



INSS Insight No. 285, October 4, 2011

The IAEA 2011 General Conference

Shimon Stein and Ephraim Asculai

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference convened on September 19, 2011 in Vienna for its annual meeting. Common to these conferences is the injection of politics into the discussions, i.e., proposals by the Arab nations, headed by Egypt, concerning Israel's nuclear capabilities. Egypt views the annual conference as a proper forum for advancing its efforts to dismantle these alleged capabilities.

In this sense, this year's conference was no different from its predecessors. Two draft resolutions relating to Israel were proposed: "Israel's Nuclear Capabilities," and "Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East." Advance diplomatic activity by Arab states focused especially on obtaining support for the first resolution. In the last two years, this resolution has become the primary battleground between Israel and the Arab states and the yardstick for judging the success or failure of Israeli diplomacy. Behind this year's intensive diplomatic efforts conducted by both sides lay the Arab failure in last year's vote on the proposal (51-46). Thus, the Arab effort focused on an attempt to generate a change in the balance of power, while the Israeli effort (with American/European assistance) aimed to repeat last year's success. In the end, estimating that they would not be able to guarantee a majority in the conference plenum, the Arab nations decided to withdraw the draft resolution.

How can the fact that Israel and its allies scored a diplomatic coup in such a hostile arena for the second straight year be explained? Does this indicate a new trend whereby most members are no longer willing to support the Arabs singling out Israel for its nuclear activities? Hovering in the background of the General Conference discussions and the addresses by many of the Arab speakers were the IAEA Forum scheduled for November and the conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East scheduled for 2012, decided on at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Do the results of the IAEA General Conference impact on the two forthcoming gatherings, and if so, how?

Some would explain the Arab failure by the difficulty in agreeing on a uniform stance and inadequate inter-Arab coordination, apparently in light of the Arab spring, which deflected

the attention of the Arab nations towards what they regarded as more urgent issues. In addition, Israel's success may be attributed to an improved diplomatic campaign and better coordination with the United States and European Union member nations. The latter focused on the negative contribution that would be made by a resolution singling out Israel, given the effort to build an atmosphere of trust on the eve of the IAEA Forum Conference and the efforts to convene the 2012 conference. In this context, the EU was able to point to the success of the seminar it held this past July in Brussels. Thus unlike in 2010, once the Arab nations understood that they had no chance to win a vote, they decided to withdraw the resolution, thereby sparing themselves a second straight loss. They explained their decision not to bring the resolution to a vote as a goodwill gesture in the context of the IAEA Conference and the related events.

Despite the achievements of these two years, it is too early to evaluate whether this is indeed the start of a trend based on the recognition that singling Israel out for vilification on the nuclear question contributes nothing to establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Egypt and its Arab partners will likely not miss future opportunities to denounce Israel on the nuclear issue. The reason for Israel's success this year should be seen as the success of the US and EU to convince the undecided of the damage to their efforts to convene the forthcoming conferences. The ability to recreate this success next year (assuming that the Arab nations launch a similar effort) will depend to a decisive extent on the ability of the US and EU to point to successes at the planned conferences.

The IAEA Forum is scheduled to discuss experience gained from nuclear weapons-free zones around the world and examine the relevance of this experience to the efforts to establish a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. In a certain sense, this heralds an IAEA success: in past years, the IAEA tried very hard to hold a discussion of such topics but failed.

The decision at the NPT Conference regarding the 2012 conference determined that the IAEA, together with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and other relevant international organizations, would assist in the preparations by submitting documents and discussing modalities relating to the establishment of a WMD-free zone. Thus, the IAEA is playing a secondary role here, though this was less evident in the many speeches that related to the planned 2012 conference. There is no doubt that the Arab "goodwill gesture" in withdrawing the resolution on Israel's nuclear capabilities will increase the pressure on the three conveners (the US, Great Britain, and Russia) to advance the preparations for the 2012 conference – preparations that have progressed little since the decision was made in May 2010. The three, primarily the United States, will likely make every effort to prevent accusations of their having failed to convene the conference. Appointing a host nation and a coordinator are the first tasks for the sponsors. It seems that the three have an understanding whereby the coordinator will come from the host nation. The appointments process will start with consultations with the nations in the

region, which will have to give their blessing to the proposed appointment. The recommendation of the three and the UN Secretary General for the person to be appointed will be formulated later. The anticipated difficulties until the conference is convened, in light of the differences of opinion among the relevant nations (especially in the Middle East), some of which will oppose the conference itself, will undoubtedly postpone its convening. Moreover, with all the importance that Egypt and some of the Arab nations attribute to holding the conference in 2012, to the United States and President Obama it is important to make sure that the conference is held before the next NPT Review Conference in 2015.

The appointment of a coordinator who will start consultations with the regional states will confront Israel with the dilemma whether or not to cooperate with him. In an announcement immediately after the close of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Israel stated it could not participate in the implementation of the conference decisions. Is this statement still valid? What considerations might make Israel reexamine its position regarding the entering into a process of negotiations over the conditions that would allow Israel to participate?

In conclusion, Israel acted correctly in participating in the seminar held by the EU. Having expressed willingness in principle to participate in the IAEA Forum, Israel would be wise to participate and there present a clear position regarding the necessary conditions for establishing a WMD-free zone. And despite its stated opposition to the 2012 conference, Israel would be wise not to reject the advances of the coordinator once such a person is appointed. Following the earliest possible coordination with the United States (which also presented a list of conditions for the convening of the conference, conditions that have yet to be fulfilled), Israel will be able to present the coordinator with its conditions for participating in the conference. Chances are that should Israel turn the coordinator away and/or reject participation in the 2012 conference, it would help the negative approach of many other nations. On the other hand, more than a few nations in the region will likely refuse to sit down with Israel at a conference concerning all WMD (not just nuclear weapons) in the Middle East. It behooves Israel to take this consideration into account as well as it prepares to take a decision on the issue.