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## **NPT RevCon 2010: Implications for the Middle East**

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**I**t may be recalled that one major pillar on which the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), especially the Arab countries led by Egypt, had agreed to the indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT in 1995, was the adoption of the Middle East Resolution. Co-sponsored by Russia, the UK and the US, the Resolution had promised to find a solution to the problem of nuclear weapons as well as that of other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East. Although Israel was not named in the Resolution, the basic understanding was for the sponsor nations to find a way to get Israel to give up its nuclear weapons capability and join the NPT as a NNWS. The Resolution, rather unimaginatively, had called upon 'all States of the Middle East that have not yet done so, without exception, to accede to the Treaty as soon as possible and to place their nuclear facilities under full-scope International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards'. However, scant attention was paid to this Resolution after the end of the 1995 NPT Review Conference (RevCon), while it failed to attract any attention at the NPT RevCons in 2000 and 2005.

In fact, the 2005 RevCon ended in disarray since most of the conference time was devoted to sorting out procedural matters and little could be achieved on substantive issues. As a result of this experience, the pressure on the 2010 RevCon was palpable to ensure that it ended with

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something to show for. Sentiments to this effect were voiced by Egypt on behalf of the Middle Eastern countries in March 2010 at an event to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NPT. Hisham Badr, Egypt's Ambassador to the UN in Geneva, said, 'We in the Middle East feel... tricked into giving concessions for promises that never materialized.'<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, there was an underlying sense of urgency to achieve something tangible in the 2010 RevCon, especially on the Middle East issue. In fact, it was made amply apparent by Egypt that the inability of the Conference to register some progress on this issue would result in the collapse of the RevCon.

## Business at RevCon

Fortunately for the 2010 RevCon, it could get straight down to business since the procedural issues had been sorted out during the third Preparatory Committee Meeting in 2009. The task of debating 'regional issues, including with respect to the Middle East and implementation of the 1995 Middle East resolution', and coming up with suggestions and recommendations was entrusted to the Main Committee II, which further created a Subsidiary Body to examine it. Its meetings were held in private and negotiations continued right into the final week of the conference. The final output from this exercise was included in the last section of Part II (Conclusions and Recommendations) of the RevCon Final Document.<sup>2</sup>

The contents of the section on Middle East are noteworthy for several reasons. Reaffirming the importance of the 1995 Resolution and regretting the lack of progress on its implementation, the Conference made two significant recommendations. Firstly, it called upon the UN Secretary General and co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution to convene a conference of all the Middle Eastern countries in 2012; the conference would deliberate on the modalities for creation of a Middle East zone, which is free of WMD and their delivery systems. The terms of reference for the conference are to be derived from the 1995 Resolution and the UN Secretary General and co-sponsors of the Resolution have been tasked to identify a host nation for the conference and appoint a facilitator to support the implementation of the resolution. Progress made at this event is to be reported at the 2015 RevCon. Secondly, the conference also calls upon the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and other relevant organizations to prepare background documentation for 2012, detailing the modalities for the regional WMD-free zone.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Egypt Says Nuclear Treaty 'A Trick'', *Al-Jazeera*, 10 March 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast>

<sup>2</sup> The full text of the final document of *2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* is available at: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20%28VOL.I%29](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20%28VOL.I%29)

However, despite its forward-looking stance, the idea of organizing the envisaged conference in 2012 could flounder over some very basic issues of the language used in the Document. For instance, paragraph 5 of the section on the Middle East recalls '*the importance of Israel's accession to the Treaty*'. This language was included despite American reservations. Meanwhile, in stark contrast with this singling out of Israel by name is the next paragraph that stresses '*the necessity of strict adherence by all States parties to their obligations and commitments under the Treaty*'. While in this case the reference is clearly to Iran, Tehran managed to keep its name out. This has obviously not gone down well with Israel and not surprisingly, the press has decried the US for having 'sacrificed' Israel at the altar of the NPT RevCon. Indeed the US might have felt compelled to accept this wording in order to keep Iran and/or Egypt from taking the RevCon down the slippery slope of failure because had they not been appeased; they had the ability to block consensus on the Final Document. Israel, nevertheless, has openly expressed its unhappiness over the issue and indicated its dismissal of the call for the conference.

## The Problem

The task ahead cannot be expected to be easy since the Middle East conundrum is made up of many different and difficult types of issues. The first of these is the need for a general understanding that the goal of ridding the region of WMD and its delivery systems cannot be undertaken in isolation from a regional peace process. Unless the threat perceptions of the nations involved are adequately addressed, and in the case of Israel and Palestinian territories these are existential concerns, the chances of resolving the nuclear imbroglio are extremely remote. Even though Israel has never officially claimed or owned up to a nuclear weapons capability, the fact that it has one is not a secret. And, it would be naïve to expect Israel to negotiate away its nuclear capability without finding an agreeable solution to its legitimate acceptance as a state.

Israel's inflexibility on its nuclear capability leads to the second challenge that the region faces. The presence of nuclear weapons in Israel obviously raises threat perceptions in other nations of the region, planting thereby the motivation for nuclear proliferation. Iran, therefore, claims a threat from Israel, even if the actual motivations for its nuclear ambitions might be for various other reasons, such as the US, the Sunni Arab world, or a matter of prestige. In any case, the rancorous relationship between Israel and Iran is well known. Iran's pursuit of an alleged nuclear weapons capability, in turn, raises the spectre of others in the region, most notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, being tempted to look for ways of travelling down the same path themselves. In fact, it is no coincidence that many countries of the region (members of the Gulf Cooperation Council most notably) have expressed interest, in recent times, to develop national nuclear programmes for peaceful use of nuclear energy. Given the inherently dual nature of nuclear technology, the risks of proliferation can never be dismissed. Thirdly, the presence of the US in the region, in support of some states, and stridently against another, does little to ease threat perceptions or reduce the attractiveness of nuclear weapons as a strategic equalizer.

Given this complex nuclear cauldron in the Middle East, what is the significance of the recommendations made at the 2010 NPT RevCon? What are the chances of successfully achieving a WMD-free zone in the Middle East? Does the Final Document have the capacity to bring about substantive change in the region? Unfortunately, there are no easy or quick ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers to these questions. At this stage, these can only be speculated upon on the basis of an understanding of the political dynamics of the different players involved.

## The Promise

**B**efore exploring the chances of success of a Middle East conference, it must first be conceded that the very fact that such a decision could be consensually taken at the RevCon given the rigid positions of the US, Iran, and Egypt (on behalf of the Arab group) on the subject is in some sense a success of sorts. Egypt was the prime mover behind this decision. The US and Iran, despite their reservations, for different reasons and on different issues, decided to adopt a flexible stance and keep their peace. While the US was keen to ensure a consensus document from the RevCon, Iran was happy to have managed to keep itself from being named in it.

The recommendations made at the RevCon have been hailed by the other NNWS, as holding the promise of taking the region forward towards peace. The US, however, immediately after the conclusion of the RevCon, was quick to inject a note of caution that the proposed conference in 2012 might not be an easy proposition. This was so because by insisting on naming Israel in the Final Document, the participants had diminished American leverage over Israeli government. This, the US representative expressed, had jeopardized the chances of success of the conference since Israel had already conveyed its sense of betrayal to the US government.

Indeed, the idea of convening such a conference with the participation of all the stakeholders throws up the challenge of how countries that have not even accepted each other as sovereign nations can be expected to sit with one another across the table. For instance, Iran, Lebanon, and Syria do not recognize the nationhood of Israel. Therefore, in case the representatives of these countries were to agree to negotiate, it would amount to a tacit recognition of the Israeli state. The coming together of different nationalities of the region, therefore, would call for opening of minds to new ideas and possibilities.

Officially, and as an immediate response to the announcement of the Final Document, Israel has rejected the call for the conference. However, its press has called for a more considered response to the initiative.<sup>3</sup> Examined objectively, Israel could respond to the call for the conference in many ways. For one, it could ask the US to block the very convening of the event in 2012; this should not be too difficult if the US also wanted to do so, as the US government has looked after Israeli interests in the past. But, this cannot be taken as a given since a change in the

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<sup>3</sup> For instance see ‘The Way out of Isolation’, Editorial, *Ha’aretz*, 31 May 2010

contemporary context is brought about since US President Barack Obama took office. Obama's personal desire to seriously and sincerely seek a workable compromise to the Middle Eastern problem might be able to convince Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu to give the initiative a chance.

Secondly, if it were unconvinced of the prudence of the US push, Israel could refuse to participate in the conference or attach certain unacceptable conditionalities to its participation. This would obviously kill the idea of the conference since without Israel's presence and participation, the meeting would be meaningless. Such a move by Israel would, of course, make it the target of international criticism. But then that has never been known to deter the Israeli government.

As a third option, Israel could choose to attend the conference in good faith. In fact, as some analysts have pointed out Israel's standing position clearly supports the vision of an arms-control process leading to the establishment of a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (MEWMDFZ).<sup>4</sup> Seen from this perspective, Israel could discern in this event an opportunity to end its international nuclear isolation and to weave its way constructively into the region. An Israeli decision to take this step might also be influenced by its consideration of how far or close it feels Iran is to a nuclear weapons capability. Rather than having its nuclear monopoly in the region broken and freezing itself into a relationship that would have a negative impact on its nuclear deterrent, Israel could see better sense in redressing its threat perceptions through meaningful negotiations and incremental confidence building. Ironically, Iran can also be expected to maintain a constructive attitude in the Conference for the same reasons of overcoming its isolation.

## Conclusion

However, for this to happen, entrenched mindsets and vested interests that have long dominated the thinking in the region would have to give way to fresh ideas. The realist school of thought would be highly sceptical, if not outrightly dismissive, of the possibility of any change in the situation given their belief that every nation seeks its national interest above everything else. However, it cannot be ignored that the NPT RevCon might have opened a window of opportunity for the Middle East.

The complexity of the problem at hand is undeniable. But, statesmanlike vision by major players and a flexibility of approach could bring in the winds of change. Of course, this would call for the sincere participation of all states as well as the parallel processing of issues related to peace and arms control. The stakes are high for all the states in the region and it should be expected

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<sup>4</sup> Dominic Moran, 'Israel's Nuke Talk Jitters', *ISN Security Watch*, 31 May 2010, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&id=116690>

that they would rather make all efforts to ensure success of the Conference, even if it is only an agreement to meet again for further discussions, than face the prospect of confrontation between regional nuclear powers at some point in the future.

Meanwhile, the larger international community must also express its support for all the initiatives and cheer the participants as they precede step by step. Obama, of course, has a lifetime opportunity to justify his Nobel Peace Prize in case he could gain some tangibles in the Middle East. His task would include not only getting the protagonists together to convene for the conference, but also to motivate or incentivise them to approach it with a constructive mindset to get something really worthwhile in terms of resolving the long standing issues of the Middle East. The process will have to be long and arduous and the agenda will have to be broader than only the WMD concerns. Issues such as settlement of long-standing territorial disputes as well as Israel's recognition will have to be simultaneously addressed. Regional peace and disarmament can only walk into the region hand in hand as confidence makes way across difficult terrain.

Will that happen? Will the states in the region use this opportunity to achieve a meaningful breakthrough or to continue with the old game of politics? The coming few months will show whether the decision at the RevCon turns out to be as momentous as it has the potential to be.

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