

Blocking a Nuclear-Free Mideast

With a large undeclared arsenal of nukes and the missiles to deliver them, Israel ranks as the world's top rogue nuclear state, even as it threatens to bomb Iran over the theoretical possibility of building a single nuclear weapon, hypocrisy backed up by the U.S., as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Last week, the latest quinquennial review conference for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) ended as a failure, without issuing a formal statement or report. The single biggest snag concerned whether to call for the convening of a conference on a Middle Eastern nuclear weapons free zone (MENWFZ).

Fingers of blame were pointed in various directions, including at Egypt for pushing some procedural changes regarding the convening of such a conference that some other delegations regarded as needless complications. But the procedural issues were not much of an obstacle and could have been resolved.

The more fundamental roadblock was the same one that has been decisive every time the subject of a MENWFZ has come up. Israel doesn't like the idea, and the United States, acting as Israel's lawyer (Israel itself, not being a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, was only an observer and not a full participant in the review conference), blocked approval of the draft statement that was on the table.

Israel doesn't like the idea because Israel itself would naturally be the chief focus of any discussion of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, given that it has kept itself outside the international nuclear nonproliferation regime and is the owner of what just about everyone in the world believes to be the only nuclear weapons possessed by any Middle Eastern state.

Israel's official position regarding a conference is that discussion of nuclear weapons can only take place amid a discussion of "the broad range of security challenges in the region," and it says it would consider joining the NPT only if Israel were at peace with the Arab states and Iran.

That position is, of course, a formula for putting off the subject of a MENWFZ indefinitely, given that the Israeli government has sworn eternal hostility toward Iran and is determined, all the more so in the Israeli government's latest post-election configuration, not to settle its conflict with the Palestinians and therefore will not be at peace with most Arab states either.

None of this is altogether new. The 2010 NPT review conference did produce a recommendation to convene a regional conference by 2012, and considerable preparatory work was done under Finnish leadership. But the Israeli government was infuriated by the whole idea, and on its behalf the United States helped to throw enough dirt into the diplomatic gears for the regional conference never to take place.

What makes this month's failure to make progress on this front even more unfortunate is that another set of negotiations has made the opportunity for progress toward a MENWFZ greater than ever. These are the negotiations that are close to completing a comprehensive agreement to restrict and monitor Iran's nuclear program.

Although Iran evidently has not decided to build nuclear weapons anyway, the impending agreement, if completed, would be a major accomplishment on behalf of the cause of nuclear nonproliferation. Iran is a significant country in this regard given that it is one of the largest countries in the Middle East, it has a substantial nuclear program, and it probably has in the past actively considered building nuclear weapons.

The agreement currently being finalized provides for major restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities and a system of international monitoring of those activities that is more extensive and intrusive than what any other country has ever voluntarily imposed on itself. The agreement thus provides a very useful model for extending the cause of nuclear nonproliferation throughout the Middle East, while embodying the NPT's principle of reconciling the widespread peaceful use of nuclear energy with stringent safeguards to stop the spread of nuclear weapons.

It provides a model, and it provides momentum. And despite the many sharp disagreements between Iranians and Arabs, a MENWFZ is one concept on which they agree.

The potential for the Iran agreement to serve as a region-wide model is underscored by how many of its provisions (as revealed in the partial "framework" agreement announced last month) resemble recommendations of a recent report from an independent group of nuclear experts on controlling fissile materials in the Middle East.

These provisions include limiting enrichment of uranium to specified low levels, prohibiting the stockpiling of enriched uranium, banning the reprocessing of plutonium, and adhering to international safeguards such as the Additional Protocol for inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

All this potential gets swept out of sight by the campaign of those who for other reasons oppose reaching any agreement on anything with Iran and would have us inhabit a Alice-in-Wonderland world in which we are supposed to believe that placing major restrictions on someone's nuclear program is a blow against rather than in favor of nuclear nonproliferation.

It is in the same topsy-turvy world that leading the charge against this agreement is the most prominent nuclear outlaw state in the Middle East. All of this is regrettable, but doubly so when it means blowing a good opportunity to make progress toward keeping nuclear weapons from being part of this conflict-ridden region.

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Saudis Eye Human Rights Chair

Despite an abysmal human rights record, Saudi Arabia reportedly hopes to chair the UN's Human Rights Council, a test of how far money can go in buying the world's silence and acquiescence, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

It's hard to be shocked by anything that happens in the Middle East, but this act of chutzpah comes close: Saudi Arabia is lobbying to head the United Nations Human Rights Council when the current German president's term expires at the end of this year, [according to Le Tribune de Genève](#).

Human rights activists have been stunned by the news. "It is unthinkable!" exclaimed a spokeswoman for Amnesty International.

Other recent events put a special pall on the news. As the London *Independent* observed, "Reports of the bid come just days after Saudi Arabia posted a [job advertisement for eight new executioners](#)." In early May, Saudi Arabia reportedly [beheaded](#) five foreign criminals and then hung their bodies from helicopters, an act that would have garnered headlines if committed by ISIS.

The U.S. State Department's most recent [human rights report](#) offers page after page of Saudi violations covering an almost encyclopedic range of abuses, including "citizens' lack of the right and legal means to change their

government; pervasive restrictions on universal rights such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and freedom of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and a lack of equal rights for women, children, and noncitizen workers.”

It also cites reports of “torture and other abuses; overcrowding in prisons and detention centers; holding political prisoners and detainees; denial of due process; arbitrary arrest and detention; and arbitrary interference with privacy, home, and correspondence,” as well as “violence against women, trafficking in persons, and discrimination based on gender, religion, sect, race, and ethnicity.”

Last year, according to Human Rights Watch, Saudi Arabia continued to jail peaceful dissidents and human rights activists and engage in “systematic discrimination” against women and religious minorities. It sentenced two prominent activists to 15 years in prison, travel bans and huge fines for crimes including “contact with foreign news organizations to exaggerate the news,” and “circulating his phone number to [foreign] news agencies to allow them to call him.”

Saudi authorities also sentenced the blogger Raif Badawi to a decade in prison and 1,000 lashes for insulting Islam on his website and in television interviews. Despite a huge international protest, Badawi suffered the first 50 lashes of his punishment this January, and is now threatened with beheading, his family said.

For every case of public flogging, countless other prisoner abuses take place behind closed walls. Amnesty International reports that “Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and sentenced prisoners” appear to be “common, widespread and generally committed with impunity. Reported methods included beating, suspension by the limbs and sleep deprivation.”

The victims of Saudi “justice” range beyond ordinary criminals and political dissidents. A year ago, the Saudi government reported that prosecutors had filed charges of sorcery in 191 cases, punishable by death, in the seven months through May 2014. Many of the accused were female foreign domestic workers who reported employer abuses.

Women remain subjugated under Saudi law, required to cover themselves in public from head to toe, and forbidden to marry, attend college, obtain a passport or visit a male doctor without permission of a male guardian.

There are no signs that the Saudi monarchy, newly led by the fiercely Islamist King Salman, plans to change its ways. “In January, he [Salman] replaced the

head of the religious police who was seen as trying to curb excesses of the force," reported the *New York Times*. "He has also dismissed the deputy education minister, the only woman in such a high-level cabinet post, and appointed as a royal adviser a cleric whom King Abdullah had dismissed for criticizing the country's first coed university."

King Salman also appointed his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince and heir to the throne. As former Interior Minister and counterterrorism chief, Nayef took charge of arresting and torturing peaceful dissidents and branding critical speech as "terrorism," without judicial review.

U.S. officials have said almost nothing publicly critical of Saudi human rights practices, outside of published State Department reports, just as they have pandered to Riyadh over its military interventions in Yemen and Bahrain.

In 2013, Washington did not oppose Saudi Arabia's election to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, according to UN Watch. If the Obama administration and the European Union now stand by and let Saudi Arabia preside over that commission next year, they will truly destroy its credibility and undermine the cause of human rights everywhere.

Jonathan Marshall is an independent researcher living in San Anselmo, California. Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions"; "Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran"; "Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor"; "The Saudis' Hurt Feelings"; "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Bluster"; and "Israel's Plan to Kill Lebanese Civilians."
