

Internationale Konferenz: Für einen Nahen und Mittleren Osten ohne Massenvernichtungswaffen

Die von der Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung unterstützte Konferenz fand am 5. und 6. Dezember 2013 in Haifa statt. Der Veranstaltungsbericht liegt bisher nur in englischer Sprache vor.



On the 5th and 6th of December 2013, an international conference took place in Haifa that dealt with the sensitive issue of a “Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone” (MEWMDZFZ). The event was hosted and co-organized by the Emil Touma Institute, the Israel Office of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS), the International Association of Peace Messenger Cities and the Israeli Disarmament Movement and brought together a wide array of politicians, civil society actors and academics from various countries. The conference was well attended (more than 100 Jewish and Arab Israeli participants and 20 foreign guests) and received broad attention by Israeli and foreign media. More than a dozen articles were published in English, Hebrew and Arabic. Israel radio (Reshet B) and several TV stations, among others, Al-Jazeera and Press TV (London), reported about the event.

From Mutual Threat to Collective Security

The opening panel began with a speech by Prof. Tadatoshi Akiba, the former mayor of Hiroshima, who reminded everyone that nuclear weapons can have very devastating consequences. “No one needed to suffer as his countrymen had suffered”, he said and added that civil society activists should put pressure on their governments to achieve the goal. Akiba urged the government of Israel (Gol) to attend a conference in Helsinki which is aimed at pushing the MEWMDZFZ forward on a diplomatic level. This conference was supposed to take place in 2012, but had to be postponed indefinitely due to a lack of consensus among the prospective participants. Akiba said that the Israeli and international public should pressure the Gol to attend the event and increase efforts for a nuclear exit in general.

Avraham Burg (former Speaker of Knesset) repeated the need for the public to act, because the government cannot be trusted and left alone. He explained how the Israeli nuclear strategy is rooted in the security narrative that engulfs Israeli politics since its establishment. Though much is still to be done, there are some positive developments in the region, mainly the change of government in Iran and the deal that was reached on its nuclear program in Geneva. But Israeli politics seem to be unable to deal with these diplomatic opportunities. According to Burg “the new realities in the region require for states to choose whether everyone can possess nuclear weapons

or to have a zone free of nuclear weapons.” He recommended that Israel comes clean about its nuclear weapons as part of a strategy “from trauma to trust” in the region.

The initiator of the conference, Issam Makhoul (former MK), underlined the importance of a broad debate on nuclear weapons in Israel. If Israel won't go to Helsinki, Helsinki will come to Israel. Makhoul criticized the Gol for trying to avoid regional peace and countered the mainstream Israeli security considerations by stating that Israel's security can only be achieved by establishing a MEWDMFZ soon. If these efforts fail, more states in the region are likely to acquire nukes.

Dr. Emily Landau (Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv) tried to divert criticism of Israel, saying that the real problem is the framework of discussion about the MEWDMFZ. The logic that Israel is spoiling it must be overcome. The reality is more complex, because the issue of arms control is embedded in the difficult regional context of the Middle East. She suggested a regional forum to address general security issues as a way forward.

The Nuclear Issue in the Knesset

The following round-table discussion was comprised exclusively of Members of the Knesset, lending further credibility and clout to the conference. Dov Khenin (Hadash) recalled a debate on Israeli nuclear weapons that took place in the Knesset more than a decade ago, when the public taboo on the issue was broken for the first time. He said there should be much more talk about the ramifications of the use of nuclear weapons, how limited this use may be. Diplomacy as a way to resolve conflict instead of relying on WMD deterrence is the order of the day, with the Syrian chemical weapons and the Iran nuclear issue setting important precedents for successful diplomacy.

MK Tamar Zandberg (Meretz) noted the lack of awareness and public debate in Israel, which also has to do with censorship and intentional silencing of the matter. Hence, it is important to encourage further debate and to get the message out that some in civil society are actually talking about this issue. This is also something the Knesset could attend to.

MK Masud Ghanaim (Ra'am-Ta'al) asked for new initiatives to be discussed in the Knesset and in the public. He underlined the necessity of broader civil activities.

Reflecting on the connection between the nuclear issue and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mohammad Barakeh (Hadash) saw the reason for Israel's ongoing focus on the Iranian nuclear program as a means to divert attention from the occupation. He believed that the elimination of Israeli nuclear weapons can only happen when the occupation has been eliminated and reminded the audience that the Arab Peace Initiative offer is still on the table.

The Humanitarian Repercussions of Nuclear Weapons: Society, Democracy and Environment

Tamar Gozansky (former MK) started the second panel with the idea to place the costs of the Israeli nuclear program against the prevailing security narrative. Because the numbers are hidden in the budget, the exact amounts spent for the Dimona reactor, R&D, missile storage, infrastructure and waste processing are unknown, but she said it certainly has been costly and came at the expense of civilian development.

The perspective of nuclear weapons in International Law was explained by Johnny Assi (UNESCO). He mentioned the 1986 decision by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legality of nuclear weapons, which was made after a strong controversy about the hierarchy between humanitarian standards (proportionality of the use of violence and targeting of civilians) and the use of nukes, including for self-defense reasons. The court eventually ruled that nuclear weapons do not conform to humanitarian law and human rights. Interpreting this ruling from a human rights perspective, it can be argued that since the use of nuclear weapons is a violation of the UN Charter and a crime against humanity, the threat of using them is illegal, too. On a positive note, Assi said that after the 1986 ICJ case, the discourse has shifted from the legality of nuclear weapons towards focusing on their elimination.

The audience raised another point relating to the impact of the nuclear issue on society and democracy in Israel: The case of Mordechai Vanunu, the scientist who revealed details about the Israeli nuclear program two decades ago and still faces certain liberty restrictions imposed on him

by the State of Israel. One participant complained about this ongoing mistreatment and the lack of public and academic outcry, while another suggested sending a message of solidarity from the conference to Vanunu.

Iranian Threat, Israeli Threat

The third panel focused again more on the prospects of having a MEWMDFZ. Uri Bar-Joseph started with an account of recent Israeli history. In 1967, Israel crossed the nuclear threshold. In the same year, the 6-Day-War showed there is no necessity for Israel to possess nuclear weapons, since it was the dominating military power in the region already by conventional means. In the 1980's, the power balance shifted even more towards Israel after the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt and while Iran and Iraq were at war. The developments continued in Israel's favor with the collapse of the USSR. All this made having nukes from a security point of view more or less redundant. Besides, whenever there have been efforts by countries in the region to walk the nuclear path, they got effectively stopped by Israel, as seen in Iraq, Syria and possibly now Iran. All in all, there is no conventional threat for Israel, and the unconventional threat has greatly diminished now that the Syrian chemical weapons are being destroyed. There is no existential military threat for Israel and none seems to be on the horizon. But the danger that other countries might keep on trying to get nuclear weapons is still out there and enhanced by the fact that Israel is intent on keeping its nuclear weapons.

Prof. Coleman Altman provided some facts about the Iranian nuclear program. The heavy water reactor in Arak, which the international community is most concerned about, is an important and efficient factor of the program, because these reactors run on basic uranium that need not be enriched and they produce less nuclear waste. They are very common for producing nuclear power around the world and thus it makes a lot of sense for Iran to have this kind of facility. The concerns of the negotiating powers can sufficiently be addressed by free access for IAEA inspectors, something that was agreed upon recently. Altman said that the Iranian goal of nuclear power generation is in line with their broader energy market objectives, countering the claim that Iran doesn't need to be nuclear for it has a lot of oil and gas. In fact, the Iranian energy market is diversified and Iran is also a major exporter of electricity to its neighbors. Another argument supporting Iran's position is a fatwa that was issued by Ayatollah Khamenei, forbidding the production, possession and use of nuclear weapons.

Concluding the last panel of the day, Sharon Dolev (Israeli Anti-Nuclear Movement) addressed the developments on the MEWMDFZ. She criticized that there is no real political push, although there was a general consensus on the issue at international NPT conferences in 1995 and 2010. But altogether, there seems to be no vision and this contributes to the overall resignation and disbelief. The responsibility of a conference like this is to create and stimulate discourse on the public and political level. Dolev argued that the lack of peace is not an obstacle to the MEWMDFZ. It is crucial that WMDs disappear from the region no matter what. Israel's adversaries are actually willing to sit down in Helsinki and talk. The problem is Israel's "long corridor" tactic also observable in the conflict with the Palestinians: crucial issues are being pushed back over and over again. Dolev closed by urging the Israeli government to join the Chemical Weapons Convention as a first step.

Later on in the evening, the participants gathered in the Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art for a reception and speeches by Issam Makhoul, Dr. Angelika Timm (RLS Israel), Mohammad Nafa, Tadatoshi Akiba and Avraham Burg, while being treated to some marvelous music performances by the famous Palestinian-Israeli singer Amal Murkus.

The Role of Europe in Face of Nuclearization of the Middle East and the Need for Demilitarization

The second day featured two panels, the first of which dealt with the European perspective on the subject matter. Four European politicians raised several points and made suggestions on how to address certain problems in the ME. Wolfgang Gehrcke (Die Linke, Germany) insisted that Europe should not recognize the occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory and demanded an EU weapons embargo on Israel. Michelle Demessine (PCF, France) criticized her country for its continued imperialist intervention in Africa and also the Middle East. There needs to be a new approach to counter this kind of "New Militarism". Zisis Zannas (Syriza, Greece) recommended that the Israeli and Arab Left work together to create bonds and defuse tensions, but said that the

situation in the Middle East will remain largely as it is as long as the Palestinian question isn't solved. Finally, (AKEL, Cyprus) stated that the MEWMDFZ needs confidence-building measures and should involve security assurances by the five members of the UN Security Council as the major nuclear states. It is, however, questionable to see the EU as an independent contributor to the establishment of such a zone, given the Union's organic ties to NATO, its military interventions all over the world and its stake in the global production and proliferation of weapons. Another point he made was to try and get people of the whole political spectrum, including the Right, on board of the mission by showing the immense economical and ecological costs of nuclear weapons.

Civil Society and the Anti-Nuclear Movement

The last conference panel brought various civil society and feminist actors together: Jackie Cabasso (Western States Legal Foundation, USA), Dr. Ruhama Marton (Physicians for Human Rights, Israel), Aida Touma (Women against Violence, Israel), Fathia Sageer (Movement of Democratic Women in Israel), Dr. Edna Gorney (Isha L'Isha, Israel) and Nadav Shaltiel (Israeli Dismarmament Movement).

They stressed the need to unite internationally in order to change discourse from bottom-up. There was a call for international civil assistance to the Israeli anti-nuclear movement, which is still small. Furthermore, the feminist perspective of nuclear weapons as primarily male "rational" tools in a men-dominated world was raised.

The last panel also mentioned ways in which disarmament and denuclearization can be achieved. Information should be placed where it is most effective. The politics of symbols for identification are also important, as they make the framing of a subject possible. The catastrophic implications and a symbolism of loss could be used to ingrain a sense of rejection when it comes to nukes. Another means would be the politics of leverage: Bring in more powerful actors to exert pressure and convey seriousness. Finally, actors should be held accountable to what they have committed.

It goes without saying that the road to a MEWMDFZ is long and hard. The Middle East is intertwined in various conflicts, trust between states and societies is low. This should not distract civil society actors and policy makers from what's at stake: The survival and well-being of the peoples of the Middle East. Thus, as long and hard the road may be, this conference certainly served as a step in the right direction.