



British American Security  
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## Speech to the Nuclear Forum in Cairo: “Promoting the 2012 Conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East”

Delivered by Anne Penketh,  
Program Director British American Security Information Council  
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“I’m going to concentrate on the diplomatic process towards the 2012 conference on a Middle East WMD-free zone, a kind of diplomatic narrative if you will, and on the role of civil society which was recognized in the final document of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference last May in an unprecedented departure from tradition.

Something special happens when the world comes together after a particularly difficult multilateral negotiation. It happened in the final hours of the RevCon when diplomats managed to agree a consensus document in which it was decided to convene a conference in 2012 on establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East to be attended by all states of the region. It would be the first such security conference ever to be attended by both Iran and Israel at a time when the Iranians may be poised to challenge the Israeli monopoly on nuclear arms in the Middle East. The consensus at the RevCon was reached at the last minute and against all expectations after the US, then Iran, decided they would not be the spoilers.

As one speaker after another spoke to praise the collective resolve, Egyptian diplomacy and the president of the Review Conference for their role in securing a successful outcome, more than one diplomat had a lump in their throat.

But the euphoria was short lived. Only minutes later, senior US officials in Washington were warning that the document’s mention of Israel – even the very soft reference which “recalls the reaffirmation” of the 2000 RevCon about Israel joining the treaty and placing its nuclear facilities under international safeguards - would undermine the chances of the conference ever being held. President Obama’s national security adviser, Gen Jim Jones warned in particular that: “Because of the gratuitous way that Israel has been singled out, the prospect for a conference in 2012 that involves all key states in the region is now in doubt and will remain so until all are assured that it can operate in a unbiased and constructive way.”

Two days later, Israel, which is not a party to the NPT but which had been involved in consultations with delegates on the margins of the RevCon, declared it would not attend. The Israeli government issued a statement announcing that “given the distorted nature of this resolution, Israel will not be able to take part in its implementation.”

So where do we stand today, five months later? The co-sponsors remain committed to the conference, but I’m afraid that it is only now that the UN secretary-general’s office and the US, UK and Russia are starting to consider the concrete preparations for 2012, after a long cooling off period that followed the RevCon.

The principle issues at stake are the appointment of a facilitator for the 2012 conference, agreeing a host government for the event and hammering out its agenda.

Since last May, however, the Americans have made it clear that they were not interested in appointing a facilitator until they had seen how the Arab group would approach a resolution on Israel’s nuclear capability during the general conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Thanks to a high profile US-led diplomatic effort after the Arab group refused to back down, the resolution was rejected by 51 votes to 46. It should be noted though that at the very moment of the vote, a total 31 delegates found they had a pressing need to be somewhere else and were not even in the hall, which shows that the fundamental issues are far from being resolved.

The general conference just happened at the end of last month, since when both Obama administration officials and Egyptian diplomats have told me that they want to put this behind them and move on. But there are a number of other hurdles ahead.

The most important, in my view, concerns the difference of interpretation as to the purpose of the 2012 conference. The Americans see it as a way to isolate Iran, while the Arabs – at least publicly - see it as a way of dismantling Israel’s nuclear arsenal.

So everyone involved will have to show flexibility if they want to move forward. As one American official put it to me: “the IAEA General Conference gives a basis to proceed, but there is a sense of daunting challenge because of the disconnect.”

Another issue looming in the background is the Middle East peace process. It’s not possible not to think of this while here in Cairo. This held up progress on the 1995 ME resolution for many years because of the US-Israeli insistence on a comprehensive peace before disarmament. Now, since May, that precondition has been lifted, and it is to be hoped that even if the peace process collapses, the disarmament track can proceed separately.

The facilitator will be key in terms of getting the process on a forward track. However there are budget questions linked to his or her appointment – and I’m told it could take six to eight months to sort out at the UN. Once the facilitator is appointed, other budget decisions would have to be taken about the holding of the conference itself, depending on the level of representation, the venue and how long it will last.

The facilitator is to be chosen by the UN secretary-general and the co-sponsors of the 1995 Middle East resolution - that's the US, UK and Russia – in consultation with the states of the region. Yet there is no consensus on the facilitator's profile – which was not defined by the RevCon. The Arab group have established three criteria regarding the facilitator:

- 1) He or she should not be from an Arab state or Israel, nor from the three depositary states
- 2) They should be of a very high level, say that of foreign minister or former foreign minister
- 3) They should have good relations with both Israel and Iran.

Needless to say, the depositary states are not all in the same hurry to appoint a facilitator. But that's not all – there has been no decision taken as to the host government, let alone a date for the 2012 conference. And the exact states comprising the Middle East in the context of the conference have not been fixed. Each of these items will be the subject of arduous negotiations.

Last but not least, there remains the agenda for the conference devoted to the establishment of a Middle East zone “free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction”. There is an understanding that it will not be a “negotiating” conference. Here's what President Obama had to say last July after his important meeting with Mr Netanyahu which led to the revival of the Middle East peace process. “As a co-sponsor charged with enabling the proposed conference, the United States will insist that such a conference will be for discussion aimed at an exchange of views on a broad agenda, to include regional security issues, verification and compliance, and all categories of weapons of mass destruction and systems for their delivery.”

You hear a lot about sequencing in terms of preparations for the 2012 conference. But there is a risk that if all attention is fixed on choosing a facilitator first of all, the whole thing will drag on when other issues such as the conference agenda – which must be about confidence-building measures, security assurances and practical steps – need to be resolved. So it would be far better if all these aspects could be considered at once. Possible host governments should be considered simultaneously. I've heard Austria and Switzerland mentioned, but why not a Mediterranean country like Turkey or an EU member like Ireland? The key thing is to get the ball rolling.

This is where civil society comes in. There are so many issues out there, that there is a danger that within the confines of a multilateral negotiation, the co-sponsors lose sight of the bigger picture which is how global security can be advanced by bringing Iran and Israel to the same table. It's true, the words “Middle East WMD-free zone” do not have the same resonance for the public as “Israel bombs Iran”, but believe me, it is a far better alternative for mankind than a regional conflagration. It's a really important issue for all our publics. Civil society should be out there organizing Track II and (at a later stage) Track I.5 events where new ideas can be aired, and generating support for the WMD-free zone in the media. Non-governmental organizations like my own are already doing this but there is probably a need for a broader coordinated effort.

2012 is just around the corner. Time is short. The Americans say that they are whole-heartedly behind this conference, but they now need to walk the walk. The Egyptians have had their eyes on this goal for so long, most recently as leader of the NAM and the Arab group, that they should keep up the momentum now it is within reach. The UN secretary-general should be encouraged to speed up the process insofar as his mandate allows. Israel, which understands how its security could be affected by both the Iranian nuclear programme and the prospect of a chain reaction of nuclear proliferation in its neighbourhood, should be encouraged to speak out about its intentions and concerns. Iran should do the same.

The fact is that the notion of a Middle East zone free of WMD is even more topical now than it was 15 years ago when the 1995 resolution was adopted. It would be a real shame if a conference of such importance were downgraded to a meeting of experts. Sooner or later Israel and Iran are going to have to deal – they have done in the past and we should all be encouraging them to do so in the future. Bombing Iran to delay its nuclear program cannot be a solution.

Meanwhile, there are signs of the beginnings of a debate in Israel over its “don’t ask, don’t tell” nuclear policy. As Professor Ze’ev Maoz said in the pages of the Israeli paper Haaretz not long ago: “The dilemma Israel faces in the longer run is between a nuclear Middle East and a demilitarized one. Either everyone in the region has nuclear weapons or no state has.”