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Subject: COUNCIL DECISION in support of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East (ME WMDFZ) in a dynamic regional security environment - Annex

Project Document

Supporting the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in a Dynamic Regional Security Environment

Context and Rationale

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) continue to pose a serious and persistent challenge in the Middle East. The region is marked by long-standing nuclear challenges, including the lack of participation in international treaties, the existence of undeclared nuclear and other WMD programmes, unresolved safeguards issues, and ongoing non-compliance, while past findings of safeguards non-compliance continue to shape regional mistrust.

In addition, chemical weapons have been used in the region in recent history, and questions regarding adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) remain salient due to cases of non-participation and non-compliance.

Compounding these challenges, non-state actors have also pursued and employed chemical weapons, underscoring the erosion of established non-proliferation norms and the difficulty of enforcement in contexts marked by conflict and weak governance. Recently, there has also been a recent increase in nuclear rhetoric among elites in the region who advocate for the development of nuclear weapons, their use in conflicts, or the targeting of nuclear infrastructure, which has heightened the risk of nuclear weapons, the potential for conventional tensions and conflict escalating to WMD domains, and increased the urgency for the establishment of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East.

This reality, coupled with the stagnation in regional arms control diplomacy, highlights the need to promote dialogue on regional disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control and to build channels for regional engagement.

Objectives

The proposed UNIDIR Project aims to support the ME WMDFZ initiative by promoting the four main future components of the MEWMDFZ: (1) non-proliferation, (2) disarmament, (3) peaceful cooperation, and (4) verification and safeguards.

The project adopts a holistic approach by integrating research, capacity building, dialogue, and partnerships with regional stakeholders and governments. Through policy research, the project will provide the evidence base necessary for creating a shared knowledge base and informed decision-making; capacity-building activities will enhance the skills and knowledge of regional stakeholders to identify possible solutions and ways for their implementation; through dialogue, the project will facilitate communication channels and space for identifying de-escalation, trust building and collaboration ideas, ensuring diverse perspectives are considered; and partnerships with regional stakeholders and governments will facilitate coordinated efforts and resource sharing.

Additionally, the project delivers key outputs translated into regional languages to ensure broad accessibility and dissemination, which is crucial for reaching a wide audience and fostering widespread understanding and impact.

Activities will span the four thematic topics:

- Non-proliferation to address existing WMD capabilities and threats and prevent future ones.
- Disarmament to identify steps toward WMD elimination, supported by existing mechanisms and innovative regional arrangements to support such processes.
- Peaceful cooperation to identify new and enhance existing collaborative efforts to build trust, reduce tension, identify transparency measures, and strengthen the region's science, technology, and development objectives.
- Verification and safeguards to identify technical measures to ensure compliance with current and future regional states' commitments

The project will do so while addressing the region's and international evolving security landscape, characterized by escalating conflicts, increased salience of nuclear weapons, including their development, testing, use, and transfer, advancing technology, growing regional interest in nuclear energy and cooperation on civil programs, negative and positive shifts in longstanding policies on WMD, and emerging diplomatic opportunities.

Additionally, it will examine how these trends, alongside existing and emerging regional security challenges, affect the scope and structure of the Zone and its feasibility. The project will also provide expert support to ongoing and future regional security and ME WMD/FZ-related processes. Key outputs and findings of the project will be disseminated and communicated to relevant actors and stakeholders as part of the project's knowledge transfer activities and engagements in regional meetings and multilateral processes.

Methodology

Building on the first two phases, which established shared knowledge bases on historical events and efforts, secured buy-in from regional states, and identified policy bridging ideas as well as areas for further research and activities, this phase of the project will expand and build on these efforts. Key takeaways and activities from the previous phases included proposals to build confidence through multi-level dialogues and inclusive participation, strengthen institutional memory through the development of online tools, and improve verification and compliance using existing international frameworks. It also highlighted lessons from past agreements and negotiations, incentives, and security drivers for regional engagement, including post-JCPOA and October 2023 adjustments by regional states. It also laid out treaty modalities and scope, including the two main pathways for nuclear disarmament. Project findings also covered issues such as delivery systems, the integration of chemical and biological weapons in the scope of prohibitions, including possible specific OPCW arrangements and complementary regional measures, regional cooperation on peaceful nuclear energy, the growing impact of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies on WMD risks and arms control, and comparative insights from existing nuclear-weapon-free zones concerning the role of extra-regional states. Activities on the four thematic topics will benefit from integrating policy and research analysis methods. These include dialogue, capacity building, specialized briefings, simulation and tabletop exercises, knowledge transfer, and regional partnerships.

Activities and Deliverables

Non-Proliferation

The project will explore the linkages between the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (ME WMDFZ) process and regional and global disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control trends, identifying opportunities to strengthen these connections at the national, regional, and global levels. It will also assess regional proliferation dynamics, including developments related to advanced military capabilities, potential non-conventional capacities, and emerging areas of concern associated with WMD.

The project will facilitate regional engagement among government representatives and experts to exchange national perspectives on WMD-related threats and challenges and to identify constructive approaches and bridging ideas to address them.

The project will also support efforts to strengthen regional legal, technical, and diplomatic capacity by enhancing understanding of existing international non-proliferation frameworks and obligations—including those under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)—as well as lessons from existing nuclear-weapon-free zones and their relevance to the ME WMDFZ process.

Under this line of activities, the project will produce *one research paper* that examines the synergies between the ME WMDFZ and regional and global non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control trends, while identifying opportunities to promote them at national, regional, and global levels. It will also convene *one dialogue* to support and initiate discussions among government representatives and experts, share national perspectives on WMD threats and challenges in the region, and identify bridging ideas to address them.

Disarmament

The project activities will explore historical experiences with WMD disarmament across different regional and international settings, highlighting lessons and insights relevant to the Middle East. The project will also facilitate structured, scenario-based discussions to examine pathways, sequencing options, and incentives for advancing regional WMD disarmament under varying political and security conditions. Additionally, the project will support capacity-strengthening engagements for diplomatic and civil society stakeholders to improve their understanding of verification approaches for disarmament that can inform and sustain regional initiatives.

Under this line of activities, the project will produce *one research paper* analyzing key dynamics, challenges, and lessons relevant to advancing WMD disarmament and its verification in the Middle East, with a focus on how international and regional experiences can inform future efforts. It will also include a feasibility study on requirements, concepts, and formats of implementing a regional disarmament verification process. The project will also convene *one event* bringing together policymakers, technical experts, and civil society stakeholders to exchange perspectives, explore practical pathways for progress, and strengthen shared understanding of the political, legal, and technical dimensions of disarmament in the regional context. It will also explore sequencing and incentives for regional WMD disarmament.

Peaceful Cooperation

The project will conduct research to examine ways to reduce regional mistrust and enhance confidence by linking security concerns to cooperative, non-military approaches. This work will consider shared vulnerabilities across the region and assess how collaborative frameworks can contribute to stability and lessen reliance on coercive responses. Analytical work will explore conceptual approaches to regional cooperation that enable the safe, responsible, and equitable sharing of knowledge, infrastructure, and capabilities for peaceful scientific and technological purposes, drawing on relevant international and regional experiences.

Sustained channels for regional science and policy engagement will be identified, developed, and supported to encourage dialogue among academic, research, and policy communities, as well as civil society, promoting collaboration, knowledge exchange, and forward-looking discussions on peaceful applications and confidence-building through science.

Under this line of activities, the project will publish *one research paper* outlining conceptual frameworks for regional cooperation that support the safe, responsible, and equitable use of peaceful scientific and technological capabilities, drawing lessons from relevant international and regional experiences, including existing zone-based arrangements. The research will identify treaty-based frameworks or transparency measures to reduce mistrust and enhance confidence by linking regional security to non-proliferation, addressing shared vulnerabilities, and reducing dependence on militarized solutions.

The project will also hold *one roundtable* bringing together academic, research, and policy communities to advance science-based cooperation, exchange best practices, and explore confidence-building approaches and joint research initiatives linked to peaceful applications and shared regional challenges. It will investigate the underlying factors, including competition for resources, the safety of critical infrastructure, advanced technology, and energy demands related to health, energy, food, water, and environmental security, as well as cooperative mechanisms to address them.

Verification and Safeguards

The project will assess existing and potential new mechanisms relevant to the establishment of a Middle East WMD-free zone, taking into account the region's specific scope and political conditions. This will include examining legal, technical, and institutional challenges related to ensuring that sensitive activities remain exclusively peaceful and do not contribute to WMD risks.

The project will support regionally focused engagement among policy, legal, and technical experts to discuss verification needs, confidence-building approaches, and lessons from relevant international and regional experiences, with the aim of identifying approaches suitable to the Middle East context.

The project will also facilitate structured, policy-oriented engagement among diplomatic, technical, and legal communities to explore verification concepts for a future zone. These activities will strengthen understanding of verification challenges, foster cross-disciplinary dialogue, and examine the potential role of established and emerging tools and practices in supporting transparency and compliance.

Capacity building through expert forums, with participation from the IAEA, OPCW, and BWC ISU, CTBTO, and other relevant regional models to discuss regional verification needs and confidence-building tools.

Under this line of activities, the project will produce ***one research paper and one factsheet*** examining existing and potential verification mechanisms relevant to the establishment of a Middle East WMD-free zone, with particular attention to legal, technical, and institutional considerations specific to the regional context. The project will also convene ***one capacity-building workshop*** bringing together diplomatic, technical, and legal experts to strengthen regional understanding of verification challenges, promote cross-disciplinary dialogue, and explore confidence-building approaches applicable to a future zone.

Intended Stakeholders

The proposed project will contribute to regional and international disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control efforts. It will build on and expand the network established in the previous phase, maintaining continuity with existing partners while broadening engagement to deepen regional ownership and incorporate emerging voices in the field. The intended audience includes:

- Policymakers and diplomats engaged in disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control issues within the region and beyond. This group includes regional and international officials and those active in regional and multilateral platforms, such as the States Parties meetings and Review Conferences of the NPT, CWC, and BWC, the IAEA General Conferences, and the ME WMDFZ Conference.
- Regional experts from government agencies, universities, research institutions, and think tanks.

- International security researchers focused on arms control, the disarmament of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and their delivery systems in the Middle East, along with topics like the ME WMDFZ and regional security or emerging technologies.
- Scholars, practitioners, emerging experts, and specialized civil society organizations in the Middle East with activities relevant to and contributing to the ME WMWFZ.

Impact

The proposed project will be the only platform dedicated solely to promoting, facilitating, and conducting research on the ME WMDFZ. Its activities and outcomes aim to identify strategies to prevent and reverse WMD proliferation in the region, bolster the Zone initiative, and ensure the sustainability of a Zone treaty once finalized. Furthermore, the project will advance goals aligned with the European Union (EU) priorities outlined in the EU Strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. These include fostering regional security arrangements and arms control processes, building partnerships and cooperation, enhancing compliance with and universalization of multilateral treaties like the NPT, CWC, and BWC, internalization, contributing to the expansion of specialized expert networks and communities in the region, reinforcing non-proliferation norms, and working to prevent, deter, halt, or eliminate proliferation initiatives of concern. The project will also address root causes and promote overall security and stability in the Middle East, which are closely linked to European security.

Time frame

The proposed project will begin in mid-July 2026 for a period of 36 months. The implementation of the proposed project is expected to be concluded in July 2029.

Engagement with the EU & visibility

The EU has been a long-time active supporter of the ME WMDFZ initiative. Its commitment has been demonstrated through sustained confidence-building initiatives, seminars, and EU-funded projects. Throughout the project, UNIDIR will cooperate with the EU and engage actively with the EU's External Action Service, as the key interlocutor, as well as with the Permanent Delegations of the EU to the UN in Geneva, Vienna, and New York. In addition to publishing written products in accordance with the EU visibility guidelines, the EU will be visible at all events co-organised by UNIDIR, including by providing opening and/or closing remarks, moderating, or contributing as an expert. Unless the EU requests otherwise, UNIDIR will take all necessary measures to publicize that the project has been funded by the EU and to highlight the EU's role in this action. The EU emblem and funding statements will be used to acknowledge the EU's presence and ensure its visibility. This will ensure that the EU's financial support for the action is visible, transparent, and well-branded.

Implementing entity & partner

UNIDIR is an autonomous institute within the UN system that provides independent research on pressing global challenges related to disarmament, arms control, and international security with the aim of promoting an inclusive dialogue to find creative and effective solutions. The Institute's history, research, and work on the ME WMDFZ go back to the 1990s.

UNIDIR maintains strong, trusted relationships and cooperation with Middle East states and regional organizations. UNIDIR is recognized for the neutrality, objectivity, and impartiality of its research.
