

Talking About a Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East

by Hillel Schenker*

While all eyes are focused on Libya, Syria and other regional venues of political drama, Israelis have probably forgotten - if they were ever aware - that, at last May's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, it was resolved that in 2012 an international conference would be convened to discuss "the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by the States of the region, and with the full support and engagement of the nuclear-weapon States." The resolution also called upon Israel to sign the NPT and open its nuclear installations to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The 2012 conference, which is to be organized by the secretary-general of the United Nations, the United States, United Kingdom and the Russian Federation, was the subject of a three-day conference held recently on the Japanese Peace Boat - a unique Japanese NGO based on an ocean liner.

Given that their country is the only one to have suffered a nuclear strike, the Japanese are particularly sensitive about this topic, and the current mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been at the forefront of activity to promote a nuclear-weapons-free world.

With their thoughts on the Fukushima reactor and their families back home, the Japanese arrived in the Mediterranean Sea in mid-March to convene an onboard conference with civil-society representatives from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and India, as well as leaders of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (winners of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize) from Greece and Switzerland, and the UN.

Of particular interest were the participation of Dr. Mohamed Shaker, a longtime diplomat who is today chairman of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, and former Egyptian ambassador to the U.S. and arms control negotiator Dr. Nabil Fahmy; former Indian navy chief Adm. Ramu Ramdas; and Dr. Randy Rydell, a senior official at the UN Office of the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

The most serious prior attempt to confront the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East took place between 1992 and 1995, when 14 regional actors participated in the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group talks, in the wake of the Madrid peace conference. The primary reason for the collapse of those talks was a fundamental disagreement between the Egyptians and the Israelis about priorities. The Egyptians said the creation of a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone was the first order of business, while the Israeli delegation insisted that comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace was the precondition for such a zone. That is still the Israeli policy. It is also clear that the Israeli government is not ready to change its current policy of nuclear ambiguity, and that it will not sign the NPT or open its nuclear installations to international inspection at this time.

However, this doesn't mean that nothing can be done. A tool exists today that didn't exist at the time of the ACRS talks - the Arab Peace Initiative (sometimes known as the Saudi Initiative). The API, which was signed by 22 Arab states and supported by 57 Muslim countries, including Iran, expresses a general Arab and Muslim readiness to recognize and establish normal relations with the State of Israel, based on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, alongside Israel.

Originally passed at the 2002 Beirut Arab League Summit Conference, the API was reaffirmed at the 2007 Riyadh Summit.

Although it doesn't mention the nuclear question or weapons of mass destruction, the API can be a framework for a parallel two-track discussion. One track would discuss methods of moving toward Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab comprehensive peace, while the second would discuss ways of advancing a Middle Eastern security regime, which would include a nuclear- and WMD-free zone. This would be the way of getting beyond the Egyptian-Israeli bind of which comes first, the chicken or the egg.

I was particularly impressed by the fact that one of the Egyptian representatives aboard the Japanese Peace Boat said that she is very aware of Israel's security concerns and that the proposals must be framed to take them into account. Everyone agreed that for the 2012 conference to have any chance of success, a formula has to be found to ensure that both Israel and Iran would participate in it. An Iranian was invited and agreed to participate in the meeting at sea, but due to bureaucratic problems, was unable to attend.

The 2012 conference will not have the unrealistic goal of producing a treaty, but rather of discussing the dynamics of how to make progress toward a nuclear- and WMD-free zone, while also relating to the need to progress toward comprehensive peace in the region.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will soon appoint an envoy, who will consult with all of the states in the region about how to prepare for conference, meet with both government and civil society representatives, and discuss a proposed venue.

Since the Israeli government has not said it would attend, but has left the door open, now is the time to brainstorm and develop innovative ideas which will provide constructive input to the process of creating a successful conference in 2012.

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This originally appeared in the Op-Ed section of Haaretz under the title "Setting Sights on 2012"