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## A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East: History, Challenges, and Possible Steps Forward\*

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### Abstract

The efforts of the international community to free the Middle East from weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) date back five decades ago. This process was initiated with Iran's proposal in 1974 and has not yet achieved its goals after almost five decades. The main question in this article is how to achieve a WMD Free Zone in the form of a regional arms control and disarmament regime in the Middle East. The answer is formed in the form of the hypothesis that despite the presence of Israel as the only possessor of nuclear weapons in the region and uncertainties about Iran's nuclear program, reaching a WMD-free zone will not be far from reach. Using the theoretical framework of international regimes, in this article the possible actions needed to create a WMD Free Zone will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Arms Control, Confidence Building, Disarmament, JCPOA, Security Dialogue

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## 1. Introduction

The initiative to free the Middle East from nuclear weapons (ME NWFZ) dates back five decades ago. In 1974, concerns were growing in the region regarding Israel's nuclear weapon program and its use against Egypt during the October 1973 conflict<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, Iran has officially proposed the concept of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East in a joint resolution in the UN General Assembly. This initiative was backed by Egypt and the UN General Assembly, which passed a resolution to prevent an arms race in the Middle East zone (UN, 1974). The 1995 resolution demands all Middle Eastern countries to adhere to the NPT treaty. It also demands that they put all their activities under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and refrain from developing, producing, manufacturing, or otherwise acquiring nuclear weapons to establish a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East. Moreover, it emphasizes that a nuclear-weapon-free Zone in the Middle East “would greatly enhance international peace and security”.

In 1990, when Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran and its own Kurdish regions, Egypt proposed the initiative to free the Middle East from nuclear weapons and other WMDs (chemical and biological weapons) at the disarmament conference (Lewis & Potter, 2011). The UN Security Council also evaluated the destruction of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons as a step toward implementing a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (ME NWFZ) (Adel et al., 2004).

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1. Resolutions Adopted by the General Assembly during its Twenty-Ninth Session, A/RES/3263. (XXIX), Establishment of a nuclear weapon free zone in the region of the Middle East, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/738/65/IMG/NR073865.pdf?OpenElement>

In 1991, the Madrid Peace Conference established the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRC) to complement bilateral negotiations between Israel and its neighbors. This group aimed to enhance regional security through discussions on practical and confidence-building measures (CBMs) in the region (Jones, 1997). Negotiations were officially launched in Moscow in 1992, leading to the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty in 1994. However, these negotiations failed due to profound disagreements over the goals of the process.

The failure of the ACRC negotiations contributed to adopting the so-called ME WMDFZ resolution at the NPT Review and Extension Conference in 1995. The 1995 Review Conference, which was responsible for reviewing the implementation of the treaty and making decisions in this regard, relied on Article 10, Paragraph 2, “whether the treaty will be extended for a specified period or indefinitely”, to adopt a resolution on the Middle East that inextricably linked the indefinite extension of the treaty to “maximum efforts” to establish a WMD-free Middle East (UN, 1995). The 1995 resolution:

[...] calls upon all States in the Middle East to take practical steps in appropriate forums aimed at making progress towards, inter alia, the establishment of an effectively verifiable Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological, and their delivery systems, and to refrain from taking any measures that preclude the achievement of this objective; ... [It] Calls upon all States party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and in particular the nuclear-weapon States, to extend their cooperation and to exert their utmost efforts with a view to ensuring the early establishment by regional parties of a Middle East zone free of

nuclear and all other weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems.

This resolution was supported by the nuclear-weapon states (NWSs) and provided a legal framework to continue the process of a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East (Rauf, 2021). The next step was taken in the 2010 Review Conference when a 64-step action plan, including measures to completely implement the 1995 resolution on the Middle East was proposed. One of the important measures emphasized in the conference, in which all Middle Eastern countries were present, was to establish a ME WMDFZ in 2012:

[to] convene a conference in 2012, to be attended by all states of the Middle East, on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by the states of the region, and with the full support and engagement of the nuclear-weapon states (UN, 2010).

The states also agreed on appointing a facilitator with a mandate to support the implementation of the 1995 resolution, conduct consultations with the regional states, and make preparations for the 2012 conference. After years of inactivity, the proposed 2012 conference was an exceptional opportunity to improve the regional security environment in the Middle East through arms control and disarmament. However, it was postponed in November 2012 based on the US statement, which declared “the unready conditions in the Middle East and the existence of profound differences between the states of the region” (Nuland, 2012). The US government emphasized that this dispute can only be resolved through a direct agreement between the states of the region and that foreign governments cannot impose a trend on the region. The US’s refusal

to support the conference revealed its concern about Israel and the possibility of its isolation and placement under pressure in the region. This concern was evident in the statements of US officials after the adoption of the final document of the 2010 Review Conference:

The US will not permit a conference or actions that could jeopardize Israel's national security, We will not accept any approach that singles out Israel or sets unrealistic expectations. The long-standing position of the US on peace and security of the Middle East, including its unshakeable ironclad commitment to Israel's security, has remained unchanged (Jones, 2011).

The postponement of the 2012 conference, its uncertain holding time, and Egypt's withdrawal from the 2013 preparatory committee in protest of the US decision led to the failure of the 2015 Review Conference. The US criticized Egypt for its non-practical proposals. On the other hand, the US was criticized for supporting Israel (Ravid, 2015). According to Israeli media reports, the US support for Israel was an important cause of the failure of the 2015 conference (The Guardian, 2015):

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked the then Secretary of State John Kerry for preventing a Middle East resolution that singled out Israel and ignored its security interests and threats posed by growing turmoil in the Middle East.

Three years later, in December 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted a new resolution based on the draft resolution of the Arab countries, according to which the UN Secretary-General was to hold annual conferences on establishing a ME WMDFZ from 2019

until the goal is achieved. The first session of the conference was held by Sima Bahous, the representative of Jordan in the UN, with the presence of all 22 member states of the Arab League, Iran, and four NWSs (China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom). At the end of the 2019 conference, in a final statement, she emphasized the commitment of the participating states to pursue “a legally binding treaty to establish a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and other WMDs based on a freely reached consensus of the states of the region“, and all the states of the region were invited to join it (UN, 2019).

The second conference session was scheduled to be held from November 16 to 20, 2020, at the UN headquarters in New York. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the conferences and meetings of the UN, the 2021 conference on establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMDs was held under Kuwait’s presidency. The conference emphasized the commitment “to make efforts to move the process forward in an open and all-encompassing manner”. Egypt recognized an open negotiation space and “a chance for every nation to express their views”, and the Iranian delegation supported “the adoption of several decisions in this conference session, including the approval of the internal regulations and the creation of a working committee for the inter-sessional process that supported the effective and efficient process of the conference” (UN, 2021).

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

International regimes are the continuation of liberal and neoliberal institutionalism, whose roots may be found in convergence, interdependence as well as functionalism. The theory of regimes is

a theory in international relations, which is learned from the liberal tradition in international relations; argues that international institutions or regimes influence the behavior of governments. International institutions are mostly created to cause stability and order at the regional and international levels. This theory is based on three following principles: First, they are created by world powers, but over time, they create a procedure for themselves and they are also presented as actors alongside the governments. Secondly, as mechanisms for cooperation between States, they foster trust and security and contribute to the stability of the international system. Third, regimes change with different factors, the most important of which is power. In fact, the stability of the international system and the changes that occur in it form the main center of the theory of regimes. According to this theory, the creation of such regimes does not guarantee the end of the conflict by itself, but rather shows the desire to develop (Asgarkhani, 1383 [2002 A.D.], p. 171). It is a regional way of dealing with disputes through the creation of mechanisms that provide alternatives to conflict. In other words, governments in a particular region have agreed to adhere to a set of norms regarding their relations with each other to resolve their differences without resorting to threats or violence (Keyvan Hosseini, 1389 [2010 A.D.]).

### **3. Disagreement on the Nuclear Order of the Region**

#### **3. 1. Israel**

As the only possessor of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, Israel is one of the most important obstacles to the ME WMDFZ. It has long maintained the “nuclear ambiguity” policy regarding its nuclear arsenal. Its authorities have neither confirmed nor denied

the existence of nuclear weapons; they have only announced that they will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the Near East (Cohen, 1999).

In fact, Israel's non-membership in the NPT treaty and its refusal to place its nuclear facilities under the safeguards of the IAEA are considered among the most challenging regional issues that caused the treaty members to explicitly call for Israel's membership in the treaty in the 2000 Review Conference. However, Israel has considered any disarmament deal conditional on peace negotiations, arguing that genuine disarmament action in the region should be carried out through a step-by-step process beginning with CBMs and mutual recognition.

Although Israel has officially accepted the ME WMDFZ establishment as a long-term goal, it has refrained from participating in any arms control or regional disarmament processes that might undermine its deterrence capacity against regional threats (Lewis, 2014). Therefore, it has called for a conference that addresses all regional security issues and establishes a "comprehensive peace" between Israel and its regional rivals (Bahgat, 2015). On the other hand, Iran and the Arab countries, led by Egypt, have opposing views toward Israel. They argue that Israel's nuclear weapons are a serious threat to the security of the Middle East (IAEA, 2010) and there will be no stability in the Middle East as long as this process continues. They consider establishing a WMDFZ as the only solution to this issue and argue that Israeli nuclear disarmament must precede peace and normalization (Foradori & Malin, 2012). Therefore, the ME WMDFZ seems stuck in a chicken and egg situation. On the one hand, Israel argues that regional security must be developed before the establishment of WMDFZ. On the other hand, Arab countries



and Iran argue that regional security is impossible without WMDFZ (Finaud, 2013).

In addition, the US's strong political support for Israel's nuclear program has helped Israel maintain its nuclear program and continue its policy of nuclear ambiguity. This ambivalent behavior toward Israel has exacerbated the mistrust and negative feelings of the Arab countries. These feelings have an undeniably high impact because they deteriorate the undermined relations between the Middle Eastern countries and make it less likely to reach a constructive interaction on various issues, including mass destruction.

### **3. 2. Iran**

The Iranian government has always held the position that establishing a WMDFZ in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East zone is a favorable and beneficial goal to achieve for improving its national security as well as regional security. However, the perceived threat of Iran's WMDs has strained relations with neighboring countries (Bino et al., 2022). This threat perception can increase military instability or investments in a nuclear envelope by Middle Eastern countries.

In the past decade, the primary justification for the increasing militarization of the region was the threat that Iran had made to its neighbors, especially the member states of the GCC led by Saudi Arabia. This threat includes the following:

Iran's ability in nuclear, chemical, and biological technology, along with its self-sufficiency in terms of defense and missiles, is considered a serious threat by the Middle Eastern Arab countries.

Another important point is its great influence in the Islamic world and Arab countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon, and Palestine. This regional influence is the primary concern of the GCC (Mousavian & Kiyaei, 2020). For instance, Iran's support for Hezbollah helped this militant group build a powerful political and military organization and curb the influence of Lebanese parties close to Riyadh. In Syria, Hezbollah and other Iranian-supported groups supported Bashar al-Assad's regime, helping him remain in power and protecting his country politically outside the Saudi-dominated Arab world. The events in Yemen, in particular, have strengthened the Saudis' understanding of Iran's blockade.

Iran's nuclear program is another factor deteriorating the relations between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Saudis have expressed concerns about Iran's nuclear research. An emerging arsenal can possibly further Tehran's regional ambitions.

Since the beginning of Iran's nuclear program, Tehran has accused most of the GCC member states of supporting the pressures and sanctions of the international community against Iran. Saudi Arabia has also played an active role in this regard and demanded greater pressure on Iran and its isolation in an attempt to destroy its economy. It even supported the coercive efforts of the US to control Iran (Habibi, 2010). Most of the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, believed that the nuclear agreement would strengthen Iran's position in the region, and argued that Tehran would have an advantage in its relations with the Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, the reduction of economic sanctions and the renewed efforts of the international community to interact with Iran, as well as the economic benefits of the nuclear agreement, cause Tehran to provide the resources needed to support its proxy

forces in the region, namely the Syrian government, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen (Naylor, 2015).

### 3. 3. Arab States

The growing interest in nuclear technology in the Middle East, coupled with uncertainty about nuclear activities in Iran and Israel, has raised concerns about the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region. Nuclear power is expected to expand in the Middle East in the coming decade. In 2021, the United Arab Emirates became the second country in the region (after Iran) to operate a nuclear power reactor. Now the fourth reactor of the UAE is under construction. Egypt is following the UAE, and has recently begun the construction of a four-unit nuclear reactor based on Russian technology. In addition, Jordan and Saudi Arabia have committed to programs that focus on small reactors for uranium mining. Over the past two decades, Saudi Arabia has shown interest in nuclear energy and has sought cooperation with major exporters of nuclear energy technology. Recent updates on the Saudi nuclear project show progress in developing human resources, regulatory frameworks and preliminary studies for nuclear energy projects (Albalawi, 2023).

However, the country has no significant infrastructure related to nuclear weapons, not even a research reactor. Speculations about Saudi Arabia's intention to develop its nuclear program are based on three observations. First, Saudi Arabia refuses to follow the "golden standard" of the UAE by signing the 123 agreement and regardless of the right to enrich uranium. As part of its non-proliferation policy, the United States requires its partners to sign the agreement in exchange for nuclear technology and materials

needed for nuclear power projects. The reluctance of Saudi Arabia to sign this agreement can be an important sign in this regard.

Second, the 2020 report on the secret cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in uranium mining drew the world's attention to the activities of the Saudis. Saudi Arabia's ambitions to develop its own nuclear fuel for peaceful and commercial purposes have since been no secret to the international arena.

Finally, Saudi Arabia has yet to sign the IAEA's Additional Protocol, which would allow the agency to investigate undeclared nuclear activities. None of these observations prove that Saudi Arabia is attempting to construct a nuclear bomb. In the absence of technical expertise and basic nuclear infrastructure, Saudi Arabia is far from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, due to the development of Iran's nuclear program and pessimism towards the security guarantees of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Arab countries of the region can set their goal for long-term nuclear deterrence. According to the hedging theory, countries such as Saudi Arabia will pursue nuclear weapons if the allies' security guarantees are lost. However, a strong and comprehensive zone free of weapons of mass destruction can be presented as the best solution to address these concerns. It will certainly be difficult to find a way to bring Israel into such a zone. However, other countries in the region and other interested parties - including the United States, Russia, and China - should look for a way to at least start a dialogue with Israel about nuclear proliferation in the region (Albalawi, 2023).

### **3. 4. Mistrust**

Middle Eastern countries' efforts to develop WMDs result from

their great mistrust toward the intentions of their neighbors, a mistrust that has roots in the ongoing conflicts in the region. The Middle East has long been known as one of the most unstable regions in the world and, indeed, the only region where WMDs were used after the Second World War. Egypt's use of chemical weapons against Yemen in the Middle East conflict in the mid-1960s, Iraq's use of them against its Kurdish population and Iran in 1980, and the Assad regime's use against its opponents are instances of using WMDs in the Middle East (Bahgat, 2007). This instability in the Middle East has resulted from ongoing tensions and conflicts in the region, the variety of political tensions between the Middle Eastern countries, and the development of different alliances. In the past years, Iran's alliance with its proxy countries and groups under the name of resistance in the region, on the one hand, and the coalition of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to stand against the influence and threat of Iran, on the other, have increased the conflicts and proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen (Barzegar, 2018). In fact, severe mistrust and opposing priorities have postponed efforts to deal with arms control and more fundamental political issues (e.g., resolving past conflicts and establishing diplomatic relations).

#### **4. Possible Steps Forward**

##### **4. 1. Security-Related Negotiations in the Middle East**

Since effective arms control follows political relations and is dependent on a broader security environment, special measures taken by the Middle Eastern states can improve regional security. However, the region ultimately needs a multilateral, regional security process to address the intentions of countries and security-

related vulnerabilities in the region. Examining the history of successful examples of WMD-free zones reveals that when the countries of the region value common security regarding nuclear issues and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the probability of creating such zones increases. In fact, the formation of a WMD-free zone is a regional measure of non-proliferation and security, which includes mandatory regulations for regional disarmament, compliance and verification mechanisms, and negative security against the use of nuclear weapons. As a result, the expansion of regional institutions and Regional cooperation is one of the main conditions for creating a WMD-free zone (Lacovsky, 2021). The recent developments in the Middle East regarding the resumption of relations between the Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia with Iran and Syria after almost a decade of tension can give hope for the start of security talks in the Middle East. This agreement can also help open doors for security dialogue between the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Iraq. Some of the smaller Gulf Arab states were already hesitant to expand their engagement with Tehran if Riyadh did not mend relations first; as a result, the deal opens the door to broader discussions. This agreement may have a beneficial effect on the war in Yemen and even in other arenas over time.

Based on this, considering the key position of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the West Asian region and the mutual interests of the parties in the improvement and development of relations, it is expected that if the two sides successfully manage and advance the process of normalization and improvement of relations, they will soon see a solution, which could mark an end to the season of chronic problems in the region, including the political-economic crisis in Lebanon, the war in Yemen, and governance problems in Syria.

The increase in diplomatic exchanges between regional actors, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia as two regional powers, has revived an old idea based on dialogue. "Dialogue and Cooperation Assembly" is a plan that the Islamic Republic of Iran proposed after the formation of an agreement with Riyadh and its implementation in the form of a return to bilateral relations, and its details are supposed to be finalized in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Muscat, and be sent to Kuwait, Manama and Baghdad (Esfandiary & Wimmen, 2023).

This plan, if successful, can bring the region into a period of reconciliation and cooperation based on emerging variables after decades of tension and escalation of crisis. Although this idea is old and Iran has unveiled such plans many times before, the new situation of the region seems influential after extensive de-escalation between competing actors, the prominence of the element of economy and trade, the preference of statesmen to adopt diplomatic solutions and the emergence of solution horizons. Politically, the issue has provided a new space for planning and promoting this idea. The idea of the Islamic Republic of Iran for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf has a long history, and over the past few decades, various plans have been proposed, including the regional dialogue forum, the Hormuz peace plan, and collective security. Even paragraph eight of Resolution 598 approved in 1367 asks Iran, Iraq, and the regional parties to consider good office efforts to resolve disputes, the clause on which the UN Secretary General's initiative to hold a meeting of foreign ministers of eight coastal countries is based.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> government, the Islamic Republic of Iran presented its plan and idea to form a forum for dialogue and cooperation based on four levels:

First level: Bilateral relations at this level seek to restore relations to the former track by reopening embassies and consulates, intensifying diplomatic visits, developing economic relations and strengthening the tourism dimension.

Second level: Regional relations, where Iran hopes to create a more favorable atmosphere for cooperation and consensus at the regional level by strengthening relations at the bilateral level. The political solution to the crises in the Middle East, including in Syria and Yemen, and the need to have a strong region to deal with emerging challenges are the main issues upon which agreements may be made by other actors.

Third level: Institution building in the region. From a joint meeting to the formation of a dialogue forum and finally becoming a regional organization that can discuss the issues and dilemmas of the region at a higher level while providing a partial solution to the issues, this level of the plan can also create an executive guarantee.

Fourth level: The development of collective security with new arrangements is the maximum expectation from a regional organization, similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which after 20 years of security talks after the 1973 Helsinki Conference, was able to lead to the formation of this organization in 1994 (Karami, 1402 [2023 A.D.]).

The final document of the Helsinki Accords included three “baskets” covering a wide range of issues to enhance security and cooperation. Basket-I included CBMs measures to ensure international security and increase military transparency in the region (Kaye, 2022). Basket II covered economic, scientific, technological, and environmental cooperation and dealt with subjects including migrant labor, vocational training, and tourism promotion. Finally, Basket III was devoted to cooperation in



humanitarian fields such as freer movement of people, human contacts, freedom of information, safe working conditions for journalists, and cultural and educational exchanges, known as the “Human Dimension” (Lewis & Kamel, 2014).

Following the Helsinki Accords, the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference adopted a broad approach to regional security by creating a series of multilateral working groups concerning water, refugees, the environment, economic development, and arms control. It created two parallel negotiating tracks (i.e., bilateral and multilateral) to address a set of unsolvable problems and simultaneously build trust and positive relations among Middle Eastern countries (Jentleson & Kaye, 1998). The negotiations formally began in January 1992 in Moscow and led to the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty in 1994.

The Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) negotiations were established by the Madrid Peace Conference as one of the multilateral working groups. It has had significant progress, including the full text of the Prevention of Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) Agreement and a plan to establish regional security centers, and exchange information before military maneuvers until the negotiations broke down in 1995. This failure was primarily due to the ACRS’s conflicting views on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation – “first peace then disarmament” or “first disarmament then peace” (Erästö, 2020). However, the short-term history of the only formal multilateral security experiment to date in the Middle East (the ACRS Working Group of the Arab-Israeli multilateral peace process) suggests that such a process can be established in the region and improve its security. Nevertheless, any future negotiations to establish a ME WMD-FZ must begin with changes to make them different from the 1990 negotiations.

One of the problems of the ACRS Working Group was related to its composition. The ACRS was part of the Middle East peace process, but Iran, Iraq, and Libya were not invited to participate. Furthermore, among the Arab countries directly involved in the peace process, both Lebanon and Syria announced that they would not participate in multilateral groups until their bilateral negotiations with Israel came to fruition. This lack of participation significantly impacted the working group's ability to address regional security issues in a serious and constructive manner, as it was impossible to imagine how a WMDFZ discussion could come to fruition without the participation of Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria – i.e., countries that were suspected of mass destruction activities during that period of time (Sipri, 2011).

The second problem was that ACRS used the discussion of regional security as an element of the Arab-Israeli peace process, whereas the discussion of regional security and arms control should not be part of the Arab-Israeli peace process. To solve its security challenges, the Middle East needs to have a dialogue on the subject of regional security for its own sake, not as an offshoot of the peace process (Jones, 2010).

Third, arms control cannot occur in a vacuum; without efforts to establish a regional political and security order, it is impossible to achieve arms control. This establishment may require a creative approach at first. For example, it may not be possible to contact the representatives of some states, but a semi-formal approach may allow at least preliminary discussions to proceed (Fisher, 2005). Thus, any substitute to ACRS must have a structure that recognizes the very different relationship between arms control and security issues. Simply put, developing a new approach or system for regional dialogue and cooperation provides the basis for successful

arms control. It is, therefore, necessary to emphasize first a regional cooperation and security system and then an arms control plan.

#### **4. 2. Confidence-Building Measures**

What the Middle East needs most is confidence-building. To establish the ME WMDFZ, regional actors must first develop a common understanding of security among themselves and overcome the mistrust that prevents the establishment of regional security institutions. CBMs are aimed at gradual confidence-building by addressing “softer” issues, thereby allowing the parties to discuss more complex and divisive issues over time (Krepon et al., 1993).

CBMs are a potentially important tool for reducing tensions. By definition, they are intended to make all parties confident that the security of neither party would be jeopardized. Over time, and as part of a broader process, these measures foster transparency, communication, and confidence that can help transform adversarial relationships into friendly ones.

The unique security challenges facing the Middle East, the level of mistrust among the Middle Eastern countries, and the scope of a WMDFZ require extensive, innovative, and regionally-tailored CBMs. As a starting point, social and humanitarian CBMs are often known as measures to initiate discussions among countries. A collective discussion on a regional health-related rapid response strategy can create important common grounds for future crises. In addition, the growing global attention to climate challenges provides an opportunity for Middle Eastern countries to initiate dialogues and accept their own commitments for joint cooperation

on these issues (Stang, 2016). Energy diplomacy and issues related to maritime security are other measures that can be used at the beginning of regional dialogues.

Considering the sensitivity and complexity of the issues of arms control and disarmament in the Middle East, we need to address them by starting with measures that improve the security environment of the Middle East. The joining of all the Middle Eastern countries to conventions on the non-proliferation of WMDs (e.g., CWC and BWC) can improve the Middle East security environment. For instance, Israel is unlikely to join the NPT or abandon its policy of nuclear ambiguity. However, it could take other arms control measures, such as ratifying the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and joining the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) (Carlson 2020). Moreover, since it is impossible to separate nuclear arms control from other WMDs in the Middle East, we need a comprehensive approach for arms control to be a serious effort in the region. Although Egypt pioneered ME WMDFZ efforts, it has signed neither the CWC nor the IAEA's Additional Protocol. Moreover, it has not approved the treaties that it has already signed, such as the BWC, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (ANWFZ), also known as the Pelindaba Treaty. As mentioned above, restoring the JCPOA could provide an opportunity for bilateral, subregional, and regional dialogues on conventional arms control to reduce tensions between Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, thereby allowing them to focus on other issues. Although resolving the current challenges of nuclear proliferation, like Iran's nuclear program, does not depend on creating new regional security structures, the US and its Western allies' strong political support for such processes can create a more favorable regional space for regional actors

#### **4. 3. The Role of JCPOA in the Formation of Regional Dialogue**

In the past two decades, the greatest concern regarding the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East zone has been related to Iran's nuclear program. Although Iranian officials have repeatedly asserted that Iran's nuclear program is aimed at the peaceful use of nuclear energy, the international community is deeply suspicious of this country's nuclear program (Nephew & Inhorn, 2016). As concerns over the proliferation of nuclear weapons increased, negotiations to limit Iran's nuclear program began in 2003. As a result, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the 5+1 group came to fruition.

The JCPOA focused on the most important strategic concern of the international community, i.e., controlling Iran's nuclear program. These powers had other concerns about Iran as well, especially about its missile program and growing power in the region. Nevertheless, they all agreed that the most severe danger Iran can have to international peace and security is manufacturing nuclear weapons. As Trump rose to power, the US took a different approach, arguing that Iran would back down more than ever before under economic pressure in its nuclear program and other issues (International Crisis Group, 2018).

The Trump administration did not accept the JCPOA as a mechanism to deal with Iran's nuclear program and adopted a unilateral policy of "maximum pressure". They assumed that the imposition of back-breaking economic sanctions would force Iran to renegotiate the nuclear agreement in favor of the US and give concessions concerning the use of ballistic missiles and exertion of regional influence (White House, 2018). However, Iran responded to the maximum pressure policy with its own three-dimensional campaign: It gradually violated the nuclear agreement, pursued the

development of ballistic missiles, and reacted directly or through its network of allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to the pressure of the US and its allies in the region, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia (International Crisis Group, 2021). This reaction caused the Trump administration to reach a completely different result; it failed to achieve a better agreement than it had promised, that is, reduce Iran's capabilities that it had predicted, or change the regime that it had hoped for.

The strategy adopted by the US, based only on "maximum pressure", only led to the escalation of nuclear tensions, dangerous regional wars, and economic deprivation for the Iranian people. The legacy of this strategic error can be measured today in the tons of enriched uranium that Iran has amassed, including the uranium enriched to near-weapons-grade levels spinning in thousands of advanced centrifuges. The Biden administration correctly identified the mutual return of the US and Iran to their respective obligations under the 2015 agreement as an essential course correction (International Crisis Group, 2022). A noteworthy point in this regard is that establishing a ME WMDFZ requires measures to increase transparency and verification in the conventional and peaceful uses of nuclear, biological, and chemical technologies throughout the region. According to Yukiya Amano, the late Director General of the IAEA, the JCPOA has "the strongest verification system in the world" (IAEA, 2016) and can be considered a CBM in the region, increasing the transparency of Iran's nuclear program. Moreover, the renewal of the JCPOA can make it possible for bilateral and regional talks on conventional arms control to reduce tensions between Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, thereby allowing them to focus on other issues.

#### **4. 4. Possible Lessons to be Drawn from the Experience of Previous Regions**

Domestic and international political changes should be considered as an opportunity. Major domestic and foreign political changes often provide catalysts or triggers that can be used to promote policy innovation, including the pursuit of nuclear-weapon-free zones. This phenomenon started in Argentina and Brazil with the fall of the military governments and the reorientation towards the internationalization of the countries' economies, which began in 1967.

The presence of nuclear weapon states stationed in a region should not delay the efforts of other countries in the region to pursue discussions on the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone. In fact, the first step in this process may not be bringing Israel to the negotiating table, but opening serious dialogues between Iran and the Arab countries and creating a parallel path to discuss other security issues and concerns (Lewis & Potter, 2011).

Some observers believe that it is not possible to create nuclear-weapon-free zones in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia due to the characteristics of stable and bitter competition with a nuclear nature. A successful example, however, is the Tlatulco Treaty, which covers a region that was fraught with conflict at the time of negotiation and included nuclear rivals Argentina and Brazil. Although the intensity of conflict in Latin America was much lower than in the Middle East and South Asia, and did not involve religious issues, in fact, during the negotiations of the Treaty of Palindaba, several participating African countries were engaged in full-scale hostilities, but this did not prevent the conclusion of a weapons-free zone. Moreover, most regional regimes initially consisted of only a select few states in the region

and gradually expanded over time. However, a successful regional security regime does not start by permanently excluding certain countries or viewpoints. Instead, it adopts an inclusive approach to membership, allowing new members to join when they demonstrate their willingness to adhere to the established regional norms set by existing regime members (Preez & Parrish, 2006). Another point about security regimes, is that they often start modestly and evolve over time, both shaping and being shaped by events. Obviously, a change in fundamental views takes time, especially in cases where hostilities are deep and long-standing. Furthermore, the success of such a process cannot be guaranteed. Decades of mistrust cannot be expected to disappear overnight.

## 5. Conclusion

Establishing a WMDFZ is a regional approach to strengthen non-proliferation and international disarmament, and consolidate international efforts toward peace and security. Iran and Egypt officially proposed the idea of ME WMDFZ in the UN General Assembly about 50 years ago. Since then, diplomatic relations have gone through many ups and downs.

There is a common perception that regional cooperation is beyond the capabilities of the Middle Eastern countries due to ideological and religious conflicts, mistrust, efforts to get WMDs, the arms race, and the use of chemical weapons. Furthermore, the specific dynamics of Israel's strategic relations with its neighbors, the challenges of Iran's nuclear program, and the desire of most Middle Eastern countries to adopt independent security policies by increasing their military capabilities, have all challenged the prospect of establishing a ME WMDFZ.



Currently, the countries of the region do not believe that they can improve their security by establishing regional regimes or institutions. In fact, such frameworks have not yet been established in the region. The Arab countries of the region depend on the security guarantees of America to ensure their security. On the other hand, Iran is trying to improve its security with self-reliance. In creating an efficient mechanism for building a security regime in the Middle East, elements that facilitate a shift from viewing security as a zero-sum game and creating win-win situations for all states in the region should be emphasized. This requires the creation of a security regime, in which regional governments take significant steps to counter the pressures that led to the development of these weapons in the first place. The agenda is much broader than weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, developing a mechanism that can bring Middle Eastern countries back to the negotiation table would be very useful. Creating regional dialogues can therefore be helpful in this regard. The experience of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 brought together almost all parties and initiated bilateral dialogues between Israel and all its neighbors. This conference created a multilateral track to address regional and economic development, arms control, refugee affairs, water, and the environment and can be helpful in the progress of this process.

To develop an efficient mechanism for a Helsinki-like conference in the Middle East, we need to emphasize elements that facilitate the shift from viewing security as a zero-sum game and result in win-win situations for all states in the Middle East.

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