

Toward a WMD-Free Middle East

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[Daryl G. Kimball](#)

By the end of this year, representatives from more than a dozen Middle Eastern states may come together for an unprecedented meeting in Helsinki on creating a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Given their history of conflict; the presence of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in the region; and the prospect of further proliferation, these states can ill afford to squander the opportunity.

Clearly, a Middle Eastern WMD-free zone is a daunting and distant goal. But the step-by-step pursuit of such a zone can strengthen the security of all states in the region over time. Severe tensions over Iran's nuclear program, as well as Syria's brutal civil war, threaten to derail the meeting. Delaying the process, however, will only worsen the proliferation risks in the future.

For more than two decades, all of the states of the Middle East have voiced support for a regional zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. Not surprisingly, chronic distrust and animosity between Israel and its Arab neighbors have stymied progress.

Finally, in 2010 the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference agreed, for the first time, to convene a conference of all Middle Eastern states on such a zone by 2012. Last year, Finland was called to facilitate the conference with the support of Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

To date, no one has turned down the invitation from conference coordinator Jaakko Laajava, but not everyone has accepted. The participation of Iran and Israel is most in doubt.

The United States played a critical role in winning support at the 2010 NPT conference for the meeting on the Middle Eastern WMD-free zone. Now, Washington must work even harder to bring key states, particularly Israel, to the table.

Israel has long asserted that a dialogue on limiting WMD capabilities in the region cannot advance without progress toward normal and peaceful relations. Israel is leery of the proposed conference because it could spotlight the Israeli arsenal of 75 to 200 nuclear weapons and the country's absence from the NPT.

But if Israel does not join the talks on regional WMD control issues, it will only draw more attention to its 45-year-old regional nuclear weapons monopoly and provide others with an excuse to maintain or improve their WMD and missile capabilities.

By engaging in the process of negotiating a WMD-free zone, Israeli leaders can underscore the need to address the threats posed by Syria's chemical arsenal and Iran's uranium-enrichment program, open a much needed security dialogue with Arab states, and help put into motion overdue steps that verifiably curtail the WMD potential of its neighbors.

For Iran, the meeting is an opportunity to lend credibility to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's fatwa against nuclear weapons and to reinforce the taboo against chemical weapons, which were used by Saddam Hussein in the brutal Iran-Iraq war. If Tehran is a no-show or spoiler at the Helsinki conference, it would only increase suspicions that it is seeking nuclear weapons and

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deepen its political isolation.

The United States and other countries can help by pushing Egypt and other Arab governments to engage in a serious and sustained technical dialogue on region-wide WMD issues, rather than simply using the forum to chide Israel. For instance, the meeting provides an opportunity to send a united message to Tehran to limit its enrichment work to the level of power reactor fuel and immediately cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify that past nuclear weapons-related experiments have stopped.

Over time, a dialogue on a Middle Eastern WMD-free zone can explore the broad framework and the interim steps that would strengthen regional peace and security. Key elements should include compliance with comprehensive IAEA safeguards and an additional protocol, a ban on production of fissile material for weapons and on uranium enrichment beyond normal fuel grade, and accession to the treaties prohibiting biological and chemical weapons.

Ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia would add another important barrier against proliferation. In addition, given that 10 states in the region have some ballistic missile capabilities, it is essential to explore mutual and verifiable limitations on the further deployment of ballistic and cruise missiles capable of carrying WMD payloads.

The states should also consider legally binding assurances against attacks involving nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, backed by security guarantees from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in the event any state is subjected to a WMD attack.

As a 1991 UN study on the Middle Eastern zone noted, "Only a series of steps that reduce tensions drastically can bring the parties to a serious negotiation. And even then it would not be expected that the negotiations would be quick and easy or that the zone—when agreed—can be fully realized without an extended transition."

The road ahead will be difficult, but the time to begin is now.

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