

2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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Progress on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction

Working paper submitted by the Russian Federation

The Russian Federation attaches particular importance to the resolution on the Middle East adopted at the 1995 Review and Extension Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which Russia co-sponsored with the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The adoption of this resolution paved the way for the decision to extend the Non-Proliferation Treaty indefinitely without a vote. Its goals and objectives remain in force until they are fully realized, and the three co-sponsors of the resolution have a special responsibility in this regard. Russia is fully aware of this. We are working steadfastly to create the conditions to realize the idea underpinning the 1995 resolution on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (“WMD-free zone”).

First steps towards establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East

The first practical breakthroughs regarding a WMD-free zone in the Middle East were made at the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The resulting Final Document contained a separate section with recommendations on how to make progress in implementing the 1995 resolution on the Middle East. Among them is the convening of a conference, no later than 2012, on the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East to be attended by the States of the region. This task was entrusted to the three co-sponsors (Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom), the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the designated facilitator of the process, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Jaakko Laajava. Helsinki was chosen as the venue for a possible conference.

Agreeing on the modalities and a clear timeline for holding and convening the conference on a WMD-free zone was not possible in 2012 or subsequently. This was largely due to the intransigent position of the United States, which proved unwilling to exert an amicable influence on Israel for the common goal of strengthening the non-proliferation regime. Washington chose to derail the process under the pretext of “conceptual differences” in the region over the issue of a WMD-free zone. Nevertheless, there were also a number of positive elements during this phase:



(1) Despite the differences between the three co-sponsors (which largely prevented the conference on a WMD-free zone from taking place), there was effective cooperation between them, as well as between the Secretariat of the United Nations and the facilitator, in a business-like atmosphere;

(2) Russia managed to insist on the start of informal consultations with States in the region on the preparations for the conference;

(3) It was possible to involve Israel in the informal consultations. Five rounds of such meetings were held, first in Glion and then in Geneva in 2013–2014. This allowed the States of the region to gather around one table for the first time since the 1991 Madrid Conference. The Glion-Geneva process, while not yielding practical results in terms of convening a conference on a WMD-free zone, demonstrated that an equitable and business-like dialogue between the regional players is still possible.

The stalemate of 2015 and the search for new solutions

The next attempt to give the necessary impetus to the WMD-free zone process was made at the 2015 Review Conference. Russia worked closely with the States of the Middle East region, primarily with the Egyptian delegation, as well as with the Algerian presidency, preparing the relevant section for a future final document. The effort was unsuccessful: the United States, along with the United Kingdom and Canada, once again prevented even minimal progress on the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East by blocking the adoption of the widely supported draft final document. Meanwhile, the mandate to convene the conference on a WMD-free zone under the Non-Proliferation Treaty review process expired.

More than 20 years without any tangible progress in implementing the 1995 resolution has predictably led to growing discontent among the Arab countries of the region. In view of the stalemate, the League of Arab States initiated the transfer of the WMD-free zone issue “inside the walls” of the United Nations with the holding of a relevant conference, facilitated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. As this was the only possible solution, we supported the idea. As a result, the United Nations General Assembly adopted decision 73/546 of 23 December 2018. Holding a conference on the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East was, in fact, the first practical step in implementing the goals and objectives of the 1995 resolution on the Middle East.

United Nations Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction: initial results

There have been two sessions of the Conference to date: the first was held from 18 to 22 November 2019, and the second was held from 29 November to 3 December 2021. A significant shift from the “business as usual” WMD-free zone process is that the primary responsibility for making progress toward establishing a WMD-free Middle East rests primarily with the States in the region. The five nuclear-weapon States are invited to attend the Conference as observers. The specialized international institutions (the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the Biological Weapons Convention Implementation Support Unit) are also invited to participate in the Conference as observers.

The Russian Federation regularly sends delegations to New York to attend the United Nations Conference on a WMD-free zone. We welcome the fact that our Chinese partners, as well as the United Kingdom and France, have also joined in the work of the Conference. Unfortunately, the United States, a co-sponsor of the 1995 resolution and a depositary State of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, has not yet joined the process. The only Middle Eastern State not participating in the Conference

remains Israel, the most significant player in the region, without which the task of forming a full-fledged Middle Eastern WMD-free zone is unlikely to be feasible.

The first session of the Conference on a WMD-free zone was very productive. The difficult discussions during the meeting resulted in the adoption a strong Political Declaration.¹ The desire of countries was articulated to continue to cooperate on the establishment of a WMD-free zone in order to elaborate a legally binding treaty in the future through an open and inclusive dialogue. The document stressed that the door remained open for all States in the region to join the process, and confirmed that the zone would be established on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by consensus by the States of the region. On the whole, the first session of the United Nations Conference fully accomplished its main objective of giving a political impetus to launch the process of elaborating the arrangements for a WMD-free zone.

The second session of the United Nations Conference on a WMD-free zone had to be postponed for two years owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. It appeared that the momentum driving the process had been lost. However, the results of the 2021 session were at least equally conclusive:

- (1) The parties were able to agree that all decisions, both procedural and substantive, would be taken solely by consensus;
- (2) It was decided to establish a working committee, which would operate during the intersessional period;
- (3) The rules of procedure were developed and adopted.

The working committee has already begun its activities: an organizational meeting was held on 24 March 2022, and two sessions are scheduled before the end of the year, in June and September. Significantly, the conference participants are ready to move on to the next stage: discussions on the outlines of a future treaty.

Further expectations and prospects for the process of establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East

The United Nations Conference on a WMD-free zone has proven to be an effective tool for interaction between countries of the region and other stakeholders involved in the process. It is now the only platform where regional States can gather around the same table for a substantive and engaged exchange of views on specific security concerns. We trust that the third session of the Conference on a WMD-free zone will be no less successful than the previous two.

We urge Israel and the United States, which have not yet joined this forum, not to ignore it any longer. The process has gone “in depth”, which means that it is time to get involved, not to keep watching from the sidelines.

The interests of Israel will be securely protected, in fact, by the right of veto on any issues. No decision will be taken at the Conference without the consensus of all its participants. Claims that the process is supposedly aimed at isolating Israel are unfounded. On the contrary, it is an open-ended invitation for dialogue to the States of the region. The Glion-Geneva process and the participation of Israel as an observer at the 2015 Review Conference show that there is still some interest from Israel in a WMD-free zone. If Israeli colleagues are not ready to join the work of the United Nations Conference on a WMD-free zone now, an intermediate step in this regard could be to send a delegation as an observer.

The United States should also no longer be “left behind” and should at least try to live up to the leadership role in non-proliferation that Washington regularly tries

¹ [A/CONF.236/6](#) (Annex).

to claim it has. The three co-sponsors of the 1995 resolution have this collective responsibility.

Recommendations to the Tenth Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty

The issue of a WMD-free zone must remain within the context of the Non-Proliferation Treaty until the goals and objectives of the 1995 resolution on the Middle East are fully realized. We are convinced that the significant progress made in establishing a dialogue on a WMD-free zone at the United Nations Conference can and should be appropriately reflected in the draft final document of the current Review Conference. This would be in the interests of all parties involved and would also demonstrate that the United Nations process on establishing a WMD-free zone makes a qualitative contribution to the Non-Proliferation Treaty process.
