

An Iranian Perspective on a Nuclear Free Zone (NFZ) in the Middle East

*By Nasser Saghafi-Ameri**

With a regional conference that is scheduled to be held in 2012 on the establishment of a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East, all concerned parties are busy for the preparation of that event. At the official level, there are some positive argumentations in the West for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East at a time that the threat of war by Israel against Iran looms on the horizon. Thus, NFZ looks as a better alternative to a military option to everyone, except perhaps some Israeli officials and their supporters in the US.

Cognizant of the fact that any initiation that would lead to a world free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is valuable and welcomed by everyone who is committed to the world peace; the success of the forthcoming conference very much depends on a realistic approach and understanding the real challenges ahead.

In the analysis of future negotiations for the establishment of NFZ or WMDFZ, the following points might be relevant:

The scope of the plan

The geostrategic context of the proposal for NFZ in the Middle East since 1974 has dramatically changed. During that period, a bi-polar system dominated the international system. And, consequently the boundaries of the Middle East were defined according to the rules of a global bi-polarity. After a period of more than two decades since the end of the Cold War, the question still remains about the boundaries of the new Middle East. After the events of 9/11 and following the military intervention of the US and its allies in Afghanistan, and later extension of their military campaign to Pakistan, there were some suggestions that Pakistan and Afghanistan have to be considered as part of the new Middle East. That proposal is just one of many indications that perhaps a new criterion regarding the boundaries of the new Middle East at least in the nuclear domain is needed.

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Extension of the agenda

The idea of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East was first proposed by Iran and co-sponsored by Egypt in 1974. Since then, a variant of thinking for the establishment of a NFZ in the Middle East has been introduced. Most important, is the 1995 NPT Review Conference that extended the domain of the NWZ to all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), namely, biological and chemical weapons. The proposal was made by the Arab countries in which Egypt had the leading role. By extending the mandate of the Conference and to include Chemical, Biological and the WMD delivery systems in the agenda, in reality and in practical terms, the process became more complicated with the tradeoffs involved. With that decision, the prospect of NWZ became even more elusive than before.

The motives of Mubarak's Egypt and other Arab countries that supported this proposal is not easy to grasp; since it was Israel that to evade pressure regarding its nuclear weapons, insisted on a linkage between its own nuclear arsenal and other weapons of mass destruction, particularly chemical weapons that it claimed some Arab countries (specifically Egypt and Syria) possessed, and could be the main benefactor of that proposal.

At the same time, disarmament of the other two categories of weapons of mass destruction, namely biological and chemical weapons were taking their own independent process in their respective international organizations. The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) came into force in 1975, and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) came into force in 1997. Moreover, the NFZ is directly linked to the NPT that deals with the nuclear weapons with all its complexities. Thus, inclusion of other categories of weaponry and especially their delivery vehicles could lessen the focus on the nuclear weapons, and make the realization of the NFZ more elusive. The inclusion of delivery vehicles in the agenda of the conference poses open ended discussions and great challenge for reaching an agreement, since there is a wide range of delivery systems with probable applications for delivering WMDs; that includes simple hand held weapons to sophisticated war planes and submarines that could be deployed for launching WMDs. Perhaps the main intention of the initiators of that proposal was to put a ban or restrictions on missile systems in the pretext of nonproliferation! Any way, if that would be the intention, it hardly would serve any purpose since certain countries like Iran have based part of their

defense systems on missiles for deterrence against potential threats of WMDs that they have denounced it in their military doctrines.

Geopolitical changes

With the Arab Spring in full swing, the geopolitical setting of the Middle East is apt to change dramatically. One major change in the Arab world and its leadership is occurring in Egypt. In every assessment, the new Egypt is not going to resemble with the Egypt of Mubarak's era. A sign of an early change in Egypt came in 2010 NPT Review Conference when Egypt took a leading role among other Arab states, for pressuring the US to accept the commitment to a conference in 2012 on the establishment of a Middle East WMD free-zone, with a specific reference to Israel. That move was in direct contrast to Egypt's policy in 1995 when it convinced the Arab countries to sign the NPT indefinite extension, presumably in exchange for a Middle East resolution a la Camp David.

Turkey is also thriving to have a greater role in the new Middle East. Turkey aspires to be a model for Arab countries that are experiencing revolutionary changes in the context of the Arab Spring. Turkey's Foreign Affairs Minister Davutoğlu says: "We will direct the winds of change. We have a vision of a new Middle East and Turkey will lead this new order of peace." Turkey's thrust for preeminence in the region is of course not without costs and challenges. On the nuclear free zone issue, Turkey has to come clear of its stand on the US nuclear weapons stationed on its soil. That question becomes more precarious, considering the tension in Turkey – Israel relations following the attack of Israelis against a Turkish ship in the Mediterranean Sea and killing of nine Turkish citizens, including one with dual American citizenship. Also a more active role by Turkey in the NFZ or WMDFZ plan is expected, while that country has the intention to launch an extensive nuclear energy program.

Israeli confrontation with Iran

Israel, which is not a member of the NPT and is in the possession of 200 plus nuclear weapons, has consistently taken the position over the years that a complete peace involving the region must precede any prohibition directed at the possession of nuclear weapons. To avoid any blame, Israel has adopted the policy of ambiguity on its nuclear arsenal that it obtained with the complicity of the West as documented in Seymour Hersh's 1991 'The Samson Option'. In recent years, Israel

has been involved in a dirty covert war against Iran with the backing of the United States in a destabilization program of Iran that is funded by the US Congress. That is while, Iran's enrichment activities, as its other nuclear programs, are under the supervision and safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran has consistently denied any ambition to acquire nuclear weapons, but has insisted on its rights under Article IV of the treaty to exercise "...its inalienable right...to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination..." Iran's current enrichment program is at the level of 3.5% and some to 20% for the medical research and pharmaceutical isotopes, and that is far less than 95% required for nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Israel is currently under the nuclear umbrella of the US, so even a remote chance that Iran would attack Israel is none. Nevertheless, it seems that Israel finds it convenient to identify Iran's nuclear program as a threat to its existence, apparently in an attempt to avert international pressures regarding its systematic infringement of the rights of the Palestinians; and more importantly to divert attentions from its nuclear arsenal that poses a threat to the region and beyond.

Non –Weapon Nuclear States

Iran as a founding member of the NPT and the first country, who called for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East since 1974, has always been a faithful member of the NPT. Witnessing mounting pressure against Iran's peaceful nuclear program that is under the supervision of the IAEA; while at the same time Israel as a non member to the NPT, enjoys a freehand in acquiring and stockpiling its nuclear weapons, has puzzled many experts , regarding Iran's position not to freed itself from the obligations of the NPT by exercising its option to withdraw from the treaty, since it is entitled to do so by Article X of the Treaty, simply by providing a notice to other treaty parties and an explanation of its reasons for withdrawal.

Despite that, and while Israel is given a free hand as a non member of the NPT to pose military threats against a NPT member, Iran has resisted the urge to abandon the NPT for the good of the peace. Iran has resisted all pressures and allegations regarding its nuclear program to prove to the world its peaceful intention and to become a model as a Non- Weapon Nuclear State (NWNS). Indeed with its perseverance and dedication, Iran has achieved nuclear capability and as declared to be used solely for peaceful purposes. With growing number of countries that have the necessary industry and technological capabilities to develop their indigenous

nuclear industry, the model of NWNS becomes more attractive and is apt to provide a brighter prospect for establishment of NFZ in the Middle East and other regions.

Nuclear disarmament

No one can deny that the first step toward the establishment of a nuclear free zone would be the elimination of existing nuclear weapons from the region. In what can be interpreted as a policy to appease Israel, most western countries and their institutions, fail or ignore or to address this critical parameter, namely Israel's existing two hundred plus nuclear weapons. The next category of nuclear weapons in the Middle East belongs to the so-called 'Nuclear Weapon States'. These weapons are mostly on board the warships in the Persian Gulf and other surrounding areas. Of course, the existing nuclear weapons in Turkey as part of NATO's nuclear sharing policy are another contending issue that needs to be addressed when attempts are made to clean the region from nuclear weapons.

Another related question is how much the nuclear weapon states are willing to commit themselves to a comprehensive nuclear disarmament, and in honoring the rights of non nuclear weapon states member of the NPT to live peacefully with a guarantee that they would not be threatened by nuclear weapons. In other words, are the NWS willing to give to NNWS the much advocated negative assurances? Finally, it should be pointed out that any nuclear disarmament effort, including a WMDFZM could not take place in vacuum and needs to be supported by the notion of comprehensive nuclear disarmament.

It is sad and disappointing to witness that while twenty two years has elapsed since the end of the Cold War, the same language is prevalent in the discourse of nuclear weapons between nuclear weapon states. What is puzzling for the people in the Middle East as elsewhere in the world is why nuclear weapon states do not practice what they preach and take a step back and think about a Europe without the weapons of mass destruction? After all, it is Europe that is more infested and still targeted with all types of nuclear weapons. The danger becomes even more acute when we remember that the two most devastating wars in the history of mankind were fought on the continent of Europe, and one wonders why not a decisive action is absent in this regard.

Conclusion

The idea of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East is to be considered as a part of an overall effort in realization of a world free of weapons of mass destruction.

As such, there should be a general undertaking by countries that possess these weapons to abandon these weapons in a defined timeframe. Otherwise, if nuclear weapon states continue to drag their feet for realization of a comprehensive nuclear disarmament, as they did during the past decades, and worst if they would insist on modernizing and using them for threat against other nations, there would be little to no chance for a nuclear free zone in a volatile region of the Middle East. In the same vein, while there are Israeli nuclear weapons in the region and that country refuses to join the NPT or to commit itself to any nuclear disarmament, it is hard to imagine any breakthrough in the negotiations for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East.

Despite that pessimistic scenario, the geopolitical changes in the Middle East that bring Turkey and Egypt with Iran as most powerful and influential centers in the region, while first two countries aspire to become non weapon nuclear state (NWNS) like Iran, could dramatically change the scene; compelling Israel to give-up its nuclear weapons for a safer environment, without risking to have nuclear weapons at its doorstep. Anyhow, Israel has always enjoyed the security protection of the United States, and its present nuclear arsenal has nothing much for its security and has been used mostly in the past as a tool for its intimidation policies. Thus, by making Israel to give-up its nuclear weapons, a major step is taken toward the NFZ and eventually for the WMDFZ plan.

Iran's Nuclear Talks in Moscow: The Need for 'Win-Win' Approach

*By Nasser Saghafi-Ameri**

While an air of optimism prevailed in the new round of talks that began in April between Iran and the six major powers (China, Russia, US, France, UK, and Germany), known as 5+1 in the Istanbul- II meeting, the follow- up meeting in Baghdad in May did not meet the expectations, and the meeting in Moscow in June was even more disappointing for reaching an agreement in these talks. From Iranian perspective, the West is now backtracking what was principally agreed before and during the Istanbul-II meeting for finding a 'win-win ' solution to this issue, which meant acceptance by the West of Iran's right for production of nuclear fuel for reactors, and Iran providing the necessary guarantees that its nuclear program would not be diverted to weapons production. During the Istanbul-II meeting the six major powers agreed that negotiations would be conducted within the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); that supports Iran's demand for the right to enrich uranium in accordance with the Treaty. They even agreed on Iran's demand that the next meeting be held in Baghdad.

But, the second round of talks in Baghdad in May ended bitterly, as the P5+1 insisted that Iran halt all levels of enrichment, and offered no sanctions relief, which Tehran expected as a minimal in reaching a comprehensive accord. After that, some blamed Israel's lobby for pressuring Obama administration while the competition between Democrats and Republicans in the election year in the US is going on. Thus, the idea of finding a win-win solution soon lost its track; at least for the time being and before the Presidential elections in America. Apparently, since pronouncement of total failure of the talks would have caused panic in oil markets with a sharp surge in oil prices, the door was kept open for future talks at the experts' level in Istanbul on July 3rd.

The present stalemate in talks is viewed differently from Western capitals and Tehran. The West believes the sanctions are hitting Iran hard and time is on their side while they are not prepared to engage Iran for a comprehensive agreement. Apparently, after the Istanbul-II, they have come to a conclusion that accepting Iran's right for enrichment, at any level, even at low levels would undermine the system of sanctions that they have vigorously imposed; and by that they would be losing the chance later to pressure Iran for limiting its nuclear ambitions; or to extract concessions from Iran in the regional geopolitical scene. However, this policy seems to be facing two major challenges. First there is a fear that by increasing belligerencies against Iran through new sanctions it might snowball into a military clash or a full scale war. Second is the risk that hawks in Israel might be tempted to take advantage of the present stalemate to launch an attack against Iran with the aim of dragging the US yet into another war.

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From the Iranian perspective, it has a treaty right in the NPT to master the nuclear fuel cycle under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Thus, it considers the UN Security Council resolutions that the West has sponsored to override that treaty right as illegal. Based on that view point, it is obvious that going back to the same cliché and asking Iran to forgo its right for enrichment would be a non-starter in any future negotiations. Iran says that imposing additional restrictions or limitations on an NPT-signatory's rights by raising demands that goes beyond commitments in the NPT, will have negative effects on this fragile Treaty. To be spared of the continuing harassments that is facing now in the name of the NPT, it would not be inconceivable that at some point Iran might consider abandoning the NPT; although remaining committed to the principles of non proliferation.

Also in analyzing the present dilemma, one should not lose the sight of the fact that "Iran's nuclear issue" originates from a hostile relationship that has existed between Iran and the US during the past 33 years. Many people are now of the opinion that nuclear is not the core of the crisis, but rather the question is about mistrust in the US-Iran relations. The problem has become even more complicated when the US apparently in an attempt to overwhelm Iran's emerging role in the region, initiated to build a consensus among major powers against Iran's nuclear program that is now in the form of 5+1. The said powers, besides their mutual goal to cap Iran's nuclear program, are now having their own agendas that might not concur with the policies regarding the rapprochement between Iran and the US. Meantime, it is important to keep in mind that seeking a solution for this question is not possible without the US readiness for finding a lasting solution for its relations with Iran through diplomacy and dialogue. That is a critical and necessary decision to be taken by the US administration while there are drum beats of war coming from Neocon- Zionist circles calling Iran's nuclear program as an existential threat to Israel. Of course, their claims are refuted in the published reports by the former and present intelligence officials in both the US and Israel. However, the risk of a mistaken military clash that could burst into a full scale war calls for precautionary measures to be taken by all sides involved. Under these circumstances, going back to the negotiation table with a "win-win" approach on the principle of reciprocity, and of course within the context of the NPT, seems to be the best reasonable option available.