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The Decision to Call Off the 2012 WMDFZ Conference: An Outcome Destined from the Start?

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After several weeks in which the three state conveners of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone (WMDFZ) conference failed to reach a joint position on postponement of the conference, the United States, Britain, and Russia issued separate announcements reflecting their different perspectives on the reasons for the delay, and the conditions and timeline for getting the conference on track. In her announcement of November 23, 2012, US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland pointed to the present conditions in the Middle East, and the fact that "states in the region have not reached agreement on acceptable conditions for a conference." She spelled out the essential conditions for holding the conference in the future, without setting a prospective date. That same day Russia issued a statement calling for the conference to be held – with its original mandate – not later than April 2013; Britain's announcement called for continued direct consultations among the regional states with the aim of holding the conference in 2013.

Other responses followed. The EU and several individual countries (France, Turkey, and Japan) issued general statements expressing disappointment over the postponement of the conference and hope for its early convening. The Secretary General of the United Nations called for multilateral consultations to allow holding the conference at the earliest opportunity in 2013, and Ambassador Jaakko Laajava, the Finnish coordinator, announced that he would work via multilateral consultations to convene the conference at the earliest possible opportunity. On November 25, 2012, the Egyptian Foreign Minister argued that the failure to hold the conference in 2012 violated the Non-Proliferation Treaty. He pointed to Israel as the only state that did not confirm its participation, and also noted that the failure to hold a conference could impact on the next review of the treaty. The Secretary General of the Arab League, who also pointed to Israel as the only state not to announce its participation, reported a meeting held on November 28-29 to which "all the senior leaders in the Arab nations" had been invited to discuss this development and make decisions accordingly.

What are the reasons for the failure to convene the gathering? Who are the winners and the losers from the postponement, and what are the chances for convening the conference in the foreseeable future?

The central reason for the failure to convene the conference is the unbridgeable gap between the sides, which has only widened as a result of the changes in the Arab world and Iran's progress toward a military nuclear capability. Conceptually, there are two contradictory approaches to conducting a regional discussion on the subject. One proposes taking rapid steps towards arms reductions, with a focus on Israel and the nuclear realm. The other maintains that it is impossible to discuss arms reductions before addressing the difficult inter-state relations through a process of dialogue and the creation of an initial basis for cooperation and confidence building. The latter approach was strengthened in recent years, against the backdrop of ongoing deception and lies in the nonconventional realm that surfaced in Syria and Iran. The gap between the approaches made it impossible to reach an agreement on the agenda for the planned conference.

As to the relevant actors:

Egypt: The 2010 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) decision about convening a conference to discuss implementation of the Resolution on the Middle East adopted at the 1995 RevCon was a significant diplomatic achievement for Egypt, which for many years strove to initiate a negotiation aimed at ultimately forcing Israel to divest itself of nuclear capabilities attributed to it. Egypt had hoped that a conference in 2012 would begin a process leading to follow-up meetings under NPT auspices, thus keeping the issue on the international agenda. Egypt used political leverage against the United States in order to promote its agenda. As early as 1995, Egypt threatened to withhold support for the NPT's indefinite extension should the United States not support the Resolution on the Middle East, including the paragraph about the need to establish a WMD-free zone. In 2010, Egypt again threatened to prevent a successful conclusion to the RevCon unless a decision was taken regarding a WMDFZ conference in 2012. The recent statement by the Egyptian Foreign Minister and the Arab League's urgent meeting of senior Arab figures to discuss the situation are manifestations of Egypt's frustration with the postponement. Since the regime change in Egypt, the Arab League has spoken for the Arab nations on this issue, which for years had been led by Egypt. It remains to be seen if this will affect the way President Morsi relates to the nuclear question. Arab threats to leave the NPT because the conference was not held are not credible.

Israel: As a non-member of the NPT, Israel is not obligated to accept the decisions made at the RevCons. Nevertheless, and despite its principled reservations about a 2012 conference (on questions of framework, mandate, and agenda), Israel participated in the diplomatic activity conducted by the Finnish coordinator and stressed the conditions that

would allow it to participate, so as not to be accused of being responsible for the failure of these efforts. Officially, Israel may derive satisfaction from the postponement. The conference would have thrust the spotlight on Israel's presumed nuclear capabilities instead of on Iran's nuclear advances. In addition, the conference would most likely have ended with recommendations for the next NPT RevCon, thus creating a dynamic of conferences under the auspices of the NPT, an undesirable result from Israel's perspective. Moreover, the US State Department's announcement is consistent with Israel's positions. The conference was liable to have created tensions in the US-Israel relationship, especially were the US to yield to Russian pressure and set a date for the conference. Still, the achievement is temporary. The United States will likely come under pressure to moderate its stance, which in turn may generate new pressure toward Israel.

Iran: Despite its support in principle for convening the 2012 conference, Iran did not rush to announce its participation, choosing rather to wait until the last minute. During an EU seminar in November 2012, Iran's ambassador to the IAEA dramatically announced its willingness to attend. Iran apparently hoped to force attention on Israel's refusal and also divert attention away from its own nuclear crisis. The conference postponement will therefore not give Iran the breathing room it had hoped for.

United States: Given President Obama's disarmament speech in Prague in April 2009 calling for a world free of nuclear weapons, his support for the notion of a Middle East free of WMD was only natural. But what is true in the global sphere holds for the Middle East as well: the gap between vision and reality is currently unbridgeable. In this sense, the original mistake was undoubtedly the administration's agreement in 2010 to include the WMDfZ 2012 conference in the RevCon final document in exchange for Egypt's promise to enable a successful conference result. Statements issued by the President and the National Security Advisor immediately after the RevCon – statements that contradicted the conference summary itself – stipulated the conditions without which it would be impossible to hold the 2012 conference. The State Department's recent statement on the postponement was in effect a repetition of the 2010 statements, reflecting the reservations that prompted the United States to be less than enthusiastic in the first place regarding the necessary preparations for implementation of the decision. The lack of enthusiasm was evident in the fact that it took over a year to appoint the Finnish coordinator, who was then charged with the near impossible mission of securing the agreement of all the regional states for the conference within a relatively short period of time. The US decision to postpone the conference, and the reasons it gave, may restore Israel's trust, which was damaged by the original 2010 decision. An interesting question is how, given the high threshold set for convening the gathering, the US will continue to embrace Obama's disarmament agenda while at the same time not yielding to the expected pressures to convene the conference before 2015.

Russia, seeking to promote its interests in the Middle East in the midst of the transformations occurring in the Arab world and using every opportunity to upstage the US, worked to convene the conference. It will now apparently continue to support the Arab agenda even at the cost of a confrontation with the US and disagreements with Israel.

As long as it remains impossible to bridge the ideological divide between Israel and Egypt (responsible for the Arab position to date), there is no chance that such a conference can jumpstart a process genuinely geared to helping the parties move in the direction of a Middle East free of WMD. This recognition was echoed by the State Department statement: “The United States believes that a deep conceptual gap persists in the region on approaches toward regional security and arms control arrangements....Outside states cannot impose a process on the region any more than they can dictate an outcome. The mandate for a MEWMDFZ must come from the region itself...A comprehensive and durable peace in the region and full compliance by all regional states with their arms control and nonproliferation obligations are essential precursors for the establishment of such a zone.”

