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**The Middle East as weapons of mass  
destruction free zone: A proposal to  
overcome the deadlock**

**by**

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## Abstract

Creating a nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction free zone (NWFZ/ WMDFFZ) in the Middle East is a promising goal. The recent chemical weapons attack on Syrian citizens highlighted the need for regional diplomacy and better protection of civilians. The Global Governance Institute advocates re-launching negotiations regarding a WMD free zone in the Middle East. It is crucial to take these steps at this moment in time. The obstacles are considerable, but the benefits far outweigh the costs. Increased trust among states in a fragile region, additional protection for citizens and a binding agreement promoting peace are possible if an eight-step roadmap is followed. Written by the Italian Ambassador to Switzerland and previous Permanent Representative to the Disarmament Conference in Geneva, Cosimo Risi, this '*view from practice*' provides insights on how to advance an ambitious multilateral proposal.

## About the Author

**Cosimo Risi** (Salerno, Italy, 1951) is a career diplomat since 1978. He has a long experience in European affairs and Euro-med Partnership. Before Geneva and Bern, he served several times in Brussels. He is the author of academic essays and lecturer of International Relations at Parma European College.

## Introduction

The use of chemical weapons in Syria, killing over 1000 people, led to an outcry throughout the world<sup>1</sup>. Military strike options were prepared within days of the attack by the United States, the United Kingdom and France, asking their governments to support such a campaign<sup>2</sup>. However, a diplomatic solution was ultimately pursued and agreed upon by the UN Security Council at the insistence of Russia<sup>3</sup>.

This latest incident has shown, once again, the benefits of regional cooperation to protect citizens. As always, prevention is the best approach to conflict resolution. One proposal to such effect is to make the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. This '*View from Practice*' outlines the background, interests of and obstacles for the main actors, and provides an eight-step roadmap for implementation of the proposal. Contrary to the dogma in the region, a Middle East free of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction would not decrease the military capability of states, but increase their security and better facilitate protection of citizens. It would promote trust among the states in the Middle East and enshrine it in a formal regional security regime.

## Background to a nuclear weapon and mass destruction free zone

A nuclear weapon free zone (NWFZ) was proposed in 1974 by Iran and Egypt at the United Nations. A majority of member states supported it and in turn the UN General Assembly (GA) commended 'the idea of the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East' in resolution 3263<sup>4</sup>. With Israel and Myanmar abstaining, the resolution had to be supported by 128 votes for and none against. In the following years the GA reiterated its support by annually passing a resolution for a NWFZ with only slight modifications to the text.

The regional powers, Israel, Egypt and Iran were all seeking nuclear weapons in the 1960s for political and security reasons. To avoid a nuclear arms race the Soviet Union, the USA and the United Kingdom decided to limit the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons, principles enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT entered into force in 1970 and gave the exclusive right to possess nuclear weapons to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council<sup>5</sup>. Iran and Egypt agreed to the Treaty's obligations 'not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices' (NPT 1970: art.2<sup>6</sup>). In order to pursue their nuclear weapon programs and avoid sanctioning, India, Israel and Pakistan did not sign the NPT. For the same reason, North Korea withdrew from it in 2003. Israel never officially confirmed its nuclear weapons capability but is widely

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<sup>1</sup> Childs, N. 2013 UN probes new alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria. BBC News, accessed on 30 September 2013: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24301618>

<sup>2</sup> Rettman, A. 2013 France 'ready' to strike Syria despite British No vote, 30 August 2013. EUObserver, accessed on 2 September 2013: <http://euobserver.com/foreign/121265>

<sup>3</sup> UN 2013 S/RES/2118 Resolution 2118 adopted by the Security Council at its 7038th meeting on 27 September 2013. United Nations Security Council: [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2118.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Pierre, A. J. 1997: *Cascade of Arms: Managing Conventional Weapons Proliferation*. Cambridge: World Peace Foundation. p.273

UN 1974 A/RES/3263/XXIX Establishment of a nuclear weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East. United Nations General Assembly. Accessed on 10 June 2013: <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/r29.htm>

<sup>5</sup> The UK, USA, France, China and the Soviet Union.

<sup>6</sup> Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, accessed on 10 August 2013: <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPT.shtml>

believed to have acquired weapons in the late 1960s. Israel sees nuclear capability as a necessary deterrent against its neighbors, some still refusing to accept the existence of Israel as independent and sovereign state. The 1974 proposal for a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East, introduced by Iran and Egypt, was to make public Israel's position and to create international pressure on Israel to give up its nuclear weapon capabilities. At the same time and despite being parties to the NPT, there were strong desires by Iran, Iraq and Syria to develop nuclear weapons programs as well. Among the Security Council members, considerable concern existed about the compliance of Iran, Iraq and Syria; therefore inquiries were launched to confirm their nuclear initiatives were not designed to acquire nuclear weapons.

As noted above, the proposal for a nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction free zone is intimately intertwined with the changing politics and frictions among states in the Middle East and the Middle East peace process. Any real progress towards the zone is contingent on a complex set of factors and in essence real progress is only feasible if Israel and its neighbors gain enough confidence and trust in one another to stop relying on politics of deterrence.

In the early 1990s, the Middle East Peace process between Palestine and Israel and its neighbours gained momentum. At the US and Russia sponsored conference in Madrid in 1991, the proposal of a nuclear weapon free zone was a major component of the conference. It broke new ground as Israel accepted negotiations to control arms for the first time. Yet, as Israel could not join the NPT for the reasons outlined above, and the Arab countries remained too concerned about renewing the NPT without sanction mechanisms, the conference failed to produce an agreement. Thus, while a nuclear weapon free zone could not be implemented at that time, the negotiations towards the free zone facilitated confidence building among the parties.

Four years later, the issue was back on the table. Built into the NPT was the decision after 25 years whether the treaty should be continued indefinitely or run for a fixed amount of time. At the conference in 1995, it was decided to extend the treaty indefinitely. Building on an Egyptian proposal from 1990, the conference also agreed on practical steps to create a Nuclear Weapons and Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East (NWFZ/WMDFFZ). With this, the Middle East was and remains the only region in the world on which such a resolution is adopted. The main reason for this type of resolution was that great concern prevailed among the 190 NPT parties over nuclear proliferation and possible escalation of conflict in the region. Any conflict in the Middle East carries the potential to become a major threat to international peace and security.

And the recent history illustrates the dangers associated with the use of weapons of mass destruction in the region. WMDs were used first by Iraq against Iran during the First Persian Gulf War from 1980 to 1988. Similarly, suspicions about Iraq attempting to build nuclear weapons triggered Israel to bomb the Osirak site in 1981<sup>7</sup>. Egypt's proposal for a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East was a direct consequence of this<sup>8</sup>. Fearing military escalation, the 1991 UN General Assembly 4630 Resolution<sup>9</sup> requested Iraq to stop all their active programs related to the weapons of mass destruction, in order to build the base

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<sup>7</sup> Institute for National Strategic Studies 1995: Israel's Osirak Attack. Accessed on 3 October 2013: <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/program/docs/41osi.html>

<sup>8</sup> Egypt first proposed this at the UN Conference on Disarmament at the United Nations Office in Geneva.

<sup>9</sup> UN 1991 RES/4630 Establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East. United Nations General Assembly. Accessed on 10 June 2013: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/46/30&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/46/30&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION)

for a future free zone. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Iraq's alleged nuclear weapon research program was one of the principle justifications for the 2003 US-led intervention. And currently the topic is more acute than ever. Chemical weapons were used in the civil war in Syria. The investigations into the Iranian nuclear program are ongoing and Israel's threats to other states in the region have heightened security concerns.

## **Moving towards a nuclear weapon and mass destruction free zone**

How can this security dilemma be overcome? The 1995 NPT review conference laid out a clear solution to addressing security concerns in the region: to create a nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction free zone (NWFZ/WMDFFZ). It was affirmed in 2000 and at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Following the conference, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States proposed talks in 2012 to discuss the implementation of 1995's resolution. The Finnish Diplomat Laajava was nominated as the facilitator of the Conference in Helsinki. However, before the conference took place, doubts about the zone surfaced yet again. Sensitive issues included the Gaza Strip crisis, the civil war in Syria, the stalemate of the dialogue between the permanent members of the Security Council and the European Union with Iran over its nuclear program and the impact of the Arab Spring on relations in the region. Furthermore, apprehensiveness about the November 2012 elections in the US and Israel's elections in January 2013 limited ambitious policy shifts.

In order to break through the deadlock, the EU hosted a seminar about the future agenda of the nuclear weapon/WMD free zone in Brussels in December 2012. The Iranian delegation announced its plans to take part in the conference, yet the Israeli delegation did not wish to participate. Consequently, the State Department deferred the conference. Russia criticized the delay and Washington's unilateral decision. Similarly, the Arab countries raised concern about Israel evading the negotiations. In 2013, signs have been more positive, with President Obama visiting Israel in March 2013, where the new government had been established. At the same time, the dialogue between P 5 + 1 and Iran also restarted in Astana.

The current difficulties in implementing the proposed policies are described briefly below. Domestic politics in many Arab states are fragile since the advent of the Arab Spring. Israel maintains its need to be accepted as a sovereign and equal state in order to negotiate on issues as sensitive as a nuclear weapon free zone, despite not having signed the non-proliferation treaty. In addition, relationships have deteriorated between the most reliable neighbours in recent months: Egypt-Israel relations can be described as 'a cold peace' since the fall of Mubarak and Israel-Jordan relations have been under severe strain. The movement of people between the countries is decreasing and official visits are also becoming rare. The civil war in Syria affects all states in the region and has left millions seeking refuge across borders in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Lebanon is increasingly drawn into the civil war in Syria and so is Turkey. Many of the states in Northern Africa also experienced regime changes and are focusing on fostering domestic stability before engaging again in regional diplomacy.

Iran continues to play an important and ambiguous role with its potential for nuclear weapons capability and its support for Syria, despite the quieter rhetoric of President Rouhani. The Gulf monarchies strongly support a NWFZ and WMDFFZ. They have faced their own opposition movements in the years since the Arab Spring. Yet, their privileged financial situations allowed counter-measures to weather the spring movements and reduce their impact. At the same time, their financial wealth allows leveraging influence in the region. For example, Qatar has become an influential country in the region. Engaging Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and the other Gulf countries is important to develop a sort of

backbone for the WMDFZ. At the same time, diplomacy of the Gulf countries is often carried out with strong reservations towards Iran's regional leadership role, thus limiting the possibility for genuine negotiations.

The League of Arab States has pushed strongly to establish a NWFZ/WMDF. It advocated that a conference should start a process to create the zone and emphasized that negotiations towards it would serve as an important confidence building measure to enhance security for all states in the Middle East. The decision to postpone the conference without a precise date demonstrates that the international community has not been able to fulfil the commitments undertaken in 2010 as a result of Israel's refusal to participate in the conference.

Some argue that in the current political situation, no progress is possible and that nations should wait for a more opportune moment to push forward on this initiative. Before this background the United States decided to postpone the conference scheduled for December 2012. Russia contested this decision. Moscow was concerned, like the Arabs and the Iranians, about Israel's reluctance to participate in a multilateral forum where its nuclear arsenal could be the focus of the agenda. Even without the Brussels meeting, the topic will feature prominently on the agenda of the 2013 NPT Preparatory Committee. Still, for actual progress, Israel needs to be part of the process and Israel, at this moment, will only accept a focused mandate, in a format of equal partners, with strong assurance of consensus ruling both for procedures and for content of any agreement reached.

### **A vision for short-term measures towards a NWFZ/WMDFZ in the Middle East**

In order to overcome the considerable obstacles, a set of principles is needed. Two different visions are charted below: In the short term, the basic set of foundational commitments for the zone should include: the commitment to accept collective security measures to regional problems instead of purely national solutions to regional problems. Collective commitment also entails that security will only last if it is achieved through peaceful relations, dialogue and political arrangements. Arms reduction and disarmament as confidence-building measures should involve both independent and national authorities. Over time, the creation of a weapon of mass destruction free zone means the reduction and ultimately the destruction of all such weapons to prevent an arms race, an increase of military transparency and an institutionalised process for cooperation. In the short-term an organisation modelled on the intergovernmental status of the Conference and subsequently Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe seems an ideal to aspire to. The geographic scope of such an undertaking should include the territories of the Arab League countries plus Iran and Israel.

## 8 steps towards creating of the Zone

Among the detailed steps towards implementation of the Zone, the Russian view concerning the Zone formation is quite interesting as the Russian diplomacy is very active and efficient in the region (see the agreement with the Americans about the Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons). The Russians think about a ten-step process:

1. Develop joint statements that commit all the parties to refrain from attacks, or threats of attacks, against each other's declared nuclear facilities placed under IAEA safeguards.
2. Draw a road map for gradually placing all nuclear infrastructure facilities in the region under the IAEA safeguards.
3. Ratify the Additional Protocol to the IAEA safeguard agreement.
4. Form a standing regional mechanism for confidence-building measures with regard to nuclear programs, as well as chemical and biological weapons with some types of delivery systems.
5. Ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty as a precondition for signing the treaty, establishing a WMD-free zone.
6. Sign agreements to ban certain types of missiles helping to build confidence and establish verification mechanisms.
7. Join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC).
8. Internationalize and regionalize the nuclear fuel cycle in order to reduce the likelihood of some countries choosing to pursue nuclear weapons programs.
9. Institutionalize nuclear cooperation and establish an international body including every country of the region.
10. Establish effective regional mechanisms for early warning in the event of a nuclear accident.

## A vision for long-term measures towards a NWFZ/WMD-free zone in the Middle East

In the long-term all parties wishing to participate in a possible agreement need to be ready to refrain from the acquisition, transfer and use of nuclear weapons as outlined in the NPT as the end-goal. Credible measures need to ensure compliance to the agreement and an undertaking as ambitious as a nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction free zone in the Middle East cannot work only based on good faith. A pacific approach that strengthens diplomacy among the neighbours is a crucial part of the process. The tensions among Middle Eastern nations are significant, yet EU countries also waged war fifty years ago and incrementally managed to establish peace and regional cooperation. Steps from the 1995 Barcelona Declaration that established the Euro-Med Partnership can serve as a model here<sup>10</sup>. The same ideas should be translated and adapted into a Charter for the Middle East, establishing a regional organisation.

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<sup>10</sup> European Union 1995: Barcelona Declaration, adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 27-28 November 1995. Accessed on 30 June 2013: [http://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/pdf/barcelona\\_declaration.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/pdf/barcelona_declaration.pdf)

## Conclusions

The need for a weapon of mass destruction free zone is today greater than ever before. And it is within reach. The European Union was a strong political supporter in the last years, but it needs to use the current momentum. With Russia and the United States negotiating on destroying the chemical weapons in Syria, the opportunity has to be seized for the entire region. The neighbours in the Middle East should endorse the proposal of making the region free of weapons of mass destruction openly and unequivocally. The Middle East needs the additional stability.

A weapon of mass destruction free zone is not an alien agenda in the region but has been at the heart of political discussions since the 1960's. Today, support reached a new level. While the obstacles are considerable the benefits far outweigh the costs. The recent chemical weapons attack on Syrian citizens highlighted the need for regional diplomacy and better protection of civilians. Eight steps have been drawn up for a short-term initiative that develops into a long-term plan. Together, it allows the countries in the region to engage more openly with one another but also with the international community. Many positions in the Middle East are not reconcilable in the short-term, but understanding and dialogue is a first and necessary step to be able to overcome them in the long-term. Beliefs, values and religious positions need not preclude diplomacy and multilateral negotiations.

The use of chemical weapons and the wars in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s and the most recent suffering of innocent civilians in Syria in August 2013 should be a wake-up call. Before the background of the challenges in the region, the Middle East as a zone without nuclear weapons and without weapons of mass destruction is a win – win game: ‘everything to gain and nothing to lose’ (Turki Al-Faisal).