



British American Security
Information Council

Report on:
Expert Roundtable in
Washington, DC
October 29, 2013

Steps on the way forward to a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East

On October 29th, 2013, BASIC hosted a small group of academics and experts on and from the Middle East region for a roundtable in Washington, D.C. on the current challenges surrounding a WMD –free zone in the Middle East. This paper highlights the key points discussed: the ideas are presented in summary form, and are not necessarily indicative of a collective viewpoint of participants, or of BASIC or its funders. BASIC would like to thank The Prospect Hill Foundation for helping to make this event possible.

Regional dynamics:

The Arab Spring has stimulated more open and detailed discussion of regional security issues and how to address them. On Iran, American optimism over recently reinvigorated negotiations was not necessarily a sentiment shared across the region. Significant skepticism still exists, particularly among the Gulf States, about Iran’s nuclear intentions: many judge that a Western deal with Iran over its uranium enrichment program would only happen in exchange for an alternative status “reward” – that is, regional hegemony. Israel is also likely to remain highly sensitive to any deal that leaves questions unanswered around Iran’s nuclear ambitions. While breakout capability remains a possibility, Israel will continue to be nervous.

The Arab Spring has also opened up more in-depth analysis of security issues relating to Israel and how to tackle those challenges. A number of participants firmly believed that Israel was still a long way from being able to participate in any regional or international discussion on nuclear weapons. Israel hadn’t ruled out accession to the NPT altogether –as Pakistan had done –but it remains at best a long-term proposition. Some expressed concern that pushing Israel to formally announce its nuclear weapons program would make the situation harder to resolve: discussing the issues publicly would only force Israel to have to dig in to its nuclear position. In sum, a number of participants believed the security conditions simply do not exist with Israel at present to make any real headway on including nuclear weapons in a WMD-free zone discussion. The current Israeli administration, in particular, had a very small margin on security and was unlikely to be convinced.

Helsinki Conference

The ongoing postponement of the planned 2012 Helsinki Conference, which aimed to discuss steps towards a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, continues to cause much frustration. Not only was hope diminishing on the likelihood of a conference happening in the near future, but any real discussion on substantive, technical issues had been overshadowed by the logistics of the conference. This was discouraging for both the conveners and the states in the region.

Challenges:

It was suggested that two key areas of work needed to be addressed for sustained progress to be made on a WMD-free zone: first, all regional parties needed to adhere to the suite of international treaties and conventions on chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Second, regional institution-building was critical - such as training, inspectors and monitoring systems - to ensure that the right mechanisms were in place to implement any agreement, if it were made. At present, no such regional infrastructure exists, and regional expertise remains predominantly academic and diplomatic, rather than technical.

The following technical provisions were highlighted as frameworks to be in place for the zone to succeed:

- remaining nuclear weapons and facilities must be dismantled and destroyed
- nuclear weapons needed to be renounced
- the transfer of nuclear materials must be prohibited within the zone
- the testing of nuclear weapons must be prohibited within the zone
- nuclear facilities needed to be used for peaceful purposes only
- nuclear facilities needed to be placed under international safeguards
- structures needed to be put in place to uphold the zone

Opportunities:

(a) Some participants looked to other nuclear weapon-free zone agreements as examples of how progress might be made. Other existing nuclear weapon free zones were treaty-based, with legal obligations and commitments, such as the Argentinean/Brazilian Joint Monitoring Scheme (ABACC), which employs inspectors from both states in addition to those from the IAEA. The region could also take notes from South Africa, who dismantled their nuclear programs in the 1990s. Some participants highlighted that the political dynamics in South Africa were considerably different from those of the Middle East. Others pushed back to stress that, regardless of political dynamics, the case of South Africa illustrates that nuclear disarmament is indeed possible and, as such, Israel's nuclear program and Iran's nuclear ambitions could yet be rolled back.

Participants recognized that a fundamental shortcoming of the discussion surrounding the WMD-free zone was a lack of creativity. The process as it stands is not working. A suggestion was made to resurrect the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group, in order to breathe new life into the debate. ACRS had been close to success, but was halted late in the process as a result of

Egypt's insistence that nuclear weapons be included as part of the package – which other states could not accept. Other participants at the roundtable disagreed with the proposal to resurrect what they termed a “failed experiment”, but believed that the lessons around creativity and dialogue as a focus of ACRS might successfully be applied to a new initiative.

- (b) We were unlikely to see any rapid change in Israel's position on nuclear weapons. As such, participants proposed that the region should consider incremental regional options as a means to move forward on the WMD-free zone. Countries might proceed at different paces and on different pathways. A suggestion was made for Egypt to start the process by ratifying the Convention on Biological Weapons, and urging Israel and Syria to do the same. A ban on biological weapons could be followed by a ban on chemical weapons. Implementing a WMD-free zone in an incremental way would allow for regional parties to build confidence in one another, including by monitoring each other's compliance. However, Israel was likely to find it incredibly difficult to accept a regime, such as on chemical weapons, which called for external monitoring. The biological weapons convention might be easier for them.

Some participants urged caution about focusing only on a phased approach at the risk of neglecting the over-arching goal of a WMD-free zone, which must include nuclear weapons. All components to the zone were equally important, even if some might be resolved at a faster pace than others.

- (c) It was suggested that the immediate focus should be on establishing the institutions and structures to support a WMD-free zone. The recent situation in Syria illustrated the point that the international community was able to make real progress when political will exists, and when institutions were already in place to deliver an agreement and manage any technical aspects -in the case of Syria, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Putting infrastructures and training in place before there was anything substantive to deliver also carried with it some risks that needed to be mitigated.

Conclusion:

At present, security concerns throughout the region make prospects for negotiating a full WMD-free zone look bleak. However, opportunities do exist to make incremental progress – such as focusing on incremental agreements and putting the necessary technical and structural capacity in place to help deliver any agreement.



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