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Working for a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East

The need for a weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-free zone in the Middle East is now more urgent than ever. As Israel's brutal assault on Gaza continues, tensions between Israel and Iran have reached an all-time high with both countries exchanging missile strikes triggered by an Israeli attack on Iran's consulate in Damascus. This latest escalation has exerted yet more pressure on a region still reeling from the disastrous civil war in Syria and enduring the violent and chaotic legacy of foreign military intervention in Iraq and Libya. CND actively supports the establishment of a WMD-free zone, which should be seen as an increasingly important step in the struggle to achieve the peaceful settlement of disputes in the region.

Introduction

Five nuclear weapons-free zones covering groups of countries have been recognised by the United Nations since the 1960s. These are geographical areas which have signed agreements banning the use, development, or deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory. 115 countries are included in these zones, which are Latin America/Caribbean, the South Pacific, the ASEAN region, Central Asia, and Africa. Mongolia is also an UN-recognised nuclear-free zone. Similar agreements have established Nuclear-Weapon Free Areas in the Antarctic, on the Seabed and in Outer Space. Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones are highly successful forms of collective security across large parts of the world, including almost the entire southern hemisphere.

Middle East

There has been discussion on establishing a nuclear weapons-free Middle East since Egypt and Iran tabled a UN General Assembly resolution calling for this in 1974. In 1990, Egypt proposed that the scope be extended to cover all weapons of mass destruction due to the growing concerns about chemical and biological weapons.

Israel is the only country in the region to possess nuclear weapons. Although its government does not confirm or deny this fact, it is estimated that they have 90 nuclear weapons. Israel has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its nuclear weapons are outside any international regulation or inspection regimes.

The 2010 NPT Review Conference highlighted the need for negotiations towards a WMD-free zone. The conference's final document identified five steps necessary to achieving the goal of establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, including convening a conference and appointing a facilitator.

The initiative continued to be discussed at NPT meetings, with the UN General Assembly mandating a conference to take place in 2019, with the Jordanian Ambassador to the UN chairing. All the countries in the region were invited to participate, as were the five officially recognised nuclear states. China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom attended, along with 22 states from the region, but the United States and Israel stayed away. The political declaration following the conference did not announce anything new, but the summits have continued on an annual basis.

The fourth session – which again Israel did not attend – was held in November 2023, soon after the start of Israel's war on Gaza. Participating governments articulated profound concern and condemnation regarding two recent nuclear threats made by high-ranking Israeli officials, including a statement by the Israeli Minister of Heritage threatening to use nuclear weapons on Gaza. The Conference decided that its fifth session would be held in November 2024, with members emphasising the necessity for Israel to participate.

Other zones

There is a strong record of establishing nuclear weapons-free zones internationally, including states that have had, or have the capacity to develop, nuclear weapons. The Treaty of Pelindaba (signed 1996, ratified 2009) established a nuclear weapon-free zone in Africa. As part of that, South Africa set a precedent by becoming the first state with nuclear weapon capabilities to enter into a NWFZ, after getting rid of its nuclear weapons. The Treaty of Tlatelolco, which prohibits nuclear weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (signed 1967, ratified 1969) includes two signatories, Argentina and Brazil, with large nuclear power industries with the capability of developing nuclear weapons. But the treaty provided a mechanism by which non-

proliferation became the norm and the perceived need for pursuing nuclear weapons was defused.

The creation of these regional treaties has encouraged cooperation between countries and possible threats have been transferred into agreements on maintaining peace.

Other obstacles to peace

There are of course other significant obstacles to overcome before a similar zone can be established in the Middle East. Talks have been ongoing for decades but with no concrete results, due to deep-rooted disagreements between some countries in the region.

There have been longstanding concerns about Iran's nuclear power programme, with some believing that Iran intended to develop nuclear weapons – an intention denied by the Iranian government. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, initiated by President Obama and Rouhani, was a positive development for the region. It set limits on Iran's nuclear activities in return for an easing of sanctions. But the US withdrawal in 2018, followed by the re-imposition of sanctions and the targeted killing of one of Iran's top officials, caused increased tension. It is understood that Iran has subsequently increased the level of uranium enrichment that it undertakes.

Since fighting began in 2011, the civil war in Syria has exacerbated divisions in the region, and deep problems remain in Iraq, a country which has been economically and physically devastated by the US-led war and occupation.

Another complicating factor is that Turkey hosts US nuclear weapons on its territory.

Security

Overcoming these significant obstacles will require a lot of diplomatic work. But the benefits to the Middle East and the rest of the world would be huge. Nuclear weapons are horrific weapons of mass destruction that threaten the lives of millions. Steps towards ensuring this region is free of all weapons of mass destruction must surely be a priority for the international community.

Policymakers and the public in the region would do well to look to the African and Latin American examples. They demonstrate how regional security can be far more effectively achieved through co-operative, transparent and rigorously verified security frameworks.

Every country in the region apart from one has signed the NPT, a positive start in establishing a WMD-free zone.

Conclusion

The most immediate and urgent concern facing the Middle East is the need to end the war on Gaza. CND calls on the UK government to work towards an immediate ceasefire.

In addition, CND calls on the British government to promote sustained and sincere dialogue without preconditions between the countries of the region. The UK should take more effective measures in UN and NPT forums to promote a WMD-free zone.

A WMD-free zone could represent a significant step towards global disarmament and completely transform security relations within one of the world's most unstable regions. A nuclear weapons-free Middle East is central to the fight for a just, peaceful, and stable region and a crucial component in the struggle for a nuclear weapons-free world.

