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**NPT RevCon 2015:
Considerations for Convening a WMDFZ Conference
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The final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) included a section on the Middle East stipulating the intent to work toward convening a conference on a Middle East WMDFZ by the end of 2012. This provision in 2010 resulted from strong Egyptian pressure, and the US proved vulnerable to this pressure – especially following Obama’s embrace of a nuclear disarmament agenda the previous year, and his keen desire for the conference to secure a consensus final document, which it had failed to do in 2005.

Concerted efforts to convene the WMDFZ conference (which has since become known as the “Helsinki Conference”) over the next two years failed to bridge significant differences among the parties over what the conference (mandate and auspices) should entail, and by late 2012 it became clear that a conference would not take place. Unable to reach a consensus over a joint statement, in late November the conveners issued separate postponement notices. The US announcement on November 23, 2012 was the most significant in that it made note of the “deep conceptual gap” in the region “on approaches toward regional security and arms control arrangements.” It maintained that this gap could only be bridged through direct engagement and agreement among the states in the region. The implicit message was that the parties must meet and discuss the issue, and that much work was still needed before the conference could convene.

With the opening of the 2015 RevCon on April 27, 2015, the parties have still not succeeded in agreeing on a concept, agenda, or date for the Helsinki conference, and this will no doubt be a topic of discussion in the coming weeks. However, any discussion of the WMDFZ conference at this year’s RevCon must include all that has transpired over the past few years. Although a conference date has yet to be set, there were nevertheless unanticipated developments and progress, particularly due to the noteworthy efforts of the Finnish facilitator, Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, who held dozens of individual meetings with the different Middle East parties to appraise the situation. He met with scores of officials and academic and think tank experts, seeking out positions and expertise from many quarters in order to facilitate the process. From late 2013 to mid-

2014 he managed to help convene five interim meetings with the direct participation of regional parties, all with the aim of gaining consensus among them on the parameters of a process that would enable a conference date to be set.

Consensus has still not been achieved, but the Russian statement to the 3rd NPT PrepCom from late April 2014 nevertheless assessed that “quite important results have been achieved” at three informal meetings in Glion attended by the Middle East states “that managed for the first time to establish a direct dialogue.”

Moreover, the process has generated a clear understanding among the conveners of the different perspectives of the parties, along with the awareness that convening the Helsinki conference is dependent upon making progress on directly agreed-upon arrangements. In the co-conveners’ joint statement to the UNGA First Committee in late October 2014, they welcomed the “constructive and substantive” consultations in the five meetings that were held, and urged all states of the region to continue these consultations “with the aim of agreeing [on] arrangements so that a Conference can be held in Helsinki soon thereafter.”

Notwithstanding Israel’s fundamental reservation regarding the mandate and the NPT umbrella under which the conference is to take place, one of the notable aspects of the progress so far is the positive role that Israel has played, especially its willingness to engage in the process led by Laajava, with high level and consistent official participation in the five informal meetings. Israel’s positive approach has gained important recognition among the conveners, reflected in their understanding that with all the difficulties that the NPT framework poses for Israel and the clear intent of Arab states to use this conference as a means of pressuring Israel on the nuclear front, Israel has been willing to engage in the effort. Israel has explained its concerns, and participated in an effort to carve out an agenda that might provide a win-win encounter for discussing acute security concerns of all states in the region. At the UNGA First Committee in October 2014, US Special Representative to the Conference on Disarmament, Robert Wood, noted: “The regional states have met five times in the past year...Israel has participated constructively and at senior levels in all five rounds of consultations, and has demonstrated its commitment to attending the conference once agreement is reached.”

That commitment was expressed by the head of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, Dr. Shaul Chorev, in his statement to the 58th IAEA General Conference in September 2014. He noted that Israel was the first regional state to participate in the multilateral consultations, and that “Israel stands ready to continue direct engagement with all states of the region, in order to reach an agreement on all substantial aspects. That includes the agenda, a concluding document, and the terms of reference of a possible regional event in

Helsinki. Once such an agreement is reached, the regional states can set a date for such an event.”

Thus although Israel is targeted by Arab states that would like to strip it of essential strategic defensive capabilities, its positive approach is noteworthy, and must be part of any discussion of the WMDFZ conference at the NPT RevCon.

In an April 2015 interview to *Arms Control Today*, US Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation Adam Scheinman was asked about the obstacles to convening the Helsinki Conference. Scheinman noted the difference of views on an agenda, and the importance of the five meetings that have taken place. He emphasized that “the pathway to a conference is agreement of the regional states” that bear the responsibility to negotiate, seek compromises, and speak to each other directly. He noted that the process “will only work if the regional states are engaging directly and take responsibility for reaching an agreement.” Moreover, Scheinman said that the conference could spark an arms control process that would be very important and valuable because there has been no forum in the Middle East for discussing regional security issues since the ACRS talks of the early 1990s. Indeed, Scheinman’s theme echoes the cogent argument that what is sorely needed in the Middle East is a regional security dialogue forum where a full range of security issues could be discussed – from the very soft to the hard security issues that affect the lives of millions across the region.

The question is how all of this will play out at the 2015 NPT RevCon, especially with Israel absent from the table. How will the Arab states present the issue, and how will the US respond? Will the US remain firmly behind the clear positions it has taken on this process in the years since 2010, or will it be pressured into accepting Arab demands that could again attempt to press for quick decisions that do not take Israel’s concerns seriously? Finally, how would a prospective conference be envisioned in the severely deteriorating Middle East regional landscape?

