Nuclear Threats in the Middle and Far East: Proliferation, Pursuit of a NWFZ, or Nuclear Sharing

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The Middle East

Over the past several years, the global security environment has been subjected to corrosive challenges. The increased resort to force, the erosion of arms control norms, lowering of thresholds for use of nuclear weapons, the paralysis of the United Nations Security Council, disregard to international law and international humanitarian law, and undermining of the global governance structure represented by the United Nations. All have created an unprecedented nuclear environment since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the Middle East, where acute nuclear-related risks persist, including Israel's undeclared and unsafeguarded nuclear facilities and activities; the apprehension towards Iran's nuclear activities; and the absence of regional security structures capable of managing crises. These vulnerabilities were exacerbated by the 2025 and 2026 attacks on safeguarded Iranian nuclear facilities, as well as reported attacks on nuclear facilities in Dimona and Baraka. Even the possibility of use of nuclear weapons was toyed with in the parallel universe of disinformation, and outright propaganda campaigns by all sides.

Together, these risks and events generated unprecedented concerns and demonstrated how regional tensions can spiral into direct military confrontation, with far-reaching implications for nuclear safety, proliferation risks, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), global security, and economic stability.

They underscored the urgent need for a regional framework that reduces risks, prevents miscalculation, and removes weapons of mass destruction (WMD) from the region's volatile strategic environment. Strikes on safeguarded facilities erode confidence in the ability of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure compliance, while the presence of unsafeguarded facilities or activities erodes confidence in the global nuclear order, heightens the risk of radiological release, and exposes the fragility of the region's security architecture.

Against this backdrop, it becomes more evident a Middle East free of nuclear weapons is not merely desirable, but an urgent global and regional necessity.

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The idea of establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East emerged during the late 1970s, at a time when regional conflicts, shifting alliances, and the global Cold War competition heightened concerns about proliferation.

In 1974, Egypt and Iran introduced the first United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolution calling for a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East, reflecting a shared recognition that regional security could not be achieved through an arms race or unilateral military advantage. This early initiative was rooted in the belief that regional stability requires mutual restraint, transparency, and a commitment to collective security, rather than the pursuit of deterrence through WMD capabilities.

Over time, the concept evolved to encompass chemical and biological weapons, reflecting the region's experience with chemical warfare and the broader international movement toward comprehensive disarmament.

The political momentum behind the weapons of mass destruction-free zone (WMDFZ) gained further significance with the adoption of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East, which formed an integral part of the package enabling the indefinite extension of the NPT.

The Resolution recognized the Middle East's unique security environment requiring a dedicated framework to address longstanding asymmetries, unresolved conflicts, and the absence of region-wide verification arrangements. It also acknowledged that progress toward a WMDFZ would reinforce the NPT's credibility and contribute to global nonproliferation objectives. This move was further advanced by the 2010 NPT Review Conference Action Plan on the Middle East, reaffirming the international community's commitment to establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons.

Yet progress toward implementing the Resolution has been consistently hindered by persistent hesitation, political fragmentation, and the argument that regional perspectives are too divergent to permit meaningful preparatory work. At the same time, international attention sought to address nuclear proliferation concerns not through a region-wide security architecture, but more through a targeted and selective case by case approach. That "Band Aid" approach, has failed to address region-wide WMD security concerns. Within this approach came the handling of the" Iran nuclear file," under the assumption that resolving a single topical issue would ease broader proliferation concerns.

It remains bewildering that we keep practicing the same counterproliferation approach, basically dealing with the symptoms rather than addressing the lack of a credible region-wide security architecture.

More worrisome, especially in the current global security perception, the fact that such a Band Aid approach has failed to diminish the value of nuclear and other WMDs as the ultimate deterrence and guarantor of security, as clearly witnessed by discussions on modalities for extended nuclear deterrence, friendly proliferation or acquisition, all of which leads to one simple conclusion: "Nuclear weapons are useful and necessary as the ultimate guarantor of security."

Irrespective of the NPT review conference, which has concluded its month-long deliberations with no agreement on a final document, what has transpired regionally in the past two years, demonstrates beyond any doubt that the Middle East cannot rely on ad-hoc crisis management or external mediation both of which are not sustainable to prevent escalation. The region requires a structured, predictable, and inclusive process capable of reducing risks and building confidence over time. While political conditions remain challenging, practical steps are both possible and urgently needed. Experience from other regions shows that progress toward a nuclear weapons free zone does not begin with comprehensive agreements, but with incremental measures that gradually create trust, transparency, and a conducive environment for cooperation.

In this context, a set of mutually reinforcing building blocks can help lay the groundwork for meaningful negotiations. These measures do not prejudge final outcomes, nor do they require states to compromise on core security concerns at the outset. Instead, they provide a pragmatic pathway to reduce immediate dangers, strengthen verification mechanisms, and open channels of communication that have long been absent in the region.

Such measures would be based on three basic clusters namely, regional confidence measures; strengthening verification and safeguards; and an inclusive security dialogue; and would include greater transparency on nuclear-related activities, voluntary information exchanges and notifications, universalization of IAEA comprehensive safeguards agreements, regional cooperation; nuclear safety and security, and projects on training and emergency preparedness, among others.

The engagement and leadership of the nuclear-weapon States is indispensable for advancing the establishment of a Middle East WMDFZ and restoring confidence in the NPT. Their responsibilities extend beyond lip service: they must provide legally binding negative security

assurances to regional states, support dialogue without political preconditions, refrain from actions that heighten regional tensions.

A Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction is a realistic, necessary, and achievable objective that would serve the security interests of all regional actors.

The continued failure to implement the 1995 Resolution undermines the credibility of the NPT, and risks further deterioration of the regional security environment. In its absence, states will continue to seek alternative means to address their security concerns, thus increasing the likelihood of proliferation−friendly or otherwise−, miscalculation and conflict, especially at a time when nuclear deterrence and sharing is once again the center of the current discourse around nuclear weapons, risks, and the global deliberations on the continued validity of the NPT regime.

The Far East

Further East, the situation does not appear to be much better. Eighty years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapons remain central to the security doctrines of nuclear-armed states and many of their allies. Throughout the region, there is less talk about the urgency of nuclear disarmament, and if the two words are mentioned, it is usually in a somewhat shy low-key way, making it almost inaudible, or incomprehensible. The conclusion of such is a sense of normalization of nuclear weapons, in the one region that has witnessed firsthand the unimaginable consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. Consequences that one can only see a minute fraction of when visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial - and yes, it is called a Peace Memorial.

Such normalization, in addition to the breakdown of the bilateral arms control regime between the United States and the Russian Federation, as well as the deep regression of the global nonproliferation regime, the latest failure of the NPT Review conference only fuels the downward spiral towards normalizing not only the continued possession of nuclear weapons by the nuclear weapon states but also extends to the normalization of possession by states nonparty to the treaty, such as the case of the DPRK, which has withdrawn from the treaty. And to add further concern to the regional environment, voices have been raised, questioning the credibility of sharing arrangements, and toying with the idea of developing indigenous capabilities.

Such is the Far East moment, and nowhere to be seen there, the prospect of any possible regional security arrangement to avert a nuclear order meltdown.

Each region with its own set of risks and challenges can and does provide lessons learned to the other region. They may not be the right lessons, which drives me to propose the usefulness of undertaking a cross-regional dialogue between the Middle East and the Far East on the future prospects of the global nuclear order.

About the Author



Khaled Shamaa is a career diplomat and multilateral negotiator. He served as Permanent Representative to the UN, the IAEA, and other international organizations in Vienna, and as Ambassador to Austria, Mexico, and Belize. He also served as a negotiator on disarmament, non-proliferation, and transnational threats, and as Chair of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. During his 30-year career, he held a variety of portfolios related to multilateral affairs, international security, disarmament, sustainable development, public policy, project management, and strategic policy advice.