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**Another Arab Bid to Establish a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free
Zone in the Middle East**
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November 2019 saw the first session in New York of a conference within the framework of steps to implement a 2018 UN General Assembly resolution, prompted by an Arab League initiative, to establish a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East. All Arab League states were invited to the conference, as were Israel and Iran, and representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council. Israel and the United States did not attend the meeting. Even before the resolution was passed by the General Assembly, Israel announced that its longstanding support for the initiative was intended as support for the principle of consensus, but this principle was violated by the Arab League's call for a resolution that would be imposed on the parties. That being the case, Israel made clear that henceforth it would not cooperate with regional initiatives in the disarmament realm. The United States said its own absence was warranted, *inter alia*, as the Arab League's decision was tantamount to an attempt to dictate terms unilaterally while singling out Israel. Such circumstances raise once again the question of the utility of the conference. Will this conference (as well as future gatherings on the same issue) mark a move toward the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East? Will there be any change in conditions that thus far have prevented convention of the conference to implement a WMDFZ, or does the value of the conference lie simply in its very occurrence?

At the UN General Assembly in October 2018, in response to a proposal by the Arab League, a resolution was passed to convene a conference on establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. The General Assembly resolution stated that the conference would be predicated on a resolution adopted at the 1995 Review and Extension Conference on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as well as on UN resolutions that have served as a basis for all decisions on the Middle East taken within the treaty's framework. The UN Secretary-General was mandated to convene an annual conference (that would last a week, or alternatively, as much as the allotted budget allowed) to draft a treaty on these issues, accepted freely and by consensus among countries of the region (even if not necessarily all of them). Thus in November 2019, within the framework of steps to implement the resolution, the first session of the conference was convened in New York with relevant countries invited –

namely, all Arab League countries, Israel, and Iran. Also invited were the five permanent members of the Security Council and representatives of international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Israel and the United States did not attend the meeting. Already in the aftermath of the 2018 General Assembly resolution, Israel emphasized that its longstanding support of a proposal to establish a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East was intended as support for the principle of consensus. This principle, Israel argued, was violated by the Arab League's call for the imposition of a resolution in this context. That being the case, Israel emphasized that henceforth it would no longer cooperate with regional initiatives in the realm of arms control. The United States explained its own absence, *inter alia*, by citing the Arab League decision as tantamount to an attempt to dictate terms unilaterally and single out Israel.

Such developments once more raise the question of the utility of the conference. Will this gathering (as well as future gatherings on the same issue) mark a move toward the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East? Is there any change underway in the conditions that until now have prevented convention of the conference – or does the value of the conference lie simply in the very fact of its occurrence?

The initiative to convene the conference should be viewed in the context of a longstanding effort (intensified since the adoption at the 1995 NPT Review Conference of the resolution on establishing a WMDFZ) on the part of the Arab League generally, and Egypt in particular, to preserve the issue on the international agenda. This effort has continued with no regard of the question raised over the years by Israel and the United States as to whether necessary conditions have ripened in the region to begin negotiating about regional disarmament. At the core of the current initiative is the Arab League's failed bid to implement the resolution adopted at the 2010 Review Conference regarding the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Despite its misgivings in principle about taking part in initiatives that stem from the NPT, to which it is not a signatory, in 2011 Israel deviated from its policy and acceded to a request to participate in deliberations that were intended to advance a regional dialogue.

Within this framework, Israel participated in five meetings in 2013-2014, along with a number of states of the region. Their goal was to reach a regional consensus, *inter alia* regarding parameters for convening a conference that would discuss an agenda and a final document, as well as a decision on the principles of a conference due to convene in Helsinki. These meetings among delegates of Israel and of Arab countries were the first since the working groups on arms control and regional security, held as part of the

multilateral track in the wake of the framework of the Madrid Conference framework more than two decades prior. Israel emphasized that if agreements were reached on the issues of the agenda, the final document, and the rules of procedure, it would be possible to set a date for that conference. Presumably concern lest the Finnish coordinator of the conference, Jaakko Laajava, adopt some Israeli positions that the Arab side sees as designed to delay attainment of the immediate goal of nuclear disarmament, including the necessity of regional dialogue, ultimately brought about the cessation of the dialogue (as with similar past cases where talks within the framework of working groups on regional security and arms control broke up). Another failure of the Arab drive was Egypt's inability to impose on the 2015 Review Conference a draft resolution that was imbalanced – namely, in its pejorative singling out of Israel – on the issue of a WMDFZ. The draft was rejected by the United States, and this led to the conference ending without agreement on a final document.

Organizers of the recent conference in New York set limited goals and low expectations. The discussions, held mostly behind closed doors, focused on the following issues: adopting the rules of procedure and work plan, and composing a political statement. As it happened, the participants did not reach agreement on the rules of procedure – specifically, as to whether the principle of consensus should be adopted only for substantive matters or for all matters.

The discussion on the work plan focused on the treaty's applicability, scope, and substance, as well as on confidence building measures. The scant reports that emerged from the discussions of the scope of the treaty show that the subject of launch systems – ballistic missiles, whose inclusion is alluded to in the 1995 resolution on a WMD-free region – was at the heart of the dispute between those who argue that at the initial stage, including non-conventional weaponry alone should suffice, so as not to further encumber already complex talks, and those who support including ballistic missiles already at the outset of the discussions. This dispute can be expected to reappear at future conferences.

The main points of the short political declaration published after the five days of discussions included hope that a treaty, based on arrangements attained freely and by consensus among countries of the region, will advance regional security and trust, and all countries of the region would allow for its implementation; a call to avoid steps that would impede establishment of a WMDFZ; and, a call to all countries of the region to support this declaration. Principles included in the political declaration – regional security, confidence building, and decision making by consensus, on the one hand, and not negatively singling out Israel on the other hand, reflect a desire among participating countries to leave the door open to future participation by Israel (as well the United States).

Indeed, there is nothing in Israel's announcement that it will not support regional initiatives in the arms control realm that are not founded on the principle of consensus. Similarly, the many reservations by the United States about both protocols and substance do not attest to any imminent change in their position on the need for conditions to ripen, which can prepare the ground for a regional process with inherent potential for a successful discussion on a WMDFZ.

A document submitted by the United States in 2018 as part of the preparatory meeting ahead of the NPT Review Conference of 2020, "Establishing regional conditions conducive to a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction and delivery means," stated, inter alia, that "creating such a zone in the Middle East region, in particular, would require overcoming a unique set of political and security challenges which have long impeded efforts towards regional arms control." As long as these challenges are not addressed, it will not be possible to progress. The regional challenges described in detail include the lack of trust among countries of the region, the lack of compliance in the region, regional security challenges (military struggles between countries, political instability, an arms race, development of advanced ballistic missiles, state-sponsored terrorism, use of chemical and other weaponry, absence of political will among countries in the region).

Accordingly, progress toward the objective is first and foremost the responsibility of the countries of the region, which are urged to hold a direct dialogue as the NPT Review Conferences, held every five years, cannot be the main mechanism for making progress toward a WMDFZ. These main points, which Israel supports unreservedly, represent what is self-evident regarding preliminary conditions for negotiations, but their rejection by Arab countries is to be expected. As far as they are concerned, these points are obstacles placed on the path toward the goal that at least some of them seek, even if they do not say so on every occasion: stripping Israel of the nuclear capabilities attributed to it.

In conclusion, following the New York conference, the open questions are whether Arab countries will be satisfied with the very convention of the conference and the launch of a mechanism that will allow the issue of a Middle East WMDFZ to remain on the international agenda over time, as well as for Israel to be singled out negatively for not taking part in the discussions, and whether they will avoid an attempt to railroad a resolution on ridding the Middle East of nuclear weapons at the upcoming NPT Review Conference (April 2020) marking 50 years since the treaty came into force. That is what Arab states did at the 1995 Review Conference, when they conditioned their agreement to extend the NPT on the adoption of a resolution on establishing a WMDFZ, and again in 2015, when they brought about the termination of the Review Conference without a final document due to Egyptian insistence on a text, opposed by the United States, regarding

the WMDFZ. A promise not to turn the Review Conference into a stage for addressing the WMDFZ issue was made. Whether it will be kept is another question.