

Middle East Nuclear Arms Control Regime Simulation Conference

**** Participant Backgrounder ****

Directions: This gives an overview of nuclear arms control and other prominent issues in the Middle East as well as a map of the region. Additional resources are available at <http://slramirez.github.io/idp.html>.

I. Nuclear Arms and the Middle East

What is a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone?

Nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) agreements are regional agreements that prohibit states from acquiring, developing, or stockpiling nuclear weapons—in short, a geographical area without nuclear weapons.

NWFZs are an important tool in the international nuclear arms control regime. They provide confidence-building measures that enhance regional security and build trust among states in several ways. NWFZs open space for dialogue on other regional security issues, and signal the credibility of peaceful intentions to the international community. They also often include negative security assurances in which states that possess nuclear weapons agree not to use those weapons against non-nuclear states.

There are currently five NWFZs: Treaty of Tlateloco (Latin America), Treaty of Rarotonga (South Pacific), Treaty of Bangkok (Southeast Asia), Treaty of Pelindaba (Africa), and the Treaty on a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia.

Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and the Middle East

The Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (MENFWZ) has been on the international agenda for almost 40 years. First proposed in a UN Resolution in 1974, the UN General Assembly adopted resolutions annually to reaffirm its commitment to the establishment a NWFZ in the Middle East with a consensus voting in favor since 1980.

In 1991, the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group was established as part of the Madrid Peace Process to build multilateral momentum. States involved intended to establish confidence-building measures and initiate

broad discussion of the MENWFZ. Although a number of confidence-building measures were agreed upon – including maritime issues (search and rescue), pre-notification of military exercises, exchange of military information, a regional communication network, and the establishment of three regional security centers – none were implemented. Talks collapsed in September 1995 as Israel and Egypt disagreed about when to place the MENWFZ on the agenda and whether an Israeli-Arab peace settlement should be a precondition to the MENWFZ.

In 1995, the U.S., the U.K., and Russia spearheaded and adopted a Middle East Resolution in the final document created at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review and Extension Conference. The resolution called on all states in the Middle East to accede to the NPT, to take practical steps in establishing a verifiable MENWFZ, and to apply all IAEA safeguards to nuclear facilities in the Middle East. Further, the resolution called on all NPT states to extend their cooperation to support the resolution. With the exception of Israel, all states in the Middle East have acceded to the NPT. However, since 1995, no further progress has been made on the Middle East Resolution.

As a follow-up, the final document at the 2010 Review Conference reaffirmed “the importance of Israel’s accession to the Treaty and the placement of all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards.”¹ It also called on the UN Secretary-General, the U.S., U.K., and Russia to convene a conference on the establishment of a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (MEWMDZFZ) with the attendance of all states in the region. This conference was slated for December 2012, but was postponed indefinitely in November due to regional instability.

Although the MENWFZ has been on the table for four decades, little substantive progress has been made. Regional insecurity coupled with Israel’s nuclear arsenal and Iran’s enrichment activities presents a significant challenge. In the past, Israel has been reluctant to engage in MENWFZ negotiations until a peace process is established. Egypt maintains the position that peace cannot be discussed without Israel’s nuclear arsenal on the table first – nuclear weapons must be part of the process from the beginning.

Briefly, What is Today’s Nuclear Situation?

Israel

Israel is the only state in the Middle East that possesses nuclear weapons. Although Israel practices a policy of “nuclear opacity,” it possesses an estimated 80 nuclear

¹ 2010 NPT Review Conference Final Document
<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/npt/revcon2010/DraftFinalDocument.pdf>

weapons. Israel has stated in the past that it will not be the first state to introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

Iran

Iran is party to the NPT, however there is strong suspicion among the international community that its uranium enrichment program has a military dimension. In 2003, Iran temporarily suspended its uranium enrichment activities in response to international concerns, but resumed its program in 2005. Secret documents dismissed as forgeries by Iranian officials indicated that Iran sought to modify its missiles to carry a nuclear warhead. The IAEA found Iran in noncompliance with its safeguards agreements because of undisclosed enrichment facilities. The U.S. intelligence community believes Iran halted its weapon program in 2003, but concerns remain over Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium. The UN Security Council has passed several resolutions requiring Iran to suspend its enrichment activities. Iran recently agreed to temporarily suspend some parts of its nuclear work in exchange for lifting sanctions.

Arab States

No other state in the Middle East possesses nuclear weapons, although several have or are pursuing civilian nuclear capabilities (Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Yemen, Syria). One concern of the international community, however, is the potential for a regional arms race if Iran becomes a de facto nuclear weapons state. Saudi Arabia has publicly stated it will consider acquiring its own nuclear weapons if it feels threatened.

II. Prominent Issues in the Middle East

Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks

Under the stewardship of Secretary of State John Kerry, the United States began comprehensive peace talks at the end of July 2013 with the Palestinian Authority and Israel. The peace talks are set to last for approximately nine months and an agreement is expected by the end of April. Secretary of State Kerry has met with both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, although neither has met the other since talks began.

The talks have continued under the direction of Martin Indyk while Kerry has been addressing other issues. The talks have consisted of ten meetings of Kerry with Abbas or Netanyahu, while diplomats from each side have continued discussions. The negotiators have met around twenty times, and. While both sides have stated that progress has been made, each side blames the other for not having reached a deal.

Recently, Kerry revealed a "framework for peace" that would establish an independent Palestinian state. He has also attempted to bring Jordan and Saudi Arabia

into the peace talks to garner regional support and pressure both sides to reach an agreement.

With April fast approaching, Secretary of State Kerry is expected to focus almost exclusively on the peace process. Many believe that the issue of borders, a Palestinian state, and the fate of Jerusalem are just too difficult to tackle and that the peace process will fail. Others warn that even if a peace deal is struck it will only be between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and thus will not affect the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by Hamas, a terrorist organization. All sides have been optimistic about the process, and Kerry has stated that he believes an agreement will be reached.

Egyptian Revolution

Egypt has been in turmoil since its political revolution and protests began on January 25th 2011. The revolution resulted in a “peaceful transition” when longtime leader Hosni Mubarak who remained defiant for eighteen days agreed to peacefully step down on February 11th 2011.

On June 2nd 2012, Mubarak was found guilty of murdering protesters. The conviction was later overturned on appeal and a retrial was ordered. Elections were held later that year. On June 24th the State Election Commission announced that the Muslim Brotherhood backed Mohamed Morsi had won the Egyptian presidential election.

Morsi struggled to gain legitimacy: large portions of the population, many in the West, and the military saw Morsi as an Islamist and a threat to the secular nature of Egypt. Several protests erupted on June 20th 2013 by Morsi’s opponents. Morsi was then removed from office on July 3rd 2013 in a coup d’état by the military.

The military has attempted to establish its rule over the country despite numerous protests and ongoing violence. On August 14th 2013, security forces dispersed pro-Morsi sit-ins and the removal caused the death of hundreds of Islamists. Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood continue to refuse to recognize the coup, and claim to be the legitimate rulers of Egypt.

The military has presented a new constitution for the country that will be voted on in early 2014. The Egyptian revolution is only one part of the Arab Spring and many other nations have gone through either revolutions of their own or fear a revolutionary onset.

Syria’s Civil War

Protest broke out on March 15th 2011 against Bashar al-Assad, the longtime president of Syria, as tensions fomented between the Sunni majority populace and the Alawite Shi’ite minority in power. By the end of April 2011, the protests were nationwide. At first, protesters wanted democratic and economic reforms, but following repression by the police and army, protesters demanded the resignation of Assad and the Ba’ath Party. Al-Assad has refused to resign despite calls for his resignation domestically and internationally. The opposition (Syrian National Coalition) has state that it will not accept an agreement unless Assad resigns. 4

In April 2011 the Syrian army attempted to suppress the protests by firing upon protesters around the nation. Protesters turned to armed rebellion, and a civil war began.

The Syrian Civil War has expanded to involve many outside forces. The terrorist organization Hezbollah entered in support of the current Syrian regime. Russia and Iran supplied the Syrian regime with weapons, and China has been supportive of the regime but has not actively armed it. The United States, European Union, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have supported the rebels including through the transfer of weapons.

Today's situation is more complex due to disagreements between moderate and jihadist rebel forces. The Syrian rebels began to take increasingly Jihadist tendencies, and the radical Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has gained more influence with the rebels as a whole. However, the Islamic Front, a seemingly radical group has surprisingly had a moderating and secularizing force on the rebels. Internal friction between the rebel groups has led to fighting among the rebels, and the current civil war is being fought between jihadists, moderates, and the Syrian regime.

The current state of the conflict has seen the disintegration of the Syrian National Committee, a Western backed moderate rebel group. The Islamic Front has also refused to talk to the United States, which leaves many questioning how moderate the Islamic Front truly is and whether ISIS's radicalizing effect will dominate rebel intentions.

The conflict has also diffused across borders. Lebanon has seen an increase in Hezbollah fighting, and a rise in the number of Sunni militants. The Sunni militants have increased their opposition to Hezbollah as well as to the Syrian regime and given aid to many of the Syrian rebels.

Egypt has also seen a rise in terrorist activities from individuals returning from fighting against the Syrian regime. Egypt has had at least 358 individuals leave to fight in Syria. There are concerns that these individuals will become radicalized and battled hardened in Syria and destabilize their home countries upon their return.

Most recent estimates place the Syrian government in control of 30-40 percent of the country's land, with the population in control of roughly 60 percent. The death toll is estimated to be over 120,000. Over 10,000 protesters have been imprisoned and torture is suspected. Chemical weapons have been used during the conflict, drawing harsh international criticism and threats of United States military intervention. The use of chemical weapons has been curtailed due to international pressure and an agreement proposed by Russia that it would take and dismantle the chemical weapons of the Syrian regime.

Both sides have been accused of human rights violations. More than three million Syrians have fled the country and are refugees. In an attempt to end the violence occurring on both sides of the conflict there has begun a new round of peace talks being held in Geneva and mediated by the United Nations. The ongoing Geneva Talks are tense and the opposition has offered only partial support for an agreement. The talks struggle with Assad and the Ba'ath Party refusing to step down and the opposition refusing to accept an agreement unless they resign.

Iranian Nuclear Talks

Hassan Rouhani was elected as the 7th president of the Islamic Republic of Iran in June 2013, and assumed office in August. He promised to open up Iran to the world and ease the crippling sanctions that have been placed on Iran by the international community.

Many in the West feel that the election is an opportunity for engagement in diplomacy with Iran. Rouhani is believed to be a moderate and a political pragmatist. Rouhani faces many challenges from the Ayatollah Khamenei (the religious leader of Iran) and other hardliners (including Orthodox, conservative and more fundamentalist leaders) who believe any discussion with the Western nations is against Islam.

In September 2013 the p5+1 talks continued and hope emerged for an agreement between Iran and the Western powers over Irani nuclear activities. The month of September also saw Rouhani visit New York, a major diplomatic breakthrough between the United States and Iran. The trip to New York was followed with a phone call between Barack Obama and Rouhani, the highest level of diplomatic talks since 1979 between both nations.

In November 2013 a preliminary agreement was reached in Geneva regarding sanctions and Iran's nuclear program. The agreement was designed to halt Iran's nuclear advances for six months in exchange for the easing of international sanctions. The goal is to buy time to reach a final agreement.

Talks about the implementation of a final agreement with details on the specifics of the nuclear arrangement will take place between Iran and the European Union in January in Geneva.

A major issue in the ongoing dispute and negotiations is the nature of Iran's nuclear program. Iran has stated that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. The West and in particular the United States and Israel have stated that Iran's nuclear program is for the enrichment of weapons grade uranium and ultimately nuclear weapons.

Rouhani has worked hard to balance between his own personal desire to acquire nuclear power while easing sanctions and maintaining domestic legitimacy. The Ayatollah Khamenei and other hardliners remain critical of the nuclear talks and believe that the agreement is a violation of Iran's sovereignty.

Current talks focus on Iran's centrifuge research and the suspension or reduction to 5% of production, and allowing Russian nuclear plants to run within the country instead of Iranian nuclear facilities. The heavy-water reactor at Arak, which could be used to make weapons grade material, has also been a large part of the disagreement.

The United States has faced its own internal challenges on the issue. Republican and Democratic lawmakers are attempting to place new sanctions on Iran that would be implemented if Iran violated the interim nuclear deal. The House of Representatives approved similar legislation in July and if a vote for sanctions takes place in the Senate it will likely pass. Obama has attempted to hold off a Senate vote, and has spent substantial political capital on holding it off and threatening a veto if the legislation is passed. Obama believes that passage of the sanctions during the current negotiations risks collapsing the entire nuclear deal.

Terrorism in Iraq

Al-Qaeda has recently taken over the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah. The United States has sought to support the Iraqi government in removing al-Qaeda from the two cities. This support has been limited, however, as the United States has been reluctant to place troops on the ground after their removal in accord with the Status of Forces Agreement between the U.S. and Iraq. The Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq has also

rejected retaining U.S. troops since 2011, and is under domestic pressure to continue to stabilize the government without Western involvement.

Map of the Region



(Map credit: University of Notre Dame OCW)