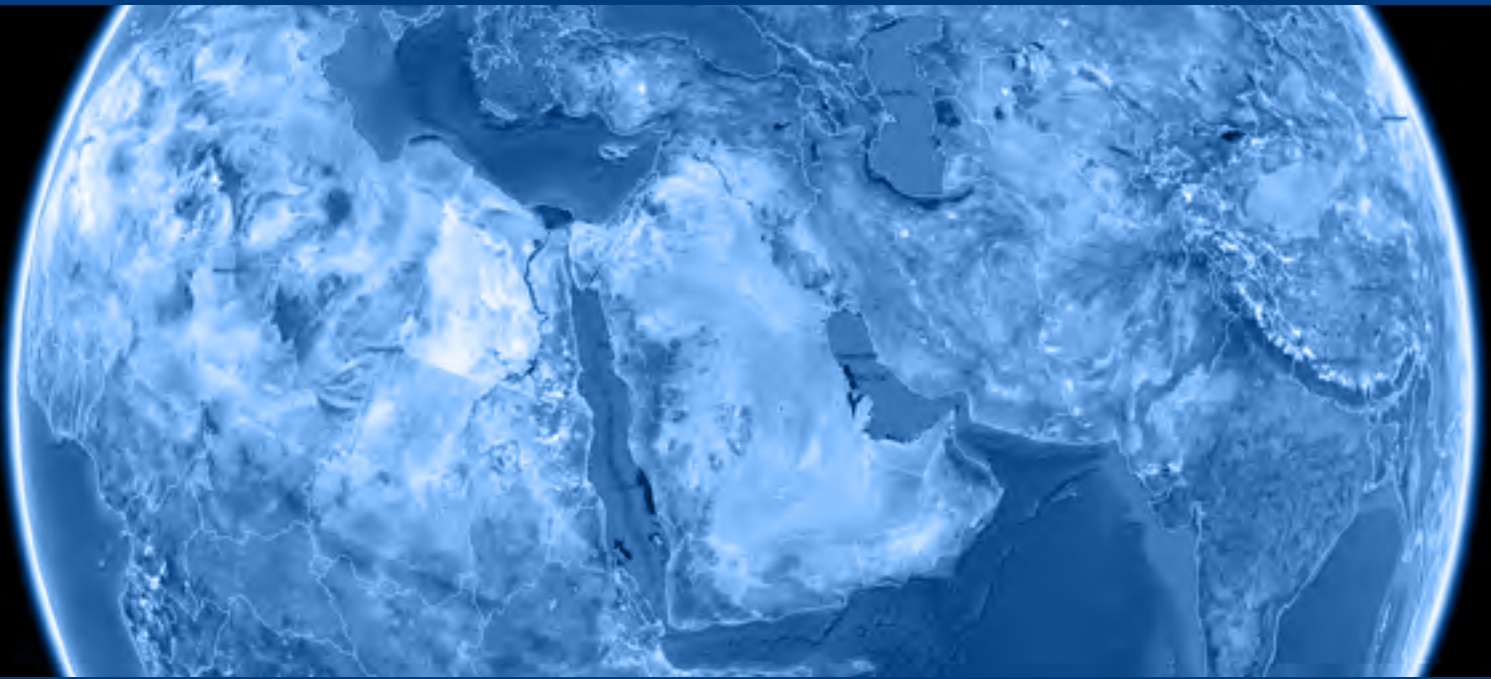


# THE 2012 CONFERENCE ON A WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION-FREE ZONE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES



A SPECIAL ROUNDTABLE REPORT

*JULY 2012*

Bilal Y. Saab, Editor



**Monterey Institute  
of International Studies**  
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# The 2012 Conference on a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East: Prospects, Challenges, and Opportunities

## A Special Roundtable Report

*July 2012*

### CONTENTS

Foreword <i>Bilal Y. Saab</i>	3
Arab States Are Ready for the Conference <i>Wael Al-Assad</i>	4
Turkey Is on Board <i>Gülden Ayman</i>	6
The Zone Is a Win-Win for All <i>Michael Elleman</i>	8
The United States Should Lead from Behind <i>Peter Jones</i>	10
Bad Timing but Still Some Hope <i>Chen Kane</i>	12
Focus on Renewing the Regional Security Dialogue <i>Dalia Dassa Kaye</i>	14
Peace and Disarmament Are Mutually Reinforcing <i>Bernd W. Kubbig</i>	16
Identify Common Ground <i>Emily B. Landau</i>	18

Lower Expectations <i>Valerie Lincy</i>	20
A New Era in the Arab World <i>Abdulaziz Sager</i>	22
Constructive Ways to Kick-Start the Conference <i>Michael Yaffe</i>	24
The Technical and Military Dimensions of the Zone <i>Jean Pascal Zanders</i>	26
The Road Ahead <i>Bilal Y. Saab</i>	28

## FOREWORD

*Bilal Y. Saab*

On June 1, 2012, the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) at the Monterey Institute of International Studies began assembling a team of regional and international scholars to discuss the 2012 Conference on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (MEWMDFZ). We were pleased to secure the commitment of twelve internationally recognized experts to our special roundtable, “The 2012 Conference on a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East: Prospects, Challenges, and Opportunities.”

The aim of this exercise was twofold—to raise awareness of, and shed greater light on, the upcoming conference in Helsinki, Finland. Given the current turmoil and upheaval in the Middle East, it is easy to get distracted and overwhelmed by immediate political and security challenges and lose sight of long-term processes and events—including this conference—that could have an equally substantial impact on the future of the region. Indeed, the conference’s ambitious and first-of-its-kind mandate to rid the region of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) carries tremendous implications for regional and international security and the future of arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament efforts in the Middle East and the world at large.

What follows are the contributions of the roundtable participants, including a conclusion by this author that takes a long-term view of the future of arms control in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Wael Al-Assad, Gülden Ayman, Michael Elleman, Peter Jones, Chen Kane, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Bernd W. Kubbig, Emily Landau, Valerie Lincy, Abdulaziz Sager, Michael Yaffe, and Jean Pascal Zanders for agreeing to contribute to the roundtable. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to CNS Deputy Director Leonard Spector for his support throughout this project. Last but not least, special thanks go to CNS Research Intern Madeleine Moreau for assisting in the editorial process, CNS editors Rhianna Tyson Kreger and Stephen I. Schwartz, for their careful copyediting and for designing this report, and to CNS Senior Web and Desktop Publishing Specialist David Steiger for publishing it online. As lead editor, I remain fully responsible for any remaining imperfections or omissions.

Finally, all ideas, statements of fact, or analysis expressed in this special report should be construed as representing the views of the individual authors and therefore do not reflect the official positions or views of their respective institutions.



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*July 2012*

## ARAB STATES ARE READY FOR THE CONFERENCE



*Wael Al-Assad*

Although we are only six months away from the proposed date of the 2012 conference on “A Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East,” it is unclear if the conference will actually convene. At the First Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) of the 2015 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference in Vienna, Austria, last May, the conveners of the Middle East conference made contradictory and vague remarks.

In a joint statement, the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom asserted that it is the primary responsibility of states in the region to ensure the success of the conference. In its national statement, Russia was more positive and assertive, emphasizing the importance of the conference and the need to create the necessary conditions for success. Although the facilitator, Finland’s Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Security Policy Jaakko Laajava, in his report to the PrepCom, confirmed that the conference will be held in 2012, the United States bluntly stated in its national statement that the time was not right to hold the meeting due to changes brewing in the region, and that states in the region need to achieve Arab-Israeli peace before they can begin to discuss the creation of the zone.

Despite the negative US statements, the United Nations’ obvious hesitation to get involved, and the upheavals in the region, the Arab states have started to prepare seriously for the conference, having realized that this event is an opportunity they cannot miss. The Arab states believe they have invested a lot of political capital over the past three decades promoting a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. As a result, they have established a Senior Officials Committee within the League of Arab States to prepare for Arab participation in the conference. The Arab Summit in Baghdad last March declared that the 2012 conference represents a crossroads for Arab policy regarding nonproliferation in the region. If the conference fails, they will have to revisit these policies and look for alternatives to guarantee their security.

In the next six months, officials preparing for the conference will face a number of challenges and obstacles, the most important of which includes bringing all the regional states to the table and drafting an agenda.

With regard to the first challenge, there is an agreement among the conveners and the facilitator that the geographical delineation of the Middle East for the purpose of the zone includes Iran, Israel, and all member states of the Arab League. With all twenty-two members of the Arab League confirmed to participate, the real problem lies with Israel and Iran. Though neither state has rejected or accepted participation, both have expressed skepticism and see the event as a threat, not an opportunity. Both are expected to wait until the last moment, to get as many concessions as possible for attending.

With regard to the agenda, the Arab League rejects Israel’s proposal to enlarge the scope of the conference to include regional security issues and confidence-building measures. The Arab League believes that such discussions further complicate the subject matter and go beyond the mandate and terms of reference agreed upon in 2010. The Iranians continue to maintain a very low profile and have not yet expressed any preferences.

It is imperative that the outcomes of the 2012 conference include a work-plan for follow-up activities and a timeline for negotiations leading at least to the 2015 NPT Review Conference. In addition, the conference should adopt a declaration confirming the commitment of conference participants and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

In conclusion, I believe that the conference will be held only if the participants can address the aforementioned challenges. Laajava is an important actor, and much will depend on his ability to appear both unbiased and capable. Many experts are very pessimistic and believe that this endeavor will not succeed. But failure to hold the conference will force the Arab States to revisit their policies since the status quo is unsustainable for them. The question remains: is this an exercise in futility or a real opportunity? That remains to be seen.

*Wael Al-Assad is Director of Multilateral Relations and Representative of the Secretary-General for Disarmament and Regional Security, League of Arab States.*



## TURKEY IS ON BOARD

*Gülden Ayman*

The major political changes that have occurred in the Arab world in the last year pose serious challenges to nonproliferation and arms control efforts in the Middle East. It remains unclear whether a more democratic, stable, and peaceful Middle East could emerge from the ongoing uprisings and political transitions. Under conditions of increasing uncertainty and flux, it becomes even more difficult to convince actors to compromise and make concessions with lasting strategic implications as immediate security incentives tend to increase. Yet in an era of drastic geopolitical change in the region, the 2012 conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East is an important venue for initiating a region-wide security discussion and encouraging activism to create a new Middle East security architecture through negotiations and dialogue.

The necessary conditions of success for the conference depend on its inclusiveness and its ability to offer a viable and durable setting for multiparty communication. Despite some negative remarks made by some regional states, the conference seems likely to be held with the participation of all major regional countries. Iran's incentive to attend the conference stems mainly from its intention to use this forum as a means to resist US diplomatic and economic sanctions. Israel could be tempted to attend if the conference does not solely focus on its nuclear arsenal but also scrutinizes the Iranian nuclear program. Moreover, because the upheavals in the Arab world could distract Arab leaders from foreign policy and preoccupy them with domestic affairs, Israel could feel more comfortable in attending, though this is hardly a guarantee.

Though the conference will most likely convene, it does not necessarily mean that a consensus on the core issues or processes will be reached. For that reason, Finnish facilitator Jaakko Laajava and his team should pursue a very delicate diplomatic approach in order to prevent a hardening of the positions and the dominance of the old Israeli-Egyptian nuclear dispute over the conference's agenda.

Regarding the role and influence of external powers, there is no doubt that the United States is the most important external state that could positively (or negatively) affect the process, if it so chooses. Ideally, the United States should concentrate on the issue of security assurances and avoid overtly controlling the talks. The success of the conference—and its aftermath—requires that regional countries take ownership of the process and lead it themselves. In this regard, the manner in which major regional powers such as Egypt, Iran, and Turkey interact with each other and with other participating countries assumes critical importance.

Turkey has expressed a strong will to actively participate in the Middle East security dialogue and it supports any initiative concerning arms control and WMD disarmament. Turkey's principled attitude against WMD led Ankara to sign all international agreements against the acquisition and proliferation of WMD. Ankara regards the 2012 conference as a long-term process and as an opportunity to promote confidence- and security-building measures. Ankara has stated that if the conference convenes in an inclusive way, it would be a step in the right direction. In the initial stages of this process, Ankara does not expect to see many substantive issues resolved or concrete proposals put into practice.

In order for the conference to succeed, participants should avoid statements that strengthen prejudices and suspicions. Ankara believes that the process should not be limited to the representatives of



states; it should also involve nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that work on arms control and disarmament, in order to take advantage of these groups' knowledge and experience. Ankara appreciates civil society's involvement and considers papers delivered and recommendations made in such platforms as important contributions to formal meetings.

Last but not least, contrary to some arguments made with respect to Turkey's inclusion of geographical boundaries to a possible WMD-free zone in the region, Ankara regards itself as "a neighbor to the Middle East," while also stressing that it is a member of the United Nations-based (but unofficial) Western European and Others Group (WEOG). Turkey participates fully in WEOG, but it sees no tensions whatsoever between its Middle Eastern and Western identities and, in fact, considers these as an asset to the discussion of the zone.

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## THE ZONE IS A WIN-WIN FOR ALL

*Michael Elleman*

A Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone, if realized and implemented in a verifiable fashion, offers compelling strategic benefits to the region and the world at large. The zone would resolve the Iran nuclear crisis, thereby removing the stimulus for a proliferation cascade that could include three or four additional Middle Eastern countries joining the nuclear club. The zone would also strengthen the NPT and other nonproliferation regimes by reducing the number of states in possession of WMD, and it would set an example and international norm for other regions to emulate. Perhaps most importantly, eliminating the world's most dangerous weapons from a historically volatile region greatly reduces the risk that these weapons could be used in war or by accident, or stolen by—or sold to—non-state groups.

Participation by Egypt, Israel, Iran, and Syria is critical to the 2012 conference's success. However, it is far from certain that all four states will choose to attend. Cairo has strong incentives to support the conference. It has been championing and advocating for the zone concept since 1974, when Egypt proposed the creation of a nuclear-free zone in a United Nations General Assembly resolution. Moreover, Egypt played a decisive role in convincing the Arab world to accept an indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 in exchange for promises by the United States, Russia, and other leading powers to promote a MEWMDFFZ. But the political upheaval in Egypt, and a newly elected president who reflects popular sentiment, may counteract these incentives. The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli regional nuclear monopoly engender considerable antipathy towards Israel, leaving a new regime little room to maneuver on the compromises it may have to accept at a successful conference, especially those that might allow Israel to maintain its nuclear arsenal until the final implementation steps are completed.

The religious fatwa against possession and use of WMDs issued in August 2005 by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei comports with the aims of the zone, making Iran a likely participant. Moreover, Tehran may see the talks as a forum for shifting attention away from questions about its uranium enrichment activities and toward Israel's nuclear monopoly. But, should Israel decide not to participate, Iran will find it difficult to attend, as most eyes will be focused on Tehran's nuclear activities, rather than the zone's larger disarmament aims.

Israel likely holds ambivalent views. On the one hand, Israel has much to gain from a verifiably implemented zone. A region with no nuclear weapons or other WMDs is preferable to one that has multiple nuclear weapon states, especially if Israel maintains its decisive advantage in conventional weaponry. On the other hand, the Jewish state has unpleasant memories of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, the Final Document of which focused on Israel's nuclear status while neglecting to mention Iran's. Israel may elect to avoid the discussions if it feels history will be repeated. Israel may also fear that the talks will mark the start of a prolonged process that yields few if any tangible security benefits, while simultaneously redirecting the international spotlight from Iran's nuclear program to its own. In the end, Israel's decision might be influenced positively by assurances from the United States and other world powers that Israel will not be singled out for criticism, and that the talks will not impact current efforts to curb Iran's nuclear progress.

Syria reportedly holds the region's largest chemical weapons stockpile, and it represents the hard-

line Arab position on security issues involving Israel. Therefore, Syria's participation in the talks is important. However, the Assad regime finds itself embattled in a civil war and may not make attendance at the talks a priority. If Syria decides to skip the conference, its absence may in fact facilitate a positive outcome, as a Syria under the Assad regime might be disruptive and counterproductive.

If Egypt, Iran, and Israel can be persuaded to attend the talks, then Laajava and his team must find a balance between promoting enhanced regional stability and security and pursuing the disarmament goals of the zone. Israel, for example, will find it difficult to relinquish its nuclear monopoly unless its security is improved. The uncertainties stemming from Egypt's transition to more democratic rule and Syria's civil war will only amplify Israel's security concerns. The proverbial Arab street, empowered by the recent political developments in the region, will find it difficult to accept compromises that address Israel's security concerns without a resolution of the Palestinian issue and Israel's nuclear monopoly.

In light of these challenges, the talks should focus on modest confidence-building measures promoted by the United States and others, but not to the exclusion of overall disarmament objectives.

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## THE UNITED STATES SHOULD LEAD FROM BEHIND

*Peter Jones*

The so-called Arab Spring is perhaps the most significant development in the Middle East in the past half-century. Prognostications as to where it is going, and what its impact will be, both generally and in terms of regional proliferation questions are guesses. This is just a fact. One can construct scenarios either way as to the impact of the Arab Spring on the region's proliferation future. To my mind, the more useful question is: "What policies need to be adopted to increase the chances of a good future and which ones should be avoided?"

In relation to the proposed Helsinki conference, policies and actions to be avoided are those which attempt to single out or demonize any particular regional state—be it Israel, Iran, or anyone else. There are several forums where that can be done, and is being done every day; we do not need another. What this forum should be about is constructing a positive vision of the Middle East's future as a WMD-Free Zone and then developing a process that will work towards that, recognizing that this will take decades, as it has in every other region of the world.

In this context, the question of whether to go ahead this year with the conference raises serious questions. I believe the region is too unsettled for a major conference of this sort to be useful, unfortunately. In the present circumstances, the conference has every chance of descending into a pointless "blame game." Better, in my view, that it be postponed, rather than be used to just drag up all of the old ghosts of the past. More time needs to be invested in quiet, inclusive discussions (possibly semi-official ones), which have the goal of laying the foundation for a conference that will attempt to develop and pursue a positive goal.

One possibility is that the conference could take place in late 2012, but be a brief affair dedicated to setting up and providing a mandate for the required background talks over the next few years. These could then report back to a resumed official conference when a program of work has been achieved.

If the conference does go ahead this year, much discussion will be devoted to whether Israel or Iran would show up. My view is that if it happens, they will be there. Make no mistake; this is too important for them not to show up, if only to defend themselves. This is a negative incentive, but it is a powerful one.

Beyond the question of participation, my greatest fear for the conference is that it will turn into a repeat of the dispute over Israel's nuclear posture that proved fatal in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks of the 1990s. Having lived through that, I have no desire to see a repeat. It serves no purpose, other than to give some in the region an excuse to point fingers at each other. Perhaps this is what some of those pushing to hold the conference now want. But that is very shortsighted diplomacy.

In terms of the United States' role in this conference, this strikes me as a perfect opportunity for President Barack Obama's policy of "leading from behind." Regional states will want to know that the United States is fully engaged in this if they are to take it seriously, but too overt a US leadership role (either in the conference itself, or in the quiet, semi-official diplomacy which needs to take place for it ultimately to be successful) just invites acrimonious discussions on the question of US policy

in the region, rather than serious reflection as to the way forward towards a regional WMDFZ. It is a delicate balancing act.

In conclusion, much energy has been expended over the past year on the mechanisms and structures of the proposed conference. Such issues are always critical in any diplomatic endeavor of this kind. But I wonder if some of this has not been an example of the pursuit of form over substance. At this stage, if my hunch is right that the conference will not take place in 2012, or at least not in any substantive way, then the key is to set up a credible, inclusive, semi-official dialogue which can quietly develop a set of proposals for future work. This will not satisfy diplomats in some countries, but a conference which just results in finger-pointing and blame-shifting is not going to address the real problems the region faces today.

*Peter Jones is Associate Professor, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, Canada.*



## **BAD TIMING BUT STILL SOME HOPE**

*Chen Kane*

**T**he decision of the 2010 NPT Review Conference to hold a conference on “A Nuclear-Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East” was part of a compromise between the United States and Egypt (the latter as Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement, the New Agenda Coalition and a leading country in the League of Arab States). This US-Egyptian agreement was intended to facilitate a consensus text for the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Specifically, Egypt got Iran to agree on the consensus document in exchange for the United States promising to launch the 2012 conference.

It is important to mention the background story behind the 2012 conference because both Egypt and the United States are currently unwilling to hold or incapable of holding (or both) the conference in late 2012, but both also do not want to openly admit it.

Current Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi has been in power for a month, and his ruling party has no experience in government or in pulling the levers of power. Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood have yet to start articulating Egypt’s domestic, security, and foreign policies, and it is unclear who will actually decide on international affairs for the country; will it be the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces or the president?

The power struggle between those two blocs has just started and will take a while to resolve. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry has made it clear that the current situation in the region should not be used as an excuse for postponing the conference, but the ministry also lacks strategic instructions or a coherent planning mechanism for what they want to achieve in such a high-level forum. Should the conference be used as a venue to further isolate Israel or to start a constructive regional security dialogue?

The United States is not in a better position, either. It is presidential election season in Washington, DC. One only has to hear US officials commenting on the conference to conclude that the United States is unable to invest any political power to make it happen (perhaps after the November election, but not before the scheduled month of the conference in December).

Conference facilitator Jaakko Laajava and his team have been working extremely hard to reach an agreement on some terms of reference, an agenda, and follow-through for the conference, but they lack the influence and authority to make things happen, assets that only the United States possesses in its relations with many Middle East nations, most importantly with Israel. With such a demonstrable lack of US interest, it is extremely unlikely that Israel will prepare any constructive ideas to kick-start the conference, especially since it opposed the conference in the first place.

With this background in mind, I believe that the agreement to hold the conference has been reached for the wrong reasons and its timing could not be worse. That said, I do not think that holding a conference is a bad idea. I do believe that it is in the best interest of all countries in the Middle East to convene and openly discuss all the security issues facing the region.

But here is the main question: are countries in the region ready and do they have the proper incentives

to come to the negotiating table and talk directly to each other? No matter how significant the threat of failing to reach consensus in the 2015 NPT Review Conference is, if the states in the region are not ready to engage in a constructive dialogue, the process will simply not start.

Should they prove their readiness to talk, here are some useful ideas regarding both process and substance that can be agreed upon for the conference:

- States in the region have not met for more than seventeen years since the collapse of the ACRS talks, and some of them did not participate in (Syria and Lebanon) or were not invited to (Iran, Libya, and Iraq) the ACRS talks. There is a great deal of bad history in the region and tensions must be relaxed. States will need time to deliver “national statements,” and speak about their concerns and threat perceptions. This is crucial because if states are not given the proper amount of time to do this healthy venting exercise on the first day of the conference, they might do it throughout the meetings, rather than engage in a constructive dialogue and achieve tangible results.

- While countries in the region may not be willing to work together right now, they may be willing to take unilateral steps to enhance regional security. The model of the Nuclear Security Summit where every country brings a “house gift,” a measure it is committed to implement unilaterally or as a sub-group by 2015, can be adopted. Starting with unilateral steps is likely to create a momentum for working toward a common goal, even if these commitments are not taken in unison.

- If a follow-up meeting or process is agreed upon, it would be best to start with the technical issues. While the region may not be ready to solve the political-strategic issues yet, especially while the governments of the major regional players are consolidating power, there are technical issues that can be discussed. One example would be a discussion on how to create a verifiable zone free of chemical and biological weapons and their delivery systems, including missiles.

- Regional civil society, and especially the youth, should have a say and a role to play in the prospective zone. A Finnish NGO should host a meeting in parallel with the conference (similar to the NGO meeting held in parallel with the Nuclear Security Summit) for international NGOs and next generation practitioners from the region to come together outside the bounds of official government talks. Such a parallel conference may create even more important opportunities to promote dialogue and support fresh ideas in conjunction with the official talks.

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## FOCUS ON RENEWING THE REGIONAL SECURITY DIALOGUE

*Dalia Dassa Kaye*

The Conference on a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East, which is scheduled for December 2012, could occur before the next NPT Review Conference in 2015. But given widespread regional unrest and the ongoing Iranian nuclear standoff, it is doubtful that this event will convene this year.

Regardless of when it takes place, absent a broader regional security framework that addresses security concerns and builds confidence among regional parties, the conference will most likely produce limited results and do little to advance its ambitious goal. From Israel's perspective, the conference is too closely tied to the NPT process, which could complicate efforts by Israel and Egypt to find common ground on the nuclear issue.

The conference preparations have nonetheless proved valuable, as they have triggered a resurgence of official and track-two efforts focused on regional arms control and disarmament. Such discussions are greatly needed but have been on the back burner since the demise of the ACRS multilateral working group in the mid-1990s.

It is unclear whether the Middle East's volatile political environment will boost or undermine what appears to be a renewed interest in regional arms control. In the long run, new opportunities may emerge as socio-economic factors and the growth of civil society might create popular pressure against excessive military build-ups that could jeopardize development needs. But in the short run, such effects could prove deleterious as rising nationalist and populist sentiments might lead to less cooperative nonproliferation positions.

With regard to the conference, the participation of Israel and Iran is likely to prove most significant. It is conceivable that the conference could go ahead without Iran's participation (some Arab and Western officials may even welcome this). Yet this may make Israel's attendance less likely if it believes its nuclear program will be singled out while Iran's program is ignored. Such concerns led to Israeli skepticism toward this conference from the outset. Nonetheless, Israel has, in principle, supported the concept of a WMD-Free Zone and Israelis understand that this conference is important to the Obama administration's nonproliferation agenda. As a consequence, Israel has still left open the option of attending. If Israeli officials are convinced that the conference will not be used to pressure them to join the NPT, or that their country's nuclear program will not come under heavy scrutiny during the conference, Israel may well show up.

Iran is similarly ambivalent. Tehran may find value in participating to demonstrate its commitment to nonproliferation, a strategy that could ease growing international pressure on its own nuclear program. But Iran's primary interest is to protect its nuclear program from growing international scrutiny; in this respect, Israel and Iran share common concerns. If Iran believes that Egypt will emphasize Israel's nuclear capability and not its program in such a forum, the odds of Iranian participation will most likely improve.

There is a good chance that Egypt will indeed do exactly that. The issue of Israel's nuclear disarmament is an established Egyptian government policy based on the universality of the NPT. But such policy



is also likely to be reinforced by post-uprising domestic pressures. Absent a major shift in Israel's national security doctrine and its firm belief in the bomb as the ultimate deterrent (albeit through an opaque posture), the country is likely to continue to resist international pressures to join the NPT or any discussion of its nuclear program without significant progress on regional peace and Arab recognition of the state of Israel.

Given the gaps in regional approaches, the US position will be crucial. The United States committed itself to facilitating this conference, and played an active role in identifying the Finnish facilitator and host. However, it is not clear that the United States has a strong interest in pursuing a broader arms control and regional security process beyond this one event, assuming it takes place. US efforts are arguably limited to launching this conference at some point before 2015. There appears to be little to no US strategic thinking in leveraging this meeting to facilitate a more sustained arms control and regional security process.

This is a missed opportunity. Finnish facilitator Jaakko Laajava (who enjoys relevant experience with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, CSCE) should be encouraging the United States to help build support for a much broader forum for regional security dialogue beyond 2012. A broader forum that includes discussion of a WMDFFZ but that also addresses a wide array of less contentious common regional security concerns (e.g., piracy, terrorism, displacement, pandemics) could provide greater incentives for states to participate and ensure that the process is inclusive.

Tangible progress on the Arab-Israeli peace process will be key to achieving this, but a renewed regional security dialogue should not be held hostage to peace process developments. Therefore, the United States and its allies must start working immediately with regional states on the establishment of a more ambitious and comprehensive regional security forum. Such a forum would not be a challenge to a WMDFFZ, but rather the only viable way to move the concept of the zone forward over the long run.

*Dalia Dassa Kaye is Senior Political Scientist, RAND Corporation.*

## PEACE AND DISARMAMENT ARE MUTUALLY REINFORCING



*Bernd W. Kubbig*

The upcoming Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone Conference, under the auspices of Finnish Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, offers a unique, nonviolent means for discussing how to free the Middle East from all categories of weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, biological, and chemical, as well as their delivery vehicles. Sustainable security can only be created when adversaries choose to cooperate. As was the case during the Cold War, perhaps Helsinki will once again serve as the place where extreme differences can be reconciled. However, the antagonists need to sit at the same table.

Since the concept of a zone free of nuclear weapons (later expanded to all weapons of mass destruction) has been unanimously endorsed at the UN General Assembly each year for more than three decades, all Middle Eastern states now have the opportunity to demonstrate that their votes are more than ritual, and that they are prepared to seriously discuss an incremental path to such a zone.

However, since May 2010 the Middle East has witnessed dramatic political events that toppled dictators and empowered the people. These developments are likely to impact the conference (and, more broadly, regional arms control efforts) both directly and indirectly, for good and for ill. It remains to be seen how the so-called Arab Spring influences crucial states to join the MEWMDFZ initiative, behave constructively, make the conference successful, and stay committed to the process even when fundamental disputes appear. While the emergence of new political actors in the Middle East might create new barriers for arms control, we suggest focusing not only on well-known regional security and political problems, but also on (potentially) positive developments.

We realize that the groundwork for the conference is underway, but we advise that the event be held at a time when the necessary preparation, both procedural and substantive, is finished. We believe that December 2012 is the best timing for the conference, as supported in the mandate of the facilitator and confirmed in his remarks at this year's NPT Preparatory Committee. It is promising that, so far, no Middle Eastern state has rejected the invitation. Still, increasing the incentives of states to participate in the conference is vital. The regional countries are likely to join only if participation is compatible with their security and political interests (prestige, legitimacy, removal of their adversaries' arsenals) or if they calculate that their absence would hurt them politically. Powerful allies could also levy pressure on them to participate.

Only an inclusive conference can guarantee direct regional expression of security concerns and hopefully move toward comprehensive solutions. Yet, only participating states can set and shape the agenda. The conference mandate includes nuclear armaments, biological and chemical weapons, and their delivery vehicles. All of these weapons can be discussed en bloc, allowing the fixation on the nuclear dimension to be considerably reduced, thereby increasing the possibilities for trade-offs and compromises. Of course, in order to create such a holistic discussion, the participating states must be willing to compromise.

Weapons and their regional context should be kept in their dialectical yet asymmetrical relationship. This could be instrumental in overcoming the traditionally unfruitful debate of “nuclear disarmament first” vs. “regional peace first,” since it provides leeway for compromise. At the negotiation table,

confidence- and security-building measures need not strictly precede steps that tackle the armaments themselves. Thus, there is room, in principle, for a “peaceful coexistence” of various measures of different range. Rather than discussing which must come first, it is important to note that peace and disarmament are mutually reinforcing and share a common goal: enhanced security for all.

Major extra-regional powers like the United States could play a potentially constructive role, such as through efforts to limit their weapons exports, or to become energetic gavel holders for the conference, and possible guarantors of a MEWMDFZ. A minimalistic, yet important, role for external actors would be to grant negative security assurances to states comprising the prospective zone. They should realize that if states commit not to pursue WMD, it is their right to be spared the risk of a nuclear attack.

The conference represents a golden opportunity for regional states. The confidential procedures offer a venue for what is most needed: direct regional dialogue, which can help de-escalate regional tensions. It is in the hands of the Middle Eastern states to shape the MEWMDFZ conference and make it happen. It is also their responsibility to have it succeed and serve as a sustainable regional peace strategy.

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## IDENTIFY COMMON GROUND

*Emily B. Landau*

The conference in Helsinki on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone MEWMDZFZ is still on the agenda for 2012, with the tentative date set for December. But some formidable challenges would need to be overcome in order to get there, and more importantly, to convene a meeting with any constructive outlook for the long term.

Currently, there are significant differences among the prospective participants on issues that relate to the very basic conceptual underpinnings of arms control in the unconventional realm. The positions of the major protagonists, Egypt and Israel, are looking very zero-sum and, absent a common interest in working together in the future, there might not be a true basis upon which to convene the conference. The discussions at some of the track-two meetings that have taken place over the past year and a half on the topic of the zone underscore that Israel and Egypt continue to have almost polar views on how this dialogue should proceed. There is no discernible change from the days of the ACRS talks in the 1990s.

While still slated for December, there is a fair chance that the conference will be postponed. Holding it without all of the relevant regional participants, including Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Iran, would not make sense and, although it could happen, it would not be advisable. Israel and Iran are likely to continue to have reservations, each for different reasons. For Iran, the very prospect of sitting together with Israeli official representatives in order to discuss arms control issues goes against the regime's official rhetoric and the country's outright rejection of Israel as a sovereign state. At the same time, however, there could be one major incentive for Iran to attend the conference: to potentially collaborate with other states in a regional framework to target Israel while deflecting attention away from its ongoing advances toward a military nuclear capability. This cynical use of the regional framework must be firmly resisted.

From an Israeli perspective, conducting a MEWMDZFZ conference within the NPT framework is illogical and unacceptable. However, this does not necessarily mean that Israel will refuse to participate. While it is essential that the conference not be construed in a manner that would set Israel up for collective and ongoing censure, Israel might be amenable to a conference that adopts an arms control logic that places a premium on working with other states to stabilize and improve regional relations.

The domestic uprisings in the Arab world are likely to increase the chances that the conference will be postponed. Such regional upheaval is likely to turn governments' focus away from the goals of the conference in order to deal with the internal crises that are sweeping the Middle East. Moreover, they could increase anti-Israel sentiments that will make dialogue even more difficult. In the case of Syria, the ongoing civil war makes its participation seem unrealistic, at least until it becomes clear who assumes power in Damascus.

The question of US participation is interesting. On the one hand, its role in ACRS proved to be essential as far as getting all states on board, moving the process forward, and navigating through the different agendas. This time, however, while officially committed to the conference, the Obama administration has not displayed the same enthusiasm to take on a leading role as did the George H.W. Bush administration in the early 1990s. One likely reason is that the Obama administration was pushed

into a corner by Egypt at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Moreover, the administration has stated that it will not support a process that will be used as a platform to single out and badger Israel.

My advice to the Finnish facilitator Jaakko Laajava would be to direct his main energies to finding a common interest that all sides can agree to begin working on. If states go into the conference with zero-sum agendas, it will most likely fail. Successful statecraft should be expressed in the initial stage by identifying (even minimal) common ground and supporting a constructive dialogue. However, the constraints loom large and it could be that the Middle East cannot sustain this major undertaking.

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## LOWER EXPECTATIONS

*Valerie Lincy*

At present, the prospect of progress on nonproliferation in the Middle East is very low. This is not the result of political uprisings in a number of Arab states, but rather of two realities that pre-date these uprisings: first, Israel's status as an undeclared nuclear weapon state outside of the NPT; second, Iran's status as a potential nuclear weapon state in noncompliance with its NPT obligations. The former is largely a status quo issue that has long been an obstacle to establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. The latter is a growing threat that further undermines nonproliferation efforts in the region.

Iran's nuclear program, and in particular its uranium enrichment project, continues to progress despite several UN Security Council resolutions calling for its suspension and the implementation of an ever increasing panoply of sanctions. Israel is most directly threatened by this progress and has warned that it might at some point prompt a preventive attack against Iranian nuclear facilities. While such an attack would slow Iran's nuclear program in the short term, it would likely push Iran to aggressively and overtly pursue nuclear weapons and would have other serious consequences for security in the region. For their part, some Arab states in the Middle East have reacted to the Iranian threat by planning nuclear energy programs, which could eventually provide them with a virtual nuclear weapon capability of their own—a “hedge” against Iran. These programs, especially if they include a uranium enrichment component, would be a major setback to nonproliferation in the region.

How, then, does the “Arab Spring” affect these dynamics?

The resulting instability is likely to harden Israel's already firm position vis-à-vis its nuclear program. So far, the uprisings have not caused Iran's leaders to shift their nuclear strategy, nor has the Iranian population demanded it. Uprisings across the Arab world may delay at least some of the planned nuclear energy programs, which would be positive. In fact, Kuwait and Jordan have decided to suspend their civilian nuclear programs due to domestic pressures and economic difficulties. The Arab uprisings have been driven by popular calls for democratization, socio-economic justice, and more transparent and accountable governance. The attention of new and existing Arab leaders will likely remain focused on such issues, which are of greater concern to their populations than expensive nuclear energy projects. An unstable political climate could also make it more difficult for countries to secure external financing for these efforts. And the need for a “hedge” against Iran may be seen as less pressing if new leaders share the view of the general public in the region that Iran's nuclear ambition is less of a threat than Israel's actual arsenal. In addition, it may be that a state's new leaders will view projects actively pursued by a former regime with suspicion, just as the leaders of Iran's revolution in 1979 initially abandoned the Shah's nuclear program.

Ongoing protests and armed conflict in Syria and the security and safety of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile also affect nonproliferation efforts in the region. There is a heightened risk that this stockpile (both weaponized and bulk chemical warfare agents) could be diverted, stolen, or used. This threat may motivate countries in the region and beyond to prioritize the issue of securing, reducing, and (eventually) eliminating such stockpiles.

In this context, the outlook for the conference on a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass

destruction, planned for the end of this year, is bleak. Egypt, which has long been a driving force behind this type of initiative, is undergoing major political upheaval that will necessarily lower the priority of preparing for and guiding the conference. No other country in the region is poised to pick up the slack. Iran will be less motivated to attend given its own deteriorating relationship with the International Atomic Energy Agency and with nonproliferation norms in general. Israel, hardly a fan of such initiatives, and critical of the action plan that called for the conference, will at best be a reluctant participant.

Whether the conference is cancelled, postponed, or held on schedule, expectations for the outcome should be low. At this point, the conference might be considered a success simply if it is held as scheduled and with all countries in the region in attendance. Expecting anything more in the current climate is wishful thinking.

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## A NEW ERA IN THE ARAB WORLD

*Abdulaziz Sager*

Although the 2010 NPT Review Conference decided to hold a regional conference that seeks to establish a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in December 2012, there are many questions about whether it will indeed be possible to convene such a meeting this year.

The turmoil that has engulfed the region has both short-term and long-term consequences for this potential conference. In the long run, one major effect of the Arab uprisings is the ultimate change in the structure of governmental decision-making in the Arab world. The “Arab Spring” has given rise to the phenomenon of “people power,” an outcome that will undoubtedly affect the public policy process in Arab governments, and specifically, foreign policy decision-making, and steer it in directions that are aligned with popular preferences. Indeed, the decisions that will be made by the newly elected leaders and members of parliaments will be subject to greater domestic pressures and accountability.

This new domestic political environment and culture of accountability in which the new leaders will operate could serve the process of arms control in the Middle East. For example, leaderships will have to justify to their constituencies specific arms deals and explain their reasoning behind their potential pursuit of WMD programs. In general, foreign and security policies will be increasingly scrutinized and potential engagement in events such as the 2012 conference will be debated by the political class, civil society, and the news media.

In the short run, due to the regional uncertainties caused by the “Arab Spring,” it is more likely that the 2012 conference will be postponed, as the region continues to be fully preoccupied with the crisis in Syria, the instability in Egypt, and the Iranian nuclear challenge. In this volatile environment, and particularly as the Arab state system undergoes a fundamental transformation and perhaps a new balance of power, the 2012 conference is likely to take a back seat to more urgent security and political developments in the region.

The commitment of the main protagonists—Egypt, Israel, Syria, and Iran—to the 2012 conference is highly uncertain. In the case of Iran and Israel, the two states are likely to test each other out before making any kind of commitment. Specifically, Iran will not attend the conference if Israel, which still hesitates to be part of this process because of its “peace first” condition, decides not to attend. Egypt’s position is unlikely to change at the present time. The new Egyptian government will stay the course on nonproliferation and disarmament policy, as this issue is considered to be a staple in Egyptian nuclear diplomacy. But again, other internal dynamics, such as the views and preferences of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Egyptian president Mohamad Morsi, could play an important role in the shaping of Cairo’s strategy for the 2012 conference.

With regard to external powers, there is doubt about their commitment to the 2012 conference. The United States can positively contribute to the conference if it applies pressure on Israel to participate. This would be in the US national interest since it would serve the US nonproliferation agenda. Convincing the Israelis to attend will be the United States’ key role—a role that could have a huge impact on the outcome of this process. Should he be re-elected in November, President Barack Obama will be in a better position politically to exert such pressure on Israel since the conference is



scheduled for the following month.

As far as the Arab Gulf states are concerned, the position of the Saudis and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is clear: no regional state should possess a nuclear military capability. At the same time, they are also fully aware of Israel's unwillingness to disarm. As a result, their main objective for the moment is to prevent another regional state (Iran) from obtaining a nuclear capability, as this could open the door to a nuclear arms race in the region.

It should also be remembered that for some Arab states, including GCC members, "process" and "structure" are extremely important issues that will have a direct impact on the substantive issues of the negotiations. Therefore, it is necessary to agree in advance, with the help of Finnish facilitator, Jaakko Laajava, on these procedural matters. More clarity on the process and structure of the talks at the conference will increase the likelihood of regional states' participation as well as inter-state cooperation.

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## CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS TO KICK-START THE CONFERENCE

*Michael Yaffe*

Ever since Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak proposed in 1992 that the Middle East should become a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone, regional parties have grappled unsuccessfully with how to achieve it. What makes this lack of progress all the more frustrating is that all regional parties have declared their support for such a zone in various international forums. In addition, most, if not all, have endorsed the idea that the zone should be comprehensive, arrived at freely by the regional parties, and mutually verifiable through some form of regional mechanism. All would also probably agree that the urgency for such a zone has never been greater.

The holdup is to be found in the lack of agreement on where to start. The parties have spent the last two decades debating the same five options without reaching agreement:

- Integral to a WMDFZ, all regional parties must adhere to the relevant global nonproliferation treaties (e.g., the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention) and comply fully with their obligations under those treaties.
- It is undecided whether immediate negotiations on a WMDFZ treaty can be detached from ongoing regional conflicts and efforts to resolve them; indeed, questions persist as to whether progress towards such a zone would enhance the prospects of achieving a comprehensive peace.
- Establishing a WMDFZ must be an integral part of comprehensive regional security negotiations from the start.
- Comprehensive regional security negotiations begin with limited confidence-building measures in order to develop the trust and mutual experience necessary for tackling harder security issues, including limitations on weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons.
- First comes a comprehensive peace agreement and normalization between all regional parties, only then to be followed by broader regional negotiations on measures that build trust among the regional parties including a WMDFZ.

Failure to bridge the gaps between these five positions doomed the ACRS Working Group, the most comprehensive regional security discussions to date, in 1995. Though faltering Middle East peace negotiations were a major contributor to the demise of ACRS, its coup de grâce centered on incompatible visions about how to achieve regional security including a WMDFZ. This deadlock occurred despite the absence of several key Middle East players (i.e., Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon), each probably with its own vision of the way ahead.

Will the proposed conference in Helsinki to establish a WMDFZ mark the beginning of formal negotiations on such a zone? History says it is doubtful. The conference will not be held in a political vacuum and yet it lacks a mandate to deal with broader security issues plaguing the region. As the first region-centric forum supposedly with all parties attending, the odds are high that the session will turn

into another inconclusive debate on the five approaches to a WMDFZ.

Depending on the flexibility and constructiveness of the participants, all need not be lost. The conference could produce a three-part action plan that would bypass the question on how to begin negotiating a zone while meeting the test of making progress.

First, the parties could agree on a set of non-binding practical measures that regional countries could undertake individually in support of the WMDFZ, without mandating reciprocity and mutual recognition, or waiting until there is an overall peace settlement. These would require regional parties to report regularly on their national nonproliferation activities, including adherence to and compliance with international obligations as steps leading to the zone. Such measures could include legislating measures in support of UN Security Council Resolution 1540, hosting conferences and training activities related to regional security and border control, establishing national monitoring and verification centers that could augment a regionally-based verification regime for a WMDFZ, adopting codes of conduct by indigenous scientists and companies in dealing with toxins and chemicals, and so on. Cumulatively, these measures could amount to the development of a trans-regional “culture of nonproliferation responsibility.” Such national capacity-building would also convey regional parties’ ownership over the zone’s establishment.

Second, parties could agree to set up an experts’ group charged with designing the technical dimensions of a regional verification system in support of the zone. The idea of segregating scientific and technical issues from unsettled political questions is borrowed from the successful experience in negotiating the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Technical experts met for seventeen years in order to hammer out a viable verification regime for detecting and reporting on nuclear tests while the diplomats slowly worked out thorny political issues. When treaty negotiators were finally ready to address an acceptable verification mechanism, the hard work had already been done.

Third, regional parties could politically endorse and pledge sustained financial support for track-two efforts aimed at bringing together regional parties for non-binding discussions on a WMDFZ. Track-two diplomacy is a convenient tool for making progress when formal negotiations are stymied. Resorting to such an approach would not necessarily mean creating something from scratch. There are several Middle East track-two initiatives currently operating, including some that focus on the WMDFZ concept. Track-two programs are also well suited for bringing civil society elements into the dialogue on nonproliferation, especially important now that Arab citizens are taking on a larger role in governance throughout the Middle East.

Regional parties attending the conference in Finland should lower their sights from the goal of actually starting negotiations on a WMDFZ. That is not a likely outcome in the current security landscape, but progress can still be achieved towards enhancing the nonproliferation context in the Middle East. Being in the same room together and showing mutual respect as equals would be a positive beginning.

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## THE TECHNICAL AND MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF THE ZONE



*Jean Pascal Zanders*

The conference in 2012 to discuss a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East, as envisioned in the Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, seeks to include all regional countries and discerns a role for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Despite the NPT's preoccupation with nuclear weapons, the call brings biological and chemical weapons, as well as delivery systems for all types of non-conventional weaponry, into the ambit of the discussions.

Notwithstanding its frequent use, the concept of WMD lacks formal legal definition. While a high degree of shared understanding exists regarding nuclear, biological, or chemical arms, consensus is weaker about weapons on the fringes of these categories. Incendiary weapons (such as white phosphorus) or smoke, for instance, fall outside of the definition of a chemical weapon (CW) in the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), but not all regional parties accept this legal demarcation. The inclusion of delivery means raises similar definitional problems. While a relatively large number of ballistic missiles with short to intermediate ranges are usually associated with nuclear warhead delivery, chemical and biological agents can also be filled into small, homemade rockets operated by non-state actors. Demarcating the types and characteristics of weaponry may not be a prerequisite for, or a determinant of the outcome of, the first regional conference, but negotiators must be conscious that without early agreement on the definitions of the weaponry to be considered, talks will inevitably stall.

A second complication is the unequal distribution of non-conventional weapon categories across the region. Israel is the sole state to possess nuclear arms, Iran is widely believed to be aspiring for such capability, and several Arab states demonstrate a growing interest in nuclear power. No regional player claims to possess biological weapons (BW), but a few including Iran and Israel have advanced biotechnology and vaccine research, development, and production capacities. Today, Syria is the sole possessor of an advanced CW arsenal, but the technology is within the reach of several states, some of which have extensive chemical defense programs.

A negotiated WMD-free zone covering all categories of non-conventional weapons would be unique in the world (the exceptions being some uninhabited expanses, such as Antarctica, the seabed, or outer space). Nuclear weapon-free zones exist in well-specified geographic areas in which nuclear weapons were absent from military equations or in which they had already been eliminated prior to the negotiations. For chemical weapons, several regional agreements (but not treaties) were agreed upon prior to the conclusion of the CWC negotiations. However, the one major effort to create a CW-free zone in Europe in the 1980s ended in failure, although the exercise benefited the global negotiations of a chemical weapon ban. With respect to biological weapons, one regional agreement was concluded in anticipation of the (failed) protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

These experiences illustrate the third and arguably biggest problem. Some Middle Eastern states have assigned similar functions to different weapons categories in their respective security postures and military doctrines. For example, Israel's presumptive nuclear weapons and Syria's recently acknowledged chemical weapons purport to address existential security, creating a functional equivalency of weaponry between these two states. Such similar functional equivalence does not exist between Israel and the other Arab states; the latter do not possess nuclear or chemical weapons and Israel seeks to preserve its

existential security with regard to any and all Arab entities. The absence of such functional equivalency makes disarmament or arms reductions extremely difficult.

Furthermore, discrete agreements concerning only the control and elimination of specific weapons cannot guarantee security absent a complete change in the overall security environment, thus making states unlikely to consider these agreements sufficient in the short-term. Egypt's insistence that Israel join the NPT before Egypt accedes to the BWC or the CWC is but one example of the problem. To overcome this hurdle, working groups dedicated to each specific type of weapon should be established in order to consider: the joint and coordinated elimination of each category of weapon; how to prevent future rearmament; and methods of enhancing transparency and increasing confidence in all states' compliance with a treaty. Strong and frequent coordination among these working groups will be necessary to ensure that all security issues are considered in concert, and that progress in one area does not create a security deficit in another.

The prospects of regional participation in the 2012 conference seem good. However, one must bear in mind that the conference will not yield a comprehensive regional security arrangement that addresses non-conventional weaponry. Rather, the conference could—if it is held—initiate a long-term diplomatic process towards such an agreement. Since no state will be required to give up anything at the first meeting, the international political damage from not participating would outweigh any domestic benefits to be accrued from taking a principled stand against diplomatic engagement.

Uncertainties about the event nonetheless remain, arising particularly from the current diplomatic engagement of Iran over its nuclear program, the intensifying civil war in Syria, and the unpredictable ways in which political power will be consolidated in Arab societies after the popular uprisings. Despite their different national interests in the region, outside powers will have to be the guardians of the process and be prepared to facilitate the path (e.g., by offering concrete security assurances) or cajole participants, including their closest allies. They, too, will not be immune from pressure by domestic constituencies, and elections or other forms of power transitions may dramatically alter the dynamics of the process. However, past experience has demonstrated that by focusing solely on real or possible roadblocks, no one has ever been able to move ahead, even if the road appeared to be clear.

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## THE ROAD AHEAD

*Bilal Y. Saab*

If a conference on “A Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East” does take place in December 2012 in Helsinki, it would not be the first time Middle Eastern nations meet in the Finnish capital to address underlying sources of regional insecurity and instability.

Indeed, more than seventeen years ago, delegates from all regional participants in the ACRS talks, along with the gavel-holders (the United States and Russia), the host country (Finland), and experts from Australia, India, France, and the United Nations, met to discuss all things arms control and regional security. While modest progress was achieved on some of the conceptual and operational items in ACRS, the talks ultimately collapsed in 1995, primarily because Egypt and Israel disagreed over a disarmament strategy and timeline (Israel is the region’s only nuclear weapon state). Assuming it happens later this year, will the 2012 conference produce more positive results? Most analysts, including participants in this roundtable, are skeptical, and perhaps rightly so.

Nobody doubts that it will take years, if not generations, for arms control to take root in the Middle East. With no end in sight to the Arab-Israeli conflict, with increasing regional uncertainties caused by the Arab uprisings, and with talk of possible military action by Israel and/or the United States against Iran to halt or destroy its nuclear program, the prospect of states in that part of the world cooperating with each other like they have never done before and placing real, verifiable, and mutual limitations on their state sovereignty, national secrets, and defense armaments for the collective goal of reducing regional insecurity indeed seems unthinkable at present.

The Middle East will experience growing pains should regional states decide to resume the long-interrupted arms control process and participate in the 2012 conference. Any casual reading of the arms control experience between the Soviet Union (later Russia) and the United States and among European states after the end of the Cold War will clearly show that arms control—already a counterintuitive concept and exercise even to the most liberal and open-minded—is tough and complex business.

Much has changed in the Middle East since the ACRS period of the 1990s. Iran is much closer today to achieving a nuclear weapons capability (if it so chooses) than it was years ago. With Saddam Hussein out of power since 2003, Iraq is no longer a confrontationist state in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Iraq’s recent radical shift in politics has resulted in a Shi’ite-majority government that is increasingly under the influence of Iran, though the situation in Baghdad remains unstable. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey have increased their regional power and influence at the expense of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya are transitioning from authoritarianism to representative government following their popular uprisings. Finally, Syria is in a state of civil war that could engulf several states in the region. If Damascus falls and a new anti-Iranian leadership comes to power in Syria, Tehran will lose its only real ally in the Middle East and its most important access to the Arab world. These changes (actual and potential) notwithstanding, many of the old problems plaguing the Middle East—territorial disputes, arms races, security dilemmas, historical rivalries, and religious, sectarian, and ethnic animosities—persist.

All of these fluid security and political dynamics present a wide array of challenges to the 2012 conference in particular and to the future of arms control in the Middle East in general. But they also present potential opportunities, depending on how the political transitions in the region unfold. The biggest long-term opportunity I see is the gradual change in the overall political landscape of the Arab world and in the domestic context of Arab foreign and defense policy.

Current and emerging leaders could be more receptive to new thinking and practices in foreign and defense policy. Even if they prove to be worse than their predecessors, they will still operate under vastly different political circumstances, i.e., facing greater societal demands and political pressures that could positively impact foreign policy decision-making. For example, if Arab publics call for regional cooperation on security and nonproliferation, their national governments—Islamist and secular—will have to comply with their wishes. Otherwise, they will face political costs.

In addition to new leadership, the political transitions in the Arab world are likely to empower parliaments and free judiciaries from the grip of all too powerful executives. Indeed, Arab parliaments and judiciaries no longer have to be symbolic, powerless, and rubber-stamped institutions, and can play a more effective role in foreign affairs. Arab parliaments should be empowered to fulfill the goals of legislation, oversight, accountability, regulation, and constant renewal of political life. But they can also play an extremely constructive role in arms control by ratifying treaties, financing foreign policy proposals, approving defense budgets, and overseeing weapons systems to the best they can.

In a similar vein, Arab bureaucracies no longer have to be used by dictators to sustain their patronage policies. Instead, today there is an opportunity to stop the trend of staffing the bureaucracies and intelligence services with regime loyalists who are instructed to suppress and spy on society. If properly handled by the new leaders, intelligence services can be used to perform necessary national tasks, including defending the homeland and assisting with arms control-related verification mechanisms, if the opportunity presents itself. Absent real intelligence reform in the Arab world and no less than a revolution in these services' mission and standard operating procedures, regional arms control is likely to face some serious technical problems.

As far as civil society is concerned, its recent resurgence and the empowerment of the public in the Arab world are positive developments that will help ease and speed up the transition to democracy. Open societies tend to form governments that are more competent and better at integrating and incorporating the input of as many skilled and specialized voices from outside the government as possible. Closed societies, on the other hand, tend to form less than effective governments because they have a much smaller pool to choose from, often paying more attention to factors like loyalty and ideology at the expense of skill and capability.

The importance of the involvement of civil society in the arms control process cannot be overstated. The instrumental role that American civil society and industry has played in supplying the United States government with knowledge about and technical resources for arms control—including nuclear power, chemistry and biology, weapons systems, radars, sensors and overhead reconnaissance satellites—has helped the United States successfully negotiate and sign a number of arms control treaties including the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Even the most competent governments need the expertise and specialized skills of practitioners, scientists, and companies from the private and nonprofit sectors. In arms control, public-private collaborations and partnerships are a must given the field's complexity and multi-disciplinary nature.

The Arab world's governments do not have a stellar record of engaging their civil societies and seeking from them the necessary knowledge and skill-sets to better perform at public policy and foreign affairs. Of course, some governments are better than others. Obviously, the more open the political system is, the more opportunities and avenues civil society will have. Unsurprisingly, the idea of empowering civil society or including it in governmental decision-making has been anathema to Arab autocrats who viewed it as a political threat. With new political opportunities now forming in the Arab world and civil society being allowed to operate with more freedom after all these years of suppression, real investments in education and science and technology—necessary for creating and nurturing an arms control culture—are now possible.

While one could argue that public opinion in the Arab world did not generate significant political costs to old autocrats as they engaged in foreign policy (one notable exception, however, is the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat for his unpopular peace treaty with Israel), this is more likely to change. Through popular will and mandate, Islamists and liberals (in fewer numbers of course) are coming to power in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and possibly elsewhere, and should these new rulers fail to deliver and fulfill their promises, public opinion will not be kind to them and may force political adjustments or resignations.

Of course, the pace and scope of widespread change in the Arab world is largely dependent on the changing role of the militaries and law enforcement agencies, i.e., the remnants of the ancien régime. One cannot speak of a new social contract in the Arab world if the militaries retain their supra-constitutional powers and firm hold on national politics. Take Egypt, for example, where the fight between the Islamists and the liberals on the one hand (i.e., those who led the popular uprising), and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (the ruling military council) on the other will determine the future of the country. We can expect similar political battles and rocky transitional scenarios to take place in Syria should the regime of President Bashar al-Assad collapse and the armed rebels take over until a new government is formed.

In sum, for arms control in the Arab world to have a better chance to succeed, civil-military relations should be relatively sound and the role of the military in society should be properly defined; the military services should not obstruct the natural flow of politics and instead answer to the civilian authority whose agents are solely responsible for making and conducting foreign and security policies, and not the other way around.

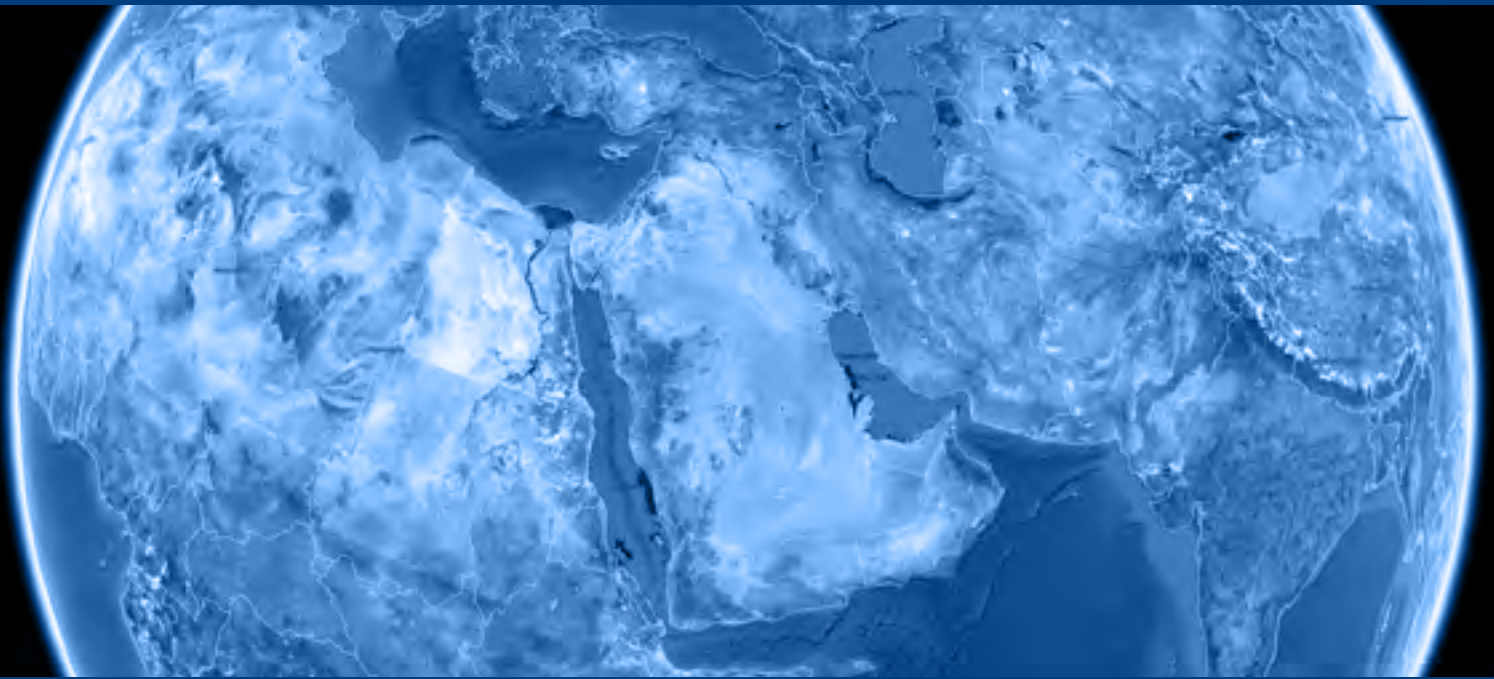
We have no choice but to wait and see how the new leaders of the region will approach issues and how amenable they will be to new and more cooperative approaches in foreign affairs, including arms control. Should the transition succeed and real, drastic reforms in political and economic affairs take place, the next big test for Arab societies will be to start building durable and effective governmental, institutional, administrative, and technical capacity in order to deal with a host of domestic and foreign policy challenges. That in itself is a process that is likely to take an even longer time.

It is one thing for nations to be free, but quite another to be prosperous and competent at home and in their dealings with the outside world. The Middle East could open up politically but remain mired in bureaucratic under-development and economic slump. Smart national leadership can prevent that from happening.

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