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Remarks by Emad Kiyaei

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He was previously a researcher at Princeton University’s Program on Science and Global Security, an associate at Columbia University’s Center for International Conflict Resolution, and executive director of the American Iranian Council.

*Greetings to everyone joining us from across the world. I would like to recognize the organizers and co-sponsors for this timely event—thank you Joseph and your team for your important work.*

The socioeconomic and political consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic are bringing humanity to a crossroad—either we continue on the path towards steeper inequality, injustice and environmental catastrophe or, by renewing our commitment for collective action, we build a “world free of nuclear weapons, without wars, with global, social, and environmental justice”.

The Middle East is a good example for this rule. It has all the ingredients to play a constructive role in this process: strategic location, plentiful natural resources, and millennia-old cultures, with a fearless, youthful demographic fighting to transform their region for the better. Yet, it also holds the ingredients to foster and spread destruction and discord, with an added toxic dose of ethnic, sectarian, national, and religious fanaticism.

The grand-scale transformation we are witnessing, today, provides a rare opportunity to rethink and expand the realm of ***what*** is possible, ***how*** we can get there, ***who*** can help us along the way and ***why*** the time to act is ***now***.

*Let us begin our journey to rid the Middle East from all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as a gateway toward regional cooperation on peace and security. This will build bridges for cooperation on wider, cross-border environmental, social, and economic challenges.*

We know that WMD—nuclear, biological and chemical weapons—threaten the survival of our human family and planet. But nowhere is it more urgent to rid and stem their spread than in the Middle East.

Luckily, we do not have to start from scratch. But we do need to reenergize, retool and reformulate the ***process*** to realize the decades-old idea of establishing a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East (an idea first proposed by Egypt thirty years ago, in 1990, with support from Iran).

We need to base this process on the principals of cooperation, trust and goodwill—undoing the current animosity and misunderstanding among regional countries that have crippled the drive toward peace, security and prosperity. Thus, the WMDFZ will not only contribute to strengthening nonproliferation efforts, it will also open the discussion to broader challenges facing the region.

**The bottom line is this:** we need a ***treaty*** negotiated through an inclusive process by all 22 Arab countries in the Middle East and Africa in addition to Iran and Israel, with the support of world powers. We will then need to establish a ***regional organization*** to oversee the treaty’s eventual implementation, verification and compliance.

The good news is that there are multiple initiatives currently underway to support the realization of the zone. The traditional track, linked to the ***Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT’s)*** indefinite extension in 1995, requires the international community to support the establishment of the zone. Regrettably, though, there hasn’t been much progress since then on the treaty text nor on establishing a regional organization.

A more promising complementary diplomatic process was kickstarted recently with the first annual ***United Nations Conference on the WMDFZ,*** held in November 2019 with participation from all 22 Arab countries in the Middle East and Africa, Iran and permanent members of the UN Security Council (with the notable absence of Israel and the US). This watershed conference will occur annually until a final ***treaty text*** is negotiated through an inclusive, consensus-driven process.

These diplomatic processes take a long time but as civil society we do not have to wait—***we have the flexibility and freedom to take action—now!***

That is exactly what a group of activists, academics and dreamers (which I am part of) from within the region and beyond started doing. We went ahead and wrote an evolving and adaptive ***Draft Treaty*** text and established a preparatory organization named the ***Middle East Treaty Organization (METO)***.

The Draft Treaty text and METO, bolstered by our citizen diplomacy, advocacy, partnerships with leading academic and policy institutions, are already galvanizing governments and civil society across the region and beyond to imagine what is ***possible***—and how they can play a part in shaping the path forward!

**A reality-check:** we are not naïve, and we’re far too familiar with the formidable obstacles in our path forward—from the combination of lingering disagreements over the process of ***how*** & ***when*** to achieve the zone, to the broader WMD proliferation risks and geopolitical realities facing the region.

*Here are few examples:* Israel’s nuclear weapons monopoly and efforts by major Middle Eastern countries to level the playing field through ongoing efforts to expand their WMD capabilities. The multiple cases of chemical weapons use in Syria since the 2011 uprising and struggle to eliminate those stockpiles and bring those responsible to justice. Regional destabilization—in the wake of U.S. wars with Iraq and Afghanistan and the Arab Spring—has created an opportunity for extremists and terrorist groups to flourish and contribute to WMD proliferation threats via illicit trade, transfer, and use of such weapons. The fragility of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers following Trump’s 2018 unilateral withdrawal, reinstating previously removed sanctions and introducing evermore draconian sanctions on the country—has crippled the Iranian economy and inflicted collective punishment on over 80-million Iranians.

The above exists alongside broader political tensions that contribute to regional instability and continue to complicate progress towards a WMDFZ. These security challenges, including the role of world powers in militarizing the Middle East (with the US and Russia accounting for the lion’s share of weapons sales—and military aid—to their respective allies in the region). Regional rivalries are also prolific, fueled by sectarianism and ideological differences—particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In addition, previous failures to resolve the Palestinian–Israeli—and wider Arab–Israeli—conflicts continue to sow distrust and provide fodder for radicalization in the Middle East. The series of uprisings that swept the Arab world from Tunisia to Syria, and their messy aftermath, are further disrupting the security, stability, and geopolitical configuration of the region, and changing political dynamics as a result.

**Moving Forward:** By reducing proliferation risks, achieving a WMDFZ can renew regional efforts to tackle the deep-rooted challenges I have mentioned. The zone will require regional countries to build closer lines of communication and reduce tensions and mistrust, thus cultivating a new beginning in multilateral and bilateral relations. These refreshed geopolitical dynamics could unlock the positive social, economic, and cultural potential of a region rich in both natural and human resources, in one of the most strategic locations on the planet. With renewed hope from improved regional relations, excessive spending on defense would also diminish, freeing up vast financial resources for high-impact human development.

**This is a call for action:** This pandemic has shown us that we are truly connected—and our actions have ripple effects throughout the world. The path we take today will determine on a larger-scale the fate of our human family. The injustice, insecurity and carnage that have infected the Middle East, therefore, will continue to manifest on all levels of our societies. Inaction is no longer an option if we truly seek to realize the noble goals inscribed here: “a world free of nuclear weapons, without wars, with global, social, and environmental justice”.

I call upon you all to *join us. Your solidarity, support and engagement help make us stronger and resilient in the face of those seemingly powerful naysayers that cast doubts on what we can achieve!*

*Thank you.*