

Iranian Approaches to Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East

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The idea of establishing a Weapons of Mass Destruction or Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Middle East is not new; it dates back to 1970's. However, the security landscape of the Middle East today has compelled most analysts to look at the idea and the concept anew. Most regard the potential arms race in the Middle East to seriously jeopardize the prospects for long term stability and balance of power in the region. Israel, Iran and Egypt seem to have the main regional role in making or breaking this idea for another forty years.

The absence of real progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the hesitant international expectation to make some movements in the front, as well as Iran's nuclear program being considered at the UN Security Council, where Iran is being practically considered guilty until proven innocent, may offer a window of opportunity to creative thinking and planning for advancing the idea of Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East.

1. Iran's Policy for Nuclear disarmament and transparency

When NPT was indefinitely extended in 1995, the states also agreed on a set of "Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament" which included, among others, "the determined pursuit by the nuclear-weapons states of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce weapons globally, with the ultimate goal of elimination of those weapons, and by all States of general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." The progress on this principle has been thus far discouraging.

This article briefly discusses the legal context of general and complete nuclear disarmament, the historic obstacles, the renewed hopes that the new American President may have created, and the leading role the US and Russia must play towards eradication of nuclear weapons.

The article suggests that establishment of Nuclear weapons. The article suggests the establishment of Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZs) is a constructive step not just for non-proliferation purposes but also it is a step among many, which if pursued collectively, tends to create a global political condition which helps the nuclear-weapon states to regard the risks they associate with taking some concrete and progressive steps towards a world without nuclear weapons to be manageable.

A brief review of current NWFZs will be presented and it is argued that the nuclear-weapon states must reconsider their less the convincing support for them. The article discusses the proposal for NWFZ in the Middle East in some detail, touches on the debate on Iranian nuclear program and suggests that currently and despite all odds, there may be a window of opportunity to make some progress on this proposal. This suggestion becomes somewhat more tenable because the Third Preparatory Committee (Prepcom) meeting (4-15 May 2009) for the 2010 NPT Review Conference agreed for the first time to revisit the 1995 NPT Extension and Review Conference's resolution on the NWFZ in the Middle East.

2. Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East

The establishment of NWF zones in different parts of the world is considered to make our world safer on two grounds. First, they strengthen non-proliferation system in a particular region with possible spillover effect in terms of building confidence between member states and to some extent the neighboring countries. Second, NWFZs are designed, by definition, to limit nuclear-weapon states' freedom to project, station and move unnoticed their nuclear capable and armed vessels into NWFZs, as well as to encourage them to heed their obligations under the NPT for a phased, general and complete nuclear disarmament. Therefore, the establishment of NWF zones is a much needed boots in the arms of the NPT, and particularly its pillars of non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament.

Most analysts agree that establishing a WMD-free zone (WMDFZ) or NWFZ in the Middle East is far-fetched. It needs incremental measures, change of heart and mind, confidence building measures and a courageous resolve to save the succeeding generations for the scourge of wars – to borrow from the UN Charter. Some of these incremental, interrelated and mutually reinforcing measures that might be useful in promoting the idea of NWFZ in the Middle East are as follows:

General measures:

- Measures to promote respect for and implementation of the NPT;
- Measures to strengthen non-proliferation regime;
- Measures to strengthen nuclear disarmament and compliance by nuclear – weapon state with their obligations;

The Iranian Nuclear program in the Security Council is seen in Iran as the United States twisting Iran's arms due to thirty years of rocky relations between the two countries which the Us regards as largely unbecoming to its status as the only superpower. In return, Iran has, particularly in the last few years, addressed to the United States with a markedly combative tone a criticism that has routinely addressed to all five recognized nuclear-weapon states by majority members of the Non-Aligned Movement, League of Arab States and the New Agenda Coalition in practically all NPT relevant multilateral meeting.

3. Common try for nuclear knowledge

Instead of portraying Iran as the one and only architect of the Middle eastern race to construct nuclear power plants (hereafter abbreviated as NPP), we should pay attention to at least three sets of issues which continue to have tremendous impact on the nuclearization of the region: First, most Middle Easterners are unhappy with the policies of the UK and the US as the two major powers militarily involved in the region. The Bush Administration has brought the US nuclear capable forces to the Middle East, and its nuclear targeting policies as well as its insistence on an enhanced nuclear deterrence have a significant impact on the region's militarization.

The Middle Eastern states have become interested in nuclear reactors because the international community has been incapable of putting a stop to Iran's nuclear ambition, my judgment is that this is just the sort of situation in which western commentators do not look at the large picture. Instead of concentrating on Iran's actions since 2003 as the driving force for the concentrating on Iran's actions since 2003 as the driving force for the nuclear resurgence in the region.

The refusal of the nuclear weapon states to honor their NPT commitment to disarm as well as the tendency of turning a blind eye to Israel's blatant attempt to keep its nuclear monopoly for an explanation of the new developments in the Middle East. The subject of Israeli nuclear arsenal is raised here because the regional states consider it as an indication of the double standards which has made a substantial dent in the credibility of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

It could also be 'the straw that breaks the camel's back' at the 8th NPT Review Conference in 2010, given that there has been no progress since the May 2005 Review conference which once more called for Israel along with India and Pakistan to sign the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states promptly and unreservedly. In any discussion of nuclear power in the Middle East, it is important to analyze the implications of security threats associated with nuclear proliferation and Israel's approach to nuclear weapons acquisition, characterized with secret development, and a policy of ambiguity and deception.

A side range of questions have remained unanswered: Why do the great powers deny the destabilizing nuclear weapon capabilities of Israel, and only focus on Iran's nuclear enrichment program? Why have the Arab leaders and the great powers shown contradictory attitudes toward the region's nuclear programs? What is the rationale behind the opposition to the use of nuclear power in the region.

It is high time for the western governments to acknowledge that the leaders of the developing world are capable of thinking for themselves and act independently and purposefully. In the second half of the 20th century, the ability of the OPEC members to act out of reason and based on their national interest might have created obstacles in the way of the great power competition to exploit the world's oil resources for their own development. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, Iran played the major role in the wave of oil nationalization in the Middle East. Prominent Iranian political elites believe that Iran is now at the forefront of the developing countries' struggle with the West to gain access to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Because of this worthy cause, referring Iran's dossier to the Security Council and imposition of sanctions have not dampened its enthusiasm for the expansion of Iranian nuclear reactor program.