London consultation on the Iranian nuclear issue

Avoiding the winds of war & assessing prospects for a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East

Wednesday, 12 September, 9.30 – 12.00
Robert Runcie Room, Church House Conference Centre
Dean’s Yard, Westminster, London SW1P

This consultation explored concerns, options and opportunities relating to the Iranian nuclear program. Prospects for negotiations and the planned Helsinki meeting on a Middle East WMD Free Zone also were addressed. Participants emphasized the need for a more creative approach to the negotiations, and a sense that the negotiating partners and other interested parties are not agreed on goals. Some felt that the WMD Free Zone framework might serve a very useful role in helping to create conditions for reframing the debate about long-term regional WMD issues. The UK leadership on these and related issues was noted, while participants expressed hope that the UK might exert more diplomatic muscle to avoid what some see to be a potentially catastrophic end result to the Iranian nuclear controversy, particularly if there is any military attack against Iranian facilities.

Report

On 12 September 2012, Pugwash convened in London the latest in an ongoing series of consultations which have addressed the Iranian nuclear program in various contexts. The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules: participants took part in their individual capacities; statements are not attributed to any individual; and distribution of the substance of discussions is encouraged. The report reflects the fact that the majority of participants were from the United Kingdom.

Participants covered a range of issues. However, discussion primarily addressed the following main topics, and this report will focus on these points:

1. Prospects for negotiations and the ‘dual track’ strategy
2. Possibility of a military attack on Iranian facilities and its potential ramifications
3. Assessment of progress toward a Middle East WMD Free Zone
4. To what extent do words matter?
5. “Who is the ‘we’?”

1 For example, prior meetings have taken place in Israel (Tel Aviv, September 2012; Yad Hashmona, June 2012, and Herzliya, January 2012); Gaza, February 2012; Washington, DC, February 2012; and Ramallah, January 2012. These and related reports are available at www.pugwash.org.
2 This report was prepared by Pugwash Senior Program Coordinator Sandra Ionno Butcher, who has sole responsibility for the content (sibutcher@earthlink.net). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur, the Pugwash Conferences or any of the sponsoring organizations. Pugwash appreciates the support for its Middle East project provided by the Norwegian MFA, the Carnegie Corporation, other funders and our national groups.
Prospects for negotiations and the ‘dual-track’ strategy

Participants addressed the current status of negotiations and assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the so-called ‘dual-track’ strategy, which emphasizes a tough stance on sanctions (and some say a needed component of a military threat) coupled with efforts at diplomacy. Some believe increased sanctions, which are just beginning to bite hard, are essential to bringing Iranians to the table and are causing Iranians to question their government. Proponents of sanctions say that they have been effective, for example, by stalling the missile program and hindering Iran’s ability to move to second generation centrifuges. Others disagree and believe the sanctions and any possible further expansion of sanctions are bringing the Iranian society closer to the leadership. One person noted that the gamble is whether or not pressuring the Iranians is making them move more toward weaponization or whether it will bring them seriously to the table. The negotiations partners are “betting” this will force Iran to the table. Others see this as a risky assumption and an unsafe bet.

Some further believe that widespread adoption of sanctions, including by countries like New Zealand and others, could have grave international repercussions since they are moving far beyond any purported non-proliferation goals and they are in fact endangering recognized international norms of behavior.

In addition, it was noted that the lines are blurred over the ultimate goal of sanctions, threats and negotiations. Most agree there is a likelihood that Iran is “working hard” to move perhaps faster than ever to a “capability point,” but that they are pressing relatively slowly toward nuclear weapons. This distinction is critical, and at the nexus of disagreement between key allies (including, importantly, between the US and Israel) over the ultimate goal of negotiations: whether to stop some level of enrichment, to halt Iranian enrichment altogether, or to seek regime change in Iran.

One participant said that Iran already is a latent nuclear weapon state. It has the needed infrastructure though the program is not as big as it could be and the timeline is not as short as it might be. But it has the ability to manufacture nuclear weapons should it choose to do so. So the question he asked is: “Are we prepared to live with that?” For those who say no, then the object becomes one of rollback, either through force or coercion. Until these sorts of issues are sorted out and clarified among the six (plus Israel), some think it may be nearly impossible to arrive at a negotiated settlement. Even if there are steps to build confidence that there are no illicit purposes to the program, it “gets you nowhere if you are not prepared to live with enrichment” since there will be no ultimate guarantee that there will be no breakout, and it will always be “only a decision away.” From this perspective, the focus on red lines is misguided since “that game is over.”

Participants also noted with concern the current Israeli efforts to push the US administration to declare red lines may not be helpful in the current environment, particularly taking note of the US electoral season and also the perceived partisanship of the Netanyahu government in favor of the Republican candidate for US president and what one participant termed Netanyahu’s “messianic” approach to Iran.

There is a perception among some in London that the negotiators are taking hard lines and there are no signs of progress. Participants debated whether or not there were useful offers on the table at recent meetings. Some believe that Iran was offered some serious options, but refused to engage in discussions. However, others believe there has been too much emphasis on the pressure part of
the two-track strategy. As one person said, “Our threats are credible but our carrots are incredible.” Some say that without some sort of recognition of the Iranian right to enrichment and sanctions relief, there will be no deal.

It also was noted that the Iranians have a parallel narrative, that they believe they have given offer after offer that were either ignored or neglected. The tragedy is that these two parallel narratives are similar but with “few points of tangency” and each convinces the other they are not serious regarding negotiations and “enter the fleeting moments of engagement very skeptical and unwilling to risk to advance the process.”

The example was discussed of the Iranian offer to put 20 percent enrichment on the table for full sanctions relief, which was met with refusal to discuss any sanctions relief. Some say the fact they were seeking full sanctions relief was misunderstood and that it most likely was a starting negotiating position, meaning that a critical opportunity was missed. One person said the six should have “called the bluff” and said, “We will talk and perhaps suspend some sanctions.” Someone else noted there was a fear that a deal was made with Iran regarding 20 percent in return for some sanctions relief, and Iran only stopped 20 percent enrichment for a short time, it would “take forever” to get the sanctions back to the point where they are now.

There is an added problem on the Iranian side that the very pressure that the West believes is bringing Iran to the table in fact makes it more difficult domestically for Iran to agree to any proposals that make it appear to be capitulating and giving in to coercion.

One participant said it is clear both sides failed in the negotiations, not least because the ability on both sides to actually negotiate was hindered by the fact that “people are going to the meetings without authority to negotiate.” This person felt this “must be considered and addressed.” Some also noted that some key players in the negotiations are lacking in needed technical knowledge.

The main elements of a possible deal are known and there have been efforts such as the Russian proposal to define something that could be acceptable to all sides, based on some sort of reciprocity. It was noted that Pugwash prepared a detailed model agreement based on extensive consultations that was shared with appropriate parties prior to the Moscow negotiations. (This proposal is being updated.)

There are many who are questioning the structure of the P5+1/E3+3 talks as it allows internal disagreement among the negotiating partners to add a further complicating dynamic and in some ways inhibits creativity. It also means that the six end up promoting the lowest common denominator. One person questioned whether Russia and China will continue to “put up with” the US-Israel-British-French-German position or if they will want to break with it.

Some believe direct talks between the US and Iran might be useful, while others think Iran has demonstrated in recent negotiations that they do not want to seriously engage (this characterization was refuted by others who thought Iranian reticence is more a result of lack of realistic proposals being tabled). However, some note that given different political cultures, this may not be considered feasible on the Iranian side or desirable on the US side. Even while some Iranians may be interested in talking with the US, they have challenges on how to justify this internally since whoever does it “will come under attack.” One person said the Iranians are looking to the US for discussions...
but they are “afraid” to have a meeting and “consistently reject” such opportunities when on occasion in the context of E3+3 discussions attempts have been to “reach out”. One person said it is a “huge problem” that the sides don’t know how to approach each other on this issue.

One participant suggested that while Iran might be scared to have direct conversations, they might overcome this if they had something concrete to justify this step, and this is missing at the moment. While some believe that “many, many offers have been made in meetings” this has not translated into some sort of a new negotiating strategy on the Iranian side. Others disagreed, and said that what has been offered to Iran is not good enough. Some say that the UK has for example offered Iran some new technology if they come into line with UNSC resolutions, but others point out that Iran does not recognize the legitimacy of those resolutions. It was noted there are signals that the Israelis would not necessarily be opposed to US-Iran bilateral talks, though perhaps not officially welcoming them.

This does not negate, however, prospects of indirect communications, which have been occurring through various Track II initiatives. However, receptivity to the results of such discussions has remained limited most likely due to the rigid approach by some of the negotiating partners.

So long as Iran believes the US and others’ goal to be regime change, one person pointed out, negotiations are likely to face problems. As one participant said, “Even paranoids have enemies” and the declared officially legislated US policy toward Iran is regime change, based on a law in the books signed by Clinton and never overturned. While this may not be Obama policy, it is “not hard for Iran to see the impulse,” one person said. Others refuted the idea that this is US policy.

Some note there is need for greater attention to other possible developments down the road. For example, Iran has mentioned it might build a nuclear submarine (which could justify enrichment up to 60 percent) or they might change their position on reprocessing and move toward the “Japan model” where they could get close to the threshold by a civilian MOX program making access to plutonium more readily available. Others note the need for some sort of special agreement regarding research reactors, which blur the line of the boundary between civilian and military nuclear programs.

Possibility of a military attack and potential consequences
It was reported that Pugwash recently convened another of its series of meetings in Israel about Iran, where discussion addressed the unprecedented national debate there about the possibility of an Israeli or joint strike on Iranian nuclear facilities and the complexities this is placing both on US-Israeli relations but also its impact on negotiations. One participant said the debate in Israel is not about war or no war, but rather whether an attack would be now or later, unilateral or multilateral. While some acknowledge a joint attack might be militarily more effective, in reality the political impact will be the same whether or not the attack is done unilaterally or not. Some believe that this threat of military attack is essential to demonstrate resolve and to bring Iran to the table. It was reported that in the recent Pugwash meeting in Israel, one Israeli said the Iranians will wait until “20 past midnight” before they will want to seriously talk. Many are concerned such brinkmanship in this volatile region is neither wise nor productive.
If Iran is attacked, many believe this will result in Iran pressing harder for a military nuclear program. One person said, “The more Iran feels threatened, the more they have an incentive to go ahead and weaponize.” If a non-NPT member (Israel) attacks, some fear this will make the NPT “worthless.” “War leads to more war, and this could lead to a global catastrophe easily,” said one participant.

Some question the framing of the debate, and challenge the idea that an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities could be limited only to nuclear facilities and not wider targets. However, one person noted that, while at one extreme there is a possibility of a huge, sustained and redundant operation with possible targets including the Iranian navy, defences, and other targets in multiple sorties, there is also a strand of thinking about a “minimum meaningful military strike” on a “handful” of “critical choke point facilities” in Iran. This scenario was referred to as “Syria times five” in which Iran could wake up one morning and find a handful of critical facilities have been destroyed (such as Isfahan, Arak, Qom, Fordow, etc.). The US air force believes it could bring down Fordow by taking out the power, access roads, directing cruise missiles up tunnels, destroy venting, and cause damage via blast waves in the stone, etc. If one assumes the US does this, then the president might give a press conference saying this is not an act of war, but an act of arms control enforcement on behalf of the UN Security Council because Iran has refused to meet its international obligations. The president might threaten that if there is any hint anywhere on the planet of anything that looks like a reprisal, the US will respond. Some believe this sort of scenario is also in the capacity of Israel. The scenario was described by one participant as an example of the “very powerful mentality” surrounding some leaders. Others point out that it would be “outrageous” for anyone to claim they were enforcing the UN Security Council resolutions without “explicit authority from the UNSC.”

There are some who wonder if the US might rely on such an attack to restore its power internationally. Others think that the “pathetic” record of the US in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan has proven there is no quick fix: even if there is a precise high-tech military operation, the political consequences cannot be controlled. In this case, there is a grave danger of unintended consequences, Iran would be likely to leave the NPT, the regional shockwaves would be serious and from Pakistan, to Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Egypt it would be a “continuous region of mess with no interruption.”

In addition, many point out that within a short time frame Iran would be most likely to reconstitute its program, outside of the NPT. It would be covert, uninspected, and aimed unambiguously toward nuclear weapons. In other words, as one participant said, it is “very plausible” that an attack will have produced “exactly the same outcome it hoped to prevent.”

Progress toward a Middle East WMD Free Zone

Despite the challenges, many believe that the goal of a Middle East free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is “immensely valuable” and the “only alternative direction to go in order to avert a crisis on a major scale.” However, there is concern that at present things are not on course for a proposed conference on this zone, slated to be held in Helsinki in mid-December. One participant noted that the two different formats, the E3+3 and the framework for the WMD Free Zone are somewhat at odds, and create additional tensions.
Someone said the only practical way forward – in face of the fact that the Israelis do not dream of giving up nuclear weapons while the possibility of other states with nuclear weapons in the region remains – is to turn the argument on its head, namely to hint that Iran too could have the possibility of building nuclear weapons (obviously outside the context of the NPT). This very idea could persuade Iran and Israel that each would benefit from a Middle East WMD free zone. Iran would be saving face in being able to demonstrate that using the leverage of a threat to go nuclear worked, Israel’s monopoly would be removed (bringing also strategic benefit to Iran); and Israel would have a major advance in its ability to improve relations with others in the region. This could be monitored through intrusive inspections, he said. (Others very much disagree about being at all explicit about even considering that Iran has the right to nuclear capability, let alone nuclear weapons.)

Others noted there potentially are ways to structure the conference so that even a country with doubts, such as Israel, could participate, depending on the framing of the conference and its working groups, etc. There are legitimate concerns that the Israelis have about the provenance and framing of the conference, but some felt these sorts of issues can be addressed through the shaping of an agenda. If the conference is primarily a dialogue focused less on a rigid schedule and more on starting a process it is possible the conference could begin to address the sorts of concerns Israel emphasizes. Some believe as a first stage the conference statement should be as generic as possible. Another participant pointed out that for Israel to attend it is critical for chemical and biological weapons to be addressed, and for the focus to not be entirely on nuclear issues.

It was noted that there is deep resentment that the nuclear weapons states are not living up to their commitments under the NPT to disarm despite rhetorical promises to that effect. This, combined with the fact that the Israeli nuclear arsenal is rarely mentioned while there is great international focus on the possibility that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons, creates an imbalance which one person termed “an unnatural form of discourse.” This person said the UK needs to think as an NPT state and ask, “Why is it that one country in the region that is not an NPT state is policing and enforcing compliance?”

Some questioned whether or not the UK and other convenors have been utilizing enough political muscle on this issue. Some believe the UK is in a position to “take the lead in getting others to take the lead.” It was noted that the UK has been doing “quite a lot of work” to build a high-level political commitment to this idea, but perhaps less so in terms of detailed engagement on how to ensure the conference is a success and she noted there is not enough attention to what “success would look like” for the meeting.

It was suggested that the convenors have been trying to build regional support and engagement for the conference, with varying levels of success. For example, one participant said that a high-level delegation of co-convenors went recently to the region, but meetings in Egypt and Saudi Arabia were cancelled. One participant said there is a “need to see more practical engagement from countries in the region.” Another participant pointed out that there is interest. The Arab League is engaged and has presented the facilitator with a “sensible” program. There is no opposition of Iran to participate and no intent on the Russian side to withdraw from convening the conference.
The debates about participation were discussed, with some emphasizing the need for all countries in the region to be present. Others suggested it might be a better approach to invite all but not to force the point, and to let those leaders who might keep their country from participating to face public opinion. One participant noted that while the attitude in Israel is against the conference, it would be “difficult” for Israelis not to participate if the meeting is convened. If it is not convened due to Israel’s objections, this will be “tremendously detrimental to the region,” said one participant.

While Israel is worried, one participant noted that if the conference is not convened due to Israel, then the convenors “are going to be in trouble.” If the weight of responsibility falls on the US to say there will be no conference, this will be a problem. In any event, such a statement is not expected before the US election. If Obama wins, some expect he will fix a date to convene the conference. Others say the decision to postpone has already been made in DC and note there have been some indications that some partners do not want the conference to happen in 2012. However, it was noted that if the conference does not take place in December, unless an alternate near-term date is fixed for the meeting, most are concerned that it will be delayed indefinitely. At a time when there is a dearth of opportunities to meet to discuss such issues, this may be a fateful loss of opportunity. One participant mentioned the obvious, if there is a military attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities, we can “forget” the WMD Free Zone conference.

One participant suggested it is most important that the conference adheres to a few guiding ideas: 1. Do not single out any country; 2. Emphasize the beginning of a process without forcing conclusions and frame it as a discussion to lead to other discussions; 3. Don’t insist on security issues relevant to a particular country, but provide room for convincing other partners to organize other discussions on issues of regional security; 4. Define some intermediate steps of what can be done. If this approach could be taken, then it would be “enough,” said this participant.

Some felt that it is important to look further down the road. Some discussed concerns that there might be a Middle East nuclear arms race. One participant noted that we are witnessing the “very early stages of possible widespread nuclear civilian infrastructure” in the region, with countries like the UAE, Jordan, Egypt (though its plans post Arab Spring and post-Fukushima are in abeyance), Saudi Arabia, and others contemplating developing the nuclear energy infrastructure for various reasons. As one participant said, we can see what is coming down the road 20 years from now. Abu Dhabi has said they will not have a fuel cycle, but Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have not, so there have been hints that if there is another nuclear state in the region, the calculus might change later for these sorts of countries as to their own intentions. This reinforces the importance of creating a norm against WMD in the region.

Do words matter?
Participants mentioned ways in which the grave situation is further inflamed by rhetoric. Concerns about Iran’s anti-Israel rhetoric are well-known and many acknowledge that their impact has contributed in a major way to create the situation of distrust of motives that exists today. It was noted that the persistent Israeli threats to attack Iran also have impact on Iran’s threat perceptions. While this is the intent of such threats, the consequences can sometimes be harder to predict.
There is concern that unless the rhetoric on all sides is toned down, the needed window of opportunity for arriving at a peaceful settlement may be lost.

It also was noted by some participants that questions about the impact of the Iranian fatwa against nuclear weapons remain. This is an explicit religious ruling that production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are all haram (religiously prohibited). Some say that it is not in the security interests of Iran to possess nuclear weapons, and the fatwa backs up this thinking. However, others do not believe that if Iran were facing an existential crisis that the fatwa would be binding in all circumstances. It is possible, one participant said, to conceive of a situation in which a sufficient number of people in Iran think that the threats to Iran are so persistent and imminent that they seek to develop a nuclear weapon in secret. In those circumstances, they would need another religious ruling, however we would not necessarily know about it, it could be kept secret. Another interpretation of the fatwa is that it reinforces the chain of command in Iran, to make sure agencies like the Revolutionary Guard, do not “go rogue” and develop a deployable nuclear capability and surprising their own leadership with a fait accompli if they think the leaders are not capable of defending Iran. The Guards are answerable now to the Supreme Leader via the fatwa. It was noted that many, including many Israelis, dismiss the fatwa, since “God can change his opinion.” Others believe there is too much playing down of these sorts of declarations, which can be a political tool to coalesce people behind their leaders.

“Who is the ‘we’?”

Participants raised important questions about the nature of leadership needed in solving these issues. Throughout the discussions, participants lapsed into saying “we” need to address such and such an issue. One participant then asked, “Who is the ‘we’?” This is, he said, the “epicentre” and defining this can greatly influence prospects for resolving outstanding issues. From his perspective, people are still caught in the idea that somehow the US will be the leading force, and that there is a “gigantic illusion” that the Western and Atlantic powers will continue to “call the shots.” However, “the world has shifted” and there needs to be mobilization of new alliances and new forces via the Non-Aligned Movement and others, including Turkey, Brazil, Korea, Russia, and China. The evolving role of Egypt, which is seeking normal relations with Iran but also with key other countries like Israel, the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia was noted. Others noted that while the US has short- and long-term goals of supporting regional power, at least in the short-term the US role in the region cannot be ignored. Another person noted that even Iran understands this.

The UK as both a member of the E3+3 and as a convener of the WMD Free Zone conference has a leadership role on these and related issues. There was a hope that the UK could exert additional diplomatic resources toward ensuring a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and in creating conditions for a more durable long-term and more forward-looking solution. As someone said, “We need a game changer.” And that, of course, might depend upon who the ‘we’ is that we are looking to for a new approach.

One participant noted that the lessons of past negotiations proves that the ways in which states have been rolled back from the nuclear threshold is by making them feel safer rather than more insecure. While this may seem like common sense, it must be fostered and creative thought must be given to an overarching security framework for the region.
## Final Participant List

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position/Institution</th>
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<td>David Cliff</td>
<td>Vertic</td>
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<td>Paolo Cotta-Ramusino</td>
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<td>Dina Esfandiary</td>
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<td>Mark Fitzpatrick</td>
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<td>Lord Howell</td>
<td>Special Advisor to the Foreign Secretary</td>
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<td>Paul Ingram</td>
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<td>Amb. Peter Jenkins</td>
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<td>Scarlett MccGwire</td>
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<td>Malcolm Savidge</td>
<td>Former MP, former convener All Party Parliamentary Group on Non-Proliferation and Global Security</td>
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<td>Christopher Watson</td>
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