



British American Security  
Information Council



Collaborative briefing involving Israeli and international civil society

# Belief in the WMD Free Zone

## Designing the corridor to Helsinki and beyond

### Introduction

This is a briefing arising out of a unique process conducted in Israel in November 2013, involving International and Israeli civil society, think tanks and government representatives. This document does not represent these groups, nor does it seek to preach, or to offer a single, superior alternative path... but highlight the problem themes, chart many of the obstacles, search for ways around those obstacles and find common interests involved, and suggest modifications to the approaches taken by the parties.

We believe that all involved have clear explicable reasons for their current positions, and that all are, to a greater or lesser extent, trapped by their histories, narratives and positions, not least as a result of a deep distrust and attachment to the desire to be strong in the face of opposition. We also believe that this is not a binary choice between strong and weak, collaborative and confrontational. Rather, the effort not only to understand the interests and positions of other parties, but also the attempt to reflect back our understanding of those positions and to absorb those interests into our own proposals, is essential to the success of international negotiations, and to avoiding further deterioration in the strategic security of all parties in the region.

There is a window of opportunity here beyond the implied political pressure associated with the NPT. The recent success in the United States and Russia collaborating to deal with Syria's chemical weapons offers hope. Other states can also reconsider their options towards WMD control in the region, whether by joining existing global institutions or by setting up new regional ones. These two are not necessarily in competition, and both have building blocks to offer.



*This briefing and associated activities were made possible by  
financial support from **Green Cross Switzerland***

[www.gcint.org/](http://www.gcint.org/) [www.basicint.org/](http://www.basicint.org/) [www.ikvpaxchristi.nl/](http://www.ikvpaxchristi.nl/) [www.u235.org.il/en/](http://www.u235.org.il/en/)

## Envisioning the end game

1. One of the core obstacles to progress has been the inability to envisage the zone in a realistic manner. Few really seem to believe it possible, and those arguing for it have little hope of success because the barriers appear to be so high, and parties so entrenched in their positions. This pessimism is self-fulfilling. In particular, the Israeli resistance to envisaging the end state only strengthens the impression amongst Arab states that its objective is simply to delay or block progress to maintain the status quo, leaving only negative unilateral options for Arab states in response. Israelis have described this approach as the long corridor – a process that tightly conditions cooperation and opposes international agreements deemed a risk to Israel’s strategic advantage. All involved in this process have a responsibility to go beyond the all-too-easy focus on barriers to progress or outlining their own position, and engage in a visioning process that outlines in greater detail the goal, some of the steps necessary to getting there, and the guiding principles that need to be adopted by all parties if there is any hope of success.

## Obstacles

2. There are many reasons why parties should feel aggrieved with the process that has got us to this place. Israel resents the assumption that it has obligations it never agreed to (the Helsinki process), by an international mechanism it had no part in constructing (the NPT), and fears losing control of a process that could raise expectations and justify even more isolation of Israel. The Arab states resent Israel receiving all the security benefits from non-proliferation whilst deploying its own nuclear arsenal and showing no accountability towards strategic arms control mechanisms. Egypt uses symbolic non-cooperation such as walking out of last year’s NPT Preparatory Committee, and blocking non-proliferation measures, such as refusing to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention or sign an Additional Protocol with the IAEA. However these tactics have had few results, leaving a situation that is bad for Arab states, and bad for regional security. Efforts to force the other party either into accepting the status quo or into a particular mechanism for change have only re-enforced the resentment.
3. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing negotiators is the unique position of Israel within the region. This justifies special consideration, but all too often excuses unreasonable exceptionalism. It will therefore be a highly contested issue as to where the line is drawn, as some seek to single out Israel’s position and behavior as the core cause of the problem, whilst others base their entire approach to the region in terms of Israel’s right to all means for its protection. Israel is a traumatized society, much as other states in the region, in both chronic and acute ways. This trauma, integrated into the essential narratives of Israeli society, hampers trust-building with neighbors. But Israel is far from unique in this regard. Negotiations on arms control as well as regional security could form an important part of the normalization process Israel values so highly.
4. Israel’s isolation from the international non-proliferation regime has also meant that it has not developed a similar language or set of norms, such as the importance of reciprocity or the limits to deterrence. Whilst the application of universal principles for the final end-state can be the only fair and sustainable approach, other states will also need to give greater reassurance to Israel surrounding its security in order to facilitate moves to universalization of regional security mechanisms such as the WMD Free Zone.
5. Other obstacles that were discussed included: the differing interpretations of confidence-building measures (CBMs) that mean the Arab states have become quite cynical about their application; the differing interpretations around the failure of the ACRS talks in the early 1990s; the lack of any progress on the peace process or the settlements issue.

## Steps

6. We suggest that parties engage together in open discussions linked not to obligations (legal or moral) or addressing grievances, but rather towards envisaging future mutually-beneficial regional mechanisms and safeguards that serve regional strategic security, and the steps that might take us there. Israel could acknowledge the considerable security benefits it gets from the NPT whilst criticizing its features that lead Israelis to feel excluded. There are important lessons the NPT and regional nuclear weapons free zones have for any WMD processes in the Middle East, but this does not mean they should form the particular framework for any agreement.
7. Before parties can develop genuine trust they will need to engage in concrete confidence-building measures with some level of intrusive verification and inspection carried out in a fair and equitable manner. These may involve internationally-established mechanisms, such as the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and standard procedures agreed with the International Atomic Energy Agency, or alternatively may involve the creative negotiation and implementation of regional arrangements. Other candidates for international agreements Israel should consider joining are the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, talks over a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty and its verification, Israel is already a member of several conventions governing nuclear safety and security which could form the foundations for deeper cooperation and transparency in related areas. Other think tanks have conducted more technical studies of the possible CBMs that could be applied in steps towards a WMD Free Zone. Such technical approaches, if insulated from the deep political division, can take us some way towards mechanisms that provide confidence and assurance without unrealistic trust expectations.

## Sequencing

8. Nevertheless, whilst disarmament must be an integral part of any process from the very beginning, it cannot be achieved in isolation from broader regional security issues. The proposal promoted a few years ago by now Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy when he was an academic has much merit. This involved parallel processes to discuss aspects of disarmament, including conventional capabilities, to happen at the same time as other discussions on regional security, on Palestine, and on recognition and normalization. These would not be formally linked or conditioned to progress in another track, and not dependent upon each other for success, but informal political links would clearly emerge as discussions progress.
9. No state can indefinitely (or even for any length of time) remain outside the crucial institutions and norms that form the back bone of international society without harming those institutions. On the other hand, the NPT cannot be the mechanism to govern the regional process, even if it is the ultimate goal for all states to join as non-nuclear weapons states, because it has no means of including Israel in a manner it is able to accept. Therefore, such a process to address WMD will need to be formally outside the NPT, even if most parties report to it and are informed by it.

## Preparatory process for Helsinki

10. The Arab League has sometimes resisted informal consultations in advance of the Helsinki conference fearing these could draw out the process and be seen as an alternative. Nevertheless, such initial consultations have been held in Glion with all the key antagonists represented, and plans for a follow-on meeting that could include higher-level officials. These meetings are encouraging, not least because there needs to be agreement behind the agenda, membership and scope of the more formal Helsinki process. In other words there needs to be some form of expectation that the process will involve formal negotiations at some future point. An open ended, non-committal series of consultations could only

exacerbate the frustrations felt by Arab states. On the other hand, Israel needs to be given clear assurance that decisions will be unambiguously by consensus, that they are not pre-determined by the NPT structure, and that there are no premature negotiations on an agenda they have not agreed to.

### **Roles for related parties**

11. Civil society and think tanks in Israel, the Arab states and further afield, have a role to play in both influencing the process and perhaps more importantly facilitating a public debate that supports rather than obstructs it. Governments can view their communication with civil society as an opportunity to prepare for the public messaging that will be essential to success. Key states should consider dialogue with civil society in their own country and in other countries.
12. The media also has an important role to play in this communication, and all involved would do well to consider their use of the media. Journalists could be more actively supported in their role of educating the public in the complexities and opportunities involved.
13. The international community has a critical role to play in shaping and facilitating the discussions and negotiations at an early stage. It is unreasonable to allow the resentment clearly felt in certain quarters towards sections of the international community that do not fully support their policy positions to exclude or ignore them, whilst continuing to rely upon other members of the international community to defend them. Equally, in the final analysis it will be up to the regional players themselves to handle their differences and agree the mechanisms that address their problems. Solutions cannot be imposed from outside, but key members of the international community have to step up to the plate.
14. In this context, the two key states are the United States and Russia. A unified position between them would do much to move this issue forward, and could benefit global security in other areas. The recent resolution of the issue over chemical weapons in Syria, and the clear recognition of the reduced threat (Israel has stopped issuing gas masks to its population) offers hope that Israel can soon reassess its relationship to international agreement over chemical weapons. It also is cause for optimism that such leadership over the broader issue of WMD across the region is possible. It will require joint clarity of purpose and a willingness to place the interests of particular allies in the context of wider regional security.

### **An honest re-evaluation of the value of nuclear weapons**

15. Regional security challenges are only getting more complex, but the relevance of nuclear weapons to these challenges is less clear. States in the region are experiencing severe stresses and challenges to their legitimacy. The power of non-state actors: ethnic, tribal, religious groups and commercial organisations is growing relative to the state. The effectiveness of WMD is weakened by these trends, and the dangers of possession increased. Traditional paradigms of defence need re-evaluation.
16. Possessing nuclear weapons is often perceived as providing a state with an added dimension of power. It is also a symbol of inequity and unfairness, and as such a grit in the machine of regional relations. Such weapons are often considered necessary but horrifying. This attitude means by implication that we will never get rid of them. Yet the power invested in nuclear weapons is illusory, coming more from their size and forbidden nature, than from their practical utility. Nuclear weapons are messy, clumsy and inappropriate for any realistically conceivable military mission. More study on the humanitarian and environmental impacts of a nuclear exchange in the region could dent the allure of nuclear weapons possession.
17. However, it is clear that whilst strategic analysts and government officials are recognizing that nuclear deterrence has fewer applications than originally thought, there is still strong attachment to the

political utility of nuclear weapons. They are seen as bringing assurance, giving states confidence to tolerate risks in other areas they would otherwise react to in different ways. This emboldening effect can be positive or negative. However, the risk of accidental or premeditated use of nuclear weapons is far greater than normally acknowledged. The possession of nuclear weapons not only affects strategic procurement decisions by neighbours and potential adversaries, it also has a powerful impact by example on political decisions taken around nuclear weapons capabilities.

18. We recommend an extensive regional discussion on the role of nuclear deterrence and assurance in the region, and its unintended consequences. The Israeli military should also engage in discussion with other militaries in relation to the evolving military attitude towards the efficacy and the dangers associated with nuclear deterrence.
19. Israel's nuclear opacity re-enforces the status quo, undermines efforts at regional transparency and confidence-building, reinforces the mystery surrounding the utility of nuclear weapons, and leads to uncertainty as to what Israel's red lines really are. The benefits to Israel of opacity, including escalation dominance and its ability to project power, are more than outweighed by the costs, but these are not widely recognized in Israeli strategic circles. While opacity is an important topic for Israeli society to address, regional engagement is possible without resolving this particular dimension.

## Recommendations

20. There needs to be a major effort amongst civil society and governments in the region to envisage a WMD Free Zone. Cynicism is all too easy and self-fulfilling. The negotiation of a WMD Free Zone may involve challenging complexities and take time, but it is far from impossible. The process itself will have positive impacts upon international relationships, well before a zone is realized.
21. We suggest parallel processes to consider disarmament and regional security issues, ones that are linked only informally. The NPT and other regional weapon-free zones hold important lessons, but equally cannot pre-determine negotiations.
22. There is much work to be done in Israel to acknowledge the importance of reciprocity and learn the language of non-proliferation and disarmament. Israel cannot indefinitely remain outside international norms without harming them. This can only detract from Israel's long term security.
23. Concrete confidence-building measures are needed, dealing with hard security issues such as the control of weapons systems, verification and inspection. Discussion on the technical dimensions of the WMD-free zone could usefully build confidence in the process.
24. Pre-conference talks can certainly help smooth the process, but if seen as an (even temporary) alternative to the intergovernmental Helsinki Conference, could become a source of major friction.
25. There are important roles for civil society, the media, the rest of the international community, and in particular the United States and Russia. It is crucial these two in particular pull in the same direction.
26. There also needs to be an open and honest discussion in the region on the utility of nuclear weapons and the role of nuclear deterrence in providing stability and security, in the context of radical challenges to state legitimacy. The comfort and assurance attached to nuclear weapons is largely illusory, but the political symbolism of inequity, the risk of accidental or premeditated use is all too real. Regional mechanisms for arms control and disarmament alongside verification and confidence-building hold the promise of escape from the traps we are in.