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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

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Identify Common Ground

Emily B. Landau

The conference in Helsinki on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone MEWMDFZ 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 MEWMDFZ 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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