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The 2012 WMDFZ Conference: Assessments from Track II Discussions

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The recommendation for a conference in 2012 on a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East, included in last year's NPT Review Conference Final Document, has thus far not produced tangible progress at official levels. A facilitator has yet to be named, and more important, there is no indication of substantive progress on forging a common understanding in the region and beyond on the immediate goal of this meeting, its format, and its subject matter. The political turmoil in the Middle East over the past six months, including governments and regimes in a number of Arab states that are in a state of flux, has raised additional questions about the viability of convening such a meeting.

In contrast to the foot dragging and problems at the official level, the recommendation to hold the conference has already generated much discussion at unofficial levels, both in Israel and in broader regional frameworks. Over the course of 2010-2011 a number of meetings in the context of Track II and Track one-and-a-half initiatives have sparked a debate over the prospects of convening this conference and a discussion of its conceptual guidelines. Some telling insights into the thinking among the different parties can be gleaned from these discussions, including the EU seminar held in Brussels in early July. Due to its broad region-wide participation, this meeting provided a good opportunity to assess an array of state approaches.

What emerges most clearly from these unofficial debates is the longstanding gulf between the positions of the two major protagonists: Israel and Egypt. Egyptian participants continue to highlight the nuclear issue almost exclusively, pointing to Israel's non-party status to the NPT as the primary – if not only – constraint to achieving a WMDFZ in the Middle East. For their part, Israeli participants continue to underscore the importance of the regional realities that characterize the Middle East and the poor quality of inter-state relations in this region. They stress that the starting point for a WMDFZ discussion must be an effort to improve these relations, and in the first place, the ability to rely on the commitments that states make. Hence their emphasis on initiating a regional security

process that draws on the notion of confidence building and step-by-step progress. Egyptian participants do not accept this logic, and the opposing positions continue to present as zero sum.

While this ongoing divide perhaps comes as no surprise, it nonetheless underscores the degree to which familiar positions have become entrenched and static, even in the face of new realities in the region, first and foremost the rapidly developing nuclear capability of Iran. There is no indication at these meetings that the highly negative regional implications of Iran's nuclear progress over the past decade have driven home to Egyptian experts where the real danger in the nuclear realm lies, or have led them to reconsider previous Egyptian positions. Amr Moussa, one of Egypt's presidential hopefuls, has stressed that there will be no change in attitudes toward Israel. In an interview with Lally Weymouth in early May he asserted, "The nuclear issue in the Middle East means Israel and then Iran."

The new factor in this round of discussions – as opposed to the ACRS dynamic of the early 1990s – is no doubt the presence of Iran. At the July Brussels meeting, Iranians were not only present at the discussions, but proved to be very active participants. If this is any indication of what can be expected for 2012, it means that Iran will not stay away because of Israel's presence at the table. Indeed, the primarily bilateral dynamic that characterized the ACRS talks could turn into a trilateral Israel-Egypt-Iran dynamic this time around, with Egypt and Iran cooperating on the basis of a mutual tactical interest to focus all attention on Israel. While in one sense Egypt would no doubt draw comfort from Iran's support in finger pointing at Israel, in another sense Iran's activism would also present a challenge to Egypt, fueling the implicit general Egyptian-Iranian rivalry over prominence and influence in the Middle East. Thus some of the major energy Egypt is already exerting in its campaign to have Israel join the NPT could be doubling as a message to Iran, namely, that it should take the back seat in this campaign.

If Iran joins the prospective 2012 meeting, this would create another framework for discussing its nuclear program. Thus, the "conversation" that the international community is currently having with Iran regarding evidence of its military intentions in the nuclear realm and its broken commitment to remain non-nuclear according to its NPT membership would be joined by another dialogue: a regional discussion of ridding the Middle East of all WMD. If Iran overcame its aversion to sitting at the same table with Israel, it would be in its interest to cooperate with the WMDFZ idea, as this would enable it to capitalize on the "all against Israel" dynamic, while deflecting attention from itself. One of the challenges of a WMDFZ conference in 2012 will be to keep these conversations separate and not allow Iran to hijack the 2012 format for its own agenda – namely, deflecting any plans to deal harshly with Iran's violations of its international commitments.

The identity of the facilitator for the 2012 conference has generated much focus at the unofficial meetings. Great expectations are being pinned to this announcement, as if it will be a concrete achievement in itself. Clearly, those who are most interested in the 2012 conference being convened need this emphasis on naming the facilitator and the host country as a means of creating an ongoing sense of activity and forward motion.

A final observation regards the puzzle of US commitment to the 2012 conference. While official statements broadcast "yes, the US is committed," US behavior on the ground, including its low profile at the Brussels meeting, seems to convey a less than enthusiastic approach. The reasons for this could have something to do with the dilemma that the conference poses as far as the strong US commitment to Israel's continued strategic advantage in light of the security challenges that it faces. The US might also be considering what the conference could mean as far as efforts to stop Iran from attaining a military capability. In addition, the turmoil in the Middle East may underscore that the region's volatility must ebb somewhat before such a discussion can be broached. At the same time, the US knows that it needs evidence of activity before the next NPT Review Conference in 2015, so it cannot entirely ignore the issue. The result of the dilemma is the ambivalence that is quite noticeable on the ground.

