

Mideast nuclear-free vision turns into a mirage

Proposed conference for this year runs into mysterious opposition.

By:Paul Meyer [The Star – editorial opinion- Nov 28 2012]

The Middle East has been a region of conflict for well over the last half century. For as many decades, there have also been voices calling for the creation of a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

Such zones have been successfully established in other regions of the world such as Latin America and Africa, but they have required the support of all the states in the regions concerned.

Within the context of the [Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT), such zones are seen as advancing the treaty's goal of non-proliferation and have been frequently endorsed at NPT review conferences. The last such conference, in May 2010, took a major step in operationalizing the hitherto purely aspirational goal of establishing a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East.

The 189 states parties of the NPT agreed to hold a conference in 2012 on the subject with the participation of all states of the region and to appoint a “facilitator” to undertake the necessary consultations to this end. Obtaining this outcome had been a primary objective of Egypt and other Arab League states at the review conference and was widely viewed as the price to gain their support for the final document as a whole that required consensus to be adopted.

From the NPT perspective, the Middle East has always been a challenging region. One state, Israel, stands outside the NPT and is considered to possess nuclear weapons. Others — Iraq, Iran and Syria — despite their status of NPT non-nuclear weapon states — have conducted or are suspected of conducting illicit covert nuclear weapon work in the past. To find the common ground that would enable these and the other countries in the region to consider the creation of a zone free of all WMD was an inherently daunting task.

Nevertheless, and conscious of the need to retain the support of key states for the NPT itself, the three depositary states of the treaty — the United States, United Kingdom and Russia — in conjunction with the UN secretary general attempted to get a process going.

Finland was identified as the host government and Helsinki the venue for the 2012 conference. A senior Finnish diplomat, [Jaakko Laajava](#), was appointed “facilitator.” Laajava promptly launched a series of consultations with the concerned parties and by the time of a NPT meeting this May was able to provide a moderately upbeat report on his progress to date. At the same time, Laajava made it clear that while none of the parties had said “no,” they hadn't all said “yes” either, and that all the key points of agenda, program and participation remained to be determined.

In the view of many, the chief question was whether Israel or Iran would be willing to attend a conference at which their nuclear programs would come under scrutiny. Iran, after some posturing, announced earlier this month that it was prepared to participate at the Helsinki conference. Israel remained silent about its intentions, but on Nov. 24, the four convenors of the conference issued separate press releases indicating that the conference would not take place in 2012 as foreseen. In comparing the texts however, differences are apparent in how each of these powers is now interpreting the effort.

The Russian statement is critical of the postponement decision and suggests it could only have been justified if all states had agreed to participate at the later date. New dates should be fixed now and no later than next April.

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called for renewed consultations by the facilitator “to allow the conference to be held in early 2013.”

The United Kingdom also backs further efforts by the facilitator in order to “agree arrangements for a conference in 2013.”

The U.S. statement, in contrast, fails to set any timeframe for the conference and, while encouraging states to “take a fresh look at the obstacles standing in the way of convening a conference,” warns that the United States “would not support a conference in which any regional state would be subject to pressure or isolation.”

Continued turmoil in the region does not augur well for ironing out the remaining differences over this project. It is possible that Washington agreed not to press Israel to participate in the Helsinki conference as part of the diplomacy that resulted in the recent cease fire agreement for Gaza.

In any case, the fact that the four convenors could not agree on a common statement on the “postponement” of the conference reveals the lack of unity in their approach and will make the hapless task of the Finnish facilitator all that more trying.

The implications for the NPT’s integrity of a failure to hold the promised conference can’t be assessed at this stage, but are bound to be negative.

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