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A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East: The Road Toward It as Seen From Moscow

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Key words: Middle East, WMD, WMD-Free Zone Treaty, NPT, IAEA, OPCW.

THE MIDDLE EAST remains one of the zones of high tension and instability in the contemporary world. Today, new challenges – e.g., international terrorism, the crises in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Syria – are adding to the old and deeply rooted problems created by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The unresolved issue of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) increases regional destabilization even though the issue of a zone free from nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction (WMD-Free Zone) in the region has been discussed by the international community for several decades now. So far, almost no results have been achieved in fulfillment of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East.

We should, however, admit that the year 2019 was marked by an important event in the sphere of non-proliferation of WMD – the November UN Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction – which can be described as generally successful, at least much more successful than anticipated. This was the beginning of a new, no-nonsense and long-term progress toward the Middle East free from nuclear and other types of WMD.

What does this new process mean in the context of the approaching 2020 Review Conference (RC) on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)? To what extent will the positive effect of the

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November Conference cool the heat of discussions of the WMDFZ at the coming 2020 RC? What will these dynamics mean for Russia and its interests? Let us call a spade a spade – Russia is one of the key players here and one of long standing.

The Soviet Union as the Initiator of the Nuclear-Free Approach to the Middle East

ON JANUARY 22, 1958, TASS issued a Statement that said, in particular: “The Middle East should and can become a zone of peace where there is no and should never be nuclear weapons and missiles, a zone of good neighborhood and friendly cooperation between states.”¹ This suggestion remained unrealized in the unfavorable foreign policy context of the bipolar world. The U.S. was of the opinion that the Soviet Union promoted “the establishment of the nuclear weapons free zones as a way, we believe, of weakening the military capabilities of the United States and its allies.”² In 1961, events started unfolding as predicted by the TASS Statement: Washington deployed its PGM-19 Jupiter medium-range ballistic missiles in Turkey.

In 1974, sixteen years after the Soviet initiative and two Arab-Israeli wars, Iran launched an official discussion on the UN GA platform of a nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. In the same year, the UN General Assembly passed the resolution “Establishment of a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Region of the Middle East,” which was approved by 128 countries, including the Soviet Union and the United States, with Israel abstaining.

At the 1985 NPT RC, the Soviet delegation stated that the time had come to start practical realization of the NWFZ initiative and pointed out that it would be much easier to do so if no nuclear weapons were deployed in the states of the Middle East and the territories they controlled.³

In 1990, on the initiative of President of Egypt Hosni Mubarak supported by all five permanent members of the UN SC, the Nuclear Weapon Free Zone was transformed into a wider WMD-Free Zone concept.

1995: The Fateful Resolution Adopted

AT THE FIRST FOUR review conferences, a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East received little attention. The situation changed radically in 1995 when the future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty was at stake. Russia

and the other nuclear powers participating in the NPT were convinced that it should become by consensus a treaty of unlimited duration. From the very beginning, however, it became clear that the position of the Arab states on the WMDFZ might become a stumbling block.

At the 1995 RC, the League of Arab States laid on the table its draft resolution on the Middle East that condemned Israel for refusing to join the NPT and demanded that a WMDFZ should be established. Foreign Minister of Egypt Amr Moussa stated that “as long as Israel keeps away from NPT, this country cannot rely on the Treaty for its safety.”⁴ Israeli officials assured that they accepted “the aim of setting up the WMDFZ in the Middle East yet insisted that before the talks on the issue begin the threats emanating from the regional states hostile to it, Iran, Iraq and Libya in particular, should be reduced. Israel would be ready to discuss a reliable WMDFZ when a solid and time-tested peace had been established.”⁵

By acting consistently to create favorable conditions for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, Russia cannot and should not do the jobs of others. Security in the region is the concern of its countries.

The final document, which did not mention Israel, appeared after protracted consultations between its co-authors – Great Britain, Russia and the United States. After heated debates behind the scenes, the Arab countries agreed to exchange their agreement on the NPT unlimited duration for a resolution on the Middle East that called “upon all States in the Middle East to take practical steps at appropriate forums aimed at moving towards, inter alia, the establishment of an effectively verifiable Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical and biological – and their delivery systems, and to refrain from taking any measures that preclude the achievement of this objective.”⁶ The resolution called on all states in the region to join the NPT and “to place all their nuclear facilities under comprehensive safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).”

Russia’s Considerable Contribution to the Resolution’s Adoption

FIRST, the Russian delegation joined the process at the most important stages – adoption of the final text and agreement on co-authorship.

Sergey Kislyak, Deputy Head of the Russian Delegation at the 1995 RC, said that “from our point of view, the NPT will be fully effective if all countries join it. [...] We fully agree with those who insist that Israel and others should join the treaty.”⁷

Second, the Russian delegation cooperated in a constructive way with the United States on the resolution. According to Lewis Dunn, former U.S. Ambassador to the RC, “in the closing negotiations over this Resolution, U.S.-Russian cooperation was critical – and proved absolutely essential to achieving consensus on Indefinite Extension without a vote.”⁸

“Indefinite Extension without a vote,” that is, extension by consensus, was possible because the resolution on the Middle East had been included in the “big packet” of final documents with the decision on the NPT indefinite extension. The NPT extension was the only legally binding decision of the 1995 Conference; all others were purely political. We are convinced, however, that inside this packet, all elements are tightly connected and that an annulment of the WMDFZ decision in the Middle East will annul the Indefinite Extension decision.

The WMDFZ Dialogue Within the 2000-2010 Review Cycles

BY 2000, the UAE, Djibouti and Oman had joined the NPT; Israel became the only one in the Middle East outside the treaty’s legal framework. The final document of the 2000 RC defined the resolution on the Middle East as “an essential element of the outcome of the 1995 Conference and of the basis on which the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of the Nuclear Weapons was indefinitely extended without a vote in 1995.”⁹ The final document likewise registered the extreme importance of Israel’s joining the NPT and placement of all of its “nuclear facilities under comprehensive safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).”¹⁰

Between the Review Conferences of 2000-2010, the international community was informed about the suspicions of undercover activities in the WMD sphere by Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.¹¹ This added urgency to the comprehensive solution of the WMDFZ issue, yet the instruments created in 1995 were not applied.

The RC 2005 revealed the fact that the states-NPT members were not ready to compromise: the conference ended without a final document. The George W. Bush Administration did not consider the WMDFZ as a

priority¹² and tried, instead, to shift emphasis to Iran's failure to obey the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In 2009, at the third session of the Preparatory Committee (PC) of the 2010 Review Conference, the Russian side formulated constructive proposals to lead the WMDFZ issue out of the impasse. In our opinion, it was a serious array of breakthrough and timely proposals and ideas.¹³

First, it suggested to convene an international conference of interested states to discuss the implementation of the 1995 Resolution and appoint a Facilitator responsible for consultations with the states of the Middle East.

Second, all local states were recommended to join the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). As the first step, Russia called on all countries that had signed the treaty – Israel, Egypt and Iran – to ratify it.¹⁴

Third, Russia suggested that the Middle Eastern countries should not set up and develop uranium enrichment and chemical processing of spent nuclear fuel. Instead, they should rely on guaranteed supplies of nuclear fuel through the mechanism of multisided approaches to the nuclear fuel cycle. In this connection, Russia mentioned the International Uranium Enrichment Center (IUEC) in Angarsk.¹⁵

The above-mentioned suggestions were made at the meetings of the Russian-American Arms Control and International Security Working Group. In addition, there was bilateral exchange of opinions on the zone issue: Ellen Tauscher, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, shared information with Sergey Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, related to the talks with Egypt. It was expected that the latter would block the final document of the Conference if it failed to register the progress on the WMDFZ issue.

Coordination of the Middle Eastern part of the Final Document of the 2010 RC on the NPT was an uphill job. American diplomats spared no effort to avoid the following formula: "Recalling that the 2000 Review Conference had reaffirmed the necessity of Israel's accession to the Treaty and the placement of all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards."¹⁶ A positive role in solving this problem belongs to Rose Gottemoeller, the then Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security at the U.S. State Department. Israel negatively responded to the decision and pointed out that the countries that had joined the NPT and violated it (Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Libya, Syria, and Iran) presented a much bigger problem for the regime of non-proliferation.¹⁷

Nevertheless, this formula opened the road toward a compromise decision on convocation in 2012 of a conference attended by all Middle Eastern states to discuss the establishment of WMDFZ based on understandings voluntarily achieved by the region's states. Preparations for the Conference were entrusted to the UN Secretary General, the United States, Great Britain, and Russia as the co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East; it was expected that the Facilitator would supervise practical efforts.

The Conference of 2012 That Never Took Place and the Consultations in Switzerland

THE DECREE of the President of Russia, "On Realization of the Foreign Policy Course of the Russian Federation" of May 7, 2012, said in part: "Pursuant of the consistent implementation of the Russian Foreign policy course... I hereby decree: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, together with other federal executive bodies... are instructed to support the establishment in the Middle East of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and means of their delivery."¹⁸

Speaking at the First Session of the Preparatory Committee of the 2015 RC, head of the Russian delegation Mikhail Ulyanov said that the 2012 Conference was one of the foreign policy priorities of Russia and that it was critically important to "implement it without further delays" in the specified time, that is, in 2012.¹⁹

During the preparations for the 2012 Conference, Washington was gradually withdrawing its support of the specific suggestions of the 2000 and 2012 Review Conferences that called on Israel to join the NPT and put its nuclear objects under comprehensive control of IAEA. Instead, the White House was talking about the region's unsettled problems and lack of trust between the region's states. This approach had little in common with the positions of the Arab states who never missed a chance within the review process to point to the great importance of the decisions passed in 1995 and 2010, including a very much needed international conference.²⁰

Different positions on the decision to include the regional security and peace issues into the agenda of the 2012 Conference were another stumbling block. Israel treated inclusion as the main condition of its participation, while the Arab states and Iran believed that peace in the region and the issues related to the establishment of the WMD-free zone should be treated separately.²¹

In October 2012, Moscow held a highly interesting, for many reasons, international seminar in this mainly unfavorable context. Organized by PIR-Center, one of the Russian NGOs, it was attended by official representatives of the key interested actors – Russia, the United States, Iran, Israel, the League of Arab States, UN Facilitator Jaakko Laajava and others. It was at that informal meeting that Iran confirmed, for the first time, that it would attend the Helsinki Conference. Israel made no similar statements but met behind-the-scenes with the representative of the Arab League.

By November 2012, however, due to disagreements between the sides, the Facilitator had failed to reach an agreement on the common agenda. Washington in fact disavowed its support of the Conference which forced Russia and the United States make separate statements about its postponement.²² In its statement, Moscow insisted that the Conference should be held “no later than April next year,” while Washington pointed out that a “deep conceptual gap” between the region’s countries did not allow to specify exact dates.

The year 2013 brought the impression that the world had finally achieved a breakthrough on the issues related to the Middle Eastern and WMD problems. First, the long-expected talks on the Iran nuclear program began in Geneva, which involved five permanent members of the UN SC, Germany and Iran. Second, the Russian idea of multisided consultations was set in motion against the background of Russian-American consultations on Syria. As a result, between late 2013 and 2014, Switzerland hosted five rounds of talks (in Geneva and Glion above Montreux) attended by most of the countries of the Middle East. It was the first time that Israel was willing to fix the date of the WMD-free zone conference which should also discuss the regional security issues. Russia was prepared to support Israel, while the Arab countries were convinced that Israel’s idea “diluted” the mandate of the Conference. The talks were closed.

A year later, in 2014, interaction between Russia and the United States experienced a setback: Washington accused the Syrian government of using chemical weapons against civilian population; Israel refused to discuss a possible ratification of CTBT; by that time, the United States and Israel had lost any interest in a WMD-free zone.

The 2015 Review Conference

STRONGLY DISAPPOINTED by the developments around the WMD-free zone, the Arab League, headed by Egypt and supported by members

of the Non-Alignment Movement, created a new format. They suggested that the UN Secretary General should be appointed the sole authority responsible for holding the conference “within 180 days after the ending of the Review Conference.” Israel, who, for the first time in 20 years, attended the RC as an observer insisted on “launching a continuous process of negotiations” to address regional security problems.²³

Russia supported the Arab initiative in general and prepared its own working document with a detailed description of the conditions, order and time of convocation: the conference should be convened by UN Secretary General not later than March 1, 2016. According to this document, all states of the Middle East – the Arab League members and Israel – should start direct consultations on the conference agenda and pass all decisions by consensus. Russia, the United States and Great Britain preserved their key roles in the preparations for and organization of the conference.²⁴ The Russian suggestions were not made of-the-cuff; they were formulated in the course of long and far from easy consultations with the Middle East countries and Israel. As could be expected, Moscow was involved in a dialogue with the United States and the UK; it was met with displeasure in certain circles that accused Russia and the United States of “singing in unison.” Later, it became clear that this impression was wrong. The United States insisted that all states of the Middle East should achieve an agreement on conditions related to the Conference and “decried the ‘arbitrary deadline’”; Great Britain objected to the draft of the Final Document that did not contain the right of veto for the conference’s co-organizers.²⁵ The Canadian representatives wanted Israel to be involved in all talks on the WMD-free zone issues. In the final analysis, the obstructionism of the Americans, British and Canadians undermined the consensus at the 2015 RC.

Immediately after the failure, foreign experts announced that it was Egypt who was responsible for it. Egyptian delegation indeed demonstrated maximal intransigence, yet we should bear in mind that the Egyptians had been very patient while waiting for the fulfillment of the 1995 decision on the Middle East. It was the U.S., the UK and Canada, not Egypt, who buried the 2015 Review Conference, which was “an opportunity squandered.”

The 2016-2020 Review Cycle

THE DISAGREEMENTS between the key players became even more obvious during the sessions of the Preparatory Committee of 2017, 2018 and 2019.

In 2017, Washington started talking a lot about the factors that made the WMDFZ impossible: lack of trust, prolonged conflicts and violation of treaties as well as the situation in Syria, Iranian ballistic missile program and the non-recognition of Israel by the majority of Arab states.²⁶

Concerned, Russia continued looking for compromises. At the first session of the 2017 PC, it presented a working document in which three principles of the preparatory work were formulated: “1. All essential decisions during the preparatory process and at the Conference itself should be taken by consensus. 2. Preparatory meetings should preferably be attended by all States of the region. 3. It is advisable to devote one session of the Conference to several specific aspects of regional security. Those items should be agreed upon in advance and fit the context of the 1995 resolution on the Middle East.”²⁷ From our point of view, the document was absolutely balanced and took into consideration the interests of Israel and the Arab states.

In its working document of 2018, Washington dismissed the NPT Review Cycle as “ill-suited to resolving such issues in the Middle East, as not all regional states are a Party to the NPT or bound by decisions made in the NPT context.”²⁸

Egypt responded with a statement that America was paralyzing the NPT review process which did not agree with its status of one of the co-authors of the Middle East Resolution²⁹ and warned that the 2020 RC might fail.

In an absence of progress, the Arab League decided to promote the WMDFZ on the UN platform. Later, the UN General Assembly used the draft submitted by the LAS to pass a decision: “To entrust to the Secretary General the convening, no later than 2019 ... of a conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction”; the goal of this conference was a legally binding treaty. 88 countries (Russia among them) voted for this resolution; 73 abstained while Israel, Liberia, Micronesia, and the United States voted against it. The UN Secretary General was appointed guarantor of the conference.³⁰

It was back in 2016 that the idea of an active involvement of the UN Secretary General in the discussions of the WMDFZ in the Middle East had been formulated for the first time. Ban Ki-moon requested the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters to provide him with recommendations on how to overcome the “vacuum” in the realization of the resolution on the Middle East. The Advisory Board pointed out that the

Secretary General could play the leading role in encouraging initiatives and ideas that might help revive the talks between all sides involved.³¹

According to the official Russian assessment, active participation of the UN GA in the work on this issue was “a far from ideal yet balanced and absolutely constructive option with no alternatives,” because “the work on the Middle Eastern NPT issues ran into an impasse.”³²

During the Third Session of the PC of 2019, it was announced that the UN Conference on the establishment of the WMD-free zone in the Middle East would take place in New York on November 18-22, 2019. Russia and China immediately reconfirmed their participation while the United States pointed out that it could not accept the November Conference and refused to attend. The UK and France needed more time to decide. The Arab League looked back at the experience in Geneva and Glion and expressed its negative opinion about inviting “moderators” or “coordinators”; as a result, Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations Sima Bahous was appointed chairperson.

The November UN Conference of 2019

IN MAY-JUNE 2019, the Middle Eastern states, in close cooperation with the UN Secretariat, were pouring a lot of efforts into the conference convocation. All Middle Eastern states, the co-sponsors of the 1995 Resolution (Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States), as well as China and France as permanent members of the UN SC and relevant international organizations, were invited on behalf of the UN Secretary General.³³

The U.S. representative supported the idea of the WMDFZ in general yet found it necessary to specify that Washington objected to the practiced non-inclusive approach that left certain states of the region out in the cold.³⁴ The reference was to Israel, who was absent because the agenda did not include the regional security issues. From this it followed that the United States would treat any of the Conference’s decisions as illegitimate.

Under President Trump, the U.S. position on the WMDFZ took shape against the background of another aggravation of the American-Iranian confrontation triggered by the Washington withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A week before the beginning of the November talks, Christopher Ford, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, spoke at the expert confer-

ence in Tel Aviv and strongly criticized Iran for being “the leading state sponsor of terrorism worldwide” and a “revisionist country”; Iran was described as being obsessed with a feeling of impaired dignity and as a “grievance state” pursuing its aggressive policy to restore its “glory.”³⁵

During the preparations, the Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) unexpectedly announced that this organization could not dispatch its representative to the conference. After a while, however, it found an official who could represent it at the November event. As could be expected, Israel refused to attend.

Great Britain and France confirmed their participation on the eve of the Conference. On the first day, all participants, in particular António Guterres, UN Secretary General, agreed that, in view of the latest regional developments, a WMD-free zone was badly needed. He said that the discussion of removal of WMD from the Middle East would help the region’s countries to start a direct dialogue to consolidate regional and global security.³⁶

Egypt made the following statement: “While we regret the absence of one State of the region from this session, we have to take advantage of the presence of all other States of the region, together with four of the five Nuclear Weapon States at an international forum. We should take into consideration that we are not starting from scratch. There are already international agreements addressing WMDs.... It is worth mentioning that many such treaties were negotiated without the participation of a number of parties at the beginning, and that did not prevent the negotiations from being continued and completed or the non-participating parties from joining the negotiations or ceding to the treaties at a later stage.”³⁷ The Egyptian representative pointed out that the conference should produce a legally binding document rather than continue politicizing the issue, isolating certain states or imposing certain positions.

Algeria, Palestine, Bahrain, Iran, and Jordan deemed it necessary to point out in their statements that the conference should arrive at a legally binding treaty on the WMDFZ.³⁸ Other states, likewise, spoke of practical steps in this direction as highly important.

Takht Ravanchi, Permanent Representative of Iran to the United Nations, said that he was glad to attend this “long-awaited conference” and pointed out: “For nearly 40 years, the UN GA annual resolution on the ‘establishment of a nuclear weapon free zone in the region of the Middle East’ was adopted by a consensus.... However, in recent years, at the request of Israel and the U.S., it has been adopted by a vote.” The

Iranian diplomat pointed to Israel's arsenal of WMD, its refusal to join the CWC and CCD and "the latest NPR of the United States that allows the use of nuclear weapons even against the non-nuclear-weapon States Parties to the NPT"³⁹ as the highest obstacles. "WMD has no place in our national defense doctrine," he highlighted. "Our well-known position is total, irreversible and verifiable elimination of these inhumane weapons."⁴⁰ At the same time, the future WMDFZ Treaty would be related to "the total elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East"; he said nothing of the delivery means.

Amal Mudallali (Lebanon) said that "Israel's 80 to 90 nuclear war-heads are a major source of concern at a time when the non-proliferation landscape is weak and the pillars of the arms control regime are dying."⁴¹ She pointed out that an absence of certain countries was not constructive and did not lead to any positive solutions. "Israel's nuclear policy is premised on the principle of deterrence," she said and quoted Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State of the United States, as saying that "absolute security for one nation means absolute insecurity for all others."⁴²

The representative of Saudi Arabia pointed out that Israel continued to hinder all attempts to build a regional WMD-free zone. This means that the efforts of the international community, not only of the region's states, invested in the project were wasted.⁴³ The Saudi diplomats believed that the November Conference would be successful if it confirmed political will and recognized the previous agreements and treaties, the continuity of the experience of the already existing zones and an indiscriminate constructive dialogue based on a consensus. Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq, the UAE, Morocco, and Algeria agreed.

The Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine said that Israel's boycott "is a serious threat that looms over the prospect of international peace and security."⁴⁴ He called on all sides to use pressure to persuade Israel to join the non-proliferation and disarmament treaties. Palestine pointed out that nuclear weapons were an existential threat that contradicted the norms of international humanitarian law and were, therefore, illegal. Its representative stressed the importance of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as a supplement to NPT. Libya agreed with this.

Syria expressed its hope that while the Conference would "build true momentum towards its objective, the absence of Israel and the United

States sends a negative message that demonstrates that their allegations about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in the region are just political manoeuvres.”⁴⁵ Its representative pointed out that while Washington supports non-proliferation across the world, it says nothing about Israel and occupies an opportunistic position.

Iraq pointed out that “the Middle East is unique, given an ongoing arms race, ballooning military spending and the duration of the Arab Israeli conflict. By sticking to ‘fallacious pretexts,’ Israel is encouraging others to seek weapons of mass destruction in pursuit of strategic balance. Before such a nuclear-weapon-free zone can be established, Israel must join the Non-Proliferation Treaty, accept the safeguards regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and declare and dismantle all of its weapons of mass destruction.”⁴⁶

The UAE spoke of the conference as a chance to reach mutual understanding among the region’s states on the WMD-free zone and to realize positive changes in the Middle East that required political will, creative diplomacy and real leadership rather than a fake one. Its representative deemed it necessary to stress that all region’s states, as well as the states-coauthors of the 1995 resolution, should be actively involved in the process.⁴⁷

Morocco defined inadequate efforts by and an absence of key players at the talks on legally binding agreements as the highest obstacle on the road toward complete prohibition of nuclear weapons. It warned that terrorist groups might acquire WMD and reminded that the Middle East was the cradle of cultures, civilizations and trade as well as of wars and conflicts. Lebanon, Libya, Algeria, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia agreed with the above and indicated that the Middle East is the only region that so far had failed to move toward a WMD-free zone.

“Emphasizing the right of all States to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, Bahrain’s representative said that many countries had concerns about the safety and security of nuclear plants on the borders of their neighbors. The proposed treaty must allow States to develop peaceful nuclear programs – under IAEA safeguards – to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.”⁴⁸ Yemen supported the idea and said that “this right should not be infringed upon for political reasons.”⁴⁹

Great Britain, one of the extra-regional participants, made the following statement: “We remain disappointed that the Decision of the UN General Assembly that led to the creation of this Conference was tabled by the Arab Group without the support of all states of the region... such

zones must be established on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at among the states of the region concerned and that initiating to pursue such zones must be pursued by all states of the region.... We also take this opportunity to strongly urge Syria to return to full compliance with all unresolved issues and cooperate with the IAEA and JCPOA in connection with the all unresolved issues.”⁵⁰

Having criticized a “certain state” seeking domination in the security sphere by fanning geopolitical rivalry between great powers and putting its interests above the interests of other states, China said that it supported the dialogue between the Middle Eastern countries on all regional security issues and hoped that the Conference would be highly constructive. This would give a chance to all interested sides to join the talks on the zone sometime in the future and would create favorable conditions for 2020 RC. Beijing was firmly convinced that the nuclear states should extend their political support to the establishment of the zone and regretted that certain states refused to attend the November negotiations; it also hoped that in the future the U.S. would demonstrate more reliability as one of the NPT depositaries with certain obligations.⁵¹

France, in turn, declared that the Conference would succeed if the participants avoided attempts at isolating some states; on the contrary, they should create an atmosphere of trust without which no consensus would be possible. It called on Iran to follow the JCPOA and discontinue illegal trafficking of weapons in the region. It was pointed out that establishment of the WMDFZ needed innovational ideas: all states of the region should have access to the instruments of the non-proliferation regime while the frameworks of cooperation with the IAEA in the sphere of nuclear energy should be clearly outlined jointly with the Agency.⁵²

Having hailed the beginning of the Conference, Russia expressed its conviction that Washington would not be able to fulfill its obligations as one of the authors of the 1995 Resolution. The Russian representative deemed it necessary to point out that an inclusive process that took into account the experience of the already existing zones was highly important.⁵³ Mikhail Ulyanov said that the participants did their best not to concentrate on the differences between the sides and added that “the states that have not yet joined the Conference can do this later since the process of elaboration of the treaty on the zone will be fairly long. The Decision of the General Assembly presupposes annual sessions [...] until the process has been completed by a treaty.”⁵⁴ The second session is scheduled for November 16-20, 2020. Vladimir Ermakov, Director of the

Department for Nonproliferation and Arms Control (DNAC) at the Foreign Ministry of Russia, pointed to the fact that those who represented the Arab states carefully avoided any critical remarks related to Israel to give it a chance to join the process in the future without problems.⁵⁵

After five days of discussions, the participants passed a political Declaration, which said, in particular: “We declare our intent and solemn commitment to pursue in accordance with relevant international resolutions, and in an open and inclusive manner with all invited States, the elaboration of a legally binding treaty to establish a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by consensus by the States of the region”; “...the establishment of a verifiable Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction would greatly enhance regional and international peace and security” and “could contribute to building regional and international confidence.” An open-ended invitation was extended to all States of the region “to lend their support to this Declaration and to join the process.”⁵⁶

As Seen From Russia

HAS the November Conference created favorable conditions for 2020 RC?

Let us sum up all positive aspects. First, attended by many of the regional states and four out of five nuclear states, the November Conference launched practical realization of the 1995 Resolution. Second, the arguments of those who were holding forth about its non-inclusive nature do not hold water: any state can join at its second and later sessions. Third, its political declaration demonstrated that all participants were determined to work together and, fourth, the talks revealed the mutually complementary nature of two platforms – the NPT Conference and the UN Conference – where the WMD-Free Zone could be discussed.

The contradictions between the main groups of players – the Arab League, on the one hand, and the U.S. and Israel, on the other – have not yet been resolved. So far there are no signs that Israel and the United States would change their attitude to the processes launched on the UN platform. “It is regrettable that some States (Israel and the United States) had urged the IAEA (and other relevant international organizations) not to attend the November Conference.”⁵⁷

We can hardly assess to what extent the world has moved away from the negative agenda to concentrate on the common approach to the current issue. Today, it seems that the WMD-free zone discussion at the future 2020 RC will be less vehement than at the 2015 RC: the steam has been blown off, at least for a short while.

Starting with 1995, the Russian Federation is working consistently to make a WMDFZ in the Middle East a reality and applies its efforts to general as well as very specific points. It did more than any other state to remove chemical weapons from Syria; for many years or even decades, Russia was insisting on diplomatic measures to prevent the appearance of another nuclear state in the region (Iran). Consistent diplomatic efforts were crowned with the JCPOA, which made Iran's nuclear program clear and transparent. It is not Russia's fault that JCPOA is falling apart at the seams. Moscow is doing its utmost to preserve it and guarantee that Iran will remain within its NPT obligations for a long time and that these obligations will be verified.

The Middle East is situated dangerously close to the borders of Russia and its CSTO allies which means that the WMDFZ fully corresponds to Russia's national interests. Moscow is interested in removing WMD from the periphery of the Middle East; this refers to Turkey in the first place (American nuclear weapons still remain on its territory). The nuclear potential of Israel does not threaten the Russian Federation in view of their recently deepened partnership; on the whole, however, it is a destabilizing factor in the region and its periphery.

This means that Russia should insist today and in the future, despite the unfavorable international situation and Washington's skepticism or even open opposition, on the WMD-free zone in the Middle East. This consistent approach is appreciated by our partners in the region, Egypt in the first place. Those regional states that still have doubts about Russia's position (as are the Gulf monarchies) cannot ignore the fact that this position is absolutely clear, logical, independent, and free from short-term considerations.

Russia, however, cannot do homework for those who are responsible for the agenda, that is the region's states. By acting consistently to create favorable conditions for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, Russia cannot and should not do the jobs of others. Security in the region is the concern of its countries. The Middle East is full of conflicts and peace is a rare guest there. The WMD stationed in the region have already caused catastrophes when Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran. We should

do everything to prevent catastrophic repetitions. It is even more important to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons and military nuclear technologies in the Middle East.

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The Advisory Board suggested that the roles and functions of the co-authors of the 1995 Resolution and the Facilitator should be strictly specified: they should monitor the observation of the initial mandate issued by the 1995 and 2010 Review Conferences to prevent any attempts to move away from it by the region's countries; formulate ideas and decisions designed to overcome all problems that might emerge at the negotiation table; assess the progress achieved at the meetings and inform the RC and its PC about it; discuss possible involvement of the UN SC in the process.

It was suggested that during the period of preparations, the conference participants should refrain from attacks or threats of attacks or cyberattacks against all declared nuclear objects functioning under the IAEA guarantees. The sides should arrive at a Roadmap on gradually moving all objects of the region's nuclear infrastructure under the IAEA guarantees; they should reach an agreement on prompt adoption by all countries of the region all-inclusive IAEA guarantees and an additional protocol; set up a permanent regional mechanism of the confidence measures in the nuclear, chemical and biological spheres; call on those of the region's states that have not yet ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) to do this. The complete text can be found on the UN site // https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=a/71/176&referer=/english/&Lang=R (accessed: 18.12.2019).

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