



Iran and a Middle-East zone free of all weapons of mass destruction

A Middle East Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone, proposed in 1974 by Iran, was widely endorsed. **RUTH WANGERIN** and **SHAHRIAR KHATERI** explain why the proposal was extended in 1990 by Egypt to include chemical and biological weapons. A key meeting in December 2012 to discuss establishing a Middle-East zone free of all weapons of mass destruction was postponed indefinitely by certain interests. Yet this zone could end the instability and conflict in the Middle-East region. Civil society's help is needed to build a worldwide consensus that nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass destruction are totally unacceptable.

War is more than an abstract concept to people in the Middle East. Millions have lived through armed conflict, and many children in the Middle East have never known peace. The region's people have been exposed to terrifying weaponry from 'nerve gas' in Iran to 'shock and awe' bombardment in Iraq. Understandably, the desire to be free of such weapons is strong among the people of the region.

Weapons that terrorize civilians needn't exist in the Middle East. Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones (NWFZs) occupy a majority of the earth's surface including most of the Southern Hemisphere.^{1,2} A Middle East NWFZ proposed in 1974 by Iran and supported by Egypt has been widely endorsed. But a meeting set for December 2012 to discuss establishing a Middle-East zone free of all weapons of mass destruction (MEWMDFZ) has been indefinitely postponed due to disagreements on process and agenda.

Political will lacking

There is a deficit of political will when it comes to disarmament and settling outstanding conflicts in the Middle East. Some parties' agendas: Israeli settlements, international arms sales,³ regime change, are furthered by continued conflict and instability. The status quo is good business for armaments manufacturers in the US, UK,⁴ Russia, Australia, and others. In 2011, officially in response to 'tensions with Iran,' the U.S. sold almost \$39.2 billion of 'expensive warplanes and complex missile defense systems' to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman.⁵

Political will is also weak on universal nuclear disarmament, a requirement of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) of 1970.⁶ Some states have been unwilling to give up the 'deterrent' power of nuclear weapons. Perhaps in response, some other states are unwilling to give up the deterrent

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power of chemical and biological weapons, 'the poor man's atomic bomb.' Without a change of direction, states in the region could draw each other into the strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) long followed by the US and USSR.

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only nuclear-armed state in the region, retains an arsenal of 80-200 nuclear warheads⁷ while following a policy of 'opacity' (neither confirming nor denying possession of nuclear weapons) since the late 1960s.⁸ The US has guaranteed Israel's security, in part by defending it from challenges to its possession of nuclear weapons, which Israel claims are a deterrent.⁹ This deterrent comes at great cost to Israel and the region. Syria has justified its chemical weapons as a deterrent to Israel, and Egypt is thought to remain outside the Chemical Weapons Convention for the same reason. Having been threatened regularly since its 1979 revolution, attacked with chemical weapons, and placed under 'crippling sanctions,'¹⁰ Iran could also claim to need its own deterrent.

Israel is determined to keep its local monopoly on nuclear weapons, regardless of the unsustainability of such an imbalance. Yet Israel's leaders have another choice if they don't want Iran (or Egypt, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia) to strive for nuclear weapons. They could support the MEWMDFZ proposal. With a mutual security agreement in place, no country in the region would be tempted to pursue any kind of WMD. Israel could demand enforceable security assurances from its neighbors, the USA, the UK, and Russia, in exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons and its position as a regional 'superpower.'

Security for who?

Governments all over the world have reserved the right to manufacture and use the most heinous weapons ever invented in the name of 'security.' Most people think of security as *human security*, the safety and welfare of human beings.¹¹ Treaties however deal with *state security*; the territorial integrity of a state, often interpreted as 'strategic security' or military position relative to other states. Less often acknowledged but on the agenda of many negotiators is the security of *vested interests*: corporate investments or domestic political power. Human security may be endangered by enhancing these other forms of security.

The Middle East has never experienced nuclear warfare, but it has experienced something similar on a smaller scale; chemical warfare. Nuclear, chemical, and biological/toxin weapons all harm combatants and civilians indiscriminately, causing unnecessary suffering, and damage the natural environment. Their use is contrary to International Humanitarian Law,¹² so adding chemical and biological weapons to the proposal for a nuclear-weapons-free zone is important.

More than a million people died on both sides during the Iran-Iraq war, the longest conventional war of the 20th Century (1980-88).¹³ Iraq used huge quantities of chemical weapons, the first wide-scale use of such weapons since World War I, and the first use in warfare of 'nerve gas.' Long after the war, Iran is still dealing with damage to the environment and chronic health effects in those injured by the chemicals. The international community was unable to stop the use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war, just as it has been unable to hold nuclear weapons states to their obligations under the NPT.

Reasons for this ineffectiveness are informative. Iran made formal complaints to the United Nations, and seven UN investigative missions from March 1984¹⁴ confirmed that Iraq was using banned weapons. But the UN Security Council took no effective action. According to investigator Joost Hilterman, powerful forces inside the region (e.g., the Persian Gulf monarchies) and internationally (e.g., the USA) did not want the Islamic Republic of Iran to succeed.¹⁵ Iraq held it would lose the war unless it was able to repel Iranian offensives with chemical weapons; a 'force multiplier' to compensate for its lower troop numbers. The same logic may explain Israel's determination to cling to its nuclear arsenal. Egypt's population is over 10 times greater.

After the war, the U.S. and Iran both enthusiastically supported implementation of one of the strongest disarmament treaties ever negotiated: the Chemical Weapons Convention (1997), which bans altogether the manufacture and possession of chemical warfare agents, sets strict timelines for disposal of stockpiles of chemical weapons and regulates the chemical industry to keep track of any substances that could be used in manufacturing these weapons. Only eight countries have yet to ratify this treaty. Unfortunately, five of them (Egypt, Israel, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria) are in the Middle East.

The MEWMDFZ proposal

In 1990, Egypt extended the original 1974 proposal for a NWFZ in the Middle East to cover chemical and biological weapons, a change endorsed by United



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Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 687. Almost 20 years later, the 2010 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty Review Conference breathed new life into the proposal with 189 member countries calling for a conference in 2012 to establish the MEWMDFZ.¹⁶ The countries to be invited included all the members of the League of Arab States as well as Israel and Iran. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) called upon all states in the Middle East to take certain confidence-building measures: acceding to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), applying IAEA safeguards and cooperating fully with the Agency.

Within the region, at least three serious obstacles stand in the way of the MEWMDFZ: Israel's policy of 'nuclear opacity,' the unwillingness of some countries to recognize Israel (and of Israel to recognize Palestine), and the absence of peace treaties between some states/peoples. Although Israel's official policy favors the MEWMDFZ, agreeing to the IAEA 'confidence-building measures' or other steps on the road to disarmament presents a dilemma. Once Israel gives up its policy of 'opacity' and announces it has nuclear weapons, unless it also agrees to immediately disarm, it is in effect asking that other states in the region officially accept its nuclear monopoly as legitimate. In this situation, other states in the region might develop nuclear weapons to 'match' Israel. It is calculated that a regional war with fifty 15-kiloton nuclear warheads would cause 7 million immediate deaths in Egypt, almost as many in Iran and between 2.5 and 3 million in Israel.¹⁷

Building confidence

Obstacles to the MEWMDFZ also involve states outside the region. Nuclear weapons exist in nearby countries: Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Russia. The U.S. has military bases and naval vessels in the region and could potentially launch nuclear (or conventional) attacks from the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. A viable MEWMDFZ would require 'negative security guarantees,' requiring that these countries and other nuclear weapons states commit to not attacking any country in the WMD-free zone with nuclear or conventional weapons.¹⁸

Small confidence-building steps have been suggested to circumvent these obstacles. States could establish better regional communication and co-operation over issues that affect them all, such as infectious

disease control. They could agree to simultaneously ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Ratification of the CTBT by the U.S. would also move the process forward.¹⁹

In November 2012, a month before the MEWMDFZ conference was to take place in Helsinki, rumors were circulating about a possible postponement. The Arab League continued to insist on urgency and Iran said it would attend, but question marks remained over Syria and Israel's participation. Later that month, the Secretary General of the United Nations and the three convening countries: Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, issued separate announcements saying the conference had been postponed; all but the US specified the conference must be held in 2013. The U.S. statement expressed support for a conference at some future date but said 'all parties' would have to agree on a 'process and agenda' that would operate by 'consensus' and cover 'the legitimate security interests of all states in the region.'²⁰ These requirements effectively give any one state a veto.

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Civil society's importance

Efforts to achieve the MEWMDFZ are part of a global approach to free the world of nuclear weapons and other WMD. The 2010 NPT Review Conference decision triggered a very dynamic civil society discussion in the Middle East and worldwide.²¹ With the indefinite postponement of the Helsinki conference,

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civil society will have to take the lead if a Middle East WMD-free zone is to become reality.²²

While it is relatively easy for governments to acquire WMDs, and difficult for them to create binding disarmament treaties among themselves, civil society can create a setting for government collaboration and make depicting another people as 'the enemy' illegitimate as an excuse for war. It can also build a worldwide consensus that nuclear weapons and all WMD are taboo. The existing international civil society campaign to 'delegitimize' nuclear weapons and challenge the assertion that they are a 'deterrent' helps reduce any allure nuclear weapons may have as a status symbol.

At least 17 million international migrants, including many women working as domestic labourers, live in the Persian Gulf states and Israel, making nuclear disarmament in the Middle East of wider concern.²³ Civil society groups interested in the welfare of these migrant workers could be called on to participate in dialogues about the MEWMDFZ and even to request observer status at the proposed Helsinki conference.²⁴

Peace is popular

Wherever the question has been asked in public opinion polls, total nuclear disarmament has been endorsed by the majority.²⁵ Among places that have been polled are Russia (57% in 1999²⁶), the United States (77% in 1997²⁷, 62% in 2010²⁸), and most of the Middle East. In Israel (2011), 64% supported a MEWMDFZ.²⁹ In a survey of 12 Arab countries (2011), support for a NWFZ in the Middle East was between 50% and 68% in 10 out of the 12 surveyed countries, and 41% and 47% in the other two.³⁰ Though no recent poll results are available from Iran, there is reason to expect the Iranian public to favor peace, given their experience in the Iran-Iraq war. A typical view is that nuclear power plants are needed for economic development but have nothing to do with nuclear weapons, which are 'so 20th century,' in the words of Iran's president.³¹ The highest religious and political authority in Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has declared unconditionally that pursuit and possession of nuclear weapons is incompatible with Islam. As recently as August 2012, at the 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, he reaffirmed this position:

*Iran considers the use of nuclear, chemical and similar weapons as a great and unforgivable sin. We proposed the idea of 'Middle East free of nuclear weapons' and we are committed to it.*³²

Russia and the UK, international co-conveners of the Helsinki conference, seem eager to continue the MEWMDFZ process despite the conditions set by the U.S. and Israel. Non-governmental organizations with participants from around the world met at a conference in Helsinki in December 2012 to talk about the zone and urged civil society everywhere to hold the co-conveners accountable for the delay.³³

Much of the groundwork for the MEWMDFZ has been laid. The existing Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones are models where states give up 'deterrence' in return for collective security through regional treaties. Several states in these zones had nuclear weapons or the capability for their development. The IAEA, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and existing NWFZs have developed successful methods for inspection and verification. There is experience with disarmament treaties in the region (e.g., the Arab states of North Africa are part of the African NWFZ; Iran is active in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons).

Perhaps most importantly, people in the region are talking to each other. In November 2012, a group of 37 participants from Israel, Iran, Egypt, Palestine, Leba-



Tehran Peace Museum.

non, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen, Turkey, and others met in Greece for a two-day 'Athens Dialogue' to discuss the MEWMDZF.³⁴

In Iran, the Tehran Peace Museum,³⁵ affiliated with the International Network of Museums for Peace, reopened in June 2011 in a central city park with Mr Koichiro Maeda, Director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, as a special guest. The museum currently averages 1,000 visitors monthly and sponsors interactive peace education activities. One entry in the Museum's guest book was written by Tehran's

mayor, M. Bagher Qalibaf, who, like the Mayor of Hiroshima, is a member of the international organization Mayors for Peace:

When we take each other's hand in spite of our differences, then we are brothers.... We have many options and it is up to us whether we plant love or violence.... Let's hope that we all choose no other option but love.

'We have many options and it is up to us whether we plant love or violence.... Let's hope that we all choose no other option but love.' – Tehran's mayor, M. Bagher Qalibaf

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