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# Egypt, Israel, and the WMDFZ Conference for the Middle East: Setting the Record Straight

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The stark incongruence between the goal of creating a Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East and the somber realities on the ground in this region is primarily responsible for the decision to call off the conference on this topic that was due to take place in 2012 in Helsinki. The mandate for the conference was included in the final document of the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon). While a WMDFZ is a worthy goal, regional conditions in the Middle East are not conducive to its creation, nor currently even to serious discussion of the idea.

Ironically, those who have pushed the hardest for a WMDFZ over the years have unfortunately been the least willing to seriously address the underlying regional security challenges. Since 1995, the WMDFZ agenda has been plagued by cynicism and political tendentiousness on the part of its advocates. This has undercut the salient goal of improving interstate relations in the Middle East through the initiation of regional security dialogue.

Egypt has been the strongest advocate of the WMDFZ idea since its inception in 1990 (by President Hosni Mubarak), and is the party that almost single-handedly forced it onto the international agenda. Egypt claims that the WMDFZ idea has been on the NPT agenda since 1995, and that it is therefore high time to get serious about moving it forward. To those unfamiliar with the history, this might sound quite reasonable; however, for any serious consideration of the future of regional arms control efforts in the Middle East, the record must be set straight about how the WMDFZ idea wound up on the agenda of the NPT in the first place, and what has transpired since.

During the years that the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group was active as part of the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process

(1992–1995), Egypt pressed hard to place the WMDFZ idea squarely on the agenda of the talks, with the explicit aim of pressuring Israel in the nuclear realm. Israel—which felt this agenda was premature, and that discussions on confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) were proceeding in a positive manner in the ACRS talks—strongly opposed the idea. Egypt’s campaign ultimately failed, after which it adopted a decidedly uncooperative attitude toward any further discussion in the context of ACRS. Because of this uncompromising stance, the situation deteriorated, and by the end of 1995 the US had no choice but to postpone the talks indefinitely.<sup>1</sup>

Although the ACRS framework provided the best venue for genuinely advancing regional arms control discussion, Egypt would not let go of the WMDFZ agenda, even at the cost of derailing the talks themselves. The NPT Review and Extension Conference (April–May 1995) presented Egypt with an opportunity to present its case. In the months leading up to the conference—at a time when ACRS was still on track—Egypt spearheaded a determined campaign to press Israel to join the NPT, and convince the other Arab states to withhold their support for indefinite extension of the treaty unless Israel agreed to join. That campaign failed, but Egypt continued to threaten to block consensus for an indefinite extension of the NPT during the conference itself unless a resolution that applied direct pressure on Israel was adopted. In an effort to thwart Egyptian threats but still allow it to save face, the US reluctantly agreed to the inclusion of a special resolution on the Middle East in the final document of that conference, with reference to a Middle East WMDFZ.<sup>2</sup>

In the ensuing years (1995–2000), discussion of how to get the ACRS talks back on track overshadowed the WMDFZ idea, and during the Bush years, Egypt was not able to make any headway in this regard. Its next opportunity to press forward came with the 2010 NPT Review Conference—after Obama had been elected president, and had specifically embraced a nuclear disarmament agenda in his Prague speech of April 2009. Leading the members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Egypt threatened to withhold support for the RevCon final document unless a decision was included to advance the WMDFZ agenda. Obama proved vulnerable to this pressure because of his stated commitment to the global disarmament agenda, and once again Egyptian political leverage vis-à-vis the United States succeeded.

What this brief reminder highlights is that the manner in which Egypt worked to get the WMDFZ idea on an international agenda was hardly conducive to initiating genuine dialogue on improving the security situation in the Middle East. Rather, Egypt was on a campaign to pressure Israel specifically in the nuclear realm. For the sake of its Israel-based agenda, Egypt effectively derailed the very

framework in which the only regional arms control discussion to date was taking place: the ACRS talks. In 2010, Egypt demonstrated that it would go so far as to ignore Iran's dangerous nuclear advances in the 2010 NPT RevCon framework, even though at that time, Mubarak and his foreign minister had been voicing their firm displeasure with Iran's emerging military nuclear capability and intervention in Egypt's internal affairs.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, from the outset, Egypt's mode of operation alienated the US, causing it to be ambivalent and ultimately reluctant about the conference itself. While the US administration could not object to the stated goal of a WMDFZ conference, it displayed no enthusiasm for it. Immediately after the 2010 RevCon, the administration openly reasserted its iron-clad commitments to Israel's security. While Egypt proved capable of forcing an issue onto the agenda, it could not force the US to be a willing partner under these conditions.

Egypt's lack of genuine concern with initiating regional dialogue was underscored at a recent EU-sponsored seminar held in Brussels (November 2012) to discuss the conference idea. Egypt and some additional Arab states boycotted this seminar, ostensibly because they were not consulted on the agenda. The more likely explanation is that the seminar placed too much emphasis (to their minds) on CBMs, and not enough on the NPT framework and on pressuring Israel in the nuclear realm. An additional indication of the lack of true interest in engaging Israel constructively is a recent widely attended Track II conference on the topic organized in an Arab capital—to which Israeli colleagues were not even invited.

The role Iran has played in recent years has only complicated matters as far as the WMDFZ conference is concerned. Iran continues to work to achieve a military nuclear capability and refuses to entertain the idea of speaking to Israel. And yet, it cynically announced its willingness to take part in the WMDFZ conference on the final day of the Brussels seminar in November, a few days before the media report that the conference would be delayed (which Iran most likely knew was coming). Perhaps Iran thought it would impress the P5+1 with its announcement, and at the same time alleviate some of the pressure it was experiencing on the nuclear front. If it ever had to actually go to such a conference, Iran would no doubt join forces with those states focusing on Israel, in an attempt to deflect attention away from its nuclear program.

There are, of course, other problems—the real difficulties currently plaguing a number of states in the region, first and foremost Syria. Damascus has worked on a nuclear program and has amassed chemical weapons that the Assad regime threatened to use over the summer of 2012 against external forces that dared to intervene. Can any progress be made with regard to a WMDFZ discussion in the Middle East while a civil war rages in that country?

Following the decision to call off the WMDFZ conference, officials from Egypt and the Arab League were quick to point a finger at Israel as the only state in the region that had not expressed willingness to take part.<sup>4</sup> At least one Western diplomat, however, was quoted as clarifying that the Arab states “refused to budge” from positions that made it impossible for Israel to attend.<sup>5</sup> Alienating Israel and trying to force its hand, as well as that of the US, cannot serve as a basis for constructive regional dialogue, especially regarding strategic capabilities and threats.

Regional dialogue is no doubt sorely needed in the Middle East—but dialogue that focuses on solving problems endemic to this region, not entrenching and exacerbating them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emily B. Landau, *Arms Control in the Middle East: Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Constraints* (Brighton, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> [www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/GENERAL-DOCS/outcome1995-ME.pdf](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/GENERAL-DOCS/outcome1995-ME.pdf). Significantly, the resolution that passed was a US compromise proposal that specifically tied the WMDFZ idea to the Middle East peace process. For a detailed account, see Gerald M. Steinberg, “Middle East Peace and the NPT Extension Decision,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, (Fall 1996), 17–29, <http://cns.miis.edu/npr/pdfs/steinb41.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Egypt has been persistently focused on Israel’s assumed nuclear capability for years. For an in-depth analysis of how Egypt related to Israel’s nuclear potential from the 1960s to the 1990s, see Ariel Levite and Emily Landau, *Israel’s Nuclear Image: Arab Perceptions of Israel’s Nuclear Posture* (Tel Aviv, 1994) [Hebrew]. For evidence that Egypt continues with this emphasis, and that it was the driving force behind the campaign to place the WMDFZ conference idea on the agenda of the final document of the 2010 RevCon (including attributing to it greater importance than stopping Iran’s nuclear program), see Louis Charbonneau, “Egypt Seeks UN Pressure on Israel over Nuclear Arms,” *Reuters*, April 20, 2010. Egypt continues to raise the issue at different international fora; see, for example, statements by Egypt’s permanent representative to the UN in late 2010: “Egypt accuses Israel of continuous ‘suspicious nuclear activities,’” *Xinhua English News*, November 9, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-11/09/c\\_13597131.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-11/09/c_13597131.htm). The approach of the new Morsi government in Egypt is less clear, and with its energies directed to internal problems, this is not surprising. But there are no indications of a change in Egypt’s approach to Israel in international fora.

<sup>4</sup> Fredrik Dahl, “Iran, Arabs Criticize Delay of Middle East Nuclear Talks,” *Reuters*, November 26, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> George Jahn, “Mideast Nuke Talks Called Off,” *AP*, November 10, 2012.