

MEDIA BRIEFING: FACT SHEET

September 2021 - page 1

What is a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) for the Middle East?

The WMDFZ in the Middle East, evolved from a proposal from 1974 instigated by Iran with Egypt's support to create a zone free of nuclear weapons in the region where Israel is the only state known to possess nuclear weapons. In 1990, on Egypt's initiative, the proposal was expanded to also include chemical and biological weapons to cover all classes of WMD. The proposal would establish a WMDFZ in a region consisting of 22 Arab States of the Middle East and North Africa, plus

Israel and Iran. In 1995, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was extended indefinitely in parallel with the adoption of a resolution calling for the establishment of the zone. In 2010, the NPT States Parties committed to hold a conference on the zone by 2012, but considering Israel's opposition, the United States unilaterally called the conference off. In 2015, the United States once more opposed a conference proposed for 2016.

The UN "November Conference" to negotiate a WMDFZ in the Middle East

In 2018, Egypt took the issue to the UN General Assembly which passed a resolution to convene an annual conference until states of the region are able to adopt a treaty to eliminate all WMD and their means of delivery from the Middle East. The first conference took place in November 2019 with 23 of the 24 regional countries participating (with the exception of Israel) and 4 of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council also participating (with the exception of the USA). Subsequently, this process has been referred to as the "November Conference".

The second session of the Conference is due to take place from the 29th of November 2021 to the 3rd of December in the United Nations in New York. Currently the conference is planned to be an in-person meeting, but is awaiting the announcement of the President of the session, which is expected to be a Kuwaiti diplomat, and of course there is uncertainty over the status of the meeting in relation to pandemic control. There is no news at the time of writing regarding the participation of Israel and the United States.

Changes of Government in Israel and Iran

Israel

In 2021, after 12 years of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and after extremely tight elections in Israel which had to be repeated four times in two years, an 'anti-Netanyahu' coalition was formed that led to the installation of a government under Prime Minister Naftali Bennett that consists of politicians from across the political spectrum, including Arab members of the Knesset from the Arab Ra'am Party. Thus far there is no indication of any change in stance from Israel towards Iran or the JCPOA (see next page).

Iran

Also in 2021, after 8 years of government under President Hassan Rouhani, the conservative candidate and jurist, Ebrahim Raisi, was elected in the first round to the position of President in a landslide with 72% of the votes cast. At the time of writing, the new government is taking office and there is as yet no indication of any changes in stance from Iran towards the outside world other than a pledge by the new president to put greater priority on regional security matters.

MEDIA BRIEFING: FACT SHEET

September 2021 - page 2

The Iran Nuclear Deal

The **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)**, otherwise known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, is an agreement reached by Iran together with China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and the European Union in 2015. The deal, which is the most wide-ranging and comprehensive set of conditions placed on a national peaceful nuclear programme agreed by any UN member state, explicitly acknowledged Iran's right to develop a civil nuclear programme under restrictions, in exchange for the lifting of nuclear-related economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, the European Union and the United States. The deal was dealt a body-blow during the US presidency of Donald Trump when in 2018, the US unilaterally withdrew and re-imposed unilateral sanctions both directly upon Iran and upon other entities dealing with Iran. At the time, the **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)** had repeatedly certified Iranian compliance. After a year of non-compliance by the United States, Iran invoked clauses of the treaty and responded by suspending some of its commitments through a number of reversible steps, such as the increased enrichment of uranium to 20% and the production of uranium metal.

After his inauguration, President Biden announced that the US would re-join the agreement, and negotiations among the parties to the agreement started in Vienna, Austria in an attempt to choreograph a return to compliance with the original terms of the JCPOA by both the US and Iran. These talks were suspended close to the Presidential elections in Iran and pending the establishment of the new Administration. Although lots of positive words have come from Vienna, there is no assurance that the talks will be successful. Although the Iran Nuclear Deal was only ever an agreement to monitor and verify compliance with issues related to Iran's nuclear programme, and is acknowledged to be the most stringent inspection regime imposed on any country in the world, other countries in the region objected to it both on the basis that it was insufficient and allowed Iran to develop nuclear capabilities, and because it did not cover issues related to regional security. Israel insists that Iran should have no capability to enrich uranium at all, whereas Saudi Arabia is concerned that no one is talking about Iran's increasingly sophisticated missile programme.

Regional Context

Rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran

After the change of government in the US, President Biden signalled that Saudi Arabia could not rely on Washington's unconditional approval of Riyadh's foreign policy, including the war in Yemen. This has led in recent months to increasing diplomatic contacts among

countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (six states in the Persian Gulf which includes: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) and Iran, via the mediation of Iraq.

Chemical Weapons Use in Syria

Since the Arab Spring social protests that ignited across the region and the world in 2011, the situation in Syria has been among the worst in the region. On several occasions the use of chemical weapons was reported and Russia eventually brokered a deal whereby Damascus would accede to the CWC and hand over all its weapons material. After the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) certified Syria

had handed over or destroyed all its stockpiles, further attacks using chemical weapons have been alleged. Official reports from the UN and OPCW experts have been disputed and the blame for the use of such weapons has been attributed by governments around the world and international media to both the Syrian government and non-state actors in Syria.

MEDIA BRIEFING: FACT SHEET

September 2021 - page 3

Regional Context cont...

Other Nuclear Energy Programmes in the Middle East

In 2020, the United Arab Emirates became the first Arab country to open a nuclear power plant. The UAE has agreed to IAEA intrusive inspections but there are concerns that its nuclear programme could spur regional nuclear proliferation. Saudi Arabia has moved aggressively to nuclearize with its near completion of a research reactor and ambitious plans to build civilian nuclear power reactors. The Kingdom is resisting calls for it to accede to all of the relevant verification agreements.

Egypt has also announced plans to build four nuclear reactors and Jordan also has a nuclear power programme. All of these developments have the potential to increase instability in the region as nuclear reactors are the primary source of the fissile materials required for nuclear weapons. Just like in the JCPoA, the main focus should be on ensuring that uranium enrichment does not allow production of material usable in nuclear weapons.

Which UN conferences deal with WMD and when are they scheduled to take place?

The **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)** is based on three key points: no new states besides the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom should seek to develop or attain nuclear weapons; the previously listed states all agree to disarm their existing stockpiles, and; all states parties have the right to pursue the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. The States Parties to the NPT, which entered into force in 1970, meet every 5 years for a Review Conference to review implementation and agree on further steps. The 10th review conference was due to take place in May 2020, but was postponed due to covid-19, and will take place from the 4th to the 28th of January 2022 at the UN in New York. 192 states are party to the NPT. The 5 Non-parties are India, Pakistan, North Korea, South Sudan and, most importantly in terms of the Middle East, Israel.

The **Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)**, which entered into force in 1997, is a treaty that prohibits the large-scale use, development, production, stockpiling and transfer of chemical weapons and their precursors, and currently counts on 193 States Parties. From the region, the non-parties are Egypt and Israel, although Israel has signed it. Meetings of States Parties take place annually in The Hague, The Netherlands. This year the meeting takes place from the 29th of November to the 3rd of December, unfortunately coinciding with the November Conference.

The **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)** came into force in January 2021 and will hold its first meeting of States Parties from the 22nd to the 24th of March 2022. This Treaty was promoted by non-nuclear weapon states and civil society organizations tired at the slow pace of nuclear disarmament and within the context of article VI of the NPT, in order to comprehensively outlaw any activity connected to nuclear weapons. The meeting will take place in Vienna, Austria. At the time of writing 86 states have signed the Treaty and 55 states have ratified it, including from the region: Algeria (signed), Comoros (ratified), Libya (signed), Palestine (ratified), Sudan (signed).

The **Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)**, which entered into force in 1975, similarly prohibits all activities related to biological weapons, and counts on 183 States Parties. From the region, the non-parties include Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Israel, Somalia and Syria. The meetings to review the BWC take place every five years in Geneva, Switzerland and the next conference is scheduled for the 22nd to the 25th of November 2021. Between the review conferences, meetings of States Parties or Experts are convened annually.