMDFZ Project published several studies and convened dialogues.

A report examining the strategic and political aspects of the regional landscape and how they could influence the ME WMDFZ and its realisation was published in 2025.[2] It provides an updated analysis of the saliency of WMD capabilities within the current regional environment. Based on 35 interviews and reviews with current and former officials and experts, the report examines whether and, if so, how Arab states, Iran and Israel are adjusting their security strategies, including those related to WMD policies. It emphasises the importance of advancing the Zone initiative in regional security discussions, alongside the United Nations-mandated conference. The report offers practical recommendations grounded in the Zone's threat-reduction functions, confidence-building benefits and in its role as a tool for regional cooperation.

[2] Abdolrasool Divsallar, *Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East: The Role of the WMD Free Zone Initiative*, (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2025), https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2025/CombatingWMD.

Another project's publication examined the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on regional stability, particularly the ME WMDFZ.[3] It identified potential scenarios and risks of an arms race in military AI applications among the region's states, which could either heighten or help reduce WMD risks. Additionally, the report discusses new factors that AI might introduce into arms control initiatives and negotiations to establish the Zone, including urgency and technological opportunities.

The project also organised a series of events and closed-door meetings to facilitate discussions on Zone-related topics, identify solutions to enhance regional security and promote the ME WMDFZ. It organised a round table in Prague in February 2024 to examine the implications of regional security developments for the Zone. A research round table was held online in June 2024 to discuss AI and its connection to the Zone. In January 2025, the project organised a regional security dialogue co-hosted by the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) in Abu Dhabi. In September 2025, the project was hosted by the Middle East Council on Global Affairs in Doha to present its research findings on regional security and the ME WMDFZ. Finally, in February 2026, another two-day dialogue on WMD threats and regional security in the Middle East was held in Prague. These events involved over 80 current and former officials, experts, academics and representatives from regional and international organisations.

Additionally, to discuss prospects for a new nuclear agreement with Iran, the project organised three round tables in Geneva and Vienna (the latter in cooperation with the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, VCDNP). The round tables brought together more than 60 diplomats and experts from parties involved in the negotiations, as well as other regional and international stakeholders.

2.2. Build regional capacity

The ME WMDFZ Project conducted four groups of capacity-building activities: developing digital tools; organising training courses and capacity-building workshops; organising briefings; and empowering young regional experts.

Building on previous experience and feedback, the project's digital tools have had a noticeable impact, clearly enhanced regional capacities and knowledge management. The ME WMDFZ Compass addresses gaps in knowledge and information related to the current negotiations of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction.[4] This gap makes it difficult to compare and map the positions of various states on the Zone's future elements. By identifying and outlining statements made by Middle Eastern and other relevant states over time and comparing them, the Compass assists in understanding the evolution of views on specific issues and areas of agreement and

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[3] Nasser Bin Nasser, *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Regional Security, Threat Perceptions and the Middle East WMD Free Zone*, (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2025), https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2025/ZoneAI.

[4] Middle East WMD-Free Zone Compass, https://compass.unidir.org/.

disagreement. The Compass was launched in July 2024 at a side event on the margins of the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference. It was also presented on 19 November 2024 at the first side event of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction during its fifth session. Additionally, the project has continued to update and improve its existing digital tools by uploading new documents to the ME WMDFZ Documents Depository and adding recent milestones to the interactive Timeline.[5]

The NWFZ Hub is the most recent digital tool that the project has developed, in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), to facilitate learning from established zones in other regions.[6] The Hub offers a topical comparison of the provisions of the established NWFZs, along with background information on each associated treaty. It was developed to support the work of negotiators, decision-makers, researchers and other relevant stakeholders on existing NWFZs and the negotiation of new ones. The tool also aims to inform the United Nations General Assembly resolution 79/241 and its associated Qualified Group of Experts.[7]

All these tools have been welcomed by stakeholders, both inside and outside the region. The ME WMDFZ Project has received numerous testimonies from officials and experts describing how they have incorporated the tools into their work. The tools have both informed their policy and improved their access to knowledge and resources.

UNIDIR also organised two capacity-building workshops to enhance national capacities, encourage the exchange of expertise, and involve regional experts and officials. The first workshop took place in January 2025, in partnership with the ECSSR in Abu Dhabi, with 30 Emiratis in attendance. The second training workshop was held in January 2026 in Vienna, in collaboration with the VCDNP, and was attended by 22 officials, experts, and civil society members from most states in the Middle East. The participants widely welcomed the simulations, visits to international organisations in Vienna, and engagements with senior officials at these organisations, which provided them with invaluable knowledge and hands-on experience.

In addition, the project's regional briefings have helped raise awareness of issues related to the ME WMDFZ. In this context, the project contributed to a UNIDIR briefing before the 2024 Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference, held in Geneva. The briefing was intended to help delegations prepare for the committee session by discussing expectations for the meeting. The project addressed issues concerning the ME WMDFZ within the scope of the NPT review process. The project also held side events at the Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference, in New York in 2025, and at the Review Conference in 2026.

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5 ME WMDFZ Documents Depository, https://depository.unidir.org/, and the ME WMDFZ Timeline, https://timeline.unidir.org/.

6 Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones Hub, https://nwfzhub.unidir.org/.

7 United Nations General Assembly, "Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in All its Aspects", A/RES/79/241, 24 December 2024, http://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/79/241.

Simulation exercise at the UNIDIR-ECSSR capacity-building workshop in Abu Dhabi, UAE, January 2025. Credit: ECSSR.

Empowering youth and the next generation of professionals in arms control and disarmament is another vital step towards expanding the regional expert community and knowledge in the field. Accordingly, the project recruited young graduate professionals from the Middle East, emphasising geographical diversity and gender balance. Since 2019, four young graduate professionals – from Algeria, Iran, Israel and Oman – have joined the project, gaining experience in a multilateral setting and receiving tailored mentorship to enhance their expertise and networks.

Lastly, to strengthen the regional expert community, the ME WMDFZ Project has focused on making its research and educational resources accessible to regional audiences by translating them into the region's main languages, using translators from the Middle East. For this reason, the Compass is available in Arabic, Farsi and Hebrew, as well as in the United Nations official languages, and English translations are provided for statements originally given in other languages. Additionally, the project's report on AI has been published in these three regional languages.

FIGURE 1.

Geographical distribution and affiliation of registered participants in project's events

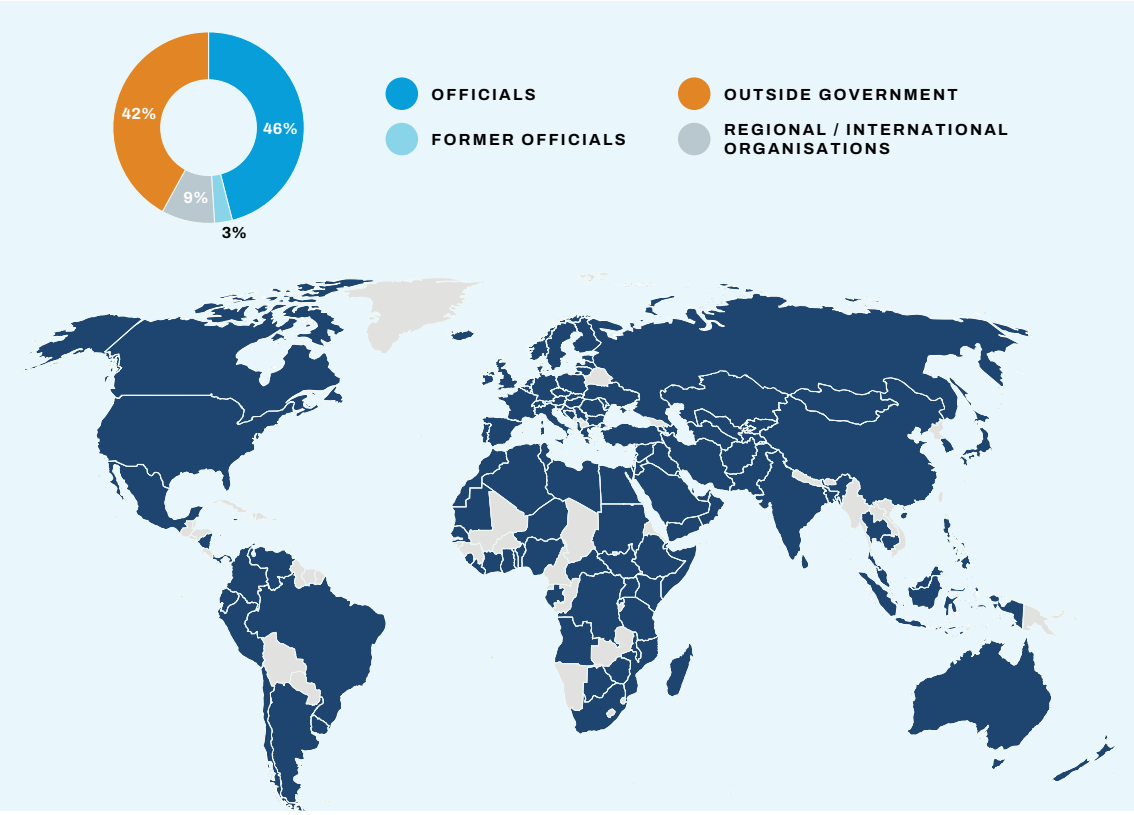
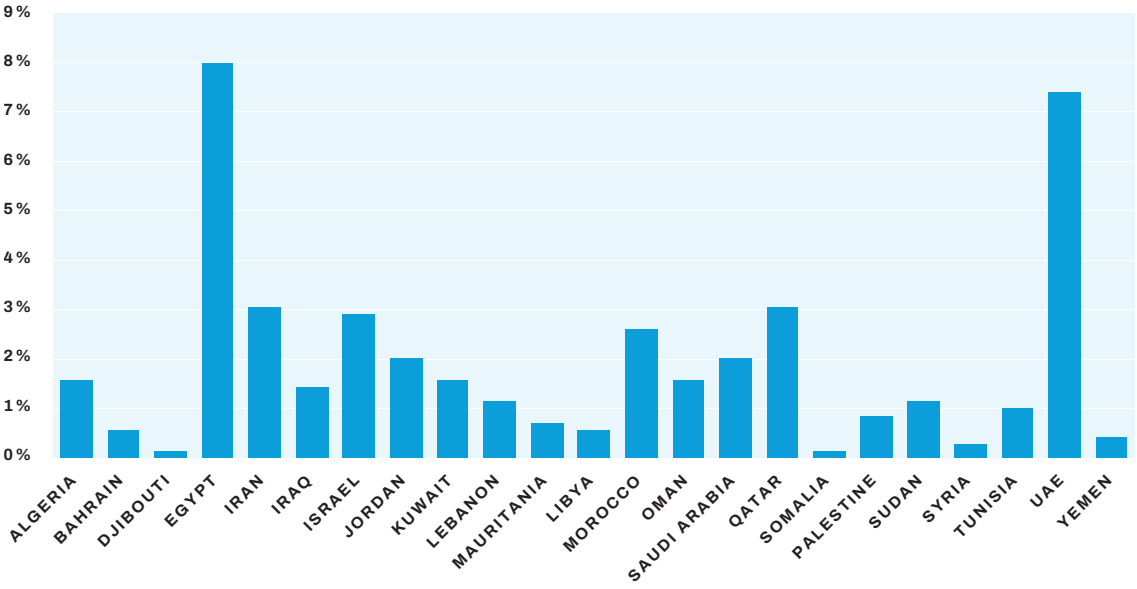


FIGURE 2.

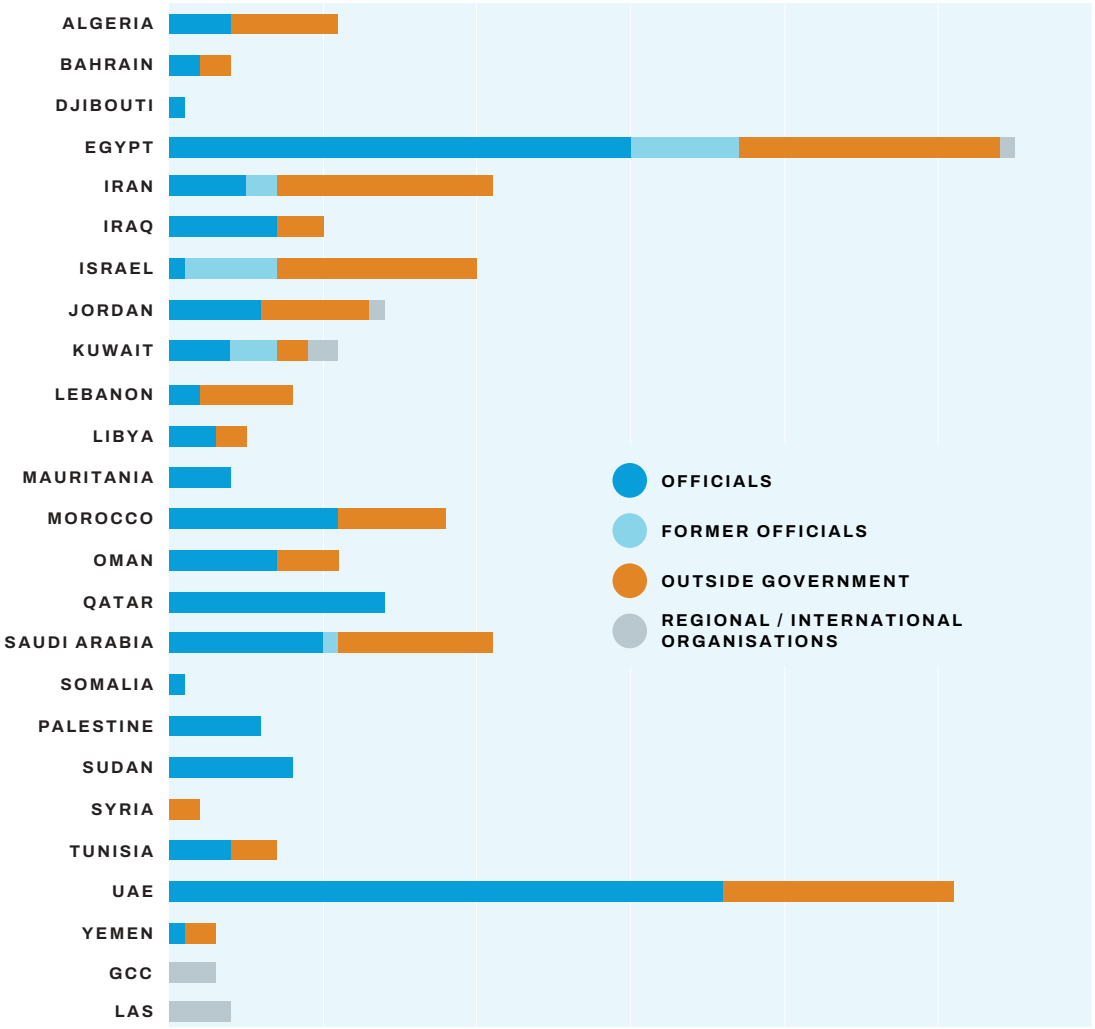
Number of regional registered participants in project's events[8]



[8] Based on registered participants in the project's events (note: information was not available for all events).

FIGURE 3.

Breakdown of registered participants in project's events based on affiliation[9]



2.3. Promote an effective, verifiable, inclusive and sustainable ME WMDFZ

The ME WMDFZ Project produced two research reports to promote an effective and sustainable ME WMDFZ. The participation and support of extraregional states, especially the nuclear-weapon states (NWS), are crucial, particularly in the context of the future treaty's protocols. To advance this aim, the project published a report highlighting the role of extra-regional states in key issues related to the Zone that require balancing among national policies, regional security goals and the strategic interests of external parties.[10] These issues involve the Zone's geographical scope and boundaries, the NWS's provision of negative security assurances (NSA), and maritime-related matters. The report emphasises early

9 Ibid.

10 Chen Zak Kane and Sarah Ruth Opatowski, *The Role of Extraregional States in the Middle East WMD Free Zone*, (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2025), https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2025/ExtraRegRole.

and continuous engagement, proactive dialogue with extraregional states and a focus on pragmatic solutions to resolve outstanding issues.

The project's most recent report examines the region's growing interest in nuclear energy.[11] It examines the factors driving this interest, evaluates potential proliferation risks and offers strategies to enhance regional cooperation on peaceful applications of nuclear energy. Additionally, the report highlights the implications of expanded nuclear energy activities for the Zone initiative, including the ongoing negotiations at the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The ME WMDFZ Project has also continued supporting existing initiatives, notably the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction. Ahead of its fifth session, the project released a factsheet on the conference's mandate, objectives and progress.[12] The staff of the project have also supported the Secretariat of the conference by contributing to session preparations, developing conference documents – including technical content and discussion papers – handling communications with member states, meeting reporting requirements in close collaboration with the Conference Presidency, and providing advice when requested. This contribution has been recognised and endorsed by regional and extraregional states during the conference and in other forums.

Separately, the ME WMDFZ Project submitted a paper on NWFZs in all their aspects, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 79/241, to inform the study and the discussions of the Qualified Group of Experts.[13] The Project also briefed the group on the project's publications and tools, which could support their deliberations and the study. To support effective and sustainable negotiations, the project also published a commentary on the minimum nuclear safeguards commitments that states in the Middle East may consider.[14]

Lastly, the project has continued to promote an effective, verifiable, inclusive and sustainable ME WMDFZ through outreach activities in various forums and regional security dialogues. The project supported UNODA during a joint Qatari–UNODA regional meeting on "Perspectives on a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMD," convened in Doha in June 2024 on the margins of the Third Arab Forum on Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation. Project staff made several other presentations and contributions at conferences and forums,

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11 Almuntaser Albalawi, *Navigating a New Era for Nuclear Energy in the Middle East* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2026). https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2026/ME-nuc-energy.

12 Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project, "Understanding the Middle East WMD Free Zone Conference", UNIDIR, 15 November 2024, https://unidir.org/publication/understanding-the-middle-east-wmd-free-zone-conference/.

13 Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project, "Submission on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 79/241: Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear Weapon Free Zones in All Its Aspects", UNIDIR, 3 October 2025, https://unidir.org/publication/submission-on-united-nations-general-assembly-resolution-79-241comprehensive-study-of-the-question-of-nuclear-weapon-free-zones-in-all-its-aspects/.

14 Fateme Fazel, "Harmonizing the Minimum Nuclear Non-Proliferation Commitments of States in the Middle East", UNIDIR, 14 May 2025, https://unidir.org/harmonizing-the-minimum-nuclear-non-proliferation-commitments-of-states-in-the-middle-east/.

including different track-1.5 dialogues, and side events on the margins of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference in Vienna, Geneva and New York, along with presentations to the Conference on Disarmament, the LAS' 16th Nuclear and Security Forum, and the Arab Center for Policy Research (for the full list see Annex I).

FIGURE 4.

Project activities, by objective

WORKSTREAMS[15]	OBJECTIVE 1	OBJECTIVE 2	OBJECTIVE 3
	Deepen understanding of the causes, motivations and risks associated with regional WMD proliferation	Build regional capacity	Promote an effective, verifiable, inclusive and sustainable ME WMDFZ
AI and WMD proliferation	✓		
Briefings		✓	✓
Digital tools	✓	✓	
Nuclear energy	✓		✓
Iran's nuclear negotiations	✓		✓
Regional security	✓		✓
Promoting the ME WMDFZ in other forums		✓	✓
Role of extraregional states	✓		✓
Supporting existing Zone-related initiatives			✓
Training	✓	✓	✓
General Assembly study on NWFZs	✓		✓

15 Workstreams are cluster of activities that each encompass several outputs to support one or several project objectives. See Annex I for a detailed list of outputs and deliverables.

3. Key trends and developments: Project takeaways

Fourth session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction, New York, 13 November 2023. Credit: UN Photo.

The project's diverse activities, ranging from research and training to participating in dialogues and briefing diplomatic communities, have offered a unique opportunity to view the Zone initiative from multiple perspectives. This section describes the main takeaways and observations from these activities, offering valuable insights and supporting strategies for the Zone initiative and other arms control and nonproliferation efforts in the Middle East.

3.1. Militarisation of regional security dynamics and WMD threats

Throughout the project implementation period, the Middle East has experienced an intense period of violence and wars. At least three major developments characterise the recent phase of militarisation in the region. The first development has been the belief among some regional states that strategically favourable outcomes can only be secured through military force. This has led to growing dependence on the use of military force to address national security challenges.

Second, the unrestrained use of force has further entrenched militarised approaches, thereby undermining and sidestepping diplomatic solutions. The ineffectiveness of international procedures, institutions, and norms in preventing the use of military force and the absence of a regional mechanism to limit militarised approaches have contributed to this pattern.

Third, there have been significant shifts in the region's balance of power. Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli–Hamas war spilled over into several states, including Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. The collapse of the Assad government in the Syrian Arab Republic and the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon, along with the Israel-US–Iran wars across the region, further affected the regional balance of power.

In this new security environment, the project's activities have highlighted several key military dynamics and trends that may influence WMD threats in the region and the establishment of the Zone. Although most of the following trends are confined to a few states in the region, and most states continue to hold to their traditional policies, the extent to which these trends spread in the future could shape the landscape of WMD threats in the region and the subsequent political process to address them.

3.1.1. Urgency of boosting deterrence

Several states are urgently strengthening their conventional deterrence and updating their national security policies. This trend has intensified in response to: (a) the failure of existing deterrence models in preventing wars and an increased complexity of establishing reliable conventional deterrence, (b) the emergence of new forms of immediate security and military threats and the insufficiency of existing deterrence models to address them, and (c) shifts in the regional balance of power. The growth of military spending in absolute terms and as a share of gross domestic product since 2023 across the region, alongside official statements, are strong evidence supporting this observation.

Key states of the region have pursued arms modernisation and introduced new military strategies to strengthen several domains of warfare. This has included long-range stand-off weapon capabilities, air defence systems, naval capabilities, and AI and autonomous systems. These efforts have been accompanied by further emphasis on national autonomy in defence capabilities. Some Middle Eastern states have also paid greater attention to strategic realignment with extraregional states in order to diversify their defence partnerships and security guarantees.

Overall, deterrence strategies and capabilities are undergoing a period of re-evaluation and revision, following the failure of existing deterrence models to prevent military strikes.

Overall, deterrence strategies and capabilities are undergoing a period of re-evaluation and revision, following the failure of existing deterrence models to prevent military strikes. In at least a few states, this rethinking includes national debates about the role of non-conventional capabilities. For example, military elites in several states debated the possible contribution of nuclear capabilities to complementing conventional forces. However, it is important to acknowledge that these debates have not been reflected thus far in states' diplomatic positions or military doctrines. Thus, states in their official positions still emphasise the importance of a diplomatic pathway to resolve regional security issues.

In this context, and as the scope of war has expanded across the region, states' immediate reaction has been to rebuild and enhance conventional military power and assess the potential security benefits of diverse capabilities. In this militarised environment, pursuing arms control and nonproliferation initiatives that aim to limit current capabilities or reduce future military options might be seen by some as undermining national security strategies.[16] As a result, the strategic-military discussion of arms control may become further complicated and less appealing among elites in a number of the region's states.

3.1.2. Review of nuclear policies and rise in systemic interdependence

WMD policies in the region currently reflect a level of continuity with past policies, but the ongoing regional turmoil leaves open the possibility of adjustments. Most Middle Eastern states continue to adhere to the NPT and see no political or military value in nuclear capabilities. These states are concerned about the impact on their national security of existing and new developments related to nuclear weapons and nuclear capabilities in the region. In their political and security agendas, these states thus argue in favour of the urgency and priority of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

Israel's nuclear weapon policy also continues as before and appears to have been unchanged thus far by regional developments or technological advancement. It continues to perceive nuclear disarmament as imposing security costs with no benefits, and it still sees its current nuclear policy as successful. Israel sees no value in the current scope and format of the Zone initiative to address its security concerns. It remains to be seen whether Israeli policy will change after the 2026 war with Iran. It is possible that it will continue to perceive the effects of the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, unwilling to take any risks, and continue to see no security benefit in the Zone. Alternatively, if believed to address its threat perception regarding Iran's nuclear programme, Israel might change its policy of no engagement with the Zone.

In the future, some key countries in the region might consider modifying their nuclear policies in response to adversaries' capabilities, regional developments, and leadership changes. These modifications could include a wide range of options, from a comprehensive resolution of the nuclear issue to rebuilding nuclear latency or building a nuclear weapon, to alliance with external powers (strategic realignments). For example, Iran may adjust its nuclear policy following the United States and Israel attacks on it since June 2025. There are growing uncertainties about how Iranian

Some key countries in the region might consider modifying their nuclear policies to adjust their national security strategies in response to adversaries' capabilities, regional developments, and leadership changes.

[16] Divsallar, *Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East*.

nuclear thinking and decision-making will evolve and adjust in the post-war landscape. With the collapse of diplomatic efforts for a peaceful political resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue and at the same time the failure of nuclear latency to complement conventional deterrence, uncertainties remain about Iran's future policy. Iran could aim to rebuild its nuclear latency, adopt an ambiguity doctrine, pursue nuclear weapon capabilities, or return to implementing its commitments under the NPT by negotiating a new nuclear agreement.

Both the perception of Israel as an unchecked conventional military power backed by nuclear deterrence and potential shifts in Iranian nuclear doctrine could drive changes in other states' policies. In this context, there are renewed questions about how other Middle Eastern states will adjust to the emerging power balance, including through strengthening strategic realignments that may encompass a nuclear dimension. For example, although there are few details about the Saudi–Pakistan defence pact, it is often perceived as an example of a strategic realignment that could include a nuclear dimension.[17] Overall, regional developments since 2023 have also demonstrated an increased systemic interdependence of nuclear policies among a few states in the Middle East while simultaneously recognising a need for a political resolution of current crises.[18]

3.1.3. A full spectrum of nuclear and other WMD threats

Regional stability in the Middle East continues to be threatened by a full spectrum of WMD-related threats, which have persisted and remained unresolved over the years. Lack of participation in international treaties, the existence of undeclared nuclear and other WMD programmes, lack of progress in nuclear disarmament, and the cases of non-compliance with international commitments have made the Middle East a leading region in posing WMD threats. Threats of use, the erosion of norms around nuclear weapons and the history of chemical weapons use in the region have reignited concerns among most of the region's states.[19]

The region also faces a new surge in kinetic counter-proliferation policies. The shift to the use of force as a strategy to counter nuclear proliferation and the use of military force against nuclear infrastructures are expanding nuclear risks and instabilities originating from WMD issues. It highlights the inefficiency of international procedures, institutions, and norms in protecting nuclear infrastructures. In addition to questions about the legality of these attacks, concerns regarding the nuclear safety issues and the environmental and humanitarian consequences of these attacks are rising. At a time when WMD threats are expanding due to states' military strategies, no effective regional mechanism is in place to mitigate these risks.

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17 Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif stated in an interview with Geo TV that Pakistan's nuclear capabilities "will be made available" to Saudi Arabia under the agreement. He described the deal as an "umbrella arrangement" for joint defense. See: Ashargh Al-Awsat, "Pakistan Says Its Nuclear Program Can Be Made Available to Saudi Arabia Under Defense Pact", 19 September 2025, https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/5188079-pakistan-says-its-nuclear-program-can-be-made-available-saudi-arabia-under-defense.

18 Divsallar, *Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East*.

19 Associated Press, "Israel is Building at a Suspected Nuclear Weapons Site, Satellite Photos Show", 3 September 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3OqT2fPRsI.

Iran's heavy water nuclear facility in Arak sustained heavy damage from Israeli strikes, 19 June 2025. Credit: Maxar Technologies.

On the positive side, despite recent developments, progress has been made in addressing some of these concerns. Syria's cooperation with the IAEA and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the new membership of Middle Eastern states in international treaties should be seen in this light.[20] In this context, arms control initiatives such as the Zone, along with other political tools, can play a vital threat reduction role.

3.2. Political commitment for an inclusive arms control treaty

Recent events have moved states closer to rearming or resorting to military approaches, but have also, in parallel, revealed the limits of military means in counter-proliferation and in achieving political objectives. Regional dynamics have also demonstrated the risks, limitations, and failures of hedging and opacity strategies as deterrent models. Therefore, political processes,

[20] Qatar subscribed to the Hague Code of Conduct on 11 March 2024; Oman ratified the amended Small Quantities Protocol (SQP) on 9 October 2024; Saudi Arabia rescinded its SQP with the IAEA in December 2024; the United Arab Emirates acceded to the Antarctic Treaty on 11 December 2024; Comoros ratified the Biological Weapons Convention in February 2025; and Somalia joined the IAEA on 16 September 2024 and signed the CSA and AP on March and April 2026, respectively.

including arms control, remain central and a priority for a sustainable resolution of WMD issues in the Middle East. As expressed in ME WMDFZ Project's regional dialogue in February 2026 as well as other forums, senior officials from the Middle East have expressed the urgency and support for discussing the Zone, arms control, and regional security arrangements, as well as expressing a shared recognition of risks and a commitment to further dialogue.

By the end of 2025, the General Assembly-mandated process and the Conference on Establishing the WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East continued, even amid major conflicts in the region. However, the implications of regional instability following the United States–Israel wars with Iran for the Zone process, are still unclear. If the process remains intact it can send a strong signal about its resilience amid regional security volatility and about states' decision to keep the political process alive. The following interconnected factors have so far shaped Middle Eastern states' political involvement in the Zone initiative.

> **The implications of regional instability following the United States–Israel wars with Iran for the Zone process, particularly regarding states' participation, remain unclear. If the process persists, it could send a strong signal about states' commitment to the political process and its resilience despite regional security volatility.**

3.2.1. A regional aspiration and a regionally led process

An inclusive and comprehensive WMDFZ treaty remained a regional goal for most Middle Eastern states. This is clear in the states' ongoing commitment to negotiate the establishment of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East through the General Assembly-mandated process in New York, even as the region has been tackling increasing volatility. The persistence of the process throughout this period showed the political commitment of most Middle Eastern governments to diplomatic efforts as a solution to nuclear and other WMD threats in the region. The implications of the recent United States–Israeli wars with Iran on the Zone process, including on the state's participation and political positions, are yet to be seen.

In the past three years, the regionally led nature of the process has helped sustain interest in the Zone initiative and in arms control more broadly. Middle Eastern states have shown a growing willingness to pursue regional solutions to long-standing rivalries through diplomatic means. Normalisation and reconciliation efforts among regional rivals support this trend. The lasting commitment to the ME WMDFZ should be seen within a broader context of regional initiatives to address unresolved security issues diplomatically. There is also a growing recognition among several states of the impact of regional security on WMD threats. By the beginning of 2026, number of officials called for discussion on regional security architecture, highlighting the need for a regional solution to the existing challenges.

At the same period, Middle Eastern states have actively worked to protect the ME WMDFZ process from the political fallout of regional instability by consistently emphasising the need to avoid politicisation of the process and urging good-faith engagement. These actions occurred in a context in which the region's states see greater urgency and value in mediation, especially prioritising nuclear diplomacy. Yet the implications of the United States–Israel war with Iran in 2026 and the failure of efforts to prevent war or de-escalation are yet to be seen on the extent to which the Zone process can be shielded.

> **Middle Eastern states have actively worked to protect the ME WMDFZ process from the political fallout of regional instability by consistently emphasising the need to avoid politicisation of the process and urging good-faith engagement.**

3.2.2. Recognising the importance of the multilateral frameworks and norms

From a procedural perspective, although the Zone process is led by Middle Eastern states, its organisation within a multilateral framework under a mandate from the General Assembly has made it more equitable and inclusive than any previous bilateral or minilateral format. In addition, the responsibility conferred by a mandate from the highest multilateral and norm-setting body – the General Assembly of the United Nations – has contributed to regional states' commitment to the process. The involvement of other international specialised bodies in the conference, such as the IAEA, as well as UNIDIR's efforts to provide technical support and promote the process, have also contributed to this resilience.

At the same time, at least one state is opposed to the current format. In addition, some regional states are concerned about the disregard for international norms and for cooperation with international organisations, and how these factors may contribute to regional insecurity. These states have increasingly called for upholding international norms and obligations to address security challenges within the region. The Zone initiative has been viewed as an important domain for strengthening the regional multilateral norm.

In the same vein, there is continued emphasis on the importance of relevant yet parallel international processes, such as the NPT and other NWFZs, in advancing progress towards the establishment of the Zone. More states of the region are highlighting the need to engage in such processes through coordinated efforts and early consultations with extraregional states.

3.3. Multiple constraints of the political processes

A combination of constraints is slowing progress and blocking the successful conclusion of negotiations to establish the Zone. Some of these constraints have persisted over years and decades, including disagreements over the mandate, scope and venue of the process; lack of

participation by various regional and P5 states; lack of institutional memory; mistrust among Middle Eastern states; and perception of limited benefits and utility in cooperation among the region's states. Policy research and dialogues conducted throughout the project reveal that a new set of constraints is emerging, which may further complicate deliberations and hinder progress in negotiations.

The Zone initiative, both as a negotiating platform and as a political pathway, has so far had slow progress. This fact has meant that the Zone initiative did not have an immediate contribution to addressing the region's current WMD-related issues. In the absence of prospects for an immediate diplomatic breakthrough in negotiations and the establishment of the Zone, states are instead exploring alternative pathways to address regional security concerns and WMD threats. This constraint could only widen due to an increase in the number, frequency, and scope of wars over nonproliferation and WMD-related issues.

As states aim to adjust their security policies, the disconnect and possible misalignments between military strategies and diplomatic processes are becoming increasingly significant limiting factors. On the military side, as security values of nuclear weapons and WMD capabilities have risen for some states, the immediate security gains from regional arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation efforts may lessen. Under this situation, reaching negotiated solutions diplomatically could become more challenging due to the difficulty of aligning adjustments in military strategy with political goals and the immediate posturing needs of states. Yet, so far, political initiatives to address WMD issues have remained important to most of the region's states because of their possible long-term value.

Another notable constraint concerns the technical capacity to address various complex facets of the Zone treaty. The General Assembly-mandated process has made states more aware of gaps in their technical capabilities and has raised recognition of the need to bolster national expertise. This is especially the case for addressing technically complex WMD issues such as WMD-related multilateral legal instruments; verification, cooperation, consultation and clarification; dispute settlement; cooperation between NWFZs and the Middle East conference; geographic scope; and NSAs.

The above observation is evident in the conference's engagements with regional and international subject-matter experts in its working committee meetings and in calls for regional events to engage specialised regional and national agencies. It is also evident in the identification by the conference of the above areas as requiring further consideration or input from technical experts, and in their inclusion on a list of possible thematic topics for future exploration.[21]

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[21] UN General Assembly, *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 6th session*, (New York: UN, A/CONF.236/2025/3, 21 November 2025), https://docs.un.org/en/A/CONF.236/2025/3 and; UN General Assembly, *Report of 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,* (New York: UN, A/CONF.236/2021/4, December 2021), paragraph 51, https://undocs.org/A/CONF.236/2021/4.

3.4. Sustained impact of international security and external powers on the Middle East WMD Landscape

International security developments and policies of external powers have always been critical factors for arms control and nonproliferation efforts in the Middle East. This influence has not declined in recent years; rather, it has evolved and transformed. This transformation was caused by the return of large-scale conventional war to Europe and its broader destabilising effect on the international security landscape, the weakening of the security role of Russia and other European states in the Middle East, increased Chinese security cooperation with Middle Eastern states, and the continued full engagement of the United States as the leading external security player in the region.

In this context, the roles of international security dynamics and external powers can be categorised into three main areas: implications for regional nuclear policies, extraregional commitments, and impacts on WMD diplomacy. In each of these three areas, noticeable takeaways from the project's research and dialogue activities are outlined below.

3.4.1. Implications for regional nuclear policies

The international tensions caused by the war in Ukraine, growing debates about the ineffectiveness of security guarantees and assistance, and the renewed focus on the role of nuclear deterrence and even nuclear testing in state policies have influenced nuclear narratives in the Middle East. International debates on the value of nuclear deterrence, including implied threats of nuclear use, whether as a hypothetical means to prevent the war or as a tool to manage the scale and scope of conventional conflict, could increase the importance of nuclear deterrence for complementing conventional forces by some Middle Eastern states.

The outbreak of the war in Europe, despite previous security assurances, also affected the perception of states in the Middle East regarding reliance on external security guarantees. It was seen as further evidence that such guarantees cannot be trusted and might be a risky and inefficient pillar of national security policy. These debates have contributed to the rise in importance of self-defence and autonomy. It is yet to be seen how the new emphasis on these concepts will affect states' assessments of possible nuclear and other WMD capabilities.

In parallel, European and US security assistance to Ukraine, along with developments in the Middle East, have highlighted the value of seeking external security assistance as an immediate option to protect against regional adversaries. This fact has accelerated efforts to secure stronger external security guarantees. Conventional weapon procurement from extraregional states has increased, and discussions on renegotiation existing external security assurances have begun to reinforce them or pursue new strategic partnerships.

In addition, the perception that relying on a single external security guarantor is insufficient had led to a new attempt to diversify external guarantors and address threats that the main security guarantor is unwilling to cover. As part of diversifying external security partners, Middle Eastern

states have begun forging new security arrangements with possible nuclear dimensions with nuclear-armed states outside the NPT. The ambiguity of the nuclear dimensions of these arrangements is viewed as a security tool in itself in the volatile regional environment.

These developments highlight that externally provided security guarantees have not disappeared from the security policies of states in the Middle East and continue to shape regional policies on nuclear weapons and other WMD. The Zone initiative can be both positively and negatively affected by these developments. On the one hand, attempts to forge a more effective external security guarantee might positively contribute to the Zone by reducing the desire and ability to acquire WMD capabilities. On the other hand, it may contribute to weakening the Zone initiative by strengthening self-defence thinking among states, including in favour of nuclear deterrence. The Zone and the nuclear proliferation landscape in the region could also be affected by the nature and scope of future external security guarantees, especially if these introduce new forms of extended deterrence and a more active role for nuclear-armed states outside the NPT as guarantors in defending their allies.

3.4.2. Extraregional commitments

The engagement and commitment of extraregional states, particularly the NWS, continue to be important in the ME WMDFZ negotiations. This is due to several factors, including the historic commitment of the NPT depository states to assist in establishing the Zone, the deepening dependence of states in the region on NWS policies, and varied NWS engagement in the General Assembly-mandated Zone process.

The General Assembly-mandated conference and its working committees have noted the role of NWS by calling for effective, irrevocable, non-discriminatory and unconditional NSAs. NSAs are incorporated, albeit conditional, in other established NWFZs: NWS have signed and ratified protocols that encompass NSAs, meaning that the ratifying NWS are legally bound not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against them. Yet, these assurances are frequently accompanied by reservations or interpretative declarations, including that NSAs are conditioned on the member state's continued compliance with its nonproliferation obligations.

The NSAs are a significant incentive for states within the region to join the ME WMDWFZ. A NWFZ's NSAs are legally binding and typically more extensive than those provided by the NWS in other forums, and they therefore could significantly improve the security value of the future WMDFZ treaty.[22] The NWS commitments also provide greater credibility to a NWFZ, enhancing its status and legitimacy by demonstrating recognition from external actors.[23] On this basis, participants at the General Assembly-mandated conference have recognised the need to proactively engage with the P5 and to consider engagement with states that are not party to the NPT from outside the region.[24]

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22 Kane and Opatowski, *The Role of Extraregional States in the Middle East WMD-Free Zone*.

23 Ibid.

24 UNGA, *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 6th session*.

3.4.3. Impacts on WMD diplomacy

Non-proliferation and disarmament diplomacy aimed at resolving WMD-related issues in the Middle East is increasingly dependent on international security developments and on the policies of external powers. Diplomatic processes are influenced in at least three ways by external powers' policies: by possible shifts in their approach to negotiations; by shielding regional allies, thereby affecting Middle Eastern states' willingness to negotiate; and, finally, by the level and extent of cooperation and coordination among the P5.

Recent shifts in some external powers' approaches to nuclear diplomacy, including withdrawing from nuclear agreements, implying intention to nuclear testing or expanding nuclear arsenals, as well as the use of military force over negotiation, may alter the prospects of future nonproliferation and disarmament in the region.

Recent shifts in some external powers' approaches to nuclear diplomacy, including withdrawing from nuclear agreements, implying intention to nuclear testing or expanding nuclear arsenals, as well as the use of military force over negotiation, may alter the prospects of future nonproliferation and disarmament in the region and further complicate the sustainable resolution of nonproliferation issues.

At the same time, greater involvement of external powers in promoting normalisation among the region's states presents opportunities to advance dialogue on WMD threats and arms control.[25] For example, the role of the United States, along with other regional states, was acknowledged in mediating a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas at the sixth session of the Conference on the Establishment of a ME WMDFZ.

External powers have played a decisive role in shaping regional WMD outcomes by enabling strategies or by incentivising change through diplomatic pressure, protection, or inducements. The United States, Russia, and at times also China have variously influenced regional actors by sustaining the status quo through political shielding (as in Israel, Iran and Syria), shaping negotiation incentives (as in Iran and Syria), or actively facilitating cooperation, disarmament, and treaty accession, as demonstrated in Iran's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the disarmament of its declared chemical weapons.

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[25] Adam Kozloski, "Congress Has Championed the Abraham Accords. Here's How It Can Push Them Forward", Atlantic Council, 2026, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/congress-has-championed-the-abraham-accords-heres-how-it-can-push-them-forward/.

In fact, most past successful regional nonproliferation and arms control achievements, such as the dismantlement of Syria's chemical weapons and the JCPOA, were the result of close cooperation among external powers.

However, amid current international tensions, bilateral nonproliferation collaboration among the P5 states has been affected by broader political disputes. The increase in P5 divisions over nonproliferation strategies and priorities globally, and in the Middle East, has negatively affected these countries' abilities and willingness to cooperate in resolving nonproliferation issues in the region.

3.5. Uncertain implications of emerging technologies for the Zone

The technological race is increasingly central to military and political rivalry in the Middle East. As shown by the recent use of advanced technologies in wars in the region, Middle Eastern states have varying levels of access to and advancement in emerging technologies, such as space, AI, modern air defence systems and advanced communications. This situation could have both positive and negative implications for WMD proliferation.

On the one hand, technological advancements may act as a force multiplier, creating new ways to address conventional military deficits more quickly. They could enhance the effectiveness of conventional forces and help close capability gaps with adversaries, thereby reducing the long-term importance of WMD capabilities for states. Technologies such as AI could also reduce the risk of WMD proliferation if used to improve detection, verification and compliance with current and future arms control efforts.[26]

On the other hand, uneven access to these military technologies may contribute to perceptions of insecurity by making conventional forces appear weaker than technologically advanced adversaries. The mismatch between the pace of technological advancement and states' capacity to access and absorb them may reduce confidence in conventional forces as a reliable deterrent. This situation could increase incentives to develop WMD capabilities. Additionally, certain innovations, such as AI, could simplify WMD development, enable more efficient capabilities and enhance delivery systems. Furthermore, such technologies might make proliferation efforts harder to detect.

The actual impacts of the new technologies on the Zone initiative remain largely uncertain. While these technologies are not directly included in the Zone negotiations, their impact on regional security in general and on WMD proliferation in particular should be the subject of future studies and analysis to manage potential risks and more accurately assess their benefits.

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[26] Bin Nasser, *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence*.

3.6. Lack of transparency and uncertainties about confidence-building measures

Amid the possibility that some states will review their WMD policies and the volatile security environment in the Middle East, the risks of miscalculation in WMD-related domains have increased. This highlights the urgent need to implement a set of steps, including transparency and confidence-building measures (CBMs), to reduce WMD threats, address mistrust and enhance transparency.

However, despite progress in adopting political CBMs at the subregional level, such as among GCC member states, the Abraham Accords, the GCC and Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia–Iran normalisation, little progress has been made in expanding these to military CBMs or establishing region-wide CBMs. As a result, recent normalisations have had a limited effect in the military domain and WMD issues, and the level of openness and transparency on these issues among the key states in the region has not improved.

> **The main obstacle to advancing military CBMs in the region stem from the fact that many states view such measures as incompatible with their military strategies, assuming that CBMs can potentially undermining their national security.**

On the military side, the main obstacle to advancing military CBMs in the region stems from the fact that many states view such measures as incompatible with their military strategies, assuming that CBMs can potentially undermine their national security. While CBMs aim to increase predictability and transparency through verifiable measures, key Middle Eastern players see strategic value in maintaining a degree of ambiguity in their military doctrines, including keeping hedging options. Indeed, maintaining ambiguity is regarded as an inherent component of credible deterrence, such that increased transparency may even be seen as a threat to national security. This dynamic has contributed to decreased confidence and trust among adversaries and increased risk of miscalculation. In addition, established CBMs proved insufficient during crises. Both during the 12-Day War and the February 2026 United States–Israel war with Iran, the pre-established CBMs between the GCC and Iran failed to help de-escalation or establish operational lines of contact.

Notwithstanding these constraints, the Zone process has been recognised by some states as having potential CBM value to make the process more appealing and credible to non-engaged states. These attempts do not negate the fact that the full confidence-building value of the Zone will only be realised in the long term, if and when all regional states participate and place a greater value on transparency. Only then can the Zone gradually serve as a mechanism for promoting WMD-related CBMs.

Exchange and enhance expertise during the first workshop of the GCC Armed Forces Security Working Group, November 19-20, 2024, Riyadh. Credit: GCC Photo.

This political-strategic context has shaped the prospects of CBMs under the ME WMDFZ. The immediate, realistic contribution of the Zone process and the General Assembly-mandated conference to CBMs could be to improve understanding of states' strategic intentions, concerns, and policies, as they are the only multilateral platforms where the region's states discuss WMD threats. The Zone processes could be a step towards promoting strategic dialogue and strengthening norms by implementing regional CBMs.

More efforts could be made to improve reporting on nuclear, chemical and biological activities by considering proposals such as establishing notification and data-exchange agreements. The Zone process could also facilitate cooperation with international organisations, capacity-building, and regional cooperation at the technical, legal and diplomatic levels. It could also advance adherence to international treaties, good-faith engagement in arms control talks, and the promotion of bilateral measures to facilitate early-stage reconciliation and normalisation.

4. Conclusion

The initiative to establish the Middle East WMD-Free Zone is at a critical juncture. The large-scale war in the Middle East, with nuclear proliferation at its heart, could fundamentally influence the context in which efforts to establish the Zone will take place. There are rising uncertainties and unknowns, among them are whether the volatile security environment will lead some states to consider reducing their participation in and commitment to the Zone process, or instead raise the urgency of the Zone initiative.

Amid the uncertainty, there remains support for and endorsement of the ME WMDFZ initiative by states in the region. This clearly indicates that most of these states perceive the Zone to be an integral part of a political solution to the WMD threats. In this context, it is critical to consistently safeguard the Zone initiative against regional instability, strengthen its tools and instruments, foster the political process for its establishment, and build public support for it.

UNIDIR's ME WMDFZ Project is the only multidisciplinary instrument that integrates research, policy, capacity-building and dialogue for the above ends. It provides an array of support, from analysis and knowledge management to training and procedural assistance for the establishment of the Zone. The project's uniqueness underscores its urgency and importance in the current political climate.

Learning from project activities and experience, the following lessons could be helpful in designing efforts to support the establishment of the Zone. First, a comprehensive approach that can balance legal, political and military aspects would increase the efficiency of efforts. The case of WMD CBMs is one example demonstrating that success can only be achieved by considering all of these aspects. The second lesson is that the Zone's role as a platform for discussing regional security issues could be better integrated with regional diplomatic efforts. The value of this function was evidenced in the project's regional dialogues. Third, regional capacity-building remains the most sustainable approach to strengthening regional diplomatic solutions to the Zone and mobilising civil society support. Project activities highlighted that states in the region could achieve long-term gains from these activities. Lastly, smart integration of past ideas into solutions for current and future challenges could help overcome diplomatic stalemates.

Annex I. Project publications and events

List of Publications

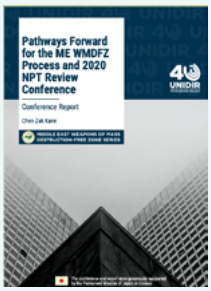
	DATE	ACTIVITY	AUTHOR
01	July 2024	The Middle East WMD-Free Zone Compass: Mapping Official Statements	Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project
02	November 2024	Factsheet: Understanding the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference	Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project Developed by: Almuntaser Albalawi
03	February 2025	The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Regional Security, Threat Perceptions and the Middle East WMD-Free Zone	Nasser bin Nasser
04	June 2025	Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East: The Role of the WMD-Free Zone Initiative	Abdolrasool Divsallar
05	October 2025	Submission on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 79/241 “Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in all its Aspects	Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project
06	October 2025	The Role of Extra-Regional States in the Middle East WMD-Free Zone	Chen Zak Kane and Sarah-Ruth Opatowski
07	April 2026	The Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones Hub	Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project Developed by: Sarah-Ruth Opatowski
08	June 2026	Navigating a New Era for Nuclear Energy in the Middle East	Almuntaser Albalawi
09	June 2026	Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Trends in the Middle East: Report of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project (2023-2026)	Abdolrasool Divsallar

List of Events

	DATE	ACTIVITY	FORMAT	VENUE
1	3 August 2023	Side event at the First Session of the Preparatory Committee of the 11th NPT Review Conference on "Perspectives on the Middle East WMD-Free Zone"	Hybrid	Vienna
2	18 October 2023	Side Event at the UNGA First Committee on "Digital Tools for Disarmament: An Overview of UNIDIR Portals and Databases	Hybrid	New York
3	24 February 2024	Roundtable on "Regional security and WMD proliferation trends in the Middle East and their impact on the ME WMDFZ"	In-person	Prague
4	21 May 2024	Briefing event in support of the preparations for the Second Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference	Hybrid	Geneva
5	13 June 2024	Roundtable on "The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Regional Security, Threat Perceptions, and the Middle East WMD-Free Zone"	Virtual	Online
6	24 July 2024	Side event at the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 11th NPT Review Conference on "Forging a Path Towards a WMD-Free Middle East: The WMD-Free Zone Compass"	Hybrid	Geneva
7	19 November 2024	Side event at the Fifth Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction on "UNIDIR tools for supporting the Middle East WMD-Free Zone"	In-person	New York
8	21–22 January 2025	Capacity building workshop on "Non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament," co-organised with Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR)	In-person	Abu Dhabi
9	23 January 2025	Dialogue on "Enhancing Regional Security and Addressing WMD Threats in the Middle East," co-organised with Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR)	In-person	Abu Dhabi
10	19 February 2025	Roundtable on "Iran Nuclear Program: Pathways and Challenges Toward a New Deal I"	In-person	Geneva
11	26 February 2025	Launch event of "The impact of artificial intelligence on regional security in the Middle East, threat perceptions and the ME WMDFZ" report	Virtual	Online
12	11 April 2025	Roundtable on "Iran Nuclear Program: Pathways and Challenges Toward a New Deal II"	In-person	Vienna

13	28 April 2025	Side event at the Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 11th NPT Review Conference on "The role of extra-regional states in the Middle East WMD-Free Zone"	In-person	New York
14	21 May 2025	Roundtable on "Iran Nuclear Program: Pathways and Challenges Toward a New Deal III"	In-person	Geneva
15	12–14 January 2026	Capacity-building workshop on "Non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament policies in the Middle East," co-organised with the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP)	In-person	Vienna
16	14 January 2026	Informal consultations in support of the 11th NPT Review Conference	In-person	Vienna
17	4 February 2026	Dialogue on "Regional security and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East"	In-person	Prague
18	27 April 2026	Launch event of "Navigating A New Era for Nuclear Energy in the Middle East" report at the 11th NPT Review Conference	Hybrid	New York
19	28 April 2026	Launch event of the Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones Hub at the 11th NPT Review Conference	Hybrid	New York
20	8 June 2026	Launch event of the "Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Trends in the Middle East: Report of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project (2023-2026)" co-organised with The Geneva Graduate Institute	Hybrid	Geneva

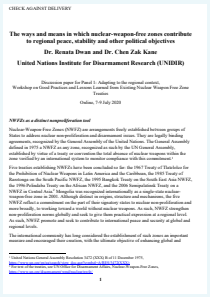
Annex II. Project publications - Findings and recommendations



Pathways Forward for the ME WMDFZ Process and 2020 NPT Review Conference: Conference Report

The report summarises a UNIDIR event held in February 2020, which explored the impact of the ME WMDFZ issue on the upcoming 10th NPT Review Conference. The report identifies persistent challenges related to proliferation in the region and proposals for the ME WMDFZ in NPT Review cycles since 1995. Achieving the ME WMDFZ has become increasingly complex due to international and regional developments. The report emphasises the importance of acknowledging past grievances, differing objectives, mistrust, conflicts, and national security interests to understand the current state and prospects of the process. The positive outcome of the first session of the UNGA-mandated ME WMDFZ Conference, which took place in November 2019, is seen as a potential relief from pressure ahead of the 2020 NPT RevCon. Diverse opinions exist regarding the causes of WMD proliferation in the region and the effectiveness of the ME WMDFZ as a solution to these problems. The report suggests specific measures and mechanisms to address mistrust and support the ME WMDFZ process such as ongoing engagement and dialogue among relevant parties to foster trust and confidence; the significance of international support and cooperation in establishing the Zone; the need for a comprehensive regional security mechanism involving all states in the region, addressing all security concerns and interests, while simultaneously addressing the root causes of insecurity and the implementation of confidence-building measures as crucial factors to facilitate the establishment of a ME WMDFZ.

The report's executive summary is also available in Arabic, Hebrew and Persian.


CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The ways and means in which nuclear-weapon-free zones contribute to regional peace, stability and other political objectives

Dr. Renata Dwan and Dr. Chen Zak Kane

United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)

Discussion paper for Panel 1: Adapting to the regional context, Workshop on Good Practices and Lessons Learned from Existing Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaties

Online, 7-9 July 2020

NWFZs as a distinct nonproliferation tool

Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) are arrangements freely established between groups of States to address nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament issues. They are legally binding international agreements. The concept of a NWFZ was first put forward in 1959 and subsequently defined in 1975 as NWFZ as any zone recognized as such by the UN General Assembly, established by virtue of a treaty or convention the total absence of nuclear weapons within the zone verified by an international system to monitor compliance with this commitment.[1]

Five treaties establishing NWFZs have been concluded to the: the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean, the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga on the South Pacific NWFZ, the 1995 Bangkok Treaty on the South East Asia NWFZ, the 1996 Pelindaba Treaty on the African NWFZ, and the 2006 Semipalatinsk Treaty on a NWFZ in Central Asia.[2] Mongolia was recognized internationally as a single-state nuclear weapon free zone in 1992.[3] Each of these treaties, and the zones established by the treaties, reflect a commitment on the part of their signatory states to nuclear non-proliferation and more broadly, to working toward a world without nuclear weapons. As such, NWFZ strengthen non-proliferation norms globally and seek to give them practical expression at a regional level. As such, NWFZ promote and seek to contribute to international peace and security at global and regional levels.

The international community has long considered the establishment of such zones an important measure and encouraged their creation, with the ultimate objective of enhancing global and

[1] United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3472 (XXX) B of 11 December 1975, https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3472(XXX)&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION, "Comprehensive Study of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, https://undocs.org/en/A/45/435

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The Ways and Means in Which Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones Contribute to Regional Peace, Stability, and Other Political Objectives

Presented at the ME WMDFZ Conference Intersessional Workshop in July 2020, this paper highlights the significance of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs) as a crucial nonproliferation and disarmament measure predating the NPT. NWFZs promote global peace, stability, and cooperation by reducing nuclear risks, renouncing nuclear weapons, strengthening nonproliferation, and fostering regional cooperation. The five existing NWFZs were established to counter threats from nuclear-armed states and mitigate nuclear testing consequences. After resolving most obstacles, negotiations concluded relatively quickly, leading to treaty enactment within two to three years in three cases. Commitments by Nuclear-Weapon States (NWSs) were limited, with only the Treaty of Tlatelolco ratified by all five NPT NWSs. These zones established significant legal and political barriers to breakout states and reinforced nonproliferation norms. While inter-state conflict was not a prerequisite for NWFZ establishment, absence of major conflict and recognition of shared interests were crucial. Limited trust among Middle Eastern states, previous WMD noncompliance, and minimal regional cooperation experience complicate zone development pathways. Each NWFZ's unique experience shows there is no single route to success and emphasises that overlapping bilateral, plurilateral, and regional arrangements can aid in zone establishment.

Middle East WMD Free Zone Document Depository

The Document Depository is one part of the two publicly available and freely accessible online tools the ME WMDFZ developed and published. It acts as a resource hub that collects and organises the main documents related to the evolution of the ME WMDFZ. Documents can be sorted and filtered by date, originating forum or state, and type of document. It currently has a total of 510 documents and includes annual resolutions, national statements on the ME WMDFZ process originating from states that will make up the ME WMDFZ, the depositories states/co-conveners, and International Organisations or forums named in any of the resolutions pertaining to the ME WMDFZ.

Nuclear Verification in a Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Lessons from Past Verification Cases and Other Precedents

Verification is crucial for the success of an ME NWFZ. Despite regional tension and mistrust, effective verification can enhance national security, reduce tensions, and discourage proliferation. The paper focuses on nuclear aspects but proposes complementary arrangements for other WMD. Prohibitions should cover nuclear weapons research, possession, stationing, and testing, with provisions for their elimination. Existing global and regional treaties can guide verification efforts, including the IAEA's safeguards system and regional verification with mutual inspections. Addressing nuclear latency, the ability to produce weapons if desired, is a major challenge. Constraints on enrichment and reprocessing are necessary to provide a timely warning of misuse. Regional cooperation and engagement with the IAEA are crucial, and negotiations involving all relevant parties are essential for success. Prohibitions on armed attacks on nuclear facilities should be established as confidence-building measures. The paper suggests options for dealing with enrichment and reprocessing activities, including limiting scale and stockpiles or prohibiting national enrichment and reprocessing altogether. Lessons from past verification cases emphasise the importance of trust, cooperation, transparency, and competent national safeguards authorities. They are necessary for addressing safeguards violations and verifying dismantlement.

From the Iran Nuclear Deal to a Middle East Zone? Lessons from the JCPOA from an ME WMDFZ

While the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) explicitly states that it "should not be considered as setting precedents for any other state or for fundamental principles of international law," its unique negotiation process, provisions, and implementation created an important set of tools that could provide valuable insights and lessons for an ME WMDFZ. This essay series explores lessons from the JCPOA for the ME WMDFZ through essays focusing on five key themes: the structure and format of the negotiations; nuclear fuel cycle activities and research; safeguards and verification; nuclear cooperation; and compliance and enforcement. While the JCPOA is not a blueprint for a ME WMDFZ, lessons relevant to the ME WMDFZ include the importance of having a clear and comprehensive negotiating mandate; the need to build trust and confidence between the parties through a combination of factors, including regular dialogue, transparency, and verification; the importance of flexibility and compromise; the importance of verification and monitoring mechanisms; the utility of confidence-building measures such as transparency and information-sharing, and the limitation of the compliance and enforcement mechanisms adopted under the JCPOA.

The report's executive summary is also available in Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian.

Middle East WMDFZ Timeline

The ME WMDFZ Timeline is one of the two publicly available and freely accessible online tools the ME WMDFZ developed and published in collaboration with officials, experts, and regional stakeholders. The objective of the timeline is to create a baseline of knowledge and provide information on the key diplomatic milestones of the ME WMDFZ. It encompasses over 60 years of the milestones of the zone, including events, resolutions, meetings, and Zone related initiatives from the NPT, UN General Assembly, IAEA General Conference, and regional forums. The Timeline is a comprehensive resource that contributes to a deeper understanding of the process's history and supports endeavours for a WMD-free Middle East.

The Timeline is also available in Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian.

Factsheet: Arab Women in International Security and Disarmament

The international security and disarmament field faces a gender imbalance, with women being underrepresented. On average, women make up only 30% of delegates in disarmament forums, with the Middle East having the lowest proportion. Women have the right to contribute to security discussions and their increased participation can lead to peace and sustainable outcomes. UNIDIR roundtables have highlighted progress and obstacles in achieving gender equality in the field. Gender stereotypes, institutional culture, work-life balance, and the lack of role models hinder women's inclusion. To address these challenges, educational programs, mentorship initiatives, and localised communication strategies should be implemented. Women's participation and experiences in the security field should be highlighted, and communication strategies should be localised to emphasise the importance of women's involvement. Gender equality and diversity should be promoted across institutional cultures, and specific targets should be set to achieve gender parity, including in leadership positions.

The factsheet is also available in Arabic.

Perspectives, Drivers, and Objectives for the Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Voices from the Region

In this publication, experts from eight Middle Eastern states discuss the positions and potential incentives, as well as dis- and missing incentives for their country's engagement with the ME WMDFZ. By identifying and collating the incentives of different states in the region, this publication aims to promote a better understanding of regional states' security dilemmas and specific concerns related to the WMDFZ; to identify points of convergence that can be built upon and points of divergence that need to be bridged; to facilitate exchange and dialogue among regional experts; and to expand regional capacity. Based on these eight essays, national security interests drive participation, or lack therefore, in the Zone negotiations. Although the incentives identified by the authors outnumber the disincentives and missing incentives, this has not resulted in more active participation or progress toward establishing a ME WMDFZ. For some states, the incentives related to security are outweighed by the disincentives and missing incentives. Mistrust among states in the region is a common thread throughout the essays. Suggested measures to address mistrust include cooperative measures such as the adoption of CBMs, the importance of reliable

verification, compliance, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms, and the need for direct dialogue in regional security forums. Suggestions for coercive approaches include creating mechanisms to guarantee compliance and enforcement that would address mistrust.

The report's executive summary is also available in Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian.

Means of Delivery: A Complex and Evolving Issue in the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Initiative

The inclusion of means of delivery of WMD in the scope of the ME WMDFZ is a polarising question among regional states. This paper examines the history of means of delivery in the context of the Zone, assesses the regional perspectives and related concerns, and presents several policy options for states to consider. Key findings of the publication include that: (i) regional states have yet to thoroughly explore the issue; (ii) the rapidly changing technological developments and evolving regional dynamics may further complicate addressing means of delivery but may also lead to a watershed moment with a push to address the issue more concertedly given growing concerns with conventional systems; (iii) the proliferation of delivery systems in the region stems from multifaceted threat perceptions and is linked with security dilemmas and conflicts, thus states will need to be convinced that the adoption of controls on delivery systems contributes to their national security without undermining it and; (iv) though it is up to regional states to consider the viability of different options moving forward, the arms control community could offer guidance on the parameters, viability, and feasibility of any such explorations.

Examining Modalities for Nuclear Disarmament in the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Treaty

The paper addresses the complexities associated with nuclear disarmament in the absence of an internationally accepted multilateral framework. The paper sketches out and examines the implications of two primary pathways to achieve nuclear disarmament in a future ME WMDFZ treaty: disarmament as a precondition for joining the treaty and the inclusion of specific disarmament provisions in the zone treaty. The paper analyses the advantages and limitations of existing frameworks such as the NPT, CWC, TPNW, and the Treaty of Pelindaba. States of the Middle East will have to consider various factors when choosing which approach to take: What is desirable (the levels of information, transparency, and resulting assurance of the completeness and irreversibility of a state's nuclear weapon programme that they would deem sufficient to allay their concerns); What is applicable (the impact of each pathway on the complexity and time frame of the negotiation of the treaty and on its entry into force, and what is feasible (a pathway that is compatible with the desired level of assurance as well as being politically and technically feasible).

The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View from the Negotiating Table

This paper series offers a valuable collection of perspectives from key negotiators and convenors of the Glion and Geneva consultations (2013-2014) to convene a ME WMDFZ Conference, which had been mandated by the 2010 NPT RevCon. The six negotiators share insights, offer lessons learned, provide previously undocumented personal accounts of the events and discussions, and behind-the-scenes dynamics of the ME WMDFZ conference consultations process. The series also includes a timeline of relevant events that occurred between 2010-2015 with links to original documents from the consultations. Though each reflection has its unique lessons about the consultations, some authors commonly noted that: (i) the prolonged period of choosing a Facilitator hindered the consultations; (ii) regional engagement in the Glion/ Geneva consultations format was a feat in itself, the first time since ACRS in the 1990s where Arab delegations and Israel engaged on the topic; (iii) the consultations were civil and there was some willingness between regional states to find a compromise where possible; (iv) the mandate of a ME WMDFZ conference, the question whether to discuss regional security in the context of the Zone and the role of the UN remained key issues where compromise was unachieved; (v) it was important to have consistent and high-level buy-in and representation in the consultations and that; (vi) dialogue is an essential ingredient for progress.

Development and Cooperation on Nuclear Research and Energy in the Middle East: Workshop Report

The workshop and its report focus on exploring the potential for development and cooperation in nuclear research and energy within the Middle East in the context of an ME WMDFZ. The report provides an overview of the current status of nuclear research and energy programs in the Middle East, reviews existing mechanisms for regional cooperation on nuclear research and energy, identifies potential areas for cooperation in nuclear safety and security, and offers insights on these in the context of a ME WMDFZ. On the national level, workshop participants discussed their respective nuclear energy programmes and provided details about their objectives, progress, technologies under consideration, as well as organisational aspects. Common challenges noted were public acceptance and building national capacities. On the regional level, participants identified mutual interest in investment in education, creating employment opportunities, and addressing potential threats emanating from non-state actors to these programs. Participants also highlighted opportunities for cooperation in nuclear safety, emergency prevention, preparedness and response, human resources development, scientific collaboration, and development and deployment of small modular reactors.

Narratives on the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone: Historical Accounts, Drivers, and Themes

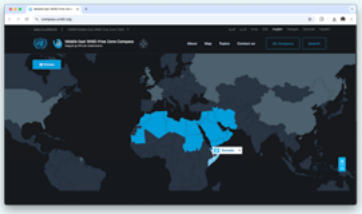
The publication documents the narratives of key stakeholders, including the Arab states, Iran, Israel, Russia, and the United States, and their involvement in Zone-related processes at various critical junctures since 1974. By distilling insights from these narratives, the study uncovers the key drivers and themes that shape the behaviour of these states toward the ME WMDFZ. It offers a comprehensive historical account of key Zone-related processes and events from all these keyholders perspectives. The study primarily draws on 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 organisations that have played important roles in the Zone processes. The narratives shed light on how historical events have been perceived and interpreted by different stakeholders, revealing their divergent motivations, objectives, and perceptions assigned to other stakeholders, emphasising the complexity and multifaceted nature of the ME WMDFZ. The diverse perspectives provided in this publication could assist in bridging gaps between Middle Eastern states, uncovering points of convergence, divergence, and misunderstanding.

Addressing Chemical and Biological Weapons in the Context of a Middle East WMD-Free Zone: Workshop Report

The report captures the discussions held during the workshop on chemical and biological weapons in the Middle East, shedding light on important considerations of addressing these weapons in the context of the establishment of a ME WMDFZ. The workshop highlighted several key takeaways, emphasising the importance of effective verification mechanisms to maintain trust in compliance, regional cooperation, and clarity on the scope and mandate of the zone. Regarding chemical weapons, participants emphasised the OPCW's verification capabilities, highlighted its various programs to promote implementation of the CWC or other regional tailored arrangements. Participants also expressed concerns regarding mistrust in other regional state participation as well as compliance with the CWC, and threats from non-state actors as well as options for including a complementary regional verification arrangement. On biological weapons, experts noted the challenge of verifying compliance due to the lack of an international verification mechanism and advancements in science and technology that complicate the task of achieving a verifiable biological weapons-free zone. Confidence-building measures were discussed as a mechanism to facilitate information exchange and reduce mistrust, while recognising that they do not replace effective verification. Participants from the region emphasised the need for governments to prioritise nonproliferation and allocate necessary funding for biosafety and biosecurity measures.

Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project: Final Report

The report offers a summary of the project's activities and outputs, presenting key takeaways and proposals to advance the ME WMDFZ initiative. It provides insights into the evolution of the issue over time, drawing lessons for current and future efforts.



The ME WMDFZ Compass

The Compass is an online tool for mapping and tracking publicly available statements made by states on the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (ME WMDFZ). It can be used to understand a state's deliberations on a particular issue, the evolution of discussions on a topic over time, gaps in covering particular topics, as well as areas of convergence and divergence, contributing to the ongoing efforts to develop practical solutions to tackling obstacles and bridging gaps between diverging views. It is developed to support the work of negotiators, decision-makers, researchers, and other relevant stakeholders on the ME WMDFZ.

Understanding the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference

The factsheet outlines the mandate and objectives of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction, its structure and composition, key topics and issues which have been addressed in the past sessions, and what to expect from the Fifth Session, taking place in November 2025, at UN headquarters in New York.

The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Regional Security, Threat Perceptions and the Middle East WMD-Free Zone

With significant advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), many countries have been seeking to integrate these technologies into military and defence industries, including in the Middle East. In this publication, the author examines and analyses the impact of AI on regional security, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), proliferation-related risks in the Middle East, and its potential influence on the initiative to establish a WMD-Free Zone in the region. The author examines plausible scenarios, such as the emergence of an arms race in military applications of AI among regional states, which could either increase WMD proliferation risks in the region or, conversely, help reduce them. The paper also discusses key factors AI may have in the negotiations to establish a WMD-Free Zone, including urgency and the potential technical benefits of AI in arms control processes.

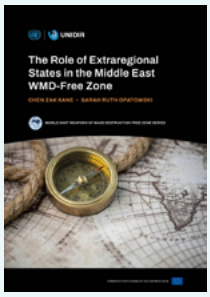
The report is also available in Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian.

Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East: The Role of the WMD-Free Zone Initiative

As security dynamics in the Middle East change, regional states may also reassess their security policies and defense strategies, including those related to WMD. This research paper analyses the impact of the evolving regional environment and changes in military dynamics on national threat perceptions, military and security strategies, and consequently assessments of the risks and benefits of acquiring or relinquishing WMD capabilities. The paper identifies the possible implications of such adjustments on states' positions regarding nonproliferation and disarmament initiatives, including the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone. It proposes a number of options to promote and enhance the security value of the Zone, including greater integration of the Zone with ongoing and future regional dialogues. The proposed options aim at strengthening the Zone's threat reduction, confidence-building, and regional cooperation functions.

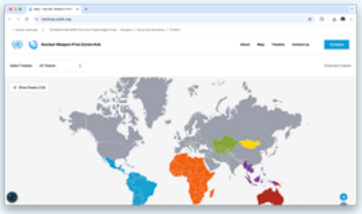
Submission on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 79/241 "Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in all its Aspects"

In accordance with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 79/241, UNIDIR has prepared a comprehensive study on Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs). This paper outlines how NWFZs play a crucial role in reinforcing nonproliferation and disarmament by ensuring the absence of nuclear weapons in designated regions. Beyond prohibiting nuclear arms, NWFZs also foster trust among regional states, enhance security, and promote cooperation on peaceful nuclear technology, contributing to broader international stability. Given the escalating geopolitical tensions and rising nuclear rhetoric, the study notes that strengthening established NWFZs, as well as pursuing the creation of new ones, has become increasingly vital for preventing conflict spillovers, mitigating global security risks, and advancing disarmament. This submission is also included in the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on the same topic (A/79/950).



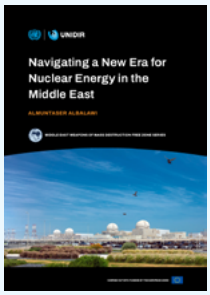
The Role of Extraregional States in the Middle East WMD-Free Zone

This report analyses the role of extraregional states, particularly the five nuclear-weapon states (NWS) under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in establishing a future Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone. It examines the protocols and relevant implications to the Middle East from established nuclear-weapon-free zones and explores three key areas: defining the zone of application, securing negative security assurances, and addressing maritime-related issues. These challenges involve navigating sovereignty disputes, foreign military bases, maritime boundaries, and NWS reservations or interpretive statements to the protocols. The report emphasises the need for early and sustained engagement through proactive dialogue and balancing regional security objectives with NWS strategic interests.



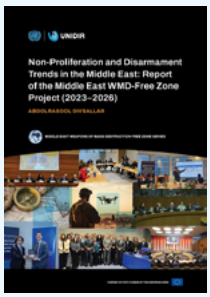
The Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone Treaties Hub WMDFZ Comparison Tool

UNIDIR's Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Hub is an online tool that provides an overview of the established nuclear-weapon-free zones worldwide and a comparison across various aspects of these zones. The in-depth comparison can help strengthen the frameworks of current NWFZs and enhance cooperation and information sharing among these zones. Furthermore, the tool serves as a critical asset for diplomats and experts currently engaged in the negotiations or considerations regarding the establishment of new NWFZs. In addition, it plays a pivotal role in informing the UN General Assembly (UNGA)-mandated comprehensive study of the question of nuclear-weapon-free zones in all its aspects. The hub could also serve as an educational tool for research, training, and teaching, providing experts, scholars, educators, and students with a resource for conducting comparative studies and educating about the intricacies and importance of NWFZs.



Navigating a New Era for Nuclear Energy in the Middle East

Interest in nuclear energy across the Middle East is gaining renewed momentum amid a global push for energy security and economic growth. However, if the expansion of nuclear activities – particularly uranium enrichment – is not reasonably justified, then it could heighten risks and tensions. This publication analyses the regional nuclear landscape in the Middle East in the light of the evolving security dynamics and the latest technological advancements. It examines the current drivers for pursuing nuclear energy and assesses how they may evolve. The publication then evaluates the potential implications that expanding nuclear energy programmes have for the initiative to establish a Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the Middle East, including ongoing discussions at the United Nations General Assembly-mandated conference on the Zone. The publication closes by assessing the political and technical frameworks that govern peaceful nuclear collaboration and technology-sharing. It uses this to identify effective risk-mitigation models and partnership strategies to address proliferation threats and strengthen peaceful cooperation in the Middle East.



Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Trends in the Middle East: Report of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project (2023–2026)

Despite significant obstacles that have delayed the establishment of the Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the Middle East, it remains the only multilateral and comprehensive effort to address the threat of WMD in the region. The need for such a Zone has only grown over recent years as WMD-related threats in the region have increased in complexity and as regional security dynamics have become more volatile than ever before. This report summarises the main activities of UNIDIR's Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project between 2023 and 2026 and its key takeaways. The report outlines the project's key objectives and how its activities were adapted to the evolving regional and international environment; provides a detailed description of the project's main activities and workstreams and their outputs; and highlights the array of other support that the project provides to stakeholders, from analysis and dialogue to training and substantial assistance for the establishment of the Zone. The report's substantive findings will provide important insights for decision makers as they adopt policy solutions to existing challenges.

Annex III. Engagement metrics (2019–2026)

PUBLICATIONS AND EVENTS

24 publications
4 languages (English, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian)

14 external articles

10,700 publication downloads (not including direct links to PDFs)

41 events with over **2,800** participants

Over **700** documents added to the ME WMDFZ Depository

SOCIAL MEDIA (X)

297k total impressions

8,300 engagements

WEBSITE TRAFFIC

231,800 visits to project pages

21,500 users

182 countries accessed/ downloaded from

74,800 visits to the Timeline

6,000 visits to the Compass

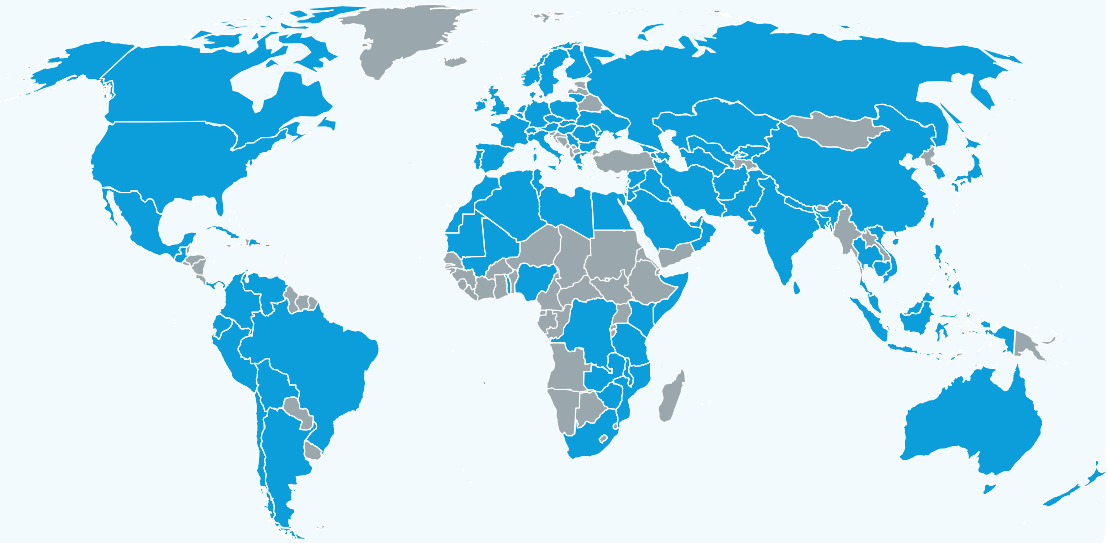
1,400 visits to the NWFZs Hub

27,000 searches on the Document Depository

TOP REFERRAL SITES

1. google
2. bing
3. chatgpt.com
4. viimes.org
5. nonproliferation.org
6. ecosia.org
7. m.facebook.com
8. Unjobs.org
9. X (Twitter)
10. Perplexity.ai

COUNTRY ENGAGEMENT



* Figures as of 1 May 2026

Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Trends in the Middle East: Report of the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project (2023–2026)

Despite significant obstacles that have delayed the establishment of the Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the Middle East, it remains the only multilateral and comprehensive effort to address the threat of WMD in the region. The need for such a Zone has only grown over recent years as WMD-related threats in the region have increased in complexity and as regional security dynamics have become more volatile than ever before.

This report summarises the main activities of UNIDIR's Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project between 2023 and 2026 and highlights key takeaways from the project's observation of political processes, research and dialogue. It offers valuable insights into nonproliferation trends in the Middle East and into the strategies to support and promote the Zone initiative. The report outlines the project's key objectives and how its activities were adapted to the evolving regional and international environment; provides a detailed description of the project's main activities and workstreams and their outputs; and highlights the array of other support that the project provides to stakeholders, from analysis and dialogue to training and substantial assistance for the establishment of the Zone.

The report's substantive findings will provide important insights for decision makers as they adopt policy solutions to existing challenges.

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