Nuclear risk in the Middle East is escalating

In the context of the current conflict in the Middle East, CND General Secretary Kate Hudson looks at Israel’s nuclear weapons system and its impact on regional – and global – tensions.

LAST WEEK’S ATTACK on Yemen is a dangerous escalation of the war in the Middle East. The attack is intended to halt the Houthi support for the people of Gaza that has taken the form of attacks on Israel-bound shipping. But as the Houthis have made clear, the attacks will not end their support for the Palestinians. The only way to stop this escalating conflict in the Middle East, is to stop the war on Gaza: to implement a permanent ceasefire, and to ensure sovereignty for Palestine, as enshrined in UN resolutions and international law.

The alternative is the further spread of war, to Yemen, Lebanon, and even to Iran. This is the most dangerous time for more than two decades in the Middle East and it raises the spectre of nuclear weapons use. Israel’s nuclear arsenal, which it refuses to formally acknowledge, comes under no international controls or inspections. Yet it has an enormous killing capacity – and Israel is the only nuclear weapons state in the Middle East. Recent rhetoric from a number of
Israel politicians suggests a willingness to use their nuclear weapons; if the conflict were to extend to Iran, who can say that Israel would not use its nuclear weapons on non-nuclear Iran?

So what does the Israeli nuclear arsenal look like? The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) outlines estimates between 90 and 300 nuclear weapons. SIPRI also reports that since 2021, there has been significant construction taking place at the Negev Nuclear Research Centre near Dimona, in southern Israel. Some may remember that the great Israeli nuclear whistle-blower, Mordechai Vanunu, worked as a technician at Dimona, before revealing details of the secret Israeli nuclear programme to the British press in 1986. The purpose of the recent works isn’t known.

Israel has air, land and sea-based delivery systems for its nuclear arsenal. Bombs can be dropped from planes, either the F-161 or the F-15 aircraft, and are likely to be stored near air force bases such as Tel Nof airbase in central Israel, or Hatzerim airbase in the Negev desert.

Israel’s nuclear weapons can also be launched on land-based Jericho ballistic missiles. And Israel also operates five German-built Dolphin-class diesel-electric submarines from the port of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. Some or all of these subs may have been equipped to launch a nuclear-armed cruise missile.

By any estimate, this is a formidable array of weapons of mass destruction and it gives Israel the capacity to inflict catastrophic damage on its neighbours.

The war on Gaza must end; it must end with a ceasefire, and with peace and justice for the Palestinians. And it must end, to stop the unthinkable risk of a nuclear war in the Middle East.
Roadmap to a dead-end

CND Campaigns Director Sara Medi Jones assesses the government’s latest nuclear power announcement.

It’s only mid-January and we have already had two major nuclear power announcements in 2024. A long-awaited ‘roadmap’ of nuclear power expansion was unveiled earlier this month, with the government promising to accelerate new nuclear projects. And this week we’ve just heard that construction of the Sizewell C nuclear station in Suffolk should be a step closer.

But the problem is – nuclear is a dead-end technology that is not the answer to our climate or energy needs.

Plans for eight new nuclear sites laid out in 2011 have largely stalled, with the only two projects to have got off the ground – Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C – beset with problems. Costs at Hinkley Point have spiralled by 30% to £33 billion, and the start date repeatedly pushed back. Sizewell C is struggling to attract private financing, and despite building permission finally being granted now, there are still many hurdles to clear.

The nuclear roadmap’s main aims are to ‘explore’ another nuclear site, develop small modular reactors, secure more investment, and engage the private sector more.

But we are unlikely to see any meaningful progress, because nuclear power in its very essence is a dangerous and economically unsustainable technology. It burdens future generations with a potential human and environmental disaster that is not compensated for by the expensive electricity provided.

Any new nuclear projects would take decades to build. But we need an answer to our cost of living struggle and to climate change now. Even if nuclear power capacity was doubled worldwide by 2050 (a hugely ambitious ask in itself), it would only result in a 4% reduction in emissions.

The debate and investment into trying to develop new nuclear energy projects divert funds and political motivation away from further developing truly renewable energy sources, which is the real solution.

We must also bear in mind the main reason this government is so in favour of nuclear power – it helps to ensure the infrastructure and skilled personnel is in place to maintain and manufacture Britain’s nuclear weapons system, Trident.

During this time of global instability and increased nuclear risk, Britain would do well to forget about propping up their weapons of mass destruction and instead focus on delivering the things that people in this country need, including a functioning and sustainable energy system.
What’s on: For a full, updated list of events, see cnduk.org/events/

Ceasefire now! – The big Birmingham demo for Palestine
20 January 12 noon.
Assemble Sparkhill Park
Contact wmcdnall@gmail.com

Palestine stories of struggle, resistance and hope
20 January 2pm-4pm
Gallery Frank at Ebor Studio, William Street, Littleborough OL15 8JP
Contact patsanchez@phonecoop.coop

Peace Poetry Night with Scottish CND
25 January 7:30pm
Kirk Lounge at The Renfield Centre, 260 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4JP
Contact scnd@banthebomb.org

Student/Young Pugwash AI conference
27 January 10am
Strand campus at King’s College London, WC2R 2LS
To register, contact office@britishpugwash.org

Nuclear Amageddon: How Close Are We?
Watch Panorama documentary this Thursday
‘Nuclear Armageddon: How Close Are We?’ will air on BBC Two this Thursday 18 January at 9pm. The documentary explores the global proliferation of nuclear weapons and the dangers they pose in a world of increasing conflict.
Late last year, CND activists joined the Panorama team at RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk to discuss our campaign against the return of US nuclear weapons to Britain.
We encourage everyone to watch it and post your thoughts on social media, tagging CND!

Meet the staff
This month:
Rachel Earlington, Parliamentary Officer

Hello to you in 2024! We had such a busy year in 2023 and I’m always thankful to work for CND at such critical times in global politics. So many of you took the time last year to support our parliamentary initiatives. Whether that’s writing to your MP or carrying our banner at a demonstration, your actions have really helped to strengthen our anti-war and no nukes messaging throughout parliament.

There are a couple of big things to be considered this year from a Parliamentary point of view. We know that a General Election must be called by this time next year, and it’s clear that many people want change. So, CND will be engaging with members and supporters to find out potential candidates’ views on nuclear weapons.

Another key task for us is to highlight the government’s irresponsible spending priorities. There are so many money-draining problems with the current Trident submarines whilst at the same time, unlimited resources have been thrown at the replacement programme when many are struggling with the cost of living. This year, we will continue to work on government spending pledges to enable us to update CND’s cost of Trident replacement figure.

For a Nuclear-Free Middle East. GM&D CND AGM 2024
3 February
Bridge 5 Mill, 22A Beswick Street, Manchester M4 7HR
Contact gmdcnd@gn.apc.org

Drop a line at E. P. Thompson at 100
3 February 10am-3:30pm
Trinity Sixth Form Academy, Northgate House, Halifax
Contact info@yorkshirecnd.org.uk

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