

ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief
Security Council
Weapons of Mass Destruction
In The Middle East
Cody Zimmerman



Introduction

The Middle East is one of the most unstable, violent regions in the world. Religious strife, ethnic tensions, and strategic competition between both countries in the region and those abroad, combined with modern military capabilities that are somewhat lacking in other conflict-prone regions, make the Middle East quite dangerous. Many countries in the region have at least a minor weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) capability, be it nuclear, biological, chemical, or some combination thereof, and some have in the past shown a willingness to use them. As a result, the issue of WMDs in the Middle East is an important one in the realm of international security.

But solutions are not obvious. Most countries in the region agree the greatest danger of nuclear weapons there comes from Israel, and to a lesser degree from the aggressive actions of the United States. Their priorities are first to press Israel to sign the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and abandon its nuclear weapons, and second to persuade other nuclear powers to keep their nuclear capabilities out of the region. This perspective is led by Egypt, which makes Israel de-nuclearization the basic goal of its security policy, with support for all Arab League (AL) members and much of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Countries outside the region often stress the risks of proliferation among other Middle East countries, especially Iran and to a lesser extent Syria, as well as more distant possibilities like Saudi Arabia.

The most promising approach to solving all these issues may be a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ). Israel—with support from the United States and Micronesia—demands diplomatic recognition and an end to hostilities with Arab countries first. Arab countries insist that Israeli nuclear disarmament come first. Syria also seeks recovery of the Golan Heights as a precondition. Other Arab countries and Iran demand resolution of the Palestinian problem before making any other deal with Israel.

Israel

Israel is believed to be the only country in the Middle East with a nuclear weapons capability, although it has never officially confirmed this. It is commonly estimated to have 100-200 nuclear weapons, deliverable by ballistic missiles and aircraft, and possibly including thermonuclear weapons. Its one source of highly enriched uranium was its nuclear complex at Dimona, which has been shut down for several years. Israel has not signed the NPT, but it did sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996.

Isolated in the UN, Israel relies here on American support. In the Security Council, the United States vetoes resolutions aimed specifically against the Israeli nuclear program. In the General Assembly, though, the one-state one-vote principle makes such protection harder. Criticizing Israel is one of the few issues that most the Non-Aligned Movement can reliably agree on.

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Iran

Iran has not tested nuclear weapons and still appears to be a few years from having enough fissile material to make a bomb. It has a large nuclear development program under way, stressing a complete nuclear fuel-cycle, enabling it to make highly enriched uranium (HEU). Ostensibly for civilian power generation, HEU also can be used for weapons making. Its enrichment facility at Natanz has been the center of international disputes.

Iran ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970, and signed the Additional Protocols for international inspection in 2003, though it has not ratified this document. In 2005, Iran was found by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and UN Security Council to be non-compliant with the NPT, having failed to divulge all the required information about its nuclear program to the IAEA, and was subsequently referred to the Security Council. Iran argues that it has the right to domestically enrich uranium for its nuclear energy program under the NPT, while critics, like the United States and members of the European Union, argue that Iran's lack of transparency on the matter calls into question its intentions, and that its non-compliance precludes its right to enrichment until it is found to be compliant once again. The Security Council has approved limited sanctions against Iran, but their effect is unclear. Russia continues to sell conventional military equipment and China is dependent on Iranian oil exports.

Syria

In October 2007 Syria became part of the international nuclear proliferation agenda when a small reactor under construction in the east of the country was destroyed in an Israeli air raid. This reportedly was a North Korean-designed reactor optimized for production of bomb-grade plutonium. Syria denies it was a nuclear site and insists its nuclear activities are entirely civilian, permitted under the NPT, which it signed in 1969. Syria also is widely believed to have a substantial biological and chemical weapons capability.

Incentives and Consequences

The primary reason for any state to acquire WMDs is national security, Israel being the prime example. Almost since its inception in 1948, Israel has been at war with one neighbor or another, or under the threat of war. Moreover, while Israel's military is the most advanced and sophisticated in the region, it has traditionally been lacking in numbers. WMDs are a cost-effective way to make up for a manpower deficit, especially if their deterrent effect prevents a war from even happening. However, while Israel has never confirmed the existence of its nuclear arsenal, the widespread belief that it has one has had a negative effect on relations in the region, diminishing trust in a region that is

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already sorely lacking in it. Furthermore, Arab states and Iran perceive a double standard when great powers in the West criticize their WMD capabilities, but tolerate Israel's.

On another strategic axis, unrelated to Israel, there is a widespread feeling of solidarity among the Arabs of the Middle East, often referred to as Pan-Arabism. Paradoxically, this solidarity has led some national leaders to compete with each other to be the champions of the Arab world, as President Nasser of Egypt was widely hailed in the 1960's. WMDs have served as a means to strengthening a country's regional and global influence in order to don this mantle. Entering into this fray of Arab competition, moreover, are the sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. For example, Iran, a predominantly Shi'ite country, has ramped up tensions with its Sunni neighbors, like Saudi Arabia, by pursuing its nuclear program. To complicate matters even more, Iran is not an ethnically Arab nation, but Persian, which creates yet another line of division between states in the Middle East. So much so, in fact, that Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and several other Arab countries have announced a resumption of previously dormant nuclear technology programs, likely in response to Iran's growing capabilities.

UN Action

In 1974, Iran and Egypt proposed establishing a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East, a multilateral agreement among nations in the region to abstain from developing nuclear weapons, during a session of the General Assembly. Since then, the GA has adopted a resolution expressing support for a NWFZ in the Middle East every year. NWFZs had been and have since been successfully established in other regions, including Latin America, the South Pacific, and Africa, to name but a few. In 1988, the NWFZ resolution also called for a comprehensive study under the directive of the Secretary-General to research verification and inspection measures required to implement the NWFZ. The International Atomic Energy Agency conducted a similar study as well. The study found that more stringent measures than those prescribed by the NPT would be required to establish and maintain a NWFZ in the Middle East. In 1990, President Mubarak of Egypt proposed a weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East (WMDFZ), which would be pursued in tandem with the NWFZ, a proposal given official political clout during the NPT Review Conference in 1995.

However, while the idea of a NWFZ and WMDFZ in the Middle East has been adopted by consensus by all states in the region, progress towards achieving it has been, and will continue to be stalled by the seething tensions between Israel and its neighbors. Arab anger over the occupied Palestinian territories, Israeli fears for their very survival, and Israel's not-so-ambiguous status as a nuclear power are sticking points that derail the NWFZ and WMDFZ proposals. In the meantime, Arab dissent over Arab WMDs will never be voiced in nor addressed by the GA as long as it is believed that the West is

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imposing and protecting a double-standard by allowing Israel to possess nuclear weapons with no sanctions or censures.

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Recommended Resources

Arms Control Association. "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) at a Glance." Fact sheet, November 2007. <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nwfz>

Lawrence Scheinman. "Summary Report on Meeting on Preconditions for a NWFZ in the Middle East, Milan, Italy, March 13-14 2008." Center for Nonproliferation Studies, June 13, 2008. http://cns.miis.edu/stories/080613_mnsg.htm

James F. Leonard & Jan Prawitz. "The Middle East as a NWFZ or WMDFZ Application." Excerpts from *Pacifica Review* 11, no. 3, Oct. 1999, pg. 263-264. <http://www.isodarco.it/courses/candriai03/paper/candriai03-Prawitz.pdf>

Sammy Salama & Heidi Weber. "The Emerging Arab Response to Iran's Unabated Nuclear Program." Nuclear Threat Initiative, December 2006. http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_83.html

Edith Bursac. "Israel's Nuclear Policies and a NWFZ in the Middle East: How Feasible Is It?" Center for Nonproliferation Studies, November 2006. http://cns.miis.edu/reports/mideast_nwfz.htm

Kurt M. Campbell, Mitchell Reiss, and Robert Einhorn, et al. *The Nuclear Tipping Point*. Brookings Institution Press, 2004. This is a book of country essays, covering the nuclear programs of all the major states of the Middle East, including those just thinking about nuclear options.

Center for Nonproliferation Studies. Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East. WMD Profiles. Excellent website for news and brief articles on regional nuclear issues. Best on country programs, weak on NWFZ proposals. <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wmdme/map.htm>

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Merav Datan. "Nuclear futures for the Middle East: impact on the goal of a WMD-free zone." *Disarmament Forum*, Arms Control in the Middle East (2008), no. 2: pp. 21-32 <http://www.unidir.ch/pdf/articles/pdf-art2728.pdf>