

DO WE DARE DREAM OF A MIDDLE EAST WITHOUT WMD'S?

Just a few short months ago, speculation regarding a US attack on Syria centered only around when the attack would take place, how large it would be and how long bombardment would continue. But then accidental diplomacy broke out and it appears to be moving along remarkably well. Last week, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons certified that Syria has complied with the first stage of its giving up chemical weapons:

The Joint Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons – United Nations Mission confirmed today that the government of the Syrian Arab Republic has completed the functional destruction of critical equipment for all of its declared chemical weapons production facilities and mixing/filling plants, rendering them inoperable.

By doing so, Syria has met the deadline set by the OPCW Executive Council* to “complete as soon as possible and in any case not later than 1 November 2013, the destruction of chemical weapons production and mixing/filling equipment.”

On a separate front, Iran's Foreign Minister announced yesterday that he feels an agreement on Iran's nuclear technology could be reached as early as this week:

Two days before negotiations resume in Geneva between Iran and the United States and other Western powers aimed at ending a fight over the disputed Iranian nuclear program, the country's foreign minister sounded an optimistic note on Tuesday, saying a deal was possible as

soon as this week.

"I believe it is even possible to reach that agreement this week," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in an interview with France 24, a major television network here, before meeting with the French foreign minister, Laurent Fabius.

It is possible that these two diplomatic breakthroughs have provided cover for an even bigger diplomatic effort. An initiative had grown out of the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Review Conference to work toward an agreement banning all weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. A conference based on the initiative had been planned for last year, but the United States announced it had been delayed just before it was scheduled to begin.

A planning meeting for the formal conference was held October 21-22 in Switzerland. The Nuclear Threat Initiative outlined a number of issues that were to be addressed a few weeks before that meeting:

A United Nations-appointed diplomat on Tuesday said he will convene multinational consultations in Switzerland later this month as a potentially key step toward discussing an eventual ban on weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

If nations in the region can agree on the terms and objectives of regional discussions, a formal conference on creating a Mideast WMD-free zone could occur in Helsinki, Finland, as early as mid-December, according to international diplomats and expert observers.

Jaakko Laajava, a Finnish envoy who serves as facilitator for the prospective talks, played down continued differences between Israel and its Arab neighbors over the necessity of this

month's multilateral planning session, which is to take place in Glion, a lakeside retreat roughly 60 miles northeast of Geneva.

Yes, you read that correctly. Even though Israel was not a participant in the 2010 conference that created this initiative, Israel now is suddenly a party to the discussions. Of course, the region faces a multitude of WMD issues and especially non-compliance issues for agreements already reached:

Speaking on a panel discussion alongside Karem on Tuesday, retired Israeli Brig. Gen. Shlomo Brom rejected Fahmy's call for a treaty-based process for instituting a WMD ban in their region, saying his own nation's views must be taken into account if a gathering of all Middle East countries is to succeed.

He called the Middle East a region "that excels in noncompliance with signed agreements."

"Why should we think that signing on another agreement – [one] on a WMD-free zone – will lead to better compliance with this agreement?" said Brom, now senior research fellow and director of the Institute for National Security Studies' Israel-Palestinian Relations program. "And therefore, Israel does not think that the establishment of a WMD-free zone can simply be achieved by all states signing on the NPT and other things."

The Nonproliferation Treaty "has proven too weak" to prevent proliferation in the Middle East and elsewhere, he said.

With that warning, then, we can at least note with some optimism that Israel did indeed show up for the meeting. Israel's Foreign Ministry even saw fit to issue a statement downplaying

the significance of the meeting and suggesting that Israeli and Iranian representatives never actually talked to one another:

The participation of Israeli and Iranian officials in a meeting last month in Switzerland for a proposed conference on a nuclear-free Middle East had no more significance than when the two countries sit together in at various other international meetings, a Foreign Ministry official said Tuesday.

This was a completely procedural meeting, and there was no contact between the Israeli and Iranian representatives, the official said, downplaying reports of the meeting.

Reuters provides a bit more on the meeting and the basis for a bit of optimism:

An Arab diplomat told Reuters: "That they were there, the Israelis and Iran, is the main thing." The discussions were also attended by representatives of the United States and some Arab states, the diplomat added, without naming them.

There were 13-14 delegations around the table and Finnish Foreign Ministry Under-Secretary of State Jaakko Laajava, who is charged with organizing the Middle East conference, was among the participants, another diplomat said.

The discussions were "quite constructive," the diplomat said, adding that another meeting was likely later this month, although it was still unclear exactly who would attend.

Hmm. I will take "quite constructive" any day when you have Israel and Iran among 13 or 14 delegations discussing how we get to a Middle East free of WMD's. Given the actual progress on Syria's chemical weapons and the apparent

progress on Iran's nuclear work, there is hope for the first time in many years that concrete steps could be taken to remove a number of devastating weapons from an area where their use could unleash unprecedented damage and decades of reprisals. I know, it's crazy, but imagine both Israel and Iran without any nuclear weapons or their technology (or chem or bio weapons, either) and a system of international parties working together on verification. Not likely, but that people are even working toward it now is very encouraging.

Postscript: It seems that The Hill believes the October 21-22 meeting was "secret", despite the clear description of the participants, topic, date and location in the article from Nuclear Threat Initiative linked above and published on October 1.