



British American Security
Information Council

Report on:
Expert Roundtable
in Washington, DC
January 24, 2014

NPT PrepCom 2014: the WMD-free zone in the Middle East and prospects for success

On January 24, 2014, BASIC hosted a roundtable in Washington, DC with experts on both nuclear weapons issues and the Middle East, to discuss potential for progress on a WMD-free zone in the region. This paper highlights, in summary form, the key points discussed. These ideas are not necessarily the collective or individual viewpoint of all roundtable participants, BASIC or its funders.

Political context:

Participants explored the political context likely to shape the 2014 NPT Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) and 2015 Review Conference (RevCon).

Issues which have potential to significantly hamper NPT discussion included:

- Limited progress on some areas of the 2010 NPT Action Plan;
- Ongoing frustration that no date has yet been set for the official conference on the WMD-free zone in the Middle East agreed in 2010;
- Frustration over the pace and process of disarmament efforts, which was generating parallel initiatives such as the Oslo and Mexico conferences on the humanitarian dimensions of nuclear weapons.

There have also been a number of positive developments:

- Informal meetings have taken place between regional parties to discuss the WMD-free zone in the Middle East;
- Syria has taken steps towards complying with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC);
- The P5+1 negotiated an interim deal with Iran over its nuclear program.

WMD-free zone in the Middle East:

Some participants saw this as a moment of real opportunity. The Arab Spring had effectively ended the taboo in the Middle East region on discussing security issues. Increasingly positive Egypt-Israeli relations, along with recent developments in Syria, might present an opportunity to encourage simultaneous CWC ratification by both Egypt and Israel - which would result in universal CWC membership across the region.

It was clear that setting a concrete date for a conference on the WMD-free zone remains an important policy and symbolic goal for some in the region. However, some participants stressed the value of the behind-the-scenes negotiations, and suggested that focusing primarily on the conference date might be overlooking more substantive, significant steps towards progress. They felt that the focus should be on getting the initial informal discussions - such as the ones which took place in Glion in 2013 - right. Negotiating the details would be necessary before any high-level conference would be possible. For others, however, the inability to hold a conference on the matter demonstrates the depth of challenge and lack of trust involved, harming confidence in the process.

Capacity Building:

Roundtable participants discussed proposals, laid out in a joint [article](#) by Sameh Aboul-Enein and Rebecca Cousins, for technical capacity building measures in the region which might help to:

- (a) provide a foundation for progress on a WMDFZ, enabling the states in the region to deliver any agreement when it is reached, and;
- (b) stimulate more in-depth, creative negotiations on the parameters of a zone.

At present, the region lacks the technical capacity needed both to effectively negotiate a WMD-free zone, and to oversee its implementation should the long-sought political agreement be reached. This lack of technical expertise is particularly apparent among the younger generations; this may take years of training and education to correct, but was a necessary investment.

Proposals/Next Steps:

Roundtable participants broadly supported the proposals for technical capacity building, and highlighted a number of potential challenges and suggestions on how to move forward:

1. **Political process:** The political and diplomatic process around negotiating a zone would remain the priority for many key states. It was important to consider to what extent and how technical capacity building might link in to and support the political process. It was also important to acknowledge that that this was a long-term proposition, and clarify exactly how far outreach might, or might not, go to easing some of the immediate tensions around the NPT.
2. **Funding:** Capacity building is expensive and funds are limited - this was likely to be the biggest challenge. Some participants highlighted the huge investments being made in the Gulf States on regulatory issues (nuclear safety and security), and suggested keying into that work. Building off

multilateral cooperation at nuclear summits could also be valuable.

3. How to operationalize: Roundtable participants discussed who would operationalize capacity building: governments, civil society or international institutions. A certain degree of regional government participation would be necessary. But perhaps the most constructive way forward would be through the engagement of international organizations (including those with a wider interest, such as UNESCO or ERASMUS).

4. Existing initiatives: Some training and education programs, as well as think tank initiatives, already exist, such as that of Texas A&M University, the Monterey Institute's Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs and the Amman Security Colloquium, which should be leveraged.

5. Role of think tanks and media: Think tanks and NGOs should be encouraged to engage, and to utilize media outreach to draw attention to and build momentum for the process. At present, media, academic and policy community coverage of the issues was highly politicised - training, briefings and engagement would be needed to stimulate neutral, technical content.

6. Regional ownership: It would be critical that inspectors and experts of any WMD-free zone regime originate from within the region, to ensure a legitimate and sustainable process.

7. Regional vision: It was suggested that one significant step would be for regional states to collectively acknowledge that a nuclear war would be unwinnable (studies exploring the consequences of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan were cited). Such an agreement would signal that governments have a shared understanding of the political, economic, and humanitarian consequences of nuclear war in the region, and highlight the dangers associated with a slide into a nuclear deterrent relationship.



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