



Is a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East possible?

SUMMARY *A Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) is seen as a useful instrument to implement multilateral agreements prohibiting acquisition, stocking, and testing of nuclear weapons. NWFZs also include legal provisions and specific safeguards against the use of such weapons.*

The purpose of a NWFZ is twofold: it is an initiative aimed at the elimination of nuclear weapons in a specific region and, at the same time, a security-building measure.

Around the world, five Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (or Areas) have been established so far. However, the very different circumstances of the Middle East mean it is difficult to draw on lessons learnt.

As for the Middle East, talks have been in the air for decades, however with no concrete results. Hostility between Israelis and Palestinians, frozen diplomatic relations, Israeli and Iranian nuclear ambitions and the unstable political situation in the region are some of the reasons why talks have not yet materialised.

Hopes were dampened when the Helsinki conference, scheduled for late 2012, was postponed. But recently there have been signals that the process could be revived.



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New momentum for a nuclear-free Middle East?

In 2010, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference called for a Conference in 2012 on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction. However, at the last minute, the Conference was postponed indefinitely in December 2012. That was due to the unstable security situation in the region, and opposition from relevant stakeholders.

New momentum for such a conference appears tangible, as various stakeholders have in recent months reaffirmed their continuing commitment. The European Union, in [April](#), and again in [July](#) 2013, and the [US](#) both recently reaffirmed their support for establishing such a zone, and called for the Conference to be convened in 2013, as soon as possible. Russia and Turkey, in a [joint statement](#), urged all States concerned to participate actively in the process. Hans Blix, expert on non-proliferation issues, said that European countries had taken the lead in pushing for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East, adding that a successful outcome of the conference could make Israel and Iran [scale down](#) their nuclear programmes. Gulf States have been identified as the actors most likely to table a formal proposal.

What is a NWFZ?

The concept of the NWFZ emerged in the 1950s following a Polish proposal to make part of Europe nuclear-weapon free.

The concept is included in the NPT which, in [Article VII](#), establishes the "right of any group of States to conclude regional treaties in order to assure the total absence of nuclear weapons in their respective territories".

In such zones, members cannot acquire, use, possess, test, develop or deploy nuclear weapons. Nuclear facilities in the area should be declared and put under surveillance by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Stationing of nuclear weapons is also prohibited. Verification and compliance measures are generally included in such treaties. Once an agreement is reached, the UN General Assembly should recognise the zone. The duration of these treaties is usually indefinite, but a right of withdrawal may be granted.

Existing NWFZ treaties

Stemming from the possibility in the NPT of concluding regional agreements, several treaties establishing Nuclear-Weapon-Free Areas are currently in force, ranging from the status of nuclear weapon free countries to entire zones and geographical regions.

Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones:

- 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco¹ (Latin America and the Caribbean)
- 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga² (South Pacific)
- 1995 Treaty of Bangkok³ (southeast Asia)
- 1996 Treaty of Pelindaba⁴ (Africa)
- 2006 Treaty of Semipalatinsk (Central Asia)⁵

Similar agreements have established **Nuclear-Weapon-Free Areas** in the Antarctic region⁶ and also in Outer Space⁷ and on the Sea-Bed⁸.

Mongolia's self-declared **Nuclear-Weapon-Free Country** status was recognised by the UN in 1998.

Among the [positive features](#) of these experiences are the use of a regional organisation as a forum for discussion, the opportunity to transform threats into triggers for cooperation and the role of civil society in making recommendations to decision-makers. Although the specificities depend on the region, the examples to date have shown that new zones often improve on the earlier ones, as the newest zones have redefined the legal provisions in order to broaden the range of prohibited weapons. Indeed, the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco only prohibited possession and handling of nuclear devices, while more recent ones also exclude stationing, and research and development related to nuclear weapons.

The latest provisions also extend – usually through additional protocols – safeguards to the environment and other areas. Further progress is also achieved by exchanging information between different zones and coordinating on issues of mutual interest, through regional or international meetings and relevant [Codes of Conduct](#).

However, a significant reason for NWFZs proving successful in these regions is because there were no nuclear weapons prior to the agreements being concluded. This is not the case for the Middle East. The positive outcomes also required sustained efforts at all political levels. The prospects of establishing a Middle Eastern NWFZ depend therefore on the security situation, but also on improvement in bilateral relations. Indeed, the enduring Arab-Israeli conflict and the non-recognition of Israel by many Arab states, coupled with the volatile security situation in the region, discussions over local nuclear programmes and ongoing fighting in certain countries make the prospect of a NWFZ in the Middle East more complicated.

Middle East NWFZ: history

The [idea](#) of a NWFZ in the Middle East dates back to the 1960s, when the issue was first

discussed. In 1974, it was included in a UN General Assembly (UNGA) [resolution](#) tabled by Iran and Egypt. All member countries voted in favour of this proposal, except Israel and Burma which abstained. Since 1974, a similar resolution has been adopted in every annual session of the UNGA.

In 1990, Egypt's then-President Hosni Mubarak proposed extending the proposal to cover all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), encompassing not only nuclear, but also chemical and biological weapons. Since then, relevant stakeholders and commentators have often made reference to a [Middle East WMD-free zone](#), and official EU documents follow this approach.

The topic has also been discussed, since 1995, in the framework of the Review Conference to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, highlighting the need for negotiations. The [2010 final document](#) includes the proposal for a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction.

The General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency has several times supported the initiative in [resolutions](#).

In its December 2012 [resolution](#), the UNGA invited all parties to implement the proposal for a NWFZ and relevant states to adhere to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It also encouraged all states in the region to formally declare their support for such a NWFZ.

The international community, in relevant multilateral fora, is pushing for the establishment of such a zone, but efforts have yet to be successful. Increasing regional security and building mutual confidence are two [necessary preconditions](#) for a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Transparency of data on military spending, arms holdings, and military forces is also needed, since several UN instruments barely report relevant information.

The EU's 1995 [Barcelona Declaration](#) included the goal of promoting the establishment of a Weapons-of-Mass-Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East. This was reiterated in the 2003 [EU Strategy](#) against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The European Parliament, in its [Resolution of 17 January 2013](#) on the establishment of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction, deplored the postponement of the conference foreseen in December 2012 and has called on the UN to reschedule it in 2013. The EP affirmed that a NWFZ in the Middle East could enhance peace and international security in the area.

EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton had also [regretted](#) the conference's postponement. On 1 July, she made a [statement](#) reiterating EU support for a NWFZ and calling for the conference to be convened in 2013.

The Council also [allocated](#) funds in 2012 to support projects aimed at moving towards a zone free of nuclear weapons and all other WMD, while encouraging political and security-related dialogue within civil society and governments.

Real prospect of an NWFZ?

Divergences among main actors

Commentators have identified [several reasons](#) for the postponement of the Helsinki Conference: lack of support from the US and absence of several Arab States from preparatory meetings. Forthcoming Israeli elections and the unstable security situation within the region further weakened prospects of agreement.

Israel has always been against the initiative, [criticising](#) the 2010 NPT plan. It claimed it was "deeply flawed and hypocritical", as it would ignore the realities of the Middle East and the threats faced by the region.

The US, the UK, Russia, the sponsors, and other countries formally expressed regrets

at the postponement of the conference. Finland, the host, assured that it will step up efforts to prepare a successful conference to be attended by all States from the region.

The parties still hope to achieve a political declaration of commitment followed by the establishment of thematic working groups to prepare for future negotiations. Those in favour of an "[incremental approach](#)" argue that States should make parallel moves in order to build trust which could then lead to mutual concessions on weapons.

Even though the idea of a NWFZ in the Middle East has been around for decades, several concerns remain, including on-going nuclear programmes and the volatile security situation. Moreover, reciprocal mistrust stems from stalemate in the Middle East peace process.

The Arab Spring uncertainties

The [Arab Spring](#) has changed the internal structure of several Arab states, leaving uncertainty about future political implications. Leaders have been overthrown, but achieving peace and democracy is countered by the need to stabilise. The transition is far from over, and it is not clear whether governments will evolve democratically or keep authoritarian features.

Moreover, good relations with Israel seem now difficult to achieve in the short-term run, because of the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict, and because of the tense diplomatic relations in the region.

Regional nuclear programmes

Israel [criticised](#) the mention of its nuclear programme, in the 2010 NPT conference resolution. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has criticised the plan conceived in the NPT Review Conference, as not adapted to the concrete situation in the Middle East. It has threatened, therefore, "not to take part in its implementation".

Israel indeed is understood to have a developed [nuclear arsenal](#), and insists that other countries in the region refrain from

acquiring weapons of mass destruction before it will make concessions on a NWFZ.

Iran's [nuclear programme](#) is another hurdle to the establishment of the NWFZ. Though there is no evidence of actual acquisition of a nuclear arsenal, no doubts exist about Iranian attempts to acquire relevant technology. Iranian enrichment and reprocessing activities have been prohibited by UN Security Council [Resolution 1737](#) and subsequent Resolutions, and an embargo on nuclear technologies is in force.

The civil war in **Syria** has raised concerns over alleged use of chemical weapons, while **Libya** and **Iraq** have in the past adopted nuclear-weapon programmes.

Turkey is still keen on developing a nuclear programme, and hosts US nuclear weapons on its territory. However, its [inclusion](#) in the geographical scope of the NWFZ is uncertain, since the definition of Middle East varies according to the sources⁹.

Relevant international agreements

Increasing mutual trust and confidence also stems from more accurate information and transparency in the field of military equipment. This would lead to a clearer picture and reduce cases where States are reluctant to make concessions or contemplate [reductions](#) to their armaments.

Egypt and Syria are not party to the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, prohibiting "inhumane" weapons. Moreover, Israel has not yet signed the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which bans the possession of such weapons. Relevant provisions of these instruments are often used as a model for the content of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone or Area.

Israel has yet to accede to NPT and to the IAEA Full-Scope Safeguards. Several States¹⁰ have not signed the IAEA Additional Protocol concerning inspections for verifying compliance with the NPT, with Saudi Arabia and Syria not party to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty either.

Is a NWFZ a real option?

Enduring rivalries do not help, improving bilateral relations is therefore necessary, for instance revoking the formal state of war between Israel and Syria. Official recognition of certain states and establishment of diplomatic relations are also needed before negotiations on nuclear programmes and weapons of mass destruction can start.

Commentators have discussed the idea of a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East for decades. They all point to the need for realistic expectations about the length and the difficulty of achieving concrete results.

[Gawdat Bahgat](#) affirms that denuclearisation is the way to achieve stability in the region. He agrees with Fareed Zakaria on the imbalance of power between rival countries as the main factor fostering insecurity, and suggests serious negotiations on a NWFZ would develop mutual trust and confidence.

Conversely, [Pierre Goldschmidt](#) and others believe that, at the moment, conditions are not favourable enough to establish a NWFZ in the Middle East. An overall change in local political relations would help, but at the moment is unlikely.

Main references

[A Middle East free of nuclear weapons: possible, probable or pipe-dream?](#) / Patricia M. Lewis, The Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs, International Affairs n°89: 2 (2013), 17 p.

[A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East?](#) / Gawdat Baghat, Middle East Policy, Spring 2013 20, no 1 (2013), p. 30-38.

[A Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction: for a comprehensive and incremental approach](#) / Marc Finaud, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Policy Paper 18, July 2011, 5 p.

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<http://www.library.ep.ec>

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Endnotes

- ¹ For the status of signatures and ratifications of the Treaty of Tlatelolco and its Additional Protocols I and II, see OPANAL [site](#).
- ² It was signed by the South Pacific nations of Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa on the island of Rarotonga (seat of the capital of the Cook Islands), came into force with the 8th ratification, and has since been ratified by all of those states. The Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau are not party to the treaties but are eligible to become parties in the future.
- ³ Also known as the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, it has been signed by 10 Southeast Asian member-states under the auspices of the ASEAN: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar/Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- ⁴ It covers the entire African continent as well as the following islands: Agaléga Islands, Bassas da India, Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Cargados Carajos, Chagos Archipelago - Diego Garcia, Comoros, Europa Island, Juan de Nova, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Prince Edward & Marion Islands, São Tomé and Príncipe, Réunion, Rodrigues Island, Seychelles, Tromelin Island, and Zanzibar and Pemba Islands. It came into effect with the 28th ratification on 15 July 2009. 36 States have ratified it so far, with 16 African Union countries having signed it but not yet ratified. South Sudan is the only country in Africa not to have signed.
- ⁵ Also known as the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia or Treaty of Semey, signed and ratified by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, entered into force on 21 March 2009.
- ⁶ Since 1959, 38 countries have acceded to the Treaty. Original signatories were 12 countries active in Antarctica at the time.
- ⁷ Formally the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, with 101 State parties and 27 having signed but not completed ratification.
- ⁸ Multilateral agreement between 87 countries, list of signatories can be found on the US State Department [site](#).
- ⁹ Moreover, in many relevant papers and articles, Turkey is not considered part of the Middle Eastern NWFZ. However, Ankara has recently endorsed the idea of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East.
- ¹⁰ Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.