

Minutes¹ of the Lunch discussion
Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East
30 May 2011, FES, Berlin

What are the prospects for a Zone free of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East?

This question was at the focus of a lively debate that took place during a lunch discussion organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Berlin with experts from the region as well as German experts and politicians.

Core Issues of the Presentations

The discussion on establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East already has a long history, reaching back to the 1970s. With the outcome of the NPT review conference of 2010 however, it was decided that a conference on this issue should be held in 2012. Yet, until the day of the discussion (May 30th, 2011) neither a host country for this conference nor a suitable mediator had been agreed upon and prospects for meaningful progress with regard to these two aspects remained dim. A particular question referred to in the discussion was, whether the current changes in the Middle East would have an impact (and if so what sort of) on the prospects of these efforts: The diminishing power of the US to shape Middle Eastern policies; the new regional role of Iran and Turkey; and first and foremost the revolutionary changes in Egypt and Tunisia and the unrest in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

It was stated that at the moment there is significant uncertainty concerning future developments – with uncertainty not being conducive to a trust-demanding endeavor such as negotiating a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli relations, on the one hand the Arab Spring represents high hopes for regional peace in the long run but on the other hand expectations for short-term progress are rather limited with a stronger focus on associated risks.

With regard to the planned conference on a Zone free of WMD in the Middle East in 2012, the participants expressed mixed expectations. While it was emphasized that a good preparation was crucial for the success of such conference, it was stated that Israel – believed to be the only undeclared nuclear power in the Middle East and not having ratified the NPT – probably would, at this time of uncertainty, not be willing to join such effort if it took place in a NPT-context.

Points of Discussion

This left the debate with the known dilemma: Do we need regional stability first in order to achieve an agreement on a WMD free Zone in the Middle East, or do we need such an agreement on disarmament first in order to achieve regional peace and stability?

In light of the fact that proliferation of WMD is not only an upcoming threat but an already ongoing process, efforts should be made to pursue a policy of détente. Without confidence-building measures, no substantial progress is likely to be achieved. Supporting the democratic developments in the Arab world therefore seems as important as the repeated commitment to regional peace and stability.

¹ The discussion has been held under Chatham House Rule which means that arguments are not attributed. The summary therefore merely reflects mayor points of the discussion from the perspective of FES.

At the same time the issue of double standards received considerable attention in the discussion. In particular, the highly counterproductive influence of related extra-regional developments like the U.S.-India nuclear deal was emphasized. In the recent past this process and the intervention in Libya – which had halted its WMD-programs not even one decade ago – rather seem to reemphasize the disquieting rationale to keep WMDs in general and nuclear weapons in particular. The progress of the Iranian nuclear program additionally adds to a regional environment that seems to be suggesting a need to (i) either pursue own WMD-ambitions – or at least retain corresponding options close to a threshold capability – (ii) to increase conventional deterrents or (iii) to team-up with strong extra-regional powers like the US.

Recommendations

Against this background, avoiding a failure and breakdown of the process should be the priority concern for short-term efforts to pursue the mandate of the NPT review of 2010. To this end, realistic expectation management is the key. It would suggest trying to find a way of holding such a conference – to keep the process going – without expecting substantial progress already for 2012. To achieve this minimal aim, it became evident that first and foremost there is a need to identify and acknowledge clearly the differences in expectations of relevant regional actors.

Concrete efforts should be made to find a venue and a facilitator for the conference in 2012. Whether this conference is supposed to take place within the framework of the NPT or not remains a contentious issue that needs to be discussed further, as well as the selection of participating countries for such conference. In addition to holding the conference itself, a serious and systematic recap of valuable experiences and results from past negotiation processes in the region – like ACRS – and from other regions was called for during the discussion. Efforts already under way in that field, like the Monterrey Institute's Lessons Learnt Process should be supported and referred to, for example in the context of the European Seminar. Furthermore, the experiences with the biological and chemical weapons conventions should be reconsidered in this context. Logical first steps on the way to a WMD free zone which were brought up during the discussion were a commitment to a policy of no armed aggression and peaceful settlement of disputes (along the Helsinki final act model) as well as a policy of no-first-use. Both of these policies – possibly coupled – would make the logic of keeping or acquiring weapons of mass destruction less compelling, especially against the background of the costs they entail.

Yet, it was also stated that one core problem is, that the basis to pursue such negotiations today is less conducive than it used to be. In the new generations of diplomats and experts from the region, the value and logic of disarmament and arms control diplomacy is far less widespread than it used to be. Against this background, efforts were encouraged to contribute to the emergence of a new epistemic community from across and beyond the region to lay the basis for mid-term progress with regard to disarmament and arms control in the region. It was also considered to broaden the corresponding debate beyond issues of WMD towards a broader process of arms control related confidence building measures, as used to be the starting point for the CSCE in the last century for Europe.

Extra-regional actors like the EU can play a conducive role, as it did in the Quartet. Yet, also other relevant external actors like China should be enlisted in the regional non-proliferation and disarmament efforts.