



Routledge Advances in International Relations and Global Politics

A MIDDLE EAST FREE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

A NEW APPROACH TO NONPROLIFERATION

Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Emad Kiyaei



“In a field dominated by Western voices, Mousavian and Kiyaei offer a refreshing perspective as Iranian scholars who understand both worlds. They offer practical ideas for how the Iran nuclear agreement can be a building block to the long-sought goal of a Middle East free of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. At a time when the nuclear agreement is under severe pressure, their prescription is another strong reason to preserve the accord.”

— *Mark Fitzpatrick, International Institute for Strategic Studies*

“The book makes thoughtful, well-informed, original, balanced, and timely contributions to the academic and policy debates on the challenges of reducing the risks from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, focusing particularly in the Persian Gulf region. At a time when we are so close to war as a result of the U.S. confrontation with Iran—nominally over Iran’s nuclear program, but at least as much because of regional rivalries—it is an important reminder that there are more creative and positive ways to deal with the situation.”

— *Frank von Hippel, Princeton University, USA*

“The dynamics that produce calls for making the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction are not going away. Neither are the obstacles to creating such a zone. Mousavian and Kiyaei make a fresh and constructive case for why Middle Eastern states and others should more energetically begin efforts to build such a zone and how it could be designed and verified.”

— *George Perkovich, Ken Oliver and Angela Nomellini Chair and vice president for studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

“For over 30 years, the international community has struggled over the goal of freeing the Middle East from weapons of mass destruction. This effort found new impetus in December 2018 when the United Nations agreed to hold an annual conference to develop and conclude a legally binding treaty for such a zone. In this timely and necessary contribution, Mousavian and Kiyaei chart a detailed and compelling path for what such a treaty could include and how it could be achieved.”

— *Zia Mian, Princeton University, USA*



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A Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction

The establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons, a concept more recently broadened to cover all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), has been before the international community for decades. In this book, two experts from the region explore why the matter remains unresolved and outline a comprehensive yet achievable roadmap to a Middle East free of WMD.

Weapons of mass destruction pose an existential threat to global peace and security. But nowhere is it more urgent to stem their spread than in the Middle East, a region fraught with mistrust and instability. Accounting for these geopolitical realities, including the ongoing talks to curb Iran's nuclear program, the authors present a practical and innovative strategy to a Middle East free of WMD. They outline a phased approach toward disarmament in the region, prescribing confidence-building measures and verification tools to create trust among the region's governments. Their vision also sees the realization of a WMD-free zone within a broader regional agenda for security and cooperation to advance socioeconomic and political progress.

This book will be of great interest to students and scholars of international relations, politics, and security studies in the Middle East.

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A New Approach to Nonproliferation

**Seyed Hossein Mousavian and
Emad Kiyaei**

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Foreword

In October 2011, I was appointed by the UN secretary-general as the facilitator for a conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction. This appointment was part of the decision of the 2010 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference concluding document, which called for the conference to be held in 2012 with the attendance of all states of the region. In spite of significant efforts by all, the conference in Helsinki has not yet materialized. The goal of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction thus remains elusive.

It is welcome that discussions and exchanges continue regarding this important topic. The situation on the ground in the Middle East does not bode well for immediate results, but efforts to find workable solutions and, perhaps, new perspectives remain crucial for progress in this important but challenging issue.

I have had the privilege to get to know one of the authors of this book, Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, during my activities as facilitator. His background as a journalist, politician, diplomat, and scholar gives him an excellent viewpoint from which to evaluate the progress so far, understand the obstacles that until now have prevented the states of the region from making steps toward the goal, and think about the ways forward.

What is remarkable in this book is its fundamental idea to discuss, in the spirit of openness, various new, alternative, or complementary avenues potentially available for the region to try to make progress, including subregional approaches and a wider perspective for security and stability of the Middle East. Perhaps one of the core reasons making progress in this important endeavor has been so difficult is the deep-rooted mistrust that prevails in the region. This has, of course, its reasons, and will be difficult to change. Yet, without an effort to build trust and mutual confidence, chances of success remain low.

I am confident that this interesting book will bring an important contribution to the ongoing discussion regarding ways to improve the perspectives for a more secure and more stable Middle East.

Jaakko Laajava
Finnish ambassador and under secretary of state (Ret.)
Facilitator of WMD-free zone in the Middle East



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Introduction

The Middle East might seem to be the last place on earth to establish a geographic area free from all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but the potential benefits in striving to achieve this goal far outweigh the risks involved. The idea of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East (hereafter WMDFZ, or simply “zone”) is decades old and was first proposed by Egypt in 1990 with support from Iran. The primary aim of realizing such a zone is to rid the region of all weapons of mass destruction—chemical, biological, and nuclear. The zone would eventually cover a vast geographic area of about 15 million square kilometers (approximately one and a half times the size of the United States) and include all twenty-two Arab countries in the Middle East and Africa in addition to Iran and Israel (with a total population of more than half a billion), stretching from Iran in the east and north to Mauritania in the west, and as far south as Comoros.

Realizing such a zone in the Middle East is paramount for a region reeling from decades of instability, insecurity, destruction, and WMD proliferation. The scope of the zone should not be limited to ridding the region of these destructive weapons; it should also include the creation of a closer political climate in which it can be achieved, requiring a rare occurrence of collective cooperation in a divided region. This process will require a complete reversal of the current animosity and misunderstanding among regional countries that has decapitated the drive toward improved security and socioeconomic and political advancement in the region. Therefore, the WMDFZ will not only contribute to strengthening nonproliferation efforts; it will inevitably open the discussion to other security-related challenges facing the region. The Middle East has all the ingredients to flourish: strategic location, vast natural resources, millennia-old cultures, and an educated youthful demographic hungry for transformation in their region and eager to be connected to the global community. It also possesses the ingredients for carnage to ensue and hatred to flourish, with an added toxic dose of ethnic, sectarian, national, and religious fanaticism.

The recent history of the region is littered with governments attempting to expand and use weapons of mass destruction, including the use of chemical weapons by Egypt in Yemen (1962–1967); by Iraq on its own citizens (1988) and against Iranians during the eight-year war (1980–1988); and by Syria in multiple cases since 2013.¹ There are also continuing concerns over Israel’s opaque nuclear

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weapons program and the advancement of Iran's nuclear developments. These nonproliferation challenges are further compounded by the lack of global nuclear weapons disarmament; regional proliferation risks as nations develop their own nuclear energy programs; and the increasing threat of WMD acquisition and use by extremists and terrorists. These historical and contemporary WMD proliferation risks impede the realization of the zone and also contribute to the broader security context of threats facing the Middle East. There is no shortage of security challenges, including the role of world powers in the militarization of the Middle East; regional rivalry, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia; the unresolved decades-old Israeli–Palestinian conflict; and the origins and ramifications of the Arab Spring, including the ongoing instability in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

There are, however, encouraging developments that could strengthen the chance of achieving a WMDFZ. Specifically, the breakthrough in nuclear talks between Iran and the EU3+3 (the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China, and Germany) coupled with efforts to rid Syria of its chemical weapons.

Iran and the EU3+3 agreed on a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on July 14, 2015, which puts in place unprecedented inspections and transparency measures to ensure Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful. Iran also agreed to limit its nuclear program, which effectively closed the two routes to developing nuclear weapons, namely uranium enrichment to weapons grade and the amassing of plutonium. In return for Iran's full implementation of its nuclear commitments, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States removed all nuclear-related sanctions imposed on the country.² While the JCPOA was a great asset for nuclear nonproliferation, it does face major challenges to its sustainability and full implementation. Chief among them is the unilateral decision by President Trump to withdraw the United States from the deal on May 8, 2018.³ This move has placed the future of the accord on an unpredictable path, with the risk of the complete collapse of and repercussions for Iran's nuclear program as well as wider regional security implications. Meanwhile, the continuing conflict in Syria and further cases of chemical weapons use have brought into sharp focus the difficulty in verifying the complete removal of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. It goes without saying that these sobering developments have placed doubt on the longevity of the JCPOA and the complete destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile; however, the limited success thus far, coupled with ongoing international efforts to salvage the JCPOA and bring an end to the Syrian conflict, can ultimately inject needed urgency into achieving a WMDFZ in the Middle East.

More recently, the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), tasked with addressing disarmament and international security matters, adopted a resolution in October 2018 (introduced by Egypt with support from Arab states) requesting that the UN secretary-general convene an annual regional conference on the zone by the end of 2019 and subsequent conferences each year until an accord on the zone is adopted. Despite explicit opposition from both the United States and Israel, the first "Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction" was

convened at the UN Headquarters in New York from November 18 to 22, 2019. The conference was presided over by Jordanian Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Sima Bahouz, with facilitation by the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA).⁴ At the opening session of the conference, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reminded the participants that achieving the zone would not only contribute to WMD nonproliferation but also serve as “means for States to take the initiative and work together to advance their own common regional security.”⁵ This conference was a watershed moment for advancing the zone, as past attempts had failed to materialize. To the surprise of naysayers, participation in the conference was robust—with the presence of all twenty-two member states of the Arab League, Iran, four nuclear-armed states (China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom), relevant international institutions, and a handful of civil society organizations. The only ones missing in the room were Israel and the United States, who remain attached to their insistence that the region is not “ready” to discuss the zone, with U.S. Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament Robert Wood adding that the United States opposes the conference because of its “focus on isolating Israel.”⁶

The regional countries participated in good faith, with discussions on key issues facing the realization of the zone (technical and security related), and laid the groundwork for future conferences. At the conclusion of the conference, participating states adopted a political declaration by consensus, which emphasized their intention to “pursue, in accordance with relevant international resolutions, and in an open and inclusive manner with all invited States, the elaboration of a legally binding treaty to establish” the zone.⁷ The political declaration leaves the door open for all invited states to participate in subsequent conferences.

Taking advantage of these positive developments, albeit with limitations and challenges, will require implementing innovative initiatives to address WMD and the security challenges that face the realization of the zone. One such initiative would strengthen the nuclear nonproliferation regime by regionalizing the principles of the EU3+3 and the Iran nuclear accord. Furthermore, to remove concerns over national uranium enrichment, which could be weaponized, it is worthwhile to assess the potential for creating the first multinational enrichment facility in the region. As a stepping-stone to the final zone, and to build momentum, another initiative may be to establish a regional cooperation and security arrangement in the Persian Gulf that would include a subregional WMDFZ. This subregional zone would serve as a litmus test for the eventual broader zone by initially addressing both WMD-related and security challenges among a smaller group of participants to boost the chances of reaching a wider consensus. That said, there is a need to think outside the security and nonproliferation paradigm by incorporating the influence of civil society and religion to advance the zone. The role of civil society through activism, advocacy, and public awareness is crucial in pressing governments within the region and beyond to take concrete actions toward the zone. Within the religious domain, working with prominent religious leaders who denounce the production, stockpiling, and use of all WMD will carry enormous weight in achieving popular support for the zone.

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While a macro view of the region is necessary to highlight the enormity of the task ahead, there is a need to frame the implementation of the zone within a practical and attainable roadmap. The details of achieving the end state of a WMDFZ in the Middle East through a phased approach will include proposed guidelines and parameters for the zone, with practical, confidence-building measures to shore up trust among all stakeholders and a sequence of steps to achieve universality of all WMD nonproliferation treaties and conventions by regional member states.

With slow progress, political wrangling on the issue, and many setbacks for establishing the zone over the decades, there is a risk that any initiative will be seen as naive and hopeless. Yet, that is exactly why there is an urgent need for advocates of the zone, scholars, and policymakers to refine practical mechanisms to achieve movement toward a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Inaction is not an option, as the region will either continue on its path toward mass destruction or look ahead to the realization of a WMDFZ in the Middle East, which will have wide-ranging socioeconomic, political, security, and nonproliferation benefits. The zone's positive impact will not be limited to the region and will have profound effects on the global WMD nonproliferation regimes. Achieving a WMDFZ will make progress toward a regional security arrangement and cooperation, contribute to the positive influence of religion on nonproliferation, reduce conventional arms expenditure, and bring about a more constructive role for world powers in the region.

The fact that a zone free from all weapons of mass destruction has never existed complicates matters. However, successful examples of nuclear weapons-free zones (which exclude other weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological weapons) could be used as a basis on which to establish the more encompassing WMDFZ. An encouraging sign and notable achievement for nonproliferation of nuclear weapons is that all countries in the region, except Israel, are parties to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).⁸ Entered into effect in 1970, the NPT aims to advance disarmament of nuclear weapons already in existence and stem the proliferation of nuclear weapons and related technologies, while at the same time promote peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The NPT established a safeguards arrangement under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure that nuclear facilities and materials in signatory states are monitored and verified for peaceful purposes. Currently, 191 countries have signed and ratified the NPT, more than any other international arms control and disarmament agreement.⁹

Article VII of the NPT supports establishing nuclear weapon-free zones (NWFZs). The general definition of such a zone is a group of countries in a specified geographic area that agree not to manufacture, acquire, or test nuclear weapons within their respective land and water territories. Once a regional NWFZ is realized, the treaty remains in force indefinitely, though with an option for nations that are party to the zone to withdraw. Currently, there are five NWFZs around the world: Latin America and the Caribbean (2002), the South Pacific (1986), Southeast Asia (1997), Africa (2009), and Central Asia (2009).¹⁰

The idea for creating an NWFZ in the Middle East dates to the early 1970s, when the UNGA passed a joint Iranian and Egyptian resolution calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.¹¹ If realized, the NWFZ would commit regional countries, like other similar zones across the world, to refrain indefinitely from the manufacture, acquisition, testing, or possession of nuclear weapons.¹² A key motivation for the resolution was to constrain the nuclear-weapon capabilities Israel had developed in the late 1960s and to prevent further proliferation in the Middle East.

Since 1980, the UNGA has adopted the resolution and annually called for the NWFZ by consensus, including the official support of all Arab states, Iran, and Israel. The wide support for such a zone, however, has not translated into practical steps toward implementing the resolution, and progress has been slow. The main stumbling block has been the sharp disagreement among countries in the region on the terms and the sequence of steps leading to its establishment. The security concerns in the region are viewed from two perspectives: Israel, as the sole nuclear weapons state, insists on a comprehensive peace agreement with its Arab neighbors before committing to any talks on the zone, while other regional states emphasize the need for the creation of the zone first, before the details of a comprehensive peace agreement are finalized.¹³

Part of the rationale for establishing a WMDFZ is to assuage Israeli concerns that a zone focusing on nuclear weapons would single out Israel and require it to disarm its nuclear weapons. In such a scenario, Israeli nuclear disarmament would be matched by the commitments of other regional countries to dispose of their chemical and biological weapons. Hence, the notion of establishing the wider, encompassing WMDFZ in the Middle East resurfaced during the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. Since the NPT came into force in 1970, all members of the treaty meet every five years at the NPT Review Conference to discuss how to further strengthen global nuclear nonproliferation and to fulfill their obligations.

The 1995 conference had two major outcomes. The first was the indefinite extension of the NPT, and the second was the passing of a resolution (cosponsored by Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) calling for the “establishment of an effectively verifiable Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction.” The resolution also called on all NPT members, 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.”¹⁴ However, few hard results have materialized.

The NPT Review Conference in 2000 reaffirmed the goal of the 1995 conference and stated that the resolution would be “valid until its goals and objectives are achieved.”¹⁵ It was only at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, however, that practical steps were agreed on to make progress toward establishing the WMDFZ. Specifically, it was agreed that, in consultation with regional countries, the UN secretary-general (UNSG) and the three cosponsors of the 1995 resolution would convene a WMDFZ conference in 2012, to be attended by all states in the Middle

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East. NPT members also appointed Finland's former ambassador to the United States and United Kingdom, Jaakko Laajava, as the WMDFZ facilitator with "a mandate to support implementation of the 1995 Resolution by conducting consultations and undertaking preparations for the convening of the 2012 conference." It was also agreed that a host country would be selected to convene a conference.¹⁶

In November 2012, however, the WMDFZ conference was called off by the United States because of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and because "states in the region have not reached agreement on acceptable conditions for a conference."¹⁷ The American statement also mentioned that the United States could not support a conference "in which any regional state would be subject to pressure or isolation," a clear reference to Israel's objection to participate.¹⁸ With the exception of Israel, all other regional countries had confirmed their intention to attend.¹⁹ Similarly, at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the final draft document calling to restart the talks on the WMDFZ was derailed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. This time, the primary objection aired by the United States was that the final draft document set "unworkable conditions" and "arbitrary deadlines" and the agenda set for the conference lacked "consensus and equality."²⁰ Once again, with only Israel not committing to attend the conference, the U.S. objection alongside those of the United Kingdom and Canada was seen as strong-arming by Israel.²¹

In response, Egypt walked out of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting in Geneva for the 2015 NPT Review Conference in protest of the lack of progress on convening the WMDFZ conference. Egypt stated that the purpose of its walkout was "to send a strong message that it does not accept the continued lack of seriousness in dealing with the issue of establishing [the] zone."²²

The 120 member states of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to the NPT also expressed their regret at the indefinite postponement of the conference and blamed Israel for the hold-up. The NAM was established in 1961 as a group of nations that sought independence not formally aligned with either the United States or the former Soviet Union.²³ The call on Israel went further: "to renounce possession of [its] nuclear weapons, to accede to the NPT without preconditions and further delay, to place promptly all its nuclear facilities under IAEA full-scope safeguards according to Security Council resolution 487 (1981) and to conduct its nuclear related activities in conformity with the non-proliferation regime."²⁴

As detailed previously, previous attempts at convening the conference on the zone were intricately tied to the 1995 agreement for the indefinite extension of the NPT. Therefore, with no future date set for the conference, this issue will remain a key point of debate, particularly as nations prepare for the 2020 NPT Review Conference. It is against this bleak background that other avenues to convene the conference outside the NPT process were advanced, specifically the 2018 UNGA resolution that led to the first conference on the zone in November 2019 at the UN Headquarters in New York. While this UN-facilitated conference is independent of the NPT and obligations set by the 1995 indefinite extension, it is an important step toward realizing the zone. An important outcome of the 2019 November conference is that the participating states reached a political declaration in which they