

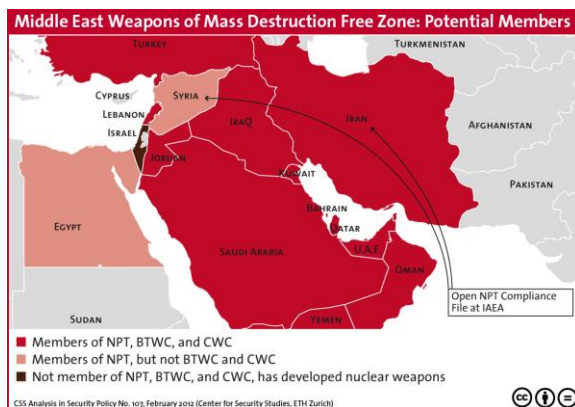


Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East

Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society

Introduction

The proposed Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (MENWFZ) is a longstanding, proposal to prohibit the possession and use of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. An important variation is a proposed Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (MWW MDFZ), which would also involve fully verified prohibitions on biological and chemical weapons capabilities.¹ To its supporters, the resolution would extend the security from the dangers of nuclear war that other regions already enjoy, enhanced by regional Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZ). It would ensure that however bad armed violence is in the region, it could not escalate to the level of outright nuclear genocide.



Regional dangers are growing. Nuclear weapons have been part of Middle East insecurity and instability since the late 1960, when Israel was first to deploy operational nuclear weapons. In the 1973 Middle East, both the Soviet Union and

United States moved nuclear weapons and heightened their alert status, threatening nuclear escalation. The United States continues to base nuclear weapons, B61 air dropped tactical bombs, just outside the region in Turkey. More recently Iran started a large nuclear program with clear military potential, although it has not built actual nuclear weapons. In the past, Iraq, Libya and Syria tried to start nuclear programs but were stopped by outsider intervention or outright attack. Fear that a terrorist groups in the region could acquire nuclear weapons, probably form the arsenal of a state in the region, must be faced continuously. Today other countries in the Middle East are suspected of starting military nuclear programs.

Proposals for a NWFZ in the Middle East, like other regions, are based on the fundamental goal of the UN General Assembly, which is strengthening the universal principles of international relations generally and international peace and security, in particular. Non-use of nuclear weapons is not a universal principle; several UN Member States—including all five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council—currently reserve the right to use nuclear weapons under particular circumstances. While this has never happened since 1945, when the United States used nuclear weapons to kill over 150,000 people in Japan, the possibility of nuclear escalation remains an abiding danger, not least in the Middle East. There is agreement among most UN Member States that a nuclear weapons free zone offers the best insurance against nuclear weapons being used there.

¹ Kelsey Davenport, 'WMD-Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance', *Arms Control Association*,



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How NWFZs Work

The proposal for a MENWFZ has been pushed most aggressively by Arab League and Non-Aligned Member States in the United Nations. It has support from Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific, where UN Member States already established their own regional Nuclear Weapons Free Zones. Some advocates see it as a way to stabilize the entire region. Others support it because it would currently affect only Israel, the only country in the region believed to have nuclear weapons. More recently it has been praised as the best way to suppress a potential nuclear arms race involving both Israel and Iran, which also could eventually extend to other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Since 2017 the proposed MENWFZ gained indirect support from the completion of the *Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW, or the Nuclear Ban Treaty), another initiative in the UN aiming to eliminate the inequality between nuclear haves and have nots.

The strongest argument in favor of a MENWFZ comes from belief that Israeli nuclear capability means other regional actors will become nuclear capable sooner or later. Israel may gain security from having a nuclear monopoly, but its monopoly status is not sustainable. So long as Israel has nuclear weapons, it is inevitable that others will acquire the same. Others stress the importance of keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists, who are most likely to get nuclear weapons or technology from governments in the region.

Several other countries in the region have tried to acquire nuclear weapons in the past, including

Iran, Iraq and Libya. Syria also tried to acquire a nuclear research capability in the early 2000s. The country in the region closest of nuclear weaponization today is Iran.

The greatest evidence of what such a treaty can achieve comes from other regions where comparable treaties are in force. Not only possession of nuclear weapons, but also stationing by foreign powers is illegal in Africa, Latin America, the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, under regional treaties:

- Treaty of Tlatelolco, 1967; The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean
- Treaty of Rarotonga, 1985; The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty
- Treaty of Bangkok, 1995; The Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone
- Treaty of Pelindaba, 1996; The African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty²

All these treaties include pledges by the signatories and verification through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Vienna-based UN agency which monitors and ensures the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Regional NWFZ treaties all require signatories to open all their nuclear facilities—civilian, research and military—to IAEA inspection and safeguarding. The same model could be used in the Middle East, requiring all signatories to open all their nuclear facilities of IAEA inspections, safeguarding and challenge inspections.

² ‘Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones’, *United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs*, n.d., <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/nwzf/>



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Who To Include?

One approach is to follow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) definition of the Middle East region, which comprises the 21 state-members of the Arab League plus Iran and Israel. This is also the definition used in the Draft Final Document of the 2015 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. It differs, however, from more commonly understood definitions of the Middle East that include the following sixteen states: Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.³



Suspected Israeli nuclear sites

The Member States of the United Nations define the region to include the Comoros and Mauritania, but not Turkey. The latter, as part of

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is only an observer in the Arab League. Many think Turkey is part of the Middle East security problem, as shown by its extensive interventions in the civil wars in Libya and Syria, and should be considered as part of the Middle East. Whether or not to include Turkey is a major issue. Many Arab League member States are opposed, on the grounds that Turkish involvement would lead to Turkey becoming part of the Arab League, where it would disrupt the influence of current Arab League leaders like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The role of Israel is the fulcrum for a MWNWFZ. As the only widely suspected nuclear weapons states in region, Israel is both the principle target of a MENWFZ, and the country that would have to do the most were it to join. A MENWZ without Israel will still have an effect, if signatories agree not to go nuclear themselves. But few regional actors are likely to sign if Israel refuses.

Israel is believed to have developed a nuclear weapons capability in 1967-68, based on highly Plutonium created at the Dimona nuclear complex, near the Israeli city of Beersheba. The Dimona reactor, supplied by France in the 1960s, arrived in an era before exporters insisted that all nuclear technology transfer be safeguarded against misuse by the International Energy Agency (IAEA). That oversight made it possible for Israel to use the research reactor to generate fissile (bomb-grade) Plutonium Pu²³⁹. Before it was shut down in the mid-1980s, the Dimona reactor is believed by outside observers to have accumulated enough Plutonium for 80 to 100 nuclear weapons.

³ Goldschmidt, Pierre, 'A Realistic Approach Toward a Middle East Free of WMD', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 July 2016,

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/07/07/realistic-approach-toward-middle-east-free-of-wmd-pub-64039>



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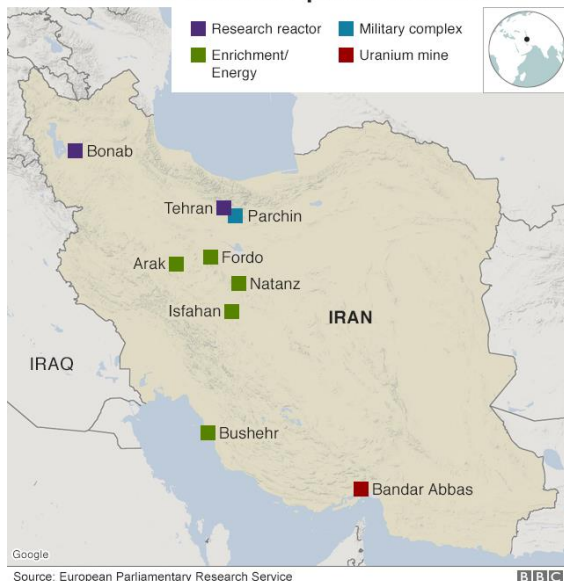


Scholars maintain that Israel first deployed nuclear weapons around the time of, or shortly after the 1967 Seven Day War. Its nuclear weapons originally were designed for aerial delivery by tactical aircraft. Today most of its nuclear arsenal is believed to be ready for delivery by long-range ballistic missiles (the Jericho force) or by cruise missiles from submarines.⁴ A major debate surrounds the question of whether Israel ever tested a nuclear device. There has not been a publicly acknowledged Israeli nuclear test. In 1979, an American Vela early detection satellite may have identified a nuclear test in the South Atlantic, far off the coast of South Africa. The so-called Vela Incident has been hypothesized as a possible Israeli nuclear test, but this remains speculation.⁵

Another difficult country is Iran. Iran signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1975, forswearing any plan to acquire nuclear weapons, but it has developed a substantial break-out capability. Under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA, or the Iran Deal), Iran agreed to major restrictions on its nuclear research and development program. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), safeguards and verifies all nuclear activity in Iran, and reports that there is no possibility Iran can build a nuclear weapon today. The 2015 Iran Deal further delays Iran, should it want to move ahead. Currently, it would take Iran at least six months to acquire enough highly enriched Uranium U²³⁵ to build a bomb.

Iran has made clear it will not join a MENWFZ unless Israel does first.⁶ While Iran insists it does not have, and is not interested in acquiring, nuclear weapons, the International Atomic Energy Agency has uncovered substantial of an Iran bomb-making program, which continued until 2003, when it appears to have stopped. Meanwhile, Iran has accumulated the equipment to fabricate enough fissile material (highly enriched Uranium U²³⁵ or Plutonium Pu²³⁹) to build a bomb with a few months or years. In 2015 Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA, or the Iran Deal), further mothballing major parts of nuclear program. Iran is the only country in the region to formally declare it will not use nuclear weapons, for religious reasons.⁷ Even so, there is great distrust of its intentions and capabilities, in no small part because of its viciously anti-Israeli, anti-American and anti-Saudi rhetoric, and its

Iran's nuclear and other power facilities



⁴ Kristensen, Hans M. and Robert S. Norris, 'Israeli nuclear weapons, 2014', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 2016, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0096340214555409>

⁵ 'Vela incident', Wikipedia, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vela_incident

⁶ Nader, Alireza, 'Iran and a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Middle East', *Arms Control Today*, September 2011, https://www.armscontrol.org/2011_09/Iran_and_a_Nuclear-Weapon-Free_Middle_East%20%20%20%20

⁷ Mousavian, Seyed Hossein, 'This is why Iran should play a major role in the negotiations to ban nuclear weapons', *The Independent*, 14 June 2017,



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support for revolutionary groups on Israel's northern and southern borders in Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa.

Many argue that a NWFZ in the Middle East should include Turkey.⁸ Not only is Turkey bordering several crucial regional states—Iran, Syria—but it also is committed to creation of a NWFZ. The issue creates difficulties for the government of Turkey, which hosts the United States Air Force at its base in the south of Turkey at Incirlik, where an estimates 60 to 100 US nuclear weapons are stored; B61 gravity dropped tactical nuclear weapons. Those nuclear weapons are a constant source of controversy. There is widespread suspicion that should the United States withdraw the B61s, Turkey would rapidly acquire nuclear weapons of its own.

(NPT), he asks why the treaty forces Turkey to permanently surrender any right to nuclear weapons, while permitting the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to keep theirs, and doing nothing about Israel's nuclear arsenal. It is not clear whether Turkey is starting a nuclear research program, or whether it is a civilian or military program, but President Erdogan leaves no doubt his country is interested.

Attention also has been focused on the nuclear intentions of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia already has long range ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads.



Incirlik Air Force Base, site of US nuclear weapons on Turkey

Turkey President, Erdogan, has recently inflamed this dispute, asking why Turkey should not have nuclear weapons. Like other critics of the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty

Role of the United Nations

The United Nations is the major forum for global deliberation on a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Many resolutions have been passed. Three stand out for their importance framing the issue and global hope.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/iran-nuclear-disarmament-global-peace-usa-weapons-of-mass-destruction-a7789201.html>

⁸ Goldschmidt, Pierre, 'A Realistic Approach Toward a Middle East Free of WMD', *Carnegie Endowment*

for International Peace, 7 July 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/07/07/realistic-approach-toward-middle-east-free-of-wmd-pub-64039>



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The first came in 1974, when the United Nations General Assembly approved resolution 3236, endorsing the goal of establishing a NWFZ in the Middle East following a joint proposal by Egypt and Iran.

A second key moment came on 3 April 1991, when the Security Council adopted *United Nations Security Council resolution 687*. This established the goals and mandate of the international community after the 1990-91 Iraq War. As part of the resolution of the war, with an eye to prevent comparable wars in the future, the Security Council specifically supported the creation of MENWFZ:

Recalling the objective of the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the region of the Middle East, Conscious of the threat that all weapons of mass destruction pose to peace and security in the area and of the need to work towards the establishment in the Middle East of a zone free of such weapons, Conscious also of the objective of achieving balanced and comprehensive control of armaments in the region...

UNSC resolution 687 is important not only because it is international law, but even more because it was passed with the outright support of all five Nuclear Weapons States; China, France, the United Kingdom, United States and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation.⁹

⁹ 'United Nations Security Council Resolution 687', 8 April 1991, New York: United Nations, <https://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/documents/687.pdf>

¹⁰ *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 4 December 2017, 72/24*, 11 December 2017, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/72/24>

¹¹ 'Despite Opposing Views on Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, First Committee Delegates Say

Third and most recently, in 2017, the General Assembly passed a resolution reiterating international commitment to see a MENWFZ created.¹⁰ The resolution is short, however, without specific details on how the zone is to be created, which Member States would be involved, and how the treaty would be verified, it at all.

Country and Bloc Positions

Arab League: The Member States of the Arab League agree on the need for Israel to lead action on regional nuclear disarmament. As the first country in the region to go nuclear, Israel has the greatest responsibility to act first, they feel. There is increasing division in Arab ranks, though. Gulf Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, increasingly insist that Iran also be part of any framework.¹¹

China: China firmly opposes nuclear proliferation in whatever forms and participates in the political resolution of regional nuclear proliferation issues in a responsible manner. Generally, however, China does not strongly support resolutions targeting any one Member State. Rather, it maintains disarmament must be pursued globally, starting with the Member States possessing the biggest nuclear arsenals, Russia and especially the United States.¹²

European Union (EU): Most, but not all, European Member States advocate a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction and

'We Are in the Same Boat', Must Join Forces to Reach Safe Shores', *UN General Assembly*, GA/DIS/3637, 30 October 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gadis3637.doc.htm>

¹² 'Envoy says China opposes nuclear proliferation in whatever forms', *Xinhua*, 30 April 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/30/c_138023016.htm



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their delivery systems. They also maintain that any arrangements must be freely arrived at by all States in the region. EU Member States generally support the goal of a MWNWFZ, but want to see practical steps that strengthen Iran's commitment not to develop nuclear weapons, above all evidence that Iran will cease development and deployment of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. They also urge Israel to make its nuclear program more transparent, allowing the world to better understand its nuclear capabilities. European governments advocate a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems, with arrangements freely arrived at by all States in the region.¹³

Egypt: No country has done more to push the proposal for a MENWFZ than Egypt, since abandoning its own nuclear weapons option in 1968, when it was one of the first states to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In 1981 Egypt shifted its own caution and ratified the NPT, making nonproliferation part of its domestic law. Egypt insists that Israel abandon its nuclear program as well, and made such steps an essential part of any regional peace settlement. Egypt opposes efforts to make Iran equally responsible, or to make action depend on Iran. Their focus is on Israel.

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): the 120 Member States of the UN's largest voting bloc, which also includes most Member States of the Arab League and Iran, strong support all effort to establish regional NWFZs. They generally

support Palestinian sovereignty and oppose Israel's control over Palestinian territory. The NAM is less unified on issues surrounding Iran. Saudi financial support, for example, has drawn many into the anti-Iranian camp.¹⁴

Russian Federation: According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, 'Russia supports the establishment of the zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery in the Middle East. Unfortunately, this particular zone in this particular region have not materialized, but we keep on trying.' Russian also believes that rapid economic growth in the Middle East creates growing need for new sources of civilian electrical power generation. Russia maintains that the only realistic alternative to petroleum is nuclear energy, which Russia is prepared to meet with sales of civilian nuclear power.¹⁵

The United States plays a crucial role in Middle East nuclear diplomacy. For several decades it supported the goal of a MENWFZ, although it generally insisted on a regional peace settlement first. Under President Trump, the United States continues to support the goal, but now insists that it be pursued only as part of a general regional settlement, involving permanent and intrusively verified commitments by Iran to forswear nuclear weapons. When it comes to modalities, America now consistently supports the position of Israel, peace first, then consideration of nuclear disarmament¹⁶. In recent years, only Israel and the United States

¹³ 'Despite Opposing Views on Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, First Committee Delegates Say 'We Are in the Same Boat', Must Join Forces to Reach Safe Shores', *UN General Assembly*, GA/DIS/3637, 30 October 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gadis3637.doc.htm>

¹⁴ 'Despite Opposing Views on Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, First Committee Delegates Say 'We Are in the Same Boat', Must Join Forces to Reach Safe Shores', *UN General Assembly*,

GA/DIS/3637, 30 October 2019,

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gadis3637.doc.htm>

¹⁵ 'Russia's role in the process of establishing the WMDFZ and development of peaceful nuclear energy in the Middle East', *PIR Center*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.pircenter.org/en/projects/16-russia-and-the-middle-east-promoting-strategic-interests>

¹⁶ Ford, Christopher, 'Whither A Middle East WMD-Free Zone?' Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of



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consistently vote against General Assembly support for the goal of a MENWFZ.¹⁷

Some Proposals for Action

Further Study: Rather than take action, which is bound to be controversial, the General Assembly may be more comfortable authorizing a study by the UN Secretary-General to investigate modalities for achieving a MWNWFZ. Issues to be covered in the SG report would have to be specified. It might make recommendations on which countries should be included, the impact on the nuclear weapons of outside powers, technology transfer, and relations to the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons and their nuclear forces.

Confidence Building: Rather than accelerate action on the Middle East denuclearization, a first step would be confidence building through exchanges of information. A promising first step would be a regional treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons testing. Several countries in the region already have signed the 1995 nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Testing is not essential to nuclear capability. There is no certain evidence Israel ever tested, and basic designs always seem to work the first time. A test ban would not satisfy Member States like Egypt and Iran, determined to reverse the nuclear programs of others (Israel). But a testing prohibition would

enhance political relations and build mutual confidence.¹⁸

Nuclear No First Use; Rather than proceed directly to an outright prohibition, here might be more support for an in-between step like regional pledges of nuclear no first use (NFU). Several countries in the region already have signed or ratified the 1995 Comprehensive nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), giving up the right to test nuclear bombs. While this does not prevent a country from building or using nuclear weapons—the bomb dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 had not been tested—it would inhibit technological advancement and dangerous symbolic acts. Pressure to sign the CTBT would be most meaningful for Israel, the only nuclear weapons state in the region, and prominent for refusing to sign the CTBT.

Demand all countries in the region immediately negotiate and sign a MENWFZ: After forty-six years of debate, maybe it is time to act. A MENWFZ can be drafted without agreement from all regional actors, although it will not be meaningful without the participation of key Member States like Iran and Israel. A treaty could be drafted and left open for signature, putting pressure on tardy Member States to join the regional census. Incentives or pressure might be necessary to help accelerate their cooperation.

State, 2 August 2019, <https://www.state.gov/whither-a-middle-east-wmd-free-zone/>

¹⁷ Norton, Ben, 'US and Israel were lone votes against UN resolutions opposing space arms race, nuclear Middle East, Cuba embargo', *The Gray Zone*, 8 November 2019, <https://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/08/us-israel-un-resolutions-space-arms-race-nuclear/>

¹⁸ Goldschmidt, Pierre, 'A Realistic Approach Toward a Middle East Free of WMD', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 July 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/07/07/realistic-approach-toward-middle-east-free-of-wmd-pub-64039>



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