

NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: HERE TO STAY

In order to avoid enduring setbacks, rigorous groundwork will be required prior to and during a diplomatic meeting addressing nuclear issues within the Middle East. At the same time, structural factors render any prospect for regional disarmament premature. Resolving Iran's nuclear file remains paramount, but a solution is not in sight. For Israel, the abolition of nuclear weapons appears neither necessary nor desirable. Given existing dynamics, the most plausible future regional developments are unlikely to encourage disarmament steps. More probable, upholding the existing state of affairs will prove challenging enough.



A difficult task ahead: Jaakko Laajava (left), Facilitator of the 2012 Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone. New York, October 27, 2011. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

A conference scheduled for 2012 to promote a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East has renewed hopes that disarmament could be a promising medium-term option. Innovative diplomacy is thus being called for to take advantage of the current shifts within the region's strategic architecture. Nonetheless, much work and skill will be required for the meeting to be completed without any long-lasting negative implications. As for additional steps, a realistic assessment suggests that optimism is unwarranted. Fundamental considerations related to Iran's on-going nuclear program, Israel's

existing atomic options, and the region's intricate security structure remain nearly insurmountable hurdles.

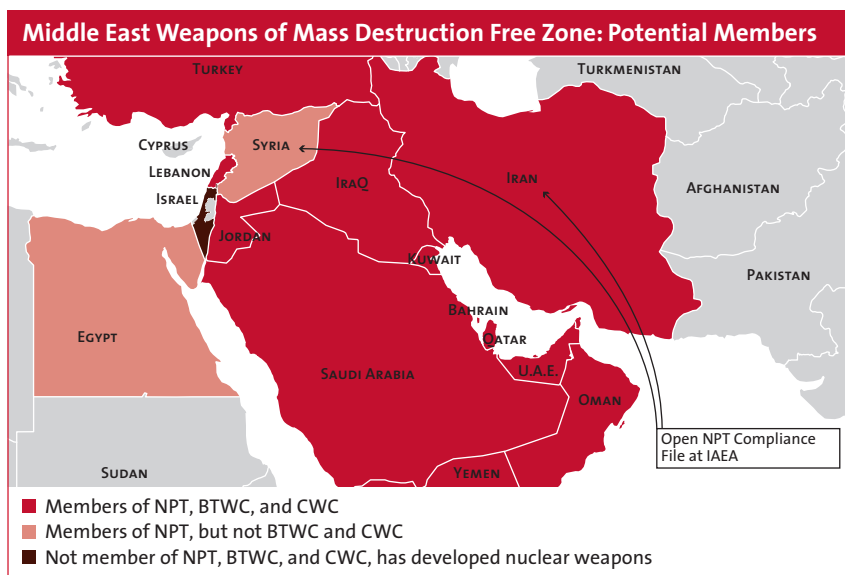
Background

The concept of nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZ) can be traced back to a 1950s Polish plan focussed on Central Europe. While this initiative was never finalised, five other zones have by now been negotiated (cf. box). Within the Middle East, after Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons during the 1960s, regional actors led by Egypt and Iran endeavoured to increase their diplomatic leverage by calling for a NWFZ. To

deflect pressure, Israel ultimately accepted the premise of a zone, but articulated a number of preconditions to negotiating such an instrument. Thus, while a NWFZ has been formally receiving universal regional support since 1980, progress has been very limited.

By the 1990s, taking into account the efforts of various actors within the region to acquire other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the concept of the zone was expanded to also cover chemical and biological armaments. In 1995, the treaty prohibiting the acquisition of nuclear weapons, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), was due to expire with the end of its initial 25-year mandate. Hence, the Arab states could exchange their support for the NPT's indefinite extension for a resolution on the Middle East to be included in the final decisions package, calling on all states in the region to take steps towards a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (MEWMDFZ). This resolution generated hardly any progress during the subsequent fifteen years, but granted Arab states, and especially Egypt, stronger leverage within the NPT diplomatic context.

Thus, given the failure of the 2005 NPT review conference to achieve a consensus outcome and the Obama administration's desire to obtain a fairly positive result at the 2010 meeting, the Egyptian delegation was in a good position to extract additional concessions on the Middle East. Within the concluding Action Plan adopted by



the 2010 review conference, the member states agreed to mandate the United Nations, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States to consult with countries in the region and convene a meeting in 2012 “on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction”. However, even though the current diplomatic debate covers all WMD, the linchpin to any potential zone agreement remains the nuclear question.

Historically, NWFZ have been viewed as useful instruments complementing other multilateral agreements. In addition to banning the acquisition and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, NWFZs enable members to prohibit any type of nuclear weapons research, exclude all such weapons from their territory, and forbid testing on their soil. Further, they allow for establishing enhanced transparency and verification mechanisms. Finally, they are attractive as instruments for requesting legal assurances from the recognised nuclear weapons holders that they will not use or threaten to use such weapons against the zone’s members. Ultimately, a viable MEWMDFZ proposal would have to go further than existent frameworks prohibiting nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons (NPT, Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)), and include additional regional or international verification mechanisms, as well as obligations for extra-regional actors.

In the aftermath of the 2010 NPT review conference, preparations for the 2012 event proceeded sluggishly at first. Nev-

ertheless, after a series of discussions during the summer of 2011 and the Arab states’ decision to refrain from putting additional pressure on Israel within the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) annual general conference, agreement was reached in October 2011. Finland was designated the host country and Finnish Undersecretary of State Jaakko Laajava, the meeting’s facilitator. Currently, the Finnish diplomat is expected to consult and resolve issues like timing, participants, focus of the talks, conference agenda, and potential outcomes.

Short-term issues

Nevertheless, as far as the 2012 planned meeting goes, any detailed discussion on a potential zone is premature. A number of unsettled conflicts, the existence of all types of WMD within the region, and serious concerns about compliance with non-proliferation obligations are significant challenges for a productive 2012 diplomatic event before it has even begun. Furthermore the Arab Spring partially reshuffled the regional architecture, generating an increased level of uncertainty under which most of the actors are unwilling to make any concessions with lasting strategic implications. Thus, while Arab states remain keen to see the promised 2012 event formalise political concessions received at the NPT review conferences during the last two decades, domestic turmoil is distracting their focus away from nuclear policy.

Israel first declined to participate, but subsequently signalled some readiness to cooperate, most likely wanting to avoid being blamed for a cancelled or failed meeting.

Given Iran’s stance towards such conferences and the current developments related to its nuclear file, it remains unclear whether its diplomats will partake. Washington, concerned with this year’s domestic presidential election, wants a short meeting involving the participation of all countries of the Middle East, comprising a broad exchange of views, and requiring consensus decisions, especially in regard to any follow-up actions. Thus, it is safe to say that the expectations are very low.

However, all the parties involved seem aware that a cancelled, excessively delayed, or failed meeting will have negative implications. Given that Egypt invested significant political capital to obtain the 2012 event, Cairo is likely to block further action within the NPT realm in response to a deadlock on the Middle East. A poorly planned event just a few months before the next NPT review conference in 2015 will give spoilers, like Iran or Syria, a strong incentive and a unique opportunity to divert attention from their own NPT compliance issues.

Thus, the best possible outcome appears to be a well-managed inconsequential diplomatic event that successfully avoids additional hardening of positions and thus long-term harm to the broader regime. Still, experts and observers hope that dialogue and trust-building, albeit without immediate results, will be conducive to a solution in the mid-term future. Yet while shepherding the diplomatic process is key to achieving even very modest results, structural factors generate almost insurmountable impediments for substantial progress to be made towards regional disarmament.

Iran’s nuclear program

In 2003, after having covertly explored nuclear opportunities for almost two decades, Iran’s efforts were made public. Iranian engineers have most probably researched weapons-related technologies, but existing evidence is unsatisfactory for establishing whether Tehran has ever decided to acquire a nuclear arsenal. Nevertheless, in spite of US pressure, European mediation attempts and IAEA investigations, Iran is slowly but steadily advancing towards acquiring critical technology, hardening its facilities against potential attacks, and producing larger quantities of fissionable material. Expectations were high when the Obama administration took office that accommodation could be found between Washington

and Tehran, but a solution currently seems out of sight. Without resolving the Iranian nuclear impasse, any discussion of a zone remains hypothetical.

The US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in a regional power vacuum that Washington proved unable to fill either with strong independent entities, or with its own capabilities maintained on the ground. Thus, Iran – the largest country in the Persian Gulf in terms of size, population and economy – sees little reason to give in to US pressure. To the contrary, Tehran appears bent on keeping all nuclear options on the table, hoping that an advancing program will strengthen its negotiating position in relation to Washington. Ultimately, should the United States remain opposed to Iran's regional ambitions, an atomic arsenal has the potential to constrain Washington's current force-projection options.

Conversely, with the United States still the dominant strategic player in the Middle East, the Obama administration remains unwilling to accommodate an inimical regime in Tehran. Washington prefers to leverage additional pressure on Iran through unilateral and multilateral sanctions, a process that has the potential to limit the expansion of Iranian power, but has little chance of convincing Tehran to abandon its nuclear program. Likewise, US and Israeli covert actions can slow down Iran's acquisition of nuclear technology, but also provides hard-liners in Tehran with strong arguments for continuing the program. Washington's approach towards the standoff with Iran comes down to upholding the semblance of a diplomatic process, while in fact playing for time in the hope of regime change in Tehran. Thus, Iran's nuclear file is likely to remain open for the foreseeable future.

Israel's atomic options

Israel is currently the only Middle Eastern country that is not a member of the NPT, and thus has not forsworn the right to acquire nuclear weapons. Indeed, the Jewish State is widely believed to have developed an advanced nuclear arsenal and most likely maintains nuclear-capable missiles, bombers, and submarines. Israel's official position is that negotiations on a zone can only begin once all other countries in the region have abandoned any ambition of acquiring WMD and a comprehensive peace agreement safeguarding its security and recognising its right to exist has been

reached. While a denuclearised Israel is a precondition for any feasible NFWZ proposal, it appears highly improbable that Tel Aviv will give up its nuclear arms. For a number of reasons, nuclear abolition appears neither necessary nor desirable for Israel.

First, given the developments surrounding Iran's nuclear program and the further dispersion of sensitive nuclear, chemical, and biological technologies within the region, Israel's regional non-proliferation precondition is unlikely to be met anytime soon. Besides, Israel's leadership have made it clear during past negotiations that it has no interest in even discussing alternative paths to circumvent this requirement of universal denuclearisation prior to any agreement. Second, due to the on-going Israeli settlement activities, the persistent de-facto US support for Israel's actions, and the weakness of the Palestinian position, optimism appears misplaced in regard to a forthcoming solution to the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict.

Third, assuming a negotiated option came within sight, Israel's nuclear disarmament would not be a prerequisite for peace. A peace settlement would most likely be achieved in conjunction with an acceptable resolution of the main outstanding issues regarding a two-state solution and a bilateral deal with Syria. Finally, as the emergence of future dangers remains impossible to foresee, an Israel in a pacified region would still have an incentive to maintain nuclear weapons. Both the expansion of nuclear capabilities over and above what is needed for an option of last resort and Israel's strategic culture point in this direction.

Democracy and stability

The 'Arab Awakening' has truly shaken the Middle East. This has raised renewed expectations for better opportunities to address the nuclear question. Some experts hope that these events will bring democracy and prosperity. These would in turn generate stability and peace, the prerequisites for the medium-term establishment of a MEWMDfZ. Nevertheless, the current transformations may not deliver the hoped-for results and the consequences of these changes are most likely less straightforward than many expect. Indeed, the most probable regional developments over the upcoming years do not bode well for WMD disarmament.

Treaties of existing NFWZs

- Treaty of Tlatelolco (Latin America) 
- Treaty of Rarotonga (South Pacific) 
- Treaty of Bangkok (Southeast Asia) 
- Treaty of Pelindaba (Africa) 
- Treaty of Semipalatinsk (Central Asia) 

Over the last months, a number of dictators in Arab countries were toppled. This has led some to foretell the creation of a democratic zone of peace in accordance with the Western prototype. Yet such an outcome is far from predetermined. While some of the states concerned exhibit positive indicators for a transition towards more democratic and representative systems, others will likely evolve into semi-democratic entities or even return to authoritarian forms of government. In addition, a number of authoritarian regimes within the region were able to solidify their position. Some are under threat from within and outside, but their replacement is uncertain. In any case, as these new regimes will need time to stabilise, economic growth, and thus prosperity, is unlikely to swiftly materialise.

In addition, it remains unclear whether a more democratic and prosperous Middle East will necessarily be more stable and peaceful. Democratic Arab governments are likely to pursue foreign policies attuned to the sentiments of the majority of their population, and thus are less likely to favour either good relations with Israel or public acceptance of US regional dominance. A number of actors will be tempted to adapt their positions to the reshuffled architecture. For example, Egypt is likely to strive to regain its role as the region's core power. A stronger Turkey might compete with Iran and Egypt, pressure Israel, and reassess its relations with the United States and Europe. The spread of democracy within the region might put significant pressure on authoritarian regimes supported by Washington, such as Saudi Arabia. Finally, with young democratic regimes tending to be domestically insecure, the Middle East is likely to face not less but more instability in the near future.

Therefore, while rampant proliferation remains improbable, the incentives for either maintaining or acquiring nuclear weapons are likely to increase. Serious consideration of the abolition of WMD within the Middle East will probably be even less likely than in the past.

Conclusion

International NPT diplomacy will be aided by succeeding in bringing all regional actors to the table for a Middle East meeting with no dramatic negative implications at some point in 2012 (as UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon recently announced) or at the beginning of 2013. In terms of outcomes, such a conference will most likely struggle to attain anything more than the lowest common denominator. However, low-key Israeli participation would provide spoilers little ammunition. Egypt could see its efforts legitimised, announce a limited success, and refrain from acting to down-right stalling the diplomatic process.

The 2015 NPT review conference will still face numerous challenges. Nonetheless, if concerns about the Middle East can somehow be mitigated again and the United States delivers some small concessions, like providing security assurances for other zones and finally ratifying a treaty comprehensively banning nuclear testing (CTBT), the chances are that a minimalist solution can once again be achieved.

However, within the broader picture, without dramatic policy adjustments in the United States' approach towards the Middle East and in the region's capitals, the likelihood that the 2012 meeting or any other subsequent similar efforts could somehow further the vision of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction remains very low. For states interested in non-proliferation, maintaining the nuclear status quo within this unstable region will certainly remain challenging enough.

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