

# **The UN Conference on a Middle East WMDFZ: Another Milestone toward a Utopian Goal?**

Shimon Stein | No. 1543 | December 21, 2021

**Following a one-year delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDFZ) was held at the United Nations on November 29-December 3, 2021. The UN conference did not serve as a platform for an offensive against Israel, beyond calling for it to join the NPT, and it endorsed the principle of consensus. Still, it is doubtful whether a decision on the establishment of the conference as a permanent mechanism until the drafting of a treaty will change Israel's opposition in principle to the guidelines of the discussion. However, Israel would do well to consult with the US administration ahead of the upcoming NPT Review Conference scheduled for January 2022, with the goal of reaching a coordinated position, and present an initiative to establish a framework for a comprehensive discussion on regional security issues.**

With a one-year delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction was held at the United Nations on November 29-December 3, 2021. The conference was the second one; the first was held in 2019. The conference derives its authority from the UN General Assembly resolution of 2018, initiated by the Arab League countries, which have worked to promote a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) since the decision on its establishment taken at the 1995 NPT Review Conference (RevCon). The conference is supposed to convene once a year until a convention establishing the Middle East WMDFZ is drafted.

The decision by the Arab League countries to advance a Middle East WMDFZ even outside the NPT framework reflects their continued frustration at the lack of progress on the issue since the 1995 decision, which was a milestone for them. The immediate reason for the decision to advance the UN General Assembly resolution in 2018 to act to rid the Middle East of WMD should be seen in the context of a resolution in this spirit adopted at the 2010 NPT RevCon. Following Arab pressure to move

forward on the issue, the Obama administration agreed to a demand for a conference (in 2012) to discuss the implementation of the 1995 resolution.

Despite Israel's initial opposition in principle to participation in the decision, it responded in the affirmative, but presented conditions agreed upon by the conference facilitator, Finnish diplomat Jaakko Laajava. In 2013–2014, five rounds of meetings were held with the participation of 15 countries from the Middle East. Iran participated in one of them. Arab states, having judged that a decision on a Middle East WMDFZ was unlikely, stopped the process on the eve of the NPT RevCon. The move was led by Egypt, which has been at the forefront of the Arab effort to establish the WMDFZ since the 1970s. The Egyptian demand for a decision against Israel drew opposition from the United States, Britain, and Canada, leading to the RevCon ending without a final consensus document.

In 2018, ahead of the next NPT RevCon, held every five years, the Trump administration criticized the decision of Arab states to continue meetings with the goal of bridging disagreements outside the framework of international elements, such as the NPT. The US administration's position was that the discussions must address regional security issues. The need to build trust through direct dialogue while recognizing the security concerns of each state and recognizing Israel as a sovereign state was emphasized. This position led the Arab states to draft a resolution and submit it in December 2018 to the UN General Assembly, which was adopted by a majority of 88 states. The United States and Israel objected, and EU countries abstained. Following its adoption, Israel clarified that the conference was contrary to its position on regional security and consensus decision making, and that it would not support UN resolutions on a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Therefore, it does not intend to take part in regional meetings on the issue.

The main summaries achieved at the recent conference: participants and observers described it as successful, probably due to the fact that for the first time since the 1995 decision, Middle East countries are involved in formal discussions on key aspects that will address relevant issues, even

though the discussion was poorly attended (partly due to lack of expertise on the issue in most Arab countries). Participants agreed on the guiding principles of the discussions, first and foremost on the principle of consensus decision making. It was also agreed to establish a permanent committee that would meet at least twice a year. It was decided that the committee could set up subcommittees, which could invite experts to discuss issues related to the establishment of the WMDFZ. In addition, it was decided that the committee would establish a mechanism that would contribute to the work of the annual conferences for the formulation of the convention on the WMDFZ.

Apart from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Yemen, the UK and France, which participated as observers, also addressed the Iranian issue, expressed concern about the nuclear program, and called on Iran to fully implement the nuclear deal of 2015 and cooperate with the IAEA. Iran expressed regret that the issue was raised. For their part, representatives of Syria and Iran emphasized that the NPT conferences are a parallel and complementary route to the implementation of the 1995 resolution. Presumably this view is shared by the other participants as well, which is to say: the issue will continue to be on the agenda of the NPT RevCons.

It was further agreed that discussions on the drafting of a WMDFZ convention should not be related to the peace process in the Middle East – a statement contrary to the Israeli position that the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East cannot be detached from political reality in the region. In addition, due to the principle of adopting a final document by consensus, Israel will be able to prevent this if it decides to participate (in this theoretical case, the conference left itself the option of making a decision by a majority vote only).

As expected, Israel's name was far from absent from the debate and decisions taken at the conference. Most of the speeches included a call for Israel to join the NPT as a non-nuclear state, and to put all its nuclear facilities under the supervision of the IAEA. It was regretted that Israel and the United States were not participating (one observer even noted that now

that the consensus principle has been adopted, they have no reason not to participate). The summary document emphasized the importance of Israel joining the convention.

Regarding the implications of the conference summaries in particular, and on the process underway at the UN on the next NPT RevCon, scheduled for this coming January in general: the issue of the Middle East WMDF, which the Arab states (especially Egypt) are putting on the agenda of the five-year RevCons, is the focus of disagreements – and is what prevented agreement on a final document at the 2015 conference. The assessment is now that the Arab states have achieved a process to be conducted at the UN and continued until a document is drafted to establish a demilitarized zone in the Middle East, future NPT RevCons will be spared controversy on this issue. Even if the issue is not removed from the agenda of the forthcoming conference, it is to be expected that the diplomatic efforts, particularly by the United States vis-à-vis Egypt, will focus on the wording as it pertains to the final document.

Regarding the implications of the conference summaries for the United States' position: the Trump administration joined Israel's opposition to the General Assembly decision to convene a conference to establish a WMDFZ in the Middle East, and supported the principles/ preconditions set by Israel for discussion. In contrast to the Trump administration's position, it was the Obama administration that responded to pressure from Arab states and expressed support in 2010 for the convening of the conference (in 2012) to implement the 1995 resolution. The decision led to a sharp crisis of confidence between the Israeli government at the time and the Obama administration. In advance of the forthcoming RevCon in January, the Biden administration will likely formulate its position in principle on a WMDFZ in the Middle East.

As for Israel: although the UN Conference did not serve as a platform for an attack on Israel beyond the call for it to join the NPT, and despite the acceptance of the principle of consensus, it is doubtful whether a decision on the establishment of the conference as a permanent mechanism until a

treaty on a Middle East WMDFZ is drafted will change Israel's opposition in principle to the guidelines of the discussion. However, Israel would do well to consult with the US administration ahead of the conference in January, with the goal of reaching a coordinated position (Israel is not a member of the RevCon and therefore does not participate in the discussions; will it decide to send an observer, as it has done in the past?). At the same time, Israel should call for the establishment of a framework to discuss the issue of regional security, which must be inclusive in terms of the participating countries and comprehensive as far as the issues to be deliberated. With the process of normalization between Israel and a number of Arab countries in the background, Israel can try to coordinate with them toward adoption of a common position in this context.

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