

ESTABLISHING A NUCLEAR WEAPONS-FREE ZONE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East continues to be an important zone of nuclear proliferation concerns due to its ongoing geopolitical disputes. Despite international efforts, political rivalries, state mistrust, and unresolved disputes have hindered attempts to create a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ). This study examines the ongoing difficulties and implications of establishing a NWFZ in this unstable area. The lack of mutual security assurances, the unwillingness of nuclear-capable governments to disarm, and the involvement of other entities that exacerbate regional complexity are some of the main obstacles. This study uses a qualitative approach to evaluate the viability of a NWFZ by looking at historical and current regional dynamics. The results emphasise the importance of international mediation, regional collaboration, and confidence-building initiatives in promoting trust between governments. Global powers must take a proactive stance to handle security issues and guarantee fair agreements. The paper emphasises that comprehensive diplomatic efforts and reciprocal security guarantees are crucial to moving closer to an NWFZ.

Keywords: Middle East, nuclear, proliferation, NWFZ.

INTRODUCTION

During the Cold War, the main cause of the Middle East's notable surge in nuclear proliferation was regional security dynamics. In their intense geopolitical rivalry, the US and the USSR attempted to control nuclear aspirations strategically and diplomatically. Iran was an ally of the United States of America until relations soured during the 1979 revolution, whereas Egypt, Iraq, and Libya were allies of the Soviet Union. Regional security concerns significantly shaped nuclear aspirations. When the British left the Persian Gulf in 1971, a power vacuum heightened tensions, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The region was further destabilised by wars like the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the civil war in Lebanon, and the nearly ten-year-long Iran-Iraq War. Under the Shah, Iran accelerated its nuclear program intending to gain regional supremacy. (Andrea K. Boylan, 2018) During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran renewed its efforts

by obtaining nuclear technology covertly. Driven by the Iran-Iraq War and regional rivalry, Iraq intensified its nuclear endeavours, especially following the 1981 Israeli raid on the Osirak reactor. Driven by ambitions to dominate the Arab world, Libya sought a nuclear weapon to oppose Israel, while Saudi Arabia's purchase of missile systems with nuclear-capable warheads highlighted its strategic goals.

The Middle East's proliferation dynamics have become even more complex due to nuclear technology's dual-use nature. Although it was first created for peaceful uses like energy production and medical applications, nuclear technology can also be used for military goals like creating nuclear bombs. Under the pretence of energy independence and scientific progress, this dual-use feature has enabled regional states to continue civilian nuclear programs while gaining the knowledge and

resources required for possible weaponisation. Examples of developments essential to creating nuclear weapons include improvements in uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, which are also important for civilian energy initiatives. Due to this uncertainty, international oversight organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) work to distinguish between military and peaceful objectives. Due to the widespread mistrust and security concerns in the Middle East, dual-use technology has intensified regional rivalries. This uncertainty has been used by nations such as Iran to build substantial nuclear facilities, which has alarmed their neighbours. The prospect of a regional weapons race has also been raised by Saudi Arabia's pursuit of nuclear energy. The Middle East's unstable security situation and nuclear technology's inherent dual-use potential continue to be major obstacles to international non-proliferation efforts.

The necessity for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East is highlighted by the region's continuous proliferation trends. A NWFZ would act as a comprehensive framework to avoid the exploitation of dual-use technologies while addressing the security concerns that push states towards nuclear ambitions. In addition to providing strong verification and enforcement procedures, a NWFZ might reduce these hazards by requiring governments to refrain from creating, obtaining, or possessing nuclear weapons. Furthermore, it would impose the responsibility for avoiding any development or support of nuclear weapons programs in the region on nations outside the region. With the history of violence and proliferation in the Middle East, an NWFZ provides a means of reducing tensions and fostering collective security, laying the groundwork for long-term peace and regional collaboration.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Globally, the Middle East is still one of the most unstable areas due to its long-running hostilities, geopolitical rivalry, and developing nuclear aspirations. Notwithstanding global initiatives such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), governments have been able to secretly pursue nuclear weaponisation under the pretence of civilian programs due to the dual-use nature of nuclear technology. The lack of trust and the prevailing

security concerns have increased the risks of nuclear proliferation, while countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq have stepped up their nuclear endeavours. The construction of a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ) has been further hampered by regional factors such as unsolved territory disputes, ideological differences, and power vacuums. These difficulties pose a threat to regional stability as well as the possibility of a nuclear arms race with potentially catastrophic worldwide repercussions. This research aims to shed light on the intricacies of establishing an NWFZ in the Middle East by examining the current obstacles and possible consequences of such an endeavour.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following are the objectives of the research:

1. To examine the geopolitical and strategic elements influencing the Middle East's nuclear proliferation and how they affect the creation of a zone free of nuclear weapons.
2. To determine the main challenges to the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the region.
3. To evaluate the effects of a NWFZ on global security, international non-proliferation initiatives, and regional stability.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for examining the possibility of creating a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East is qualitative and integrates security, geopolitical, and historical considerations. This study examines the regional dynamics, focussing on the power struggles and the security threats posed by nuclear weapons in nations such as Israel and Iran. It analyses recent studies, government publications, and important treaties to assess the possible advantages of a NWFZ for non-proliferation, nuclear risk reduction, and regional stability. The study also discusses the political and diplomatic barriers, including Israel's deterrence policy and the competing interests of superpowers like China, Russia, and the United States. The paper's data has been collected from a range of scholarly books, research papers, and official reports, including those published by international organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United Nations. For a thorough grasp of nuclear non-proliferation initiatives,

important treaties and agreements, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), were also examined. The study also examined the security concerns and geopolitical dynamics surrounding the creation of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East by consulting government publications and scholarly literature.

DISCUSSION

It is crucial to address the intricate and multifaceted nature of the security dynamics in the Middle East before delving into the difficulties in creating a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) there. Any disarmament attempts are complicated by the Middle East's long-standing geopolitical conflicts, rivalries, and lack of confidence among regional countries. The formation of a NWFZ is further complicated by the refusal of some regional states to participate in nuclear non-proliferation protocols. With an emphasis on the regional power struggles, and the verification and compliance concerns that come with such a proposal, the discussion will delve deeper into these difficulties.

Challenges to Establishing a NWFZ in the Middle East

Rivalries and mistrust among regional powers

Middle Eastern geopolitical tensions are deeply ingrained, with rivalries and mistrust amongst regional countries influencing the stability of the area. The security dynamics of the region are greatly impacted by this intricate web of relationships, especially when it comes to nuclear non-proliferation and the potential creation of a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ). These tensions stem from the competition between major regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. Iran's nuclear aspirations, which many see as an existential danger to the regional power structure, exacerbate tensions with Israel and the Gulf Arab governments, who see Iran having nuclear weapons as a destabilising force. Iran, on the other hand, believes that the military presence of Western nations in the area, especially the US, poses a threat to its sovereignty and influence.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which frequently manifests as proxy conflicts, introduces still another level of complication. A strong opponent of Iran's nuclear aspirations, Saudi Arabia has declared that if Iran is successful in producing nuclear weapons, it will pursue them.(CRS, 2024) As a result, other

regional actors may consider nuclear proliferation as a realistic alternative in a risky arms competition. Despite having nuclear weapons, Israel has kept its nuclear arsenal ambiguous.(Andrea K. Boylan, 2018) One indicator of its resistance to accepting international control over its nuclear weapons is its unwillingness to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This position makes it more difficult to create a NWFZ in the Middle East because any regional agreement must include Israel dismantling its nuclear weapons, according to other regional actors, particularly Iran. However, Israel contends that, in light of the hostile environment and the absence of trustworthy security guarantees from international powers, its nuclear deterrence is crucial to its national security.

Israel's Deterrence Policy

There are several issues with Israel's nuclear strategy, especially because it refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its nuclear ambiguity over its Dimona reactor, which is thought to produce plutonium suitable for nuclear weapons. Israel's deterrence strategy, which aims to offer a last-resort security option against existential threats, is centred on this purposeful policy of ambiguity. Israel views nuclear deterrence as essential to its survival because it is encircled by states with powerful conventional forces. Clear accountability is impossible due to the uncertainty surrounding its nuclear capabilities, which poses a problem for both international relations and regional stability. The strategy has widespread support throughout Israel's political spectrum with most of its people supporting its continuation and viewing nuclear deterrence as essential to national security. Furthermore, because of concern that openness would undermine its deterrence, Israel continuously opposes international demands to join the NPT or permit inspections of Dimona. Although it is challenging to test the policy empirically, Israel contends that deterrence has worked well in stopping assaults, citing Iraq's 1991 choice to forgo chemical weapons and Egypt's restraint during the 1973 conflict as examples. Israel views nuclear deterrence as crucial despite its shortcomings, barring major political shifts in the area. (Steinberg, 1998) Lastly, as long as there are regional problems, particularly with nations like Iran, Israel is expected to maintain its nuclear capacity. There is no chance of eliminating its nuclear weapons until a

comprehensive and long-lasting peace agreement is reached. (Bahgat, 2007)

Linking the NWFZ to the global NPT of the IAEA regime

Due to institutional and regional differences, the creation of a NWFZ in the Middle East is troubled with difficulties. Arab nations—especially Egypt—call for the inclusion of a NWFZ in the international framework, highlighting Israel's necessity of joining the NPT and submitting its nuclear sites to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. Israel, however, disagrees, claiming that this kind of integration defeats the intent of a NWFZ. While Israel favours regional mechanisms separate from international organisations, Egypt emphasises the importance of international organisations like the UN and IAEA in bolstering regional security. Disarmament is made more difficult by the fact that Israel's nuclear deterrence strategy is based on dealing with more general security threats, such as conventional forces and chemical and biological weapons. Deep differences on this subject were highlighted in 1994 when the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group, which had previously offered a forum for discussion, broke up over differences over connecting the NWFZ to the NPT. Even the Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1994, which calls for a Middle East free of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), leaves important questions unsolved because it makes no explicit mention of nuclear weapons, the NPT, or IAEA safeguards. The establishment of a workable NWFZ in the area is hindered by these enduring disputes and security worries. (Steinberg, 1998)

Safeguards and Verification Issue

Verification and security issues are major obstacles to the creation of a NWFZ in the Middle East. As evidenced by Iraq, North Korea, and doubts about Iran, international institutions such as the NPT and IAEA have shown weaknesses. The legitimacy of the IAEA is weakened by its susceptibility to political influence, which includes nations rejecting inspectors or tampering with safeguards. (IAEA, 1983) Additionally, some states, like Israel, are not represented on the IAEA Board of Governors, a political organisation, which exacerbates mistrust in the region. Because of its varied political structures,

which range from open democracies to strictly regulated dictatorships, the Middle East presents extra challenges. The inadequacies of international processes have been revealed by closed civilisations with vast regions, such as Iraq, that have hidden weapons programs from inspectors. Regional views on verification are still divided. While Arab governments, led by Egypt, stress adherence to the NPT and a central role for the IAEA, in line with their larger objective of connecting regional measures to global frameworks, Israel promotes a mutual regional verification mechanism free from international political influence. Since confidence is key to preventing clandestine projects, states such as Syria, Iran, and Libya must cooperate regionally and recognise one another for verification to be effective. Regional systems are viable, but they would need to be significantly modified to accommodate Middle Eastern circumstances, as demonstrated by the lessons learnt from the Treaty of Tlatelolco and the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC) in Latin America. (Steinberg, 1998)

Establishing a Broader Security Framework

The development of nuclear capabilities in the Middle East is strongly linked to more general security issues, such as conventional and unconventional military threats. Because of the region's disparities in population, land area, and conventional military power, the nuclear deterrent is seen as a component of a larger strategy that addresses several security issues rather than being considered in isolation. A Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (MENWFZ) needs more extensive restrictions on conventional and non-conventional military capabilities to be successful. This involves the complicated process of stabilising conventional armament levels, which is based on precedents such as the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) agreements. Despite peace initiatives, there is still a serious risk of conventional battles in the area since Israel, a nation with military and geographic imbalances, views conventional forces from more powerful neighbours like Syria, Egypt, and Iraq as existential threats. Israel's susceptibility to conventional attacks has been brought to light by historical occurrences including the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the connection between nuclear

weapons constraints and other WMDs, including chemical and biological weapons, with regional debates highlighting the necessity of comprehensive arms control to handle these threats holistically.(Steinberg, 1998)

Implications of a Middle Eastern NWFZ

The establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) can significantly impact the Middle East's security, political stability, and international nuclear non-proliferation initiatives. This section examines the potential implications of such a framework on regional and global security.

Regional Security

The creation of a NWFZ in the Middle East has great potential to improve regional security. The institutionalisation of non-proliferation standards might be extremely beneficial to the region, which is characterised by long-running conflicts, rivalries, and a changing geopolitical landscape.

Stabilising Power Dynamics and Reducing Nuclear Risks

The stabilisation of power dynamics throughout the region is one of the main effects of a Middle Eastern NWFZ. Asymmetries in political influence and military have long plagued the Middle East. The security architecture has long been governed by nations such as Israel, which has an unreported but commonly assumed nuclear arsenal. Rival powers have frequently sought countermeasures, such as nuclear proliferation attempts, in response to this perceived imbalance.

An NWFZ would create a regional commitment to denuclearisation, so addressing these asymmetries. It would force all sides to give up pursuing or acquiring nuclear weapons, including Israel, Iran, and Arab nations. An NWFZ might lessen the mistrust and security issues that fuel weapons races by levelling the strategic playing field. Additionally, it might act as a measure to boost confidence, promoting increased communication and collaboration between regional states. Furthermore, a NWFZ in the Middle East may lessen the possibility that nuclear technology might end up in the wrong hands. There are serious dangers of nuclear theft or sabotage in the region due to its unstable political environment, which includes weak nations and non-state actors acting across porous borders. These risks might be lessened by

legally binding agreements to safeguard nuclear materials combined with international supervision.

Mitigating Escalation During Crises

From proxy wars to interstate wars, the Middle East has seen many crises that have put the region's stability to the test. The presence of nuclear weapons or the belief that they could be used could greatly intensify tensions in such a high-stress setting. In times of crisis, a NWFZ would lessen the likelihood of nuclear brinkmanship. For example, states would be less likely to misjudge the intentions of their opponents if nuclear deterrence were no longer a threat. The temptation to use nuclear weapons as leverage in talks or as a way to win immediate military victory would likewise be eliminated if they were no longer present. An NWFZ would have a de-escalating effect on more general security frameworks. By creating a zone, the area might get access to global systems for ensuring adherence and settling conflicts. To reduce tensions and stop nuclear aspirations from resurfacing, organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and outside mediators may be extremely important.

Global Impacts

The conflicts in the Middle East continue to be intricately linked to outside forces, ideological disagreements, and regional power rivalries, making it a focal point of instability on a worldwide scale.(Faisal Khalifa Al Farsi, 2018) The creation of a Middle Eastern Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) will have global ramifications, which would fortify the international non-proliferation framework and lower the risks of nuclear catastrophes.

Strengthening Non-Proliferation Norms

A NWFZ in the Middle East would support international efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Concerns about nuclear proliferation have historically centred on the region, with Israel and Iran being the focus of close examination. An NWFZ in the Middle East would strengthen the validity of agreements like the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) by establishing a framework that binds all regional states to denuclearisation.

Other unstable areas might be encouraged to take comparable action by this campaign. For example,

the Middle Eastern approach might be seen as a workable model for South Asia, East Asia, and other regions with high nuclear threats. The establishment of a Middle Eastern NWFZ would give global disarmament efforts impetus by proving that it is possible to denuclearise long-standing disputes. Additionally, it would bolster the oversight of compliance by international organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). To ensure that nuclear technology is utilised responsibly and safely, improved inspection regimes, verification procedures, and technical assistance for peaceful nuclear energy will strengthen the international commitment to non-proliferation.

Reducing the Risk of Nuclear Terrorism and Misuse

Nuclear terrorism is still a concern on a worldwide scale, particularly in areas with unstable political systems and inadequate governance. The Middle East is especially vulnerable because of its open borders and active insurgency organisations. Stricter security measures for nuclear materials and installations would be implemented in a NWFZ, decreasing the possibility that these assets might end up in the hands of terrorist groups. Furthermore, to further reduce the possibility of misuse, a NWFZ might also have procedures for exchanging intelligence and coordinating law enforcement efforts against illegal nuclear trafficking. The effective creation of a Middle Eastern NWFZ would, on a larger scale, strengthen the international prohibition on nuclear weapons and discourage governments or non-state actors from pursuing nuclear capabilities in other regions. The effort would help create a more secure and safe world by showcasing the concrete advantages of denuclearisation.

Economic and Diplomatic Gains

Beyond non-proliferation and security, a Middle Eastern NWFZ holds great promise for boosting the region's diplomatic position and opening up economic prospects.

Encouraging Economic Investment and Cooperation

A denuclearised Middle East would demonstrate the region's commitment to peace and stability, sending a strong message to international markets. Such an

atmosphere is essential to draw in foreign direct investment (FDI) and promote economic expansion. A NWFZ would offer guarantees of long-term security, and investors are more inclined to participate in nations with lower war risk. Furthermore, funds that are currently used for military spending, such as the development of nuclear weapons, may be used for economic growth instead. To promote sustainable growth, regional nations might make investments in vital areas like renewable energy, infrastructure, and education. Creating a NWFZ may also encourage economic cooperation in the area. States would find it simpler to work together on projects like trade agreements, cooperative energy projects, and infrastructural connectivity if there was less mistrust between them. Deeper political collaboration may be based on this economic integration, creating a positive feedback loop of peace and prosperity.

Promoting a Peaceful Image of the Region Internationally

Conflict and instability have long influenced the Middle East's standing in the world. A NWFZ would represent a significant change and present the area as an active participant in maintaining world peace and security. States in the Middle East may be able to play a more significant part in international forums as a result of this change in their diplomatic position. The establishment of a NWFZ would also show that the area is capable of resolving complicated issues through cooperation and multilateralism. Promoting other international causes like climate change, sustainable development, and human rights, would increase the legitimacy of Middle Eastern governments. A calm Middle East might draw more international interest from the standpoint of tourism and cultural diplomacy. Through tourism, nations in the area might diversify their economies and increase their soft power by leveraging their rich histories and cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

A nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East is still an ideal but extremely difficult goal. Nuclear disarmament efforts in the region are nonetheless hindered by enduring geopolitical tensions, political mistrust, and long-standing rivalries. This article emphasises how the difficulty of establishing a regional NWFZ is increased by the lack of mutual security guarantees and the

resistance of nuclear-capable states to disarm. Nonetheless, the research emphasises the possibility of advancement with thorough international mediation, regional cooperation, and strong steps to foster confidence. To solve the security issues that Middle Eastern governments face, the participation of international powers is essential since it guarantees fair and legally binding agreements. Nuclear risks can also be decreased by establishing a culture of trust via open communication and mutual agreements. This article suggests that, despite the enormous obstacles, a road towards reducing nuclear dangers can be found through gradual and persistent diplomatic efforts combined with an emphasis on global security institutions like the IAEA. The international community must place a high priority on improved communication, collaboration, and fair security arrangements if a NWFZ is to be implemented. The Middle East's long-standing nuclear proliferation issues can only be successfully resolved by a concerted and tenacious strategy.

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