



Weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East

As tensions continue to mount in the Middle East, so does the need for a weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-free zone in the region. Forty years after such a zone was first proposed, the need for one remains as urgent as ever. The disastrous civil war in Syria rages on, foreign military intervention in Iraq and Libya has resulted in upheaval and further violence while there is no settlement in sight to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. 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

Nuclear weapons-free zones are legally-acknowledged geographical areas which have signed agreements prohibiting the use, development or deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory. Five zones have been recognised by the United Nations (UN) since the 1960s.

115 countries are included in these zones, which are Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Central Asia and Africa. Mongolia is also a UN-recognised nuclear-free zone. Similar agreements have established nuclear weapon-free areas in the Antarctic, on the sea-bed and in outer space. Large parts of the world are covered by these zones, including almost the entire southern hemisphere.

There have been attempts to establish a nuclear weapons-free Middle East since 1974, following a UN General Assembly resolution by Egypt and Iran. In 1990, the scope was extended to cover all weapons of mass destruction due to growing concerns about chemical and biological weapons.

The 2010 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference highlighted the need for negotiations towards a WMD-free zone, including call to convene a conference and appointing a facilitator. The UN Secretary-General and the NPT Depositary States (Russia, the United States and the UK) are to share responsibility for monitoring the process. Finland has been designated the host country for a future conference, with Finnish Under-Secretary of

State for Foreign and Security Policy Jaakko Laajava selected as facilitator. A conference due to be held in Helsinki in December 2012 was postponed indefinitely when Israel refused to attend. Laajava has continued to host multilateral consultations since then to try and re-arrange the meeting, but those involved are not hopeful of any imminent progress.

The prospects seem even bleaker after the latest NPT Review Conference ended in failure, with diplomats failing to agree on a final document, largely due to the issue of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. The US, UK and Canada were unable to accept Egypt's demand for a conference to be held within six months, with or without Israel's participation.

Successful zones

A nuclear weapon-free zone was established in Africa following the 1996 Treaty of Pelindaba. South Africa set a precedent in becoming the first state with nuclear weapons to disarm and enter into a nuclear weapon-free zone agreement. The Treaty of Tlatelolco – committing Latin America and the Caribbean to be nuclear weapon-free – was signed by two countries, Argentina and Brazil, which had the capability to develop nuclear weapons due to their large nuclear power industries. The treaty provided a mechanism by which non-proliferation became the norm and the perceived need for pursuing nuclear weapons systems was defused.

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

Obstacles to peace

As we have seen, there are significant obstacles to overcome before a similar zone can be established in the Middle East. The region is volatile and unstable after centuries of western intervention. Talks to establish a WMD-free zone have been ongoing for decades but with no concrete results. Israel repeatedly hinders progress, by claiming that the establishment of a zone would need to be agreed in the context of a broader Middle East peace plan. Israel is also the only country in the region to actually possess nuclear weapons. Although the government does not confirm or deny this fact, it is estimated that Israel has 80 bombs. Israel has not signed the NPT and would only be able to do so after disarming its nuclear weapons.

Many countries, as well as the UN Security Council, have voiced concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions. A recent agreement with Tehran on limiting aspects of its nuclear development programme in return for an easing of sanctions should however provide some confidence in the possibility of a wider agreement.

International treaties to ban both chemical and biological weapons already exist, but not all of the countries in the region have signed. Egypt, Iran and Israel are suspected by some of possessing these weapons. Egypt is known to have used mustard gas in the Yemeni civil war from 1963 to 1967 but more recent reports doubt they still have a stockpile or the capabilities to produce more. Iran denounces biological and chemical weapons but the Center for Strategic and International Studies in the US believes Tehran maintains facilities for their production. Israel refuses to sign the Biological Weapons Convention. Military evidence almost certainly confirms the country possessed chemical weapons in the past, though the current status of these weapons is not confirmed.

The civil war in Syria has contributed to the instability of the region, with the fighting further complicating political divisions in the Middle East. Over ten years since the illegal invasion in 2003, Iraq remains economically and physically devastated by western intervention which has created many additional political problems and divisions within the country. 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 of the world's population. Steps towards supporting the region to be free of all weapons of mass destruction should be a priority for the international community.

Policymakers and the public in the region could look at the other examples of nuclear weapon-free zones to see how regional security can be achieved through co-operative, transparent and rigorously verified security frameworks. The ongoing talks with Iran are also an example of how dialogue and agreements can be reached, even after years of mistrust. Diplomacy also delivered in Syria in 2013, with the US and Russia signing an agreement to destroy the country's chemical weapons. Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention and the process of destroying the weapons is now underway. This achievement – which few would have believed possible – shows what can happen when the political will exists.

Conclusion

Every country in the Middle East apart from Israel has signed the NPT. This is a positive start in working towards establishing a WMD-free zone but pressure has to be put on Israel by its allies and the international community as a whole, to engage in the process. Israel is the only country in the region to possess nuclear weapons and the only country refusing to commit to attending a conference.

CND calls on the British government to promote sustained and sincere dialogue between the countries of the region. Britain should especially be pushing Israel to sign the NPT as a nuclear weapon-free state and to be prepared to agree to a WMD-free zone without any pre-conditions. The UK should take more effective measures to promote this aim in UN and NPT forums, especially considering its role as an NPT Depositor State. 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.

