



British American Security
Information Council

Preparing for the 2012 conference: towards a zone free of nuclear weapons and all other WMD in the Middle East

Follow up Report

The British American Security Information Council and the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs held a conference in Cairo on January 29th 2012 on “Preparing for the 2012 conference: towards a zone free of nuclear weapons and all other WMD in the Middle East.”

The day-long conference was the first such meeting in Cairo in support of the 2012 conference since the January 2011 Egyptian revolution, and was designed to reach out to Egyptian experts and representatives of civil society. The event was addressed by foreign and Egyptian experts and was attended by about 40 Egyptians. Participants learned that the facilitator for the conference, Finnish diplomat Jakko Laajava, and his team have been in touch with all states in the region about the 2012 conference which is intended to be held at the end of this year. Movement towards convening the 2012 conference has received quite a lot of momentum as a result. However the exact timing, the participants, the rules of procedure and other key matters remain to be resolved.

The discussions focused on the following areas: the relevance of the notion of nuclear deterrence and non-proliferation today, preparations for a successful 2012 conference from a political and technical point of view, the politics of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East – what’s in it for Egypt and others in the region, and regional relations in the post-Mubarak era.

During the big picture discussion on deterrence, it was pointed out that the India-Pakistan model was risky and showed that it is a bad idea to rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence. Egypt itself took the decision in 1974 to follow the non-proliferation route rather than engage in an arms race. The conference was briefed on the military budget discussions in Washington and prospects for the presidential guidance on nuclear weapons which is due to be issued in the coming months. One of the options under consideration is to bring down the number of US nuclear weapons to 1,000. But many participants voiced skepticism about the nuclear weapons’ states commitment to disarmament in line with their NPT pledge, and said that they could be hedging their bets only to build up again once the economic situation improved. Consequently the Obama vision of a nuclear-weapons free world could be described as indefinitely adhering to nuclear deterrence rather than real change. Several participants noted that because the last NPT Review Conference in May 2012 was dominated by negotiations on the WMD-free zone in the Middle East, disarmament did not receive the attention it merited and that this should be corrected in the forthcoming review cycle.

On the issue of Israel's presumed nuclear arsenal, it was pointed out that the Israeli nuclear weapons had not stopped the Palestinian intifadas nor wars with Israel's Arab neighbors. Speakers said that the presence of one nuclear power in the Middle East was a recipe for instability and that Israel should realize that it is in its own security interests to discuss establishing a WMD-free zone. Its possession of nuclear weapons has not made Israel any more secure. Participants agreed that the United States should be seen to have a more even-handed policy in the Middle East.

Turning to the preparations for 2012, there was much discussion of lessons learned from the earlier regional negotiations in the context of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group in the 1990s and whether it could be a model in the context of the 2012 conference. It was agreed that a new approach is needed. Some strong objections were voiced about using ACRS as a model for 2012, particularly given Israel's refusal to discuss nuclear disarmament in ACRS. The endless engagement and open time frame were cited as negative aspects of ACRS. However one speaker noted that you can't have a timeline for how long it takes to convince elites that nuclear weapons are of no use. Participants disagreed on the scope of the 2012 conference, some saying that it should be broadened to including human security and environmental issues, while others argued that the scope should be deliberately narrow and focused only on nuclear and other WMD. There was agreement however that the process leading to a WMD-free zone would take years, even generations, to conclude. There should be a recognition that there would be hedging by some for a considerable time. It was proposed that there should be rules on hedging, and rewards for renouncing, and that renunciation of hedging should be promoted. External actors, which sponsored the ACRS process, should be facilitators in the case of 2012.

The conference reviewed technical data available via the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organisation which is made available to every state. Israel has a lab, Iran has five monitoring stations, but Egypt and Saudi Arabia have not yet built their monitoring stations. The point was made that science can lead the way on political issues.

The afternoon discussions on political issues proved lively. Panelists addressed such issues as the impact of the Arab Spring on the 2012 conference, the relations between Israel with its Arab neighbors and how concerns can be addressed. Speakers warned that the Arabs would not accept a delay in convening the 2012 conference. One said that the proposal for a WMD-free zone is the only game in town – if 2012 creates momentum, the Arabs would support it, but if not they would go back to the drawing board and therefore the option of proliferation still looms. Also the endgame needs to be defined at the 2012 conference. The Iranian calculation remains unclear regarding 2012. But there was some unease about Iran and Israel setting out conditions for participating in the 2012 conference. One participant said that the Arabs should avoid getting drawn in to persuading both countries to attend, and that this is the job of the facilitator.

Speakers were pessimistic about the future of Israeli-Egyptian relations, with one suggesting a scenario in which Israel would exaggerate the threat from political Islam, would become more isolated regionally, would escalate weaponization, would reject peace talks and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty would become a dead letter in a matter of time. The speaker said that if the treaty dies this would be as a result of

Israeli government policies not because of the Arab Spring. This doomsday scenario, which could lead to a nuclear arms race in particular if Israel confirms its nuclear status, requires agreements on security which can only be provided by a WMD-free zone, the speaker argued. Considering the politics from an Egyptian perspective, there were predictions of a series of short-lived coalition governments in Egypt over the next one or two years because no single political force has a monopoly on power. This will undoubtedly have an effect on foreign policy and arms control. Israel should expect Egyptian authorities to react differently than former President Hosni Mubarak, particularly on Gaza and Sinai. Egypt will also take a different view on the \$1.3 billion in annual US aid to the military which in a decade might be gone. The Egyptian authorities will be looking at domestic alternatives and it is expected that this issue will come up in the forthcoming presidential elections. However it was considered unlikely that the dominant Muslim Brotherhood would take the lead in changing relations with Israel and the US.

As for the effect of the US presidential election on the 2012 conference, it was agreed that if President Obama is reelected, this would be the safest bet for a successful conference held at the end of 2012 after the November 6 elections as there would be little expected change in administration policies.

BASIC wishes to thank the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office for funding this event