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In this *ACIS Paper*, Assistant Secretary Ford looks back at the history of efforts to implement the Middle East WMD-Free Zone called for in the Resolution on the Middle East adopted by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty’s Review and Extension Conference in 1995, outlining how traditional ways of trying to achieve this goal have become irrelevant or counterproductive, and calling for a new approach based around trying to ameliorate challenges in the security environment and develop good-faith engagement between all regional states.

The “Resolution on the Middle East” – one of the decisions adopted at the Review and Extension Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1995 – called upon all States in that region “to take practical steps in appropriate forums aimed at making progress towards, inter alia, the establishment of an effectively verifiable Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological, and their delivery systems.” It also called upon States Party to the NPT to promote “the early establishment by regional parties of a Middle East zone free of nuclear and all other weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems.” Over the ensuing decades, the 1995 Resolution has been a symbol of the international community’s aspiration to keep weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems out of one of the world’s most volatile and troubled regions. It has also, however, often been the object of sometimes bitter diplomatic contestation.

This paper looks back over the history of that contestation in order to put debates over the Middle East

WMD-Free Zone – often unpronounceably abbreviated as MEWMDFZ, but which I will therefore describe herein simply as the “Middle East Zone” or “Zone” – into their geopolitical context. This exploration will help explain why most current efforts to create a Zone, which revolve around a United Nations-sponsored conference process, are unlikely to succeed, and why a new approach is badly needed. Properly contextualizing these longstanding debates is critical to finding a better path forward, for Zone debates in recent years have drifted unproductively, and perhaps even dangerously, in directions that are inconsistent with what was called for in the 1995 Resolution itself, and which are likely to preclude success without some change in course.

I. Learning from the 1995 Resolution Itself

The modern statesman who looks back to the 1995 Resolution to find guideposts for how to confront the challenges of creating a Middle East Zone will find much to draw upon – including points that have apparently been

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forgotten by some diplomats along the way. To my eye, a serious reading of the Resolution suggests five key lessons to bear in mind as we work to make such a Zone a reality:

- First, although many Zone proponents act as if the issue pertains exclusively to nuclear weapons – in the manner of a traditional Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (NWFZ) of the sort established in Latin America by the Treaty of Tlatelolco in 1968 – this is far from the case. As clearly spelled out in the Resolution itself, the stated objective is a Zone free of *all* forms of WMD. The achievement of a Middle East Zone will therefore require not merely resolution of longstanding regional challenges related to nuclear proliferation and to the adoption and observance of state-of-the-art nuclear safeguards, but also success in ending Syria’s flagrant violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and bringing about uniform regional adherence to both the CWC and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC).
- Second, the 1995 Resolution calls for ridding the Middle East not only of WMD, but also of delivery systems capable of carrying WMD. As we will see below, especially when read together with the first point above, this has enormous implications for a path forward in today’s missile-studded Middle East.
- Third, the Resolution makes clear that a Middle East Zone must be *verifiable*. This might seem a commonplace observation, since it would surely be madness simply to accept at face value countries’ declarations that they are free of all forms of WMD and WMD-capable delivery systems. When taken seriously, however, the requirement of verifiability is a challenging one, especially in the contemporary context of a region that today contains countries that are in violation of their NPT, nuclear safeguards, and/or CWC obligations, that have refused to adopt state-of-the-art nuclear safeguards in the form of a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and adherence to the IAEA Additional Protocol, and/or that refuse to cooperate fully with international inspectors from the IAEA or the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) charged with verification responsibilities under such instruments – and one where chemical weapons have been used repeatedly, to horrific effect, in recent years.
- Fourth, the 1995 Resolution makes clear that although all NPT States Party should “exert their utmost efforts” to support the creation of a Zone, that zone must be established “by regional parties” themselves. The rest of us should support this process as best we can, in other words, but it is the “States in the Middle East” who must actually create the Zone. Forgetting this – such as by pretending that distant institutions in places such as New York can somehow substitute for regional states engaging directly and constructively with each other, or that votes or pronouncements in such places can make regional security challenges disappear, or make up in volume and fervor for the exclusion of key players – is a great mistake.
- Fifth, and in some sense most fundamentally, the 1995 Resolution makes clear the importance not merely of taking just *any* steps ostensibly dedicated to creating a Zone, but rather of taking *practical* ones. The objective is clearly to make *actual* progress in making the Middle East a more peaceful place, and one less at risk of exploding into conflict that could quickly escalate to the use of WMD. It necessarily follows from this that efforts to establish a Zone should be assessed on the basis of their practicality in contributing to this end. The Resolution points us to the obvious conclusion that this should not be primarily an arena for political posturing and diplomatic virtue-signaling, but rather one in which all parties focus upon devising and implementing measures effective in helping work through whatever concrete security problems stand in the way of progress.

Read together, these five points help illustrate the embeddedness of the Zone problem in the regional security context of the Middle East, and why trying to create a Zone *without* addressing those broader regional problems is doomed to failure. Most specifically, they suggest why finding a viable path forward is likely to require a new and different kind of dialogue that both: (1) *starts* with involving all regional states in exploring ways to address security challenges, rather than imagining that some *deus ex machina* of exogenous diplomatic exhortation can resolve things on which relevant parties have yet to engage directly with each other; and (2) seeks to salvage and repair existing institutions and mechanisms for WMD prohibition and proliferation control that are currently under threat throughout the Middle East before

pretending that sweeping new ones can be successfully implemented atop damaged foundations.

II. The Early Years

The idea of a *Nuclear Weapon Free Zone* in the Middle East goes back at least to 1974, when the U.N. General Assembly passed Resolution 3263 (XXIX), which noted that “the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones, on the initiative of the States situated within each zone concerned” was a measure that could contribute to halting the proliferation of such weapons and contribute to disarmament. Various disputes over whether and how to implement such an idea, however – all in the context of regional security dynamics that remained notably fraught – prevented progress for many years.

By the time of the 1995 Resolution, however, things looked notably different, at least for a while. In the broader global context, the world-imperiling nuclear standoff and geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War had ended, the United States and Russia seemed to be finding a new and cooperative relationship, and steps were being taken to reduce the enormous nuclear weapons stockpiles that had accumulated as NATO and the Warsaw Pact faced off against each other. With implementation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty by then already having succeeded in eliminating an entire class of nuclear-capable delivery systems – destroying a total of nearly 2,700 missiles by June 1991 – the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) was signed between the United States and the USSR, and entered into force in 1994. Under START’s provisions, the two former Cold War adversaries would remove from service and dismantle perhaps 80 percent of the strategic nuclear weapons then in existence. With the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991 and 1992, furthermore, Washington and Moscow also began dramatically to scale back their deployments of non-strategic nuclear weapons.

It was an extraordinary period, in which controlling and even rolling back WMD threats seemed at last to be possible. At the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva and elsewhere, diplomats were hard at work trying to take advantage of this optimistic new era and bring to fruition long-stalled hopes for new global instruments to rein in WMD threats. Work on the CWC had been underway since 1980, but the post-Cold War era provided a chance to bring negotiations to closure, and by

the end of 1993 the Convention had been opened for signature, the first meetings of the CWC’s Preparatory Commission held, and a Provisional Technical Secretariat established. Similarly, negotiations on a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) began in 1994, reaching their conclusion in 1996. Building upon the U.S. suggestion of such a step in 1991, the U.N. General Assembly called in 1993 for a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, thereby setting in motion a new process at the CD to negotiate a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). At its 1995 Review and Extension Conference, moreover, the NPT was transformed from a time-limited instrument into an enduring feature of the international community’s response to nuclear proliferation challenges and fixed in place permanently as the cornerstone of the global nonproliferation regime.

In the Middle East, things also then looked promising in ways unseen for decades, if ever at all. To be sure, the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq had been revealed by the 1991 Gulf War to have had dangerously advanced WMD programs, but by mid-decade Iraq was subject to a stringent system of international inspections intended to find any last remnants of such programs and implement their elimination. More dramatically, progress seemed to be being made in resolving the poisonous antipathies and endemic violence of the Israeli-Palestinian problem, with agreement being reached on the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, which created the Palestinian Authority in parts of the West Bank and Gaza and set up a framework for permanent-status negotiations that it was hoped would lead to final resolution of the conflict.

At the time, there also seemed to be hope for progress in resolving broader Middle East security problems. Multilateral discussions in Madrid in 1991 had led to the formation of multilateral working groups covering economic development, water, refugees, environment and Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) to complement bilateral negotiations between Israel and its neighbors. Under ACRS, participants – including not only Israel and a Palestinian delegation, but representatives from 13 Arab states – met beginning in 1992 to discuss possible confidence building measures (CBMs) for the region, including exchanges of military doctrines, incidents at sea agreements and hot lines. Due to progress in the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian peace process, ACRS venues moved from outside the region to locations within it, another hopeful sign.

This was, then, the context in which the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East was adopted. It was a world in which dramatic progress in codifying WMD-elimination seemed finally to be possible as a result of rapid movement by affected states in resolving many of the underlying security problems that had divided them and impeded such movement for many years. At the time, it seemed reasonable to expect that *further* movement in institutionalizing WMD-elimination arrangements – such as by setting in place a Middle East Zone free of WMD and their delivery systems – might be possible as favorable trends in the security environment continued.

III. Fast Forward: Challenges for the 2020 NPT Review Cycle

Unfortunately, those happy trends did not continue. The reasons for the failure of the broader peace process and the region’s continuing instability are beyond the scope of this paper, but movement on the Middle East Zone itself seems to have run aground in part because the international community’s desire to institutionalize a process outran actual progress in working through security challenges. ACRS, for instance, stalled over Egypt’s desire to front-load WMD-free-zone issues on the regional agenda – which was unacceptable to Israel in advance of more progress being made on regional security. And so the Middle East Zone shifted gradually from being a locus of optimistic and aspirational diplomacy into little more than a vehicle for accusatory recriminations and reciprocal blame-shifting.

By the time the current U.S. Administration came into office at the beginning of 2017, diplomatic posturing over the Zone had already destroyed chances for agreement upon a consensus Final Document at the 2015 NPT Review Conference (RevCon), and prospects for progress along the traditional lines argued by Zone advocates such as Egypt seemed dim indeed. Quite apart from the dynamics of NPT discussions, moreover, an even more fundamental challenge was that by the beginning of 2017, the once-hopeful situation in the Middle East had been in retrograde motion for years and looked nothing at all like 1995 anymore.

It had been reported by the IAEA in 2011, for instance, that Iran had maintained a structured military nuclear weapons program until 2003, including activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile, and

that some nuclear weapon-related activities may have continued after 2003. Even though Iran had accepted temporary limitations on the size and scope of its fissile material capabilities in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Tehran continued to deny the existence of its past weapons program and had refused to divest itself of whatever items, materials, and capabilities had been part of it. Iran had also kept many of the *personnel* from its prior weapons program working together on closely related dual-use technologies, and indeed under the same man who had previously run the program. Even *before* the Israelis revealed to the world in 2018 extensive records and data the Iranians had been secretly preserving from that weapons program, in other words, Iran was clearly maintaining the option of resuming its pursuit of nuclear weapons should it choose to do so.

With certain limits set by the JCPOA set to expire in a few years’ time and others by 2025 or 2030, Iran would thereafter be free to pursue unconstrained material production and stocks of enriched material – just the sort of capabilities it would need if it decided to reactivate its weapons work using the personnel and know-how it had retained from that program. By early 2017, therefore, this was not only a tremendous nonproliferation and regional security problem that had yet to be solved, but also one that the very existence of the JCPOA made it *more difficult* to solve – since the nuclear deal lifted just the kind of pressure on Iran that would be needed in order to elicit Tehran’s acceptance of more enduring nuclear limits.

It was also painfully clear by early 2017 that Iran’s rapidly-developing ballistic and cruise missile programs were presenting radical new threats to stability in the Middle East, well beyond the mere fact that Iran had worked for years to develop a nuclear warhead for its Shahab-3 ballistic missile. Iran had built up the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East, and under the JCPOA its behavior worsened, with new missile developments being announced at a furious pace despite the U.N. Security Council’s calling upon Iran to refrain from such provocations. Iran was taking rapid steps to improve the accuracy and lethality of its missiles even while *exporting* rockets, missiles, and missile technology to non-state actors such as Lebanese Hizbollah terrorists in Lebanon, Shi’ite militia groups in Iraq, and Huthi militias in Yemen. Israel was under constant and growing threats from this proliferation, Iranian-supplied rockets were periodically used against U.S. military and diplomatic facilities in Iraq as the number of Iran-backed militia forces

there had swelled into the scores of thousands, and Huthi batteries had by the autumn of 2016 even begun to launch Iranian-supplied cruise missiles at U.S. warships in the region.

Meanwhile, Syria – which had shown itself to be an acute nuclear weapons proliferation threat and violator of IAEA safeguards with its secret construction of the nuclear reactor at Al Kibar that was destroyed by the Israelis in 2007 – had by 2017 already been stonewalling IAEA inspectors for years over the nature and extent of its nuclear program. Egregious instances of chemical weapons (CW) use by the Asad regime in Damascus during the ongoing Syrian Civil War had led to a Russian-brokered deal for Syria’s accession to the CWC in 2013 and the internationally-assisted destruction of Syria’s declared chemical weapons stockpile, but by mid-2014 Syria had resumed using its undeclared CW arsenal against its opponents. By mid-2016, the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism had found Syria responsible for multiple CW attacks had occurred during 2014-15.

Things would get even worse with further Syrian CW atrocities over the course of 2017, but even as the new U.S. Administration came into office it seemed clear that the Middle East’s WMD problems were clearly only accelerating. Nor, as Syria’s CW use continued, did it escape anyone’s notice that the Middle East Zone’s most fervent diplomatic advocate, Egypt, itself had a history of CW use during the North Yemen Civil War in the mid-1960s, had an active ballistic missile program and had refused to join the CWC. By mid-2014, moreover, the good faith and bona fides of the People’s Republic of China – long a moralistic proponent of establishing a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East – also seemed to be called somewhat into question with press reports claiming that Beijing had provided ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia. In short, progress in creating a region free of all forms of WMD and their delivery systems seemed perhaps farther off than ever.

Progress on the dream of a Zone had been difficult enough back in the halcyon 1990s, but in such a new context of regional deterioration, it was hardly surprising that regional states had never been able to agree upon terms for the Zone-focused international conference called for in the 2010 NPT RevCon Final Document, and that subsequent informal consultations in Glion and Geneva in 2013-14, while initially promising, had not produced agreement. Together, these diplomatic failures

clearly demonstrated the problem with assuming that multilateral declarations from outside the Middle East can substitute for concrete progress by the countries within it, and with pretending that one could jump directly to some kind of disarmament without bothering to alleviate underlying (let alone worsening) security tensions. If there still existed a way forward, therefore, it was clear by 2017 that such path would have to be a different one than the by now traditional diplomatic cycle of trying to use multilateral conferences elsewhere as replacements for constructive intra-regional engagement.

If there was any silver lining in all this from the perspective of the new U.S. Administration in 2017 – and there wasn’t much – it was that we at least hoped Zone issues would not damage multilateral NPT diplomacy during the 2020 NPT review cycle as much as they had in 2015. In part, this was because the evolving “facts on the ground” of the worsening Middle East security situation had revealed traditional approaches to Zone advocacy as being almost ludicrously out of touch with reality. This presumably made it more difficult, we assumed, for any serious person to suggest that the right answer was simply to double down on those failed approaches.

We also imagined, however, that the events of 2015 had demonstrated to all concerned that holding the NPT process hostage to Zone-based demands was a losing gambit that would not, in fact, lead to anything constructive in implementing the 1995 Resolution. To be sure, fearful of being accused of “failure” at the 2010 RevCon, the Obama Administration had sharply broken with its Israeli allies and agreed, over Israeli objections, to call for the convening of a Zone-focused conference in 2012. But the Obama Administration had itself drawn the line when the Arab Group, supported by Russia, had tried to repeat that accomplishment by also holding the 2015 RevCon hostage, in an effort to further impose their own terms for a conference upon the region by international fiat. Since even President Obama’s diplomats had not given in to such extortion in 2015, however – and at a time, moreover, when U.S. and Israeli officials were reported to have a distinctly frosty relationship – it certainly seemed to make no sense for anyone to attempt such a ploy with us in 2020. And *that*, we hoped, might help keep the Arab Group from trying, even while opening up diplomatic space for a new approach – one more alive to the actual security problems facing the region and thus more likely ultimately to permit progress toward the Zone.

IV. The New U.S. Approach

In hopes of taking advantage of any opportunity for creative new thinking that might be opened up by the failure of past efforts to establish a Middle East Zone and the apparent bankruptcy of traditional approaches, the United States was determined to address these challenges with fresh eyes. By 2017, all participants in prior efforts had arrived at an impasse, and a general sense of burnout seemed to prevail. (The Israelis, in particular, saw themselves as having been ill-treated, both by the United States and by other diplomatic interlocutors. Jerusalem had taken substantial risks in participating at a high level in five rounds of informal regional consultations in Gion and Geneva despite legitimate concerns regarding joining an NPT-originated process to the creation of which Israel had not originally been party, and it now felt frustrated that this good-faith effort had not been met by greater flexibility by Arab states.) At the 2017 NPT Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting, Zone efforts seemed very much to be in disarray, with some in the Arab Group and Russia simply trying to double down on the failed Gion/Geneva process, but Egypt calling for what it described as “new and alternative mechanisms” without yet publicly offering any specifics about what it had in mind.

In response to this general rudderlessness, and in hopes of seizing an opportunity to direct years of stilted, formulaic, and unproductive discourse in directions that were both more constructive and more likely actually to lead eventually to the creation of a Zone, the United States prepared a [new working paper for the NPT Preparatory Committee \(PrepCom\) in April of 2018](#). This paper rested on several key principles, which are closely related to the lessons I described above and are also visible in the text of the 1995 Resolution itself.

First, as we approached this question, it was very clear that exogenous diplomacy was no substitute for seriousness by the states of the Middle East themselves. We were willing to support inclusive, consensus-based initiatives that emanated from the region, but the desire to achieve a Zone had to come *from* the region, and could not simply be projected upon it by outsiders. As the [U.N. Disarmament Commission itself recognized in April 1999](#), in fact,

“[t]he initiative to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone should emanate exclusively from States within

the region concerned and be pursued by all States of that region. ... All the States of the region concerned should participate in the negotiations on and the establishment of such a zone on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at among the States of the region concerned.”

This seemed to be at least as true in 2018 as it had been in 1999. To our eyes, it was a losing game to try to coerce regional participation or generate political will *for* the parties involved where none existed.

Second, we were not interested in simply doubling down on previous approaches and reenacting prior processes that had consistently failed to produce results. To us, such an approach sounded too much like the witticism often (if perhaps incorrectly) attributed to Albert Einstein: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Third, we wanted our approach to be grounded in a realistic assessment of the actual political and security situation in the region, and to offer some intelligible path toward alleviating the underlying problems that had stymied progress toward a Zone in the past, and which had been in recent years becoming even more worrisome. For anyone trying to create a Zone free of all forms of WMD and their delivery systems, for instance, it was absurd to ignore the region’s worsening problems of CWC noncompliance, unaddressed Syrian and Iranian IAEA safeguards problems and nuclear proliferation threats, destabilizing proxy warfare, and the rampant development and proliferation of ballistic and cruise missiles of all sorts. Any *serious* effort to establish a Zone would have an enormous amount of work to do in bringing this broad array of problems under control, and in this context, simply prolonging a diplomatic process the principal objective of which seemed to be simply to isolate and stigmatize Israel over refusing to join the NPT would be profoundly unproductive.

Finally, as the 1995 Resolution made clear one should, we wanted to focus upon practical steps, particularly those that could be accomplished in the near term. After all, creating a WMD-free zone in any region, much less one as troubled as the Middle East, is an extremely ambitious goal that cannot be achieved overnight. Rather than simply trying yet again to organize a Zone conference – or more absurdly, presuming to negotiate the text of a treaty – in advance of actual agreement by the relevant regional

parties on its merits and modalities, we thought it would make sense to promote intra-regional dialogue on such things as how to address security problems and develop regional confidence-building measures (CBMs). We did not want to be overly prescriptive in how such a process might be structured, but thought it good to start with an open dialogue about how to create a regional environment in which a Zone finally actually became feasible.

It also seemed clear that because the deterioration of the Middle Eastern security environment since the days of the 1995 Resolution has been such a central factor in the failure of prior Zone-related efforts, any success in resolving Middle Eastern problems we might have in *other* aspects of our regional diplomacy would likely be conducive to progress in implementing the Resolution. If we could succeed in placing enduring limits upon Iran’s nuclear program and reining in its missile threats, for instance – or in finally holding Syria accountable for its chemical weapons atrocities – these steps would likely do much more to increase the odds of a Zone actually being established than any number of conferences bringing diplomats together to read speeches at each other in pleasant hotels in Glion, Geneva, or New York.

In important respects, our thinking on how to advance the objective of a Middle East Zone owed a great deal to the United States’ parallel initiative on [Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament \(CEND\)](#). CEND, too, was an effort predicated upon a realization that past approaches had failed and that diplomatic discourse needed to be redirected in more constructive directions alive to the ways in which disarmament progress hinges upon progress in addressing problems in the security environment rather than pretending one can sidestep real-world problems of security simply by holding meetings, drafting idealistic treaty texts, and engaging in moralistic posturing against those who might disagree. With both CEND and the Middle East Zone, it was precisely our fidelity to the disarmament objectives in question that led us to reject failed approaches that ignore real-world security challenges, and to explore ways to bring countries together in search of new thinking and creative ways to start ameliorating such problems in ways conducive to disarmament progress.

As noted, as applied in the Zone context, this new U.S. thinking came together in our [Working Paper for the 2018 PrepCom](#). In setting forth these ideas – which focused

upon the central role that must be played by regional states acting by consensus, and upon the need to ameliorate security conditions that made progress difficult – we recognized that the reaction from some corners of the region was likely to be negative. To be sure, we did not predict the degree to which some would try to depict our call to explore how to make regional conditions more favorable to progress as some kind of malevolent effort to “set *preconditions*” for diplomatic engagement on a Zone.

We did come to appreciate, however, that the emotion behind such willful distortions simply grew out of irritation at our willingness speak openly about what was in fact already obvious – namely, that prior approaches no longer had meaningful prospects for success. In retrospect, we should perhaps have expected that our bluntness about the problem would be frustrating and embarrassing for those who had fervently advocated these failed approaches for many years (and who still did so). We hope they understand now, however, that we meant no offense, that our initiative had nothing to do with setting “preconditions” for progress but instead focused on how to create an environment in which progress would be *easier*, and that the thrust of our diplomacy was – and remains – to find a better way forward *precisely because* we continue to strongly support the 1995 Resolution.

V. The U.N. Conference Process

Unfortunately, our suggestions for a more creative and productive discourse on the Middle East Zone came too late. As Egypt had signaled even as early as the 2017 NPT PrepCom with its talk of “new and alternative mechanisms,” Cairo was already preparing to shift its attention to the U.N. General Assembly in search of a resolution – by majority vote, so that failure to involve relevant regional players would no longer be a procedural obstacle – that would establish by *fiat* the same kind of Zone-focused international conference that had for so many years failed to win consensus support in the region.

We had heard inklings of such a move for years, but it was deeply disappointing to see this effort materialize in the Arab Group’s draft conference decision in September 2018. Its contents were not surprising, for they reflected views long held by some other Arab League states, but it was disheartening that the drafters had made no efforts to address well-known Israeli redlines, and had not even attempted to socialize the idea with us or Israel in advance

of the month-long meeting of the U.N. First Committee, which voted in favor of the draft. We attempted to persuade the Arab Group to withdraw this proposal, and understand that Israel conveyed the same message. (We both also made it very clear that we would oppose the establishment of such a conference and would not participate in it if it *were* established, and that this process risked undermining the consensus support that certain other related U.N. General Assembly resolutions had long enjoyed.) It was, however, to no avail. Posturing, it would appear, had now decisively triumphed over substantive progress, for it was clearly more important to some in the Arab Group that they have a conference in which they could set the terms and venue of debate than it was to have a conference that all regional states could attend or that might actually advance the cause of a Middle East Zone.

Many states clearly shared our concerns, and the vote total reflected a deep ambivalence among U.N. Member States. Whereas the cause of the Zone itself had long elicited enormous majorities, or even consensus decisions in the past, the December 22, 2018, General Assembly vote on the Arab Group’s proposed resolution to establish the U.N. Conference yielded only 88 in favor, with four opposed, and a remarkable 75 abstentions. The effort to drive it forward over the objections of one of the parties whose involvement in implementation of any future Zone would be absolutely essential also did much to poison *all* Zone-related issues in that forum, leading the United States – as we had warned – to break consensus on one of the First Committee’s otherwise unobjectionable and quite traditional resolutions in protest.

Egypt had been calling for “new and alternative mechanisms” to advance the cause of a Middle East Zone, but the establishment of a U.N.-sponsored Conference under these circumstances at best amounted merely to using a new forum to do much the same thing that had already repeatedly failed elsewhere. If anything, this new effort was worse, however, for at least Israel had been involved in prior discussions in the ACRS process and at Glicon and Geneva. Now, Israel’s objections had been pointedly ignored, predictably guaranteeing its non-participation. The U.N. Conference was an effort to force upon states within the region purported solutions that had been developed without their participation and against their wishes. In this respect, it would be hard to imagine a process more alien to and inconsistent with the 1999 recommendations of the U.N. Disarmament Commission

on how to create nuclear-weapon-free zones – nor a process more likely to drive apart (rather than bring together) those whose cooperation would be needed to bring a Zone to fruition.

The Arab Group may have succeeded in “weaponizing” the United Nations in its campaign to isolate and stigmatize Israel and to engage in Zone-related virtue-signaling, in other words, but the Conference effort was a significant step backwards for efforts to implement the 1995 Resolution. After the U.N. vote, the only real question was how much damage this process would do to hopes of *actually* getting a Middle East Zone.

To be sure, we were pleasantly surprised that the initial meeting of the new Conference process in November 2019 was not as fixated upon criticizing non-participants as we had feared it would be, and that there was at least *some* discussion of chemical weapons and ballistic missile threats in the Middle East. That much is good, and we understand this was due in large part to extensive preparatory work on the part of some key states. We appreciate their efforts in this regard.

Nevertheless, it is still too early to know just how much damage the Conference process will do. Its proponents had promised that establishing a U.N.-based process for considering a Middle East Zone would serve as a “pressure release valve” to keep Zone issues from damaging the NPT review process, as they had in 2010 and (especially) in 2015. Perhaps these sponsors will keep these promises now that they have succeeded in establishing a conference. Nevertheless, since the 2020 RevCon has not yet occurred – having been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic – the jury is still out on whether the Arab Group will attempt to hold the Review Conference hostage over Zone-related issues yet again.

As for the chances of *actually* creating a Zone, it is also too early to tell what damage the new Conference will do – although it has surely already done some. Now that the Conference process exists, there will inevitably be a tendency in some quarters to view any *other* initiatives – such as the kind of security-focused CEND-style dialogue the United States has suggested, or intra-regional engagements focused upon CBMs – as being ones that *compete* with the new U.N. Conference, perhaps eliciting resistance to such badly-needed steps. However temperate its first meeting may have been, moreover, it is also easy to imagine the new Conference spiraling

downward over time into hyperbolic recriminations that will further poison the atmosphere for constructive engagement, especially as it becomes increasingly clear to its participants that the Conference will not actually move Zone issues forward. We shall see.

VI. Conclusion: Where Now?

Given the amount of political energy and attention that Egypt and other Arab League states have put into the new U.N. Conference process, it is likely to continue to dominate Arab efforts on this issue for the foreseeable future, making it less likely that they can be persuaded to support more constructive initiatives – even if those other efforts are pursued in parallel to, rather than in place of, the U.N. process. Since Israeli views on this Conference process are also unlikely to change, an important question for the future is whether, or the degree to which, the Arab Group will make any constructive effort to give Israel any incentive to participate or seek to meaningfully address legitimate Israeli concerns about a process seemingly designed to exclude its participation and minimize its security concerns. If the Arab Group is, that would be a hopeful sign. If not – or if the Arab Group turns instead to more divisive tactics, such as following the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) model of corraling true believers to draft a treaty text and then demonizing non-signatories – the Conference process could be especially damaging and counterproductive.

As for a genuinely better path forward, the passage of two years has not made the recommendations we made in the 2018 U.S. Working Paper any less salient. Those interested in reading that paper in detail can find it [on the United Nations website](#). For present purposes, suffice it to say that in trying to find a more viable way to implement the 1995 Resolution, we suggested seven principles, which I paraphrase here:

1. All States should remember that the primary responsibility for advancing a Middle East Zone lies with the states of the Middle East itself. We all should support and encourage them to come together for this purpose, but the task is one they must themselves lead – and which cannot succeed if they are not willing to engage directly with each other.
2. Regional dialogue on the Zone cannot be divorced from the political and security dynamics of the region,

and efforts to implement it cannot succeed if they ignore that security environment.

3. Efforts to implement the 1995 Resolution that focus on process over substance are unlikely to succeed.
4. The NPT review cycle can lend its support to realistic efforts to establish a Zone, but is incapable of solving Zone problems or imposing a solution on regional states. Efforts to address Zone concerns in the NPT context will not bear fruit, and will only threaten progress on other issues in that review cycle.
5. Because success in implementing the 1995 Resolution is closely linked to developments and trends in the Middle East security environment, supporters of a Zone should encourage regional states to find practical ways to establish there a security, political, and diplomatic environment that is more conducive to progress.
6. All NPT States Party should support and encourage regional states to act on these principles in working toward a Middle East Zone.
7. The United States is firmly committed to supporting regional states in making conditions in the Middle East more conducive to progress toward a Zone than they are at present, and we will support any path forward that has support from all the regional states.

These principles remain important today – and, if anything, they are more so now than ever. The United States remains dedicated to encouraging the regional states to move toward a process that is genuinely inclusive, that takes into account the security concerns of all parties, and that provides an opportunity for cooperative work to address real-world security challenges along the road to finally implementing the 1995 Resolution and making the Middle East Zone a reality. As I observed in [remarks at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies last August](#), moreover, the emergence of the [CEND initiative](#) and the [Warsaw Process](#) that was begun in February 2019 at the [Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East](#) – both of which are now well underway and incorporate a broad range of regional states, including Israel and Arab League states – are positive signs that such dialogue is indeed possible, and may offer useful models for progress in the future.



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